

THE EXEGESIS OF SCRIPTURE AND THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

By T. E. POLLARD, B.A., B.D., PH.D.

I

THE last decade has witnessed a sudden revival of interest, particularly among Roman Catholic scholars, in the Patristic exegesis of Scripture. The starting-point of this revival, at least as far as Roman Catholic scholars are concerned, may be traced to the Papal Encyclical, *Divino afflante Spiritu* (1943), which said,

It is indeed regrettable that such precious treasures of Christian antiquity are almost unknown to many writers of the present day, and that students of the history of exegesis have not yet accomplished all that seems necessary for the due investigation and appreciation of so momentous a subject.¹

The revival of interest in Patristic exegesis is concerned not only with the actual interpretation of the Scriptures by the Fathers, but also with the principles of exegesis, either implicit or explicit, which the Fathers employ. Closely allied with this study of exegesis is the problem of the relation between Scripture and Tradition, which has been a bone of contention between the Roman and Reformed Churches since the Reformation, and which has risen again in an acute form in the ecumenical discussions between the Protestant Churches of the West and the Orthodox Churches of the East. Apart from external stimuli, too, the question of the validity of exegetical principles arises within Protestant theology as a result of the revived interest in Biblical Theology. Both these questions—exegetical method and the relation between Scripture and Tradition—played an important part in the Arian and Marcellan controversies in the first half of the fourth century, and it was the theology which was based on the soundest exegetical principles, which understood most clearly the true relation between Scripture and Tradition, and

¹ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 35 (1943), 312 ff.; quoted by A. Kerrigan, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, Introd. p. v.

which sought to take most seriously the theology of the Bible, that was victorious in them and became established as the orthodox theology of the Church.

A later generation witnessed a bitter conflict¹ between the exegetical methods of Antioch and Alexandria. The Antiochene theologians emphasized the literal and typological senses of Scripture and eschewed the allegorical interpretation to which the Alexandrians were addicted. In the Arian and Marcellan controversies, however, this conflict plays no significant or influential part. Arius inherited from Lucian of Antioch a literalistic method of exegesis; Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra, true sons of Antioch, had no interest in allegory—indeed, the former wrote a strong criticism of Origen's allegorical interpretation of 1 Samuel xxviii. 7 in his *de Engastrimytho contra Origenem*; Eusebius of Caesarea, for all his reverence for Origen, concentrated on the literal and typological sense of Scripture;² Athanasius (and the author of the Pseudo-Athanasian *Fourth Oration against the Arians*) inherited from his predecessors in the See of Alexandria, Alexander and Peter the Martyr, an aversion to the allegorical method of interpreting Scripture, at least as a basis for the formulation of doctrine. All of the antagonists in these controversies, then, were primarily interested in the literal interpretation of Scripture, and it was on this ground that the battles were fought. In this paper I am mainly concerned with the exegetical principles which the Arians used, those which Athanasius employed in his refutation of them, and those which Pseudo-Athanasius used in his refutation of Marcellus.

II

1. *The Arians*

From Lucian, their Antiochene teacher, the early Arians

¹ Or was it only a misunderstanding? Cf. J. Guillet, "Les exégèses d'Alexandrie et d'Antioche: conflit ou malentendu?" in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, xxxiv (1947), 257-302. Cf. also H. S. Nash, "The Exegesis of the School of Antioch" in *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, xi (1892), Pt. I, 22-38.

² "Eusebius is led naturally to accept the principle of allegorical exegesis; but his temperament as a historian prevents him from going too far in this sense." (G. Bardy, "Interpretation chez les Pères" in *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, Supp. vol. iv, col. 576 f.).

inherited a method of Biblical criticism and exegesis which they appear to have carried to extremes. We have no direct evidence of the exegetical methods of Lucian, but it is possible to discover something of it from his recension of the Scriptures. As Père G. Bardy says, "Any translation, any recension of a text assumes an interpretation; and even if the details of this interpretation escape us, it is still possible to recover its guiding principles".¹ Bardy goes on to list the following characteristics of the Lucianic recension, and his list agrees with that of H. P. Smith² and that of F. Field:³

