

### Ancient Fathers on Scripture

The purpose of the quotes below is to demonstrate that the ancient fathers considered Holy Scriptures to be divine, and worthy for use in instruction and correction. This is not a balanced review of all they taught, but rather a random sampling. I have scanned quickly literally thousands of pages of these Ancients, and found they frequently commented on or made use of Holy Scripture. For some of the earliest of these Ancients, what they were calling Scriptures was current literature. It is similar to people in 2000 AD reading histories about 1930 which were written in 1960. These Ancients were not stupid people. We should not be smug with our computers and great libraries. They were the equal of the best of minds we have today, and we must take them seriously.

Clement of Rome (written about 97 AD): “Look carefully into the Scriptures, which are the true utterances of the Holy Spirit. Observe that nothing of an unjust or counterfeit character is written in them.”<sup>1</sup>

Justin Martyr (lived 114-165 AD): “And that the prophets are inspired by no other than the Divine Word, even you, as I fancy, will grant.”<sup>2</sup>

Justin Martyr (lived 114-165 AD): “Up to the time of Jesus Christ, who taught us, and interpreted the prophecies which were not yet understood, [they had a lawgiver] as was foretold by the holy and divine Spirit of prophecy through Moses”<sup>3</sup>

Irenaeus (lived 120-202 AD): His works exhaustively assert the trustworthiness of Holy Scripture for both instruction and reproof. “Such, then, is their system, which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from other sources than the scriptures.”<sup>4</sup>

Irenaeus: “If, however, we cannot discover explanations of all those things in Scripture which are made the subject of investigation, yet let us not on that account seek after any other God besides Him who really exists. For this is the very greatest impiety. We should leave things of that nature to God who created us, being most properly assured that the Scriptures are indeed perfect, since they were spoken by the Word of God and His Spirit; but we, inasmuch as we are inferior to, and later in existence than, the Word of God and His Spirit, are on that very account destitute of the knowledge of His mysteries. And there is no cause for wonder if this

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<sup>1</sup> Clement, “It is the Part of the Wicked to Vex the Righteous”, *First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians*, Chapter 45, A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D. (translator), in The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume 1, Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors) (06 January 1885). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Justin Martyr, “Manner of Christ’s Birth Predicted”, *First Apology of Justin Martyr*, Chapter 33, A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D. (translator), in The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume 1, Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors) (06 January 1885). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr, “Christ Predicted by Moses”, *First Apology of Justin Martyr*, Chapter 32, A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D. (translator), in The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume 1, Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors) (06 January 1885). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Irenaeus (lived 120-202 AD), “How the Valentiniens Pervert the Scriptures to Support Their Own Pious Opinions”, *Irenaeus Against Heresies*, Book 1, Chapter 8, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume 1, Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors) (06 January 1885). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

is the case with us as respects things spiritual and heavenly, and such as require to be made known to us by revelation, since many even of those things which lie at our very feet (I mean such as belong to this world, which we handle, and see, and are in close contact with) transcend our knowledge, so that even these we must leave to God. For it is fitting that He should excel all [in knowledge].”<sup>5</sup>

Clement of Alexandria (about 193-217 AD): “For both the law and the Gospel are the energy of one Lord, who is ‘the power and wisdom of God;’ and the terror which the law begets is merciful and in order to salvation.”<sup>6</sup>

Origen wrote that not everything in scripture can be taken literally. (Origen was called a heretic by other ancients [Jerome, Letter 51], so not everything in Origen can be taken literally either.) He gave this guidance in his work, “On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture, and How the Same is to be Read and Understood, and What is the Reason of the Uncertainty in it; and of the Impossibility or Irrationality of Certain Things in it, Taken According to the Letter”. A piece of his advice is “The careful (reader), however, will be in doubt as to certain points, being unable to show without long investigation whether this history so deemed literally occurred or not, and whether the literal meaning of this law is to be observed or not. And therefore the exact reader must, in obedience to the Savior’s injunction to “search the Scriptures,” carefully ascertain in how far the literal meaning is true, and in how far impossible; and so far as he can, trace out, by means of similar statements, the meaning everywhere scattered through Scripture of that which cannot be understood in a literal signification.”<sup>7</sup>

The presbyters and deacons at Rome sent a letter to Cyprian (200-258 AD) which addressed the question of how to treat conflicts between the teachings of the martyrs and the scriptures. The sense of what he said is that the gospel has priority. Here is an excerpt:<sup>8</sup> “Let them, then, see what it is they are trying to do in this matter. For if they say that the Gospel has established one decree, but the martyrs have established another; then they, setting the martyrs at variance with the Gospel, will be in danger on both sides. For, on the one hand, the majesty of the Gospel will already appear shattered and cast down, if it can be overcome by the novelty of another decree; and, on the other, the glorious crown of confession will be taken

