

The Discrepancies of Two Ages: Thoughts on Keble’s “Mysticism of the Fathers”

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A look at a great 19th-century Anglican writer’s defense of patristic exegesis raises questions about our own era’s theological integrity in its attempt to read the Scriptures.

ONE ELEMENT glaringly lacking in the contemporary revival of interest in patristic exegesis is any focused *theological* discussion of its character and significance, particularly its figurative orientation. Period studies of one or another ancient writer are plentiful; but there has been little attempt at formulating normative judgments of, or uncovering consistent fundamentals within, the figural interpretive views of the Fathers. The best treatments, in this respect, remain those of an earlier generation, by Daniélou and de Lubac, for instance, whose approach to their sources remains, however, for many contemporary scholars, disturbingly ahistorical.

Of course, there is no accepted standard for what should count as a historically valid evaluation or appropriation of patristic exegetical practices and insights. What does “the past,” in such matters, mean for a present to whom a figurative apprehension of a biblical personage, event, or object seems *intrinsically* unnatural, foreign, and perhaps even dangerously ideological? It is not clear what a de Lubac really meant, following patristic interpretation, by lifting up the integrity of an interpretive vision that could see Abraham’s willing sacrifice of Isaac as enclosing a startlingly bright vision of Jesus’ toweringly humble love.

In this regard, John Keble’s 1840 essay “On the Mysticism Attributed to the Early Fathers of the Church” maintains a still unusual place. (In this essay I cite from the 1868 edition, published in Oxford by James Parker.) Keble wrote this piece as Tract 89 of the *Tracts for the Times*, that series of provocative dispatches by the group of scholars, including Pusey and the still-Anglican Newman, which gave its name to the Oxford Movement. As an attempted exposition of the “principles” governing patristic figurative exegesis of the Scriptures, Keble’s work was among the first, and in some respects still the last, to examine the question, not only of what the Fathers were “about” in their exegetical practice, but how their purely theological—and theologically utterly orthodox—concerns were somehow tied to their scriptural readings in a persistently pertinent way.

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Keble himself was not without precursors in his interest in the theology of scriptural figuration. Perhaps his most notable progenitor in this regard was William Jones of Nayland, whose 1786 *Lectures on the Figurative Language of the Holy Scripture* represent a surer and clearer example of the living practice of such exegetical attitudes. But Jones had no interest in exploring “the tradition,” as did Keble (though this focus hardly gained the latter an increased readership!). Keble’s “Mysticism of the Fathers” was quickly tarred with the “antiquarian” label, and has since, in any case, been marginalized as a secondary work by a second-rate mind. Nor is the essay easy to read today. Its unsystematic character mimics (all too well) the character of patristic exegetical theory and practice, and Keble apparently brought it to an abrupt conclusion, only part way through his proposed outline, because it had grown too long by half, and he himself had lost interest in steadying its coherence with a developed ending.

But Tract 89 bears careful attention today all the same. In an era of flailing attempts at reclaiming “biblical authority” for the Church, and desperate measures at maintaining the pace of scholarly novelty within biblical and theological disciplines, Keble’s examination of patristic figurative exegesis represents not simply a challenge on behalf of a potentially useful or corrective early tradition, but hangs over our restorative and self-advancing concerns the basic question as to our capacity to read Scripture at all.

One way of looking at Keble’s goal in this work, beyond his offering some simple defense of antiquity, is as an attempt to uncover the theological “conditions” underlying the vital use of figural exegesis as a whole. In doing this, Keble tried to show the orthodoxy of patristic practice—orthodoxy, that is, according to traditional Protestant attitudes—even while exposing the *de facto* repudiation of these standard commitments on the part of those (Protestant) critics of early Christian figuration. “On the whole, the discrepancies between the two ages [ours and the Fathers’], occasioning the imputation of Mysticism to the ancients, are far beyond being accounted for by local, accidental, or temporary circumstances; they must be referred to some difference in first principles.” If contemporary denigrators of patristic exegesis are genuine in their rejection of such ways of reading Scripture, it can only be, Keble hints, because they do not *believe* what the ancient Christians believed.