In the foremost place there is to be found a very great preoccupation with clarity; Lucian adds to the received text precise terms in order to make the meaning clearer; he replaces pronouns with proper names; he introduces new words to make an obscure passage clear; he fills in blanks in the narrative. Often he seems to wish to approximate more closely to the Hebrew, but such is not, as it was for Origen, his dominating preoccupation. He appears above all to be anxious to give a text which is easy to read and interpret, to erase all ambiguities, all unprecise terms, which could receive a meaning only with the help of allegorical exegesis. Such principles are at the beginning of the literalistic exegesis which was to remain in such high honour in the Antiochene School, and it is without doubt because the Antiochenes recognized in the Lucianic recension the mark of their own spirit that they adopted it in preference to any other.⁴

That the Arians were extreme literalists is borne out by Athanasius's criticism of them. He criticizes them, however, not because they interpret the Scriptures literally, but because they isolate carefully selected texts from their context and interpret them literally without any regard for their context or for the general teaching of Scripture. The Arians claimed that their doctrine was Scriptural and that that of the Nicene Council was not. They continually criticized the Council for introducing terms which could not be found in Scripture—*ὁμοούσιον* and *ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς*. Athanasius, however, turned this argument against them by pointing out that they themselves, for all their claims to be Scriptural, set forth their doctrine in terms which were unscriptural *per se* and unscriptural in the meaning which is given to them. For example, Athanasius asks them:

¹ G. Bardy, *Paul de Samosate*, p. 408.

² *Commentary on Samuel* (ICC), pp. 420 ff.

³ *Origenis Hexapla quae supersunt*, p. lxxx.

⁴ *Paul de Samosate*, p. 408.

In what Scripture did they, on their part, find "unoriginate", and the term "essence", and "there are three hypostases", and "Christ is not very God", and "He is one of the hundred sheep", and "God's Wisdom is unoriginate and without beginning, but the created powers are many, of which Christ is one".¹

He says :

They may be convicted on this score, that, while blaming the Nicene Bishops for using phrases which are not in Scripture, although these are not harmful but are subversive of their irreligion, they themselves went off on the same error, that is, they used words which are not in Scripture.²

The Arians fell into error, just as Noetus and Praxeas had done before them,³ because they were too literal in their interpretation of selected texts isolated from their context and interpreted, not in the light of the whole teaching of the Bible, but in the light of their own extra-biblical presuppositions.

2. *The Tropici*

Before passing on to discuss the exegetical method which Athanasius opposed to the "selective literalism" of the Arians, a few words must be said about the question of the "tropical exegesis" which Athanasius attacks in his letters to Serapion. The *Tropici* were orthodox in their view of the relation of the Son to the Father, but they adopted an Arian view of the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Son and the Father; they held that the Spirit is a creature. Athanasius accuses them of "trope-mongering", of using *τροποί* in their interpretation of the Scriptures.⁴ Usually *τροπός* means "a figurative expression" in this connection, but it is difficult to see in what way the *Tropici* used figurative expressions any more than their opponents did. Athanasius's criticism of their exegesis makes it plain that it was of exactly the same kind as that of the Arians. They selected isolated passages of Scripture, interpreted them literally without any regard to the context, and drew from their literal

¹ *de Synodis*, 36 (PG, xxvi, 757); cf. *ad Epp. Aeg.*, 3; 4; *de Decretis*, 12; 15; 18; 28; 32; *ad Afros*, 6.

² *Or. c. Ar.* i, 30 (PG, xxvi, 73).

³ Cf. Hippolytus, *contra Noetum*, 3; Tertullian, *adv. Praxean*, 20; Novatian, *de Trinitate*, 16.

⁴ *Ep. ad Serapionem*, i. 2 (PG, xxvi, 532); cf. C. R. B. Shapland, *The Letters of Athanasius concerning the Holy Spirit*, p. 62.

interpretations conclusions which were contrary to the teaching of Scripture as a whole.

