Reading Origen of Alexandria from the Perspective of Contemporary Semantics

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In this article I will be looking at a third-century Alexandrian theologian, Origen, and his approach to Scriptural interpretation. I will be making an attempt to justify this approach philosophically. I will demonstrate that the epistemological value of Origen's approach to the Scriptures is equal to that of the contemporary critical-historical method, and that any attempts to diminish the value of the traditional patristic approach to the Scriptures or to present it as epistemologically inferior are philosophically unjustified. I will be paying attention to the original context out of which Origen's theology emerged, namely, certain philosophical premises of late antiquity. However, I will also use some notions and concepts that mark twentieth-century philosophical development, assuming that they can facilitate a proper understanding of Origen's exegesis. I believe that as of today it is impossible to study the patristic tradition without taking into account twentieth-century logic and philosophy of language.

Origen's significance is associated with an attempt to redefine Christianity in terms of philosophical categories of late antiquity. It was a great apologetic achievement of Origen to demonstrate that Christianity is not a set of arcane doctrines inaccessible to the enlightened mind, but rather, an intellectually advanced set of principles that affect social practices and lead human beings toward the creation of a new socially constructed reality (a reality meant to facilitate deification and sanctification of fallen humanity).

Today, Origen's theology in general, and his approach to the Scriptures in particular, do not have the same appeal to scholars as they did over the centuries. The major reason for this shift is the change of paradigms in Scriptural exegesis during the last few centuries and the introduction of critical-historical methods of Scriptural exegesis. The critical-historical method is a child of post-enlightenment philosophical development and carries with it all of the philosophical presuppositions that characterize post-enlightenment thought. Among these I should mention positivist metaphysics and epistemology, as well as the view of exegesis as a department of history that studies historical events of the Bible in light of causal laws of nature; these laws are considered universal, necessary, and exclusive of the possibility of Divine intervention into the phenomenal order of reality. The critical-historical method has proven to be beneficial for Biblical scholars. In my opinion, the traditional patristic approach to the Scriptures and the critical-historical method of Scriptural interpretation are meant to supplement each other as they reflect two different approaches to the same subject; namely, Scripture. One investigates a chain of historical events pertaining to Scripture, and the other elucidates Scripture in light of the economy of salvation. Thus, both approaches have boundaries within which they operate. Sometimes, however, the critical-historical method, being pushed to its ultimate extent by scholars and being presented as an all-embracing explanatory model, transgresses its

own boundaries, compromising its validity and critical character. In this scenario it can be easily transformed into a set of positivist dogmas, thus frustrating its own purpose, reflected in its name, 'critical.' The traditional patristic approach, transgressing its own boundaries, suffers a similar fate. Thus, both approaches suffer enormously by claiming exclusivity and universality, one turning into mythology and the other becoming a manifest form of Scriptural positivism.

In order to approach the patristic sources properly, we should make an attempt to engage the premises of late antiquity. On the other hand, these premises should also be validated. Contemporary philosophy of language can guide us in that direction. Here I intend to use some elements of Frege's philosophy of language in order to justify Origen's approach to Scripture. I propose here, as a methodological principle, that there is a certain isomorphism between late antique and contemporary semantics, and that one can be analyzed in terms of the other.[1]

Origen's exegesis can be characterized by the use of allegorical and typological methods of Scriptural interpretation. The Stoic philosophers were the originators of such methods. They made an attempt to re-describe the fables of pagan religion and present them as symbolic representations of noetic (intellectual) reality. In this re-description, narratives with obscure content were presented as manifestations of a higher reality. Middle Platonists adapted these methods and used them quite extensively. Philo, a Middle Platonist philosopher, made an attempt to apply allegorical and typological methods to the Hebrew Scriptures. Origen stood on the ground of Middle Platonism and applied these methods to Scripture as a whole, including the New and Old Testaments. Up until the late eighteenth century these methods were very much favored by scholars. For example, as late as the end of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant suggested that such methods should be used to reinterpret the Old Testament (which sounds offensive to Christian morality) despite the fact that in some cases such interpretations seem to be forced. However, later generations stopped using such methods as the major paradigmatic shift, associated with the introduction of the critical-historical method, was about to take place.

