

SUMMER 2023 | VOLUME 49 | NUMBER 3

concordia journal



Cover art: This illustration of Saint Matthew, from the 9th century Ebbo Gospels in the Municipal Library, Épernay, France, depicts him writing a Gospel.

Issued by the faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, the *Concordia Journal* is the successor of *Lehre und Wehre* (1855-1929), begun by C. F. W. Walther, a founder of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. *Lehre und Wehre* was absorbed by the *Concordia Theological Monthly* (1930-1974) which was published by the faculty of Concordia Seminary as the official theological periodical of the Synod.

Concordia Journal is abstracted in *Internationale Zeitschriftenschau für Bibelwissenschaft und Grenzgebiete*, *New Testament Abstracts*, *Old Testament Abstracts*, and *Religious and Theological Abstracts*. It is indexed in ATLA Religion Database/ATLAS and Christian Periodicals Index. Article and issue photocopies in 16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm, and 105mm microfiche are available from National Archive Publishing (www.napubco.com).

Books submitted for review should be sent to the editor. Manuscripts submitted for publication should conform to a Chicago Manual of Style. Email submission (cj@csl.edu) as a Word attachment is preferred. Editorial decisions about submissions include peer review. Manuscripts that display Greek or Hebrew text should utilize BibleWorks fonts (www.bibleworks.com/fonts.html). Copyright © 1994-2009 BibleWorks, LLC. All rights reserved. Used with permission.

The *Concordia Journal* (ISSN 0145-7233) is published quarterly (Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall). The annual subscription rate is \$25 (individuals) and \$75 (institutions) payable to Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105. New subscriptions and renewals also available at <http://store.csl.edu>. Periodicals postage paid at St. Louis, MO and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to *Concordia Journal*, Concordia Seminary, 801 Seminary Place, St. Louis, MO 63105-3196.

concordia Journal

A Concordia Seminary St. Louis Publication



Editorials	Editor's Note 5 <i>Joel Elowsky and David Maxwell</i>
	Encomium for Douglas Rutt 7 <i>Dale A. Meyer</i>
	Encomium for William Schumacher 9 <i>Paul Robinson</i>
	Concordia Seminary PhD Dissertation Synopsis, 2023 11
Articles	The Exegetical Elephant in the Room 15 <i>David Maxwell</i>
	If You Cannot Preach Like Augustine . . . Don't Worry About It! 39 <i>Timothy Saleska</i>
	The Wedding of Cana in the Interpretation of the Early Church 55 <i>Joel Elowsky</i>
Homiletical Helps	Preaching Mark 69 <i>David Lewis</i>
Reviews	Featured Review 81 <i>Organizing For Ministry And Mission: Options for Church Structure</i> By David J. Peter

Publisher

Thomas J. Egger
President

Executive Editor

Erik Herrmann
*Dean of Theological
Research and Publication*

Editor

Melanie Appelbaum
*Managing Editor of
Theological Publications*

Manager, Creative Operations

Beth Hasek

Graphic Designer

XiaoPei Chen

Faculty

David Adams
Charles Arand
Abjar Bahkou
Joel Biermann
Gerhard Bode
Kent Burreson
Timothy Dost
Thomas Egger
Joel Elowsky
Kevin Golden
Benjamin Haupt
Erik Herrmann
David Lewis
Richard Marrs
David Maxwell
Ronald Mudge
Peter Nafzger
Glenn Nielsen

Joel Okamoto
Jeffrey Oswald
Philip Penhallegon
David Peter
Ely Prieto
Paul Robinson
Mark Rockenbach
Douglas Rutt
Timothy Saleska
Leopoldo Sánchez M.
David Schmitt
Bruce Schuchard
William Schumacher
Mark Seifrid
W. Mart Thompson
Jon Vieker
James Voelz

Exclusive subscriber digital access via ATLAS to
Concordia Journal & Concordia Theology Monthly
<http://search.ebscohost.com>
User ID: **ATL0102231ps**
Password: **concordia*sub1**
Technical problems?
Email: support@atla.com

All correspondence should be sent to:
CONCORDIA JOURNAL
801 Seminary Place
St. Louis, Missouri 63105
314-505-7117
cj@cs1.edu

Editor's Note

In John 5 Jesus challenged the Pharisees to “search the Scriptures.” According to Jesus, the Pharisees were looking for evidence of eternal life. He invited them to find that life in him because he was the subject of the entirety of their Scriptures. The whole Old Testament was about Jesus, from Genesis to Malachi. This was the claim that helped the early Christians push back against the charge of the pagans of their day that Christianity was a new religion. Christianity was in fact more ancient than any other religion because it went back to the beginning, all the way back to Genesis. These early Christians also believed, along with Paul, that these texts were written not just to record history but “they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11). The end of the ages is Christ, and he invites his body, the church, to find him and themselves in these texts.

The three essays included in this volume from our Concordia Seminary faculty are meant to provide a glimpse into the history of exegesis in interaction with our Concordia Seminary exegetical faculty in particular. David Maxwell’s opening essay explores in a more general way the difference between modern and ancient exegesis. While modern exegesis is concerned largely with “the original intent of the human author as it was understood by the original readers in its historical context,” ancient exegesis was more concerned with how the text fit into the “larger narrative of salvation.” Since that narrative is focused in Christ, but Christ did not arrive on the scene until the New Testament, much of early Christian exegesis of the Old Testament was spiritual exegesis, sometimes known as allegory or typology. Our level of comfort with this approach often depends on what Maxwell terms the “granularity” of interpretation where moderns are often fine with broader themes, but less comfortable when some of the finer details of the text that show up in allegorical readings. Timothy Saleska’s foray into Augustine on the Psalms demonstrates a similar appreciation for the deep theological engagement Augustine has with the text, while ultimately finding it wanting by modern standards when it comes to the literal sense. Joel Elowsky’s essay rounds out the discussion by returning to some of the granularity in the fathers’ approach to the wedding of Cana text in John 2. He argues that this fuller, *sensus plenior* approach provides not only a deeper engagement with the text, but also with the one divine Author of Scripture, as we encounter the one who told the Pharisees (Jn 5) and the disciples on the Emmaus road (Lk 24) that these Scriptures testify to him.

And yet, two questions remain: What has the church “lost by jettisoning this deeper, fuller, multilevel reading of Scripture? What would we lose by bringing it back?”

Joel Elowsky and David Maxwell
Co-chairs of the 2022 Theological Symposium

Encomium for Douglas Rutt

It's my pleasure and honor to say a few words upon your retirement, and we congratulate *both of you*, Dr. and Mrs. Rutt.

Deborah, you have had a career in your own right. As CEO of Lutheran Housing Support Corporation and CEO and president of Humanitri, as the founding president of A&D Global Business Relations in Slovakia, and as an advancement vice president at our sister seminary . . . you have served the mission of our Lord Jesus faithfully. The love of Christ starts at home. You have been a loving wife to Doug and mother to five children and . . . How many grandchildren? 15?

Doug, you joined us in 2018 as provost and professor. Reading your *curriculum vitae* makes a person wonder . . . how did you do it all? Professor and administrator at both seminaries, executive director for International Ministries at Lutheran Hour Ministries, and many years with LCMS World Missions in Guatemala. In addition, you have written and spoken extensively in both English and Spanish about anthropology and missiology. But let me turn from this impressive catalog of your accomplishments and say something about you to our students.

Last week those of us with offices in Sieck Hall had an end-of-the-school year get together. Dr. Rutt said something that struck home with me. He said, "On a helicopter, you torque everything." "On a helicopter you torque everything." If there should ever be a Rutt Hall on this campus (feel free to donate one!), or if ever a memorial plaque in honor of your ministry, that quotation will not be on it. Here's my point: Before his studies for ministry, he was a Navy jet engine mechanic and later a commercial pilot and flight instructor. God made us to be fully human before he rebirthed us in baptism as his people in Jesus Christ. The mission is from God through us flesh-and-blood people with our sins and shortcomings, our joys and sorrows, to flesh-and-blood people who live and often struggle in their real lives. The mission is not gnostic. The mission is not about theological degrees and knowledge, though they certainly have their place. The mission is about the Incarnate One who came and comes to sanctify all life.

So, how did you both do all that you have done, and we know that you are not done doing. Retirement is not vacation; the mission continues. I don't know much

about torque, but I do know that “the wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound. . . . So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit,” and we have been blessed by your Spirit-inspired work on our campus and throughout the church. We thank you and we honor you this day.

Here’s a demonstration of their love, love of Christ and love of family. The Rutt family is going to have a reunion this coming July, a reunion of the 27 members of their family, a reunion in . . . Guatemala. Our Lord be with you in that and all that is ahead.

Dale A. Meyer

Encomium for William Schumacher

You can tell a lot about a man from what he puts on his office door. If you have ever wandered the halls of Sieck, you might have seen Prof. Schumacher's office door with its carefully curated selection of quotations and cartoons. Some of them have an obvious significance but others can be cryptic. The best example of the cryptic is a series of capital letters: VLMSG. Those letters might be part of an eye chart or an old Roman inscription. But they are not. They are an acronym of the phrase *the vigorous life of the mind in the service of the gospel*. That phrase is both a personal motto and a mission statement, and it's my starting point for this appreciation of William Wallace Schumacher on the occasion of his retirement.

Will's vigorous life of the mind began with a vigorous childhood. He and his brothers challenged their parents with a series of adventures and misadventures, many involving explosives. It is not surprising that they would gravitate toward careers that potentially involved blowing things up, and Will duly enrolled in college as an engineering major. His life took a sudden turn when he transferred to Wartburg College to major in German. As part of his program, he spent time in Bonn and took his Hebrew qualifying examination in German at the university there. By the time he was a senior, he planned to attend Concordia Seminary to become a pastor.

Here I need to point out that Will's family was not Lutheran. He discovered Lutheranism in college and developed an interest in theology. Like many of those who have embraced Lutheranism as adults, Will wrestled with the big questions about God and human beings and often found the greatest obstacle to his understanding to be other Christians. Several people warned him against Lutheranism in general and the Missouri Synod in particular. All of which might give some pertinent background to another piece from the office door. This one is a quote from Dorothy Sayers:

Q: What is the human intellect?

A: A barrier to faith.

Although, as Sayers implies, that seems to be the operant definition of human intellect for many Christians, that was not the way Will approached the vigorous life of the mind. Anything he learned or had experienced was potential grist for the mill of theological thinking.

Upon graduating from seminary, Will was called to Botswana, where he served as a missionary. It was there that his vigorous life of the mind began to be employed more fully in the service of the gospel. His time there explains one of the more obscure quotes on the office door. It's from Afua Kuma, a Ghanaian woman whose prayers were treasured by her fellow Christians. The prayer in question calls on Jesus for deliverance from Satan. In part it says, "Jesus Christ / You who are the lion of the grasslands / You whose claws are sharp."

After ten years in Botswana, Will returned to the United States with a deep knowledge of the reality of being a missionary, a love of Africa, and a lifetime supply of unique sermon illustrations. His time as a missionary led to his service as coordinator of cross-cultural experiences for field education, a duty he took on while also earning a PhD in Reformation history.

In 1996, Will joined the department of historical theology as its mission professor and taught in the areas of Reformation history, the history of the Missouri Synod, and missiology. He has presented papers and published in each of those areas. He also served the seminary as its first director of Theological Research and Publications and then as director of the Institute for Mission Studies. He has served the synod directly as theological coordinator for Africa and as a member of CTCR. Recently he also served as president of Mission Nation Publishing. In my estimation this is exactly what you would expect from a vigorous life of the mind in the service of the gospel.

Some of you may have encountered Will through one of his many hobbies. Perhaps you share with him an interest in beekeeping or brewing or sausage making. In other words, he will have plenty to do in retirement in place of full-time seminary duties. He will also be spending more time with his far-flung family—children and grandchildren on the US west coast and in Europe. I expect also that he will continue to think, to teach, and to learn in different ways and in different places but still serving the same Lord Jesus. Because the vigorous life of the mind in the service of the Gospel isn't the sort of thing you retire from.

Paul Robinson

Concordia Seminary PhD Dissertation Synopsis, 2023

Andrew Johnson (Adviser: Rev. Dr. Dale Meyer)

To the Glory of God: Evaluating Origen's Exposition of the Scripture in His Leviticus Homilies. The third-century church father Origen is well known but also widely criticized for his allegorical approach to Scripture. Through an examination of Origen's use of two rhetorical devices in his Leviticus homilies, *anthypophora* and *distributio*, Johnson shows that Origen's purpose in using figural presentation of Scriptural truths was homiletical and pastoral. Origen expanded the literal meaning of the text without destroying it. This dissertation invites new explorations and practices for post-Enlightenment, postmodern homiletics.

Dennis Matyas (Adviser: Rev. Dr. David Schmitt)

Embodied Superintendence: The Person of the Preacher in Lutheran Homiletics Especially in Relation to Cultural Identity. This dissertation demonstrates how the person of the preacher was foundational in the Lutheran theology of preaching. It also argues that this understanding needs to be emphasized today. When Lutherans faithfully articulate the foundational role of the preacher's person, they make a much-needed contribution to cultural conversations about identity politics and preaching. They are able to center the preaching task on the gospel of Jesus Christ and yet also appreciate the formative significance of the preacher's cultural identity in that act.

Larry Vogel (Adviser: Rev. Dr. Richard Marrs)

Behind the Numbers: A Traditional Church Faces a New America. This dissertation makes a significant contribution to the church and especially the LCMS by astutely examining and critiquing the sociometric reasons the synod has numerically grown

Editor's note

These scholars received the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Concordia Seminary's Commencement exercises on May 19, 2023. Fuller descriptions of their dissertations are available at concordiatheology.org.

and declined. More importantly, by exploring and carefully articulating the full meaning of catholicity as confessed in the Nicene Creed, this project presents the core theological reasons that should direct the church more actively to share Christ's Gospel with the multitudes from all cultures, peoples, and languages and so more faithfully follow the directive of the Great Commission.

Benjamin Nickodemus (Adviser: Rev. Dr. Mark Seifrid)

The Apocalyptic Character of the Ethnic Identity Argument in Galatians. This dissertation tackles the twofold nature of Paul's Gospel as both "ethnic" and "apocalyptic." In response to Galatian believers, who wanted to become Jews, Paul insists that ethnicity has been transcended. Nothing matters but the new creation that has entered the world. At the same time, however, Paul agrees that the Gospel remains ethnic and particular. God's promises were given to Abraham alone. This paradox arises from Christ, Abraham's seed, through whom the promise of blessing comes to the Gentiles.

Articles

The Exegetical Elephant in the Room

David Maxwell



David R. Maxwell is the Louis A. Fincke and Anna B. Shine Professor of Systematic Theology and chairman of the department of systematic theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri. His interests include

Christology, the history of exegesis, and Cyril of Alexandria.

Every few years I teach a class on Cyril of Alexandria's *Commentary on John*, and so every few years I have the opportunity to present to the students Cyril's interpretation of Jesus's baptism. It goes like this: When the sons of God married the daughters of men in Genesis 6, God responded by saying,

"My Spirit will not abide in man forever, for he is flesh." At that point the Holy Spirit departed from the human race. Of course, the Spirit still continued to act in the Old Testament, inspiring the prophets and so forth, but in principle humanity had been separated from the Spirit, who is the source of life. That is because "The Holy Spirit of wisdom will flee deceit," as the book of Wisdom says, "and will not dwell in a body enslaved to sin."¹ But in the person of Jesus, the Spirit finally finds a human being in whose mouth is no deceit and he descends on him and *remains* on him, as John emphasizes. For Cyril, this is the return of the Spirit to the human race. The fact that he remains on Jesus means that the Spirit is once again rooted in our nature in the person of Christ, never to depart again.² The baptism of Jesus, in Cyril's view, is not merely the beginning of his public ministry or a prelude to the cross, but it is itself a saving event.

Every time I present this account of the baptism of Jesus, I get the same response from students. First they say, "That's so cool!" Then there is a pause. Then someone meekly asks, "Are we allowed to say that?" One way to think about our symposium topic is that we are trying to answer precisely that question. *Are* we allowed to say that?

It's not obvious that we are. For a long time in our circles, patristic exegesis,

like that of Cyril, has existed uncomfortably side-by-side with our contemporary approach to exegesis, which is quite different. It has been, you might say, the elephant in the room. When I was a seminary student, I got the impression that we really like the doctrine of the early church—the Nicene Creed, the divinity of Christ, and so forth—but the early church didn't know how to read the Bible. They were hobbled by their Platonism and their allegorizing, which so utterly controlled their minds that they were unable to take a responsible approach to the Scripture that was right in front of them. But they had really good doctrine.

Now at some point, it seems to me, you have to ask, “How can they have really good doctrine if they don't know how to read the Bible?” Are we saying that the Bible is superfluous to doctrine? Is it really true that we can safely ignore the actual historical exegesis that resulted in our classic doctrinal formulations like that of the Trinity or the divinity of Christ? Such a position seems incoherent to me. What do we imagine is the foundation for all that good doctrine?

Furthermore, in a postmodern environment the confidence that our modern method of interpretation is the one right way has been shaken if not shattered. What should a church do once it admits that it does not actually possess a methodological guarantee of correct biblical interpretation? One thing it has started doing is to ask how the church in the past has read the Bible. The commercial success of InterVarsity Press's Ancient Christian Commentary Series and its successor series, the Ancient Christian Text Series, is testament to the increasing interest in patristic exegesis, especially among Evangelicals. And it's worth noting that over half of the Ancient Christian Text series was translated by Missouri Synod Lutherans, who were all recruited by Dr. Joel Elowsky. Since we have now gotten the Evangelicals interested in patristic exegesis, maybe we are finally in a position to take it seriously ourselves. Maybe we can now talk about the elephant in the room.

To that end, I will identify what I take to be the one key difference between the ancient and contemporary approach to exegesis. This is, of course, an overgeneralization since there is a spectrum of exegetical practices both in the early church and the church today. But on the theory “go big or go home,” I will focus on the one key difference and then use concrete examples to show how different interpretive moves arise out of that. The key difference is this: in the early church, the meaning of a text of Scripture is to be found in its role in the larger story of salvation, while in contemporary exegesis, the meaning of the text is to be found in the original intent of the human author as it was understood by the original readers in its historical context. My purpose in this paper is not to try to adjudicate between them, but to describe them as a way of introducing themes and issues that will be taken up, expanded, or challenged by the other speakers as they see fit.

