

# **THE BOOK OF RULES OF TYCONIUS**

**Its Purpose and Inner Logic**

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## INTRODUCTION

Just over a hundred years ago, the English scholar F.C. Burkitt was looking for a pre-Augustinian African writer whose citation from the Prophets might shed light on the Old Latin versions of the Bible. He found such a writer in the fourth century Donatist theologian and exegete, Tyconius. The *Liber Regularum* (LR)<sup>1</sup> of Tyconius, a treatise on the interpretation of Scripture, provided Burkitt with a mine of prophetic material for the study of pre-Vulgate Latin Scriptures. Indeed Burkitt claimed that it was "the only considerable body of evidence for the Latin text of the Prophets current in Africa between the epochs of Cyprian and Augustine."<sup>2</sup>

Burkitt recognized that the immediate problem in the study of Tyconius' *Book of Rules* was the state of the printed text which had been first published in the sixteenth century by Grynaeus of Basle.<sup>3</sup>

It is I believe mainly this corrupt state of the text which has prevented the recognition of the very important place which Tyconius holds in the history of Biblical Interpretation in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>*Liber Regularum* (LR) F. C. Burkitt, *The Book Of Rules of Tyconius* (Cambridge: University Press, 1894, reprint 1967).

<sup>2</sup>Burkitt, *Book of Rules*, Preface.

<sup>3</sup>Burkitt, *Book of Rules*, xxviii.

<sup>4</sup>Burkitt, *Book of Rules*, Preface.

Burkitt published his critical edition of the *Book of Rules* in 1894 but as his attention remained focused on textual criticism rather than upon biblical interpretation, a critical study of the *Book of Rules* as a work of exegetical theory was left to later scholarship. A century after Burkitt's edition was published this intriguing work still awaits adequate research. The present study is indicative of the growing awareness of the place of this African theologian in the history of Christian exegesis. The basic premise of the research is that Tyconius must first be studied directly from his own works rather than indirectly through the many commentators of the ancient and medieval Church who have been influenced by his ideas.

Tyconius was one of the most incisive thinkers of the African Church in the seventies and eighties of the fourth century. From his pen came the commentary on the Apocalypse that influenced exegetes for the next millennium. A second work, the *Book of Rules*, was the first treatise on biblical hermeneutics in the Latin West. Both works have had a checkered history. The Apocalypse commentary has been lost, and its remains lie scattered, either as source or as influence, in the works of medieval exegetes, thus providing a major task of literary reconstruction for the modern scholar.<sup>5</sup>

The *Book of Rules* has remained intact. It has suffered a different fate. Tyconius' fame as a thinker and writer extended beyond the Donatist community, but his star was eclipsed by that of Augustine, whose return to Africa in 388 renewed the fortunes of the Catholic party. Augustine was intrigued by the thought of the Donatist author, and summarized the seven rules of Tyconius in the *De Doctrina Christiana*.<sup>6</sup> The prestige of Augustine's

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<sup>5</sup>K. Steinhauser, *The Apocalypse Commentary of Tyconius: A History of Its Reception and Influence* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1987).

<sup>6</sup>Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* III, 30-37, PL 34:16-121.

summary effectively deflected attention from Tyconius' text, a decisive factor in the history of the *Book of Rules*.

The aim of the present work is to return to the text of the *Book of Rules*, and to provide an introduction to a book that needs to be read in its entirety for a just appreciation of a work so stamped with the mind of its author – at once original, creative and rigorously systematic. It is an introduction in the sense of a "re-introduction" to an acknowledged classic among the works of biblical interpretation of the past, but which has only recently been translated into a modern language. It is also a "re-introduction" to a work that has suffered serious distortion in the series of paraphrased or summarized versions through which it has been known even when the most influential of these comes from Augustine himself.<sup>7</sup>

In a more technical sense, the study is intended as an introduction to the purpose and inner logic of the *Book of Rules*. It examines the author's criteria for the selection of biblical texts. It seeks to understand both the "logic" of the seven rules and the logic of the author's structuring of the book as a whole. How does this literary structure throw light on the hermeneutical theory that underlies Tyconius' description of the seven "mystical rules" of Scripture?

