

CONCORD AND HARMONY: THE RULE OF FAITH AND PARALLEL  
READING IN CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA

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**ABSTRACT:** The very notion of ‘reading in parallel’ presupposes an interpretive frame of reference which draws texts into relation in the first place. In the early church, second-century writers articulated a set of theological assumptions known as the rule of faith which served this purpose, insisting that the shared divine authorship and subject matter of the writings of the Old and New Testaments demands that they be read in concert. This study focuses on the case of Clement of Alexandria, who describes the interrelationships of the Law, Prophets, and Gospel as one of ‘concord and harmony,’ comparable to the unified voices that make up a divinely-conducted choir. In this study, I first briefly consider the core theological assumptions of the rule of faith that constitute Clement’s frame of reference. Second, I examine his claims about the origins of this frame of reference, in the tradition received from, and modeled by, Jesus and his apostles themselves. Third, I offer a case study of Clement’s own parallel reading, analyzing both his theoretical statements and some actual examples of his interpretation of the Mosaic Law in the *Stromateis*. Based on his description of the Law’s threefold mode of speaking through symbols, precepts, and prophecies, I observe how Clement’s prior assumptions regarding the concord and harmony of the Scriptures motivate him to read each type of text in parallel with a New Testament referent.

**KEYWORDS:** patristics, biblical interpretation, rule of faith, Clement of Alexandria, law.

### **Introduction: What Makes for a Parallel?**

The very concept of ‘reading in parallel’ is founded upon the basic, though easily overlooked, assumption that a particular grouping of texts can, should, or even must in some sense be related to one another, and thus read in concert. Even the language of a ‘grouping,’ of course, already involves the idea of a prior decision to assemble the texts in the first place. While this may seem obvious, acknowledging it helps to remind us that ‘parallelism’ is not merely a quality inherent to the texts themselves, but also depends in part upon the interpreter’s recognition of the external features which

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invite or even require them to be read in parallel. These factors may be historical (related to the texts' composition and provenance), social (reflecting their cultural and traditional reception and appropriation), or, in the case of scriptural texts, theological (rooted in beliefs about the texts' divine origin, subject matter, and authority for governing the life of the religious community). Together, these factors contribute to what Kevin Vanhoozer has described as a 'frame of reference': a set of essential, underlying beliefs and assumptions about the very nature of the texts, which motivate or even compel interpreters to regard them as related in the first place, and to read them as such (Vanhoozer 2024: 67–68).

This is not to say that a frame of reference must be seen as foreign to, or artificially foisted upon, the texts by their interpreters. In the case of scriptural texts, in particular, the frame may be constructed from the texts' own raw materials, so to speak, as readers incorporate and synthesize ideas, arguments, and beliefs expressed in individual texts into a comprehensive framework, which then becomes a guide for subsequent readings. This, at least, is the dynamic at work among second-century Christian writers in their articulation of the 'rule of faith,' and its application to scriptural exegesis (Ferguson 2015: 76–78; Blowers 2017: 210–212). For leading theologians like Irenaeus of Lyons (*Adversus haereses* 1.10.1–2; *Epideixis* 6), Tertullian of Carthage (*De praescriptione haereticorum* 13; *Adversus praxean* 2), and Clement of Alexandria, the 'rule' (variously described as the rule of faith, the rule of truth, or the rule of the church) was a faithful *hypothesis* or summary of the overarching message of the scriptural texts themselves, articulating its main contours as intended by the divinely inspired apostles who wrote the New Testament (including their reception and interpretation of the Old) (Grant 2002: 47). So, as Vanhoozer explains, 'Far from being an extratextual supplement imposed by the believing community upon Scripture, then, the Rule of Faith is actually a servant of intratextuality. The Rule takes its understanding as to what Scripture is 'about' not from philosophy, culture, or religion but from the text itself' (Vanhoozer 2005: 199–203).

In their encounters with the groups they described as heretics—followers of Valentinus, Basilides, Marcion, and others—these early Christian writers appealed to the rule of faith as an interpretive guardrail that preserved the intertextual unity of Scripture, and thus excluded the unorthodox readings advanced by the heretics (Bokedal 2013: 248–251). The language of 'intertextuality,' though coined within modern literary studies, has been fruitful for reflecting on the early Christian practice of 'reading from a perspective that recognizes and makes connections between texts, by quotation, allusion, or abbreviation,' in which the rule of faith 'circumscribes the doctrinal boundaries and constrains reading options of such interpretive networks' (Bingham 2023: 14–16). Irenaeus, for example, illustrates the rule and its re-

relationship to the Scriptures using the image of a majestic king in a mosaic, whose picture is distorted by those who rearrange the tiles into the image of a fox; or, in another example, the true sequence of Homer's poetic lines, disrupted when ripped from their context and subjected to 'creative' new orders (Irenaeus 1913: 1.8.1; 1.9.4). In both analogies, of course, it is only a prior knowledge of the original, proper inter-relationship between the parts and the whole that allows the observer to recognize and reject later deviations from it.

Perhaps the most important function that the rule of faith performed in these heresiological refutations, then, was to safeguard the unity of the emerging biblical canon (Bokedal 2023: 283–316). Against the oppositional readings of the various Gnostic and Marcionite sects, which pitted the Creator of the Old Testament against the Father of Christ in the New Testament in a dualistic struggle, proto-orthodox writers insisted on the unchanging identity and purpose of the one God who reveals himself across the scriptural economy. Recognizing in the Old and New Testaments the unified witness of the same inspiring Spirit, second-century writers interpreted their individual texts in constant relation to one another, placing writings that were widely separated in historical provenance, language, and genre into direct and constant conversation, on the theological assumption that they shared divine authorship and subject matter in their diverse yet harmonious and Spirit-inspired testimony to Jesus Christ. Thus, the rule of faith served as what we have called a 'frame of reference': a set of theological convictions that compelled early Christians to regard the scriptural texts of the Old and New Testaments, in contrast to their heretical opponents, as closely related, and thus mutually-interpretive and, in fact, interdependent for their proper understanding. In short, it required that they be read in parallel.