I do not think we can get at this difference by analyzing technical terminology. Hans Boersma notes that there is a rich and variegated set of terms that the fathers use

to describe the kind of reading they are doing: “typology, allegory, *theōria*, anagogy, spiritual reading.”³ These are all terms that get at the fact that the fathers think that the words of the Scriptures function like sacraments, that is, “words that contain in themselves the greater reality of the Christ event.”⁴ It is that dynamic that is fundamental. Were I to structure this paper around each term, not only would it be boring, but it would shed no light on the issue. Whatever nuanced difference there may be between *theōria* and anagogy, for example, would do nothing to elucidate the big picture issue. I do need to say a few words about the pair typology and allegory, however, because that pair has created a lot of mischief in contemporary scholarship.

One gets the impression that typology and allegory are two competing kinds of exegesis with the following characteristics: typology good, allegory bad.

Typology and Allegory

There was a brief controversy between Antioch and Alexandria over exegesis in which the Antiochenes disapproved of the Alexandrians like Origen for allegorizing. However, the controversy was brief, and as Jacques Guillet pointed out already in the 1940s, if you look at the actual commentaries produced by each side, not just the polemical literature, there is not that much difference between them.⁵

Yet in the twentieth century, one gets the impression that typology and allegory are two competing kinds of exegesis with the following characteristics: typology good, allegory bad. This development came about in the wake of the historical critical method of exegesis. Historical criticism, strictly practiced, would prevent the church from finding Christ in the Old Testament since such a move would be ahistorical. However, ever since the time of Marcion, the church has insisted that one of the non-negotiable assumptions of Christian exegesis is that the Old Testament ultimately points to Christ. Therefore, in an attempt to salvage the Old Testament from the historical critical method, scholars began to look for examples of figurative exegesis in the early church that they could try to justify by the standards of the historical critical method. The only way to do that was to argue that there were at least some kinds of exegesis in the early church that could be construed as respecting “history” in some sense. This the modern scholars called “typology.” Exegesis that failed that test was deemed illegitimate and was labelled “allegory.” The Antiochenes were the heroes of that story, since they were seen as proto-historical critics, and the Alexandrians were the allegorizing villains.

One can see this history manifested in our own curriculum. My great uncle

Herbert Wiederaenders was a student at this institution in the 1920s. He had Pieper as his systematics professor and thanks to some investigative work by Dr. Bode, we have figured out that William Arndt was likely his New Testament professor. And I have the class notes. Interestingly, the systematics notes are in German, while the exegetical class notes are in English. (Make of that what you will.) If we look at the New Testament exegesis class, we find that the second sentence on the very first page states, “An allegorical is not a good method of interpretation.” So that must have been an important point at this seminary 100 years ago.

But if you ask modern scholars what the terms *typology* and *allegory* actually mean, there is no consensus. In a relatively recent survey of how these two terms are used in patristic scholarship, St. Louis University patristics scholar Peter Martens notes that modern scholars consistently use the term *typology* to refer to nonliteral exegesis that they find successful, while they use *allegory* to refer to nonliteral exegesis that they find unsuccessful.⁶ Beyond that, there is no consistent account of what constitutes these two forms of nonliteral exegesis.

Let me give a small sample of the variety that Martens identifies. The French patristics scholar Jean Daniélou offers this definition of typology: “The object of typology is the research of the correspondences between the events, the institutions, and the persons of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament.”⁷ The Origen scholar R. P. C. Hanson similarly describes typology as the connection between a historical event and a future historical event, but he adds the qualifier that it is only typology if there is an attempt to trace a “similar situation” between the two. Otherwise, it is allegory.⁸ Frances Young focuses not on the items being connected, but on whether the narrative coherence is being respected. She states that typology respects the narrative coherence of a text, while allegory treats the text as a code and destroys the narrative coherence of the text.⁹

Martens identifies more variety than this, but these three examples are enough for us to see that the typology/allegory distinction is not that helpful. Consider Cyril of Alexandria’s handling of Zechariah 13:6. Zechariah describes a time when the Lord will remove the prophets from the land, so that anyone left prophesying will be a false prophet and be ashamed of his visions. Verse 6 states, “And if one asks him, ‘What are these wounds on your back?’ he will say, ‘The wounds I received in the house of my friends’” (Zec 13:6). Here the prophet is lying, trying to cover up that he received the wounds as he was trying to prophecy even though the Lord had removed the Spirit of prophecy from the land. Cyril, however, pulls this passage into a discussion of Jesus’s ascension into heaven. When the angels see the nail marks on his hands, they say, “What are these wounds in your hands?” And Jesus replies, “The wounds I received in the house of my beloved.”¹⁰ Is that typology or allegory?

If we use Daniélou’s definition, we will have to classify it as typology, since it connects an Old Testament person with Christ. Therefore, it would presumably be

legitimate. But if we use Young's definition, we will have to classify it as allegory and therefore illegitimate. That is because in the text of Zechariah, the prophets are lying about the wounds that they received while engaged in false prophecy, while Jesus is displaying the wounds as a true sign of his redemption of the world. So, Cyril's figurative interpretation ignores the narrative coherence of the text of Zechariah. If we use Hanson's definition, we will have to inquire about whether the two texts involve "similar situations." They are similar in that wounds are involved in both, but the circumstances of the wounds are quite different. How similar is similar enough? If it is sufficiently similar, then it is typology. If not, then it is allegory.

In the end, the typology/allegory distinction tells you little more than whether the modern interpreter likes a given nonliteral interpretation or not. Typology is figurative interpretation that I like. Allegory is figurative interpretation that I don't like. Rather than use such a vacuous distinction, I will simply give concrete examples of patristic exegesis and describe what I see going on in non-technical language. We can then discuss what specific features of the exegesis that we do or do not like.

What Ancient Exegetes Do

So, what do ancient exegetes do when they approach a text? There are two main tasks: first they deal with the text itself; then they deal with the spiritual meaning of the text. When they deal with the text, they clarify the meaning of unfamiliar words, they clarify the punctuation, they deal with the logic of the narrative flow, and they often paraphrase the text. These kinds of activities are grouped under the heading of *historia*, which should probably be translated not "history" but "narrative." Simply put, these activities involve intensive attention to the words on the page.

Very often the fathers go beyond the meaning of the words on the page and offer one or more spiritual interpretations of the text. The Greek terms for this, as mentioned earlier, are quite varied: typology, allegory, anagogy, *theōria*, and spiritual reading. The kinds of interpretive moves they make are also quite varied. They might connect a word in the text to the same word in a different text and find some significance in the correspondence. They might connect a text in the Old Testament to a text in the New Testament. They might connect a feature of the text to some aspect of the church or sacraments or the Christian life. In short, they are involved in what you might call a game of pattern recognition. They connect a pattern in the text to a pattern somewhere else that seems similar to them.

By calling it a "game," I do not mean to suggest that what they are doing is frivolous. Rather, I mean to suggest that they are involved in an activity that has some rules, even if they cannot always tell you what those rules are. The psychologist Jean Piaget did a study of how children learn to play marbles. One startling result of the study is that when he interviewed the children and asked them individually what the rules are, he got different rules from different children, yet they were all able to play

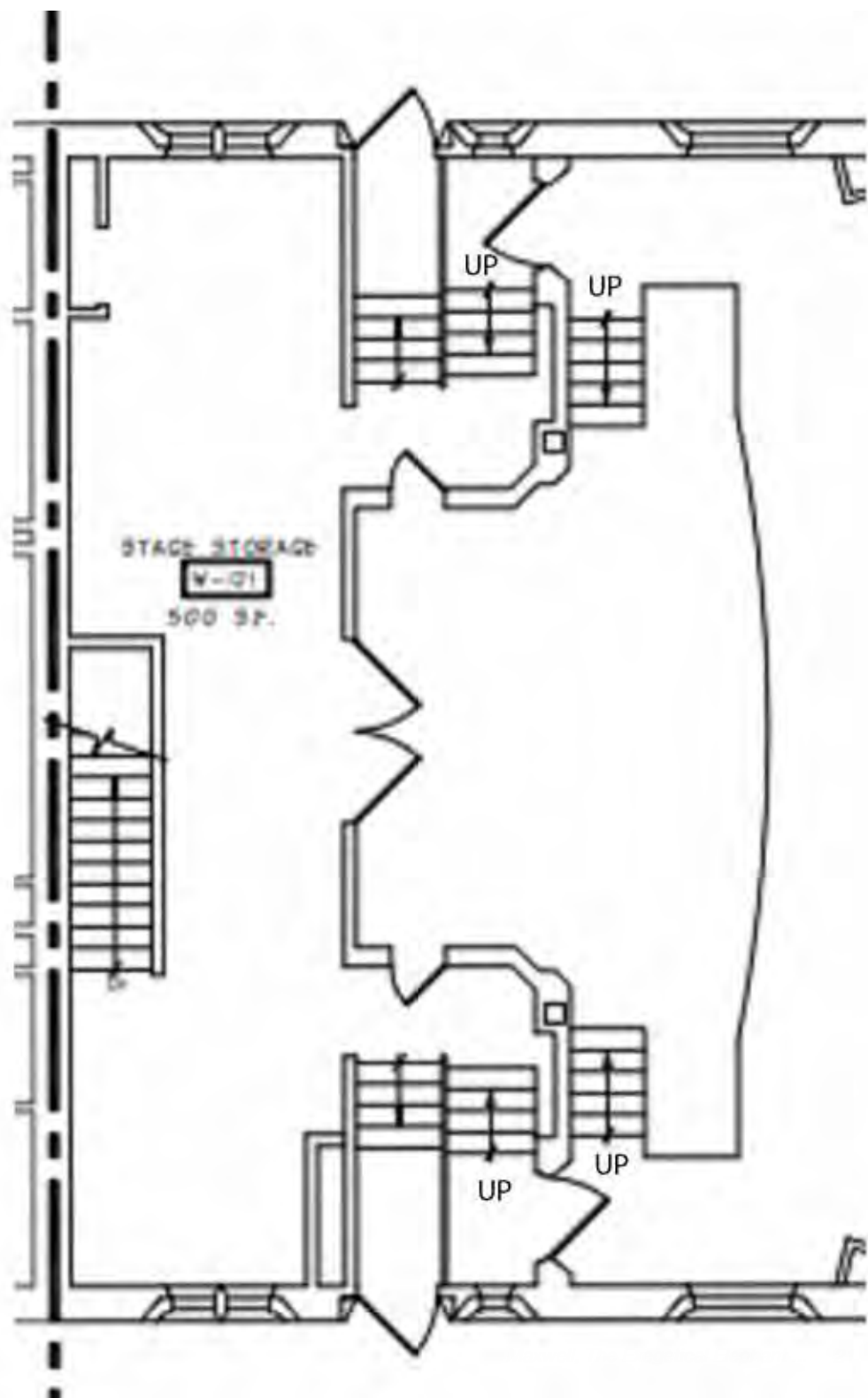
the game together! The conclusion is that you enact the rules before you can articulate them.¹¹ It seems to me that we are in a similar situation with regard to what counts as legitimate and illegitimate figurative readings of the text. We have a sense about it, and we ourselves can play the game, but it is notoriously difficult to articulate the rules.

Melito of Sardis

One early church father who did try to articulate a framework for the rules is Melito of Sardis. His homily *On Pascha* is one of the earliest Christian sermons that we have, dating from about AD 190. That puts him at about the same distance from the apostles as we are from Walther and Pieper. The sermon is structured in two parts. First, he narrates the story of the Passover and Exodus from Egypt. Then, in part 2, he retells the story making connections to its fulfillment in Christ's death and resurrection. The structure of the sermon, then, reflects the two-fold task of engaging the *historia* and then the spiritual meaning of the narrative. But, most helpful for our purposes, between these two parts he offers some explicit reflection on how to describe the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. He compares the Old Testament to a sketch or model of a building and the New Testament to the actual finished building. Here is how he puts it: "A preliminary sketch is made of what is to be, from wax or from clay or from wood, so that what will come about, taller in height, and greater in strength, and more attractive in shape, and wealthier in workmanship, can be seen through the small and provisional sketch."¹² This allows Melito to grant importance to the Old Testament in the Christian church while at the same time placing the emphasis on the fulfillment in Christ.

We might think of it in modern terms as the difference between a blueprint and the finished building. What is the correct way to read a blueprint? On the facing page is an architectural drawing of Werner auditorium, the room where this paper was delivered. We might try to read it literally, limiting ourselves to things we can say only from looking at the marks on the page. In such a reading we would attend to matters such as the fact that the author clearly prefers straight lines over curved lines. And we might suspect a scribal error on the page, since there are arrows marked "up" pointing to the top of the page, but there are also arrows marked "up" pointing to the bottom of the page. Clearly something is wrong here. Maybe there is a textual variant that could help. Now there are some allegorists who suggest that the features on the right of the page are doors through which people enter the room, and the word "up" designates stairs, which move in a third dimension. But there is absolutely no evidence for this in the text! There are no people in the text, and the text is clearly a two-dimensional drawing.

We would have to say that someone who reads the text this way has not understood what the text is for. You simply cannot read a blueprint and insist that you can only talk about features evident in the drawing because the whole point of



the blueprint is to point to something beyond itself. This is Melito's view of the Old Testament. It tells the story of Israel, but the story of Israel is not what it's really about. It is designed from the start to disclose the larger story of salvation, which is fulfilled in Christ.

Melito makes this clear in the following passage. Referring to Christ, he says, "This is the Pascha of our salvation: this is the one who in many people endured many things. This is the one who was murdered in Abel, tied up in Isaac, exiled in Jacob, sold in Joseph, exposed in Moses, slaughtered in the lamb, hunted down in David, dishonored in the prophets."¹³ It's not just a few passages in the Old Testament that find their fulfillment in Christ, but pretty much the entire plotline. Furthermore, Melito does not say merely that Abel points to Christ and that Isaac,

being bound, points to Christ, but that Christ is actually present and active already in the Old Testament text itself. Christ is murdered in Abel and tied up in Isaac. When the church fathers make the connection to Christ, they do not see themselves as making an application but rather discovering what is already there in the text.¹⁴

"Tell me angel," Melito asks, "what turned you away? The slaughter of the sheep or the life of the Lord?

The death of the sheep or the type of the Lord? The blood of the sheep or the spirit of the Lord?"¹⁵ Here Melito is making the point that the Old Testament narrative cannot be made sense of on its own. The only thing that makes the story work, that drives away the angel of death, is the presence of Christ in the blood that is spread on the doorposts.

Melito, then, is a good example of someone who finds the meaning of the text in the context of the larger story of salvation. He is not denying the truth of the historical account in Exodus. But he does insist rather pointedly that the true meaning is not to be found in those events, but in Christ's death and resurrection, which are already present in those events.

Cyril of Alexandria

Next, I want to take a few examples from Cyril of Alexandria. That is partly because I have translated his New Testament commentaries, so I know his exegesis better than I know that of other church fathers. But another advantage of Cyril is that he is not a creative genius like Origen or Augustine. That means that his exegesis is likely more representative of "normal" exegesis in the early church. I will arrange the examples in

order of their comfort level. That is to say, I will start with an example that I think you will find sensible and then proceed to ones that are a little weirder and more uncomfortable, at least from a modern perspective.

We begin with Cyril's discussion of the tabernacle. This is prompted by Peter's question in John 6, "Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). This launches Cyril into a consideration of what it means to follow God, which leads him to an extended discussion of the tabernacle because that is the place in the Old Testament where you can see people following God in the desert.

He makes the point that the incarnation is the fulfillment of the tabernacle. The "truer tabernacle," he says, is the "temple from the virgin," by which he means Christ's body according to Christ's statement in John 2, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19). Now I think for us, the connection between the incarnation and the tabernacle is probably not controversial. You get a hint of it from John himself when he says, "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us" (Jn 1:14). The ESV renders it "dwelt among us," but John actually uses the verb ἐσκήνωσεν, which is the verb related to σκηνή (tent), which is, in turn, the word the Septuagint uses for the tabernacle. So, we have a reason from the Gospel itself to make this connection.

However, it's not just the tabernacle that is fulfilled in Christ, but also every stick of furniture in the tabernacle. Cyril says that the tabernacle has the ark containing the Law because Christ is the Word of God the Father. It has a table with the show bread because of the Lord's Supper. It has a lampstand because Christ is the light of the world. The lampstand is pure gold, signifying Christ's divine nature, since there is "nothing hollow or lightweight in Christ." It has lilies because of the sweet smell of sanctification. It has an altar of burnt offering in a public place because Christ was crucified in public. It has an altar of incense hidden by a veil because the glory of Christ was hidden.¹⁶

At this point, I imagine that you are not quite as convinced. It starts to feel a bit forced. But why? You can't really argue that connecting the tabernacle to Christ is typology, while connecting the furniture to Christ is allegory. It's not a different exegetical method. It's just a different level of granularity. My observation is that the level of granularity does seem to make a difference for us. When connections are made between broad biblical themes, they seem more natural to us than when they are made between small details. I'm not sure why that is, but when I gauge my own reaction to these moves, it does seem to be the case.¹⁷ But for Cyril it does not seem to be the case. He is committed to the idea that the true meaning of the tabernacle is found not in the context in Exodus, but in its fulfillment in Christ. And that goes for the tabernacle as a whole as well as for each piece of it.

So far, we have been examining the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. But the pattern recognition game can be played with New Testament

texts as well. For example, Cyril offers multiple explanations of Jesus’s statement in John 8, “When you have lifted up the Son of man, then you will know that I am” (Jn 8:28). First “lifting up the Son of Man” refers to them ceasing “from their petty and earthly conception” of him. When they do that, then they will know that he is the light of the world. Or “lifting up the Son of Man” refers to Jesus’s crucifixion, and after they do that, the Jews will know that he is the all-powerful God because their nation will be destroyed, or that he is the light of the world because the gospel will be transferred from the Jews to the Gentiles, or they will know that he is God because he will rise from the dead.¹⁸ Cyril gives all of these explanations in rapid-fire succession.

Clearly, he does not think there is only one correct interpretation of a passage. In some cases, he even invites the reader to find additional meanings beyond what he himself has provided. I believe that this is a consequence of the patristic conviction that the true meaning of the passage resides in its place in the larger story of salvation. The larger story is, well, large, so there is lots of room to find the pattern repeated in various places.

