Well-known for his textbook on hermeneutics and for his many commentaries, Grant Osborne has for years melded several disciplines. While it is a privilege to contribute to this Festschrift in his honor, I should perhaps confess that no essay has given me as much trouble as this assigned topic, not least because, on the one hand, hermeneutics is a field that touches innumerable contributing disciplines, and, on the other, the number and range of New Testament commentaries written across two millennia in many languages is beyond the grasp of any one person. Add to this the demand to address, not the hermeneutical practice reflected in New Testament commentaries, but the hermeneutical competence, and one finds oneself awash in a search for criteria by which to measure such competence.

So in what follows, I shall first of all survey a variety of approaches to hermeneutical issues and their bearing on commentary writing, and then take courage and offer some evaluative observations.

1. Approaches to Hermeneutics

1.1 The Early Centuries

One might begin inductively by comparing, say, some of the expository commentaries of John Chrysostom with Origen’s commentary on Romans. Most of the expository homilies of Chrysostom were produced toward the end of the fourth century while he was still living in Antioch, before he became Archbishop of Constantinople. His expositions of Pauline epistles, including Romans, proceed line by line through the text, in a more-or-less straightforward fashion that does not seem entirely alien to many commentators today, but with an emphasis on moral application and a tendency toward affiriming ascetic practice. Along with Theodore of Mopsuestia, Chrysostom well represents the Antiochene school of interpretation. Writing two or three decades after Chrysostom, Theodore crafted commentaries on books of both Testaments. Most of these have been lost,
but his commentaries on Galatians and the ensuing nine shorter epistles of Paul have come down to us in Latin translation.\(^1\)

Origen’s commentary on Romans is the first commentary on that epistle to come down to us (ca. 246). The original, written in Greek, has been lost, but the Latin translation by Rufinus, prepared early in the fifth century, has recently been made available in English.\(^2\) Written before Origen was declared a heretic, and more than a century and a half before the controversy between Augustine and Pelagius erupted, this commentary on Romans reflects the theological interests of the time when it was written. Origen argues passionately against various Gnostic beliefs, not least the “doctrine of natures,” which asserts that all human beings are born with unalterable natures that inevitably bring them to salvation or damnation, irrespective of anything they do in this life.\(^3\) Origen’s defense of the freedom of the will could not (of course) take on board the complexities of discussion that would develop across the centuries, but he boldly opposed the fatalism intrinsic to many kinds of Gnostic thought. Equally, Origen opposes the reductionism of Marcion: he argues strongly for the harmony of law and gospel, and for the unity and integrity of Old and New Testaments together.\(^4\)

Nevertheless the form of his argumentation, generated by his hermeneutical commitments, places him within the Alexandrian school of interpretation—indeed, one of its ablest exponents. For many of the Church Fathers, Scripture has two senses: the literal sense and the spiritual sense. The literal sense is variously described: for instance, it is sometimes said to be the verbal or grammatical sense, the sense intended by the author (human or divine), the plain sense, the obvious sense, the sense conveyed by the words themselves. The spiritual sense is the meaning readers find when, aided by the Spirit, they discern in the text (especially of the Old Testament) the deeply Christian sense, the paschal sense. The distinction sprang in part from the conviction that the Old Testament must point to

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1 The works of both Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia are readily available in the standard Migne edition; in English translation, Chrysostom is readily accessed through the older but standard NPNF series. The relevant work of Theodore of Mopsuestia has recently been made available in contemporary English in the excellent critical version of Rowan A. Greer, trans., *Theodore of Mopsuestia: Commentary on the Minor Pauline Epistles* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).


3 Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 22.

4 Ibid., 93.