

The Antiochian School of Biblical Exegesis

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Beloved brothers and sisters in the Christ and Lord Jesus:

Besides the great names you already know about and you will hear in the Church from time to time, Antioch became known in the fourth and fifth centuries for its tradition of biblical exegesis represented in Diodor of Tarsus, the city of the Apostle Paul, his students Theodore of Mopsuestia and St John Chrysostom, as well as later Theodoret of Cyrus. Unlike the biblical approach prevailing in Alexandria at that time which made much use of allegory in its interpretation of Scripture, the Antiochian school stressed the primacy of historical exegesis.

The Alexandrian Allegory

Allegory tends to find different meanings in the one text, the premise being that men undergo three different stages in their seeking after God and union with Him: the lowest being the 'physical', then the 'psychological', and the highest being the 'spiritual.' At each of these levels, the allegorists say, man is capable of a different understanding of the same text, which thus offers different levels of meanings, the deepest being the 'spiritual.' From there it was only a tiny step to saying: the text itself has three different meanings! Now the fallacy as well as danger of such an approach lies in that its premise was rooted in a philosophical system that was alien to the Bible. This system conceived of creation as being essentially evil and thus of man's salvation as an 'inward' discovery, as well as growth in the knowledge of God, with whom eventually man becomes one. Consequently, history -- which is interaction between man and his fellow within the setting of creation -- is discredited as irrelevant. Furthermore, the text itself of the Bible becomes, as it were, at the mercy of the individual interpreter who could thus stretch it as far as his own interests dictate. In other words, the Bible becomes a mere crutch to prop our own preset ideas and preferences instead of the challenging and -- why not? -- upsetting Word of God.

The Antiochian Approach to the Bible

The Antiochian school reacted against such an approach and underscored the historicity of the Bible, namely that the latter consists of texts written by individuals to others at a given time of human history in the specific language as well as mindset of that time. Consequently, a given text can have only the one meaning intended by its author. One should note here that the case of double-meaning in some passages is not to be equated with two meanings; indeed: (a) the former radically differs from the latter in that it is still considered to be addressed to the same reader and not to two different kinds of readers as in the allegorical approach; (b) the exegete is to clearly prove that a given biblical author is intending the double-meaning in a given text. [NOTE: a telling example of double-meaning is the verb "to be lifted up" as used by the evangelist John and which means both "to be lifted up upon the cross" as well as "to be lifted up in glory."] Now, if the Antiochians insisted on the correctness of such an approach, it was not, as it is for many a modern biblical scholar, a question of technicality, but the reason was rather and foremost theological. To be sure, the Bible is not a philosophical treatise on the subject "Godhead and manhood and their relationship," but rather, a witness to God's actions in the realm of human history culminating with Jesus of Nazareth, God incarnate. Thus, biblical exegesis cannot have as its premise an abstract Godhead -- that actually never existed nor ever will! -- but the man Jesus, son of Mary, flesh of her flesh, who lived in first century Palestine and who spoke first century Palestinian Aramaic and very possibly first century Hellenistic Greek. It is this historical Jesus who is the Son of God and through whom we get to know this living God. It is the Spirit of this historical Jesus who opens for us the door toward a personal relationship with this personal God and not with an abstract Godhead. It is the flesh and blood apostles of this flesh and blood Jesus who preached, not to human generations at large, but the men and women who lived around them in first century Asia, Africa, and Europe, speaking to them, not in some sort of magical language, but in the actual languages spoken in those different areas at that time. Thus, in their exegesis, the Antiochians took seriously creation as well as time and space, which it entails, not so much due to a more scientific and realistic stand, but rather and foremost because of Jesus who, they learned from the Bible as well as their Christian Faith, was a human, and thus historical being and in whom as such, i.e. as human being, God was revealed. The outcome of such an approach was that the Bible was not for them the eternal Word of God -- abstraction of abstractions, for, whom would God be addressing in eternity? -- but rather the New Testament was a collection of first hand witness to that historical Jesus and to the faith of the apostles, who both lived centuries earlier, while the Old Testament was a collection of books relating the actions in a well-defined past history, not of an abstract Godhead, but of the Father of Jesus. And, for the Antiochians, these collections were alive because they were real, and they were real because they were, not present, but past! Thus the Antiochians cherished them by studying them, searching them and digging into them with the intention of seeking Jesus, their bread of life. They sought him by day and in the nightwatches, leaning their head as well as heart over the text, knowing that he will meet them in it and hoping that it will be sooner than later. They sought him, I said, because they knew that they were not dealing with an eternally present abstract Godhead triggered by an 'inward' search of one's soul, but rather the historically crucified, dead and resurrected Jesus who, as the living and thus free Lord, made Himself present to them by coming to them as He did among His disciples in the early church. Another and no less important outcome of their approach is especially reflected in the life and teaching of one of them, the incomparable John Chrysostom whose exegesis was always conceived and

intended to feed the people of God through life-giving homilies. Since they started, not with an abstract Godhead, but with the real and historical Jesus, God and man, the Antiochians took seriously His humanity, i.e. His having been man. By this I mean that they gave full heed to the fact that Jesus Himself, the Son of God and God, took extremely seriously the human beings by becoming one of them. Thus, in their eyes, every human being was viewed, not as a symbolic reflection of an abstract Godhead, but rather as a real image of, i.e. really similar to, the man Jesus who is God. This meant that every human being was divinely valuable, yes every human being including the poor, the needy, the sick and the down-trodden with whom Jesus associated Himself in the same vein as His Father who, through the Old Testament prophets, took in His own hands the case of the poor, the needy, the widow, the orphan, the alien and those who suffered injustice. This explains why St John Chrysostom uncompromisingly stood for such human beings in Antioch as well as in Constantinople, in his homilies as well as in his attitudes, to the extent that he even paid with his own life for such a stand.