Athanasius makes a detailed examination of their exegesis of three texts—Amos iv. 13, 1 Timothy v. 21, and Zechariah i. 9—from which they drew the conclusion that the Spirit is a creature. According to him they interpreted 1 Timothy v. 21 thus :

The *Tropici* . . . have dared to devise for themselves *tropes* and to pervert also the saying of the Apostle which he blamelessly wrote to Timothy, saying, ‘ I charge thee in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels that thou observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing by partiality ’. But they say that, because he mentions God and Christ and then the angels, the Spirit must be counted with the angels and Himself belong to their category and be an angel greater than the others.¹

Commenting on this passage, Shapland remarks that “ it is difficult to see in what sense Athanasius could describe the inference drawn by the *Tropici* from this verse as a trope. The term can mean no more than that they refused to be satisfied with the bare sense of Scripture, but drew speculative conclusions from it.”²

Similarly it is difficult to see in what sense their exegesis of Amos iv. 13, “ I am he that establisheth thunder and createth spirit ”, from which they drew the conclusion that the Spirit is a creature, can be called a trope. Their exegetical method is identical with that which the Arians used : they draw speculative conclusions from a few isolated verses of Scripture and ignore the context of the verses and the witness of Scripture as a whole. Against this subjective and individualistic method of exegesis, Athanasius lays down clearly formulated rules for the correct interpretation of Scripture.

III

Athanasius and Pseudo-Athanasius ³

In his early ante-Nicene writings, *contra Gentes* and *de*

¹ *Ep. ad Serap.* i, 10 (PG, xxvi. 556) ; tr. Shapland, op. cit. p. 56.

² Loc. cit. note 10.

³ I am not entirely convinced that the *Fourth Oration against the Arians* is pseudonymous. In any case, its thought is so close to that of the writings of Athanasius that some connection between its author and Athanasius must be assumed.

Incarnatione Verbi Dei, Athanasius shows that he has not completely broken away from the old Alexandrian tradition of allegorical exegesis,¹ but its influence is slight and insignificant. In his later writings in refutation of Arianism he concentrates his attention on the literal meaning of Scripture. It may be true that, as Shapland says, "Athanasius does not question its legitimacy",² but the pressure of the controversy made him avoid allegorical interpretations. He was not a professional exegete, but he looks to the Bible for proof of the falseness of the teachings of the Arians. His starting-point in all his arguments against them is the word of Scripture itself, which he interprets according to clearly defined exegetical principles. The same principles are emphasized by the author of the *Fourth Oration against the Arians* in his criticism of both the teachings of the Arians and those of Marcellus of Ancyra.

(i) The first principle which Athanasius emphasizes is *the sufficiency of Scripture*. In the opening paragraph of his earliest treatise he asserts that "the sacred and divine Scriptures are sufficient to declare the truth",³ and he apologizes to his readers for writing on a subject about which Scripture has already said sufficient. Throughout his writings he emphasizes this same principle. "Holy Scripture is of all things most sufficient for us."⁴ "Divine Scripture is sufficient above all things."⁵ He was always ready, as Keble said,⁶ "to commit his cause to the witness of Scripture, and to follow the voice of Scripture wherever it should lead him". He attempts to refute his opponents by no rationalistic or speculative arguments, but solely on the basis of "what the divine Scriptures say". Often he challenges the Arians to produce the passage from Scripture which supports their teaching on some point, and then proceeds to show how they are involved in self-contradiction. He sets over against their teaching words of Scripture which are contrary to their opinions, frequently being content to cite a *florilegium* of texts which contradict a proposition which the Arians have supported by a single isolated text.

¹ Cf. *contra Gentes*, 2 f. (PG, xxv. 5-9) and *de Inc.*, 35 (PG. xxv, 156 f.)

² Op. cit. p. 77, note 2.

³ *c. Gent.* 1 (PG. xxv. 4 f.).

⁴ *ad Epp. Aeg.*, 4 (PG. xxv. 548).

⁵ *de Synodis*, 6 (PG. xxvi. 689).

⁶ Quoted by W. Bright, *The Age of the Fathers*, i. 87.