As Andrew Louth has observed, this early Christian articulation of the rule of faith as a received 'pattern of knowing' is reminiscent, in some respects, of more recent epistemological proposals accentuating the role of the knower in the formulation of knowledge, by acknowledging the knower's situatedness within a particular tradition and its basic presuppositions. Louth draws a connection with Gadamer, for example, who describes, against the modernist illusion of 'presuppositionless understanding,' a theory of interpretation which 'sets the interpreter himself within tradition,' and recognizes that 'understanding is an engagement with tradition, not an attempt to escape from it' (Louth 1983: 33). Such tradition-informed interpretation becomes 'a process of revising our preconceptions, not seeking to escape from them' (Louth 1983: 37). Louth also considers Michael Polanyi's notion of the 'tacit dimension' of knowledge, whereby 'we bring a kind of interpretative framework within which we seek to interpret our conceptions,' one which selects, filters, and integrates our disparate perceptions into a unified whole based on deeply-rooted

or even subconscious criteria (Louth 1983: 61–62). Without embracing anything like postmodern subjectivism, Louth finds a certain resonance between these recent correctives to a naive modernist objectivism and the premodern church's view of tradition, and particularly the role played by the rule of faith, in shaping the scriptural interpreter's most basic assumptions. As in Alasdair MacIntyre's notion of 'tradition enquiry,' knowledge proceeds from received authorities within moral communities that share particular assumptions and orientations toward common goals (MacIntyre 1990). So as Louth concludes, 'Participation in the tradition of the Church meant for the Fathers acceptance of the Church's rule of faith, acceptance of the framework of preconceptions within which Scripture and one's own experience of grace could be interpreted as furthering the understanding of God' (Louth 1983: 64). Within such a frame, the texts of the Old and New Testaments are received as the unified works of a single divine author, sharing an ultimate referent and thus demanding to be read in parallel.

### **Reading in Parallel with Clement of Alexandria**

Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150–215) provides a particularly illuminating model of this dynamic among second-century writers. In response to the disparate scriptural approaches of Valentinus, Basilides, and Marcion which he encountered in Alexandria, Clement develops in his *Stromateis* a sketch of the Christian Gnostic (a title he reclaims from his heretical opponents) as the ideal scriptural interpreter, one who steadily matures from the simple faith of initial conversion and catechesis toward the attainment of higher *gnosis*, becoming equipped not only to understand the Scriptures but to teach them to others (Ashwin-Siejkowski 2008). Such an approach avoids the disjunctive readings of the heretics and maintains the unity of the Old and New Testaments, in keeping with the church's rule of faith. By his own account, Clement himself learned it from personal mentors (probably above all Pantaenus) who 'preserved the true tradition of the blessed doctrine in direct line from Peter, James, John, and Paul, the holy apostles, son inheriting from father.' Clement regards his own teaching likewise as an effort 'to preserve the blessed tradition' (Clement 1991: 30).

His diverse intellectual milieu compelled Clement to make explicit the theological convictions that shaped his approach to Scripture (what we are calling his frame of reference). These commitments, expressing the rule of faith passed down from the apostles themselves, include beliefs about the nature of God as the Creator and the Father of Christ; the incarnate Son, who is the focus of the divine economy; and the Holy Spirit, who speaks through the prophets and apostles in witness to him (Osborn 2005: 31–55; Ward 2022: 77–85). Their scriptural writings form a divinely inspired collection of texts, authored by the 'Spirit of prophecy and instruction' (Clement 1991: 55) who speaks through both the prophets and the apostles 'with one

and the same voice' (Clement 1919: 173). Consequently, even when Clement refers to Scripture's individual human authors, references to the divine author are never far behind, as he envisions their diverse voices, in a memorable image, as the harmonious song of a 'whole prophetic choir,' conducted by one and the same Spirit (Clement 1913: 194; Clement 1919: 195).

Divine inspiration does not imply immediate understanding, however, for Clement also believes that in the Scriptures the Spirit sometimes 'speaks obscurely,' in ways that are impossible to understand 'without a period of learning' (Clement 1991: 55). A disposition of receptive faith on the part of the interpreter, who submits to the Scriptures' self-attesting authority, is necessary to study them with profit. 'If a person has faith in the divine Scriptures and a firm judgment, then he receives as an irrefutable demonstration the voice of the God who has granted him those Scriptures' (Clement 1991: 163). For Clement, the content of this faith is, specifically, the confession expressed in the church's rule: faith in one and the same God as Creator of the Old Testament and the Father of Christ in the New Testament, revealed through the economy of the Son, and described authoritatively in the Spirit-inspired scriptural texts.

Clement first introduces this point in *Stromateis* II.6.28.6, where he emphasizes the unity of the scriptural economy, in which Christians share in the same faith as Abraham. 'If prophecy promises the same home for us and the patriarchs, then one single God is revealed in both the Testaments.' Appealing to Paul's quotation of Habakkuk in Romans 1:17 ('The righteous shall live by faith'), Clement insists on a 'faith which accords with the Testament and the commandments, since the Testaments, chronologically two, granted in the divine economy with an eye to the stage of progress, are one in power, Old and New, being presented by the one and only God through his Son' (Clement 1991: 177–178).

