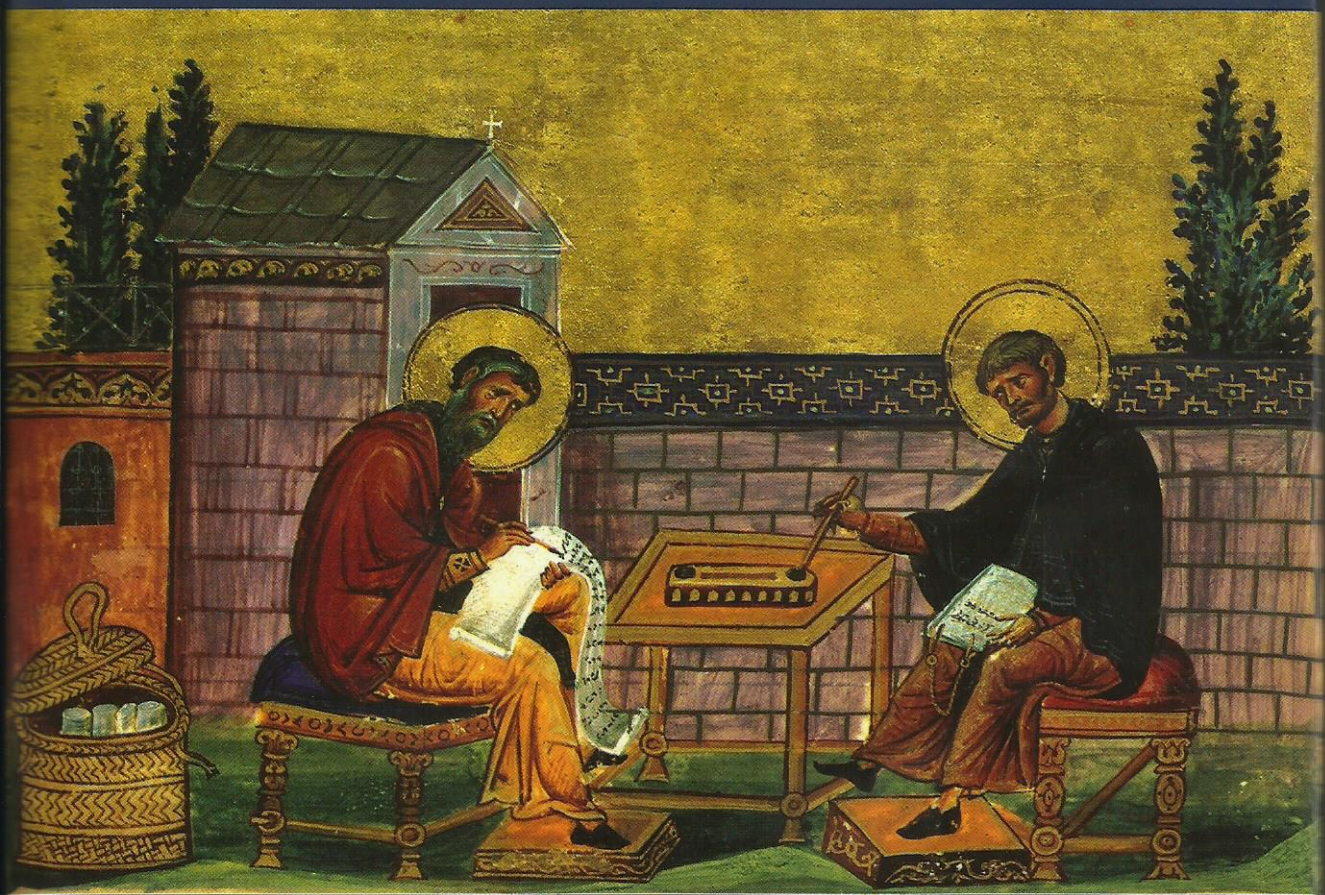


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Saint John the Damascene Theology, Image and Melody



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The Canon for the Feast of the Prophet Elijah and its Relation to 1-2 Kings Biblical Narrative and its Liturgical Interpretation

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Introduction

The canon to the prophet Elijah has no place in the modern publications of the Damascene's writings.¹ The most important evidence we have about its authorship appears in the canon's title where it is attributed to "the monk John" (Ἰωάννου Μοναχοῦ).² The Tradition of the Orthodox Church sees in this phrase one of the convincing arguments to give the authorship to John the Damascene.