The entire theological framework offered by Origen was based on the idea of the unity of two traditions (Hebrew and Christian). This unity was determined by its single originative principle that is the Godhead of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Logos. This principle suggested a particular approach to Scriptural interpretations, namely, Christological and eschatological readings of Scripture as a whole. It is clear that contemporary scholarship, being sympathetic to the idea of a radical discontinuity between the two traditions, does not easily accept such unity, and by implication argues against Christological and eschatological readings of the Scripture as a holistic unity of two Testaments. Thus there is an unfortunate lack of mutual appreciation between two rival approaches.

Having been trained as a Middle Platonist and keeping in mind a multi-layered structure of reality, Origen proposed the following way of reading Scripture: "A person ought then in three ways to record in his own soul the purposes of the Holy Scriptures; that the simple may be edified by, as it were, the flesh of Scripture (for thus

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1   The idea behind this proposed isomorphism is based upon the similarity of the Stoic notion of lecton with the one of sense.

we designate the primary sense), the more advanced by its soul, and the perfect by the spiritual law, which has a shadow of the good things to come."[2] It is quite self-explanatory that "the good things yet to come" signify the incarnate Logos.

It is interesting to note that a certain correlation can be found between the "flesh," or an immediate historical level of Scriptural significance, and its "soul," a moral level where one level can be expressed by means of the other. Thus the moral significance of scriptural passages might, under certain conditions, be perfectly transmitted by its literal meaning (but not vice versa); this happens when the Biblical narrative or the Pentateuchal Law affects practical reason and lead ones toward judging events or occurrences under the concepts of vice and virtue, good and evil. This ability to extract moral significance from the Scriptural narratives applies, apparently, to the vast majority of people. However, the spiritual transition toward "the good things yet to come," or, in other words, towards the Prefigured Christ, is not as evident.

Seeing this difficulty, Origen noted that Scripture itself gives certain hints to the reader and helps to make a proper identification of the level of significance of a particular passage (flesh, soul, or spirit). He argued that in most cases the literal sense (the flesh of Scripture) is precisely what is intended by Scripture. However, some passages might contain certain marks that the literal sense is not what the reader should pay attention to. He noted that "if the use of the Law had been everywhere made perfectly clear, and strict historical sequence had been preserved, we should not have believed that the Scriptures could be understood in any other than the obvious sense."[3] However, he pointed out, "The Word of God arranged for certain stumbling-blocks and offences and impossibilities to be embedded in the Law and the historical portion; the chief purpose being to show the spiritual connection both in past occurrences and in things to be done." [4]

Thus, Origen seems to suggest that when Scriptural passages cannot be understood literally, some sort of non-literal understanding is necessitated. Based on Origen's reasoning certain Scriptural passages, being paradoxical in appearance, present difficulties to the reader. Some passages can be classified as offensive to Christian morality and some other passages describe events that could never occur. However, he insisted, these passages are not meaningless as Scripture is of Divine origin and nothing can be added to or removed from it. At this point Origen's discourse seems to foreshadow Plotinus's notion of *aporia,* which the reader encounters in a discourse about the Divine being. When the Scriptures speak of the Divine, such speech violates rules of language and logic by fusing contraries into the same subject by speaking impossibilities and offences, by distorting the historical chain of events, and so on. Thus, when the Scriptures present the reader spiritual matters, such presentation is necessarily marked by *aporia* to indicate that the literal understanding of the sentence will necessarily lead to meaningless conclusions and thus to nonsense.

In addition, Origen insisted on the importance of ontological implications in his approach to Scripture. He argued that in dealing with Scripture, one needs to take into account a proper structure of the universe that embraces different (sometimes

2   Origen of Alexandria, *On First Principles,* trans. G. W. Butterworth (London:Peter Smith Publisher, 1973), 12.
3   ibid., p. 17.
4   ibid.

incommensurable) layers. He pointed out that these multiple layers of reality (a notion he internalized from studies of Middle-Platonism) are reflected in Scripture, and should be properly extracted from it. These extractions, in turn, necessitate certain techniques to identify and decipher these layers (spiritual layers). Here, he concluded, allegory and typology can be useful.

