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“THERE YOU SHALL OFFER HIM UP AS A HOLOCAUST
ON THE HEIGHT THAT I WILL POINT OUT TO YOU” (GEN 22:2).
SELECTED METHODS OF PATRISTIC EXEGESIS. PART TWO.

Holy Scripture has a special role in the church. Although Christianity is not a religion of the book, the Scriptures are divinely inspired. As the Fathers of the Vatican Council underline: “Therefore, since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation. Therefore «all Scripture is divinely inspired and has its use for teaching the truth and refuting error, for reformation of manners and discipline in right living, so that the man who belongs to God may be efficient and equipped for good work of every kind» (2 Tim. 3:16-17, Greek text)”¹.

Henri de Lubac underlines the importance of patristic exegesis in the understanding of Scripture. He says that understanding the spiritual meaning of Scripture is equal to understanding Christ. In the works of the Fathers he notices that Scripture was for them something more than just a study. They lived through the Scripture, which led them to interiorisation. “That is where it leads; for to the extent that we have not arrived at it, we have not drawn a totally Christian interpretation from the Scriptures. It is certain that the Christian mystery is not something to be curiously contemplated like a pure object of science, but is something which must be interiorized and lived. It finds its own fullness in being fulfilled within soul”². De Lubac refers to Origen while he states that by considering him the founder of biblical science he did not study the bible for scientific reasons. “Origen’s work is a theological meditation on sacred history. It is not, to speak very precisely, the scientific study of a text”³.

¹ Vaticanum II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, „*Dei Verbum*” (10th November 1965), no. 11.

² H. de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York 2000, p. 20.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

This article is the second of a two-part paper on 'Patristic Exegesis'. In the previous article the author presented the introduction to the Development of Christian Doctrine, Literal Meaning, Allegory, Typology and Reading Scripture with Scripture. The Fathers have developed certain methods in their interpretations of the Scriptures which the author will continue to present and give examples of interpretation on the basis of the text from the Book of Genesis 22:1-15 – The Sacrifice of Isaac.

1. CANONICAL READING

Joseph Ratzinger tries to express that there is something more in the Scripture than its historical form. What is more he calls upon the exegesis of the Fathers to show that by using their method we can comprehend better God's Revelation. "Canonical exegesis – reading the individual texts of the Bible in the context of the whole – is an essential dimension of exegesis. It does not contradict historical-critical interpretation, but carries it forward in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense. There are two further aspects of theological exegesis that I would like to underscore. Historical-critical interpretation of a text seeks to discover the precise sense the words were intended to convey at their time and place of origin. That is good and important. But - aside from the fact that such reconstructions can claim only a relative certainty – it is necessary to keep in mind that any human utterance of a certain weight contains more than the author may have been immediately aware of at the time"⁴.

Augustine disapproves of reading the books that are considered non canonical. Those books should be left to scholars who are stronger in faith. Therefore the canonical books are those that are accepted by all of the Catholic Church. There are however some books that are accepted in some churches and not accepted by others. We could benefit from those books but they should not be used before the canonical ones. Then Augustine provides the reader with the full list of those canonical books⁵.

According to Augustine God loves us and the divine Scriptures draw our attention to his love for us again and again. Love of God and neighbour is the sum of what Scripture teaches. For Augustine a person who negates that truth on purpose is a liar. A liar is a person who intentionally wants to misguide others. However there can be people who understand a passage in the Scriptures in the manner the author did not intend. Those people are obviously mistaken and yet they do not realise their own mistake. It does not mean that it is the Scriptures that have deceived them but their own judgment. Those people have to be set on the right path once again for their intention is the same as those who interpret the Scriptures correctly.

⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Bloomsbury Publishing, London 2007, p. xix.

⁵ See Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. E. Hill, J.H. Rotelle, New City Press, Hyde Park NY 1996, p. 133-135.

The important thing is that Scripture is not to be blamed for their mistakes. People who are supported by faith, hope and charity, and retaining a firm grip on them, have no need of the Scriptures except for instructing others⁶.