Almost 60 canons are attributed to the saint principally in the Octoechos, Pentecostarion and Menaion. His most representative canons for feasts are the ones dedicated to Easter, Pentecost, Christmas, Epiphany, and the Virgin Mary's Dormition (see Ephrem). Although the authorship of Elijah's canon is much discussed, there are several reasons why this conference is one of the most appropriate contexts for its study. First, the Damascene is one of the creators and main composers of this liturgical

(1) It is neither compiled in the canon collection of Migne (96:817-855) nor in Kotter's series of six volumes. Migne 96 only contains the following canons: Theophany, Pentecost, Easter, Dormition, Ascension and Annunciation.

(2) The Easter canon says it clearly: "the canon was composed by John Damascene (Pentecostarion, p. 2ar). Other canons say simply "Monk John." The Pentecost canon says "John Arcalla." All these titles have been considered by Tradition as a proof of the Damascene's authorship (see Archimandrite Ephrem's commentaries on each canon).

genre. Second, the canon to Elijah was at least written under the theological influence of his poetic work. Third, Church Tradition attributes it to him without much disagreement. Finally, it is worth mentioning Louth's opinion stating that studies centered on Byzantine liturgical poetry are just beginning, and much remains to be said about the authors (253) of this liturgical poetry. The present study is intended as a small contribution in this regard.

Since there is no critical edition available, the best version of the canon to Elijah we have so far is the one preserved in the Greek Menaion (p. 107-111). However, its literary form of an acrostic has allowed us to clearly define which troparia form part of the original composition.

This article is not intended to be an exhaustive interpretation of the canon, but rather a comparative study of a liturgical text explicitly inspired by a complex system of biblical pericopes. We shall see how the author makes use of biblical narrative, which are his areas of interest, how he develops his "canonical reading" of the Bible (Childs) and what is the message that the author finds in the biblical text for the edification of the liturgy celebrants. The article as a whole aims to elucidate the method of biblical interpretation applied by the poet for the completion of his work.

The Canons and the Canon to Elijah

This paragraph deals with the nature of liturgical canons and the special features of the one dedicated to the prophet Elijah. Yazigi (77-86) offers an important presentation of the evolution of the kontakia into canons of the morning services of the Orthodox Church up until the time when they become official in the early 9th Century. (Louth, 256)

The troparia in the canons are interlinked through two key axes, one based on the biblical odes and the other on the feast of the day. The nine odes in the Orthros service (morning prayers) are the following:

1	The Song of Moses	Ex 15:1-19
2	The Song of Moses	De 32:1-43
3	The Prayer of Anna	1Sa 2:1-10
4	The Prayer of Habakkuk	Hab 3:1-19
5	The Prayer of Isaiah	Isa 26:9-20
6	The Prayer of Jonas	Jon 2:3-10
7	The Prayer of Azariah	Dan 3:26-56 (LXX)
8	The Hymn of the Three Holy Children	Dan 3:57-88 (LXX)+ 3 verses
9	The Prayer of Maria + The Prayer of Zachariah	Lk 1:46-55.68-79

Already, the choice of these nine odes witnesses to an exultant and joyful reading of the Bible, expressing in different ways the conviction of God's assistance and salvation. The nine odes form an anthology of hymns that celebrate God's deeds throughout the history of salvation. It is like reading a Psalter of praise scattered everywhere in the biblical canon. It is from this perspective that the LXX's manuscripts compiled them as an appendix to the Book of Psalms, and Rahlfs' LXX publishes them in the same place under the title *Nouem Odae Ecclesiae Graecae* (The nine odes of the Greek church, p. 164-78).

To this thematic line the poet adds the most outstanding aspects of the feast. Undoubtedly, the clearest example for the combination of subjects is to be found in the Easter canon, which was certainly written by the Damascene. In the case of Saint Elijah's canon, the author combines in a very creative way the leitmotifs of the odes with the decisive moments in the narrative of the prophet's life. This will be dealt with below.