I suspect that the patristic understanding of the inspiration of Scripture is in play here as well. In Augustine’s classic text on scriptural interpretation, *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine argues that it is legitimate to find multiple meanings in a passage of Scripture. He grants that you should be trying to find the intent of the human author, but he suggests that when you read a passage and a thought comes into your head, it may have actually been intended by the human author. So, he seems to grant the human author a bit more insight than we tend to. But he goes on to say that even if the human author did not intend it, the Holy Spirit certainly did!¹⁹ If the Spirit is the author of the Scriptures, then it makes sense that the Scriptures would have properties that other books do not. Indeed, as Augustine explains here, the role of the Spirit in the interpretation of the text is an extension of the Spirit’s role in the inspiration of the text in the first place. We will return to this point when we deal with the contemporary approach to exegesis.

My final example from Cyril deals with a number of Old Testament passages, but this time Cyril does not connect them to Christ but to the practice of interpreting the Scriptures. In this case, Cyril seems to be aware that his interpretation might not be

plausible to his readers. Be sure to pay attention to the ways he tries to argue for its plausibility. This exegesis occurs in the preface to his *Commentary on John*. Cyril begins by making the point that it is a dangerous thing to comment on the Scriptures. As James says, “Let not many of you become teachers” (Jas 3:1). Cyril goes on to

You can’t really argue that connecting the tabernacle to Christ is typology, while connecting the furniture to Christ is allegory.

develop this point by bringing up a passage from Ecclesiastes 10, which he quotes from the Septuagint: “The one who chops wood will be endangered in the process. If the ax head slips, that person grimaces and will need more exertion” (Eccl 10:9-10). Cyril explains the passages this way:

It’s worth noting that Cyril is issuing a warning that figurative interpretation can go wrong.

He compares the sharp mind with the ax head because it is the sort of thing that pierces through and sinks into the innermost parts even though it is resisted by the thickness and density of the wood. The thoughts in the divinely inspired Scripture are figuratively referred to as “wood.” These thoughts turn the books that contain them into a kind of paradise of knowledge; even more, they are in labor, giving birth to the fruit bearing that comes from the Holy Spirit.²⁰

What do we make of this? Cyril thinks that the preacher of Ecclesiastes intends the passage to be taken figuratively so that chopping wood really refers to interpreting Scripture. Now if you look at Ecclesiastes 10, there is nothing in context that would suggest this connection, at least as far as I can see. But this does not deter Cyril. In fact, he enlarges upon the image. Not only are the thoughts of the Scriptures wood, but that makes the Scriptures themselves into a paradise, or garden, of knowledge that bears fruit. So, the principle here seems to be that it’s better if you can develop the image and bring out multiple aspects of it.

Cyril gets to the real point of the image as he correlates the details of chopping wood with the details of interpreting the Scriptures. He says,

The great danger . . . is that the ax head may slip. This happens when the mind is not borne along the lines of the true understanding of what is written but goes outside right judgment When this happens to someone, their soul, that is, their heart, will grimace and groan. They will also increase the exertion of those wicked powers that opposed them, which use pointed and perverted words to persuade the mind of the deceived.²¹

Now sometimes modern interpreters express the concern that the patristic pattern recognition approach can make the text mean anything you want it to mean, so it’s worth noting that Cyril is issuing a warning that figurative interpretation can go wrong. The ax head slips, as it were, when the interpreter departs from orthodoxy. So, orthodoxy, or piety (*eusebeia*), as Cyril often puts it, is an important presupposition of responsible exegesis.

Note also that Cyril breaks the flow of the passage when he interprets it figuratively. Ecclesiastes says that the woodchopper grimaces and needs more exertion. Cyril says that the interpreter grimaces but then transfers the exertion to the wicked powers that oppose correct interpretation. To me that seems to make the interpretation less plausible, but I'm not sure how Cyril or his readers would have felt about that.

In any case, he next feels it necessary to assert the correctness of his interpretation. "Let no one make the mistake," he says, "of thinking that this interpretation of the passage is either itself a mistake or that it is based on false reasoning in some way."²² This is the signal that Cyril anticipates that his readers may not be convinced by his exegesis. He knows he is pushing it, and he knows he needs to provide more evidence to convince them. How does he do that? By citing another passage about "wood."

If you make war against a city and besiege it for many days to take it, do not destroy its trees by cutting them down with an ax. You may eat from them, so do not remove them. A tree in the woods is not a person, is it, who enters the fort ahead of you? But do destroy and remove the tree that you know does not bear edible fruit (Dt 20:19–20).

So here we have a passage that mentions trees and an ax, but it does not actually say anything about Scripture. How does Cyril overcome this? He argues that it makes no sense for the passage to refer to trees. "I suppose it is clear to everyone," he says, "that the God of all would not have deemed it worthy to give such commands to us if he were talking about trees from the ground."²³ The principle here is that if the literal meaning of the text does not make sense, that is a signal to take it figuratively. Cyril's figurative interpretation in this case is that the trees in question are the Scripture texts quoted by heretics. Oppose the heretics, but don't reject a Scripture passage just because they quote it.

Now in case it is not obvious to the reader that God would never give such a command about literal trees, he goes on to demonstrate this from Scripture by citing two other passages. First, in Deuteronomy 7:5, God commands that all the trees around the altars of the nations be destroyed. Second, in Deuteronomy 16:21, God does not permit any trees to be planted around the altar of the Lord. So obviously God is not concerned about preserving trees. Cyril therefore feels he is justified in taking "trees" figuratively when God commands that they not be cut down during a siege in Deuteronomy 20.

And in case you are still not convinced, Cyril plays his trump card. "If I need to say anything more about this," he says, "I will speak in the manner of the supremely wise Paul, 'Is God concerned about trees? Does he not speak entirely for our sake?'"²⁴

Let that sink in for a moment. We find Cyril's interpretation to be less than plausible because he is ignoring the original context of the passages he cites. But it turns out that he is explicitly following the example of St. Paul. So, let's talk a little bit about that passage from Paul. In 1 Corinthians 9, Paul makes the point that he and Barnabas deserve to be paid. In support of this, he cites Deuteronomy 25:4, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out grain" (1 Cor 9:9). He defends this citation by asking, "Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake?" (1 Cor 9:9–10). The original context of Deuteronomy 25 does seem to be about oxen, not about paying apostles. But Paul is here saying that the original intent doesn't matter. The passage is really about the present situation.

Well, you might say, he is an inspired author, so he can get away with interpretive moves like that, but you cannot. Don't try this at home. I am frankly astonished by this response. First, it assumes that Paul sets a bad example for us in interpreting the Scriptures. Cyril obviously thinks Paul sets a good example. Second, it just seems weird to imagine that the Holy Spirit took the attitude that of course, we should ordinarily respect the original intent of a passage, but just this once we will make an exception. Or maybe a few other times. Sarah and Hagar are allegories of Mt. Sinai and the Jerusalem above (Gal 4:25–26). The rock that followed the Israelites through the desert was Christ (1 Cor 10:4). The Epistle to the Hebrews says that the body of the sacrificial animals were burned outside the camp in the Old Testament because Jesus suffered outside the city gate (Heb 13:11–12). It also says that Psalm 45 was addressed to the Son. Actually, there are a lot of passages in the New Testament that don't seem particularly concerned with the original context of the Old Testament passages they cite. Wouldn't it be more natural to imagine that the apostles are approaching the Old Testament with an assumption like Melito's that it is essentially a blueprint that points beyond itself, that the true meaning of the text is to be found in the larger story of salvation?

And in case you are still not convinced, Cyril plays his trump card.

But let us return to Cyril and gather up the lessons we can glean from his discussion of woodchopping and scriptural interpretation. First, Cyril is convinced that the patterns are there in the text; they are not something he is imposing on the text. There are ways, in his mind, to tell if you are perceiving the correct pattern. One would be whether it comports with the orthodox faith. Another would be whether the literal meaning of the text is odd or confusing. Still another would be whether the pattern can be found in multiple places. This is not an exhaustive list of criteria. But this at least gives us something to work with in interacting with the modern view.

If I may zoom out to the big picture for a moment, all of these factors fit very

nicely with the fact that the early fathers find the meaning of the text in its role in the larger story of salvation. They assume that the Scriptures are designed with these patterns built in. So, the repeatability of a pattern serves to make the interpretation more plausible.

Contemporary Approach

In contrast to this, the contemporary approach to exegesis is to understand any given passage in its original context as it was intended by the original human author and understood by the original audience. I will attempt to demonstrate this using some contemporary exegetes. Since the goal of this symposium is to reflect on how *we* read the Scriptures, I am going to limit myself to our own exegetes, not exegetes out there. More specifically, I will discuss James Voelz and Jeff Gibbs. I will discuss Voelz because he wrote the hermeneutics textbook that we use, *What Does This Mean?* And I will discuss Gibbs since I think he also has had a profound effect on our community. Also, it doesn't hurt that both Voelz and Gibbs wrote a commentary on a Gospel, and it just so happens that Cyril of Alexandria did too, so some interesting comparisons might be possible. Let me just note that Gibbs's three-volume commentary on Matthew is longer than the entire Bible, and it dwarfs Cyril's magisterial *Commentary on John* in length!

I want to start with a few points from James Voelz's *What Does This Mean?* that I think are relevant to this discussion. The first is the importance of authorial intent. One of the features that makes Voelz's book unique (and indeed postmodern) is that he focuses quite a bit on the role of the reader in the interpretive process. His point is that in order to be a competent reader of the text, one needs to be the kind of reader envisioned by the author. That is, the reader who shares the author's assumptions and worldview is going to be a more competent reader of a given text than one who doesn't. So, despite the importance of the reader, the goal of the enterprise is to understand what the human author intends to convey.

Now Voelz does allow for some amount of what I am calling "spiritual interpretation" on the grounds that Scripture is both human and divine. It is human in that it has human authors. It is divine in that God is the ultimate author. However, when it comes to balancing these two aspects, it is fair to say that Voelz tends to give preference to the human aspect. For example, he cautions against Docetism, which would mean, in this context, ignoring the fact that the Scriptures were written by human authors in a particular historical context. "It is, for example, a question," he says, "whether one can easily interpret a passage from the Gospel of Mark with a verse from Ecclesiastes, or vice versa."²⁵ He does not say this is not allowed, but he expresses caution about the procedure. Cyril, as we have seen, throws caution to the wind!

This caution makes a lot of sense, however, if the primary goal of exegesis is to discern the intended meaning of the human author. If you want to know what

Mark was thinking, the most obvious place to look is in Mark. So Voelz thinks the pattern recognition game is legitimate to a point because of the divine authorship of Scripture, but he wants to put the brakes on it.

One way he does that is to focus on major themes, not minor ones in the Scriptures. To that end, he turns his attention to the question of what the major theme of the Bible is. His answer is that it is the “active reign and rule of God in history.”²⁶ The implication here, which we can see play out in Voelz’s commentary on Mark, is that if you can find a set of patterns that ties into *this* theme, then it’s probably legitimate.

To give one example from *What Does This Mean?*, Voelz asserts that it is legitimate to “matrix the earthquake at Philippi (Acts 16:26) with the description of the visitation of Yahweh at the end of days in Isaiah 24 and Zephaniah 3 and understand it as an eschatological manifestation of the kingdom of God.”²⁷ Note that he does not insist here that there needs to be a lot of similarities between the verbiage or the details of the narrative. The key fact justifying the interpretation is that the earthquake in all three texts can be connected to the major theme in Scripture: the active reign and rule of God.

On the other hand, Voelz expresses doubt about a procedure which would focus on minor details. In a discussion of the interpretation of parables, he faults the church fathers for thinking that all the items of the parable need to be “deciphered,” which results in an interpretation that he feels is “overly complicated and unnatural.”²⁸ What he says here about the interpretation of parables I think is an apt description of our sense about interpretation in general. Why does it seem natural that the tabernacle is a pattern for Christ’s incarnation, but it does not seem natural to us that every stick of furniture in the tabernacle is fulfilled in Christ? It is because when the focus becomes too granular, we feel that it is unnatural. Why is this the case?

Voelz does not engage this question specifically, but he makes a comment on another topic that could be helpful for this one as well. When he raises the question whether texts have a purpose, he says, “Texts have meaning which is intended. We know this, not from being receptors of various texts. **We know this from being producers of various kinds of texts. Text production—our text production—is not aimless.**”²⁹ So if I were to present a paper at a conference taking a radical postmodern view that authorial intent is irrelevant because texts have no meaning, Voelz would stand up and say, “So I take it you are adopting an Eastern Orthodox position.” When I respond, “No, you have completely misunderstood my paper,” he would come back with, “Oh, so texts do have meanings after all!” When I write a paper, I have some purpose in doing so, and I intend my paper to convey some specific meaning.

That is one of those things that is pretty obvious once you say it, but it is profound. We might apply the same principle to how we know which non-literal

interpretations are legitimate and which are not. How do we know that focusing on major themes, for example, is legitimate, but focusing on tiny details is, to use Voelz's phrase, "overly complicated and unnatural"? I suspect this sense too arises from our experience as producers of texts. For example, one might observe that the first two paragraphs of my paper begin with the term "every" followed by a time reference. If you were to ask me if I intended to disclose some deep hidden meaning with those phrases, I would reply, "No, it's just a coincidence. I meant nothing by starting the first two paragraphs with the word *every*."

If I were writing a narrative, on the other hand, I might well include some details that foreshadow important themes. A confrontation with evil, for example, may well occur in darkness. When Luke Skywalker confronts Darth Vader in a light-saber fight in *The Empire Strikes Back*, for example, the room is darkened. The darkness is probably explained as symbolic and not by asserting that Darth Vader just forgot to turn on the lights.

You might say that what we find natural and convincing are patterns that are big and easy to find, like simple geometric shapes. If we imagine a narrative that looks like a mountain range, for example, then we would be looking for large triangles to direct us to what parts we should matrix together. So, if we imagine that the Bible is constructed the way we would write a book, then we are going to limit ourselves to large themes when we do figural interpretation. The church fathers, on the other hand, assume that the Scriptures are arranged more like fractals, where patterns can recur on any level of magnification. You would almost have to be God to write a book like that! But if you imagine that the Bible is constructed like that, then you could legitimately make connections between patterns, no matter what the level of granularity is.

Now I will turn to a few representative pericopes to see how our contemporary interpreters handle them.

Feeding of the 5000

In Voelz's commentary on Mark, he raises the question of whether the interpreter may connect the feeding of the 5000 with the Eucharist. His answer is yes, but only indirectly. Both the feeding of the 5000 and the Lord's Supper prefigure the eschatological banquet, which is the culmination of the reign of God. So, while one should not connect the feeding of the 5000 directly with the Lord's Supper, one can get there by drawing a line to the eschatological banquet and then back to the Lord's Supper, as it were. Note the caution here about the game of pattern recognition. One important way to control excesses is to limit the patterns to those that can fit with the main theme of Scripture, which is the active reign and rule of God.

Now it might not surprise you to hear that Cyril of Alexandria has no such hesitation when he interprets the feeding of the 5000 from John 6. Interestingly,

however, he does not connect the bread and fish to the Eucharist but to the Old and New Testaments. The five loaves signify the five books of Moses, since barley is coarse and the Old Testament is written in earthly figures, while the two fish signify the New Testament because the apostles who wrote the New Testament were fishermen, or at least some of them were.³⁰ The twelve baskets of leftovers, one for each apostle, show that the apostles do not go unrewarded for their efforts. And there is no doubt that this reward, Cyril notes, “will pass also to the rulers of the holy churches.”³¹ So taken as a whole, the spiritual meaning of the feeding of the 5000 is that pastors, to use Lutheran terminology, feed God’s people with both the Old and New Testament, and God will reward their efforts. Unlike Voelz, Cyril simply assumes that the pattern is there. He does not feel the need to argue it.

Unlike Voelz, Cyril simply assumes that the pattern is there.

Calming of the Storm

I turn now to the interpretive move that you are not supposed to make but everyone does it anyway: Jesus calms the storms of our lives. Jeff Gibbs is particularly clear and cogent on this point. He states, “Too often the account of Jesus’s stilling of the storm has been read as if it were an allegory rather than a historical narrative.”³² What does he mean by that? He is saying that one should read the text as a historical narrative, which would mean that you interpret the text in its immediate context so that the point of the pericope matches what Matthew is trying to do in that section of the Gospel. Gibbs states that this is to stress the extent of Jesus’s authority.³³

But what many people do instead is to change the meaning of the text so that it is about us and our lives directly. This Gibbs calls “allegory.” The text talks about Jesus showing his authority by calming an actual storm, while many interpret it to be about metaphorical storms in our own lives. Gibbs explains,

In such allegorizing interpretations of the account, the physical storm on the sea becomes a metaphor for “the storms of life.” The disciples in their fear become a symbol for “every Christian in difficulty,” and Jesus’s miraculous quieting of the storm becomes a promise that “God will deliver us from the storms of life.” In some such readings, the boat in which the disciples and Jesus are located may also be a symbol for “the church.”³⁴

Why is this wrong? Because according to Gibbs, “no evident textual features compel or even urge us to read 8:23–27 as an allegory or parable or symbolic story.” And he goes on to say that “the time-honored and ancient view that the boat is a symbol for the church has *no* basis in NT texts themselves.”³⁵

A few remarks on Gibbs's thought process are in order. First, he at least initially suggests that one has to choose between treating the passage as a historical narrative or an allegory. This is quite a different assumption than a church father like Cyril of Alexandria would bring to the text. His assumption is that all texts at least potentially have both. Gibbs does soften his position a bit later. He says,

Now, let me affirm my conviction that the First Evangelist (or any of the others, for that matter) is certainly capable of portraying historical incidents in ways that also invite the hearers/readers to find symbolic or "deeper" spiritual significance. The evangelist John is particularly adept at this, and Matthew himself probably intends such a narrative in the healing of the two blind men in 20:29–34.³⁶

Then he goes on to say that there are no textual features in this text that would warrant such an interpretation. So, the assumption is that the text might have a spiritual meaning or might be meant to address our lives directly, but this is relatively rare in Matthew and requires some kind of textual signal in order to justify such an interpretation.

What kind of textual signal would justify it? In the healing of the two blind men in Matthew 20, Matthew contrasts the blindness of the two men with the spiritual blindness of the crowd. The mention of spiritual blindness in the text serves as a signal that Matthew intends the readers to reflect on their own spiritual blindness. But the absence of such a signal in Mathew 9 indicates that such a spiritual interpretation is unwarranted because Mathew does not intend it.