So does Keble charge his analysis. And given the stakes he raises over the issue of exegetical form—the relative historical character of our faith—we too are invited to examine the theological “conditions” of figurative exegesis he outlines as a window onto our current theo-cultural

capacities for reading Scripture. Keble offers, at the outset of his essay, four “principles” as lying behind the Fathers’ reading of the Bible. First, he says, they shared a basic conviction about the divinely generative breadth of Scripture, that embraced an intrinsic polyvalency of meaning in the text. Second, they assumed a “providential” ordering of human life “national and individual” by God. Third, the saints and theologians of the early Church included the whole natural world within such providential reach. And finally, underlying all these assumptions, was the “perfective,” or ascetical character of interpretive practice, which formed both the context and the goal of Scripture’s reading in general.

Let me now outline each of these conditions as Keble discursively addresses them.

a. Keble is at his most exact in citing the widespread antipathy of modern theologians towards the patristic relish for “finding” allegories in Scripture that are not explicitly sanctioned by Scripture. The antipathy Keble identifies derives from traditional Protestant exegetical principles, that exclude any figurative interpretations except those already performed by the biblical writers. For instance, St. Paul *does* use the allegory of Hagar and Sarah, in Galatians, and he describes it as such in applying it to a discussion of the Letter and Spirit, Law and Gospel. But according to the typical Protestant hermeneutics Keble addresses, other readings of Old Testament personages as figures of Christian truths or other historical events are strictly ruled out.

Patristic exegesis, then—apart from certain “literalist” heroes like John Chrysostom—must strike the “modern” mind as “far-fetched and extravagant,” Keble observes; for it is based on “irrelevant or insignificant details of language and history,” whose polyvalent references go beyond the simple intended sense that Reformers like Tyndale had asserted was exhaustive of the sacred text. Indeed, figurative exegesis strikes a sensibility long nurtured on the thin gruel of exclusive literal explications as an affront to “common sense and practical utility” (what Keble calls the “idols of this age”), because it seems untethered to a common and universally accessible reason that can limit the reach of scriptural texts to particular agreed-upon usages.

For his own part, Keble sees this constricted sensibility as almost a denial of what is in fact the divinely inspired character of the Scriptures. Nowhere can he make this claim, which questions the basic Christian commitments of established leaders of his day, openly. But, in his long and rambling discussion of Origen, for instance, Keble consistently comes back to the insistence on the “plenary” reach of the Bible’s inspired nature that Origen claimed, and to the way the multi-layered “triple sense”

Origen explored was in fact an assertion of Scripture's divine authorship, not its subversion. In large measure, Keble seems to say, this is because a divine "word" can reveal its origin and character only through its disclosure of a breadth of signification that expresses the reach of divine power at work through human history and the natural world itself, not to mention the many levels of the human soul's health and disease. If Scripture, in any given text, *cannot* give up, to the faithful reader, a range of figurative meanings that apply to history, nature, and spirit, this is to limit its connection with the God Christians claim to be its author, and the author of the brilliantly textured and profoundly mysterious world in which they live and move.

b. Keble's argument here is a familiar one of experiential analogy, and, given the looseness of such analogical arguments, it does not hold up as a necessary conclusion. Still, it is coherent with his other claims about the conditions for patristic figuration, and such coherence is at the root of analogical reasoning in the Butlerian tradition in which he writes. For the "breadth" of Scripture's "allusive" character, according to Keble, fits well with the more basic patristic conviction of God's providential ordering of human history, both national and individual. Indeed, the category of "divine providence" stands at the center of Keble's defense of the Fathers, and represents his argument at its most robust and obvious.

"Mystical" interpretation, according to Keble, was possible and in fact *necessary* for the Fathers insofar as they were convinced that human history was a "chain" or "tissue" of "designed affinities," "miraculously ordered" by God to refer, in their larger shape, to the divine purpose revealed in Scripture itself. Events and characters from Abraham to Moses do their work and suffer their fates not only as isolated figures on the historical stage that has, as a later act, the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; rather, their historical narratives exist through a divine *intention* that grounds their fundamental meaning solely in the forms of this later act and person.