A number of important themes are raised here: two distinct yet unified major covenants, the one progressively unfolding divine economy which they comprise, and the 'one and only God' who is revealed across them, specifically 'through his Son.' In these lines Clement lays the groundwork for an argument developed across the work, that the rule of faith establishes an indispensable frame of reference for scriptural interpretation. The texts of both the Old and New Testaments must be regarded as unified in their shared witness to Christ, the divine Son whose self-revelation in the redemptive economy binds them together as the common object of their textual witness. As Clement reiterates at the end of Book II, 'The Law does not in fact conflict with the Gospel, but is in harmony with it: of course, the one Lord directs both' (Clement 1991: 255). The Law and the Gospel must, in other words, be read in parallel.

In the mention of ‘harmony’ in the line just quoted, Clement employs a musical term (*synadei*), evoking the distinct yet unified voices that sing together in a choir.<sup>1</sup> He later returns to this word group in *Stromateis* VI.15, a passage which is programmatic for our present purpose. Here, more clearly than anywhere else, Clement describes his ‘frame of reference’ for reading scriptural texts in parallel. In the context, he is critiquing both non-Christian Greek philosophers and Christian heretics for their flawed conceptions of God. Philosophy ‘teaches theology comprehensively; but it does not preserve accuracy and particular points; for neither respecting the Son of God, nor respecting the economy of Providence, does it treat similarly with us.’ And the heretics, ‘although they speak of one God...speak without accuracy, not in accordance with truth; for they discover another God, and receive Christ not as the prophecies deliver.’ In both cases, an inadequate conception of God, and thus Christ, lies at the root of the error. Greek philosophy knows nothing of the divine economy in which he is revealed, while the heretics misconstrue it, out of accordance with scriptural truth (‘not as the prophecies deliver’). In the latter case Clement attributes these distorted views of Christ to a willful abandonment of the theological assumptions of the apostolic tradition, which result in egregious scriptural readings. Heretical groups ‘do not quote or deliver the Scriptures in a manner worthy of God and of the Lord; for the deposit rendered to God, according to the teaching of the Lord by His apostles, is the understanding and the practice of the godly tradition.’ This ‘tradition,’ Clement clarifies, is none other than the ‘rule of truth,’ necessary for rightly ‘explaining the Scriptures.’ For in their mysteries and enigmas, many scriptural passages are intelligible only to ‘those who receive and observe, according to the ecclesiastical rule, the exposition of the Scriptures explained by Him.’

Then, in the most crucial line for our purpose (VI.15.125.3), Clement explains what constitutes this rule, and how it pertains to scriptural interpretation: ‘and the ecclesiastical rule is the concord and harmony [*hē synadei kai hē symphōnia*] of the law and the prophets in the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord’ (Clement 1913: 509). Returning to his musical analogy, Clement here explicitly defines the church’s rule of faith here as the recognition of ‘harmony’ between the texts of the Old Testament (‘the law and the prophets’) and the New (‘the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord’). Neither set of texts can be properly interpreted without constant reference to the other, he suggests, any more than a single note can comprise a harmony when played individually. There is a striking similarity here to

1 References to the Greek text are based on the critical editions of Stählin O (1905) *Clemens Alexandrinus: Vol. 1: Protrepticus, Paedagogus*, Leipzig: Heinrichs; Stählin O (1906) *Clemens Alexandrinus: Vol. 2: Stromata I-VI*, Leipzig: Heinrichs; and Stählin O (1909) *Clemens Alexandrinus: Vol. 3: Stromata VII-VIII, Excerpta ex Theodoto, Eclogae Propheticae, Quis dives salvetur, Fragmente* Leipzig: Heinrichs.

Irenaeus's concept of consonance (*consonare*), in which 'Scripture exists as 'one consistent melody' that harmonizes in various ways the work of God in Christ' (Presley 2019: 7; Presley 2015: 12–27). To put it in our earlier terms, then, the church's rule provides Clement with a frame of reference which recognizes the possibility, and in fact the absolute necessity, of reading these texts in parallel. For only in this way is each text properly situated within the 'whole economy which prophesied of the Lord.'

This fundamental assumption of 'concord and harmony' consistently characterizes Clement's many scattered references to the interrelationships between scriptural texts, which regularly juxtapose 'the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospels' to emphasize their unity and interdependence (e.g. *Stromateis* IV.1.2.2; IV.13.91.1; VI.11.88.5; VII.16.104.1). Through their various and distinct modes of speech, texts within each category, when properly understood, are seen to contribute to an 'ecclesiastical symphony at once of the law and the prophets, and the apostles along with the Gospel, and the harmony which obtained in each prophet, in the transitions of the persons' (Clement 1913: 500). By contrast, in a vivid analogy of his own, Clement compares the heretics who lack this harmonizing principle (the 'tradition of the Lord') to intruders who dig a hole in the church's outer wall to force their way through, because their own counterfeit key cannot open the door (Clement 1913: 554).

### Clement's Exemplars: Jesus and Paul

Where then does Clement derive this frame of reference? We find that he regularly locates the ecclesiastical rule's origins not only with the apostles, but with the teaching of Jesus himself, as already observed from his comment in *Stromateis* VI.15.124.3 that the heretics 'deprive the Lord of the true teaching' and reject 'the deposit rendered to God, according to the teaching of the Lord by His apostles.' There, Clement makes Christ himself the active agent in the transmission of the tradition, as the divine teacher who has both spoken through the Scriptures, and then provided his followers with the key to its meaning. The passage is worth quoting more fully:

...the deposit rendered to God, according to the teaching of the Lord by his apostles, is the understanding and the practice of the godly tradition. 'And what you hear in the ear' — that is, in a hidden manner, and in a mystery (for such things are figuratively said to be spoken in the ear)—'proclaim,' he says, 'on the housetops,' understanding them sublimely, and delivering them in a lofty strain, and according to the rule of the truth explaining the Scriptures; for neither prophecy nor the Saviour himself announced the divine mysteries simply so as to be easily apprehended by all and sundry, but express them in parables. The apostles accordingly say of the Lord, that 'He spoke all things in parables, and without a parable spoke he nothing unto them;' and if 'all things were made by him, and without him was not anything made that was made,' consequently also prophecy and the law were by him, and were spoken by him in par-

ables. 'But all things are right,' says the Scripture, 'before those who understand,' that is, those who receive and observe, according to the ecclesiastical rule, the exposition of the Scriptures explained by him; and the ecclesiastical rule is the concord and harmony of the law and the prophets in the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord. (Clement 1913: 509, slightly modified)

Clement here argues that Christ himself, as the divine Logos who divinely inspires Scripture ('prophecy and the law'), both conceals and reveals its message, which is fully grasped only by worthy recipients. The key to unlocking its meaning is to 'receive and observe' Scripture in accordance with Christ's own instruction of the apostles ('the exposition of the Scriptures explained by him.'). And this is nothing other than 'the ecclesiastical rule,' which recognizes in him the source of Scripture's unity ('concord and harmony') in all its various parts, and the focus of the one divine economy that unfolds across the Old and New Testaments.

And indeed, Clement's own readings of the Old Testament reflect a consistent and explicit indebtedness to what he regards as the mode of interpretation employed by Jesus himself, as described in the Gospels, and by Paul, in his epistles. A few examples will suffice to illustrate. First, in *Stromateis* III, we find Clement polemicizing the Gnostic Carpocrates's writing *On Righteousness*, which pitted the Mosaic Law's restriction of sexuality against the supposed 'principle of common sharing' of creation. Aghast at this oppositional reading, Clement wonders 'How can this fellow still be listed in our church members' register when he openly does away with the Law and the Gospels alike by these words?' Insisting that the Law and the Gospel be read in unison, Clement appeals to the model of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:27–28): 'The former [the Law] says, 'You shall not commit adultery,' the latter [the Gospel says] 'Everyone who looks with lust has already committed adultery. The words found in the Law...show that it is one single God who makes his proclamations through the Law, prophets, and Gospels' (Clement 1991: 261). Where Carpocrates's assumption of disunity leads him to regard the Decalogue's injunction against coveting a neighbor's wife 'as a joke of the Lawgiver' (since the same malevolent Creator who instilled the sexual instinct now commands humanity to repress it), Clement observes, on the contrary, that Jesus's first-person personal command 'I say to you, you shall not lust...shows that the application of the commandment is more rigidly binding, and that Carpocrates and Epiphanes are battling against God' (Clement 1991: 262). So Clement finds in Jesus's reading a frame of reference which interprets the Mosaic command in parallel with his own teaching.

Similarly, near the end of Book III, Clement refutes a Gnostic libertinism which considers sexual behavior 'a doctrine of moral indifference' on the basis of grace-affirming New Testament texts (Clement 1991: 294). Complaining that 'these people

do anything rather than walk by the canon [rule] of the gospel in conformity with the truth' (Clement 1991: 297), he again draws attention to Christ's own interpretation of the Decalogue: 'From the very beginning... the Law laid down the injunction "You shall not desire your neighbor's wife" in anticipation of the Lord's closely connected dictum in accordance with the New Covenant with the same meaning from his own lips: "You have heard the injunction of the Law 'You shall not commit adultery.' I say, "You shall not lust.'" (Clement 1991: 300) This claim is even stronger here, however, as Clement now argues not only that the teaching of Jesus (Matthew 5:27–28) is continuous with that of the Law (Exodus 20:14), but that the Law's original purpose was to 'anticipate' Christ's 'closely connected' saying (Clement 1991: 300). The dynamic between the commands of the old and new covenants is not just retroactive, then, with the teaching of Jesus reappropriating or imposing new meaning upon the earlier text; rather, the Law itself has an anticipatory character that reaches fulfillment in the later teaching. This forward-looking dimension is ignored by those who, like Clement's Gnostic opponents, lack the appropriate frame of reference for situating the texts in their proper relation.

In addition to Christ, the apostle Paul provides Clement with a second exemplar. In the same context in Book III, for instance, Clement notes that 'the Apostle preaches the same God whether through the Law, the prophets, or the gospel' (Clement 1991: 302). Clement observes that in Romans 7:17 Paul attributes to 'the Law' the commandment 'You shall not lust [*ouk epithymēseis*],' even though this precise injunction does not appear in the Decalogue. But a more closely matching expression is found in the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus prohibits lust in the heart (Matthew 5:27). This, Clement believes, explains how Paul can make his claim, 'in the knowledge that it is one single person who makes his decrees through the Law and the prophets, and is the subject of the gospel's proclamation.' An assumption of the common divine authorship shared by the Law and the Gospel once again drives the reading. As Clement observes in another case, it is characteristic of Paul in all his writings to 'preserve the connection between the Law and the Gospel' (Clement 1991: 310).

Many more examples could be adduced, but this brief sampling illustrates that Clement understood himself to be modeling his own parallel reading of the Old and New Testaments upon a divinely inspired framework discerned within the scriptural canon itself in the approaches of Jesus and the apostles. This framework regarded the writings of the Old Testament as propaedeutic and proleptic, looking forward to, and setting the stage for, the final, climactic revelation of the Logos, who was already acting in the divine economy and speaking through the scriptural texts of the Law and the Prophets during the era of their composition. This intertestamental 'concord

and harmony' centers around Christ, who, through his apostles, handed it down to the churches in the form of the 'ecclesiastical rule.'

