

# Introduction

The present volume offers English translations together with explanatory notes for fifteen important early Christian writings that deal with biblical interpretation. The purpose of this collection is to provide a useful survey of early Christian interpretation of Scripture through primary sources, giving enough annotation to help contemporary readers understand what they encounter and in some cases know where to go for further discussion. The study of early Christian biblical interpretation contributes to numerous fields of interest for today, including biblical hermeneutics, church history, early Christian theology, ancient literary criticism, and modern theological interpretation of Scripture.

Because of the foundational role of the Greek tradition and the significance of Latin authors for Western church history, and in view of space limitations, I have focused almost exclusively on Greek and Latin writers. Ephrem the Syrian is included as a representative of Christianity outside the Greek and Latin world. As for the choice of these specific sources: For the earlier period before biblical commentaries became common, I selected passages that illustrate major features of Christian exegesis, such as christological typology, proofs from

prophecy, appeal to the Rule of Faith, salvation-historical paradigms, and use of Scripture to refute heresy. For the later period starting with Origen, I selected passages that articulate coherent ideas about how to interpret Scripture and also treat specific biblical texts with enough detail to show how the theoretical ideas work in practice.

All of the figures chosen for this volume were influential in their own day and were widely read in subsequent centuries by at least some significant segment of the Church. Some (for example, Origen, Eusebius, Diodore, Theodore, Cassian) came under suspicion or even outright condemnation in later times, but this does not take away from the insightfulness of their ideas, the carefulness of their work, or the lasting impact they had on the history of biblical interpretation. All were self-consciously orthodox as understood within their own context, and all (except John Chrysostom) died in fellowship with the churches they served. On a certain level, the same fresh engagement with Scripture and concern for coherent methodology that led these figures to say important things about biblical interpretation also sometimes led them to engage in theological discourse that aroused controversy.

One final comment on the selection of sources: I have chosen to emphasize texts that illustrate Christian interpretation of the Old Testament. It is not that early Christian writers failed to make insightful observations while expounding the New Testament. But I decided to focus on sources that take Old Testament passages as their starting point, partly because of the rich variety of Old Testament literature, partly due to the theological significance of motifs such as creation, law, and prophecy, and especially because the Old Testament provided a special hermeneutical challenge for early Christians who were committed to interpreting the whole Bible with Christ as the

focal point. And as will be seen below, in the course of their exegesis these ancient interpreters typically cite a great many passages from the New Testament.

### **Contexts for Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church**

In order to understand what these early Christians were doing with the biblical texts they were interpreting, it is important to take into account the intertwined contexts in which they lived. The following represent some of the most important contexts for appreciating early Christian biblical interpretation:

(1) *The biblical text itself.* Most of these writers knew the Old Testament in Greek translation, according to some recension of the Greek Old Testament that came to be known as the “Septuagint” (based on a legend whereby the text was translated by seventy-two translators). Latin authors generally used a Latin translation of the Greek text, with Jerome being the only figure to engage significantly with the Hebrew. The biblical text of early Christians was not exactly the same as what is commonly found in modern English Bibles (which are based on the Medieval Hebrew text), and sometimes their text differs slightly from modern critical editions of the “Septuagint,” which aim to reconstruct a presumed original Greek text from pre-Christian times rather than the Greek text known to the early Church. Moreover, some Christian exegetes made use of the second-century CE Greek translations of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion (see the Introduction to Origen).

(2) *Jewish biblical interpretation.* A key figure in showing Christians how to bring the biblical text to bear on Greco-Roman culture was Philo of Alexandria. Hellenistic Jewish writers, and Philo in particular, suggested multiple ways that

biblical teachings could be combined with Greek philosophy or else used to challenge it. In addition, some early Christian writers were familiar with Jewish traditions such as are known to us through intertestamental and Rabbinic writings.

(3) *Ecclesiastical traditions.* The biblical interpreters presented in this volume all approached the task of exegesis as committed Christians. Most were presbyters or bishops who preached regularly and fulfilled pastoral duties in their churches. Others were actively involved in Christian apologetics. Prominent among their concerns were explicating and defending Christian doctrine, encouraging proper worship, maintaining church order and discipline, and providing spiritual edification.