Nevertheless, what is evident at this point is that the ontological account needs to be supported by the semantic justification, which can show how Scriptural passages can communicate these layers to the reader. For example, if one reads the story of Jonah and makes the identity statement "Jonah is the Prefigured Christ," it is obvious that both Christ and Jonah cannot be given as two logically independent, chronologically distanced, and yet identical entities or objects (insofar as in affirming such an identity one will inevitably arrive at nonsense). Firstly, Jonah and the Prefigured Christ (Logos) designate two heterogeneous realms of reality (celestial and terrestrial) somehow connected by Scriptural signs. Secondly, their relation pertains to something lying beyond their real referents, definite objects to which they refer. One can make this evident by pointing out the fact that a real referent of the divine Logos cannot be found in the realm of terrestrial reality prior to the incarnation. Thus, by reading Scripture allegorically or typologically, one can find him or herself in the realm of signs and their relations. Thus, the necessity for semantic justification of such readings becomes self-evident.

Now it is necessary to identify the key semantic issues associated with Origen's exegesis: 1. The behavior of a sign in meta-context, which is Scripture as a holistic unity of two Testaments (what happens to its referent and significance). 2. The possibility of identity statements (such as: A = B, where A (Jonah) is the sign drawn from Hebrew Scriptures and B (Christ) is the sign drawn from Christian Scriptures). 3. The possibility for a sign to bifurcate and signify multiple significations ($A \neq A1 \neq A2 \neq A_n$, where A, A1, A2, A_n are logically independent entities designated by the same proper name) such that, for example, we can read the story of two wives of Abraham as a symbolic narrative of two covenants.

Now what semantic conditions should one provide to allow for such readings of Scripture? Roughly speaking, these conditions are the following: the detachment of a sign from its ordinary referent so that it can enter into identity statements within a new meta-context. This condition will allow for cross-Scriptural references and identity statements, such as A=B, where A (Jonah) is the sign drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures and B (Christ) is the sign drawn from the Christian Scriptures. This possibility, in turn, entails a certain capacity for a sign to bifurcate, to stand for its content and for itself (thus signifying multiple significations). Thus in the context of the Old Testament story the sign/name Jonah designates the prophet who fled to Tarshish from the presence of God, and so on. However, being framed within Scripture as a whole, the name Jonah might also signify the Prefigured Christ. Therefore, the semantic issues are associated with the sign's behavior in a new meta-context.

I suggest that contemporary philosophy of language and semantics as represented by Gottlob Frege, the late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century German phi-

losopher and logician, can cast some light on these issues.[5] I use Frege's concepts and their implications for Scriptural exegesis to demonstrate the coherence of Origen's approach to the Scripture and its philosophical validity.

Frege, currently, is commonly regarded as the founder of contemporary logic and philosophy of language. However, not many theologians are familiar with his writings. As of today, many issues of religious metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics cannot be approached without taking into account Frege's achievements.

Now let us take a look at the following statement: Jonah is the Prefigured Christ. What kind of statement is it? Can it be expressed by means of propositional logic? Can we say, If A then B; A; B? It seems that the necessity of such connection cannot be justified in this statement. In other words, it will not necessarily follow that if Jonah, then Jesus. Can we express such statement by syllogistic reasoning? A is B; can we say that the Prefigured Christ as a concept is a predicate of Jonah? Yes, but this predication will seem quite awkward. Why? Because 'is' here is not a copula but a sign for identity. What are the identity statements?

In his "Sense and Reference" Frege attempted to solve the issue of identity statements. Here he proposed that "Identity gives rise to challenging questions which are not altogether easy to answer. Is it a relation? A relation between objects, or between names or signs of objects?"[6] Traditionally, before the time of Frege, it was assumed that identity statements are necessarily tied to their referents. However, in cases where proper names enter into the relation of identity this assumption does not seem reasonable. For example, it is definitely impossible, following this assumption, to validate such an identity statement as A is B under conditions where A and B stand for two proper names designating two personal entities (say, Jonah and the Prefigured Christ). Frege, thus, rejected this assumption. He pointed out, moreover, that if the sign A is distinguished from the sign B only as object, not as sign, the cognitive value of A = A becomes essentially equal to that of A = B.