Voelz's approach to the calming of the sea in Mark is similar, though slightly more open to the pattern recognition game. He notes that it is easy to see the boat as the church, the disciples as believers, and the storm as the "storms of life" and is willing to concede that "such an interpretation should not be rejected out of hand."³⁷ However, he insists "the metaphoric meaning suggested can never be the *main* meaning of this text." That is because the narrative context concerns "the identity of Jesus, the disciples' understanding, and the mystery of the presence of the reign and rule of God."³⁸ Here

again the meaning of the text is to be determined by the original meaning of the human author in its narrative and historical context.

There is also a calming of the storm in John 6, so we can compare what Cyril does with it in his *Commentary on John*. Cyril first paraphrases the narrative and notes

The meaning of the text is to be determined by the original meaning of the human author in its narrative and historical context.

that the disciples had lost hope and that Jesus's miraculous appearance restored hope to them. So, the first thing Cyril does is to pay attention to the logic of the narrative. Then he makes his move. He says,

Notice how Christ does not immediately appear to those in the boat when they set sail, or even at the beginning of the danger. He appears only when they are many stadia from the land. That is because the grace of the Savior does not visit us at the beginning of the circumstances that trouble us but when fear is at its height, and the danger already shows itself to be strong, and we find ourselves in the midst of waves of trouble, so to speak. Then Christ appears unexpectedly. He attends to our fears and will free us from all danger when, by his ineffable power, he changes what we dread into a sea of tranquility.³⁹

So, in effect, Jesus calms the storms of our lives. Not only that, but the precise timing of Jesus appearance is highly significant and needs to be matched to our own experience in order to interpret the passage correctly.

It is possible to compare Cyril, Voelz, and Gibbs in the following way. For Cyril, the narrative of the calming of the storm has its own logic and meaning, but there is a spiritual meaning as well. And that spiritual meaning is the true point of the passage. For Voelz, there is the narrative meaning and a spiritual meaning both of which are legitimate, but only the narrative meaning is the main point of the passage. For Gibbs, only the narrative meaning is legitimate because there are no textual indications that Matthew intends you to take the passage symbolically for our own lives.

Dialog Between the Two Approaches

Now let me try to make the case for our contemporary approach and then bring it into dialogue with the patristic one. I want to thank Devin Murphy for his conversation that helped me clarify some of these thoughts. First, if you apply the text directly to our lives, you are doing little or no exegetical work but are engaging in a relatively mindless process of interpretation. Jesus calms the storms of our lives. He also heals the blind man, which means he heals all our metaphorical blindness. He cast out demons, and don't we all have our demons that we struggle with? This is not limited to New Testament miracle texts either. David slew Goliath, and so God helps us overcome the Goliaths in our lives. If you have listened to sermons for any length of time, you can see this kind of thing coming from a mile away. So, the first problem is, it's mindless.

The second problem is that this method easily plays into the tendency to make Jesus into our personal servant for all the problems in our lives: our storms, our blindness, our demons, our Goliaths, or what have you. This has the effect of

The second problem is that this method easily plays into the tendency to make Jesus into our personal servant for all the problems in our lives.

reversing the relationship between creator and creature. We become lords, in a sense, and Jesus is our servant. I teach in the Systematics department, and in my department, we sometimes call this moral therapeutic deism. So, when Gibbs insists that Matthew's intention is to stress the extent of Jesus's authority rather than to calm the anxieties out of lives, this is important not only for exegetical theology, but for systematic theology as well.

What would Cyril think? I think he would actually affirm both of these concerns. He is constantly urging his reader to practice *akribeia*, or painstaking attention to the text, so there is no way that he would be satisfied with mindless exegesis. I think Cyril actually had the entire Bible memorized, which allows him to detect patterns that are not obvious to the casual reader, or at least not to me. Who in our day would think of the angels asking Jesus, "Where did you get these wounds on your hands?" and Jesus replying, "I got them at the house of my beloved"?

When Jesus refers to John the Baptist as a "burning and shining light" (Jn 5:35), Cyril is not satisfied with the obvious explanation that everyone is familiar with the notion that John is the "lamp" referred to in Psalm 132:17, "I have prepared a lamp for my Christ."⁴⁰ Cyril says, "Since the word of the Savior draws us to deep meanings and clearly all but demands that we grasp more precise explanations, by indicating not simply that John was a 'lamp' but also 'burning and shining,' we thought it necessary to pay closer attention to the force of the words and to track down the beauty of the truth."⁴¹ He then goes on to point out that in the regulations for the tabernacle, it calls for an oil lamp that is to "burn" for light. The oil suggests the Holy Spirit who brought about the spiritual illumination in John's message. The fact that the lamp is in the tabernacle shows that the message of the Spirit is received in the church, but the fact that it can be seen from outside the veil suggests that John brings a simpler introductory illumination compared with the illumination Jesus brings.⁴² So by paying careful attention to the text and noticing that Jesus calls John not just a "lamp" but a "burning and shining" lamp, Cyril pulls in the oil lamp from the tabernacle into his exposition and goes beyond what he considers the obvious connection with Psalm 132. Throughout the *Commentary on John*, Cyril is not satisfied with the easy explanations that everyone is familiar with. He constantly urges us to dig deeper.

As for the second contemporary concern, that direct application to our lives tends to make Jesus into our personal servant, I think Cyril would say, Then don't always make the application to our lives. The patristic pattern recognition game is looking

for patterns everywhere: between the Old and New Testament, between the Scripture text and doctrine, the church, preaching, sacraments, ministry, pedagogy, catechesis, and yes, even the struggles of our daily lives. So, the patristic solution I believe would be to advise us to expand the pattern recognition, not contract it.

Now we might turn the tables and allow the patristic authors to voice some concerns about our contemporary approach. It seems to me one concern they might have is, “Don’t you people believe in God?!” Or more soberly put, You twenty-first-century Christians formally affirm that the Scriptures are inspired by the Holy Spirit, but then you draw no hermeneutical implications from that. You make the intent of the human author determinative. And you assume that the meaning in Scripture is encoded in the way you would encode meaning if you were writing. In other words, you interpret Scripture with the same principles you would use for any other book. You also seem to need to do contortions to allow the Bible to actually address us. Augustine assumes that the meanings and connections that occur to the reader are part of the work of the Holy Spirit, but you go out of your way to limit the meanings and connections that you will allow. To this I would imagine the contemporary exegete might respond, Well if you are going to use the Holy Spirit like a trump card, then you can make the Bible mean anything you want it to mean!

So, these are the main lines of disagreement as I see it. Since the church fathers see the meaning of the text primarily in its place in the larger story of salvation, they are free to find patterns. Since the contemporary exegete finds the meaning of the text primarily in the original intent of the human author, the possibility for pattern recognition is much more limited.

Let me close with a word about how all of this relates to homiletics, which is the subject of our final plenary presentation. It has long been my contention that the most immediate practical result of increased attention to patristic exegesis would be in the field of homiletics. By that I do not mean that preachers would start including comments from various church fathers in their sermon, though I’m not opposed to that. No, the primary contribution would be that preachers would start thinking more like the church fathers when they approach the Scriptures in the first place. This would result in freshness and creativity along with a deeply christological message.

As it stands, I believe that our students feel constrained, perhaps overly constrained, when it comes to what they can say about the Scriptures in a sermon. Recall the students’ reaction to Cyril’s account of Jesus’s baptism. “Are we allowed to say that?” This is a question I leave for the other presenters to wrestle with.

Endnotes

- 1 Wis 1:5, 4, as cited by Cyril in his comments on John 1:32–33 in Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, trans. David R. Maxwell, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 82.
- 2 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 1:32–33 (Maxwell 1:81–85).
- 3 Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 103.
- 4 Boersma, 103.
- 5 Jacques Guillet, “Les exégèses d’Alexandrie et d’Antioche: conflit ou malentendu?” *Recherches de science religieuse* 34 (1947): 257–302.
- 6 Peter Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008): 288.
- 7 Jean Daniélou, “Qu’est-ce que la typologie?” in *L’Ancien Testament et les chrétiens*, ed. P. Aubray, et al. (Paris: Éditions du Cer, 1951), 199, cited in Martens, 286.
- 8 R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen’s Interpretation of Scripture* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959; reprint, with an introduction by J.W. Trigg: Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 7, cited in Martens, 289.
- 9 Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 162, cited in Martens, 291.
- 10 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, trans. David R. Maxwell, ed. Joel C. Elowsky (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2015), 375. Note that when Cyril cites the Old Testament, he uses the Septuagint.
- 11 Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, trans. Marjorie Gabain (New York: Free Press, 1970), 27.
- 12 Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha* 36, in *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha With the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans*, trans. Alistaire Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 46.
- 13 Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha* 69 (Stewart-Sykes, 56).
- 14 Cf. Boersma, 12.
- 15 Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha* 32 (Stewart-Sykes, 45).
- 16 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 6:68 (Maxwell 1:256).
- 17 Guillet actually suggests this as a criterion to distinguish good and bad figurative reading (Guillet, 301).
- 18 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 8:28 (Maxwell 1:342–343).
- 19 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* 3.38, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), 186.
- 20 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, Preface (Maxwell 1:1).
- 21 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, Preface (Maxwell 1:1–2).
- 22 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, Preface (Maxwell 1:2).
- 23 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, Preface (Maxwell 1:2).
- 24 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, Preface (Maxwell 1:2).
- 25 Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 242.
- 26 Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 245.
- 27 Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 262.
- 28 Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 308.
- 29 Voelz, *What Does This Mean?*, 213. Boldface in original.
- 30 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 6:11 (Maxwell 1:186).
- 31 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 6:12–13 (Maxwell 1:188).
- 32 Jeffrey Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 440.
- 33 Jeffrey Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 444.
- 34 Jeffrey Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 440.
- 35 Jeffrey Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 442–443.

- 36 Jeffrey Gibbs, *Matthew 1:1–11:1*, 442.
37 Voelz, *Mark 1:1–8:26*, 338–339.
38 Voelz, *Mark 1:1–8:26*, 339.
39 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 6:19–20 (Maxwell 1:191).
40 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 5:35 (Maxwell 1:164–165).
41 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 5:35 (Maxwell 1:165).
42 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John* 5:35 (Maxwell 1:165).

If You Cannot Preach Like Augustine . . . Don't Worry About It!

Timothy Saleska



Timothy E. Saleska is professor of exegetical theology and dean of Ministerial Formation at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. His areas of interest and expertise include Hebrew and the history of exegesis. He

is particularly interested in the book of Psalms, namely how Christians read and meditate on them, and the history of their interpretation in the church. Saleska's latest publication is *Psalms 1–50*, Concordia Commentary (Concordia Publishing House, 2020).

First, I'd like to thank the members of the symposium committee for asking me to be here today. And I want to assure you that I am *almost* happy you asked me to do this.

When Erik Herrmann called me, he told me that the committee wanted me to compare how I interpret the Old Testament with how the church fathers interpreted it. And do it in thirty minutes, give or take. "Well," I said, "I

am so very thankful you've narrowed the topic to something manageable." But I was also immediately worried. I knew that accepting the job would put me behind the eight ball in two ways. First, it would open the door to arguments over my personal interpretive practices. And as Tertullian said, "Arguments over Scripture achieve nothing but a stomachache or a headache."¹ I am not a big fan of either. Second, I am not an expert on the church fathers, and I knew that this room would be filled with people who know much more about them than I do.

"Don't worry about that," Erik said, a little too enthusiastically. "You don't need to know a lot about the church fathers. We want someone like you. You could write this paper in your sleep." I interpreted this to mean, "Don't worry about that. We want someone who doesn't know what they're talking about. It'll be fun." "As an added bonus," Erik said, "You'll be doing this with Paul Raabe. That should be a real *hoot*." Well, the idea that I should think of Paul and me as your after-dinner entertainment has a certain *je ne sais quoi* to it that I couldn't resist.

So, I thought it would be a hoot to look at Augustine's interpretation of some Old Testament texts in his sermons. Augustine's sermons on the Old Testament are very accessible.² Also, by reading his sermons I could learn something about how Augustine interprets an OT text on his way to using it in his preaching, and that would be even more fun.

Obviously, here I can only give you an appetizer. And I hope that you find what I say to be at least slightly appetizing. I also hope that it will encourage you to continue to reflect on your own interpretive practices as you put Scripture to work in your preaching.

1 Kings 3:16–28

My first example is the famous story in 1 Kings 3, showcasing Solomon's wisdom. Augustine probably commented on this text around AD 412.³ I chose it because this is one of the few sermons in which Augustine deals at length with an Old Testament narrative.⁴ Augustine's interpretation of the story is complex, and so I have to limit my observations, but I will do my best to be fair to him.

After praising Solomon's God-given wisdom, Augustine begins his interpretation with an assumption about the character of the Old Testament. It's an assumption that appears in other sermons as well. He says, ". . . since the divine books of the Old Testament normally provide not only a faithful record of past events but also an intimation of the mysteries to be revealed in future ones, we should consider whether this passage of scripture is pointing in these two women to something else represented and symbolized by them."⁵

This is the assumption that enables Augustine's reasoning about the meaning of the text to get started. Although Augustine comes up with two possible interpretations, I will discuss only the first.⁶ (I also need to warn you that you may find his interpretation to be offensive. That's okay because it makes me uncomfortable too. But what Augustine does with this text appears in other sermons as well. It's not unique. So, with that caveat, I plunge ahead.)

Augustine begins by asserting that the two women in the text are the *Synagogue* and the *Church*.⁷ And we come to learn that the two babies, at least initially, *both* refer to Christ. The woman who killed her baby in her sleep is the *Synagogue*. This is obvious to Augustine because he maintains (incorrectly) that the Jews are the ones who killed Christ, their son according to the flesh, in their sleep. The *sleep* of this woman refers to the fact that the Jews followed the light of this present life and didn't see the revelation Jesus gave them. "Sleep" here refers to spiritual blindness.

The other woman who didn't kill her child, is the *Church*, because the Church did not kill Christ. But why is it right to think that the Church is Christ's mother? Augustine answers with Jesus's words, "Whoever does the will of my Father, this is my mother and brother and sister (Mt 12:50)."

What about the meaning of *this* woman's (the Church's) sleep which allowed the babies to be switched in the first place? Augustine interprets the sleep of this woman (the Church) in the light of Acts and Galatians.

He begins by alluding to Acts 15, where men from Judea told the Christians at Antioch that they needed to be circumcised to be saved. This story explains the switch of the babies. That is, these men wanted to foist circumcision, the dead symbol, on the Church who believed in Christ, like a lifeless body switched in the night. (Here, the dead baby seems to refer to the rite of circumcision.)

How could such a switch in teachings happen? Augustine says that the "sleep of folly" had fallen on the Church. He explains that in Galatians, Paul is speaking to this problem, and Paul is trying to shake the Church out of her foolish sleep when he asks, "O foolish Galatians, who has bewitched you (Gal 3:1)?" and "Are you so foolish that after beginning by the Spirit you now are ending with the flesh (3:3)?"

Augustine says that the church was awakened by Paul's speaking, just like the sleeping woman in 1 Kings 3 woke up and realized what had happened. The story Paul used to awaken the church was the story of Hagar and Sarah in Genesis 16, of which he gives a figurative interpretation in Galatians 4:21–26. Paul's interpretation of the Hagar and Sarah story plays well with Augustine's interpretation of 1 Kings 3.

Augustine has more granularity than I can discuss, but this is enough of a sample to give you a taste of his interpretation. As you might expect, I am dubious. Augustine hooks 1 Kings 3 to New Testament texts and events in ways that I would never dream of doing. He finds references to future events or theological truths in details of the story that I think are only details of the story. As a result, in the process of uncovering a story about the church vs. synagogue, Augustine ends up missing what God is doing through Solomon.

One of the things I would do differently is to construct my interpretation of this story within the context of Samuel-Kings. This story takes place after Solomon had won the battle to succeed David as the king (described in 1 Kings 1–2). That story is all about *power* and the brutal exercise of power. Adonijah vs. Solomon. In this part of the narrative, God is operating behind the scenes. So, for example, we don't know why God chose Solomon and not Adonijah.

But this changes in 1 Kings 3, where God takes center stage. At Gibeon, God appears to Solomon in a dream and says, "Ask what I should give you." Solomon asks

Augustine says that the church was awakened by Paul's speaking, just like the sleeping woman in 1 Kings 3 woke up and realized what had happened.

for a wise and discerning heart. And God promises to give him these and more. Our story follows on the heels of this episode, and it reinforces the theological truth that what Yhwh promises, he does.

Solomon's display of wisdom meant something to Israel as well. The narrator says, "All Israel stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to do justice." On the horizontal level of Israel's lived experience, the wisdom and justice with which Solomon ruled meant good things ahead for them. Under wise king Solomon, Israel would prosper. On the vertical axis, the people saw that Yhwh was working in Solomon for their good not their evil. God favored them with a good king.

But this does not exhaust the meaning of the text. There are important theological aspects for *Israel of that time and place* which Augustine overlooks. That is to say, within the wider context of Solomon's life, this story is part of a pattern of evidence for Israel that Solomon was the King God promised David in 2 Samuel 7.⁸ The description of Solomon's reign, the magnificent temple, the visit of the Queen of Sheba, the description of Solomon's wealth, all make Solomon's kingdom sound like a utopia. Near the end of 1 Kings 10, the narrator says, "Thus, King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of them brought his present, articles of silver and gold, garments, myrrh, spices,

horses, and mules, so much year by year (1 Kgs 10:23–24)." And a couple of verses later he adds, "And the king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stone and he made cedar as plentiful as the sycamore of the Shephelah (1 Kgs 10:27)." In Solomon, Israel saw that God had quickly done what he promised David.

But ultimately, Solomon was not the one. He was only a shadow of the king who would establish David's throne forever.

And yet, I already suspect that no, Solomon is not the one. For what about the other woman who lost her child because of a horrible accident? She had to bear her grief and shame. Solomon could not set things right for her or her dead child. And the next chapter proves the accuracy of my instincts. Foreign women turn Solomon's heart away from the Lord. Yhwh raises adversaries against him, and after Solomon's death, the kingdom was torn into two. In this part of the story, God's kingdom has become hidden and the promise to David far away.

And so, on one hand, God's promised kingdom seemed to be visibly and tangibly present in Solomon's reign. But ultimately, Solomon was not the one. He was only a shadow of the king who would establish David's throne forever.

God worked faith and hope through Solomon and his reign like he worked faith and hope in prophetic preaching.

