

Patristic Exegesis and Attentiveness to God's Love

Andrew Chronister

Introduction

I first began learning about the Fathers of the Church when I was a student at Notre Dame. There, I was blessed to have classes with excellent patristics professors like Fr. Brian Daley and John Cavadini, who introduced me to the Fathers and helped me to get to know and love them. When it came time to begin my PhD, I decided to choose Patristics as my primary field of study. It seemed to me at the time that it was particularly important for contemporary Christians to get to know the Fathers well, as many of them lived and taught in a period in which Christianity was not the dominant religion. As a result, the Fathers seemed to me to offer something of a model for us today on how to engage a culture that increasingly does not know Christ. I continue to think that this is true for a variety of reasons. But perhaps one of the most fundamental things that the Fathers can offer us and our culture is a particular vision of the world around us—something we might call a sacramental vision of the world.¹ Studying the Fathers can help us to view the world around us differently—they can help us view the world and the events of our lives as signs pointing to God's redeeming love for us. The culture around us is desperately hungry for something like this—even if most people don't realize it. So, this evening, I'd like to speak about how the Fathers might help us cultivate this sacramental vision. This might seem like a bit of a non sequitur, but in order to do so, I think we should discuss how the Fathers read Scripture.

Patristic Exegesis vs. Modern Interpretative Methods

The Fathers of the Church are famous—or perhaps infamous—for the exegetical techniques they employed to interpret Scripture. While many of the Fathers did seek to

¹ The phrase “sacramental vision” has been used by many. I am not sure of the precise origins.

understand the literal sense of Scripture, they also tended to devote much effort to plumbing the depths of the spiritual senses, for example, seeking to discover in passages of the Old Testament references to the salvific events of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. I think for many contemporary biblical scholars, the Fathers' interpretative methods seem more than a bit arbitrary and unscientific—and possibly result in more “eisegesis” than exegesis (that is, they tend to import a meaning into the Biblical text more than draw meaning out from it). In contrast to this, many modern biblical scholars prefer to interpret the text of Scripture by trying to understand what the text would have meant in its original cultural and historical setting. This approach appeals to the modern mind, I think, because we tend to readily and instinctively recognize the huge gulf that stands between us and the past. Indeed, if the world has changed dramatically over the past few decades—with the increasingly widespread availability of the internet, cell phones, and social media—how much exponentially more has it changed over the course of the two thousand years that separate us from the time of Christ (and even more since the times of the various books of the Old Testament)? So, too, conditioned by centuries' worth of interpretative traditions, isn't there something appealing about an exegetical method that attempts to consult other historical sources to help us better contextualize the Scriptural texts? There is a lot of fruit to be drawn from this methodology: by reading Genesis, for example, in light of other Ancient Near-Eastern texts we can see more readily the distinctive perspective that the Bible offers us about God, the world, and humanity. Or by thinking about the dynamics of genre at work in the Bible—and how those genres were used at the time of the composition of particular biblical books—we can more easily glean the human author's intended meaning. So, all of this is to say that I am not trying this evening to convince everyone to abandon modern exegetical methods!

At the same time, though, I would like to note a potential short-coming of some of these modern methods. As I noted already, we today tend to instinctively recognize that the books of the Bible were written a very long time ago and emerge out of a culture very different from our own. Historical-critical approaches to Scripture tend to reinforce this instinctive sense. That, in itself, is not problematic. But here is the potential danger: by reinforcing one aspect of our “reflexive perspective” these modern methods might also at times unwittingly reinforce other rather reflexive perspectives we tend to have about the premodern world. Indeed, it seems to me that many of us somewhat unconsciously view the premodern world from a rather elitist perspective: we think we know more about the world and how it works than those ancient people did; those premoderns—and especially the people in ancient Israel—were rather primitive and probably weren’t very systematic thinkers or editors; they also tended to be rather superstitious and attributed to supernatural causes things that often have natural explanations. Again, modern interpretative methods do not convey these prejudices by design—and employed well, they actually can help to undermine them. But there are plenty of examples of biblical scholarship out there that do in fact reinforce them, whether consciously or unconsciously. As a result, the Bible can easily become in the minds of modern people a book of rather dubious quality.