Athanasius's emphasis on the sufficiency of Scripture, however, raises the question of the place of tradition and its relation to Scripture. In the Western Church the *regula fidei* was a limiting factor in the exegesis of Scripture,¹ but the same does not appear to have been the case, at least to the same extent, in the Eastern Church. Against the Gnostic claim to a secret tradition, Clement of Alexandria set, not the *regula fidei* of the Church, but the true secret tradition, the *γνωστικὴ παράδοσις*, which he claims to have received from his teachers.² Athanasius seldom appeals to tradition in his refutation of the Arians and the Tropici; when he does appeal to it, however, it is usually in close relation to the appeal to Scripture. In his letter *ad Adelphium*, for example, he says,

Our faith is right, and starts from the teaching of the Apostles and tradition of the Fathers, being confirmed both by the New Testament and by the Old.³

In the same passage he introduces a quotation of 1 Peter iv. 1 with the words, "while the apostolic tradition teaches in the words of the blessed Peter".⁴ In his first letter to Serapion he writes :

Let us look at the very tradition, teaching and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, which the Lord gave, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers kept. Upon this the Church is founded, and he who should fall away from it would not be a Christian, and should no longer be so-called. There is, then, a Triad, holy and complete, confessed to be God in Father, Son and Holy Spirit. . . . Less than these the Catholic Church does not hold lest she sink to the level of the modern Jews, imitators of Caiaphas, and to the level of Sabellius. Nor does she add to them by speculation, lest she be carried into the polytheism of the heathen. And that they may know this to be the faith of the Church, let them learn how the Lord, when sending forth the Apostles, ordered them to lay this foundation for the Church, saying, "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit". The Apostles went and taught thus; and this is the preaching that extends to the whole Church which is under heaven.⁵

In this passage Athanasius equates *tradition* (*παράδοσις*), *teaching* (*διδασκαλία*), *faith* (*πίστις*), and *preaching* (*κήρυγμα*).

¹ Cf. Tertullian, *de Praescriptione*, 14.

² *Stromateis*, i. 1, 15 (GCS. ii. 11, line 19); on the concept of tradition in the Church of Alexandria, cf. R. P. C. Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition*.

³ *ad Adelphium*, 6 (PG, xxvi, 1080).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ep. ad Serap.* i. 28 (PG. xxvi. 593 f.).

In the passage already quoted from *ad Adelphium* 6 he equates παράδοσις and διδασκαλία, while in *de Decretis*, describing the conduct of Eusebius of Caesarea at the Council of Nicaea, he equates παράδοσις and πίστις :

What is strange indeed, Eusebius of Caesarea in Palestine, who had refused the day before, but afterwards subscribed, sent to his Church a letter in which he said that this was the Church's faith and the tradition of the Fathers.¹

The teaching and faith of the Church are "traditioned" to it from Christ Himself through the Apostles and the Fathers;² it is "the sound faith which Christ bestowed upon us, the Apostles preached, and the Fathers at Nicaea . . . have handed down".³

It is important to ask to what exactly Athanasius is appealing in these passages. In *ad Adelphium* 6 and *Ep. ad Serapionem* i, 28, he makes it plain that when he is appealing to tradition he is not appealing to something which is independent of Scripture or supplementary to it. In *Ep. ad Serapionem* i, 28 "neither is he appealing to the authority of the earlier Fathers. . . . The real direction of Athanasius's appeal is to be understood from the citation of the Baptismal formula later on. It is of the faith as delivered, expounded and confessed in baptism that he is thinking".⁴ Tradition is not a source of doctrine apart from or supplementary to Scripture; it is rather the πίστις, διδασκαλία and κήρυγμα which have been handed down through the ages from the Lord Himself and the Apostles. For Athanasius, then, tradition, the *regula fidei*, is a summary of the teaching of Christ and of the preaching of the Apostles, a summary used from very early times in the instruction of catechumens and based on the Baptismal formula of Matthew xxviii. 19. As such it is also a summary of the message of the New Testament which is the precipitate of the Apostolic preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Robertson says that "tradition with Athanasius is a formal, not a material source of doctrine".⁵ Previously he has said

¹ *de Decr.* 3 (PG. xxv. 430 f.); note that columns 425-56 in PG. xxv. should be numbered 417-48.

² Cf. *Apol. c. Ar.*, 37 (PG. xxv. 312 f.).

³ *ad Afros*, 1 (PG. xxvi. 1029).

⁴ Shapland, *op. cit.* p. 134.