It is now close to a century since Burkitt published his critical edition of the *Book of Rules*, but at the very time that Burkitt provided this access to the work of Tyconius, the whole understanding of the nature and purpose of scriptural exegesis was on the point of being revolutionized. In his preface, Burkitt argued for the need of a contemporary reappraisal of Tyconius'

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<sup>7</sup>P. Bright, "Tyconius and His Interpreters," C. Kannengiesser, A *Conflict of Christian Hermeneutics in Roman Africa: Tyconius vs. Augustine* (Center for Hermeneutical Studies, Berkeley, Ca. Forthcoming, 1989).

interpretative methodology, but to respond to such a challenge today is to address at best a limited and specialized readership. To be invited into a world where terms like "spiritual interpretation," "typology," let alone the infamous "allegory," are given respectful consideration is like entering a time warp. The tools and methodology of modern biblical criticism have so transformed the mental landscape that the presuppositions and the methodologies of the exegetes of the early centuries of the Church seem like those of alien life-forms.

Like great scarred monuments of the past, the vast biblical commentaries of the early Church, the hermeneutical works extolling the importance of the "spiritual senses" of Scripture, and the theological treatises studded with "proof-texts" seem part of a revered but irrevocably remote past. They gather dust on library shelves, or if taken down can only be regarded as source material for patristic or medieval scholarship. It is not that these works are devoid of charm or of spiritual insight – witness Augustine's Commentaries on 1 John<sup>8</sup> – but it is precisely the revolutionary changes in biblical hermeneutics in our own century that make much of the writings of the early Church impenetrable to the modern reader.

To remove some of the barriers to a renewed appreciation of a vast literature of the Christian past calls for a reconsideration of the hermeneutics of the early Church; but this in itself can seem an arduous and rather fruitless task in the face of the more immediate and urgent challenges posed to the modern theologian by the rapidity of cultural change today. In Macbeth's phrase, "returning were as tedious as go o'er."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Augustine, "On the First Epistle of John: Sermon X," *Early Christian Spirituality*, ed. C. Kannengiesser, trans. P. Bright (Sources of Early Christian Thought; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 101-113.

<sup>9</sup>*Macbeth*, act 3, sc 4.

In spite of these reservations, the need of a reappraisal of the hermeneutics of the early Church has been championed by a number of scholars over the past thirty or forty years, notably by the French scholars, Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou. In a 1950 issue of *Theological Studies*, Walter Burghardt referred to the study of early Christian exegesis as "one of the liveliest issues in contemporary theological discussion":

The bulk of significant contributions stems from French and Belgian pens, the shock of the controversy is felt most keenly by Alexandrian exegetes, notably Clement and Origen; the field of discussion is the doctrine of scriptural senses; and in practice the point of heaviest concentration is patristic theory and practice of the so-called spiritual sense of Scripture - the typology or allegorism of Christian antiquity.<sup>10</sup>

Burghardt judged that the ultimate frame of reference was much broader than the question of whether the modern exegete is aware of the subtlety and the variety of the understandings of what was meant by the spiritual sense of Scripture among the early exegetes.

The cataclysmic events of a decade and more have served to sharpen in many minds the lingering suspicion of a cleavage between Christian thought and Christian life, between theology and spirituality. The realization has had its repercussion in several fields of research, more obviously perhaps in the intensification of the liturgical renaissance, in the movement towards a more vital contact

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<sup>10</sup>W. J. Burghardt, "On Early Christian Exegesis," *Theological Studies* 11 (1950) 78.

with patristic thought, and in an effort to explore and exploit the possibilities inherent in a more profound penetration of the bonds that link the Old Testament with the New.<sup>11</sup>

With doggedness, with flashes of luminous insight, with frequent recriminations among themselves,<sup>12</sup> a small army of scholars set to work on the texts of Clement, Origen, Augustine, the Syriac sources, in fact across the wide scope of patristic exegesis. For all the enthusiasm and scholarly finesse of the investigation, many other scholars of the nineteen forties and fifties remained unconvinced of the value of their efforts.