The essentially creative force of divine providence in constructing these historical meanings and holding them together—giving birth the particular persons for the sake of larger temporal displays of meaning—is, for Keble, the very reason why Scripture itself can exist. Keble is hardly naive in his assumptions about subjective context, however. He makes no claims that Abraham or Isaac "knew" or were fully conscious of the figural significance of their lives and acts. Nor, for that matter, does Keble insist that particular interpreters from different ages must invariably perceive the same breadth of figural interpenetration among events of the past. Divine providence has force as a conceived reality only to the degree

that such humanly subjective consciousness not function as a criterion for history's and Scripture's meaning, but exist as a subordinate phenomenon whose exercise itself comes into play only as God chooses to use it. "Intentionality," for Keble, is primarily a *divine* (not a human) attribute with respect to the significance of the biblical narrative and for the historical purposes the narrative serves or is served by. And the Scriptures, in their figurative depth and diversity, fulfill their divine revelatory function insofar as God uses the text's disclosiveness variably in conjunction with providentially directed interpreters.

That is why the variety of patristic figurative applications is not a problem for Keble, but rather a sign of divine directive in the process itself. "Rules" and "systems" of exegesis—a "hieroglyphical alphabet" such as might be used by rationalistic cabbalists like certain Puritan expositors or the eccentric Hebraicist John Hutchinson—are not discernible by Keble among the Fathers. They would, in any case, be properly inapplicable to a providentially orchestrated history, whose providentially recorded narratives are themselves providentially applied by Christians whose spirits, minds, and ministries respond in faith to the complexity of contexts reflective of God's plan for the Church and the world.

The "plan" itself, of course, has as its source, center, and term the Incarnation and redemptive acts of Jesus, the Christ. And this generative focus precludes, assuming its assertion in a given interpretive act, any destructive deviation from the "real meaning" of Scripture's texts. Keble is adamant that the Fathers' figurative exegesis by and large worked within such a christological assertion with such consistency that any personal diversity in interpretive application could only redound to the privilege of Christic glorification towards which, as everyone agreed, all of creation and human life was geared. The Trinitarian and christologically oriented "rule of faith," to which Keble sees the Fathers tethered, defines the very shape of the Providence by which the Scriptures have any divine meaning in the first place. But because such a "rule"—comprising, for instance, the historical shapes of the Apostle's Creed—grounds the very temporal (and "literal") integrity of Scripture's referents, those referents, in all their discrete historical being, must also have their own origins and purposes, as well as their basic significations, oriented towards the forms of Jesus' divinely incarnate life. What Scripture describes, in every detail, exists only because of the historical truths of Christ.

c. The central role of accepted providential activity that Keble claimed lay at the root of patristic figurative exegesis was certainly

something his Protestant opponents were unlikely to question. How could they, without openly defying the basic Christian conviction of Jesus' "messiahship," which even Lockean liberals had made a buttress of their Gospel? And with this conviction firmly erected, the far more debatable primitive exegetical practice of extending figuration to the natural world was provided by Keble with an accepted logical ground. More than simply artifacts from the early Church, Keble was well aware that naturalistic figures—whereby birds and trees and planets were read as signifying aspects of the Christian Gospel like the cross or the resurrection or the Church itself—struck his contemporaries as typically "medieval," and therefore "popish." But the movement "from allegorizing the word of God, to spiritualizing His works" was, within the logic of the "discernible links in the providential chain" that constituted the Scripture's human history, a reasonable passage given the common created origins of "word" and "work" together.

Keble was not eloquent on this passage. And he failed to spell out clearly the relationship between patristic views of redemptive history and the fundamentally *creative* Word that is Christ. Still, he intuited this relationship, and a glance at the later Anglican theologian L. S. Thornton confirms the direction and substance of this intuition, as it is explicitly derived from the thought of Irenaeus. Thornton saw in the Fathers a coherence of Scripture, creation, and Church as a providentially unified vehicle of salvific revelation, and he contrasted that with modern liberalism's dividing and distancing wedge between humanity and creation. Thus Thornton's analysis affirms the religious, and not simply culturally conditioned, character of Keble's naturalism.