(4) *Greco-Roman philosophy and literary criticism.* Virtually all major early Christian writers were the beneficiaries of solid classical educations. Many continued to read philosophy and study classical literature into adulthood. Conceptual categories provided by philosophy, especially Platonism and Stoicism, helped early Christians express coherent and profound doctrines through biblical texts and also helped them address exegetical problems related to the content of Scripture. The practices of ancient classical “grammarians” (= literary scholars) provided Christians with the tools to interpret Scripture at the levels of textual criticism, grammar, language, rhetoric, and style.

(5) *The political and social dynamics of late antiquity.* In the second and third centuries, Christian networks were expanding but still marginal to society. During the fourth and fifth centuries Christians were navigating a shift to the center of social power. Most writers featured in this book came from relatively prominent families, and as Greek or Latin speakers they belonged to the prestige culture vis-à-vis local

populations (for example, Berber or Coptic). Moreover, all of these writers were male. These factors will sometimes be relevant for understanding how they approached their task or addressed certain issues.

Aspects of these contexts will be discussed where relevant in the Introductions and notes for each main selection given below. Within the notes I refer to many parallel passages from various ancient writers. The citation of a parallel in the notes in no way implies that the main source and the parallel source were saying precisely the same thing. On the contrary, each ancient writer usually brings his own unique insight to a common tradition or observation. As much as possible I try to offer a brief explanation for how the material in the notes relates to the main source. In general, I provide information about the ancient world that illuminates some dimension of meaning, for example, clarifying what the writer meant by a certain term, showing what information he was presupposing, or highlighting what alternative view he was trying to correct. In some cases, the note locates the early Christian interpreter's comment within a historically significant stream of thought. Such information is important. Although it would be a mistake to read Gregory of Nyssa strictly through the lens of Philo, as if the two were saying precisely the same thing, it would also be unsound to ignore Gregory's thought world and read him as if he were directly addressing medieval Europe, the Reformation era, or the contemporary Church. The notes seek to locate these early biblical interpreters within their proper intellectual and cultural contexts.

## Historical Overview

The historical period treated in this volume stretches from the early second century CE to the fifth century. The earliest source, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, comes from the same era that saw the composition of the latest books to become part of the New Testament canon. Included among writings of this era are homilies, letters addressing doctrine and church order, narrative accounts of apostles and martyrs, and literature related to the Gospels. Much of this primitive Christian literature is direct and practical, while some texts relate stories and aphorisms, and some possess apocalyptic elements. Explicit interpretation of Scripture is not common among these writings. The *Epistle of Barnabas* with its extended discussion of the Old Testament is a notable exception and so serves as a useful starting point for this volume. As for the chronological ending point, the Greek and Latin churches from the third to the mid-fifth century produced numerous writers who engaged in direct, original exegesis of Scripture based on detailed study of the biblical text. This “golden age” of patristic exegesis is the period of focus for this volume. By the end of the fifth century, fresh, in-depth treatments of Scripture became less common. Christians in the Byzantine world began to create exegetical compilations based on extracts of earlier exegesis, such as one finds in the commentaries of Procopius of Gaza (d. 528) and the *Catena* literature. Therefore, this volume concludes in the fifth century with a selection from John Cassian (d. ca. 435), who anticipates the medieval four senses of Scripture (see p. 248, n. 7).

New Testament documents and related writings set forth a salvation-historical paradigm culminating in Jesus, and they offered symbolic interpretations of Israel’s Scriptures to show

how Jesus was prefigured through patterns (“types”) and fulfilled prophecies. In early Christian sources up to the mid-second century, scriptural texts were often employed to support these christological aims. The Church’s major concerns were teaching right doctrine and pastoral oversight.

By the middle of the second century, the attention of many Christian writers turned to defending the Christian faith against outsiders (apologetics), establishing right doctrine (anti-heresy), and resolving church conflicts. Important figures for this period include Justin Martyr (d. ca. 165), Tatian (d. ca. 185), Athenagoras (d. ca. 195), Irenaeus (d. ca. 200), Clement of Alexandria (d. ca. 220), and Hippolytus (d. ca. 240) in Greek; and Tertullian (d. ca. 220), Minucius Felix (d. ca. 250), and Cyprian (d. 258) in Latin. Certain passages of Scripture figure prominently in these authors, but their writings are not exegetical in nature. Rather, they utilize Scripture in the course of addressing whatever concerns were most pressing. The memory of apostolic traditions and the structure of Christian theology were determinative for their application of Scripture. It is not clear to what extent these writers were familiar with the Bible as a whole, especially the Old Testament. At least some of them may have had knowledge only of certain books and oft-quoted passages. In chapter five below I offer an excerpt from Cyprian, *To Quirinus: Testimonies against the Jews*, which is a collection of biblical prooftexts. This work illustrates the textual format in which many early Christians encountered Scripture.

