

History of Biblical Interpretation
March 2022

Kenneth J. Woo
Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

Email: kwoo@pts.edu

History of Biblical Interpretation

As Protestants we take as self-evident the importance of the Bible to Christian belief and practice. Yet we also affirm the rich variety of experience and contexts that comprise the history of Christianity as a global faith. How did the church in different times and places relate to Scripture and understand its meaning? In what ways did significant cultural shifts impact methods of interpreting Scripture in the church? What can the history of biblical exegesis teach us about the diverse questions God's people brought to God's word in various situations, the answers they found, and the implications of these lessons for our reading of Scripture today?

Schedule

Week 1 (3/6)	Heresy and Early Christian Approaches to Scripture
Week 2 (3/13)	<i>Spiritual Exegesis from Origen to Thomas Aquinas</i>
Week 3 (3/20)	The Protestant Reformers and the Bible's "Literal Sense"
Week 4 (3/27)	A Great Cloud of Witnesses: Modern Approaches to Reading Scripture

I. The Evolution of Christian Biblical Exegesis in 2nd and 3rd centuries.

II. A Pauline Model for Reading the Old Testament

III. Origen of Alexandria (d. c. 251)

Two levels of meaning

Two kinds of readers

Origen, *On First Principles* (c.220-c.230 CE)

Book IV, chapter 1

(Trans. F. Crombie, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Roberts and Donaldson (1884-86), v. 4.)

- IV.1.8. The cause ... of all the false opinions and of the impious statements or ignorant assertions about God, appears to be nothing else than not understanding the Scripture according to its spiritual meaning, but the interpretation of it agreeably to the mere letter.
- IV.1.13 That interpretation is "spiritual," when one is able to show of what heavenly things the Jews "according to the flesh" served as an example and a shadow, and of what future blessings the law contains a shadow. And, generally, we must investigate, according to the apostolic promise, "the wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the world for the glory" of the just, which none of the princes of this world knew" [cf. 1 Cor 2:6-8]. And the same apostle says somewhere, after referring to certain events mentioned as occurring in Exodus and Numbers, "that these things happened to them figuratively, but that they were written on our account, on whom the ends of the world are come" [1 Cor 10:11]. And he gives an opportunity for ascertaining of what things these were patterns, when he says: "For they drank of the spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ" [1 Cor 10:4].
- IV.1.16 For who that has understanding would suppose that the first, and second, and third day, and the evening and the morning, existed without a sun, and moon, and stars? And the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? And who is so foolish as to suppose that God, after the manner of a husbandman, planted a paradise in Eden, toward the east, and placed in it a tree of life, visible and palpable, so that one tasting of the fruit by the bodily teeth obtained life? And again, that one was a partaker of good and evil by masticating what was taken from the tree? And if God is said to walk in the paradise in the evening, and Adam to hide himself under a tree, I do not suppose that any one doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance, and not literally. Those who are not altogether blind can collect countless instances of a similar kind recorded as having occurred, but which did not literally take place [Likewise] the attentive reader will notice in the Gospels innumerable other passages like these, so that he will be convinced that in the histories that are literally recorded, circumstances that did not occur are inserted.