One sees why it is impossible to consider the patristic exegesis as a treasure from which we have only to draw in all confidence, or even as an example to be followed. The Fathers have penetrated deeply into the religious teaching of Scripture; they are a wonderful help for us to do the same in our turn. But in their techniques for cultivating the sacred text there have been too many divergences among them, too much excess in some of them, for us to be able to think that they have given a definitive solution to the difficult problem of the spiritual sense. They can doubtless awaken our attention, arouse our interest for an investigation which the modern study of the Bible could make [us] slight and even regard as definitely outdated. We will learn from their efforts and their discussions, but for a principle of discrimination we shall have to look elsewhere.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Burghardt, "On Early Christian Exegesis," 78.

<sup>12</sup>Burghardt, "On Early Christian Exegesis," 116.

<sup>13</sup>Burghardt, "On Early Christian Exegesis," 115.



Why then a study of the hermeneutical theory of Tyconius whose *Book of Rules* proposes not one but *seven* "principles of discrimination"? And why of all people a man like Tyconius, marginalized as he was in his own lifetime? Here is a lay theologian in the age of theologian-bishops like Athanasius, Hilary, and Ambrose. Here is a member of a schismatic Church, out of favor with his own Donatist bishop, Parmenian, the forceful and intelligent successor of Donatus the Great in the see of Carthage. Tyconius is hardly a prolific author. He is known to have written four books,<sup>14</sup> but his reputation rests upon the two books that survived him, a commentary on the Apocalypse, now lost, and the *Book of Rules*, the subject of this study. The *Book of Rules* was recommended by a long line of theologians beginning with Augustine, the younger contemporary of Tyconius. With such a commendation it is no wonder that the *Book of Rules* found its way into Catholic readership, that it was diligently copied by later generations of monks, and that it was summarized and listed in catalogues of exegetical works for over a thousand years; but was it *read*, at least read in its entirety? It will be argued in this study that the *Book of Rules* has suffered the fate of many another classic work, in being praised rather than read. Perhaps one could ask, even if it has been read, has it been read without certain subtle prejudices or read in a fragmentary fashion that does not appreciate the systematic unity of the whole?

In spite of the negatives which loom large in such a study both from the point of view of the history of the *Book of Rules* itself and of the broader question of the value of the study of patristic exegesis, this ancient author

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<sup>14</sup>Gennadius, *De Viris inlustribus* 18 ed. Richardson (Texte und Untersuchungen 14. The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series 3, ed. P. Schaf, H. Wace; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. Eerdmans, 1952) 285-402.

presents us with a profoundly modern challenge. What have the ancient writings of Israel to say to the Christian Church? Where Tertullian, insisting upon the superiority of Scripture over philosophy, asks what has Athens to do with Jerusalem, Tyconius, his fellow African, asks perhaps a more penetrating question – what have ancient Tyre, pharaonic Egypt and the long vanished Assyria to do with the Christian Churches of Africa in the fourth century?

It is another form of the question that Marcion asked the Christian Church in the second century – what *are* the Scriptures of the Church? In our own century in the wake of fundamental shifts in exegesis the question of the reception of Scripture in the Church has become pivotal. In what sense can the Hebrew Scriptures be a source for theology and spiritual life for the Christian Church without denying the profound changes in exegetical theory in modernity?

Throughout the *Book of Rules*, Tyconius concentrates on the question of the relevance of prophetic texts for the Christian Church. It is not so much a question of the fulfillment or non-fulfillment in the past or in some eschatological future – but what does prophecy mean for Africa in the closing years of the fourth century? What can it mean for Africa, for whom the cities and kings against which the prophets thundered were as remote as they are for us today? Why should Tyconius' fellow Africans care about prophecies against the long-dead Prince of Tyre (Ezek 28:2-19) and the King of Babylon (Isa 14:12-21) when the Donatist community was facing the repressions of the Count Romanus and the Proconsul Hesperius under orders of a Christian Emperor?<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) 203. The Donatist Church suffered repressions under Count Romanus in 364, and under Proconsul Herperius in 376.