The concern to stress naturalistic figuration may, nonetheless, strike contemporary readers as tangential to Keble's basic concern with scriptural exegesis *per se*. Finding an image of the Cross in a blade of grass was at best a quaint pastime. But Keble writes out of a particular tradition, tied, for instance, to William Jones's even more insistent concern with this area of figuration 50 years earlier. It was a tradition that had returned to "spiritual" interpretations of the Bible in large measure out of a deliberate desire to reclaim God's nearness in the midst of a de-divinized secular universe. Not only was naturalistic figuration logically dependent upon the basic Christian axiom of scriptural providentialism, but its assertion acted as a singularly striking defense of such divine activity, in that it flew in the face of so many of the era's unexamined secularizing presuppositions. To collect the world's objects within the sphere of the Gospel's forms, to identify the very colors of a "harlot's" wardrobe—e.g., Rahab's "scarlet thread" in St. Clement's

reading—as only part even of nature’s hues literally ordered by the Holy Spirit to the proclamation of the Savior’s redemptive blood, to gather the impressions of a sensible universe into the godly realm of scriptural signification, this was to repopulate daily life and the natural environment with at least the traces of divine personality; it was to elevate a philosophically or commercially degraded cosmos into a renewed vessel of adoration. The Romantics’ parallel revolt pales in comparison with the moral grandeur and doxological depth of Jones’s vision and Keble’s extension of it to the early Church.

d. This evangelistic undercurrent in Keble’s argument is, of course, only that. The “ease” with which the Fathers were able to elide Scripture, human history, and the natural world is more evidently, in Keble’s mind, a sign of their more acute spiritual condition than anything else. And hence, the distance between the present “age” and theirs in exegetical “taste” is a token of something far more significant religiously than cultural habits of perception. Rather, the Fathers understood that such cultural habits both were founded on commitments to holy living and themselves exhibited such habits’ realization. The coherence of history and nature providentially links the embodied forms of human life to redemptive effectiveness. Thus the “perfective” character of patristic exegetical practice lies as the root experiential condition for figural apprehension. If the world itself “speaks” of God’s love in Jesus Christ, if its corners and edges and even central heft all conjoin in a varied and coherent explication of the Scripture’s enunciated story of redemption, even though their visible form remains their own, then the parabolic call to “see and hear” must be met by a disposition bound to readied “eyes and ears” (cf. Matt. 13:13ff.).

Keble, following Jones, and for that matter simply rearticulating a basic patristic assumption most fully enunciated in Origen, plays off the Pauline description of true reading of the Scripture as a “spiritual” apprehension grounded in the disposition of faith and discipleship (cf. 2 Cor. 3:12–4:12). For Paul, the “veil” that obscures the true referent of Christ within the Old Testament is removed only “in the Lord,” within a process of sanctification that itself mirrors the form of Jesus’ “death” (2 Cor. 4:10). And so Keble affirms the Fathers’ essential practice of “fasting, and prayer, and scrupulous self-denial, and all the ways by which the flesh is tamed to the Spirit” as the form by which one can “sanctify” oneself, and “draw near with Moses, to the darkness where God is,” and so “see God” in the “study of the Bible.”

That “it is an awful thing to open” a Bible—as awesome a thing as entering the presence of the Holy, in that one confronts the reality of the

“Personal Word everywhere written in the Word”—was clearly a principle bound to rankle the sentiments of those defenders of the “perspicuous” clarity of scriptural texts (not to mention the hopes of present-day Gideonites, for whom the bare encounter with the Bible is fraught with conversionary expectations). This is especially so if the scriptural Holy demands a responsive holiness for it to be received and its truth discerned. Right “dispositions” for the reading of Scripture, of course, were always prerequisites for understanding in the minds of Protestant, and especially Puritan, divines. But the kinds of sanctifying practices Keble identified from the Fathers as necessary to spiritual reading were so patently tied to Roman Catholic devotion as to offend even the most morally scrupulous of Reformed sensibilities.