### **Case Study: Clement's Readings of the Law**

The remainder of this essay will move beyond Clement's theoretical statements about interpretive 'concord and harmony' to examine one particular manifestation of it, in his reading of the Mosaic Law. We will begin with a few of Clement's statements about the nature of the Law in general, and especially his programmatic description of its three aspects. Then, we will observe some passages in the *Stromateis* where he makes use of these categories in his own exegesis. In each case we will observe how Clement's underlying assumptions regarding the harmonious and mutually involved relationship between the Old and New Testaments, rooted in the church's rule of faith, inform and direct his readings. As a frame of reference, they drive Clement to interpret the Law in parallel to the New Testament by identifying symbols, precepts, and prophecies which require the completion of a christological referent.

Clement's point of departure for discussing the Law in general in Book I is the Pauline description of it as a pedagogue (*paidagōsos*) 'escorting us to Christ' (Galatians 3:24). This establishes for Clement the foundational principle of its teleological nature, which 'leads us toward the divine' and 'leads to blessedness' (Clement 1991: 146). In a sort of *apologia* for the Law's goodness, prompted by Gnostic and Marcionite criticisms which 'run down the Law as less than excellent,' Clement contextualizes the Law within the unfolding educational program of the divine Logos who speaks through it. 'The Law cares for its subjects,' he explains; 'it educates them in reverence for God; it tells them what they ought not do; it keeps them from offences' (Clement 1991: 149). Clement argues that the Law's prohibitions, threats, and penalties actually serve to bring about 'the greatest, most fulfilling blessing of all...to turn a person from wrongdoing to virtue and good deeds' (Clement 1991: 149–150). From this perspective, it is seen to terminate not with itself, but with advancement to higher stages in the knowledge of God. It enables the one who heeds its commands, in 'moving higher, to be enrolled among the sons.' And such spiritual ascent is possible, Clement concludes, because 'the Law and the Gospel are the work of a single Lord who is 'the power and wisdom of God' (Clement 1991: 151).

In Book II, Clement builds further upon these foundational statements about the Law's educational and anticipatory character, affirming the unity of the testaments as 'one in power, Old and New, being presented by the one and only God through his Son' (Clement 1991: 178). But as he later explains, only those who discern the Law's true purposes can expect to benefit from its advantages. The Jews, for example, 'had no faith in the prophetic power of the Law' as they 'followed the bare letter, not the inner meaning,' and thus failed to discern the 'Christ who is

prophesied by the Law' (Clement 1991: 187). Christians, however — and especially, the true Christian Gnostics that Clement aims to produce — rightly progress along this upward trajectory in their approach to the Law, allowing it to restrain and reveal sin through its commandments, appropriately fearing the judgments that it threatens, and realizing their need for the deeper perfections which are attainable only through faith in Christ, its true *telos*.

How, specifically, does Christian Gnostic perform such readings? Returning to the end of Book I, where we left off above, we find that Clement suggests the way in *Stromateis* I.28.179.3, another key text for our purposes. There are three modes, he explains, by which the Law communicates: 'it may show a symbol [*sēmeion*]; it may lay down a precept [*entolēn*] for right conduct; it may pronounce a prophecy' (Clement 1991: 153). It is incumbent upon the skillful interpreter 'to make these distinctions and expound them,' so as 'to hunt down the whole process of God's teaching' (Clement 1991: 153). What is noteworthy here is the propaedeutic, or anticipatory, character of each mode, featuring an element that expects, or rather demands, a complement, without which it stands incomplete. A symbol requires a referent; a precept requires a goal or outcome or, we might say, a *telos*; and a prophecy requires a fulfillment. In other words, texts of the Law must be read in parallel with other texts that reveal these ultimate referents. Clement's framework is once again thoroughly Pauline, appealing to the motif of mystery preceding revelation (Ephesians 3:3–4; Colossians 1:26–27). And as we have already seen, Clement believes that recognition of this necessary interplay between the anticipatory texts of the Old Testament and the revelatory texts of the New Testament (that is, the move to read them in parallel) is made possible only through consistent adherence to the 'ecclesiastical rule,' which asserts their common origin and subject matter and thus perceives their true 'concord and harmony.'

In what follows I will briefly examine Clement's engagement with these three modes (symbol, precept, and prophecy) in his actual interpretations of the Law, focusing especially on cases which illustrate this overarching commitment to 'reading in parallel,' or situating texts within a frame of reference (the church's rule of faith) that highlights their anticipatory nature and ultimate christological referent.

### ***Law as Symbol***

First, Clement says, the Law may 'show a symbol' (*sēmeion emphainousan*). Book V provides an extended discussion of symbolic exegesis, followed by an example of it, in Clement's reading of the Tabernacle and its rituals (Exodus 25–28; Leviticus 17). Notably, he begins by reminding his readers of the 'gnostic rule,' which includes faith in the Son ('that He is the Son, and that He came, and how, and for what, and respect-

ing His passion; and we must know who is the Son of God'), the Father ('that we may believe in the Son, we must know the Father, with whom also is the Son'), and the Spirit ('faith has reference to the Son, and knowledge to the Spirit') (Clement 1913: 444) True faith, Clement insists, progresses toward knowledge in keeping with this 'gnostic rule,' through 'the agreement and harmony of the faith.' Significantly, this pairing of terms (*hē synōdia kai hē symphōnia*) is precisely the same as we observed in the key assertion of *Stromateis* 6.15, that 'the ecclesiastical rule is the concord and harmony [*hē synōdia kai hē symphōnia*] of the law and the prophets in the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord.' It is no coincidence that they reappear here at the outset of Clement's discussion of proper reading of the Law's symbols, contrasted with the 'discordant and disordered [*ekmeles de kai atakton*]' approach of those who 'stand outside the choir' (that is, the heretics who stand outside the church by rejecting its rule of faith). (Clement 1913: 449)

The return to musical imagery is striking as Clement argues that Scripture's use of concealment, or symbolic speech, ensures that only readers with the proper virtues (faith, hope, and love) perceive its true meaning. Its mode of speaking may be veiled, not only in its obviously prophetic portions, but in all its parts: 'Expressly then respecting all our Scripture, as if spoken in a parable, it is written in the Psalms, Hear, O My people, My law: incline your ear to the words of My mouth. I will open My mouth in parables, I will utter My problems from the beginning [Psalm 78:1–2]' (Clement 1913: 450).