Of course, this is not a new problem. St. Augustine of Hippo famously found the Bible—and especially the Old Testament—a rather unpleasant and unappealing text when he first offered it his attention. Indeed, hoping to find there the eloquence of Cicero, Augustine was sorely disappointed! Interestingly, though, it was precisely St. Ambrose’s preaching—very much influenced by the allegorical exegesis of Origen—that prompted Augustine to give the Bible a second chance.

But what was it about this allegorical exegesis that opened Augustine's eyes to Christianity? It seems to me that that allegorical exegesis allowed Augustine to see the divine authorship of Scripture. When he first came to the Bible expecting to find Ciceronian prose, he was approaching it like any other human text. And viewed at that level—especially when read in a rather poor translation—the Bible certainly couldn't compete with Cicero. However, upon learning from Ambrose that there was more to Scripture than just its literal sense, Augustine was able to glimpse the divine intentionality behind the way Scripture was composed. The Bible wasn't simply a mishmash of rather poorly composed texts from rather uneducated authors, but was a product of divine inspiration. Much like the Word became flesh, clothing Himself in humility, God speaks to us through Scripture, despite its supposed stylistic flaws and shortcomings. But those supposed flaws and shortcomings are only that—supposed. For there is, for Augustine and for the other Fathers, divine intentionality behind even those rougher parts of Scripture, where we see incongruities, apparent contradictions, and so on. In fact, the Fathers suggest, it is especially in those obscure parts of Scripture that we can see the hand of God at work.

When I'm teaching Patristics, I often find myself referring to the movie *The Matrix*. Early on in the year, it's a helpful analogy for Gnosticism, with its themes of deception, of a real-world beyond the evil construct we've been trapped in, etc. But it's also a helpful movie for talking about the way the Fathers interpret Scripture. At one point in the movie, Neo and the good guys are running from the bad guys and are looking for a way out of the matrix. They end up in an apartment building and, as they race up the stairs, Neo notices something odd. On two consecutive floors apparently the same black cat walks across a doorway just as he is running past. When he comments on this, the others with him express their concern: that sense of *déjà vu*

or “glitch” in the Matrix means that the bad guys are doing something in the background—they’ve altered the code for the building’s plans so as to trap Neo and his friends.

The Fathers felt like something similar took place in the Bible. When you notice something weird or odd, something that doesn’t quite fit or make sense—a glitch in the Matrix—it should be a signal to dig deeper: God has hidden something there that he wants us to find. Now, the Fathers are clear that everything that God reveals in these hidden passages is also revealed more plainly elsewhere in Scripture. So there is no danger here of a sort of Gnostic secret knowledge that only the really good exegetes will have access to. Rather, the point of these passages is to offer us more opportunities to reflect on God’s love for us and on His salvific work. God gives us these difficult passages in Scripture as a gift—so that by wrestling with them, we may come to know and appreciate his love for us all the more. God knows how the human mind works—God knows that we like a challenge, that we value things more when we have to work for them. These passages are God saying to us, “Do you really want to come to know me and my love for you? Dig deeper! Press further!”

A Case Study: St. Augustine’s Exposition 1 on Psalm 33(34)

Now all of this might sound perfectly fine in theory. But I’d like to offer a bit of a case study at this point because I think that the Fathers’ way of reading Scripture really bumps up against our reflexive elitist view of Scripture that I was talking about a little while ago—and it takes some significant retraining of our perspectives to read Scripture the way the Fathers did. I’d like to discuss, then, one of St. Augustine’s sermons on Psalm 33 (34).² This is a rather unusual sermon by our standards, as the whole of it deals not with the Psalm itself, but simply with its title, which reads, “*A psalm of David, when he altered his behavior in the presence of*

² All quotations below are taken from Sr. Maria Boulding’s translation of this homily, found in *Expositions of the Psalms: Volume 2, Works of Saint Augustine* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2000).

