NOTES

PATRISTIC HERMENEUTICS AND THE MEANING OF TRADITION

The purpose of this essay is both historical and hermeneutical. It will look at the exegesis of the Church Fathers, particularly the way they handle the relationship between the two Testaments. Patristic hermeneutical principles have been studied in detail elsewhere;[1] this essay will only attempt to point out the general thrust of the Fathers' thought. But what happens when the patristic approach to Scripture is set alongside modern hermeneutical principles? This is the question with which we shall be especially concerned; for reflection on the patristic hermeneutic, which has not always been accurately understood, leads one to re-examine basic hermeneutical questions, as well as to reconsider the meaning of the term "tradition." In taking up these matters, I will suggest some points about the Fathers' contribution to a "community hermeneutic," which I understand to mean a hermeneutic not just of one confession or one era in Christian history, but a hermeneutic which will represent the key insights of the total Christian tradition.

Historians have sometimes tended to dismiss patristic exegesis in general as just so much arbitrary allegorizing—and indeed the whole notion of "allegory" has to be dealt with at the outset of any presentation of patristic exegesis. The difficulty with the word is that it is a highly analogous term, perhaps even equivocal. This is what critics of the allegorical method have often failed to observe, reducing allegory to one meaning (usually pejorative) rather than seeing the various levels of meaning which the word has in the patristic writings themselves.[2]

Allegory is basically a technique, a method of interpretation; and as a technique, it is the patristic analogue of any of the techniques of liter-

[1] See the writings of H. de Lubac, especially *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'Ecriture* (Paris, 1959–64); various key chapters from this masterful work have been translated in *The Sources of Revelation* (New York, 1968). Also useful are various works by J. Daniélou, e.g., *From Shadows to Reality* (New York, 1960). A survey of earlier research on patristic exegesis by these and other scholars can be found in W. J. Burghardt, "On Early Christian Exegesis," THEOLOGICAL STUDIES 11 (1950) 78–116. The background work for the present article can be seen in my doctoral dissertation *Word and Worship in the Preaching of Leo the Great* (Cambridge University, 1970).

[2] Modern authors regularly oppose "typology" to "allegory," e.g., R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (London, 1959), and Daniélou, *op. cit.* This distinction, which is anachronistic when applied to the writings of the Fathers themselves, goes back as far as J. Gerhard, whose definitions are cited by G. von Rad in *Essays in OT Interpretation* (London, 1963) p. 21. For Gerhard as for many contemporary authors, typology works with "facts," allegory does not.

ary criticism we use today. The technique itself is common to pagan, Jewish, and Christian writers. Greek philosophers, for instance, allegorized the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, drawing moral applications from the Homeric stories and other myths for the edification of schoolchildren. Philo allegorized the OT accounts, drawing transcendental or philosophical meanings from them; the material details of the Passover ritual or of the story of creation, for instance, become symbols of the soul and its virtues. The Fathers do this type of philosophical allegorizing, and they do a great deal of it. But they also use the technique at another level, where it produces a different type of content, historical and theological rather than philosophical or transcendental. In this case allegory becomes a technique for interpreting the salvific history recorded in the text of Scripture. The NT writers engage in this application of the allegorical method when they compare type and antitype: Christ as the new Adam, the second Moses, the new Melchizedek.

Allegory as a technique for comparing historical figures is much more acceptable to us today than other ways in which allegory was used—or maybe we are only better conditioned to this use of the technique. Other uses jar us. Jerome, for instance, associates Jonah's "cry" that the Ninevites should repent (Jon 3:4) with Jesus who "cried out" in the Temple, "If any man is thirsty, let him come to me and drink" (Jn 7:37). Jerome here sees the gospel "fulfilling" the OT.[3] This is verbal association, and it seems quite arbitrary. But there often lies behind this use of the allegorical method a concern for the continuing *history* of God's action in different eras. Basically, Jerome is just as concerned here with salvific history as Paul is in his Adam-Christ allegory, or as Matthew is when he gives us the image of Christ as the new Moses. Nor should we be too quick to dismiss the strictly exegetical fruits of Jerome's method. The writer of the fourth Gospel may well have chosen the word "cry" in connection with Jesus' words in the Temple precisely in order to link Jesus and His message with the prophetic "cries" of the OT.