⁵ *Athanasius (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, 2nd Series, vol. iv)*, Introd. p. lxxiv.

that Athanasius recognizes tradition as authoritative in two ways: “negatively, in the sense that doctrines which are novel are *prima facie* condemned by the very fact; and positively, as furnishing a guide to the sense of Scripture”. If tradition with Athanasius is only a “formal” source of doctrine, it is difficult to see how it can fulfil either of these two functions. If Robertson means that tradition provides a Trinitarian form for doctrine, then, in doing so, tradition must also be a material source of doctrine. Athanasius, however, goes back to the very beginning of tradition, to what Jesus Himself “gave”, and to the kerygma of the Apostles, to the Baptismal formula which itself provides a tripartite form for the *regula fidei*. For Athanasius the authority of tradition is the authority of Scripture, for Scripture and tradition developed side by side, the former being the precipitate of the revelation of God in Christ,¹ and the latter the concentrated essence of that revelation.

Athanasius, then, rarely appeals to tradition, for he knows that all that tradition has to say is said more fully and more sufficiently in Scripture. When he does appeal to tradition it is always in close relation to his appeal to Scripture. The emphasis of Athanasius, the greatest of the defenders of the Church’s faith against heresy, on the sufficiency of Scripture is in itself the refutation of Père van den Eynde’s assertion that “Scripture is insufficient to maintain the faith and to resolve controversial questions . . . it needs to be explained by tradition”.²

(ii) Closely connected with his principle of the sufficiency of Scripture is Athanasius’s appeal to *the scope of Scripture*, and this throws further light on the place which tradition holds in his thought. It is by appeal to the scope of Scripture that he refutes Arian arguments based on literal interpretation of isolated

¹ Cf. E. Fleeseman-van Leer, *Tradition and Scripture in the Early Church*, p. 192.

² *Les normes de l’enseignement chrétien dans la littérature patristique des trois premiers siècles*, p. 280. For a point of view close to that put forward here, cf. the articles by L. Bouyer and H. E. Symonds in the supplementary number of *The Eastern Churches Quarterly*, vol. vii (1947), entitled *Tradition and Scripture*. Symonds says, “It would seem therefore that the sufficiency of Scripture as containing all necessary doctrine is taught by the *consensus patrum*” (p. 70).

verses of Scripture. No doctrine, he argues, can be based on an isolated verse of Scripture unless it is in harmony with the general teaching of the whole of Scripture. In a key passage in the *Third Oration against the Arians*, Athanasius connects tradition with Scripture by equating *the scope of tradition* with *the scope of Scripture*. He says :

What has been briefly said above may suffice to show their misunderstanding of the passages which they then alleged ; and that they certainly give an unsound interpretation of what they now allege from the Gospels we may easily see, if we consider the scope (σκοπός) of that faith which we Christians hold, and, using it as a rule (κάνων), apply ourselves, as the Apostle teaches, to the reading of inspired Scripture. For Christ's enemies, being ignorant of this scope, have wandered from the way of truth, and have stumbled on a stone of stumbling, thinking otherwise than they should think. Now the scope and character of Holy Scripture is this : it contains a double account of the Saviour, that He was ever God, and is the Son, being the Father's Logos and Radiance and Wisdom, and that afterwards for us He took flesh from a Virgin, Mary Bearer of God, and was made man. And this scope is to be found throughout inspired Scripture.¹

From the first part of this passage it appears that Athanasius is laying down the principle that the *regula fidei* is to be used as a rule (κάνων) for the interpretation of Scripture ; to conclude from that, however, that he is contradicting his own principle of the sufficiency of Scripture, would be a mistake. To discover the whole of his meaning it is necessary to ask what he means by the word σκοπός, and by the phrases " the scope of that faith which we Christians hold " and " the scope and character of Holy Scripture ".

Transliteration of the word σκοπός as " scope " does not convey the meaning of the word for Athanasius, nor is the meaning conveyed by such translations as " intention ", " end " or " purpose ". Athanasius's meaning can be conveyed only by some phrase such as " the general bearing or drift ".² The " scope of faith " is " the general drift of faith ", and so also with the " scope of Scripture ".

¹ *Or. c. Ar. iii.* 28-29 (PG. xxvi. 384 f.).