The mention of the 'law' in this quotation from Psalm 78 provides the transition into Clement's discussion of symbols, culminating in his interpretation of three symbolic passages from the Law in *Stromateis* V.6. In his complex and sometimes bewildering reading, Clement allegorizes the descriptions of the tabernacle and its furnishings (Exodus 25–27), the garments of the high priest (Exodus 28), and the high priest's entry to the Most Holy Place in the Day of Atonement ritual (Leviticus 16). As Judith Kovacs observes, his interpretation is deeply expressive of the recurring theme of harmony, as it, 'in addition to providing an example of how Scripture conceals deeper meaning, provides an indirect answer to Valentinian criticism of the psychics by showing how *πίστις* and *γνώσις*, Father and Son, incarnation and mystical contemplation, form a unity' (Kovacs 1997: 419). Rather than an arbitrary flight of fancy, then, Clement's spiritual reading of these texts is constrained and even impelled by an anti-heretical concern for the rule of faith, as a frame of reference which maintains the unity of the Father and the Son in the one God revealed consistently across the Old and New Testaments.

This explains why there is, as Kovacs also notes, a distinctly trinitarian and christological character to many of the associations that Clement draws from these ac-

counts, as ‘the symbolic interpretations of the furnishings of the holy or intermediate place relate them to fundamental points of the church’s creed’ (Kovacs 1997: 422). He finds, for example, in the tabernacle’s three divisions (the outer courtyard, the Holy Place, and the Holy of Holies) a representation of the three domains of paganism, common faith, and advanced gnosis, and the progression from paganism to faith that requires catechetical instruction in the rule of faith centered around the mysteries of Christ. These are the focal point of the covenants (the pillars) which structure the divine economy and ‘the faith of the church’ (Kovacs 1997: 422–423). Even the garments of the high priest are construed as the *oikonomia* of the incarnate Christ, with every detail, down to the robe’s 360 bells, indicating ‘the stupendous manifestation of the Savior’ (Clement 1913: 453).

What is most important for our purpose is not the particulars or even the persuasiveness of Clement’s symbolic interpretations, but the christological orientation and referent that he understands these texts to demand. As he explains about the twelve stones on the high priest’s breastplate, ‘It was otherwise requisite that the law and the prophets should be placed beneath the Lord’s head, because in both Testaments mention is made of the righteous. For were we to say that the apostles were at once prophets and righteous, we should say well, ‘since one and the self-same Holy Spirit works in all’ (Clement 1913: 453). Applying Paul’s words (1 Corinthians 12:11) about the Spirit’s bestowal of gifts to the writings of both Testaments, Clement grounds his christological reading of the Mosaic Law in a theological conviction about the unity of all Scripture, owing to its common divine authorship by the same inspiring Spirit. Symbolic interpretation not only recognizes this referential character, but possesses the proper key to unlocking it, ‘for only to those who often approach them, and have given them a trial by faith and in their whole life, will [the Scriptures] supply the real philosophy and the true theology’ (Clement 1913: 457). Sound interpreters approach the Old Testament in search of ‘him who was proclaimed symbolically from the beginning’ (Clement 1913: 457).

### ***Law as Precept***

Second, Clement says that the Law provides precepts, or commands (*entolai*), which are oriented toward a particular goal, outcome, or *telos*—specifically, that of ‘right conduct [*politeian orthēn*];’ or perhaps better translated, a ‘proper way of life.’ In *Stromateis* III.6.46.2 he explains in similar terms that the law’s overarching end (*telos*) is to cultivate a distinctively Christian ‘upright way of life [*orthēs politeias*].’ (Clement 1991: 284). Like its symbols, then, the Law’s commands have a propaedeutic character, anticipating a state of fulfillment and flourishing made possible only with the arrival of Christ. In the earlier work of the *Paidogogos*, which focuses on the Logos’s

moral formation of new converts as the ‘Educator,’ Clement had expounded upon the literal meaning of the laws, but also hinted at a deeper meaning which awaits more advanced students:

The things we should be on our guard against at home, and how we are to preserve our lives upright, the Educator has shown us in abundant detail. The things that are dear to him to discourse about along the way until he lead us to the Teacher, these, too, he has suggested and proposed by way of a general summary right in the Scriptures; he gives his commands (*parangelias*) plainly, adapting them to the time of guidance, but entrusting the interpretation of them to the Teacher. (Clement 1954: 265)

In the *Stromateis*, then, Clement makes good on this latter promise, and demonstrates how the Logos, now in his capacity as ‘the Teacher,’ reveals deeper truths through the precepts of the Law. A statement in *Strom.* V about one of the dietary laws may illustrate:

It is, then, proper that the Barbarian philosophy, on which it is our business to speak, should prophesy also obscurely and by symbols, as was evinced. Such are the injunctions of Moses: ‘These common things, the sow, the hawk, the eagle, and the raven are not to be eaten.’ (Clement 1913: 456)

Clement proceeds to relate the dietary regulations about these various animals to particular vices. This is followed by his interpretation of another precept — one regulating the eating of animals that part the hoof and chew the cud — with the help of a quotation from the *Epistle of Barnabas*: ‘But whence could they understand or comprehend these things? We who have rightly understood speak the commandments (*entolas*) as the Lord wished; wherefore he circumcised our ears and hearts, that we may comprehend these things’ (Clement 1913: 456).