Origen of Alexandria (ca. 185–253) was the first early Christian writer to work through a wide range of biblical books systematically. Admittedly, we learn from Origen about a treatise on the Gospel of John by the “gnostic” Heracleon, and there are also select commentaries preserved on Daniel and

the Song of Songs ascribed to Hippolytus. But Origen was the first to compose verse-by-verse expositions for nearly all biblical books, applying literary and philosophical methods as employed in classical commentaries. In the realm of theological interpretation, Origen took traditional Christian symbolic readings of the Old Testament and applied them more extensively throughout Scripture, thereby creating a comprehensive system of Christian biblical allegory, that is, figural readings across a coherent narrative, not just disconnected typologies. In terms of scholarship, Origen showed how insights from the study of literature, linguistics, textual criticism, and other aspects of classical philology could be used to interpret the Bible. Origen's writings exerted enormous influence on later Christian commentators, who developed his scholarly methods and also imitated aspects of his allegorical interpretation. In this volume I have included an illuminating passage on the interpretation of Scripture from Origen's *First Principles*.

In the fourth century Christianity not only obtained recognition as a legal religion but also developed into a prominent cultural and political force in the Roman Empire. This new situation allowed Christians freedom to devote more of their efforts to matters such as spiritual reflection, speculative theology, and technical biblical studies. A significant figure in the Church's transition to cultural authority was Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339), an advisor to the emperor Constantine and student of one of Origen's disciples. Eusebius continued Origen's scholarly endeavors and made selective use of his spiritual exegesis. Many writers of the fourth century followed Origen's approach to spiritual interpretation even more closely than Eusebius did. Important biblical interpreters who borrowed extensively from Origen

include Didymus of Alexandria (d. ca. 398), Hilary of Poitiers (d. 368), and Ambrose of Milan (d. 397). Origen was also influential on the three “Cappadocian Fathers”: Basil of Caesarea (d. 379), Gregory of Nazianzus (d. 390), and Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca. 395). Selections are given below from Gregory of Nyssa’s *Life of Moses*, which combines exegesis, theology, and spirituality in a manner that reflects the new Christian culture. The fourth century also saw the beginnings of Syriac Christian literature in the east. Most important are the Persian Aphrahat (fl. 340), who composed the first Syriac apologetic treatise, and Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373), whose numerous works include commentaries and hymns on biblical themes, such as the *Hymns on Paradise* offered below.

Not everyone in Origen’s time or afterward accepted all of his ideas about Scripture and theology. Even those who appreciated aspects of Origen’s thought expressed concerns about some of his conclusions. For example, Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus compiled a collection of favorite passages from Origen’s writings on Scripture called the *Philocalia*, but Basil also criticized some allegorical interpreters who took Origen’s approach too far. A stream of thinking arose in the fourth century that emphasized the “literal” (*kata lexin*) and “historical” (*historia*) sense of Scripture and denounced Origen’s interpretive methodology. Early figures that contributed to this stream include Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch (d. 269), Lucian of Antioch (d. 312), and Eustathius of Antioch (d. ca. 337). Because of its connection to the city of Antioch this school of thought is usually called “Antiochene” exegesis. This movement was not literalistic in the sense that they denied a Christian spiritual understanding of Scripture. Rather, writers of this school emphasized the coherent discourse of the text as construed with the original audience

in mind, and they focused where possible on the surface level meaning of the words. Such an interpretation served as the foundation for the spiritual sense, which they called *theōria* (“contemplation”). Prominent representatives of this movement whose exegetical writings survive include Diodore of Tarsus (d. ca. 394) and his students, Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) and the renowned preacher John Chrysostom (d. 407). Selections from each of these three figures are given below.

In biblical interpretation as in theology, Greek writers laid the literary and theoretical foundations. Latin Christian writers tended to adapt and build on the ideas and methods developed by the Greeks. It is not the case, however, that Latin interpreters made no special contributions. Three Latin figures whose insights are particularly noteworthy and whose influence on the Latin Middle Ages was extensive are Jerome (d. 419), Augustine (d. 430), and John Cassian (ca. 435). Jerome combined linguistic erudition, Antiochene historical sensibilities, Origenian allegory, and Jewish traditions to create his own unique style of scholarly commentary. Augustine synthesized earlier observations on biblical interpretation and recast this material through his own fresh reading of Scripture and vision for Christian culture. John Cassian brought his own practical wisdom to bear on eastern monastic spirituality, which he rearticulated for the Latin Church. Selections from these three authors will illustrate what Latin Christian writers of the late fourth and early fifth century contributed to the Church’s understanding of biblical interpretation.