Augustine states that the Scriptures are full of signs therefore they should be studied with greater care because if they are not, we can make mistakes in our interpretation. However we can be sure of the help of the Holy Spirit in our deliberations. “Magnificent and salutary, therefore is the way the Holy Spirit has so adjusted the Holy Scriptures, that they ward off starvation with the clearer passages, while driving away boredom with the obscurer ones. There is almost nothing, in fact, that can be extracted from their obscurities, which cannot be found very plainly said somewhere else”⁷.

To understand the Scriptures a scholar has first to get to know the text. Although he might not understand it during the first reading, he has to become familiar with it. After familiarising himself with the Scriptures the scholar can proceed to try to open up and unravel its obscurities. The text however can be misunderstood. The reason for that is the incapacity to read the signs because either they are unknown or ambiguous. The signs can be proper if they signify the things they were originally intended for or metaphorical if they signify something else. To get to know the Scriptures it is useful to know languages like Latin, Hebrew and Greek. Augustine also states that it is important to have a good translation of the Scriptures since there are differences between them that change the meaning of the Scriptures. As an example he gives a passage from Isaiah 58:7 (do not despise household of your seed; do not despise your own flesh). There can be also minor mistakes in the translations that do not change the meaning however if we are able to correct them we should certainly do so regarding the pastoral effect⁸.

During the reading of the Scriptures a reader may encounter certain problems as Augustine has stated before. Therefore he should apply in such moments the rule of faith which has been given from the plainer passages of the Scriptures and from the authority of the Church. If that still does not help a reader should put the words into the wider context so as to look at what precedes and what follows the ambiguous passage. As an example Augustine gives the Prologue of John’s Gospel where he notices the refusal that the Word is God. To explain he applies the rule of faith and particularly the equality of the three divine persons. Moreover ambiguity can arise from phrasing, pronunciation, grammatical construction, metaphorical language. According to Augustine we apply the same rules as he explained before⁹.

⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 123-126

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁸ See *ibid.*, p. 136-140.

⁹ See *ibid.*, p. 169-174.

2. MYSTAGOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SCRIPTURE

In the description of his conversion by Justin Martyr we discover his appreciation for the prophets as people of faith who were living according to high moral standards and virtues. This can suggest his appreciation of typology and the finding of the moral sense of Scripture. Justin distinguishes the natural moral law which is eternal and was always binding to legalism. He does not contradict the importance of the literal law for the Jews because they were unable to follow the spiritual law¹⁰.

For Ambrose, a given passage of Scripture might be applied to every pastoral situation and all the events of the spiritual life. The reason that Ambrose could not confine his use of Scripture to a single literary category but applied the same passage to a variety of pastoral situations is that he views Scripture as a mystery. Specifically Ambrose distinguishes a threefold meaning in the text of Scripture. For Ambrose a Scriptural text can have a natural, mystical or moral sense. The investigation of the moral and mystical or divine wisdom is what really interested Ambrose. He described moral and mystical interpretations as the two eyes with which Christ is seen and the two kinds of nutrition by which the inner life is sustained – the former sweet and soothing, the latter strong meat, strengthening the human heart. Ambrose gave a number of sermons in which he presented a strict moral code based on the Scriptures¹¹.

The use of Scripture was extremely important both in theological discourse and in decisions affecting life. Scripture, both the Old and New Testaments, was the native setting in which the Church of the first centuries lived and worked. The application of the sacred text to the various purposes of communal life required a deeper grasp of its meaning and value, so that it could then be adapted to the needs and tasks which might well have no direct or obvious connection with the given passage¹².

3. ANAGOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF SCRIPTURE

In life regarding Moses, Gregory of Nyssa reads the eschatological sense of the Scriptures. The meaning of the Paschal Vigil among the Israelites signifies the transition from this life to the next. The significance of this meal seems very important to the Father. Everything has its significance – the tunic suggests the full enjoyment of this life, the belt understood as prudence to control it, shoes as self-protection against sins. The food signifies the faith that we receive. The fire can signify a Spirit that is present among people¹³.

¹⁰ See Justin the Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, in: *Writings of Saint Justin Martyr*, trans. T.B. Falls, Christian Heritage, New York 1948, no. 1-7.

¹¹ See C.A. Satterlee, *Ambrose of Milan's Method of Mystagogical Preaching*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville 2002, p. 207-248.

