CHRISTIANIZING MALACHI:
FIFTH-CENTURY INSIGHTS FROM CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA

BY

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Shortly after his elevation to the episcopacy in the year 412, Cyril of Alexandria began work on a series of commentaries which may have at one time covered every book of the Bible. Not all of these commentaries are now extant, but enough survive to illustrate that Cyril was, above all else, an exegete. Of the ten volumes dedicated to him in Migne's *Patrologia*, seven contain biblical commentary. This fact alone marks Cyril as one of the most prolific biblical commentators of the entire early Christian period. For many students of patristic theology, however, the extent of Cyril's interest in the Bible is unknown.

Cyril's case is not unique. Until quite recently patristic exegesis in general has not received much scholarly attention. Several reasons account for this. First, the agenda of systematic theology has tended to determine which early Christian texts are translated, read, and studied. Studies motivated by systematic questions have made invaluable contributions to the scholarly understanding of patristic theology, yet they have tended to ignore an enormous amount of patristic exegetical literature. A second reason patristic commentary has been neglected relates to early Christian exegetical method. Much patristic exegesis, especially that associated with the Alexandrian tradition, makes free use of allegory, the antithesis of modern exegetical technique. Since historical criticism insists that only historical readings of the texts are legitimate, patristic commentary appears outdated and irrelevant.

Recently, a new interest in the Bible has emerged. Numerous scholars of distinction note that the major early Christian doctrinal debates (such as the debates about the Trinity in the fourth century or the debates about the nature of Christ in the fifth), revolved around the interpretation of key biblical texts. In addition, many scholars, alarmed by the alienation of the Church from its own book, have begun to question the supremacy of the historical-critical method and to seek ways to expand the meaning of the Bible to include more than the original historical meaning. Since no patristic commentator, including Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia, utilized historical criticism in the modern
sense, and since most patristic commentators accepted without question unhistorical readings of the Bible, especially of the Old Testament, many scholars have begun to reexamine ancient exegesis for help in answering contemporary hermeneutical questions.

The question is, however, what exactly should scholars look for in early Christian exegetical texts? Since they are not always the best sources for information relating to doctrinal development, studies of patristic exegesis, when they have been done, have concentrated on methodological questions.4 Answering these questions provides important information, but it can give one a false sense of having understood the goal of patristic exegesis. As R. Greer explains, ancient Christian interpreters were not "preoccupied with method," rather their exegesis rested upon the "fundamental conviction that Scripture was intimately bound up with the life of a religious community."5 In other words, it is not enough to ask how early Christian exegetes interpreted a text; one must also attempt to discover what that exegete thought the text meant as Christian Scripture for his community. Since authors brought to biblical interpretation their own cultural perspectives—perspectives governed by such diverse elements as creeds, moral teaching, and current ecclesiastical politics—patristic commentary, especially on the Old Testament, contains an important historical record of how a text was made meaningful to a community other than the one for whom the text was first composed. Early Christian commentaries, then, should be read not so much for the light they shed on strictly theological questions and not just as a means to isolate a patristic exegetical method, but primarily for what they tell us about Christian life at the time of their composition.

For Cyril, as for other commentators, interpreting the Bible correctly went beyond employing the proper methodology: it included bringing the proper Christian perspective to the interpretation. Hence, in his Commentary on Malachi, the subject of this essay, I will argue that Cyril's interpretation depends less on his method and more on his own fifth-century understanding of the nature of Christian faith, Christian ministry and Christian moral behavior. Moreover, from this interpretation the modern scholar can derive important information about Christian life in the fifth century. However, since Cyril's exegesis has been largely ignored in part because of a general characterization of Alexandrian exegesis as allegorical, some clarification of the way his exegetical method functions to support his interpretative conclusions is in order before we turn to his commentary.