² Newman, in Robertson, *Athanasius*, p. 409, note 8. The Reformers also appealed frequently to the scope of Scripture ; cf. G. D. Henderson, *Religious Life in 17th Century Scotland*, p. 21 : " We find the word employed explicitly by Dickson, Durham, Hutcheson, Ferguson, and Nisbet. The idea was applied by Luther, and from him by Matthias Flaccius. . . . It means ' corpus ipsum ', the intention, end or purpose of what the author has written."

In another passage in the *Third Oration*, Athanasius speaks of "the ecclesiastical scope":

Had Christ's enemies . . . recognized the ecclesiastical scope as an anchor for the faith, they would not have made shipwreck of the faith.¹

Under this phrase "ecclesiastical scope" "he comprehends the meaning and aim of the *οἰκονομία*, i.e. of the Incarnation as a means towards the reconciliation and reunion of God and man, till then estranged by sin".² This "ecclesiastical scope" is the scope both of that faith which we Christians hold and of inspired Scripture. Athanasius does not define "the scope of faith", but he says that "the scope of Scripture" is that it contains a double account of the Saviour, as both God and man, and it is this "scope of Scripture" that he uses as a rule (*κάνων*) for interpreting Scripture. It is evident that he considers the "scope of faith" and the "scope of Scripture" to be identical; the whole passage bears witness to the close connection between the two in his thought. The ecclesiastical scope, which is at once the scope of faith and the scope of Scripture, must be used as the "rule" for the interpretation of Scripture. By appealing to this scope Athanasius is simply asserting the principle that Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture, the part in the light of the whole. He would have agreed with a much later statement:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself; and, therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.³

When he appeals to the scope of Scripture, Athanasius is appealing to the witness of Scripture as a whole over against what might be deduced from any single isolated passage or verse. His method of arguing against the Arians is frequently as follows: the passage to which the Arians refer appears to say what they think it does, but when we read it in the light of the general drift of the teaching of Scripture, or in the light of all the other passages which refer to the same subject, their interpretation

¹ *Or. c. Ar. iii. 58* (PG. xxvi. 440).

² L. Bouyer, "Holy Scripture and Tradition as seen by the Fathers", in *Eastern Churches Quarterly*, vii (1947), Supp., pp. 3 f.

³ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, ch. i, ix.

is manifestly false. For example, the Arians argue : “ How can the Son be from the Father by nature, and be like Him in essence, who says, ‘ All power is given unto me ’ (Matt. xxviii. 18), and ‘ The Father judgeth no man, but hath committed all judgment unto the Son ’ (John v. 22), and ‘ The Father loveth the Son and hath given all things into His hand ’ (John iii. 35), and so on? ”¹ Athanasius replies that the Arians are ignoring the scope of Scripture which speaks of Christ in two ways, referring either to His eternal being as Son of God, or to His incarnate being as Son of Mary ; any passages which refer to the Son’s being created, or made, or to His receiving from the Father, refer to Him as incarnate ; therefore we cannot deduce from them that the Son, in His eternal being, is a creature. That is, we must take into account the scope of Scripture before we draw doctrinal conclusions from any isolated passage.

(iii) Along with this appeal to the scope of Scripture, Athanasius also frequently appeals to *the custom with Scripture* (ἔθος τῆ γραφῆ), as, for example, in the following passages :

It is the custom with divine Scripture to take the things of nature as images and illustrations for mankind ; and this it does in order that from these physical objects the moral impulses of man may be explained, and thus their conduct shown to be either bad or righteous.²

And again

It is the custom with Scripture to call man by the name of “ flesh ”.³

Similarly Pseudo-Athanasius says :

It is the custom with Scripture to speak and signify in the way of man what is above man. . . . Suitable then is its language about everything.⁴

and

This is the custom with Scripture, to express itself in unartificial phrases.⁵

When he appeals to “ the custom with Scripture ”, Athanasius is applying to the language of Scripture the same principle as he applies to the teaching of Scripture when he appeals to the scope of Scripture. In other words, both in its thought and in its language Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture.

It must be remembered that for Athanasius the Old Testament was the Septuagint, and that in his arguments from “ the custom

¹ *Or. c. Ar.* iii. 26 (*PG.* xxvi. 377).