The canon to Saint Elijah was written in the form of an acrostic, i.e. the first letters of each troparion form all together a sentence saying: "Dancing I praise the wonders of Elijah" (Αἰνῶ χορεύων Ἡλίου τὰ θαύματα). The Greek Menaion (107) explicitly points out the acrostic's presence at the start of the canon, even though the Menaion's version includes new troparia for the Virgin (theotokia). We shall study only those troparia that belong to the acrostic, which include two theotokia in the fourth and the eighth odes. There are 25 letters in the acrostic Greek sentence, and therefore there are 25 troparia to be studied according to the following classification: seven odes of 3 troparia each and one ode of 4 troparia. Each troparion has an average of 26 words in Greek.

The canon does not include any troparion for the second ode, which was read only in the Lenten morning services because of its penitential character, unlike the rest of the odes, in which the character of praise and exultation dominates, (Foundoulis, 254) the canon to Elijah, which was intended to be read on 20 July, consists altogether of only 8 odes.

To conclude with my comment on the form it should be added that the canon has only 3 odes where the end of their troparia is a common refrain: the third ode ("there is none holy save Thee, O Lord"), the seventh ode ("Blessed is the God of our Fathers") and the eighth ode ("O ye works, praise ye the Lord, and supremely exalt Him unto all the ages"). The seventh and eighth odes' refrains are excerpts from the songs in Dan 3:26-56, Dan 3:57-88 respectively.

The Elijah Cycle in Kings

The Elijah cycle extends from the prophetic call of God (1Ki 17:1) up to the prophet's being taken up in a chariot of fire (2Ki 2:18). Some biblical scholars believe the Elijah cycle ends in 2Ki 1:18 and that the rapture to heaven is the beginning of Elisha's cycle. (Walsh-Begg, 251, Gonzalez, 176-8) Since obviously this is a transitional paragraph between the two cycles, and since the ninth ode of the canon refers to it explicitly, there is no reason to exclude 2Ki 2:1-18 from the Elijah cycle here.

The order of chapters 1Ki 20-22 varies slightly between the original Hebrew and the Septuagint. The scenes, as displayed in the table below, follow the Greek text, and are delimited according to the methods for the narrative analysis. (Egger, 66-69; Marguerat, 51-66) The table also includes the number of the odes that refer to each scene:

Passage	Subject	Odes
1Ki 17:1-6	Elijah by the brook Cherith	1 – 3
1Ki 17:7-24	Elijah in Phoenicia: nourishment and resurrection	3 – 4
1Ki 18:1-19	Elijah meets King Ahab	---
1Ki 18:20-40	Elijah and the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel	5 – 6
1Ki 18:41-46	The drought ends	6
1Ki 19:1-18	Elijah flees to Beersheba. The theophany of Horeb	6 – 7
1Ki 19:19-21	Elisha's call	---
1Ki 21:1-29	Nabot's vineyard	8
1Ki 20:1-43	The Aramean wars	---
1Ki 22:1-54	The Aramean wars	---
2Ki 1:1-18	The announcement of Ahab's son's death	8
2Ki 2:1-18	The taking up of Elijah to heaven	9

The cycle of Elijah in the books of Kings is not a detailed biography of the prophet, but rather a series of independent events. (González, 176)

It is a mosaic of scenes that outline the identity of a prophet, about whose origins we know too little. The narratives about Elijah reflect a certain similarity with some key characters of the Old Testament, especially those of Moses and Abraham. Elijah's flight from queen Jezebel and his encounter with God in the wilderness remind us of the stories of Moses, how he escaped from Pharaoh and met the Lord on Horeb, "the mountain of God" (see Ex 33:18-23, 34:5-8). Elijah is also linked to Abraham when he is said to have passed by Beersheba (1Ki 19:3; Gen 21:33).

These features set his prophecies to the caliber of the faith founders' one. Elijah, as a new Moses, sees and experiences the presence of the Lord, who comforts him so that he may continue witnessing to his faith. The condemnation of the murder against Naboth repeats a literary, social, and theological paradigm that had already occurred in other moments of the Deuteronomistic history; for example in 2 Samuel 12 where Nathan rebukes David for killing Uriah. In both cases it is a prophetic denunciation against the abuse of authority and the violation of what today we would call fundamental human rights.