Abimelech, and forsook him, and went away.” As Augustine points out, this title seems to refer back to an episode in 1 Samuel 21, when David was on the run from Saul. During that narrative, David aims to take refuge with a certain Achis, the king of Gath, but, upon being recognized by Achis’s servants, “he altered his behavior in their presence, and affected madness, and drummed on the doors into the city; he was carried in his own hands, and fell down at the doors of the gate, and saliva dribbled down his beard” (1 Sam 21:13)—so that Achis will not have him put to death.

The “glitch” in the Matrix in this story is of course the change of name: why in 1 Samuel is the king of Gath called Achis while at Psalm 33 (34) he is called Abimelech? Now, I think for us modern readers, we might immediately offer a few responses. We might say, well, it’s just the Psalm title—so it’s really not that important whether the name is the same. Or maybe we’d say, perhaps it’s just a minor mistake. Or perhaps this Achis guy also went by Abimelech. Or perhaps Abimelech is just a sort of generic name for Philistine kings. Whichever response we choose, I think they all basically amount to the same thing: this is not a big deal and it really isn’t worth lingering over. Augustine disagrees, rather strongly:

“The fact of the change of name ought to move us to search out this great mystery [*sacramentum*]. . . . The profundity of these mysteries must be obvious to you, brothers and sisters. If it was no mystery that Goliath was killed by a mere boy, then neither was it a mystery that David altered his bearing, and feigned madness, and drummed on the door, and fell down at the doors to the city and at the doors of the gate, and that saliva trickled down his beard. How is it possible that all this had no significance? The apostle tells us plainly, *All these things happened to them, but with symbolic import, for they are written down as a rebuke to us, upon whom the climax of the ages has come* (1 Cor 10:11). Did the manna signify nothing, the manna

of which the apostle said, *They ate spiritual food* (1 Cor 10:3)? What of the parting of the sea, and the leading of the people safely through it so that they might escape from Pharaoh's persecution—did that mean nothing, when the apostle declares, *I would not have you ignorant, brothers and sisters, that all our ancestors walked under the cloud, and all crossed the sea, and all were through Moses baptized in cloud and sea* (1 Cor 10:1–2)? . . . If all these signify nothing, in spite of the statement backed by apostolic authority that they happened as mysterious types of what was to come, then we are right to think that what I read to you just now about David from [1 Samuel] had no further meaning either. Nor, consequently, is there any significance in the change of name when the psalm says, *In the presence of Abimelech.*"³

So, Augustine concludes, there must be a meaning to this change of names—and it's our task to figure out what it is. The way Augustine attempts to unravel the mystery is through a series of tried-and-true Patristic interpretative techniques. First, he considers the etymological meanings of the names "Abimelech" and "Achis"—the former he says means "my father's kingdom" and the latter "how can this be?" He then notes that David is a type of Christ—something we can grasp from the story of David and Goliath, which is a foreshadowing of Christ, who, humbling himself, slew the devil. Augustine then turns his attention to the psalm title's reference to "altering his behavior" and begins to do some "concept association"—puzzling out some key changes in behavior identified in the Bible. The first he identifies is the change in sacrificial system ushered in by the New Covenant: no longer do we offer animals as victims as under the priesthood of Aaron, but now we offer the sacrifice of the Lord's body and blood. Augustine writes, "The sacrifice of Aaron was therefore superseded, and the sacrifice according to the order of Melchizedek came into being. To this end, someone *altered his*

³ *en. Ps.* 33.1.3. I have slightly modified Boulding's translation.

behavior.” This someone, Augustine says, is Christ: Christ, though God, humbled himself to become man, so that as man he might die for us on the Cross and feed us his body and blood, the bread on which angels feed.