³ *Ibid.* iii. 30 (*PG.* xxvi. 383).

⁵ *Ibid.* iv. 33 (*PG.* xxvi. 517).

² *Ibid.* iii. 18 (*PG.* xxvi. 360 f.).

⁴ *Ibid.* iv. 27 (*PG.* xxvi. 509).

with Scripture ” he could draw on the usage of the same Greek word in both Testaments. The best example among many is to be found in his criticism of the “ tropical ” exegesis of Amos iv. 13, by which the Tropici proved that the Holy Spirit is a creature. They read there that God said, “ I am he that establisheth thunder and createth spirit ”; therefore, they said, the Spirit is a creature. In reply, Athanasius asks them :

Tell us, then, is there any passage in the divine Scripture where the Holy Spirit is found simply referred to as “ spirit ” without the addition of “ of God ”, or “ of the Father ”, or “ my ”, or “ of Christ ” Himself, or “ of the Son ”, or “ from me ” (i.e. “ from God ”), or with the article, so that He is called not simply “ spirit ” but “ the Spirit ”, or the very term “ Holy Spirit ”, or “ Paraclete ”, or “ of Truth ” (i.e. of the Son who says “ I am the Truth ”)—that, just because you have heard the word “ spirit ”, you take it to be the Holy Spirit? . . . To sum up, unless the article is present or the above-mentioned addition, it cannot refer to the Holy Spirit.¹

Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture, the teaching of the part in the light of the general drift of the teaching of the whole, and the language of any particular verse in the light of the custom of Scripture’s language.

(iv) Another principle connected with the scope and custom of Scripture is the appeal to *the sense of Scripture* (διάνοια). Discussing Proverbs viii. 22, Athanasius argues that Scripture says that the Son or the Logos is created only when it refers to a purpose, namely the salvation of men, i.e. in relation to the Incarnation. “ The works ” for which the Son (= Logos = Wisdom) was created (= became incarnate) were “ to give a witness . . . and for our sakes to undergo death, to raise man up and to destroy the works of the devil ”. He goes on to enumerate passages from the New Testament which demonstrate the soteriological purpose of the Incarnation, and continues :

Not for Himself, then, but for our salvation, and to abolish death, and to condemn sin, and to give sight to the blind, and to raise up all from the dead, has He come ; but if not for Himself, but for us, consequently it is not for Himself, but for us, that He is created. But if it is not for Himself, but for us, that He is created, then He is not a creature Himself, but He uses such language as having put on our flesh. And that this is the sense of the Scriptures (ταύτην τὴν διάνοιαν ἔχουσιν αἱ γραφαί), we may learn from the Apostle, who says in Ephesians (ii. 14 f.), “ Having broken down the middle wall of partition between

¹ *Ep. ad Serap.* i. 4 (PG. xxvi. 536 f.).

us, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances, to create in Himself of the two one new man, so making peace".¹

“The sense of Scripture”, then, is but another name for “the custom of Scripture”.

(v) There is also one passage where Athanasius appeals to *the style of Scripture*, a principle which is another variation of the appeal to the custom of Scripture. Athanasius points out that Scripture often speaks of sons as servants without denying their true nature as sons; so too Scripture speaks of the Son as created without denying His true nature as Son. He says:

Perhaps they grant that the word “servant” (Phil. ii. 6) is used under a certain understanding, but lay stress upon “who made” (Heb. iii. 2) as a great support for their heresy. But this prop of theirs is but a broken reed; for if they are aware of the style of Scripture, they must at once give sentence against themselves.²

All of these principles of exegesis may be subsumed under the general principle that Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture, the part by the whole, the lesser known by the better known.