¹² See E. Mazza, *Mystagogy: a theology of liturgy in the patristic age*, Pueblo Publishing Company, New York 1989, p. 7-13.

¹³ See Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, trans. A.J. Malherbe, E. Ferguson, Paulist Press, New

The Life of Moses is not a typical exegetical work but is written more as a spiritual guide. Gregory of Nyssa presents the Life of Moses as a spiritual path from sinfulness to full communion with God. It is remarkable that this book can be compared to the works of the great mystics who try to present the mysticism of Christian spirituality and actually teach people how to create a deep bond with Christ. For Moses God was infinite, so his relationship with God was a constant way, an active path – this Gregory names as True Being. However in this True Being there has to be a stable element, a rock. This rock is Christ and being in communion with Christ brings the fullness of life. Therefore when Moses saw the back of God it was an actual sign to follow him. “The perfect life was such that no description of its perfection hinders its progress; the continual development of life to what is better is the soul’s way to perfection”¹⁴.

Also Tyconius in his *Book of Rules* speaks about an eschatological meaning regarding the Scriptures. *The Devil and His Body* is the last chapter in Tyconius’ book. The Devil was cast down from heaven and he retains no hope that he can ascend to glory once more. Man can have a greater hope of ascending than the devil however neither of them has the ability to do so and be like God. However because of that fact Tyconius states that the understanding of the morning star can be bipartite. It can signify Christ but also the one who has fallen from the skies. For Tyconius then also the Church is bipartite and people can either follow Christ or the Devil who has built his kingdom on pride. The mountains on which the devil sits are the mountains of pride, both his and all sinners. For the mountain on which God sits is built by holy men so when Peter speaks about the church stones he speaks about those holy men. However if a person sins he/she is cast down from the mountain of the Lord. The cherubim who drives people out from among the stones of fire is a ministration of God, which has excluded all the evil from the church, but has done so spiritually. For when the Lord strikes down or unveils evil people, those who are accustomed to rely on his help for support are plunged into sorrow since a part of their own body is disabled¹⁵.

4. THE SACRIFICE OF ISAAC (GEN 22:1-15)

“Some time after these events, God put Abraham to the test. He called to him, «Abraham!» «Ready!» he replied” (Gen 22:1).

Origen underlines that this text is to be regarded with the greatest diligence. For Origen this test is very important therefore God has called Abraham by name¹⁶.

“Then God said: «Take your son Isaac, your only one, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust on a height that I will point out to you»” (Gen 22:2).

York 1978, no. 102-111.

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, no. 269-318.

¹⁵ See Tyconius, *The Book of Rules*, trans. W.S. Babcock, Scholars Press, Atlanta 1989, p. 130-145.

¹⁶ See Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, in: *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. R.E. Heine, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1982, no. 8:1.

In this verse Origen tries to interpret this passage with the passage from the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 11:17.19). Abraham knew that God will raise his Son from the dead therefore he has decided to offer him to God as God had requested. What's more, his great faith saved his Son from death. Abraham already knew according to Origen about the real future, he knew that from his seed Christ will be born and he will rise from the dead¹⁷.

For Caesarius di Arles, Abraham here is a symbol of God the Father. Isaac is a symbol of Christ who will be offered as a sacrifice¹⁸.

For Origen the fact that the sacrifice has to take place on a mountain has its significance. The way up to the mountain is a symbolic way of escaping from the urges of the flesh and entering the place of faith. The way itself is a test for Abraham so he could win with his carnal need of saving the Son and not fulfilling the words of God. Therefore the way is long and lasts for three days¹⁹.

“Early the next morning Abraham saddled his donkey, took with him his son Isaac, and two of his servants as well, and with the wood that he had cut for the holocaust, set out for the place of which God had told him” (Gen 22:3).

“On the third day Abraham got sight of the place from afar” (Gen 22:4).

The third day is for Origen the symbol. Origen also relates this third day to the three day period of purification of the unclean (Es 19:11.15-16). It is also a symbol of the resurrection²⁰.

Caesarius di Arles underlines the symbolism of days. He compares the three days to the mystery of the Trinity²¹.

“Then he said to his servants: «Both of you stay here with the donkey, while the boy and I go on over yonder. We will worship and then come back to you»” (Gen 22:5).