This shift in topics to the Eucharist might seem a bit out of left field initially, but Augustine soon explains why he focused on this theme. Indeed, returning to his consideration of the change of names in the psalm title, Augustine suggests that Abimelech—that is, “my father’s kingdom”—is a reference to the Jewish people, as Christ’s father according to the flesh is David. So when did David—that is, Christ—alter his behavior in the presence of Abimelech—that is, the Jewish people? When did he affect madness in their presence? Well, a key moment is in John 6, during the Bread of Life discourse, when Jesus tells his audience “Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you will not have life in you.” How did many of Jesus’s listeners respond to this statement? As Augustine notes, “They thought the Lord was a madman, that he did not know what he was saying, that he was raving. But he knew very well what he was saying by this alteration in his behavior; by making use of apparent madness and insanity he was proclaiming his sacraments, so he affected madness, and drummed on the doors into the city.”⁴

At this point, having identified the typology of the psalm title, Augustine turns back to 1 Samuel 21 in order to see if there are any further typological references to be found there. And sure enough, he does. When it speaks of David affecting madness, we can see the depths of God’s affection or love for us—that he humbles himself to the point of death for our sakes. Indeed, it is this affection that leads Christ to drum on the doors to the city—for what is a drum, but flesh stretched out over a wood frame? Just like Christ on the cross. And what doors does he drum on? The doors of our hearts—the doors that we had closed on God and eternal life. And

⁴ *en. Ps.* 33.1.8.

how is it that Christ “carries himself in his own hands”? He carries himself in his own hands when he says, “This is my body” at the Last Supper. And why does saliva trickle down his beard? Because he sounded like a babbling infant when he said “Eat my flesh, drink my blood”—but these words that sounded like infantile nonsense masked virile strength symbolized by the beard.

And with that, Augustine brings his homily to a close.

I have to imagine that if someone were to preach a homily like that today most of the congregation would probably find it totally bizarre. “What did we just listen to?” The reason why I brought up this homily is because I actually don’t think it’s as bizarre as it first seems. Indeed, what we find here isn’t a crazy interpretation totally unconnected with the literal sense of Scripture—even though it certainly seems like that at first glance. Rather, I’d like to suggest that there is actually a method to the madness here. The thing that prompts the whole sermon is the change of name from Achis to Abimelech—and Augustine knows that a change of name is something significant in the Bible. He also knows that the meanings of names are significant in the Bible. So what does he do? He looks at the etymological meanings of the names; then he starts thinking about other typical types and antitypes—connecting David to Christ and Abimelech/Achis to the Jewish people—then he identifies a possible connection between David’s alteration in behavior and a time when Christ altered his behavior or appeared mad. In my view, the connections Augustine draws between the title of Ps 33 and 1 Sam 21, on the one hand, and the life of Christ, on the other, are uncanny and rather startling in how well they seem to fit.

Of course, I think a lot of people would look at this sermon and just write it off as laughably farfetched—and maybe some aspects of it are. Maybe, in some places, Augustine’s

text of Scripture is a bit deficient, or his etymologies aren't exactly right, or he makes a connection that doesn't quite work. But at the end of the day, I wonder if our discomfort with this style of exegesis has more to do with a sort of reflexive disbelief that God is the author of history—a disbelief that God could very well have inspired the human authors of Scripture to write in such a way that would allow certain foreshadowings of Christian mysteries to be hidden in the Old Testament. These are the fundamental principles on which patristic exegesis is based: that God is at work in the world, intimately guiding the events of history, and that he has shaped history to revolve around the central mysteries of our Christian faith. As a result, when we read Scripture, we should be looking for those connections: God has hidden these “Easter eggs” for us to discover, to marvel at, to contemplate. And I think the effect of discovering these connections is, first and foremost, to evoke wonder and awe and love in us for God. We're shocked at just how much “work” God put into this. But our God is a God of details, a God who, in all the events of salvation history, wants to remind us of the depths of his love. Do you see David acting crazy? That's Christ revealing the crazy extent to which he will go to win us back. Do you see David drumming at the door? That's Christ begging us to let him into our hearts while hanging on the cross. Do you see the spittle running down David's beard? That's Christ, reminding us that his claim, “This is my body” is no insane babbling, but words of power. The Incarnation, Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ are events that have sent shockwaves throughout history—and the Fathers recognized that.