Studying the Bible in America

If this is our tradition, if this is the way in which our forebears expressed the life-giving Faith they handed down to us, if this is what we hold most dearly, then the question is: How are we to live up to this our calling, today and in this land? Our first duty pertains to the Bible and its place in our lives. We live in a country where the Bible is held in high esteem and thus a great opportunity is offered us to witness for our faith. But how would we do that if we do not know what the Bible says? And how would we know the Bible if we do not read and study it? And how would we study it if we are not willing to dedicate hours, researching the biblical text and discussing it with our fellow Orthodox? However a caveat is in order here: we ought not do as the large majority of the people here, namely start with a preset mind as to what the biblical message is all about by referring to a cluster of preferred passages and then proceed to read the rest of the Bible from this narrow perspective and impose on it our views. The Bible is a collection of writings amounting to well over one thousand pages that were written over a long period of time. Unless we are ready to engage in a lifelong serious study of how God has historically revealed Himself to us by researching the actual text, and be ready to question ourselves and our understanding on the basis of what it actually says ... unless we are ready to do this out of our belief that our God is not an ever-present abstract Godhead we have at the tip of our fingers, but a living God who revealed Himself once and for all in times past in the man Jesus of Nazareth ... unless we understand that every translation into English or any other language is already the interpretation of the translator imposed upon the reader and that the historical Bible is to be read historically, i.e. in the language and setting in which it was written and thus meant -- unless we are ready to humbly embark (with the help of our fellows who on our behalf have humbly undertaken the study of such) on this journey and be willing to sit in groups in our local parishes and seek Jesus Himself within the pages of the Bible ... unless the pages of our bibles have been dirtied and torn from our handling them ... the face of Jesus as carried by the Orthodox Faith will not shine brightly and convincingly on the people of our countries, both who read and those who do not read the Scriptures, both who believe in Christ and those who do not.

Living and Witnessing the Biblical Message

Our second duty stems from taking seriously the humanity of Jesus, our Lord and God. Antioch, most expressly in the name of St John Chrysostom, the prince of the exegetes of not only Antiochian but also catholic Orthodoxy, normative Father and teacher of not only the Antiochian but also the catholic church ... Antioch demands from us that we uncompromisingly speak for and uphold the case of every needy, poor, suffering and captive, hungry for both bread and justice, down-trodden and especially forgotten, not only in this country but throughout the whole world. Let us be reminded here that the word "impossible" that might come to mind at this juncture has been erased once and for all from Christian vocabulary by the God-man Jesus. Here again, unless we seriously heed this other and essential facet of our Faith, namely our uncompromising commitment to the neighbor in need whose defender is God Himself, the divine blessings bestowed upon this country because of its people's interest in the Bible might well turn, and sooner than we imagine, into divine wrath proclaimed by the same Bible. And then, woe to us Antiochians for we will be accounted forfeiters of the duty put on our shoulders by God Himself through centuries of living tradition. Woe and again woe to us then, for the Son of Man Himself will be our prosecutor and His accusation will be that we will have shied from witnessing Him as the philanthropos, the lover of man. Let us not imagine that we could come up with a pertinent excuse, namely that this country is Christian and that we imagined the people here would know what the Bible requests from them. Vanity of vanity is such an excuse, for it was in a Christian empire that St. John Chrysostom incessantly raised his voice exegeting the Bible teaching, and like the prophets of old castigating the oppressor while soothing the pain of the oppressed -- and it was that same Christian empire which put to death that great Antiochian champion of God's philanthropia, God's love for man.

The Cross as Our Reference

Children of Antioch: You heard it well. Antiochian biblical exegesis, true exegesis, is not a selfish manipulation of the text in order to insure a false security in a dream of ours we like to call heaven.' It is rather a true seeking of the man Jesus who reveals himself to us as Almighty God on the cross, Almighty indeed because it is then, says the Apostle, that "every knee bows in heaven, on earth and under the earth, at the name of Jesus" (Phil 2:10). Antiochian exegesis is a true seeking of the God-man Jesus and His heaven where true eternal rest lies and it is the cross that was the only place mentioned in the gospels where the Son of Man that had no place to lay his head did finally lay it. There, on the cross, lies our security because there God reveals His heavenly face surpassing judgment and condemnation, namely in that He is the monos philanthropos, the only lover of man. Children of Antioch: Today, if you have heard the voice of the only lover of man, go and study the Bible, go and speak up for the bereft. Children of Antioch: Today, if you have heard the

voice of the only lover of man, do not harden your hearts (Heb 3:7-8).

Amen.