For Origen the fact that Abraham said to his servants that he will return with his son does not mean that he had lied. He simply knew that God would spare his Son. Additionally he has put the wood on his Son's shoulders. This symbolises Jesus and his cross²².

For Caesarius di Arles the two servants that were left behind are the people of Israel who cannot ascend because they did not believe in Christ. The donkey is a symbol of a synagogue. Isaac who carries the wood is also a prefiguration of Christ. The fact that Abraham spoke about his return is also a symbol of his great faith in God who will raise his son from the dead²³.

¹⁷ See *ibid.*, no. 8:1.

¹⁸ See Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons*, vol. 2, trans. M.M. Mueller, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1964, no. 84:2.

¹⁹ See Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, no. 8:3.

²⁰ See *ibid.*, no. 8:4.

²¹ See Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons*, vol. 2, no. 84:2.

²² See Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, no. 8:5.

²³ See Caesarius of Arles, *Sermons*, vol. 2, no. 84:3-4.

“Thereupon Abraham took the wood for the holocaust and laid it on his son Isaac’s shoulders, while he himself carried the fire and the knife” (Gen 22:6).

The knife and the fire are a symbol of priestly ministry. Abraham is a priest who offers sacrifice on the altar as now a priest offers sacrifice in the Eucharist²⁴.

For Clement of Alexandria the sacrifice of Isaac prefigures Christ. The wood that he carries prefigures the cross²⁵.

“As the two walked on together, Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. «Father!» he said. «Yes, son,» he replied. Isaac continued, «Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the sheep for the holocaust?»” (Gen 22:7).

The question that Isaac asked his Father is a form of temptation. It is a test whether Abraham will withhold his son or not. What’s more Abraham here is a prophet when he tells that God will provide the sacrifice²⁶.

“«Son,» Abraham answered, «God himself will provide the sheep for the holocaust.» Then the two continued going forward” (Gen 22:8).

Abraham is sure that his son will be raised from death and will return. Therefore his descendants will bear the name of Isaac²⁷.

“When they came to the place of which God had told him, Abraham built an altar there and arranged the wood on it. Next he tied up his son Isaac, and put him on top of the wood on the altar” (Gen 22:9).

The fact that Abraham was prepared to offer his Son is a symbol that his faith in God is stronger than any human ties. He loved his son but this love was only carnal while his love of God was spiritual and greater than all else²⁸.

“Then he reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son” (Gen 22:10).

But the LORD’S messenger called to him from heaven, «Abraham, Abraham!» «Yes, Lord» he answered” (Gen 22:11).

“«Do not lay your hand on the boy,» said the messenger. «Do not do the least thing to him. I know now how devoted you are to God, since you did not withhold from me your own beloved son»” (Gen 22:12).

Abraham feared God because he obeyed all the commandments and did not stop in the time of trial. God accepted his sacrifice although the son was not offered. Instead God will offer his own Son and that will be the perfect offering. Those words were written for the ones who read the Scriptures so that they could also, like Abraham, be obedient to God²⁹.

²⁴ See Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, no. 8:6.

²⁵ See Clement of Alexandria, *Il Pedagogo*, trans. A. Boatti, Società Editrice Internazionale, Torino 1937, no. 1, 5, 23.

²⁶ See Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, no. 8:6.

²⁷ See Ephrem the Syrian, *Commentary on Genesis*, in *Selected Prose Works*, trans. E.G. Mathews Jr., J.P. Amar, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 1994, no. 20:2.

²⁸ See Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, no. 8:7.

²⁹ See *ibid*, no. 8:8.

The fact that God says that he knows how devoted Abraham is does not mean that God did not have that knowledge before. God knows people who are just and worthy and who are obedient³⁰.

“As Abraham looked about, he spied a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So he went and took the ram and offered it up as a holocaust in place of his son” (Gen 22:13).

The ram is a symbol of the Incarnate Christ. It was innocent as Christ was innocent. What’s more, the ram was provided by God so it prefigured the Son’s offering. The ram symbolises the Incarnate Word³¹.

The death of Isaac would not provide the liberation of this world. Therefore for Athanasius Christ has to be offered as a perfect sacrifice³².