It is because allegory is used as a technique specifically for the interpretation of the history recorded in the text of Scripture, thus yielding a content which is specifically theological, that the term eventually became a synonym, especially in the Western Fathers, for "spiritual understanding" and for *mysterium, sacramentum*, the mystery itself, the mystery of God in Christ.[4] Here the word denotes not just the method but the content turned up by the method. The exegetes of

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[3] *In Jonam* 3, 4 (*PL* 25, 1140; *Sources chrétiennes* 43, 95).

[4] On the equivalence of these terms and for copious references to patristic vocabulary, see de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale* 1, 396–408.

Antioch, at the end of the fourth century, wanted to use a different word for this type of understanding—*theōria, contemplatio*—but their literary method remained the allegorical method.

Behind the specifically Christian use of the technique lay a specifically Christian attitude, and that attitude is twofold. First, there is a continuity between the OT, the moment of Christ, and the time of the Church. Second, Christ is the transformation of history; He is in His very person the exegete of the OT, who gives a definitive meaning to all that happened before Him and to all that will ever happen. One can use here the image of a double line: the idea of historical continuity from the old era to the new is a horizontal line; and the notion of Christ as the fulfilment of history is a kind of ascending line. Exegesis done purely along the horizontal line will result in superficial resemblances between figures or events; and if the ascending line, Christ as transformation, is uncontrolled by the horizontal, almost any OT word or sentence can be made a symbol of Christ, and allegory runs wild. Much of the history of patristic exegesis, especially the controversy between Alexandrian and Antiochian exegetes, can be seen as an effort to keep the two lines balanced.

The technique of allegory must therefore be distinguished from the content which it yields. Here I would like to compare Christian allegory with the techniques of today's scientific exegesis in such a way that the two will not be opposed. The problem is to compare the two, simply as approaches, without making value judgments until the comparison is perfectly clear. Perhaps this can be done as follows.

A technique like redaction-criticism takes for its starting point the scriptural text; it wants to turn up what the text, in its historical context, says about the mystery of God in Christ. Patristic exegesis takes as its starting point the Christian's relation to the mystery of which the text speaks. Thus scientific exegesis begins with a text which speaks of a mystery; patristic spiritual exegesis begins with the mystery spoken of in the text.

"Literal" and "spiritual" meaning are troublesome concepts in this context, because the words mean different things to different eras. Ebeling's description of the function of the sermon is useful here (and it is well to recall that, in the patristic era, preaching and exegesis were barely distinguishable; statements about what a biblical writer was saying to the people of his own time are almost inextricably tied up with statements about what the text is saying to us now). Ebeling speaks of the hermeneutical function of the sermon in this way: the sermon is not primarily "exposition" of a proclamation or kerygma that took place in the historical past; the sermon as a sermon is "execution" of the text,

proclamation in the present. "It carries into execution the aim of the text. The sermon is proclamation of what the text of Scripture has proclaimed."[5]

Today we would say that "exposition" of the text, as distinguished from "execution," is literal interpretation, i.e., the total intent of the biblical writer is the literal meaning of the writer. Execution of the text, or application to today's situation, would then be spiritual interpretation. Now the Fathers use the notion of "literal" meaning in a different way. For them, the literal meaning is the historical event about which the text is talking; but they would insist that the biblical writers are not interested in the event simply as historical and past. The writers are interpreting the event in writing about it, so that the biblical authors themselves are concerned with the interpreted or "spiritual" meaning of the event. The NT writers, the Fathers would say, were surely not interested simply in reporting cures that took place in a minor Mediterranean land; in their very report they want to communicate what Jesus does *now* for those who believe in Him.

Thus what we call the literal meaning intended by the writer, the Fathers would call a composition of literal and spiritual meaning. Execution of the text, i.e., proclamation in the present of what the text has proclaimed in the past, is then still another level of spiritual meaning: the level at which we see the word of Scripture as a word that engages our lives today. It is this level which is the focal point for patristic exegesis; and it is within the context of the spiritual meaning for us today that the Fathers present what they call the literal and spiritual intent of a biblical text, and what we call simply the literal meaning.

