

Lesson 4: History of Interpretation (Part 2)

III. THE ERA OF THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS (c. AD 100 – 590)

A. Introduction

- Christians after the apostolic age sought to read the entire Bible as a Christian document, emphasizing the Gospel.
- While well intended, the methodology employed often led to lamentable outcomes:
 - Ignoring the literal & historical senses of passages.
 - Insisting that Greek philosophy was found in the OT.
 - Reading parables as elaborate spiritual allegories.
 - Not understanding progressive revelation, and thus pouring meanings into OT texts not yet revealed.
- Allegorizing** was the most popular approach.
 - It was pursued with great zeal for Christ, but it resulted in running roughshod over the plain meaning of texts.
 - Jerome, on **Gen 1:2b**, says the Spirit's hovering over the water foreshadows Christian baptism.
 - The so-called "Epistle of Barnabas" claims the red heifer in **Num 19:1-10** represents Jesus, and those who sprinkle its burnt ashes are evangelists.

B. The **Alexandria** School (North Africa)

- Clement of Alexandria (AD 155-215)** taught all passages have literal & spiritual meanings, the latter of which were richer and reserved for the few.
 - For example, in **Luke 15:11-32**, Clement said the son's robe represented immortality, the shoes represented the upward progress of the soul, and the fatted calf represented Christ.
 - The spiritual plane of a text might have up to five senses.



- Origen (AD 185 – 254)** was extremely brilliant & diligent, but his interpretations were at times shockingly bad.

- He refined Clement's system into a 3-fold meaning to any passage, corresponding to the body, soul, & spirit, corresponding to Plato's 3-fold scheme of mind, libido, & spirit.
- He taught to "move from the events of the passage (its literal sense) to find the hidden principles for Christian living (its moral sense) & its doctrinal truth (its spiritual sense)."
- His methodology held sway for many centuries. But his interpretive abuses were so notorious there was eventually a pushback by other Christian interpreters.

C. The **Antioch** School (Syria)

- Here, leaders emphasized the single meaning of Scripture. The Antioch School is the best ancient example of the grammatical-historical approach to interpretation.
- Great examples include Theodore of Mopsuestia (AD 350-428) & John "Chrysostom" (AD 347-407), a nickname meaning "golden mouth" because of his Bible preaching.
- The principles of the Antioch school laid the groundwork for the modern practice of the grammatic-historical method.

D. The **Western School (Carthage and Rome)**

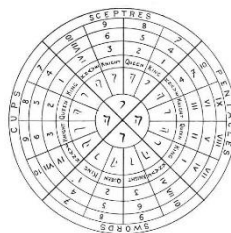
- This school was influenced by Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-430). He taught the Antioch approach but often allegorized.
- In **Psalms 3:5**, the psalmist's lying down, sleeping, and arising in the morning is sustained by God's grace. Augustine reads it as an allegory about Christ's death, burial, & resurrection.
- He spiritualized the kingdom of God to be the church only.
- He laid down 3 principles for interpreting unclear passages. The "**analogy of faith**" (using clearer passages to interpret difficult ones), the authority of the church, & the context of the passage. Unfortunately, the first 2 approaches usually trumped the last 1.

E. Jewish Interpretation in the Patristic Era

1. After the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, the major school of Jewish thought remaining was Pharisaism. It was not a unified system. As Jews spread throughout the world, they began to practice different types of interpretation.
2. Ironically, some Jews returned to a more literal reading of Scripture in reaction to the tendency of Christians to allegorize the OT into stories about Jesus and the church.
3. But Jewish allegorical interpretation continued, often in mystical directions. These sorts of Jewish interpretation might be called Midrash (from *darash*, "to study").
 - a. Often it explored not only what texts meant originally but what the text said in the moment. God was often thought to be making new revelation thru the old text.
 - b. This violates a fundamental rule of Bible interpretation: "A text cannot mean now what it never meant before."

4. Important Jewish Approaches to Interpretation

- a. **Gematria:** the "decoding" of Hebrew words by assigning numeric value to the Heb letters in each word.
 - (1) The term may derive from the Greek word for "geometry," but there are other theories as well.
 - (2) There are over a dozen different methods of gematria employed by the rabbis, enabling one to come to all manner of diverse conclusions.
- b. **The Talmud:** This was 1 of the most found-ational books for Rabbinic Judaism. It includes the tradit-ional sayings, arguments, and conclusions of the rabbis from the inter-testamental period to the end of the rabbinic era.
- c. **The Targums:** These are Aramaic paraphrases of the OT. Sometimes they are good examples of interpretation, but often they veer into bizarre allegorical readings. The Targums sometimes gave anti-Christian readings of OT texts.

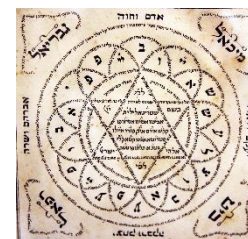


IV. THE MIDDLE AGES: (AD 590 – 1500)

A. Jewish Interpretation in the Middle Ages.

1. **Maimonides (Rambam), 1135-1204.** A Jewish philosopher, astronomer, and OT commentator on Jewish writings. He brought a kind of rationalism to religious thought that significantly influenced others.
2. **The Mystical School: Kabbala** is a Heb. word for "tradition." Proponents claim this tradition originated in the Garden of Eden. The tradition includes the secrets of the universe which are to be deciphered in the OT.

- a. Any text has four layers of meaning: the literal, the allegorical, the Rabbinic, and the mystical.
- b. The mystical meanings were outlined in the Zohar ("Splendor"), a book written in the 1300's.
- c. Kabbalah often speaks about the "70 faces" of Torah, meaning any one passage might have 70 meanings. God is supposedly revealing new things all the time.
- d. This violates the notion of inspiration. *Inspiration refers to the act in which God revealed His Word to biblical writers. Inspiration is not an ongoing event, though it does have an ongoing effect.*



3. The Literal School of Jewish Interpretation.

- a. A number of Jewish writers insisted on interpreting texts in their normal sense, even if they allowed for some allegorical understandings. Great examples include Rashi (1040-1105), Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089-1164), and Radak (1160-1235).
- b. Some of these writers complained about how Christian interpreters were mishandling texts with allegorical readings. The **Reformers** were in some ways helped by these Jewish observations.