I hope you can sense the tension in my interpretation of this text—the tension between what we usually call the tension between the now and the not yet. When I read the Old Testament, I usually feel the now-not yet tension, and that shapes the direction of my interpretation. So, on the one hand, we can describe Solomon's reign as a shadow of the kingdom to come. That is, it points to a brilliant future. But on the other hand, we can also describe Solomon's reign as a foretaste or a first fruits, or a visible ahead of time manifestation of the future promise. In other words, the future had in a small way already broken into the present.

I can explain the relevance of this by juxtaposing this story of Solomon's wisdom with a spoken prophecy like Isaiah's, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord . . ." (Is 11:1–2).

I am pairing these texts to help you see that God worked faith and hope through Solomon and his reign like he worked faith and hope in prophetic preaching. As my Old Testament professor, Horace Hummel said, "prophecy is to typology as word is to sacrament." That is to say, God gave Israel his promises through the word spoken by prophets, and he also gave his promises visibly in the events/people/institutions that he gave to them.

Isaiah preached this word of promise to nurture Israel's faith like modern preachers proclaim God's word to nurture our faith. And God gave Israel Solomon's reign, as both shadow and foretaste, in order to assure Israel that his promise was not empty, like he gave us the sacraments—visible signs connected with God's promise—to nurture our faith. Thus, when I interpret the OT, I tend to interpret something like Solomon and his reign within a sacramental perspective.

Through it all, Israel learned that they had to wait and trust God's word, until a son of David even greater than Solomon would come and do what God had promised David. One who would also astound God's people with his wisdom and mighty works (Mt 13:54).

And of course, that one has come. As Jesus said to the scribes and Pharisees, "The queen of the South will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon, and behold, something greater than Solomon is here" (Mt 12:42).

In Jesus, God fulfilled the promise he made to David that in his seed he would establish the throne of his kingdom forever. As Paul said, Jesus was not yes and no,

Like Israel, we too live in this now-not yet tension.

but in him it is always yes. All the promises of God find their “yes” in him (2 Cor 1:19–20). In Jesus, God fulfilled all that he had promised David. Yet, since Jesus ascended to

reign at the right hand of his Father, we have to wait for him to return and manifest his kingdom for all to see. Like Israel, we too live in this now-not yet tension as we wait for Jesus to come and resolve the tension.

As I reflect on Augustine’s interpretation, it seems to me that for Augustine, more is hidden under this story than is revealed. As a result, while Augustine certainly believed in the historicity of the events in this story, he takes little account of their theological importance for Israel—of the fact that in Solomon, God gave Israel a foretaste of the kingdom that was to come.⁹

For me, it is the opposite. God reveals more than he hides. The almighty God was near and was exercising his wise and just reign through Solomon. It was present for all to see, and Israel and Solomon knew it. Because of what I assume about how the promise-fulfillment dynamic works in the Scriptures, when I read this story, I see that the eschaton came (in part) to Israel ahead of time. In Solomon, God gave Israel a taste of the salvation that all Israel will experience at the end of time. So, as I see it, the historical event in 1 Kings 3, functions both as fulfillment and promise. The future is both present and promised.

Psalm 85:11(12)

The next text I want to look at is Psalm 85:11a (12a), *Truth springs from the earth*. Augustine used this verse in several of his Christmas Day sermons, and so I figure that Augustine liked his interpretation of this verse.¹⁰ Of all Augustine’s sermons that I read, this group of Christmas Day sermons are the ones I liked the most. Parts of them are rhetorically powerful, and I hope to show you a sample of that too.

Psalm 85 easily divides into four stanzas. Augustine’s text, *Truth springs from the earth*, is in the middle of the last stanza of the poem. This stanza follows the poet’s assertion in the previous verse, “Surely his salvation is near to those who fear him. (Near) is (his) glory to dwelling in our land.”¹¹ Following that verse, with this last stanza, the poet describes what that salvation will be like when it is revealed, what it will be like when Yhwh’s Glory is dwelling in the land.

What will it be like? Like nothing you’ve ever experienced, and so—fittingly—the poet gives us a description that fits nothing in our experience. To give us the experience of beyond human experience, the poet does two things. First, rather than giving us less abstraction in order to fill up the abstract word “salvation” with content, he gives us more abstraction. As you can see, he invokes the abstract nouns most commonly used when Israel’s preachers and poets plead to Yhwh for deliverance or

express their deepest hopes and fears, words with a long history of meaning and use in Israel's stories, prayers, and songs, words like **חַסֵּד** (steadfast love) and **אֱמֻנָה** (truth or faithfulness), **צְדָקָה** (righteousness), and **שְׁלוֹמ** (peace).

So, with one hand, the poet gives us the comforting familiarity of these words, but with the other he takes the familiarity away by paring these words with unlikely verbs—verbs that set the abstract nouns into action. The abstractions do things—people things, plant things. Steadfast love and faithfulness *meet*. Righteousness and peace *kiss* each other. Truth *sprouts up* from the ground. Righteousness *looks down* from the sky, and *walks* before Yhwh, and prepares the way for him to come into the world. In my mind, I cannot picture what this looks like.¹² I cannot pin the language down. The poet delivers joyful anticipation and mystery in one, neat poetic package. How will Yhwh show these words to be true? I have to wait to find out.

This kind of language is not common in the psalms (cf. Ps 126; Ps 61:7). The psalm that it has the most in common with is, coincidentally, Psalm 72. A psalm for or by Solomon. In Psalm 72, similar language is used to describe Israel's high hopes attached to the reign of Solomon.

Another place where this language has parallels is in the prophets.¹³ One commentary labels Psalm 85:10–14 as a compendium of the great promises of salvation in biblical prophecy.¹⁴ For example, in Isaiah 32, after warning a complacent Jerusalem that a drought was coming, Isaiah promises them that their judgment will have a limit. It will last, “until the Spirit is poured out upon us from on high . . . then justice will dwell in the wilderness, and righteousness abide in the fruitful field. And the work of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness, and trust forever” (Is 32:15–20).

In Isaiah 45, after God announced that Cyrus, of all people, was his choice to deliver Israel, Isaiah says, “Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the clouds rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation and righteousness may bear fruit; let the earth cause them both to sprout; I the Lord have created it” (Is 45:8). If I interpret Psalm 85:10–14 in the light of these texts, the conditions they express are attached to the rule of a king. Both Solomon and Cyrus brought a small measure of peace and righteousness and faithfulness to Israel, but their deeds hardly fit the expansive prophetic descriptions assigned to them. Still, the prophets seem to be inviting people to look at even these kings and trust that in God there is much more to come.

The poet gives us the comforting familiarity of these words, but with the other he takes the familiarity away by paring these words with unlikely verbs.

And we still believe this, which is why Psalm 85 is sometimes used in the season of Advent.¹⁵ In Advent, we look forward to celebrating the birth of our king who came in the past to save us. And like Israel, we wait for him to come again. We look forward to the day when our Lord will come and reveal a rule and reign that lives up to the language of Psalm 85.

While I have been long winded, Augustine's interpretation of a single line in Psalm 85 is straight forward. *Truth has sprung up from the earth.* In the word *truth* Augustine identifies Christ. The phrase *springs from the earth* means that Christ was born out of the womb of his mother, the virgin Mary. Augustine explains his logic in Sermon 189, "Where did Mary come from? From Adam. Where did Adam come from? From earth. If Adam's from earth, and Mary's from Adam, then Mary too is earth, let us realize what we are singing, *Truth has sprung from the earth.*"¹⁶

Augustine's way of reasoning out the meaning of this text is different than mine, and the easy move that he makes from the word "earth," to Mary's womb, via Genesis 2, looks like a bad move to me. I remain unconvinced.

And yet, what he does with the text is beautiful. One of the notable characteristics of Augustine's Christmas and Epiphany sermons is his use of paradox in order to help us experience the wonder and mystery of Christ's incarnation. Here, Augustine becomes a poet. He takes Psalm 85:11 and puts it to work in his poetry, and through his poetry I experience the mystery—not of the eschaton—but of the incarnation.

While Augustine and I both interpret texts in light of the story of salvation, and we both use Scripture to interpret Scripture, his way of hooking texts together that seems obvious and natural to him does not seem obvious and natural to me. You can see this in the different ways that Augustine and I interpret 1 Kings 3 and Psalm 85. While we both believe that these texts point towards a future fulfillment, we differ on how we conceive of that future and how these texts work to do the pointing.

Hidden under the Old Testament signs, in a very granular way, as Dave Maxwell said, Augustine uncovered stories told in the New Testament—the incarnation of Jesus and events in the early church. Events that have already taken place. He does not interpret these texts in light of the coming eschaton.

But for me, 1 Kings 3 gives Israel a *foretaste* of the eschaton, and the poetry of Psalm 85 finds its ultimate fulfillment there as well—but the eschaton understood in that now-not yet way. That is, *ultimately*, these texts point to Israel's future fulfilled when Jesus comes again, in events still to come. But at the same time,

While I have been long winded, Augustine's interpretation of a single line in Psalm 85 is straight forward.

penultimately, God has already fulfilled the promise he made to David in Jesus's first coming, ahead of time. That is why it is common among us to talk about Jesus in two ways. We say that Jesus is Israel condensed into one—Jesus is the Son of David in whom God fulfilled his promises to Israel. And we also say that Jesus is the *first fruits* of those who have fallen asleep. He is going to come again in all his glory.¹⁷

Exodus 3:13–15 is a famous text that has raised the curiosity of ancient and modern readers alike.

Exodus 3:13–15

The last text that I want to discuss is Exodus 3:13–15. In this case, Augustine gave me a perspective that I admire. Exodus 3:13–15 is a famous text that has raised the curiosity of ancient and modern readers alike.¹⁸ In one of his sermons, Augustine lists a few of the text's curious details, all of which you would recognize.¹⁹ Here I have time to discuss only one.

Augustine notices that when Moses asked God's name, God said, "Tell them, *I am who I am*." But in the next verse, God said, "This is what you shall say to them, 'The Lord God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you. This is my name forever'" (Ex 3:15).²⁰ Two different names. What's going on?

In most modern commentaries on this text, scholars debate the meaning of the first name that God gave Moses, "I am who I am," אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה, in the Masoretic text, and Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν in the LXX. Everything is up for debate—the morphology of the verbs, the best translation of the phrase into English, the basic meaning of the phrase, the relationship of אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה to Yhwh. For most modern readers, that's where the interpretive action is.

The other name is understood as a simple reminder to Israel that the God who was about to deliver them from Egypt was the same God who made a covenant with their forefathers and saved them out of all their troubles. This same God would now act to deliver Abraham's children, captive Israel.

But Augustine has different interests. As to the first name, why does God call himself, "I am who I am?" Or (according to the LXX), "What does it mean, I am called He-is?" Augustine answers, "That I abide forever, that I cannot change. Things which change are not, because they do not last. What is, abides. But whatever changes, was something and will be something; yet you cannot say it is, because it is changeable. So, the unchangeableness of God was prepared to suggest itself by this phrase, I am who I am."²¹

What about the second name in Exodus 3:15? Augustine does not connect

it backward to the patriarchs in Genesis. Instead, he connects it forward to the incarnation. He says, “How is it . . . that here is another name, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? It means that while God is indeed unchangeable, he has done everything out of *mercy*, and so the Son of God himself was prepared to take on changeable flesh and thereby to come to man’s rescue while remaining what he is as the Word of God. Thus, he who is, clothed himself with mortal flesh, so that it could truly be said, I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”²² It is a clever insight. By taking on this other name, God ties himself to the process of history. Through the incarnation God submits himself to the historical process and to change.

As to Augustine’s interests, which may be behind his interpretation, Edmund Hill tentatively dates Sermon 6 after AD 400, partly for stylistic reasons, but also because most of it is occupied with teaching the people about the invisibility of God and also God’s unchangeableness. Both of these are topics that Augustine deals extensively with in the second book of his work *De Trinitate (On the Trinity)*.

Hill says that Augustine started writing *De Trinitate* around AD 398 and probably had completed drafts of the first three books by AD 405–406. So, it is possible that the topic was on Augustine’s mind when he was preaching this sermon, and his interpretation of the two names took the path it did because he was wrestling with these problems in his study. I am sure that this is an experience common to us all.

Concluding Thoughts

In our last few minutes together, I want to draw together my thoughts under four brief points. First, I want to tell you where I stand on the matter of authorial intention. The goal of interpretation is to figure out the author’s intentions, that is, his meaning. If you are after the meaning of a text, you are after the author’s intentions.

Like Augustine, when I am talking about the author of the Scriptures, I am talking not only about the human author, but also the divine author, the Holy Spirit. I cannot neatly divide the two, and I don’t worry about it. I assume that the human authors had their own intentions, known and unknown to them. They weren’t mindless robots. But since the authors of Scripture, “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Pt 2:21), I also assume that the authors wrote just what the Spirit intended. Moses wrote what the Spirit intended. Paul wrote what the Spirit intended. But the fact of the matter is that inspired texts are no more self-interpreting than any other text. We have to interpret what they wrote.

So, when I look at the history of biblical interpretation, I see a history of people doing just that. I see people collecting what they think is convincing evidence and constructing what they think are convincing arguments to support their belief that they have figured out the text’s true meaning, only to be opposed by others who argue

that they are the ones who interpret the text correctly. Sometimes the disagreements are pleasant conversations. But when there is a lot at stake in the outcome of the interpretive debate, like the divinity of Christ, for example, or the doctrine of justification, or the doctrine of the Trinity, interpreters will go to the mat to defend the rightness of their position. Much of the interpretive work that the church fathers passed on to us in the course of their debates still bears fruit. Their work has stood the test of time.

Second, reading Augustine's sermons deepened my appreciation of the fact that Augustine lived in a different world than I do, and in a pagan culture vastly different than mine. Augustine had different assumptions about the nature of things, different categories of thinking, and ways of organizing those categories into a coherent understanding of reality. For example, Neoplatonism exerted a significant influence on Augustine's thought, his exegesis, and his theological development.²³

As a result, when it comes to interpreting the Scriptures, Augustine was an extension of a community shaped by a web of beliefs, values, and commitments different than those that hold me. And he was taught to interpret the Scriptures within that network and with the logic internal to that structure of beliefs, as I have been taught, and as have you. I cannot simply step out of the communities of which I am an extension or change my beliefs like I change my socks in order to step into Augustine's.

Therefore, the way I reason out the meaning of a text is going to be different than Augustine. The questions that he has, and the problems that he sees in the text are not always my questions or problems.²⁴ Yet, we are both Christians. So, it should be no surprise that sometimes I will find his interpretations attractive and useful. However, at other times, I find them, "too weird and idiosyncratic to bother with."²⁵

Third, the upshot in this discussion is my realization that the interpretations I construct are as historically contingent as everyone else's. And therefore, it is more than likely that they are fragile. Sad to say, my beautiful interpretive work will soon enough be ignored. This is the humbling reality for us humans who yearn to escape the clutches of time and chance.

Fourth, even though none of us can escape the relentless march of time, I want to make the case that our contingent status can help us relax a little (both in life and in the game of interpretation). When you see the perplexing variety of ways that the apostles or the church fathers interpret the Old Testament, as Dave Maxwell

But the fact of the matter is that inspired texts are no more self-interpreting than any other text. We have to interpret what they wrote.

pointed out, it is easy to get nervous. Am I supposed to imitate Paul, or the author of Hebrews, or Augustine when I read the Old Testament in preparation to preach or teach? I don't even know how I would begin.

My answer is, "Not necessarily. Relax for a second." Keep in mind that the apostles, Augustine and all the rest are making historically conditioned arguments too. They are speaking to certain people, in certain circumstances, and in ways that they hope will convince them. But as Richard Rorty says so well, "what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited

and convinced."²⁶ Put differently, the arguments that convince and excite in one context, may not work in another. In his debate with the Judaizers, Paul was using Scripture and mounting arguments that had cash value in his day, arguments that would excite and convince the foolish Galatians.

What Paul was not doing was giving me a rigid guide of exegetical commandments that will help me preach or teach more faithfully, as if what works in one context works in

Am I supposed to imitate Paul, or the author of Hebrews, or Augustine when I read the Old Testament in preparation to preach or teach?

all. One thing that we might learn from the NT use of the OT, is that in the church there are various ways to use the OT in the service of the gospel.

This suggests that I am free to enjoy and admire Paul's argument that he mounts against the Judaizers in Galatians 4 without worrying that I have to use the same arguments were I to preach on the story of Hagar and Sarah. I can appreciate the way he uses Deuteronomy 25:4 in his argument that workers are deserving of their wages (1 Cor 9), without thinking that now I need to go back and figure out how to interpret the laws of Moses figuratively. I don't think that I am *necessarily* obligated to go from the particular interpretation of an apostle to a general enactment of it whenever I read the Old Testament.

If I am preaching on an Old Testament text, what I am interested in is preaching that text into the lives of people in this place and time and these historical circumstances in ways that will excite and convince them about the grandeur of the salvation we have received in our Lord and Savior. What arguments will excite and convince? How will I use the text to influence their hearts and minds and hopefully change their lives?

I'll leave you with one final relaxing suggestion from Augustine that coheres with what I have been saying. In Sermon 7, as he discusses two possible interpretations of "the angel of the Lord" in Exodus 3, he says, "When I say that either one may be true,

I mean whichever of them was intended by the writer. When we are searching the Scriptures, we may of course understand them in a way in which the writer perhaps did not. But what we should never do is to understand them in a way which does not square with the rule of faith, with the rule of truth, with the rule of piety. So, I am offering you both opinions. There may yet be a third that escapes me. Anyway, of these two propositions, choose whichever you like."²⁷ Now ain't that a hoot?