The purpose of Tyconius' work, as he states in the preamble to the *Book of Rules*, is to provide a guide through the "immense forest of prophecy," but Tyconius does not restrict the term "prophecy" to the oracles of the prophets of Israel. One of the most urgent questions for both the study of the *Book of Rules* and for the fragments of the *Apocalypse Commentary* is to define what "prophecy" meant for Tyconius. The analysis of the criteria for the selection of scriptural texts in the *Book of Rules* in Chapter Two of the present work reveals that although Tyconius includes a very great number of texts from the books of the Prophets that speak words of encouragement or of admonition, there is just as much emphasis upon threats and promises from the New Testament authors. From a study of the texts Tyconius selects for comment, it becomes evident that for Tyconius a "prophetic" text is one that calls sinners to repentance by warning of the death and destruction that awaits those that are separated from the love of God.

This concentration of texts from both the Old and the New Testament upon the consequences of sin makes a first reading of the *Book of Rules* a somewhat somber experience. The final words of the book are a stark description of the annihilation awaiting the members of the Church who have become separated from Christ: "You are destined for destruction" (Ezek 28:19). Tyconius' purpose is far from negative. He opposed the fundamental ecclesiology of the Donatist Church when he insisted that the Church was not the holy remnant of the End Times waiting for its vindication in the glory of the Second Coming. It was a mixed society still graced with the word of God calling the sinner to repentance.

Tyconius was the first African to use the term "spiritual" interpretation of Scripture. What he meant by spiritual interpretation was that the Spirit, the Author of Scripture, reveals present *spiritual* realities rather than the shape of future eschatological events. Tyconius' fellow

Donatists were indeed suffering persecution at the hands of fellow Christians, one of the signs of the "End Times," but the revelation of the Spirit in Scripture is not about the destruction that awaits those persecutors roused up by the Antichrist. Tyconius argues that the knowledge that the ultimate victory of Christ over the Antichrist in the "end times" is hardly a mystery to be wrested from the text by exegesis. The prophetic denunciations speak of "spiritual" death and destruction that is already present in the Church. Tyconius claims that Scripture speaks of the present reality of sin – the "mystery of evil" at work in the Church – rather than of the cataclysms of the end times which will be visible to all.

When Tyconius speaks of present "spiritual" realities – the invisible growth and spread of evil throughout the Church, he does not repeat the Gnostic devaluation of time and material reality. For a man of his time Tyconius had a keen sense of history.

A system of interpretation which frankly recognizes the historical meaning of prophecy without thereby detracting from its spiritual essence should have some interest in the present day.<sup>16</sup>

He is aware of the distance between himself and the cities of the past that had been denounced by the Prophets. In tune with the traditional eschatological awareness of the African Church, Tyconius expects the Second Coming of Christ, but the Second Coming is such a matter of the common faith of the Church that it needs neither emphasis nor argument, but it is not yet! These are not yet the days of the manifest glory of Christ. The prophecies of the Second Coming cited with such frequency throughout the *Book of Rules* are still sealed. They are not yet visible to all. In the preamble to the

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<sup>16</sup>Burkitt, *Book of Rules*, Preface.

*Book of Rules*, Tyconius claims that the "treasures" of Scripture are invisible "to some" (LR 1:5). The seven "mystical rules" themselves hide the "treasures" so that they are "closed," only to be opened by the Spirit; they are "obscure," only to be "illuminated" (LR 1:7) by the Spirit. The "breaking open" of these sealed mysteries reveals that the "coming" of the Antichrist is a present *invisible* reality within the Church. This is the revelation to the Church concerning the "man of sin" (2 Thess 2:7).