The Aramaic war scenes (Ch. 20 & 22) are gathered together in the Septuagint version of 1 Kings. Therefore, it becomes even more evident that they were added to Elijah's sequences. Modern authors consider that these two chapters are composed from different sources (Walsh - Begg, NJBC I, 268), and have no relation to Elijah's cycle. Indeed, neither the king nor the prophet has a name. Undoubtedly, the author of the canon was aware of the contents' divergence and gave them no echo in his work.

Besides the Aramaic wars, the author of the canon does not mention two scenes that are specific to Elijah's cycle: Elijah's meeting with Obadiah and Ahab (1Ki 18:1-19) and the calling of Elisha (1Ki 19:19-21). On the one hand, the first scene was dropped because it is understood as a mere preparation for the sacrifice on Mt. Carmel. On the other hand, the calling of Elisha was excluded in order to highlight Elisha's succession in troparion 9.2.

The cycle ends with the prophet's ascension to heaven in a chariot of fire (2Ki 2:1-18) and the transmission of his work to his disciple Elisha. This end is triumphant and rare among the books of the Old Testament. It is this scene that inspired the discourse on Elijah's return, which was already reflected in Mal 3:22-24 and Si 48:9-10. Elijah's return is one of the key foundations for Early Jewish eschatology (see Mt 17:10-13). The Synoptic Gospels affirm that Elijah's return was manifested in the works and preaching of John the Baptist (Matthew 11:7-14, Mark 9:9-13, Luke 1:13-17).

The Poet and the Deuteronomistic History

As for the comments on the form, the table above shows how the poet constantly follows the structure of the Deuteronomistic narrative. In other words, the contents of the odes follow the development of the story in 1-2 Kings. Therefore, the plots that make up the macro-narrative are also present in the canon. The poet obviously excludes chapters 20 and 22 because they do not speak of the prophet but of the Aramaic wars and, as it has been noted above, they were composed from different sources than those used for Elijah's story.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the poet reads the text of 1-2 Kings in Greek. This is obvious, for instance, if we compare proper and geographic names, which are identical to those in the LXX, with the exception of Zarephath: Ahab (Αχάαβ 1Ki 17:1 and in troparion 8.1); Thebaites (θεσβίτης in 1Ki 17:1 and in troparion 9.1-3), Elijah (Ηλίας in 1Ki 18:14 and in troparion 5.2). The exception of Zarephath (Ζαρεπήατη in 1Ki 17:9 and Σαραφθία in troparion 3.3) could be explained by the influence of any Semitic language spoken in the area of Saint Saba's Monastery (Aramaic or Arabic), the place where the author lived. One might also consider that the author is using a different translation of the Old Testament than the LXX, since some other terms common to the canon and the Old Testament differ with the LXX.

One of the most important terms in the canon is the noun *miracle*

(θαῦμα), which occurs 3 times in the canon (twice in ode 1 and once in the acrostic) although it is not the most common form of the noun in the LXX. There we find rather θαυμασίος. Nevertheless, neither of these forms is used in the Deuteronomistic history at all. Another key term that differs between the canon and the biblical text is the one for rain. In the canon appears the noun ὄμβρος (6.3,3), while the LXX uses the term ὑετός for the chapters on Elijah.

Two terms of no less importance are the nouns ravens (κόραξ 1Ki 17:4 and troparion 3.1) and zeal (ζῆλος 1Ki 19:10.14 and troparion 5.3). In both cases, the canon and the LXX agree on the forms. It is worth noting that the word zeal rarely occurs in the Deuteronomistic history, although it is one of the most important characteristics of Elijah, especially when he acts against the false prophets on Mt. Carmel (1Ki 19:10.14). In fact, in the Tradition of the church, “zealous” has become the major epithet of Elijah. “O Elijah the Zealot” is the way the first troparion after the Old Testament readings addresses the prophet in the Vespers service, even though the expression does not exist as such in the Deuteronomistic writings.