Endnotes

- 1 *Praescr.* 16.2.
- 2 Augustine's sermons on the Old Testament can be found in the series, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century. Part III—Sermons*, vol 1–2 and 6, trans. and notes Edmund Hill, ed. John E. Rotelle, (New York: New City Press, 1990, 1993). For the ease of readers, the sermons referred to in this paper will be cited from this work by volume number, sermon number, and page.
- 3 Volume 1, Sermon 10, 282–292. Most scholars think that Sermon 10 is not a sermon, but an article that Augustine wrote in response to someone's question about a point of Scripture. Several collections have been made of articles like these, but this particular article seems to have been overlooked in the compilations. Scholars assume that it was added into Augustine's collection of sermons because it was known that he had preached a sermon on this text, but that sermon could not be found.
- 4 Volume 1, Sermon 10, 289–290, footnote #2, Edmund Hill says also that Augustine's interpretation became a popular theme in medieval art and literature.
- 5 Volume 1, Sermon 10, 283.
- 6 In Augustine's first interpretation, the two women represent the synagogue and the church. In the second, they represent two kinds of persons in the church whom Augustine personifies as Love/Charity and Insincerity/Hypocrisy. Because the latter figure includes the Donatists, scholars suggest that Augustine regarded them as still in some way belonging to the Church (Volume 1, Sermon 10, 290, footnote #2).
- 7 Under "synagogue," Augustine includes all the uncircumcised Gentiles who worship idols, and under the Church he includes those circumcised who worship the one God.
- 8 At the completion of the temple, Solomon refers explicitly to God's promise being fulfilled (1 Kings 8:12-21).
- 9 Edmund Hill, Volume 1, Sermon 10, 290, footnote #8, observes that for Augustine these things are sacred signs, and as such they are not things of much interest in themselves but a pointer to some other thing which is of interest in itself. Hill writes, "And so, while Augustine will staunchly maintain the historical reality of events narrated in the Old Testament, because a sign has to exist in order to be a sign, he doesn't think they are usually of much interest in themselves, but only in the Christ/Church reality to which they point." I wonder if this perspective on the *realia* of the OT is enabled because of two dichotomies Augustine makes, and which work together. First, he has a dichotomy between material vs. spiritual. Second, something I notice frequently in his sermons, Augustine equates OT Israel with the Jews of his day, and this enables him to pit Israel (Jews)/synagogue vs. Christians/Church. But I disagree with both of these assumptions. *First*, OT Israel does not equal the Jews. Faithful Israel is the Old Testament Church, and thus there is a continuity, not a dichotomy between Israel and the Church. *Second*, and because of this, I do not divorce the material from the spiritual. In the Old Testament, God was at work in, with and under the physical and tangible acts of judgment and salvation that he worked on Israel. There is a "spiritual" (better "theological") dimension to the physical.
- 10 Volume 6, Sermon 189, 34–37. See also in Volume 6, Sermon 184, 17–20; Sermon 185, 21–23, Sermon 191, 42–45; Sermon 192, 46–49.
- 11 Granted that this is an unconventional translation of the second line. Most translators interpret the lamed plus infinitive construct as purpose. But my translation can be defended on the basis of similar examples (and translations) in Is 13:22; Is 56:1; Jer 48:16.
- 12 The poet does not give us a narrowly focused description of salvation like many psalms do. For example, in many psalms, a voice pleads to Yhwh for salvation, and in so doing he is specifically conceiving of salvation as deliverance from his enemies, or even as his enemies being crushed by God. But here, rather than narrowing our thinking, the poetry turns our minds loose with language that can't be easily pinned down. And he encourages us to wonder and to imagine for ourselves what it all means. How will these words prove to be true?
- 13 See, for example, Is 41:19; Is 51:3–5; Is 9:6–7; Is 40:5; Is 58:8; Is 62:2–11; Is 56:1; Is 60:2; Hos 2:21–23; Am 9:13–14; Jer 31:12.

- 14 Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, Hermeneia, trans. Linda M. Maloney, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 365.
- 15 Irene Nowell, *Sing a New Song: The Psalms in the Sunday Lectionary* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1970), 50–54; James L. Mays, *Psalms* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1994), 276.
- 16 Volume 6, Sermon 189, 34.
- 17 Thus, Paul says in Col 1:16–17, “Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ.” And in 1 Cor 15:20 he says, “But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.”
- 18 Volume 1, Sermon 6, 227–232. See also Volume 6, Sermon 7, 233–239; Volume 6, Sermon 223A, 212–219.
- 19 Volume 6, Sermon 7, 233.
- 20 Volume 6, Sermon 7, 233.
- 21 Volume 1, Sermon 6, 229.
- 22 Volume 1, Sermon 6, 229.
- 23 G. Bonner, “Augustine as a Biblical Scholar,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: From the Beginnings to Jerome*, ed. P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 551–552; Richard A. Norris, “Augustine and the Close of the Ancient Period,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol. 1, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 383–385, says, “Augustine records how Neoplatonism, in the form of treatises by Plotinus and Porphyry, came to his aid as he wrestled with problems regarding the origin and nature of evil. In these writings, Augustine not only discovered an answer . . . He also thought that he perceived in the Neoplatonist hierarchy of levels of reality, a scheme that was the substantive equivalent of the teaching of John 1:1–5.”
- 24 For example, the conflict between Judaism and Christianity was more central to Augustine than it is to me. Christians in Augustine’s day needed to deal with questions like the place that the Old Testament, especially the Law of Moses, had in Christianity *vis-à-vis* Judaism. (cf., Joseph Trigg, “The Apostolic Fathers and Apologists,” Hauser and Watson. Editors. *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, vol 1 [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003], 304–333; Paula Fredriksen, “Interpretatio ad litteram, Jews, and Judaism in Augustine’s Theology of History” in *Studia Patristica*, vol. 38, ed. M.F. Wiles and E.J. Yarnold [Leuven: Peeters, 2001], 119–135.) Augustine also lived in a time of conflict between Christianity and a paganism. How do you deal with a situation in which the average pagan reader, even a person of average learning, condemned the Scriptures, even before judging their content, because their very *style* lacked the niceties required by the canons of classical prose? (cf., G. Rinaldi, *Biblia Gentium*. [Roma: Libreria Sacre Scritturae, 1989], 109.)
- 25 The full quote from which this phrase was lifted is in Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), 144, “Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and then seeing what happens. What happens may be something too weird and idiosyncratic to bother with . . . Or it may be exciting and convincing . . . It may be so exciting and convincing that one has the illusion that one now sees what a certain text is *really* about. But what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced.”
- 26 Rorty, *Philosophy*, 144.
- 27 Volume 1, Sermon 7, 234.

The Wedding of Cana in the Interpretation of the Early Church

Joel Elowsky



Joel Elowsky is professor of historical theology, dean of Advanced Studies, and coordinator of International Seminary Exchange Programs at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis.

He also is the director of the Seminary's Center for the Study of Early Christian Texts and is a researcher for the Center for Early African Christianity at the Oden House in New Haven, Connecticut. His interests and areas of expertise include early church studies, the history of exegesis, mission work, and African Christianity.

Let Cana thank you for gladdening
her banquet!

The bridegroom's crown exalted
you for exalting it,
And the bride's crown belonged to
your victory.

In her mirror allegories are
expounded and traced,
For you portrayed your church in
the bride,
And in her guests, yours are traced,
And in her magnificence she
portrays your advent.

(Hymns on Virginitv, Hymn 33.1).¹

These words from Ephrem's *Hymns on Virginitv* see the Wedding of Cana as a foretaste of the eschatological banquet associated with the wedding feast that we will all be attending in the age to come. To twenty-first-century eyes and ears, this is a strange way to read a text like John 2. For the fathers, the Wedding at Cana served as a mirror through which to expound and trace allegories that fathers like Ephrem believed were already present in other texts such as Solomon's Song of Songs, or the fifth chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, or the whole Old Testament relationship of God with his people who were unfaithful to their vows. There is a matrix of wedding texts also including Genesis 2 with "the two becoming

one flesh” that fleshed out for the fathers a much deeper narrative of this first sign of Jesus than simply being a miracle that testified to his Messiahship and the divinity of Jesus. I hope to explain in the next half hour what I’m getting at and what we can perhaps learn from the fathers for twenty-first-century exegesis.

I can only touch on a few points. And so, in the opening section I will be looking at the occasion itself spelled out in verse 1: A wedding that takes place on the third day and then, briefly, the enigmatic exchange between Mary and Jesus in verse 4 when Jesus says to Mary “Woman, what is that to me. My hour has not yet come.” I’ve limited myself to these two due to the time, but also because I believe they are representative of the types of interpretive moves the fathers make. I will also try to sprinkle in some of the rationale for why they do what they do. We will then conclude with some observations about patristic exegesis of this passage and the enterprise in general.

A Wedding on the Third Day

This idea that Jesus’s first sign here in John 2 was meant to inaugurate the final eschatological wedding banquet was as ubiquitous and prevalent in ancient Christian commentary and preaching as it is absent in modern Christian commentary and preaching. But why? Why did those pastors from long ago, what I like to call the “Dead Pastors Society,” why did they feel free to make those connections and this type of interpretation when, obviously, John is reporting about a historical event where Jesus performed his first miracle that established that Jesus was the Messiah and had the power as God to do miracles? I mean, that’s what this text is about. Or is it?

The fifth-century Cyril, bishop of Alexandria, writes in his *Commentary on John*: “The gathering is not in Jerusalem. Instead, the feast is held outside Jerusalem, as if in the country of the Gentiles—‘Galilee of the Gentiles,’² as the prophet says.” But then he goes on to say, “I suppose it is perfectly clear that the synagogue of the Jews rejected the bridegroom from heaven, and the church of the Gentiles received him with great joy.”³ Some of you might say, “I was with you Cyril, until you got to the “obvious” part about the synagogue of the Jews rejecting the heavenly bridegroom which paved the way for the Gentile church to receive him. I think most modern interpreters of Scripture would say, “Hey Cyril. It’s not so obvious to me. I agree with the first part of what you’re saying, but the rest about the heavenly bridegroom and the rejection by the Jews just isn’t there in the text.”

If Cyril were here, and you were brave

Every detail, no matter how small, had some significance, and that significance in one way or another would point to Christ.

enough to speak to him in that way—and I would advise you not to—I think Cyril would probably ask us in return: What text are *you* dealing with? He’s dealing with John 2, but not just John 2. The Bible has one divine author, the Holy Spirit, and one divine subject, the Son of God and so Cyril, and every other patristic commentator, feels fully justified in bringing in whatever Scripture the Spirit might connect to this text, as long as you the reader ultimately find it pointing to Christ through the guidance of the Spirit and not violating the *regula fidei*, the rule of faith which for us today would be the Creed. For the ancient church, Scripture was not written for the sole purpose of communicating facts or historical narrative, in their minds, although those too have their purpose and are not ignored. But “the aim, or *skopos* of the divinely inspired Scripture,” as Cyril states it elsewhere,

. . . is that the mystery of Christ is signified to us through a myriad of different kinds of things. Someone might liken it to a glittering and magnificent city, having not one image of the king, but many, and publicly displayed in every corner of the city . . . Its aim, however, is not to provide us an account of the lives of the saints of old. Far from that. Rather it seeks to give us knowledge of the mystery [of Christ] through those things by which the word about him might become clear and true. (*Glaphyra on Genesis*, book 6.1 [*On Judah and Tamar*])⁴

We learn two things through this quote from Cyril. First of all, Christ is present in Scripture in more ways than just the “historical Jesus” kind of way. Second, there are many different images of Christ throughout the entirety of Scripture: in the Torah, the historical narratives, the wisdom literature, the prophets, the Gospels, and epistles. These are all different facets of the one overarching picture of Christ. If these did not speak of Christ, they did not speak of anything, or at least they were ultimately unworthy of claiming God as author since, as Origen said, God would never author anything superfluous.⁵ As Jesus himself had said in John 5, all the Scriptures testify to him, and the fathers believed that Scripture as a whole communicated multiple facets to the whole story. This is why Genesis 2, Song of Songs, Ephesians 5 and even the book of Revelation will figure large in patristic interpretation of the Wedding of Cana. They provide facets of the story we might otherwise miss if we just stayed with John’s account and the literal level of the text. As we will see in what follows, every detail, no matter how small, had some significance, and that significance in one way or another would point to Christ. I will only be able to focus on a few key phrases due to the time, but I’ll try to make it worth your while.

The Third Day

The fathers practiced an intensive reading of Scripture. No detail escaped their gaze.

We read the opening words of our text and see a historical marker: “And on the third day there was a wedding.” Modern commentators like Raymond Brown and Craig Keener recognize a conundrum in figuring out what John means by the third day, since referring back to the last part of chapter one would make this actually the sixth day, not the third day, depending on how you count.⁶ The fathers saw this conundrum as an opportunity. Origen believed that the Holy Spirit placed these stumbling blocks in the text to make the reader pause and go deeper. I think it is fair to ask you theologians sitting here this morning: When you hear “third day” what enters your mind? The resurrection? You have good company in the fathers if you did so—and it is even there in the text of chapter 2 if you go to verse 19. They all considered John the most historically accurate of the Gospels with his references to times, dates and narrative indicators. But they believed there had to be more.

The third day brought to mind the resurrection, but they did not stop there. The number three is significant in Scripture as a whole. Three also brought to mind the Trinity. And so later in the text at verse 6, when Augustine preaches on the little phrase two or three *metretas*, he seizes on the “two or three” and wonders if this little detail doesn’t also give us further insight into the Trinity. He preaches a whole sermon on this, and comments on how fascinating the people found his exegesis! Now perhaps this was all fresh in his mind, due to the fact he was working on his twenty-year treatise on the Trinity at the same time he preached this sermon. Had Augustine been using the RSV, though, the point would have been moot. The RSV translates for intelligibility as “each holding twenty or thirty gallons,” which may help us see the large volume of wine, making the miracle itself an even bigger deal, but it obscures the Greek of the text and renders the connection Augustine makes impossible and unintelligible to readers who follow the RSV.

Rather than quote Augustine, however, let us look at the sixth-century preacher from Gaul named Caesarius of Arles. When he preached on this text, he also felt free, perhaps due to Augustine’s influence, to associate the “third day” with the three persons of the Trinity, even as he too sees other facets in the events of Cana having a much deeper significance than talking simply about a miracle. This is that deeper reading I’ve been talking about. In his sermon, he proclaims:

The third day is the mystery of the Trinity, while the miracles of the nuptials are the mysteries of heavenly joys. It was both a nuptial day and a feast for this reason, because the Church after the redemption was joined to the spouse who was coming—to that spouse, I say, whom all the ages from the beginning of the world had promised. It is he who came down to earth to invite his beloved to marriage with his highness, giving her for a present the token of his blood, and intending to give later the dowry of his kingdom. (Sermon 167.1)⁷

Not only did he and others find deep significance in the mention of the third day, but the fact that it was a wedding, as I mentioned before, just begged for further comment as well, pointing, again, toward that final eschatological wedding feast. But that is not all it pointed to. Origen, Chrysostom, Maximus of Turin, Augustine and even Cyril of Alexandria, among others, also found the fact that Christ chose to perform his first sign and miracle at a wedding demonstrated

that Jesus not only approved of marriage but held it in high regard.⁸ There were plenty of church fathers who put virginity on a higher footing than marriage,⁹ so this is no small matter. As Gregory of Nazianzus put it in his *Oration* on Holy Baptism: “We do not dishonor marriage because we give a higher honor to virginity. I will imitate Christ, the pure grooms-man and bridegroom, as he both performed a miracle at a wedding, and honors wedlock with his presence.”¹⁰ Cyril too believed that Christ’s choice of doing his first miracle at a wedding demonstrated that Jesus was nullifying the curse on women and childbirth in Genesis 3:16.¹¹ The fifth-century Italian bishop, Maximus of Turin (ca. 380–465), in northern Italy preached:

The Son of God went to the wedding so that marriage, which had been instituted by his own authority, might be sanctified by his blessed presence. He went to a wedding of the old order when he was about to take a new bride for himself through the conversion of the Gentiles, a bride who would forever remain a virgin. He went to a wedding even though he himself was not born of human wedlock. He went to the wedding not, certainly, to enjoy a banquet, but rather to make himself known by miracles. He went to the wedding not to drink wine, but to give it. (Sermon 23)¹²

Maximus and others see a text that has multi-layered levels of meaning, all of which were consonant with the rule of faith, expressing a *sensus plenior*, a fuller sense of this text in light of the other texts. Jesus honored marriage even though his own birth was from a virgin. Jesus is fulfilling the Old Testament language about Israel’s marriage covenant with God while also branching out to the Gentiles in the New Testament church who would remain a virgin forever, like the Virgin Mary, but also like Jesus. Jesus also let his divinity be known in his miracles.¹³ And, finally, Jesus was a good guest in leaving a nice present of wine.

*That Christ chose to
perform his first sign and
miracle at a wedding
demonstrated that Jesus
not only approved of
marriage but held it in
high regard.*

One can only truly benefit from reading Scripture with the eyes of faith because it is a book that we not only read, but a book that reads us.

The Sensus Plenior

Church fathers like Maximus, Cyril, and Augustine were very comfortable with the *sensus plenior* interpretation. They were not only comfortable with it. They expected it from a God who was superabundant with his gifts.¹⁴ Chrysostom was a bishop in Antioch in the late fourth century when he delivered his homilies on the Gospel of John. While more restrained in his use

of allegory—we would probably today call what he did typology—he does provide the justification for this deeper reading of Scripture in his comments on John 5 where Jesus talks about the Old Testament testifying about him: “He did not send them, however, to the Scriptures simply to read them, but to examine them attentively, because Scripture ever threw a shade over its own meaning and did not display it on the surface. The treasure was, as it were, hidden from their eye.” (Homily on the Gospel of John 40:3)¹⁵

They viewed reading Scripture as akin to Jesus’s parables about the hidden treasure in Matthew 13:44. You search the Scriptures to find the treasure. The fathers would not have had much patience with much of what goes on at the Society for Biblical Literature where the Bible is primarily studied and dissected as an academic discipline. Not that they weren’t aware of this approach and practiced many of these things themselves. It’s just that one can only truly benefit from reading Scripture with the eyes of faith because it is a book that we not only read, but a book that reads us. This happens best in a community of faith such as the church.¹⁶ This is where one of the earliest fathers to interpret John 2 found himself. Here is how Irenaeus the second-century bishop of Lyon¹⁷ read the significance of John 2, placing it in the context of the larger narrative of salvation:

That wine, which was produced by God in a vineyard, and which was first consumed, was good. None of those who drank of it found fault with it; and the Lord partook of it also. But that wine was better which the Word made from water, on the moment, and simply for the use of those who had been called to the marriage. For although the Lord had the power to supply wine to those feasting, independently of any created substance, and to fill with food those who were hungry, He did not adopt this course; but, taking the loaves which the earth had produced, and giving thanks (Jn 6:11) and on the other occasion making water wine, He satisfied those

who were reclining [at table], and gave drink to those who had been invited to the marriage; showing that the God who made the earth, and commanded it to bring forth fruit, who established the waters, and brought forth the fountains, was He who in these last times bestowed upon mankind, by His Son, the blessing of food and the favor of drink: the Incomprehensible [acting thus] by means of the comprehensible, and the Invisible by the visible; since there is none beyond Him, but He exists in the bosom of the Father. (*Against Heresies* 3.11.5)

Irenaeus first wants to show that God did not disdain using common materials of his creation, bread and wine, to perform miracles. He says this in response to the Gnostics who saw matter as evil and spirit as good. He then makes the common observation that the wine Jesus made from water was even better than the wine the guests had drunk earlier. He also uses the text to debunk the Gnostic idea that the God who created, shaped, and formed the world in Genesis was different than the God of the NT, Jesus, who performed new acts of creation in the New Testament. You see how he connects the very act of creation with the ability to do the miracle of changing water into wine. He also makes the connection with John 6 and the Eucharist where Christ performs a miracle every time the Eucharist is celebrated with food and drink.¹⁸ This is reading the Scriptures in the community of the church. It is the church's Bible.