Frege answered this dilemma by arguing that a sign both refers and signifies. He affirmed that: "It is natural, now, to think of there being connected with a sign, besides that to which the sign refers, which may be called the reference of the sign, also what I should like to call the sense of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is contained."[7] Frege identified the mode of presentation with the sense or signification and identified reference with a definite object. Moreover, he noted, the truth value of a sentence is its reference. He pointed out that two different signs – the morning star and the evening star – have the same reference (denote the same object). Thus, they differ not in reference (a definite object), but in the mode of presentation.

The idea behind this construct is quite simple: a definite object might have many modes of presentation. Thus, we can say that Aristotle is/was a pupil of Plato. Or that he was a teacher of Alexander the Great, or a man from Stagira, or the author of *Categories*. What is important is that the same definite object might be described in various ways, and thus have many modes of presentations, many senses or significa-

5   I purposely formulated these issues in Frege's terms to avoid a possible misunderstanding of the subject under consideration.

6   Gottlob, Frege, "Sense and Reference," *The Philosophical Review*,Vol. 57, No. 3 (May, 1948): 209.

7   ibid.

tions or meanings. This means that a sign for the proper name normally refers to a definite object by presenting its object in a particular way. Thus, more than one sign (sentence) can be used to describe the same object. If a sign stands for a common name, it also refers to a number of homogeneous objects, or objects which share a certain property. Some signs both refer and signify. But this is not always the case. Some signs might signify but fail to refer to a definite object (say, fictional creatures) or to a number of definite objects. In this case we say that the sign has significance and a meaningful sentence can be formed out of it. What it lacks is a reference as there is no definite object which such a sign (a proper name) is meant to designate. Or it lacks existential import, thus there are no definite objects that fall under the class of things designated by a sign (a concept word). The truth value of a sentence is its reference, a definite object. There are two kinds of normal sentences: true and false. Therefore, a sentence containing signs which fail to refer to a definite object might be classified as false (at least as far as it is used in natural science).

It is interesting to note that in most cases signs/names keep the original connection with objects to which they refer. Thus, two names, such as the morning star and the evening star, refer to the same definite object (the particular planet named Venus) and comprise two modes of presentation of the same referent; both names keep the original connection with their referent and thus both refer and signify. This by implication tells us that these names can be used in the formation of truth value statements.

However, in some cases such referential connection is indirect or not evident. Frege exemplified this situation by formulating his concepts of direct quotations and indirect quotations. He introduced the concept of direct quotations by arguing that: "If words are used in the ordinary way, one intends to speak of their referents. It can also happen, however, that one wishes to talk about the words themselves or their sense. This happens, for instance, when the words of another are quoted. One's own words then first designate words of the other speaker, and only the latter have their usual referents. We then have signs of signs…Accordingly, a word standing between quotation marks must not be taken as having its ordinary referent."[8]

What is important here is Frege's notion that direct quotations designate words of the other speaker, "and only the latter have their usual reference."[9] Here the reference is provided only indirectly, as signs refer to other signs. Therefore, a sign that transmits a direct quotation does not have a definite object as its referent. Here one talks about the words themselves or their senses. On the other hand, in cases of indirect quotation a sign designates a thought. Here again the referential connection is only indirect. For this reason, it is impossible to assign truth value to such a sentence.

Now it is interesting to note that the sentence with direct or indirect quotations is neither false nor true. The truth value of such a sentence is indefinite. It seems to me that here Frege consciously or unconsciously rehabilitated historical studies rooted in textual analysis and reintroduced them as a limbo region, set in between science and fiction. By rehabilitation I mean the reestablishing of the reputation of textual studies as a meaningful activity, whose meaningfulness was previously

8   ibid., 211.
9   ibid.

questioned and denied by scriptural positivists. Thus, the study of ancient texts here has nothing to do with the work of sorting out sentences about objects, events, and occurrences whose existence in the past (and thus truth) can be demonstrated, and shredding sentences designating empty concepts and notions. On the contrary, the study of ancient texts, in Frege's view, has to do with the exploration of meanings/significations of such texts.