Moreover, it is certain that the author is not reading the text in Hebrew. There is plenteous evidence for this. The most convincing is the author’s use of the verb “to breathe on” (ἐμφυσάω) in the Troparion 4.3 to refer to a healing gesture of the prophet. This verb is the same in the LXX version of 1Ki 17:21. However, it is very different from the one used in Hebrew for the same passage, which is «to stretch oneself on» (תַּשְׁבֵּט).³ Furthermore, neither the term Tishbite nor the noun ravens are understood with the second meaning they have in Hebrew. The former can also mean “inhabitant,” and the latter stands also for “Arabs.” However, none of these senses are taken by the Christian author. Besides, the similarities of vocabulary between the Damascene’s canon and the Old Testament translations into Greek have

(3) Although the Damascene affirms that the OT canon consists of 22 books, as the number of letters in the Hebrew Alphabet (De Fide Orthodoxa IV; NPNF 2.09, p. 659), this does not necessarily mean that he knew Hebrew, but rather that, as in several other opportunities, he quotes Cyril of Jerusalem’s Catechism (see 4.35).

been pointed out above. A final piece of evidence to be considered is the Greek form adopted for the town name Zarephath (Σαραφθία), which is far from its Biblical Hebrew form (צָרְפָּתָה).

Some Specific Examples of Interpretation

The troparia 2 and 3 of the fourth ode have as a subject the resurrection of the son of the widow of Zarephath (1Ki 17:17-24). Here the poet focuses on the widow's insistence on the prophet's intervention, she "reviled and urged the Prophet to raise him up again" (4.2; 1Ki 17:18). In other words, the poet highlights the knot of the narrative plot or what is called in semiotics the *must-do* statement (Marguerat 80). He goes directly to the reason why the prophet must intervene; he selects the most dramatic moments in the narratives. His interpretation is not without a method, but rather directly engaged with the text.

While interpreting the same pericope on the widow of Zarephath, the canon refers to the Trinity (4.3). The poet sees in the threefold breathing of the prophet a sign of the Trinity. It does not say that the prophet revealed the mystery of the trinity, but rather that he gave an unexplained indication of it (the verb used in 4.3. is ὑποσημαίνω). This is an allegorical interpretation of the act. The breath motif is also present when Elisha raises the Shunammite's son «putting his mouth upon his mouth" (2Ki 4:33-36). A parallel scene is also present in Acts 20:10, where Paul fell on the young dead (Luke here is faithful to the Hebrew text on Elijah).⁴ Undoubtedly, the breath motif is related to the breath of life given by God to Adam in Genesis 2:7 where the LXX uses the same verb. There is a second reference to the Trinity in the canon (5.2), though this time without much connection to the biblical narrative, and the Trinity appears only as a synonym for God.

Ode 5 is inspired by the pericope on the sacrifice on Mt. Carmel (1Ki 18:20-40). While troparion 5.2 presents Elijah as the *prophet* who put

(4) The Lucan diptych has a wide reception of Elijah's narratives. (Croatto)

the false prophets to shame, the following troparion speaks of the *priest* who sacrifices false priests. Actually, the Deuteronomistic history speaks only of the prophets of Baal (vs. 20.22.25.29.40). The author of the canon focuses on the act of slaughtering of priests, and sees in Elijah a model of the true priest of the Lord. As a matter of fact, the Deuteronomistic history does not highlight this feature of the prophet; it rather mentions it briefly in the final verse of the scene (v. 40) as the natural consequence of having overcome evil. The slaughtering of idolaters was inspired by Moses' action against the first apostasy of the people of God, after their Exodus from Egypt (Ex 32:25-28). The message is clear: God defeats evil, and does not allow it to expand within the elected community. Therefore, the image of Elijah raising his sword is not supposed to be interpreted as a vindictive or violent Elijah, but as the defender of the people's faith. Even though the Deuteronomistic author does not see in Elijah's sword his favorite image, Middle Eastern Christians of various denominations still use it frequently to demonstrate that their prophet defends them with zeal against the "apostasy" of any given "false prophet."