Water and Wine

Water gets changed into wine. The church gets first dibs on determining the significance of that event.¹⁹ If you have any inkling of how the fathers think by now, you might wonder what they would do with this. An intensive reading asks: How is water different from wine and how do the two function in the church? Wine is better than the water, the fathers reasoned. The wine adds taste and flavor to the water through the grapes. And so, Augustine will say this is like the Old Testament that had no taste until Christ came and brought out the flavor of its contents. But there are obvious eucharistic overtones here too which the fathers of the church do not fail to exploit, since when Christ's side is pierced both water and blood flow from it, which they viewed as the sacrament of baptism in the water and the Lord's Supper in the blood which is given every time we receive the Eucharist as it flowed from the body of our Lord. At Cana, the water is there with the wine. At Calvary the water is there with the blood. At the Eucharist, at least how it was celebrated in the early church, there was water mixed with wine along with the blood of the real presence each communicant received. Origen believed that all the events in Scripture were not meant just to describe what was going on at the time they were written but were written for us and "for our instruction upon whom the end of the ages has come,"

quoting 1 Corinthians 10:11 where Paul refers to the rock following the Israelites in the wilderness, which he says was Christ.²⁰

Jesus and His Mother: “My Hour Has Not Yet Come”

This brings us to a third facet of their study of this text, as they connect Cana with Calvary and Jesus’s dealings with his mother. Mary asks him to do the miracle and then we have this enigmatic reply from Jesus: “Woman, what do I have to do with you? My hour has not yet come.” Just like modern interpreters, they too noticed that this was an odd way for Jesus to refer to his mother. “Woman” seems awfully disrespectful and not honoring the fourth commandment. And there was also this issue of the “hour.” Let’s take that first.

The Gnostics of the second and third century held very much to the idea, prominent in the ancient world, that fate and destiny controlled everything, just like the emperor in Star Wars who told Luke it was his destiny to turn to the dark side. Irenaeus took this challenge very seriously in his comments on John 2:4. The idea that the incarnate Son of God could be subject to fate flew in the face of his role as the Creator:

With Him is nothing incomplete or out of due season, just as with the Father there is nothing incongruous. For all these things were foreknown by the Father; but the Son works them out at the proper time in perfect order and sequence. This was the reason why, when Mary was urging [Him] on to [perform] the wonderful miracle of the wine, and was desirous before the time to partake²¹ of the cup of emblematic significance, the Lord, checking her untimely haste, said, “Woman, what have I to do with you? My hour is not yet come”— waiting for that hour which was foreknown by the Father. (*Against Heresies* 3.16.7)²²

For Irenaeus, Jesus as the creator of time and space was just like his Father. And while the Father foreknows everything, his Son still works them out in a proper order and sequence as only the Creator would know. Two centuries later Augustine still was concerned about making Jesus subject to fate, or to the seasons or astrological cycles.

But he, as well as Chrysostom and others, also made this connection that our exegetes and those throughout the history of interpretation make as well: that the “hour” that was coming was his crucifixion,²³ in John 19 when Jesus hands his mother over to John for him to take care of her.

But what about the significance of this rebuke in calling his mother “woman”?

But what about the significance of this rebuke in calling his mother “woman”? Theodoret of Cyr, a fifth-century Antiochene bishop, resolved the conundrum of Jesus rebuking his mother by noting: “At one time He gives honor to His Mother as the one who gave birth to Him (Lk 2:51, Jn 19:27–29) at another He rebukes her as her Lord.”²⁴ Augustine held that Jesus here, in admonishing his mother, was demonstrating that he now had to be about his heavenly Father’s business rather than his earthly parents’ business. At the hour of this first miracle, he manifests his divinity. At his final hour when he was on the cross, however, was emblematic of the height of his humanity in displaying his mortality:

He rather admonishes us to understand that, in respect of His being God, there was no mother for Him, the part of whose personal majesty (*cujus majestatis personam*) He was preparing to show forth in the turning of water into wine. But as regards His being crucified, He was crucified in respect of his being man; and that was the hour which had not come as yet, at the time when this word was spoken, “What have I to do with you? My hour is not yet come;” that is, the hour at which I shall recognize you. For at that period, when He was crucified as man, He recognized His human mother (*hominem matrem*), and committed her most humanely (*humanissime*) to the care of the best beloved disciple.²⁵

In the end, Jesus as God rebukes his mother, even as he also as man honors his mother. Jesus was not subject to fate or his mother, or anyone else, but did the miracle to please his mother, to provide for the couple, and because as God, as the creator of the hours and time itself, he could do with nature what he wanted to, proving he was God, and also the Groom who had come for his bride, the Church. He would sacrifice everything, even death on a cross in order to escort her to the eschatological wedding feast that would have no end.²⁶

Conclusion

There are other fascinating details I wish I could go into, like their fascination with the six water jars which Augustine said stood for the six ages of the world or his sermon on the two or three measures I mentioned briefly which for him indicated the Trinity. But we do not have enough time to get into all of that. The most I can do for now is leave with you a few observations about what I think the fathers are doing when they interpret Scripture:

1. The authorial intent that patristic writers were interested in was the Holy Spirit’s first and the human author’s second.
2. And so that authorial intent would in some way speak about Jesus because Jesus himself says so in John 5 and Luke 24 when he says the Scriptures testify about him.

3. The fathers practiced a *sensus plenior* approach to interpreting the Scriptures that expected more from the text because they believed God was abundant with his gifts.
4. If you are looking for a method to how this interpretation was practiced: good luck. The most we can identify are patterns like word associations or etymological arguments or symbolic markers like their numbers. But this does not mean what they were doing was haphazard or random. They were trained in rhetoric and knew very well how language works, even as they were also in awe of how God employed that language. Our twenty-first-century fascination with method, as far as I can tell, held little interest for the fathers. The interpreter must, however, stay within the lines of the *regula fidei*.
5. Finally, I would simply point out that this was the standard way of reading texts in these early centuries whether it was the text of Scripture or Homer's *Iliad*. According to the first century Jewish interpreter Philo of Alexandria, as found in Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* 2.17.1–24, he admired the fact that this “sect” practiced the same type of spiritual, allegorical reading that he did.
6. I leave you with these two final questions: What have we lost by jettisoning this deeper, fuller, multilevel reading of Scripture? What would we lose by bringing it back?

Endnotes

- 1 Kathleen McVey, trans., *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 407. Much of the material for this essay was gleaned from my commentary on John. See Joel C. Elowsky, ed., *John 1–10 Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (ACCS)*, vol. IVa (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 88–98.
- 2 Is 9:1.
- 3 David Maxwell, trans., Joel Elowsky, ed., *Cyril of Alexandria: Commentary on John*, vol.1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 91.
- 4 Patrologia Graeca [hereafter PG], (Paris: Migne, 1864) vol. 69:308C–D.
- 5 In the fourth book of Origen’s *On First Principles* (4.2.9) where he details some of his rules for interpreting Scripture, he went so far as to say anything in Scripture that seemed illogical, caused scandal, or seemed unworthy of God, was included in the text by God on purpose in order to indicate that it was to be interpreted spiritually and not according to the letter.
- 6 Craig Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 496–498. Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John 1–XII* The Anchor Bible Series (New York: Doubleday, 1966), 97–98.
- 7 Mary Magdeleine Mueller, trans., *Saint Caesarius of Arles: Sermons, vol. 2 (81–186)*, Fathers of the Church, [hereafter FC], vol. 47, (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 402–403.
- 8 Origen, *Fragment 28 on the Gospel of John*. Chrysostom, *Hom. on John 21.1*; Maximus of Turin, *Sermon 23*; Augustine, *On the Good of Marriage* 3.3; see also Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary On John 2.1*.
- 9 Tertullian, *On Monogamy* 8: “the ‘frequenter of luncheons and suppers, in the company of publicans and sinners’ (Mt 11:19; Lk 7:34) sups once for all at a single marriage (Jn 2:11) though, of course, many were marrying (around Him); for He willed to attend (marriages) only so often as (He willed) them to be” (A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers* [hereafter ANF], vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub, 1994 reprint), 65.) Jerome in his *Against Jovinian* 1.40 seizes on the fact that Jesus is only recorded as going to one wedding to make the point, just as Tertullian had in the early third century, that a woman should only marry once and then subordinates marriage to what he considers a higher virtue, that is, virginity and chaste widowhood. But he also notes that anyone who condemns marriage is a heretic since Christ showed by his attendance at a wedding that he valued marriage.
- 10 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 40.18; P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series* [hereafter NPNF 2] (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Pub., 1994), 365–366. See also John of Damascus *On the Orthodox Faith* 4.24: “Virginity is the rule of life among the angels, the property of all incorporeal nature. This we say without speaking ill of marriage: God forbid! (for we know that the Lord blessed marriage by His presence).” (NPNF 2 9:97b).
- 11 Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary On John 2.1* (John 2:11); Maxwell, 91.
- 12 PL 57:274, translation in Elowsky, ACCS IVa, 90.
- 13 See, for instance, Augustine, *Tract. Jn* on ch. 15.24–25, par. 2. Tertullian noted that Christ was not a phantom or spirit, as Marcion held, but was seen acting as God by his miracles, such as the “true and real draught of wine at the marriage of (Cana in) Galilee” (*Treatise on the Soul* 17). The fathers in general saw the performance of the miracle as proof of his divinity in response to pagans and heretics alike who tried to portray Jesus as a mere man.
- 14 We still see this, for instance, in the Ademta commentary tradition of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church today where multiple interpretations are allowed to stand side by side, as long as they do not contradict one another or the rule of faith.
- 15 NPNF 1 14:146–48 altered.
- 16 For instance, in the lectionary, we usually find the wedding of Cana included in the second Sunday after the Epiphany with texts from Isaiah 62:1–5 and 1 Corinthians 12:1–11 which I take as our own LCMS matrix of interpretation, since often the three texts we choose for reading on Sunday are meant to relate to each other, although the Epistle reading is often taken in series and here really doesn’t have much to do

- with Isaiah 62 or 1 Corinthians 12, which both are about weddings. But my point is that even in our liturgy we operate with this principle of Scripture texts interpreting Scripture texts.
- 17 Irenaeus became the bishop of Lyon in Gaul, modern day France, AD 177 after his own bishop was murdered along with his parishioners in a brutal persecution. He provides one of the earliest windows into the interpretation of the Gospel of John, which he felt needed to be reclaimed from the Gnostics who were using it, especially the prologue with its Logos doctrine, as a resource for their elaborate cosmologies and soteriologies.
 - 18 Augustine and other fathers make the same connection. See Augustine's *Sermon 76.4* (Ben. Ed. 126.4); NPNF 1 6:482.
 - 19 Tertullian as well as Jerome both make a connection of this miracle with baptism, in showing the potency of water to do great things (Tertullian, *On Baptism 9*; ANF 3:673; Jerome, *Letter to Oceanus 6*; NPNF 2 6:145–146).
 - 20 Origen, *Homily on Exodus 5*.
 - 21 *Participare compendii poculo*. *Compendii* literally means that which is weighed together, weighed with.
 - 22 He cites Hab 3:2.
 - 23 Augustine, *Tract. Jn* on ch. 19:24–30, par.1; NPNF 1 7741.
 - 24 Theodoret, *Erastites, Dialogue 2*; NPNF 2 3:183 altered.
 - 25 Jn 19:26–27. Augustine, *On Faith and the Creed 4.9*; NPNF 1 3:325.
 - 26 Gregory the Great, Book 10, *Epistle 39*; NPNF 2 13:48.

*Homiletical
Helps*

Preaching Mark

David Lewis

For pastors who follow the *LSB* three-year lectionary cycle, Series B gives precedence to Gospel pericopes from Mark's account with readings from John's Gospel replacing Mark frequently during the festival half of the year (in particular during the time of Easter). A *lectio continua* from Mark begins in the Sundays after Epiphany and then, after it is interrupted in Lent and Easter, picks up again on Proper 3. This *lectio continua* is then interrupted once again during Propers 13–15 when readings from the bread of life discourse from John 6 are read following Mark's accounts of Jesus's feeding the 5000 and walking on water. Pericopes from Mark then continue from Proper 16 to the end of the church year. This *lectio continua*, however, does not cover the entirety of Mark's Gospel. One notable omission is the important narrative cycle of Mark 8:1–26, a section that James W. Voelz has called "the critical turn" in Mark's Gospel.¹ Perhaps future revisions of the lectionary may one day include these texts in the Series B readings as well.

In this paper I would like to offer some thoughts that I hope will prove helpful for those who plan to focus on the Gospel of Mark in their preaching over the following year.

Preliminary Questions to Consider

How a reader approaches the Gospel of Mark will to a great extent be affected by how the reader chooses to understand the historical background and literary nature of this narrative. Thus there are several isagogical questions that should be considered from

Editor's note

This essay was first published in the winter 2018 issue of the Concordia Journal. Homiletical Helps for all the pericopes in the three-year lectionary can be found with a full range of other resources at Lectionary at Lunch Plus: www.concordiatheology.org/lalp.

the very beginning. How preachers answer these questions may affect how they then approach the task of interpreting and then preaching on Mark.

What is the relationship of Mark to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke?

The two-document hypothesis argues that Mark was written before Matthew and Luke and then was one of two sources used by the authors of Matthew and Luke when they compiled their Gospels. One of the arguments used to support this hypothesis is that it is more likely that the later narratives would be longer than their sources due to their inclusion of extra material; since Mark is shorter than Matthew and Luke, it must have been one of the first Gospels written and the source for the other two Synoptic Gospels. One does not need to hold to this hypothesis, however, to note that both Matthew and Luke contain longer narratives and in some pericopes they include details not found in the parallel accounts from Mark. Thus it may appear as if both Matthew and Luke contain the “fuller and more complete” accounts of Jesus’s ministry when compared to Mark. And so, whenever a pericope in Mark is brief, missing certain details, or even a bit troubling when compared to the parallel passages in Matthew or Luke, the preacher may be tempted to default to the parallel passages of either of these two “fuller accounts” to give the “whole story.” Preachers who advocate a harmonizing approach when preaching the Gospels might move from focusing on a text from Mark to discussing the parallel texts in Matthew and/or Luke instead.

My advice, however, is that, in spite of its shorter length, Mark should be read, interpreted, and preached first as a narrative in its own right. The unique features in how Mark presents the story of Jesus will be lost if the preacher chooses instead to default to either of the longer narratives. For instance, many details found in the baptism and temptation accounts of Matthew and Luke are absent in the briefer account in Mark 1:9–13 (part of the reading for Lent 1). I have heard preachers who were ostensibly preaching on the temptation account of Mark include the specific details mentioned in Matthew 4 and Luke 4 and then make the point that because Jesus used Scripture to refute the tempter, we ought to do the same. Yet there is no mention of Jesus doing this in Mark’s account! Such preachers wind up preaching on Matthew or Luke, not Mark. Mark’s “briefer” account of the temptation, however, does include elements not found in the other accounts: the verb ἐκβάλλω to describe how the Spirit gets Jesus into the wilderness, the mention that Jesus was with the wild animals, and an emphasis on how the angels appeared to minister to Jesus throughout the forty days. When preaching Mark 1:9–15 (the pericope for Lent 1), the preacher should focus on these features of the story and *not* discuss the three temptations from Matthew and Luke.

Note that the preacher who believes that Mark was written later than Matthew or Luke—or who chooses at least to read Mark as an independent narrative regardless of theories of origin—will not be tempted to default to the “fuller” accounts of Matthew and Luke.

What is the literary quality of Mark's Gospel?

Opinions regarding the quality of Mark as a literary work tended to be rather low in the early to mid-twentieth century. Generally, Mark was viewed as the first attempt to compile a narrative account of Jesus's ministry (see the discussion of the two-document hypothesis above). According to this view, the author of Mark preserved certain traditions of Jesus's ministry and presented them in a loose narrative framework. Generally Matthew and Luke were considered to have a higher literary quality—and this followed from the hypothesis that they both copied, adapted, *and so improved upon* Mark. Many scholars today, however, have offered opinions that Mark's Gospel displays a higher literary quality than previously thought.² Yet the preacher who holds to the older view regarding Mark's "lesser" literary quality might then again have a tendency to default to the parallel passages from "the superior literary accounts" of Matthew and Luke. My advice, again, is that, no matter one's opinion regarding the literary quality of the second Gospel, the goal still ought to be to focus on the unique features of Mark's account.

Note that the preacher who is inclined to believe that Mark is of "better" literary quality will not be tempted to default to the so-called more superior accounts of Matthew or Luke. Such a preacher also would have greater appreciation for how Mark tells the story of Jesus's ministry and rejoice in the various literary devices used throughout. This would include those texts where Mark might arguably present a "harder reading."

How much of the story of Jesus's life and ministry does the author of Mark assume that his readers already know?

Again, the older opinions regarding Mark—that it was written first and so amounts to a first attempt at preserving the story of Jesus—often sees Mark's purpose as preserving the story of Jesus for those who do not know the details. Thus later readers might naturally see Mark as "less full" or "less sophisticated" as compared to Matthew and Luke when it appears that Mark's Gospel *actually fails to give the full account*, which such readers would need. Consider, again, the temptation account of Mark 1:12–13. If the purpose of this Gospel were to inform readers who do not know the story of Jesus about the temptation account, the preacher might naturally feel compelled to reference either Matthew or Luke for the "full story" because it appears here that Mark simply fails to give the full story.