For Clement, then, a precept points beyond its immediate or literal sense to a spiritual state defined in relation to Christ (in the latter example, the ‘circumcision’ of the heart that enables true understanding). This is in keeping with a divine authorial intent (‘as the Lord wished’) which has always been present, though concealed, like the meaning of symbols, from interpreters who lack the proper frame of reference. Such precepts provide ‘a preliminary education in the acquisition of continence, starting from the use of animals...’ (Clement 1991: 227) And continuous training in the way of life that they hold out (discerned only with the proper frame of reference) draws one gradually closer to the intended *telos* of true human flourishing, or blessedness. ‘Through the commandments we have a demonstration of the blessed life’ (Clement 1991: 281).

The premier example of this approach to the precepts is Clement’s interpretation of the Decalogue in *Stromateis* VI.16, where he offers an exemplary ‘specimen for

gnostic exposition.’ This reading is not intended for the majority, but for those advancing beyond the foundation of common faith, for ‘the Gnostic alone is able to understand and explain the things spoken by the Spirit obscurely’ (Clement 1913: 507). Its subject matter is not arbitrary, but like all of Scripture speaks ‘of Christ,’ the object of every valid quest for knowledge. ‘The discovery, then, of what is sought respecting God, is the teaching through the Son; and the proof of our Saviour being the very Son of God is the prophecies which preceded his coming, announcing him... For the Son of God is the person of the truth which is exhibited...’ (Clement 1913: 507–508)

If the object is Christ, however, then an accurate conceptualization of him from the outset is paramount, and this conviction is what leads to Clement’s programmatic statement in *Strom.* VI.15.125.3, already examined above, that ‘the ecclesiastical rule is the concord and harmony of the law and the prophets in the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord.’ So we find that Clement prefaces his ‘Gnostic exposition’ of the Decalogue with the key hermeneutical principles we have already reviewed: 1) all Scripture should be interpreted in relation to Christ (‘as the prophecies deliver’); 2) the specific nature of Scripture’s relation to Christ is determined by the church’s rule of faith (‘the rule of truth’ and ‘ecclesiastical rule’ laid down by Christ himself through his apostles); and 3) this rule confesses the single, unified divine economy in which all the divine revelation given through the law and the prophets is understood to anticipate and culminate in the establishment of the new covenant (‘the covenant delivered at the coming of the Lord’). Only the one initiated within the life of the church through confession of this rule—that is, the ‘young catechumen’—possesses this frame of reference; without it, ‘the whole economy which prophesied of the Lord appears indeed a parable to those who know not the truth’ (Clement 1913: 509).

As Robert G. T. Edwards observes, this does not exactly amount to an interpretive ‘method’; rather, it describes the identity—and, I would, add, the key assumptions—that characterize Clement’s ideal interpreter: ‘the question that Clement answers is *who* is the one who may truly interpret Scripture’ (Edwards 2015: 508). Edwards goes so far as to suggest that Clement ‘does not read the commandments as commands at all. Instead, Clement ‘translates’ the commandments from the imperative mood into the indicative’ (Edwards 2015: 520). In his reading of the first commandment, for example, Clement draws the implication ‘That one only is God almighty,’ who is the creator of heaven and earth. And this, Edwards notes, ‘highlights the doctrine of the oneness of God and his purposes,’ rather than focusing on the literal instruction not to make idols (Edwards 2015: 522).

Yet this may overlook Clement’s prior emphasis on the rule of faith, and the way it informs both the fundamental assumptions of the interpreter and the object of interpretation itself. Such an anti—heretical conclusion is precisely what we have been led

to expect from Clement's preceding admonition to interpret in accordance with the church's rule of faith. In this light it is no surprise that one of the meanings Clement proposes for the two tablets is 'the prophecy of the two covenants,' which he suggests refers to the dual nature of the commandments, capable of interpretation according to either the letter or the Spirit, but always in harmonious relation. The same is true of the interpretations given to later commandments, which, as Edwards rightly observes, 'for the most part...disclose the nature of God' (Edwards 2015: 523). The second and third commands are taken to indicate 'the theological distinction between begotten/created and unbegotten/uncreated things; the command to honor father and mother refers to the relation between God and his wisdom, which proceeds (against the Valentinian emanationist view) through the Son; and the prohibitions of adultery, murder, and theft warn against the temptation to abandon, in Clement's crucial words, 'ecclesiastical and true knowledge, and the persuasion concerning God' by asserting false teachings (Edwards 2015: 523–525).

Consistently, then, Clement connects the commandments to central truths which the Christian Gnostic must confess about the nature of God, which are safeguarded by the church's rule of faith. These include that God is one, the Creator of all things, the Father united with the Son who is his Word and wisdom, attested in his incarnation by the divine economy of the unified covenants. Clement also insists that the literal meaning of each commandment invites a comparison with an analogous spiritual reality, centered around the church's rule. As precepts, then, the Law's commandments do indeed continue to command, though not only in the realm of action. For the Christian Gnostic, they help to prescribe belief in essential doctrines as well, and in this way facilitate continued spiritual ascent higher into the blessedness of divine contemplation. As Clement explains in Book I, 'Law does not consist in things done in obedience to law, any more than sight consists in objects seen... Law is a judgment governed by excellence, and that means truth, and that means the discovery and attainment of reality, that which is' (Clement 1991: 146).