Interpretation and hermeneutics, as Ebeling suggests, is needed only where the word-event is hindered for some reason; the purpose of hermeneutics is therefore to remove hindrances to understanding, so that the word can perform its own hermeneutical function.[6] "Spiritual understanding" is the patristic hermeneutical principle, and it does not remove linguistic hindrances to the understanding of a text. It does not do away with the task of historical inquiry into the origin of a text or the meaning of the words used in a text. Rather, it gives direction to such inquiry: it states that a word-event finally takes place only when the hearer understands, in an interior way, the relation of the text and of himself to the mystery of which the text speaks.

According to the patristic hermeneutical principle, the writers of the NT present Christ as the transformation of all that had gone before. He did not just preach a definitive kerygma; He is Himself the definitive

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[5] "Word of God and Hermeneutics," in *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia, 1963) p. 331.
[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 318–19.

kerygma. As de Lubac develops it, He is the final Fact that gives spiritual meaning, full meaning, to the facts that had gone before, facts that can now be seen as having been only shadows awaiting the bright light of *veritas*, the full day of the Lord. The type of spiritual interpretation carried on by the NT writers was not new. It had already been prepared for in Hebrew exegesis: for instance, by the prophets who read their people's history—covenant, law, promise of a kingdom—in an increasingly spiritual way. For the Fathers, the same interiority is sought by the authors of the NT, who report events in Jesus' life not just as carnal events, historical events that are past and gone, but as present spiritual realities, in terms of which the reader is to interpret his own experience. The interior "now" is anchored to a "then," to a past historical reality which is also seen as a present reality: the mystery that originated in time and endures in time.

Christ is the *sacramentum*, the mystery; and He is objectively present to the believers of every era of history. But the mystery which is Christ is cognitively available to different eras in different forms. The Hebrews in the wilderness knew Him in the spiritual rock from which they drank and which followed them as they went: "that rock," as Paul states, "was Christ" (1 Cor 10:4). For the Fathers, the Christian today knows Him through the symbols which carry His presence, i.e., which make His objective presence known to and efficacious for the believers of *this* era. One such symbol is found in the word of Scripture, which not only describes the historical stages of the mystery and its fulfilment in Christ, but also speaks of the believer's objective relationship with a living person now. What Scripture speaks of is therefore God's initiative in all of its temporal forms, past and present. The biblical text as a whole thus contains multiple symbolic expressions of a total existential fact—the mystery which the biblical writers present in its successive stages of development, the mystery which the Fathers take as their starting point for exegesis.

This patristic insight should not be confused with the attempt to find symbols of Christ in nearly every sentence of the OT. Today we are unhampered by a Neoplatonic theory of inspiration which saw every letter of the text as inspired; and so we are not tempted to go the Alexandrian route of seeking Christ in every word of the OT. Antioch too wanted to control the choice of symbols. But the Antiochian exegetes shared with the Alexandrians the technique of allegory; they used the same method under a different name, a method which works with resemblances between words, events, and figures; only the Antiochians made the criteria for resemblance so strict that types had to correspond in great material detail before they would be accepted as genuine types. Theodore

of Mopsuestia, for instance, rejects the return to Jerusalem after the Exile as a symbol of the redemption because the redemption wrought by Christ abolishes the privileged status of Jerusalem.[7] Today we possess better exegetical techniques than allegory, and we are better able to isolate the symbols which function within the Bible itself as expressions of the continuing mystery of redemption. We can observe the gradual evolution in the biblical books of such symbols as "Jerusalem" or "entry into the promised kingdom," and we can trace their development from a material to an increasingly spiritual conception within the scriptural writings themselves.[8]

By the use of better methods, therefore, we can correct the excesses which arose from the use of the allegorical method. But because of our contemporary concern with the historical context within which any biblical statement or symbol arose, we seem to run into the problem of historicism in our statement of the hermeneutical question. Ebeling, for example, warns us that the Church must not usurp the position of the historical Jesus, and that we must cope with the question of the relation between the Church's kerygma and that of Jesus, lest the Church proclaim something which is in fact absent.[9] This "new quest of the historical Jesus" seems to confuse exegesis and hermeneutics. It is a thoroughly valid enterprise for the scientific exegete to try to determine what were the elements in Jesus' own preaching. But to formulate not simply an exegetical question but the hermeneutical problem itself in terms of a quest for the kerygma of Jesus is historicism in the pejorative sense.