Of course, many important interpreters of Scripture from this period could not be included in this volume due to limitations of space. In addition to figures not included who were already mentioned in the preceding paragraphs numerous others could be added. For example, Athanasius of

Alexandria (d. 373) made extensive use of scriptural citations in the course of his apologetic, dogmatic, and pastoral writings. Moreover, a few important biblical interpreters lived at the tail end or shortly after the historical period addressed in this volume. Of prime importance among Greek writers due to their detailed exegetical works are Cyril of Alexandria (d. 444) and Theodoret of Cyrus (d. ca. 460). Among Latin writers Cassiodorus (d. ca. 580) and Gregory the Great (d. 604) wrote biblical commentaries and other works that consolidated and transmitted the insights of earlier Latin exegetes. As for biblical interpretation in Syriac, Ephrem was the starting point for a long tradition of translators and commentators, among whom Jacob of Edessa (d. 708) deserves special mention. The present volume cannot do full justice to the rich heritage of early Christian biblical interpretation, but I hope the sources presented here can offer a reliable introduction to this interesting and important subject.

### **The Literal Sense of Scripture**

All early Christian interpreters of Scripture operated with the understanding that biblical texts generally have a literal sense and can also convey a higher or spiritual meaning. No great intellectual effort went into recognizing that Scripture has a literal sense. In most cases, some meaning presented itself to the interpreter as the obvious one, and this was taken to be the literal meaning. Unlike today, pride of place was not given to the literal sense. Consequently, there was little motivation to establish a precise definition of “literal.” Expressions used to describe this basic sense include “according to the letter,” “on the surface,” “the obvious meaning,” “the proper sense,” “what is evident from the text,” and “words used for what they

were invented to signify.” In reality, there is no clear concept of “literal” interpretation that is shared by all early Christian exegetes, and one cannot even assume that an individual author is entirely consistent in usage. Nevertheless, many writers offer helpful discussions of the literal sense in the course of describing their ideas about the spiritual or figurative sense. The primary sources presented in this volume can only give a taste for how the literal sense was handled by these writers.

A few examples will illustrate how the idea of a “literal” sense might be handled in different ways. (1) In speaking of the “nose” of a ship, one interpreter might call this a figurative and therefore nonliteral meaning, because the word “nose” properly describes a human nose. This figurative sense could then be interpreted in a spiritual way that connects theologically with the rest of Scripture. By way of contrast, another interpreter might regard this as a literary device and therefore part of the literal sense, rejecting a further spiritual interpretation. (2) With regard to the human biblical writer, one exegete might recognize that the human writers of the Old Testament expected actual animal sacrifices and a future blessing with physical abundance (= the literal sense), in contrast to the Christian interpretation that transcends what the human writer understood by pointing to Jesus’s sacrifice and the harvest of the gospel (= the spiritual sense); conversely, another exegete might suggest that the human biblical writer actually meant to teach a fully Christian spiritual meaning, taking the Old Testament as a self-conscious allegory like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. On this latter understanding, one could say that the Old Testament text has no literal sense. (3) Regarding history, some Christian interpreters may see the literal sense of an Old Testament text as the meaning that

applies to ancient Israel, whereas the higher sense is the meaning that applies to Jesus. But how does this relate to Old Testament prophecies that are taken to speak directly about the coming of Jesus? Are these literal prophecies of Jesus? Or are these examples where the prophet spoke a nonliteral meaning? (4) When Jesus in the Gospels says, “If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away” (Matt 5:29), what is the literal sense? Is it hyperbole? Is it figurative? On issues and questions such as these, early Christian exegetes will construe the “literal” meaning of the text in a variety of ways. Even within a single author different categories can sometimes be blurred.