### ***Law as Prophecy***

Third, and finally, Clement also asserts in *Stromateis* I.28.179.3 that the Law may 'pronounce a prophecy.' This capacity is further described in Book II, as Clement critiques Jewish readings of the Law, which have 'had no faith in the prophetic power of the Law' and 'followed the bare letter, not the inner meaning; fear not faith' (Clement 1991: 187). These inner meanings are what Clement often terms, following Ephesians 3:3–4, 'mysteries,' (*Stromateis* I.28.179.1), the central truths related to the advent of Christ which are unveiled in the New Testament and described by the church's rule of faith (cf. *Protrepticus* 11; *Paidogogos* II.8.75; *Stromateis* I.1.15.2–3; VI.15.127.5). Their

‘traditioned’ character is emphasized in Clement’s assertion that they ‘were hid till the time of the apostles, and were delivered by them as they received from the Lord, and, concealed in the Old Testament, were manifested to the saints’ (Clement 1913: 459). This is the meaning of Paul’s statement that ‘For everyone who has faith, the end of the Law, leading to righteousness, is Christ’ (Romans 10:4); that is, Clement explains, ‘the Christ who is prophesied by the Law.’ As we have seen elsewhere, so here, it is an apostolic assertion about the Law (that Christ is its *telos*) that grounds Clement’s thinking about its propaedeutic orientation.

In Book IV, Clement more explicitly comments on the way this teleological character demands that texts of the Law be read in parallel with those of the New Testament, and thus as prophetic. ‘For faith in Christ and the knowledge of the Gospel are the explanation and fulfillment of the Law...unless you believe what is prophesied in the law, and oracularly delivered by the Law, you will not understand the Old Testament, which [Christ] by his coming expounded’ (Clement 1913: 434). Clement frequently describes Moses, the author of the Law, as a ‘prophet,’ possessing ‘prophetic gifts’ (Clement 1991: 140; cf. *Stromateis* I.22.150.4; V.10.63.2). In keeping with the principle of Romans 10:4, the object of this prophecy is Christ, for ‘prophecy, in proclaiming the Lord...embodied its declarations in expressions capable of leading to other conceptions’ (Clement 1913: 510). Its purpose is both to reveal and to conceal christological mystery according to the spiritual state of its recipients, for ‘prophecy does not employ figurative forms in the expressions for the sake of beauty of diction. But from the fact that truth appertains not to all, it is veiled in manifold ways, causing the light to arise only on those who are initiated into knowledge...’ Moses, for example, is found ‘prophesying’ of Christ in his promise of a future prophet like himself (Deuteronomy 18:15–18), ‘meaning Jesus [Joshua], son of Nun, but implying Jesus, the Son of God’ through ‘divine inspiration’ (Clement 1954: 55). And the key to understanding comes, once again, from the tradition imparted by Christ to his apostles: ‘Now that the Savior has taught the apostles, the unwritten rendering of the written [Scripture] has been handed down also to us, inscribed by the power of God on hearts new...’ In sum, the rule of faith serves as the frame of reference which brings the prophetic texts of the Law into the proper relation, as testimonies to Christ, that enables their full meaning to be discerned.

Clement’s exposition of the Decalogue, examined above, can also occasionally describe individual features of a prescriptive text (such as the two tablets) as ‘prophecy’ (Clement 1913: 511). More often, though, his tendency is to read the narratives of the Pentateuch, especially the stories of the patriarchs, as ‘prophetic.’ It is true that these readings sometimes show dependence on Philo, as in Clement’s ‘prophetic and allegorical’ accounts of Jacob and Esau, or Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, or Moses and the

tabernacle (Clement 1991: 223). But as Annewies van den Hoek has shown, Clement's use of Philonic material is creative, filtering the borrowed elements through a 'christological focus' which reappropriates them within a scheme of the Christian life as spiritual ascent through union with Christ (Van den Hoek 1988: 227). As one example, while Clement draws upon Philo's reading of the serpent in Eden (Genesis 3) as an 'allegorical' symbol of earthly pleasure, he thoroughly integrates it within the broader christological 'mystery,' in which Christ has 'subdued the serpent, and enslaved the tyrant death' in order to redeem 'man who had erred through pleasure, and was bound by corruption' (Clement 1919: 237, 239). In another case, Clement utilizes Philo's allegory of Isaac and Rebekah as symbols of childlike playfulness joined with submission to signify the 'mystery' of 'merrymaking in Christ, attended with submissiveness' (Clement 1954: 22). Yet he proceeds to develop additional layers of christological interpretation that advance beyond this foundation, in which Isaac becomes a 'type' of Christ himself as the obedient son who bears the wood for his own sacrifice before overcoming death in the end (Clement 1954: 23).

In all cases, then, we find evidence of a consistent assumption that in its prophetic capacity, the Law points forward to realities which can be fully understood only in reference to its *telos*: Christ and his advent, as the climax of the divine economy. And these realities are the central 'mysteries' which comprise the church's rule of faith.

## Conclusion

To conclude, then, we have seen that Clement of Alexandria provides a vivid example of the way that early Christian theological assumptions, and in particular the essential beliefs concerning the Father, Son, and Spirit that comprised the church's rule of faith, formed what we have described as a 'frame of reference' for interpreting scriptural texts in parallel. Within this frame, the texts of the Old and New Testaments are recognized as necessarily related, interdependent, and mutually interpretive, owing to their shared divine authorship (the same inspiring Spirit) and their shared material purpose (testimony to the Son). Viewed in this light, texts of the Old Testament, such as the Pentateuch, in particular, are understood to have a propaedeutic or anticipatory character which demands that they be interpreted in relation to the further revelation of the New Testament.

As a particular case study, we have examined Clement's theoretical description of the Law in its threefold capacity to speak through symbols, precepts, and prophecies, as well as some concrete examples of his use of these concepts in his own scriptural exegesis. In each case, Clement follows what he believes are the precedents of Christ and the apostles themselves, in the tradition they handed down to the churches, by consistently discerning the ultimate referents of these forward-looking features in the central mysteries of the redemptive economy, to which the 'concord and harmo-

ny' of all the prophets and apostles together bear witness like the unified voices of a divinely—conducted choir.

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