From the viewpoint of patristic hermeneutics, the major problem for hermeneutics is not that the Church might usurp the position of Jesus by proclaiming something which is not there, but rather that the Church might fail to proclaim the position of Jesus by neglecting to come out of the past. It is the intention of the biblical writers that must not be usurped. It is they who define the position of Jesus, and they do it by showing that the mystery of Jesus is at once a historical and a present reality. Thus correction in the Church, and the removal of hindrances to understanding, come not primarily from recovering Jesus' kerygma but from constantly re-evaluating the Church's understanding of the mystery of which Scripture speaks in a normative way.

Tradition or continuity with tradition is normally the criterion given for evaluating any understanding of the mystery. But the term has been given many shades of meaning in the course of Christian history; and I

[7] *In Mich.* 4 (*PG* 66, 364–65).

[8] See J. Guillet, "Les exégèses d'Alexandrie et d'Antioche: Conflit ou malentendu?" *Recherches de science religieuse* 34 (1947) 257–302.

[9] *Theology and Proclamation* (Philadelphia, 1966) p. 77.

would here like to suggest a definition of the word "tradition" formulated in the light of patristic hermeneutics. Tradition is *continuity with the intentions of the biblical writers.* That is, the Church's understanding of the mystery in any age must be in continuity with the intentions of the biblical writers. This formulation of the concept "tradition" has a number of advantages. First, it recognizes the Scriptures as normative writings and avoids any suggestion that tradition involves a deposit of revealed truth separate from Scripture. Second, it leaves room for the critical study needed for the intention of the biblical writers to be uncovered, and allows for the fact that the literal meaning intended by those writers can be spiritual as well as historical. Third, it recognizes that the Scriptures contain the only formulation of the mystery of Christ which is finally normative; but it also allows for a development in the Church's understanding of the mystery.

In the course of Christian history this development has been twofold. One type of development has consisted in the transposition of biblical language into other conceptual categories—such as the statements of Nicaea, or of the medieval Scholastics who worked with Aristotelian categories, or of modern theologians who work with the language of existentialism. A second line of development, characteristic especially of a preached theology, has involved the use of biblical symbols to show the centrality of Christ in history, and the extension of scriptural ideas or the application of biblical symbols to new situations in order to show the continuing action of Christ in history. Augustine, for example, uses the image of Jacob's birth, in which the members of the body preceded the head, as a means of extending the Pauline notion of the body of Christ to cover the question of the salvation of the OT saints: they too belonged to Christ's body, even though they appeared in time before the head.[10] Sometimes the expansion of biblical symbols is so complex that a new theological theory seems to result. There is, for instance, the theory of the devil's rights over man, acquired when Adam fell—rights which Christ had to respect when He conquered the devil. In someone like Leo the Great, however, such a theory is basically an expansion of Paul's allegory of Adam and Christ, and Leo in fact does not use the devil's-rights theory when he is engaged in a strictly dogmatic argument.[11]

Now the procedure for validating a dogmatic statement, that is, for showing its continuity with the intentions of the biblical writers, is a much clearer procedure than that of validating a "spiritual" interpreta-

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[10] *De catechizandis rudibus* 3 (*PL* 40, 313-14).

[11] See Guzie, *op. cit.,* pp. 114-32. Cf. J.-P. Jossua, *Le salut, incarnation ou mystère pascal* (Paris, 1968) esp. pp. 293-320.

tion in the special sense of the word. A dogmatic formulation needs to be recognized as such; just as many theologians are usually involved in the transposition of concepts, so the process leading to acceptance of a new language or a new formula includes a critical evaluation on the part of many. A spiritual interpretation, on the other hand, is not usually subjected to such communal criticism. The temptation, therefore, is to take a dogmatic statement seriously but not a spiritual statement, on the ground that the one is critical while the other is not. For apart from controlling obvious excesses, how can a spiritual interpretation be validated in any sort of scientific way?