Here I can suggest that the scope of Scriptural exegesis can be defined as being situated within the boundaries of direct quotations framed into conceptual constructs (philosophical frameworks or sets of doctrines). Within this scope the line of investigation can proceed in various directions, such as: studies of the historical chains of events, reconstructions of cultural horizons, elucidations of philosophical premises, and so on. It is important, however, to remember that the quoted text and a set of doctrines always constitute the scope of exegetical activities. At the time of Origen conceptual constructs were predominantly Middle-Platonist with some elements taken from Aristotle, Chrysippus, and other philosophers. The elements of conceptual constructs (particular concepts and affirmations), in turn, can be equated with indirect quotations.

Now it is time to reflect on one important implication of the concept of direct and indirect quotations for Scriptural exegesis, namely, the impossibility of assigning truth values to exegetical works. Thus, Scriptural exegesis cannot be apprehended in terms of the truth or falsity of its referent (as signs here do not refer to definite objects but to other signs and thoughts). In other words, one can find oneself in the realm of significations pursuing a meaningful discourse. Nevertheless, the truth or falsity of such statements cannot be affirmed. It will be more than enough to say here that a discourse, associated with Scriptural interpretations, makes sense. However, it will be impossible to assign truth-value to such a discourse (by affirming its truth or falsity), or to claim the discovery of a scientific truth by means of Scriptural interpretations.

Here one can question the applicability of Frege's theory of truth values to the subject matter (which is exegesis), and ask for a more flexible account, say, of a free logic, which can be freed from ontological commitments and thus save the ideas of truth and falsity for Scriptural exegesis. Really, some signs, detached from their ordinary referents, still seem to be truer than others. Nevertheless, I think that Frege's account is superior in this case as it can drive away multiple reductionist approaches of various critical-historical textbooks by connecting the notion of truth with the one of definite objects.

Now the following question arises: whether, under conditions of the detachment of a sign from its ordinary referent, one can preserve the truth of Scriptural affirmations and thus secure Christian faith. This question, however, unfolds only an apparent difficulty. The reason for it is the following: truth here is an equivocal term. In Frege's logic the truth or falsity of judgments are tied to definite objects.[10] However, in revealed religions, the concept of truth has a different significance (in Christianity it is always tied to Soteriology). Thus, one can easily accept a point of view based on which it would be possible to deny the truth value of a theological

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10   Frege understood both actual and abstract entities (say, numbers) as objects. However, the matter of Scriptural exegesis does not fall under these categories of actual or abstract objects.

discourse, as its proper subject does not consist of natural objects and occurrences. On the other hand, the soteriological truth of the Scriptural sources can be simultaneously affirmed as it is tied to the promise of salvation and deification.

Among the vast majority of statements associated with Biblical studies there might be only a few to which it is possible to assign truth value.[11] These rare exceptions are associated with Scriptural affirmations supported by the archeological data available to scholars. However, these exceptional cases lead us far beyond the sphere of exegesis *per se*. Even so-called critical-historical investigations allow for no more than explications of senses. For this reason any claims made by scholars that they have discovered a scientific truth by means of Scriptural exegesis will be nonsensical. Rather, what is discovered here is related to the truth of faith (and is a declaration of faith).

There is, however, another implication of the concept of quotations for Scriptural exegesis which has to do with its epistemological status. Do Scriptural interpretations grant us knowledge? Yes, but the knowledge of signs and their significance, not the knowledge of their referents. Nonetheless, it does not mean that Scriptural interpretations are completely determined by empty notions or concepts which lack existential import. Again, knowledge here is connected with Soteriology. Knowledge of the economy of salvation differs from the knowledge of sciences.

In sum, all affirmations regarding Scriptural texts do not have the privilege of being acquainted with objects designated the Scriptural signs (with their referents if such could exist). The proper objects of Scriptural exegesis are Scriptural signs *per se* and their significations. The knowledge of spiritual matters that arises out of Scriptural interpretations differs from scientific knowledge and does not pertain to the realm of definite objects. Finally, the truth of Scriptural interpretations is a truth of faith. From these statements it is easy to infer that the epistemological value of the critical-historical method is equal to the one of traditional patristic methods of Scriptural interpretations. Both approaches deal with Scriptural signs and their significations, and both make statements of faith. However, there is a certain tendency among scholars to assign a superior epistemological value to the critical-historical method. This tendency, I think, can be attributed to the dogmatism of the historical method and its adherents who attempt to present their premises as universal, necessary, and so on. Nonetheless, as soon as these premises are questioned philosophically, the assumed epistemological superiority suddenly disappears.