### **The Spiritual Sense of Scripture**

The early Church adopted Israel’s Scriptures primarily in Greek translation as its own Scriptures (= the “Old Testament”), and from the beginning Christians applied to these scriptural texts interpretations beyond the literal level. Pauline letters contain several passages that served as models for other Christian spiritual interpreters to follow (for example, Gal 4:21–31; 1 Cor 10:1–11; 2 Cor 3:6, 15–16; Col 2:16–17). Jesus is described in the Gospels as using scriptural texts in a non-literal fashion (for example, Mark 12:24–27), and Old Testament passages are applied directly to Jesus based on exegesis that transcends the original historical sense (for example Acts 2:24–31; 4:25–28; Gal 3:16; Rom 10:6–8; Eph 4:8–11). The New Testament interpreted Old Testament realities such as “Israel,” “unclean food,” “land,” and “Sabbath” in nonliteral ways (for example, Rom 2:29; 9:6–9; Mark 7:14–22; Rom 7:12; 14:17; Eph 6:3; Heb 4:8–11; 1 Pet 3:21). Old Testament sanctuary worship was seen as the shadow or pattern of a heavenly reality (Heb 8:5; 9:11, 24;

10:1–4). The nonliteral interpretive practices of the New Testament encouraged Christians in post-apostolic times to apply spiritual interpretation more broadly throughout the Old Testament.

Drawing on the New Testament, Jewish interpreters such as Philo of Alexandria, and philosophical commentators on classical texts, early Christians employed a variety of terms to describe the spiritual sense of Scripture. Some important terms were *tropologia* (“figuration”), *allēgoria* (“allegory”), *anagōgē* (“elevated sense”), *dianoia* (“understanding”), *hyponoia* (“deeper sense”), *intelligentia spiritualis* (“spiritual understanding”), *typos* (“pattern”), *theōria* (“contemplation”), and *sacramenta* (“mysteries”). Any given source will typically use only a few expressions to describe Scripture’s higher meaning. Generally speaking, in the earliest Christian centuries these terms were used interchangeably. It was not until the latter half of the fourth century that interpreters began to make clear distinctions between specific terms. Because Antiochene interpreters distinguished *theōria* from *allēgoria* and employed the term *typos* in their theological exegesis, some modern theologians have distinguished between “typology,” which takes history as its starting point, and “allegory,” which does not. This may be a fair conceptual distinction to make, and Diodore of Tarsus would be pleased to see modern readers making it. Yet, in the first three centuries there are no particular exegetical distinctions associated with these terms.

The spiritual or figurative approach to interpretation that one encounters in early Christian sources does not reflect a general theory of textual indeterminacy. There is no sense that they read all texts in this manner. Rather, for early Christian readers spiritual interpretation followed naturally from the belief that God inspired the writers of Scripture. According

to 2 Timothy 3:16–17, all Scripture is divinely inspired and therefore profitable for teaching, correcting, training in righteousness, and equipping for good works. For all “Scripture” (in this case the “Old Testament”) to function this way for the Church, it must contain or point to distinctively Christian meanings. It was normally granted that biblical texts could be approached as ancient documents written by human writers with context-specific goals in mind. Even Origen gave a “literal” exposition of the Song of Songs to accompany his “spiritual” interpretation. But if one believes that this collection of writings constitutes “sacred Scripture” or the “word of God,” such categories imply another dimension of meaning, namely, what the Spirit of Christ is teaching through the text. This teaching could arise directly from the text’s human discourse, but not necessarily. According to the standard early Christian view, because the biblical text is the word of God it must be interpreted not as a merely human document but in light of its spiritual meaning.

One way for today’s readers to make sense of early Christian spiritual interpretation is to recognize that these ancient readers did not limit themselves to explaining the text itself but endeavored to explain the text’s subject matter. Because divine inspiration stands behind all Scripture, it was assumed that each biblical text fits into a comprehensive statement of divine truth on whatever topic or topics it touches upon. There is a dimension of constructive theology woven into the exegesis. The topic for comment is not just the text in front of them, but the reality in the external world that they believe the text points to. Thus, if Genesis 1 talks about God creating the world, and they know from elsewhere in Scripture that all things were made through the Son (John 1:3; Col 1:16), they will talk about Jesus in their discussion of Genesis, and many

will scrutinize the text of Genesis to see if there are details that can be freshly explained in light of Christian revelation, since the same God who inspired Genesis also sent Jesus and the Apostles. I would not claim that early Christian interpreters always operated with this distinction between text and subject matter clearly in mind, but it is a useful distinction for helping today's readers grasp what these ancient writers were actually doing.