(vi) Finally, Athanasius emphasizes the necessity of paying attention to *the context of Scripture*. Issuing a warning against taking proverbial sayings literally, Athanasius says that “we must not expound them nakedly in their first sense, but we must inquire into the person, and thus religiously put the sense on it”;³ that is, attention must be given to the context. This principle becomes clear in the following passages:

Now it is right and necessary, as in all divine Scripture, so here (Heb. i. 4), faithfully to expound the time of which the Apostle wrote, and the person (*πρόσωπον*), and the point, lest the reader, missing either of these or any similar particular, may be wide of the true meaning. . . . When one has a proper understanding of these points, his comprehension of the faith is right and healthy; but if he mistakes any such points, forthwith he falls into heresy.⁴

A little later, having pointed out the kind of error that can creep in if we do not attend to the context, he says:

Such has been the state of mind under which Christ’s enemies have fallen into their execrable heresy. For had they known the person and the subject

¹ *Or. c. Ar.* ii. 55 (PG. xxvi. 261 f.).

³ *Ibid.* ii. 44 (PG. xxvi. 240).

² *Ibid.* ii. 4 (PG. xxvi. 153).

⁴ *Ibid.* i. 54 (PG. xxvi. 124 f.).

and the season of the Apostle's words (Heb. i. 4), they would not have expounded of Christ's divinity what belongs to His humanity, nor in their folly committed so great an act of irreligion.¹

Discussing Proverbs viii. 22 as referring to the Incarnate Lord, he writes :

Any one may find this sense duly given in the divine oracles, who, instead of accounting the study of them a secondary matter, investigates the time and characters and the object, and thus studies and ponders what he reads.²

Again, discussing Hebrew iii. 2, having argued from the scope of Scripture, he says :

Since the meaning (*διάνοια*) of the context is orthodox, showing the time and the relation to which this expression points, I ought to show from it also how the heretics lack reason ; namely by considering, as we have done above, the occasion when it was used and for what purpose.³

These passages need no explanation. Athanasius asserts quite plainly that a right interpretation of any passage of Scripture must take into account the context of the passage.

IV

By laying down these principles of exegesis and by using them with care in his criticism of the selective exegesis of the Arians, Athanasius was able to expose the unscriptural nature of Arian doctrine. Parallel with his criticism of the heretics is his own development of the orthodox doctrine of the Son (and of the Holy Spirit), a doctrine which is based firmly on a sound interpretation of Scripture.

In his first letter to Serapion, Athanasius compares the interpreter of Scripture with a good banker counting his money :

Let us look one by one at the references to the Holy Spirit in the divine Scripture, and, like good bankers, let us judge whether he has anything in common with the creatures, or whether He pertains to God.⁴

That is Athanasius's own method, and it proved effective in the defence of the Biblical doctrine of the Son and the Holy Spirit against the speculations of the Arians and the Tropici which they supported by a selective exegesis of Scripture.

Using a different metaphor, at the beginning of his *Orations against the Arians* he says :

¹ *Or. c. Ar. i. 55* (PG. xxvi. 125).

³ *Or. c. Ar. ii. 7* (PG. xxvi. 161).

² *de Decr. 14* (PG. xxv. 440).

⁴ *Ep. ad Serap. i. 21* (PG. xxvi. 581).

For behold, we take divine Scripture, and thence discourse with the freedom of religious faith, and set it up as a light upon its candlestick.¹

That is true, not only of the exegesis of Scripture for the formulation of doctrine, but also for the devotional life of the Christian—a fact that is never absent from Athanasius's mind even in the heat of controversy. Towards the end of his life, in his Festal Letter for 367,² having given a list of the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments, he says :

These are the foundations of salvation, that they who thirst may be satisfied with the living words they contain. In these alone is proclaimed the doctrine of godliness.

It was in order to preserve the doctrine of godliness, to ensure that the fountains of salvation should not be choked with false interpretations, that Athanasius fought for so long, often almost alone. For he knew that mankind needed a Saviour who was truly divine as well as truly human, and that the Arian Christ, "the incarnation of what is not God in what is not man"³, was useless for the salvation of mankind and for raising men up in godliness.

Against the Arian doctrine supported by a selective exegesis of the Bible, Athanasius sets forth a Biblical theology which is firmly based on Scripture and derived from an interpretation of Scripture according to clearly formulated principles which, in their broad outlines, are as valid today as they were when he used them against the Arians.

¹ *Or. c. Ar. i. 9* (PG. xxvi. 28).

² *Ep. xxxix* (PG. xxvi. 1437).

³ W. P. DuBose, *The Ecumenical Councils*, p. 90.