On the other hand, if a preacher were to assume that the readers of Mark were familiar with many of the details of the story of Jesus, then a different approach to this Gospel would be necessary. For instance, the interpretation of Mark's "condensed" account of the temptation of Jesus might operate with the assumption that the original readers may already know some of the details. Thus Mark presents Jesus as proclaiming and initiating the reign of God in Mark 1:14–15 (also part of the

pericope for Lent 1) without the author actually telling the readers specifically how Jesus overcame the tempter while in the wilderness. Perhaps this is because the author knows the readers know this story. Perhaps the author is more focused on bringing his readers to the critical point of where Jesus begins his ministry of proclaiming the reign of God—which is the goal of both his baptism and temptation in the wilderness. Perhaps the author simply trusts his readers to “get it.”

Thus the preacher has an important decision to make when approaching Mark. If Mark is merely presenting the basic story for those who do not know it, then this narrative will certainly appear lacking when compared to Matthew and Luke. Then it might seem imperative to “fill up what is missing” in Mark by referring to the other Gospels. Yet if the preacher believes that Mark is addressing those who know the fuller story, then each of Mark’s choices in what he does *not* present, what he does present, and how he presents it becomes important in the overall rhetoric of this particular Gospel account. This will then inform how the preacher will proclaim the texts from Mark.

Where is the ending of Mark’s Gospel?

Where did the author intend to conclude his narrative of Jesus’s ministry? Is the conclusion of the narrative found in 16:8 when the women leave the tomb and, in spite of the young man’s word in 16:6–7, do not say anything to anyone? Or does the narrative include one of the two “longer” endings that are attested in manuscripts—each of which depicts Jesus appearing to his disciples? Or (as many scholars have proposed) is the original ending that once followed 16:8 now missing—an ending that must have depicted Jesus reuniting with his disciples in Galilee as promised in 16:7? Answering this question will not only affect how one will preach on Easter this year (when Mark 16:1–8 is the text), but also how the preacher will understand the Gospel overall.

The three questions above come to a head when considering this final question. Some of the major objections to claims that 16:8 is the intended ending of Mark include these: (1) Since Mark wrote first, he must have included an account of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples that both Matthew and Luke then later copied and adapted; (2) Since Mark is not a sophisticated literary work, it is unlikely the author could have intended such a sharp “suspended ending” as found in 16:8; (3) Since Mark was writing for people who did not know the full story, he must have included an account of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples.

If the preacher is not convinced that these other assumptions are true—or at least not completely dogmatic about each of them—then the conclusion might be that the author of Mark was capable of concluding his narrative at 16:8 and thus suspending from the narrative any account of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples. On Easter Sunday such a preacher will point hearers to some other feature of Mark’s

narrative and not default to accounts of post-resurrection appearances found in Matthew, Luke, or some reconstruction of the lost ending of Mark. This will likely also inform how the preacher approaches other pericopes in Mark as well.

It is my assumption that Mark did intend to conclude his narrative account at 16:8. It is also my assumption that Mark may have been written later than Matthew and Luke and, even if it was not, Mark provides a sophisticated narrative written by a Christian author to Christian readers who already know many of the details of Jesus's life and ministry. Thus the author can get away with suspending from his account the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. Such "suspensions" of events or presentations of "harder readings" may then be found elsewhere in Mark's account. The preacher thus should focus on what Mark actually relates and not default to the other Gospels for "missing details" or "better and/or easier readings."

Two Important Themes and the Overall Message of Mark's Gospel

In his commentary, Voelz draws attention to two important themes in Mark's Gospel.³ The central theme regards the presentation of Jesus in this Gospel, in particular its emphasis on the reliability of what Jesus says. Voelz argues that, when compared to the narratives of Matthew and Luke, Mark does indeed appear to present a narrative of Jesus's ministry that frequently includes some troubling features. Jesus in Mark is presented as a divine person, the Son of God who represents his Father in what he says and does. Jesus exercises a unique authority over the demonic realm (e.g., 1:23–28), nature (e.g., 4:35–41), and even the commands in the Torah (e.g., 7:14–15). He is identified outright as the Son of God from heaven at his baptism at the very beginning of the story (1:11). This identification is made a second time at his transfiguration (9:7). And Jesus himself responds to the high priest's question regarding his identity with an emphatic *evgw, eivmi* (14:62). As the Son of God, Jesus's word is authoritative and reliable—and this is demonstrated repeatedly throughout the narrative.

Nevertheless, none of the other human characters in the narrative appear to understand Jesus and his mission, and no one makes the confession that he is the Son of God until the centurion's declaration only after Jesus has died upon the cross (15:39). No one except for the narrator, God the Father, the unclean spirits (see 1:24; 3:11; and 5:7), Jesus himself, and finally the centurion at the cross appear to understand who Jesus is. Not even Jesus's disciples appear to get it.⁴

What is more, in spite of his divinity, Jesus is also depicted as being a human being, sometimes even as a frail human. Note how Jesus sleeps through a storm on the sea (4:38), is unable to do many miracles in his hometown of Nazareth because of the people's unbelief (6:5), and finally how he is subject to crucifixion and death. What is more, according to Voelz, Jesus is also depicted in Mark as a person who on occasions appears noticeably odd, strange, and even frightening.⁵ Note, for instance,

how in Mark 11 Jesus seeks figs from a fig tree *even though it is not the season for figs* (11:13), and then he curses and destroys this fig tree when he fails to find any fruit on it. Such behavior might strike someone as being very strange. *Perhaps the author actually intended that the narrative affect the reader in this way.* Voelz argues that one effect of such a depiction of Jesus is to prevent the readers from entertaining any thought that it would have been more desirable for them to have witnessed Jesus's ministry with their own eyes; no, things were strange and likely they would not have understood any better than the disciples.⁶

Then perhaps most troublesome in this narrative is that the author does not say that Jesus appeared to his disciples after the resurrection. Yet one point of this ending—and the depiction of Jesus throughout the Gospel—is that the reader is left only with Jesus's word and promise. But, since Jesus's word remains authoritative and true, his word is sufficient for the reader! Jesus is an authoritative teacher throughout this narrative (e.g., 1:22; 27). Jesus predicted how the disciples would find the donkey for his entrance into Jerusalem (11:2–4). Jesus predicted how the disciples would find the room where he would celebrate the Passover with them (14:13–16). And, most important, he predicted his own suffering, death, and resurrection (8:31–32; 9:31; 10:33). *Everything came about just as he said.* Thus we should expect that the promised reunion with the disciples (14:28; 16:7) would have also taken place, even if this is suspended from the narrative (if the story ends at 16:8). Thus in Mark, seeing is not believing. *Rather believing in Jesus's word and promise becomes seeing.*⁷

The readers of Mark thus occupy a privileged position: They do not need to have been present in the past to witness Jesus's ministry or even to have seen his resurrected body. It is enough that they have Jesus's word and promise. In fact, they can stake their very lives on Jesus's word and promise.

One of the implications of this theme for preaching the Gospel of Mark is that the preacher should, of course, emphasize the reliability of Jesus's word and promise throughout the year. Yet at the same time, the preacher must not ignore the troublesome nature or somewhat “harder” readings presented in some of the pericopes. For instance, when preaching Easter 1 (Mark 16:1–8), the preacher should avoid defaulting to Matthew or Luke to speak about how Jesus appeared first to the woman and then later to his disciples. Indeed, this pericope especially calls for the preacher *not to make such a move.* Rather here the preacher has an opportunity to unpack the central theme: The words of the young man at the tomb (16:6–7), especially the promise that Jesus's disciples would see him in Galilee, recall Jesus's *own words and promise* from earlier in the narrative (14:28). Thus, as Mark tells the story, the readers do not need to see Jesus appear to his disciples in the narrative. The readers are left instead with the word and promise of Jesus himself. If the preacher solves the “troublesome” nature of this pericope by referencing the other Gospels, the very effect intended by the author of Mark is ruined.

According to Voelz, the second important theme is that Jesus has triumphed in his ministry through service and suffering.⁸ Jesus has come not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (10:45). As his disciples, then, we too are called to follow him. In this we are called to be willing to suffer for the sake of Jesus *and his words/the Gospel* (see 8:38 and 10:29). In this we are also called to serve one another (10:42–45).

One implication of this second theme for preaching Mark will be evident when dealing with the pericopes where Jesus explicitly teaches the disciples regarding discipleship. Consider Jesus's words in 8:34–38 (from the pericope for Lent 2), 9:33–50 (from the pericopes for Proper 20 and Proper 21), and 10:42–45 (from the pericope for Lent 5). In these pericopes the pattern that Jesus has set in his own life and ministry does have implications for how we live as his disciples today.

What, then, is the overall message of Mark's Gospel?⁹ Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, has indeed initiated God's reign of salvation, and he has done this in power. *Witness the miracles in which Jesus casts out unclean spirits, heals the sick, purifies the unclean, controls nature itself, and even raises the dead.* This message is indeed the very "gospel of God" proclaimed by Jesus in 1:14–15: God's reign has come in Jesus! It is in his Son Jesus that God is reconciling Israel, all of humanity, and, indeed, the whole of creation to himself. *The reader is called to trust in this proclamation.*

Yet the reign of God in Jesus's ministry was also hidden in humility and lowliness as ultimately revealed in Jesus's service and suffering. Until Jesus returns, his disciples will also experience the reign of God in this same way: It is here, yet it continues to be hidden in humility and lowliness. Nevertheless, because Jesus's words and promises are reliable, we can faithfully await the full revelation of God's reign when Jesus returns in glory. Then we will see the resurrected Jesus—even as this is promised to the disciples by both Jesus (14:28) and the young man at the tomb (16:7). We will then fully participate in his resurrection and glory even as we now experience the saving reign of God in principal. In the meantime, however, we live by and rely on Jesus's reliable word, for his word is true.

The "Bookends" of Mark's Gospel and Preaching in Lent and Easter

In Mark, the story of Jesus's ministry is framed by an interesting *inclusio* (literary "bookends") where Jesus's death on the cross is seen as parallel to his baptism. At the baptism of Jesus (1:9–11) three things occur: (1) The Holy Spirit comes "into him" (εἰς αὐτόν); (2) The heavens are torn apart (the verb used is σχίζω); (3) The voice of God from heaven identifies Jesus as the Son of God. At Jesus's death (15:37–39) there are parallel *events and vocabulary*. (1) When Jesus dies Mark uses the verb ἐκπνεύω (Jesus "spirits out"—note the contrast of the prepositions εἰς and ἐκ). (2) The curtain in the sanctuary is torn apart (again, the verb used is σχίζω). (3) The centurion—confessing, in a sense, upward from earth—identifies Jesus as the Son of God. And,

again, this confession by the centurion is notable in that he is the only human character in Mark's Gospel who identifies Jesus with this title.

Thus, the overall story of Jesus's ministry is framed by his baptism and his death. One might then argue that the true climax of this narrative is, in fact, Jesus's death upon the cross where the centurion repeats God's word spoken at the beginning of the narrative at Jesus's baptism. The reader of Mark ultimately discovers, with the centurion, that Jesus's identity as the Son of God is ultimately demonstrated at the cross. It is there that Jesus proves that he is faithful to his Father's will—faithful unto death, even death on the cross.

Note how this bookend in Mark is reflected during the season of Lent in Series B: Mark 1:9–15 is the pericope for Lent 1. This includes not only the temptation account, but also the account of Jesus's baptism and so God's identification of Jesus as his Son. The pericope concludes with Jesus openly announcing that the reign of God has come. That it has come “in power” is demonstrated as the narrative continues in 1:16ff. Yet in the passion narrative (Mk 14–15) read on the Sunday of the Passion/Lent 6, the reader hears that ultimately Jesus's ministry concludes with suffering and service. The words of the centurion recall what God has said about Jesus, and the reader learns that it is at the cross that Jesus ultimately shows himself to be the Son of God.

The account of the empty tomb (16:1–8) on Easter 1, then, might actually function more as an epilogue or denouement to the main narrative. Note especially how the young man at the tomb in 16:6 identifies Jesus as “He who (has been and as a result) *is* crucified” or, more simply, “the crucified one.” The readers are thus reminded of “the main event” of Jesus's death on the cross—the place where God's reign truly is hidden in humility, lowliness, suffering, and service. And, as noted above, the young man's words in 16:7 also recall the overall theme of the narrative by pointing the reader back to Jesus's word and promise (here, Jesus's word in 14:28).

Conclusion

Series B provides an opportunity for some challenging and, I would argue, exciting opportunities for proclaiming God's word as it is found in the Gospel of Mark. Again, I would advise that the preacher resist any temptation to leave behind even what may appear to be “incomplete” or “troubling” narratives from Mark for the “fuller” or “less troublesome” parallels in Matthew or Luke. There is much more that could be said about preaching throughout Series B, yet I pray that the thoughts I have offered here may provide guidance over the weeks ahead.

Endnotes

- 1 James W. Voelz, *Mark 1:1–8:26* (Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 51, 493.
- 2 Among this group of scholars, however, there is still a variance of opinion of just how good Mark is, from “better than people thought before” to “an excellently crafted narrative account.”
- 3 Voelz, 54–55.
- 4 Note, however, that the readers of Mark are in a privileged position as they are privy to Jesus’s true identity from the very beginning of the narrative (if one reads $\nu\iota\omicron\upsilon \theta\epsilon\omicron\upsilon$ in Mark 1:1).
- 5 Voelz, 54.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 55 and 61.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 54. Voelz notes that according to many other interpretations of Mark’s this is often said to be the first and most central theme of this Gospel. Voelz, however, argues that this is the “penultimate theme” when compared to Mark’s emphasis on the authority and reliability of Jesus and his word.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 61.

Reviews

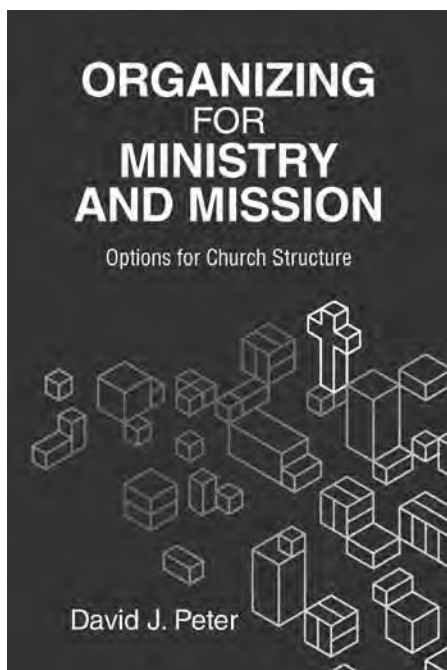
ORGANIZING FOR MINISTRY AND MISSION: Options for Church

Structure. By David J. Peter. Concordia Publishing House, 2023. Paper. 190 pages, \$24.99.

Looking for a definitive resource that provides an ordered description and situational evaluation of the three primary options available today for church structure? Needing the view of an experienced practitioner who is now an intentional observer and trainer of today's leaders? Experiencing a need to retool and revitalize your congregation's organizational structure and wondering where to turn? This author has in an ordered and consistent fashion developed a resource that fills all these needs. Most importantly he presents a

clear theology for organization in the church. No church fulfills its primary purpose by simply refining or "tuning up" its organization. Wisely, the author begins his writing by laying out a succinct theological framework which serves as the foundation and an answer to this question: "Why spend the energy on building an efficient and workable structure?" He aptly states, "*to neglect the organizational dynamic of a congregation is to hinder its Gospel ministry and mission* since gathering the saints to be nurtured in the Word and Sacraments and mobilizing them for service in God's kingdom requires organization." *The italicized emphasis is my own.*

Should you be looking for a definitive recommendation among the three prevailing styles of church organization today you will be sorely disappointed. Through his own experience and reflection as both a pastoral leader and an instructor, the author delivers a consistent outline for each organizational style. The working board, the managing board, and the governing board styles are each explained. The identifying characteristics of each are summed up with pithy phrasing which defines each style. For instance, the Managing Board style is referred to as "*Hands off and on.*" This style provides management and oversight: "*hands off.*" However, Management boards also tend to like to keep their "*hands on*" when control needs to be leveraged. Beyond the short summations, each structure is evaluated based on its effectiveness within different



sizes and styles of congregations. Advantages and challenges of each system are identified and evaluated for the benefit of the reader. Finally, each style is weighed conclusively in a summary statement. Should leaders functioning in an organizational structure require certain skills to work more effectively, this is clearly stated. The consistent structure of chapters 4–6 outlining the three organizational structures makes this section a ready and clear reference for any reader and is the heart of the book.

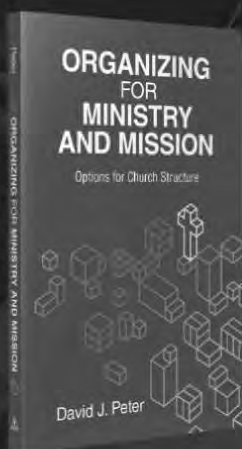
Most pleasing to this reader was that the author did not stop with an explanation of each organizational structure. Chapters 7–10 explore ways to maximize virtually any of the structures in response to the changing context of the church today. Models for “Action Teams” are explained and applied to each board style. (This is a tool that has been especially productive for this leader!) Concepts on developing competent leaders for boards using influence and intentional training are explained and reviewed. Adjusting for and empowering an innovative board member is explained and encouraged. (*What an important instruction since so often our church structures frustrate the innovative leader, seeking to force confirmation rather than encouraging fresh ideas and activity.*) Finally, some

“how to” on the integration of spiritual practices into Board Business was an inspiring final chapter. Here the author especially shines as he displays an experienced and intuitive pastoral heart. Moving far beyond an obligatory devotion and prayer, he explores with the reader how focused study of the Bible and spiritual literature presented in a timely fashion can build important structure for gospel-focused decision making. Testimony through stories of God at work become a nourishing encouragement. Prayers interwoven throughout the meeting, formal, scheduled, and even spontaneous in nature can enhance the effective functioning of a board gathering. These final chapters practically remind us that needed attention to organizational structure (a social and community activity), free up and facilitate the primary activity of the church: its gospel ministry and mission. The back cover of my paperback copy sums up the purpose well. “When it comes to the mission and ministry of the Church, organizational details are not the main thing. They are something. They are important. They are necessary.”

Michael Lange
Concordia University
Irvine, California

“David Peter does an excellent job making the case for the importance and necessity of a congregation giving attention to its organizational structure as it serves the essence of the Church—the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

- Rev. Dr. James A. Baneck, executive director of pastoral education, The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod



By David J. Peter,
professor of practical
theology and dean of
faculty at Concordia
Seminary, St. Louis

LEARN MORE AT CPH.ORG.



1.800.325.3040

© 2023 Concordia Publishing House



Concordia Seminary
801 Seminary Place
St. Louis, MO 63105