Keble’s strategy here, as with the other elements of his analysis, was to lay bare any implied alternative to such “sanctifying” preparations as would logically require a complete demystifying and rationalizing of Scripture. In this case, Keble evidently felt that his argument would require Protestant minds to shy away from their anti-Roman prejudices, for the sake of maintaining some semblance of orthodox substance. Or, for lack of such modesty, they would at least be forced to confess their hypocrisy in still laying claim to any orthodoxy in the first place. Indeed, one way of describing Keble’s larger rhetorical maneuver in Tract 89 is to see it as a trap for exposing Protestant apostasy *vis-à-vis* Scripture as a whole: anti-mysticism, or the scriptural constrictions of a popularly assumed anti-catholicism, must surely end by subverting any deeper sustaining theistic premises one might otherwise continue to presume. If, that is, the breadth of divine Providence is such as orthodoxy claims and has always claimed, then the shape of the Scriptures, and their relationship both to the larger world, its history, and the moral form of its readers must be congruent, in a basic way, with patristic exegetical practice. So that if that practice is genuinely rejected, so too must be any pretense to holding orthodox theistic convictions.

In some sense, Keble’s intuition here has been confirmed by the evolution of much modern fundamental theology. One way of describing this evolution is to say that, in the 150 years since Keble’s tract, we have carried through with the integration of anti-theistic premises into our theological discourse, having a deliberate intent to unseat traditional *scriptural* commitments which appear incompatible with pluralistic realities. The process, in fact, began long before Keble’s day, and his understanding of its dynamic was hardly novel among orthodox thinkers. The particularities, historical exclusions, distinctive judgments, and realistic forms of the Church’s traditional reading of Scripture’s referents

were, already by the late 17th century's experience with religious conflict, so threatening to the social necessity of civilly protected religious pluralism, that the reach of any divine order that might found such particular scriptural forms could only be seen as deserving of a special anathema. Keble wrote in an era already well advanced, in which the Scriptures needed to be neutralized, and a gradual method of de-theizing the scripturally-integrated world was experienced as a compelling moral duty. We live in a time where the advance has further progressed. From Deism through German Idealism, to contemporary pan-pneumatism of some feminist and revisionist theologies, the direction and purpose has been constant. If the providentialist outlook is now more overtly denigrated than in Keble's time, its repugnance has had a long preparative gestation amid the sharpening distaste with Scripture's particularist claims.

Some will doubtless feel, however, that this direction and purpose need not be shared in order still to set aside the actual exegetical practices of the Fathers. The sense of hermeneutic anachronism is not necessarily a sign of a degraded theological culture. Surely, we might wonder, Abraham and Isaac can be extracted from the Gospel accounts and returned to their Hebraic context without thereby subverting that Gospel? And here is where a rigorous reflection on Keble's argument needs to begin among self-styled Christians of whatever theological stripe: are the theistic premises Keble identifies *necessarily* and *logically* tied to the figurative discipline?

This question goes beyond Keble's own topical argument, which was perhaps less concerned with patristic figuration in itself, than with its usefulness as a mirror to his own theological culture. In our day, in any case, figurative exegesis is less a practice of disease than it is an interesting option among imaginative tropes, though without unavoidable demand; a curiosity, though without homiletical plausibility. So the question is raised: Can one hold to the breadth of Scripture's revelatory reach, bow to the creative sovereignty of God within our temporal lives, embrace the coherent character of nature's divinely transparent sheaths, and run after the transforming allure of the purified soul—can one inhabit this vision of the world *without* traversing Scripture's figured terrain?

And an answer to this kind of question is not easily offered. This is so in large part because the Christian Church's contemporary language about God is fraught with so many murky confusions, a mixture of bequests from both the tradition and its assailants that have been distressingly ill-digested before being passed on into the general soil of our common speech. The very academic developments in biblical

hermeneutics, historical research into the early Church, blossoming literary theory and cultural poetics, sophisticated and speculative sociological investigations, reactionary retrievals and yearnings, the search of spiritualities old and new, and even the unslaked market of religious publications—none of these and other contributory currents to the jumbled flow of our present theological reflections are susceptible to clear evaluation as valid determinants of the limits of our scriptural apprehensions, for their genetic interactions and the intents of their reception and deployment lie beyond the capacities of current scientific analysis.