Both the glory of the Church and the "mystery of evil" are still hidden, invisible, that is, "spiritual" realities. In this sense, Tyconius can call the Church a "spiritual world" where the saving work of God is an on-going reality. It is to this "spiritual world," the Church, that the Spirit addresses exhortations. Though anchored in the past, and directed toward the future, Scripture reveals the *present* choice between good and evil for each individual. It is not for the "signs of the end times" that one scrutinizes the Scriptures – but rather for the signs of what makes one united or separated from Christ now. This separation, now a hidden, "spiritual" reality, is what will be manifest to all at the end-time.

This "spiritual" interpretation of prophecy reveals how far Tyconius deviated from Donatist ecclesiology. He refused the notion of the apostasy of the non-Donatist Christian Churches at the beginning of the Constantinian peace. Even more daringly for a Donatist, he refused to recognize the Donatist Church as the visible faithful remnant waiting the return of the Lord.

Tyconius is remarkable for his refusal of any narrow sectarian view of the Church. Augustine and his fellow Catholics were astonished at the universal vision of the Donatist theologian,<sup>17</sup> but there is no question of

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana* III, 30.

compromise for the sake of unity in the ecclesiology of the Donatist author. In the *Book of Rules* he claims that the Church is "bipartite," with good and evil membership throughout the world. Augustine had wondered how a man who, in Augustine's terms, "had argued victoriously" against schism in the Church did not choose to join the Catholic party. The answer lies in Tyconius' very understanding of the Church as "bipartite."

Again, that the Body of Christ is bipartite is shown in this brief sentence: "I am dark and beautiful" (Cant 1:5)... Our text gives an explanation of why she is both dark and beautiful: "like the tent of Kedar, like the leather tent of Solomon" (Cant 1:5). It shows us two tents, the king's and the slave's; yet both are Abraham's offspring, for Kedar is the son of Ishmael... Nevertheless, we cannot say that the tent of Kedar is outside the Church. Our text speaks of the tent of Kedar and of Solomon, and therefore it says of both: "I am dark " and "I am beautiful." (LR 10:13-30)<sup>18</sup>

The Spirit, through the Scriptures, speaks the word of exhortation and admonition to the Church. The "spiritual" interpretation of the Scripture is a charismatic work, that is, under the grace of the Spirit the prophetic word is addressed to the "bipartite" Church. It is a word of exhortation and encouragement to those on the "right"; it is a word of warning to those of the "left" with the express purpose that the whole Church be re-called to love and unity with Christ, the Head of the Body.

Writing nearly forty years ago, Durbarle had spoken with mixed feelings of the values of patristic exegesis for our times. "We will learn from

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<sup>18</sup>K. Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Sources of Early Christian Thought, ed. W. Rusch; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 112.

their efforts and their discussions but for a principle of discernment we shall have to look elsewhere . . ."<sup>19</sup> It is true that we can learn much from a fourth-century work such as the *Book of Rules* of Tyconius. We can become more aware of the theological concerns that shaped the exegesis of the early Church, and at the same time we can learn more about the exegetical methods that shaped theology. This is particularly notable in the case of Tyconius where ecclesiology, eschatology and hermeneutical theory are so interrelated.

As Durbarle argued, there is no question of setting the clock back. The point of studying past exegetical methods is to recognize them as belonging to the past. It is not a question of some kind of nostalgic return to a golden age of spiritual interpretation. To study an exegete like Tyconius is to assume the past, rather than to repeat it. More, it is to stand beside a man of the Scriptures, who is at the same time a man of the Church as he probes the reasons why these writings are sacred for him and for his community.

This relationship between Scripture and community remains a fundamental question. It is a question for the scholar in the field of comparative religion. It is a question for the Sunday homilist. It is a question for anyone who reads Scripture today. In pondering this question, it may be argued that in Tyconius, the author of the first treatise on hermeneutics in the Western Church, we are in distinguished company.

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<sup>19</sup>Burghardt, "On Early Christian Exegesis," 115.