Now, signs, being detached from their ordinary referents (definite objects), seem to be capable of entering into various types of relations, including relations of identity or differentiation (since now their referents are other signs or thoughts) without making a sentence false. Again, in cases of signs that designate individual personal beings (say, Jonah and Christ) this might seem to be the only condition under which they can enter into such relations. The question one might ask at this point is the following: how does the semantic shift take place?

As Frege noted in *Begriffsschrift*, "the introduction of a sign for identity of content necessarily produces a bifurcation in the meaning of all signs: they stand at times

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11   Nevertheless, if one part of the statement contains a Scriptural quote and another one contains a truth value (as its object) the whole statement cannot contain truth value as its object.

for their content, at times for themselves."[12]

Now I should say that signs for identity of content necessarily produce bifurcation and, in the context of Scriptural exegesis, stand for their original significations and at times for themselves. However, when signs stand for themselves, their meaning is always indefinite (as taken out of the original context) and acquire definite status within a new meta-context by being assigned certain properties it might lack within its original context. Thus, a sign enters into a new relation and bifurcates, produces new significations; a semantic shift takes place.

For example, the name Jonah can stand for its own content (this particular man who fled to Tarshish) and for itself when it enters into the relation of identity. In this case its significance becomes indefinite and needs reinterpretation within the horizon of a meta-context. Here a sign carries its primary and obvious meaning, but allows for explication of other meanings if apprehended within a new statement of identity. Moreover, different signs might express the sameness of significations. All typological and allegorical interpretations of the Scriptural texts are ultimately grounded in this special capacity of signs to extend their designations beyond their ordinary referents, to bifurcate, to be the same and not the same, similar and dissimilar as their contents allow.

Based on this brief review of Frege's semantics it is possible to draw some conclusions about its applicability to and commensurability with Origen's exegesis. I would like to point out that Frege's philosophy of language and semantics allows for the apprehension of late antiquity from the standpoint of modernity. Two concepts are crucial in a process reconciling antiquity with modernity. First of all, Origen's Christological reading of the Hebrew Scriptures based on the unity of meta-context (Scripture as a whole including both the Old and New Testaments) necessitates a semantic concept capable of explaining how statements of identity (that combine different, apparently unrelated contents) are possible. Secondly, allegorical and typological readings of the Scriptures necessitate a semantic justification of the capacity of a sign to bifurcate, standing at times for their content, and at times for themselves (and thus signifying multiple significations). Both concepts were offered by Frege and can be used to justify Origen's approach to Scriptures. They explain the possibility of identity statements, such as A = B, where A is the sign drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures and B is the sign drawn from the Christian Scriptures (and thus for typological reading of the Scripture); and of the possibility for a sign to signify multiple significations (in the meta-context) which allows for a legitimate allegorical reading of Scripture.

This is done through the introduction of the concepts of reference, signification, direct and indirect quotations, and truth value. The implications of Frege's theory for Scriptural exegesis seem to be the following: in the meta-context, a sign necessarily becomes detached from its ordinary referent (which in Scriptural exegesis is constituted by another sign or a thought) and, being in-framed into a new meta-context, allows for meaningful statements which open up an entirely new realm of significations (without making references to particular objects). Thus in the meta-context the meaning of a sign becomes indefinite in its relation to the new whole, and

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12 Gottlob Frege, *From Frege to Godel: A Source Book in Mathematical Logic, 1879-1931*. Ed. Jean van Heijenoort (Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1967), 20-21.

retains its definiteness in relation to its original referent which now becomes a part of the new meta-context; it will reacquire its definite meaning in the new context through the reinterpretation based on the new whole.

In this light it would be unnecessary to ask whether Origen's Christological readings of the Scripture have a scientific value (constitute a positive knowledge of things). However, the question whether they make sense should definitely be answered. Does Origen's reading of the Scripture make sense? Unarguably-yes; and generations of so-called "historical-critical" exegetical textbooks that attempted to diminish the value of ancient philosophers' approach to Scriptural interpretation as part of their attempt to command our semantic concentration themselves thus stand as curiously un-philosophical.