What is obvious is that—despite the philosophical responses that have been given aplenty to rationalist disavowals of providentialist theistic frameworks or of personalist articulations of divine-human relations or of the seemingly elitist rewards of self-abnegation in favor of divine reception, responses given with crisp aplomb from Butler to Swinburne—even moderate theological voices today are uneasy with the kind of talk that would actually say outright that the forms of the world are ordered to an expression coherent with the shape of Pentateuch and Gospel. Few, certainly, even among more conservative Christians, could openly agree with Keble's brilliant contemporary H. L. Mansel in his relentlessly post-Kantian conclusion that the scriptural language of the Incarnation and its prophetic contours is not only potentially meaningful, but *exhaustively* so from the standpoint of a *rational* believer, and hence compellingly "hegemonic" in its exposition of the cosmos and its Maker. Philosophy has rarely changed minds, let alone hearts. And for lack of such a willingness to pursue intuited premises to their end—a lack whose abortive power remains historically and sociologically mysterious—it remains difficult to know how to test Keble's thesis. That is, figurative exegesis will and must remain in our day at best a curiosity or a spiritual consumable.

To be sure, there remain nagging questions about generally accepted presuppositions the Christian Church continues to uphold, if often without much enthusiasm: the unity of the two testaments, the overriding character of the Incarnation as a "rule of faith," even the necessity of some predisposition for Scripture's fruitful reading. Just as we may feel a hovering sense of these presuppositions' continued importance without knowing quite where they ought to lead us concretely in our exegetical practice, we may also remain obscurely distrustful of Keble's insistence on their vital place within a tight-knit scheme of "mystical" appropriations of Scripture's "spirit." Could he be right? Is the methodologically constricted manner in which we read the Bible, the

approach that must at best tie itself in hermeneutical knots in order to look at Abraham's willing sacrifice of Isaac as enclosing a startlingly bright vision of Jesus' toweringly humble love, only to end wearily by consigning such glimpses to the faded library of historical exegesis—could such constricted reading simply be a sign that our faith in God has faded too?

Such a conclusion might seem both too impractical and too facile. The “discrepancy” between ages may, in fact, *be* simply a cultural divide fraught with too many relativities to merit bridging. And attempts to do so for the sake of a renewed figural *jouissance* may also undermine the very real theological and apologetic value of maintaining Scripture's historical-critical factuality in the face of today's religiously hostile societies, whose embedded atheism even the ancient pagan world could not match.

To which, I suppose, Keble might have answered: The God in whom the Fathers believed, the God whose life is manifested in the Scriptures which the Fathers read, the God whose being is apprehended in the way the Fathers read the Scriptures—this God is surely pertinent and adequate to the challenges and questions of our day; and *another* God, differently apprehended, is hardly worthy of our vaunted intellectual devotions.

“Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8); or will he not rather discover a “love grown cold” (Matt.24:12)? Keble's opening query about the “discrepancies between the two ages,” therefore, that of the Fathers and our own in the matter of scriptural “mysticism, might, as he put it, be resolved into “some difference in first principles”; it might even be answered with the strong judgment that “the ancients may have been in the right, and we in the wrong” about such intellectual groundings. But the drift of his arguments, perhaps despite himself, with their repeated references to the world of wonder and astonished humility inhabited by the Fathers in their entry into the Scriptures, their delighted and driven discoveries of a creation enmeshed in Jesus' forms and words, themselves terms of the prophets' languages and gestures, their eager subjection of mind, body, and spirit to the climate of this strangely knotted universe—he cannot seem to help himself in pointing to a “veil,” let down before the eyes of the present church. Our own theological energy, in these terms, is best expended in something other than constructing hermeneutic bridges between diverse cultural eras. It is better spent in searching for an answer to the decisive *instrumental* question Keble haltingly posed: And who shall remove such a veil as this?