But let us not forget the critical norm by which the NT writings were accepted as authoritative. We know, of course, that many of the narratives recounted by the different Evangelists—the infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke, for instance, or the sign narratives of the fourth Gospel as compared with the miracles and cures reported by the Synoptics—are difficult or impossible to combine in any sort of plain historical way. And although a preacher or theologian today, talking about redemption or grace, shifts freely from the Gospel of John to the letters of Paul, he can do so only because centuries of doctrinal development have taught him how to combine the Johannine and Pauline theologies, which are two quite different languages. The historical and conceptual differences among the NT writings remind us that the early Christians were interested in authentic *spiritual* interpretations of the Christ-event. To borrow Augustine's phrase about "faith seeking understanding," we should say that what the authors of the NT did was to write up their individual "understandings" of their one "faith," their common belief in the fact of Christ; and the Christian community ratified these writings as authentic understandings. The ultimate critical norm in the formation of the NT canon was therfore a spiritual norm.

Now if hermeneutical methodology is to be consistent with itself, it cannot evaluate subsequent interpretations of the normative writings in a way that departs from the criterion used in the choice of those writings. One must therefore resist the temptation to dismiss a particular patristic interpretation or choice of symbols simply because we have accumulated more accurate critical data about the literal intentions of the biblical writers. On this basis we would have to dismiss the normative writings themselves. Matthew, for instance, ties his infancy narrative together by showing how the events he relates are all fulfilments of specific OT statements which he sees as prophetic: Christ had to be born of a virgin, and indeed in Bethlehem; it was preordained that He be called a Nazarene; and He had to go to Egypt because Hosea wrote, "I called my son out of Egypt" (Mt 1:18—2:23). Outside the perspective of spiritual

exegesis, these interpretations of the OT, and many others like them, make no sense. Later on, some of the Fathers would see almost any OT text as a nut containing Christ within its shell. But we cannot call even these excessive interpretations invalid without at the same time calling into question what writers like Matthew were doing.

All this is a reminder that a clear epistemological distinction must be made between the questions "Is the interpretation true?" and "Is it valid?"[12] A "true" interpretation implies one that grasps the exact literal intent of the writer in this particular text; it is this historical truth that the scientific exegete attempts to uncover. A good many patristic interpretations are not "true" in this sense; but they are "valid" because they conveyed the mystery, which is the primary truth recorded in Scripture, to a particular age. And if the Fathers are often excessive in their choice of symbols, an excess which is false in a strictly historical sense, they had no other end in view than the embellishment of this primary truth.

Validity is therefore a relative concept. The Spirit constantly produces in the hearts of the faithful new understandings of the fact of Christ in continuity with the biblical text. History moves on, language games change, critical knowledge increases, and faith seeks new understandings of the fact of Christ. Particular exegetical methods thus become outdated, and this is true of the allegorical method. The particular value of patristic exegesis is that it calls the attention of the scientific exegete and the dogmatician to the way in which their special criteria can legitimately be used.

There is a type of spiritual interpretation which gives a poor literal explanation of a particular text but shows a profound grasp of the total *sacramentum* contained in Scripture. Matthew's exegesis in his infancy narrative exemplifies this; we find further examples of it not only in patristic literature but in a good number of sermons preached in our day. This type of interpretation is hardly the exegetical ideal, but it can be said to be "in continuity with the intentions of the biblical writers" if for no other reason than that the biblical writers themselves engage in it. This application of the criterion of continuity may appear too benevolent, but it is needed to validate the preaching which Christians have judged as authentically Christian, beginning with the preaching found in the NT itself. Neither the scientific exegete nor the dogmatic theologian would accept most preached statements within their own discipline. The point is that the criteria of dogma and of textual criticism are not ultimate hermeneutical criteria. They can be applied only

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[12] On this distinction in connection with patristic exegesis, see K. Schelkle, "Auslegung als Symbolverständnis," *Theologische Quartalschrift* 132 (1952) 129–51.

within the larger norm that was involved in the formation of the NT canon itself, namely, the authenticity of a particular writing as a *spiritual* interpretation of the Christ-event.