Conclusion

Now, to bring this to a conclusion, I'd like to return to what I announced at the beginning of my paper was going to be my aim here. As I mentioned, I think that one of the most fundamental things the Fathers have to offer us today is a way to cultivate a sacramental vision

of reality. This is something our culture is desperately in need of. We live in a culture that believes it has a firmer grasp on how the world works than any generation before us: we have wealth, we have technology, we have countless megabytes of information constantly at our fingertips. We can design rockets and satellites, we can build incredibly complex buildings and machines, we can cure diseases unlike ever before. And yet, despite all these advances, our culture also seems deeply troubled. Despite all the material comforts many of us have easy access to, we never seem to have quite enough. If only I had a bit more money or time. If only I had a nicer car or house or job. We seek happiness in all sorts of ways—many of which lead us to the exact opposite. We are ravaged by anxiety, and depression, and uncertainty. Perhaps this is no surprise—for despite all of our intricate scientific knowledge of the world, our culture seems to have lost its grasp on who we are as humans, and what the purpose of life actually is. And indeed, at the heart of this amnesia seems to be our culture’s increasing disinterest in God. Without God, there can be no ultimate meaning to our lives, much less the course of history itself. History just becomes the story of a chaotic battle of wills. There is no plan, no design, no purpose, no end. We Christians, of course, know this isn’t true. But I do think we can all too easily absorb aspects of this way of thinking. Sure, we might attach meaning to key events in salvation history, and we might want to emphasize the importance of the choices we make in our own lives. But I wonder if for a lot of Christians, this all remains rather abstract and theoretical. I think the Fathers offer us a remedy for this: they offer a vision of the world that is suffused with meaning, a sacramental vision of reality in which God is actively at work, trying to grab our attention and reveal his love for us. This viewpoint comes across in a variety of patristic writings, but is especially apparent in their exegesis, as they attempt to show their congregations how all of salvation history points to Christ. My sense is that if we spent more time reading Scripture

with the Fathers, we'd start to cultivate a certain sensitivity for recognizing the workings of God not simply in Biblical stories, but also in our own lives and in the world around us. We'd perhaps be quicker to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, to notice the echoes of the paschal mystery in our own lives, to see God's providence in both the blessings and the crosses that come our way. By doing so, the way we view the world would change, the events of history would take on meaning, and we'd come to glimpse the depths of God's love for us—not just in the abstract, but in the concrete details of our lives.

I'd like to close with a quotation from Augustine's *Confessions*—a work that, I think, is a fruit of the sort of sacramental vision I've been speaking about. Here Augustine reflects on the new vision he has gained with his Christian faith—a vision that can now see God's avid pursuit of him, despite all his wanderings:

Late have I loved you, Beauty so ancient and so new, late have I loved you!
Lo, you were within, but I outside seeking there for you,
and upon the shapely things you have made I rushed headlong, I, misshapen.
You were with me, but I was not with you.
They held me back far from you,
those things which would have no being were they not in you.
You called, shouted, broke through my deafness;
you flared, blazed, banished my blindness;
you lavished your fragrance, I gasped, and now I pant for you;
I tasted you, and I hunger and thirst;
you touched me, and I burned for your peace.⁵

⁵ *Confessions* 10.27.38 (Translated by Maria Boulding, *The Confessions*, Works of Saint Augustine [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012]).