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<sup>5</sup> Irenaeus (lived 120-202 AD), “Perfect Knowledge Cannot be Attained in the Present Life: Many Questions Must be Submissively Left in the Hands of God”, *Irenaeus Against Heresies*, Book 2, Chapter 28, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume 1, Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors) (06 January 1885). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Clement of Alexandria (about 193-217 AD), “The Law, Even in Correcting and Punishing, Aims at the Good of Men”, *The Stromata, or Miscellanies*, Book 1, Chapter 27, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume 2, Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors) (06 January 1885). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

<sup>7</sup> Origen, “On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture, and How the Same is to be Read and Understood, and What is the Reason of the Uncertainty in it; and of the Impossibility or Irrationality of Certain Things in it, Taken According to the Letter”, *Origen de Principiis*, in Origen, Rev. Frederick Crombie, D.D. (translator), in *Fathers of the Third Century*, A. Cleveland Coxe, D.D., The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume 4, Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors) (06 January 1885). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

<sup>8</sup> Presbyters and Deacons to Cyprian (about 220-258 AD), “The Presbyters and Deacons Abiding at Rome, To Cyprian”, *The Epistles of Cyprian*, Epistle 29, Cyprian, Rev. Ernest Wallis, Ph.D. (translator), The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers down to A.D. 325, Volume 5, Rev. Alexander Roberts, D.D. and James Donaldson, LL.D. (editors) (06 January 1885). The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

from the heads of the martyrs, if they be not found to have attained it by the observation of that Gospel whence they become martyrs.”

Athanasius (lived 289-373 AD): “None else, now, is found in the Scriptures but the common Savior of all, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>9</sup>

Augustin (426 AD) discussed the importance of having a canon of scripture. “This Mediator, having spoken what He judged sufficient first by the prophets, then by His own lips, and afterwards by the apostles, has besides produced the Scripture which is called canonical, which has paramount authority, and to which we yield assent in all matters of which we ought not to be ignorant, and yet cannot know of ourselves.”<sup>10</sup>

Augustin also clearly states the status of the Apocrypha.<sup>11</sup> In this example, he clearly calls *Enoch* apocryphal, and calls *Jude* canonical. “Let us omit, then, the fables of those scriptures which are called apocryphal, because their obscure origin was unknown to the fathers from whom the authority of the true Scriptures has been transmitted to us by a most certain and well-ascertained succession. For though there is some truth in these apocryphal writings, yet they contain so many false statements, that they have no canonical authority. We cannot deny that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, left some divine writings, for this is asserted by the Apostle Jude in his canonical epistle. But it is not without reason that these writings have no place in that canon of Scripture which was preserved in the temple of the Hebrew people by the diligence of successive priests; for their antiquity brought them under suspicion, and it was impossible to ascertain whether these were his genuine writings, and they were not brought forward as genuine by the persons who were found to have carefully preserved the canonical books by a successive transmission. So that the writings which are produced under his name, and which contain these fables about the giants, saying that their fathers were not men; are properly judged by prudent men to be not genuine; just as many writings are produced by heretics under the names both of other prophets, and more recently, under the names of the apostles, all of which, after careful examination, have been set apart from canonical authority under the title of Apocrypha.

Jerome (lived 342-420): “When teaching in church seek to call forth not plaudits but groans. Let the tears of your hearers be your glory. A presbyter’s words ought to be seasoned by his reading of scripture. Be not a declaimer or a ranter, one who gabbles without rhyme or reason; but shew yourself skilled in the deep things and versed in the mysteries of God. To mouth your words and by your quickness of utterance astonish the unlettered crowd is a mark of

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<sup>9</sup> “Majesty of His Birth and Death. Confusion of Oracles and Demons in Egypt.”, *Incarnation of the Word*, Chapter 37, in Selected Writings and Letters of Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, Archibald Robertson (1891), in A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series, Philip Schaff, D.D., LL.D., and Henry Wace, D.D. (editors), 21 November 1891. The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

<sup>10</sup> Augustin, “Of the Authority of the Canonical Scriptures Composed by the Divine Spirit”, *City of God*, Book 11, Chapter 3 (426 AD), in The City of God, Rev. Marcus Dods, D.D. (translator), Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 2, Philip Schaff (editor) (1886), The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

<sup>11</sup> Augustin, “Whether We are to Believe that Angels, Who are of a Spiritual Substance, Fell in Love with the Beauty of Women, and Sought them in Marriage, and that from this Connection Giants were Born”, *City of God*, Book 15, Chapter 23 (426 AD), in The City of God, Rev. Marcus Dods, D.D. (translator), Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, First Series, Volume 2, Philip Schaff (editor) (1886), The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).

ignorance. Assurance often explains that of which it knows nothing; and when it has convinced others imposes on itself.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Jerome, “To Nepotian”, *The Letters of St. Jerome*, Letter 52, Chapter 8, in The Principal Works of St. Jerome, Hon. W. H. Fremantle, M.A. and Rev. G. Lewis, M.A. (translators) (1892), in The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, Volume 6, Philip Schaff (editor), The Master Christian Library, Version 5, AGES Software (1997).