I have elaborated this whole point because modern hermeneutical theory does not take sufficient account of it. Hermeneutics has been influenced by the method of contemporary scientific exegesis, and rightly so; but it has also been influenced by a type of historicism which may or may not be tied up with the historical preoccupations of contemporary exegetes. Ebeling exemplifies this problem. The guiding light of hermeneutics, he states, must be "a word-event in the comprehensive sense that it embraces both linguistic tradition and encounter with reality. Only by facing up to both of these together can hermeneutical knowledge be acquired."[13]

But the nature of this "encounter with reality" needs further definition. The sermon is indeed "proclamation of what the text has proclaimed." Now what has the text proclaimed? The mystery of God revealed in Christ, or the historical kerygma of Jesus? "The text by means of the sermon becomes a hermeneutic aid in the understanding of present experience. Where that happens radically, there true word is uttered, and that in fact means God's Word."[14] But exactly how is this understanding of present experience to happen "radically"? The ambiguity remains. Is true word uttered when a past historical reality illumines the present experience of the hearer? Is it God's Word that is uttered when the listener recognizes the content of Jesus' preaching, or when he sees the resemblance between his condition and a condition related in the text?

What is needed here is formal explication of the relation between symbol or word and the precise reality that is understood through the word. This understanding could be an exterior awareness that does not reach the interior life of the listener. In patristic terminology, one can recognize an *exemplum* and see the response for which the text calls, just as one can be edified by any striking historical personage with a message to convey. Present experience is not illuminated in the specifically Christian sense until the hearer perceives the *sacramentum*, the mystery which lets him know his interior relationship to the reality of which the text speaks.

It is here that Ebeling's approach to the hermeneutical problem needs correction. In one place he states that "at the core of the study of history, and implicit in the German word *Geschichte*, is the dialogue between the objective event in the past and the subjective understanding

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[13] "Word of God and Hermeneutics," p. 321.   [14] *Ibid.*, p. 331.

of the past event in the present."[15] For Ebeling, therefore, a biblical statement or biblical symbol is a vehicle for the conception of the past as related to the present. Exactly *how* the past is related to the present is not stated, and it is difficult to see how Ebeling can get around the problem of a downright opposition between past and present.

For the Fathers, as for the NT writers looking back at the OT, the guiding light of hermeneutics is the mystery of Christ as present and believed. For them, a biblical symbol is not a vehicle for the conception of the objective past as related to the subjective present, but rather a vehicle for the conception of the continuing mystery of Christ, which is objectively present to the men of every era, though in different cognitive forms. The Bible contains symbols describing different stages of a single mystery, and the new era is the era which is present to the reader. It is thus the *objective present*—a concept Ebeling does not appear to recognize—which makes a subjective response possible, not the past.

Let us put the question in another way. This paper has talked much about the "mystery of Christ." What is this mystery? For a Christian, it is a salvific reality that exists apart from his knowledge of it; but as known by him, it is known only in and through symbols which embody it and carry it to his consciousness. The Bible is one source of such symbols. However, there are other sources of understanding that go along with the Christian's perception of biblical symbols: his worship experience, his experience of the Christian community, his personal experience of the process of death-resurrection to which the gospel invites him to respond. Ebeling emphasizes the search for the kerygma historically preached by Jesus, and it is here that he wants to find symbols to express the "mystery of Christ." This effort is certainly praiseworthy, but the question is whether the hermeneutical problem can be approached or the hermeneutical question formulated in this way without creating an implicit opposition between past and present.

The Church Fathers' contribution to a "community hermeneutic" is a methodological correction which says that there is no gap to be bridged between past and present, and that hermeneutical theory cannot begin with such a gap unless it wants to leave an irreconcilable tension between proclamation in the present and proclamation in the past. Exegesis today, unlike that of the Fathers, begins with study of the text in its historical context. But the *exegetical* concern with history in the modern scientific sense is not and cannot be the first organizing principle of *hermeneutics*.

As Origen once put it, the grain of the old law and the grain of the apostles are all ground in Christ Jesus; with this wheat Christians are

[15] *Word of God and Tradition* (Philadelphia, 1964) p. 17.

to make bread.[16] Tradition is basically an act of making bread, and the primary function of hermeneutics is to go on making such bread. This it cannot do with old grain. Hermeneutical theory must understand that it is using ever fresh wheat, the wheat of Scripture, wheat which carries within itself the present objective reality of the mystery of God revealed in Christ.

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[16] *In Luc.*, hom. 28, 6 (*Sources chrétiennes* 87, 358).