All that happened as a prefiguring of the cross according to John Chrysostom. As in this text the ram was offered instead of Isaac so will the Lamb be offered for the sins of the world. The only Son of God will be offered for the world and will purify the world and transform it³³.

“Abraham named the site Yahweh-yireh; hence people now say, «On the mountain the LORD will see» (Gen 22:14).

Origen uses this verse to alert the readers of the Scriptures so that they also could see everything that has been presented and be obedient to the Lord³⁴.

5. CONCLUSION

Since the most ancient of times it has been known that the same Holy Spirit by whose inspiration the Holy Scriptures are written also inspires the interpretation of those texts³⁵. The Fathers of the Church have played a specific role in the selection of the Canonical Books. They had and still have a great impact on the Tradition that accompanies the reading and interpretation of the texts of the Scriptures³⁶. The main impact of patristic exegesis is that it has extracted the meaning

³⁰ See Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity*, trans. S. McKenna, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1954, no. 9:64; Jerome, *Homilies*, vol. 1, trans. M.L. Ewald, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1990, no. 1; Bede the Venerable, *Homilies on the Gospels*, vol. 1, trans. L.T. Martin, D. Hurst, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo MI 1991, no. 2:13.

³¹ See Ambrose, *Letters to Bishops*, in: *Saint Ambrose Letters*, trans. M.M. Beyenka, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1954, no. 8:55:1-3.

³² See Athanasius, *Lettere festali*, trans. A. Camplani, Paoline, Milano 2003, no. 6.

³³ See John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Genesis 18-45*, trans. R.C. Hill, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington DC 1990, no. 47:14; Caesarius di Arles, *Sermons*, vol. 2, no. 84:5.

³⁴ See Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, no. 8:10.

³⁵ See Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, vol. 3, trans. M.C. Steenberg, D. Unger, Paulist Press, New York 2012, no. 24.1; 1:1; Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G.W. Butterworth, Wipf & Stock Publishers, Eugene OR 1979, no. 2:7:2; Tertullian, *De Praescriptionis haereticorum*, in: *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson, A. Cleveland Coxe, Christian Literature Publishing, Buffalo NY 1885, no. 22.

³⁶ See Leo XIII, *Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on the Study of Holy Scripture “Providentissimus Deus”* (18th November 1893), no. 110-111.

that was the basis of the formation of doctrine and was a source of theological guidelines, forming and sustaining the *societas fidelium*. The methods developed by the Fathers can still be a great source of wisdom for biblical studies. However patristic exegesis can have an even greater impact on every Christian who decides to read the Scriptures.

*THERE YOU SHALL OFFER HIM UP AS A HOLOCAUST ON THE HEIGHT
THAT I WILL POINT OUT TO YOU (GEN 22:2).*
SELECTED METHODS OF PATRISTIC EXEGESIS. PART TWO.

Summary

For the Church Fathers the Scriptures constituted more than just Words and they strived to go beyond literal understanding of the text. Therefore, the purpose of this article, which is the second one of a two-part study, is to give a brief explanation of various methods of patristic exegesis and its practical application using as an example the Sacrifice of Isaac in the Book of Genesis.

Keywords: patristic exegesis, exegesis, sacrifice, allegory, literal meaning, typology, anagogy, mystagogy, canonical reading, reading Scripture with Scripture

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„I TAM ZŁOŻ GO W OFIERZE NA JEDNYM Z PAGÓRKÓW, JAKI CI WSKAŻĘ”
(RDZ 22,2). WYBRANE METODY EGZEGEZY PATRYSTYCZNEJ. CZĘŚĆ DRUGA

Abstrakt

Ojcowie Kościoła widzieli w Piśmie Świętym coś więcej niż tylko SŁOWO, coś więcej niż tylko jego dosłowne znaczenie. Dlatego też, celem tego artykułu, który jest drugą częścią serii dwóch artykułów poświęconych egzegezie patrystycznej, jest krótkie przedstawienie różnych metod egzegezy patrystycznej i ich praktyczna aplikacja na przykładzie Ofiary Izaaka z Księgi Rodzaju.

Słowa kluczowe: egzegeza patrystyczna, egzegeza, ofiara, alegoria, dosłowne znaczenie, typologia, anagogia, mistagogia, czytanie kanoniczne, czytanie Pisma z Pismem