Allegorical interpretation was not primarily a tactic for resolving interpretive difficulties but was above all a means to find the theological unity of Scripture. The Christian Bible is the product of a historical process that created, in the midst of diversity, a host of recurring themes, images, and symbols. Through figurative interpretation the early Church was able to tie these recurring elements together into a unified theological narrative with Christ as the central figure. The driving force behind allegorical reading was didactic, not defensive. It is of course true that problem passages were often handled by appealing to symbolic interpretations. For many early Christians the fact that a problem exists at the literal level suggests a figurative mode of expression. The principle behind this approach is not unreasonable. If I heard a friend say, "I was in line at the grocery store all day yesterday," I would know that he or she was speaking figuratively precisely because the literal meaning is absurd. Many early Christians applied this interpretive principle to the divine discourse in Scripture in order to find Scripture's underlying theological unity. For ancient readers such as Origen, the Bible is like a large city filled with helpful shops, parks, and so forth at street level, but also containing some closed roads and alleys that lead nowhere. But these "stumbling blocks" are meant to remind us to look around and find the sewer hole that leads down to

a golden city beneath the surface where every good exists in ideal form and all the streets interconnect in perfect harmony.

Unquestionably the Bible contains what may be regarded as “problem passages,” some of which were seen as problems in antiquity (for example, the wars in Joshua). Because Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and others often interpret such passages figuratively, they are sometimes accused of simply avoiding the problems. But I think the approach of these early Christian writers has considerable merit. First, early interpreters were honest enough to acknowledge that biblical texts at the literal level present problems. They did not attempt to deny this solely by appealing to genre or cultural background, as if these factors fully resolve the issues. For early Christian interpreters, the full theological message and unity of Scripture does not reside in the literal sense of every passage. Second, early Christians identified and evaluated problem passages on the basis of other scriptural texts and their understanding of God’s character. In other words, theological categories guided their treatment of problem passages. This is preferable to a situation where one passage (for example, “show no pity,” Deut 13:6–11) is labeled “difficult” and another passage (for example, “gleaning,” Deut 24:17–22) is commended, without any explicit theological explanation for why one passage is a problem and the other is not. This lack of theological engagement often stems from reticence to address problems directly, which stands in contrast to Origen, Augustine, and others who recognized multiple levels of meaning in Scripture. Third, through allegorical interpretation early Christians sought to find what each biblical text teaches (cf. 2 Tim 3:16–17) in keeping with the message of Scripture as a whole. For example, wars against Canaanites represent wars against sin: to obey God is to

conquer sin (Jericho, Joshua 6), and to disobey God is to be defeated by sin (Ai, Joshua 7). Often Christians today are content merely to neutralize problem passages: either to show that these passages do not suggest anything negative, or else to label them as “problematic” and therefore tacitly agree not to learn anything from them. For interpreters like Origen and Augustine, the end goal was to understand the text’s symbolic teaching in a positive sense, which in many cases takes its lead from the stylized manner in which biblical books were written in the first place.

To sum up, I hope that Christian readers of this volume will look with fresh eyes on ancient spiritual interpretation and consider what it might have to teach the Church today.

### **Reading Early Christian Biblical Interpretation**

One often encounters generalizations about how the Church Fathers interpreted the Bible, for example, that they were thoroughly Hellenized, or that they were steeped in Scripture, or that they were guided by orthodox belief, or that some were literalists and others allegorists, to name just a few. On their own, such broad descriptions are of limited value. Some generalizations of this nature are not accurate. Other generalizations are plausible, but without some firsthand knowledge of the sources to appreciate in what sense the generalization is true, even a plausible generalization can be misleading. The best way to move beyond generalities is to read as much as possible in the primary sources. This volume is intended to help in that endeavor.

Each source presented in this volume represents a contextualization of the Bible within a specific cultural setting. It is natural that all these writers interpreted Scripture in a

way that reflects their cultural environments. It is also reasonable that those today who wish to learn from these sources will need to recontextualize their ideas for the contemporary world, drawing on the present state of knowledge in relevant areas and employing today's idioms. I hope this volume will facilitate historically informed critical reflection on early Christian biblical interpretation and so provide a useful resource for contemporary theology.

The sources are presented below in chronological order, so that the reader can gain a sense of the historical flow from earlier to later periods. Each source is prefaced with a short introduction that provides basic biographical information, some indication of the author's interpretive approach, and a brief orientation to the specific selection given.