In 1Ki 18:20-40, rather than Elijah's zeal, what is really at stake is the religious faithfulness of the people. The Deuteronomist develops a strong criticism against the community of believers. Elijah uses the opportunity of the contest, and with irony and sarcasm tries to wake up his people from perplexity and make them return to the true worship. The poet of the canon subtly rescues this message and focuses on it more than once when he says: "The Law of the Fathers showed thee forth as a true Intercessor" (5.1) and calls him "a worshiper of truth" (5.2). Troparion 6.1 also stresses this message, while interpreting the primary meaning of the scene of Carmel.

Another of the most prominent biblical themes in the canon is Christ's Transfiguration, which first appears in troparion 7.3, 8.3 and 9.3. It is essential to mention that the poet is inspired to develop this topic because of Elijah's appearance in the Transfiguration scene and its connection with the mystical experience of the prophet at Mount Horeb (Sinai). In 1 Kings 19 Elijah goes back to the roots of the Jewish faith, when he confronts

Jezebel's death threats (v. 1). He goes to Horeb to safeguard the alliance and reestablish the faith in its purest expression. The Deuteronomist links Elijah with Moses (see Ex 3; 33:18-34:9, 19 and 24) and presents him as the new leader of the people, who is truly faithful to the Mosaic covenant. It is this theology which inspires the Evangelists to mention Moses and Elijah as the two faithful witnesses of Jesus' transfiguration. And this is why, after this scene, the poet cannot but repeatedly invoke Elijah's key role as a witness of Jesus' doctrine and visitation.

The location of the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor is considered erroneous by modern biblical scholars. In ancient times there were several attempts to define the location of the mountain, and Saint Cyril of Jerusalem's support for Mount Tabor gained wide acceptance in the Christian Tradition (Catechism 12:16). However, the mention of Caesarea Philippi before the transfiguration (Mk 8:27) suggests Mount Hermon (today the Lebanese Jabal ash-Sheikh) as the high mountain that Jesus chose. Mount Hermon was the most symbolic mountain in the area because of its height. Nevertheless, the Synoptic Gospels' silence about the name of "the mountain" suggests an allusion to Sinai, which is the mountain of Moses' and Elijah's theophanies. The poet prefers distinguishing the uniqueness of Christ's Theophany, and gives the name of the mountain as it was known in the Christian Tradition of the Palestinian area.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the close relationship existing between the central themes of the odes and the themes chosen for each troparion concerning Elijah's narrative. There are odes where the link is rather formal. For example, they use in the canon a refrain from the biblical ode as we indicated above for odes 3, 7 and 8. Here, the canon writer sees a kind of continuity in the celebration of the saving acts as described in the ode with the ones done by the prophet in his canon. The prophet Elijah comes as a continuation of what Anna, Azariah, and the three young men held in their songs respectively. Beyond these examples there are troparia whose relationship with the ode is connected either with the use of a certain terminology or with the aforementioned leitmotifs. For instance,

the prayer of Jonah (Jonah 2:3-10) speaks of the idol worshipers (v. 9) and, of course, uses the sea motif. Both elements in the troparion of the sixth ode are inspired by 1Ki 18:41-46. From the sea comes the rain (v. 44) in a hand-shaped cloud, which clearly represents God's blessing (see v. 46). The idolaters appear in troparion 6.2 with the expression "the frenzy of that woman, which slew the Prophets." Moreover, Elijah is presented in conflict with the idolaters in every troparion of the sixth ode.

A final example can be drawn from Anna's song (1Sa 2:1-10), the third biblical ode. Anna evokes key motifs from the Old Testament theology on justice for the poor and the humiliation of the rich oppressor. The canon writer sees in the account of the food supply to the widow a narrative exemplification of the contents of Anna's hymns (troparion 3.2 and 3.3). Also the troparia of the fifth biblical ode (Isa 26:9-20) contain some common motifs: the blind trust in the Lord (v. 9) that overthrows the enemies with zeal and anger (v. 11). This hymn of Isaiah offers the ideal context for interpreting the contest with the false prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel (see Troparion 5.3).

Conclusions

The morning canon system is a complex web of interlinked biblical texts that has two main goals: to celebrate God's saving deeds throughout history and to highlight the particular role of the feast of the day within the broad framework of the history of salvation.

The liturgical text presents a committed reading of the biblical text that combines historical data, allegorical interpretation, and dogmatic terminology as developed in the Christian Tradition. The poet makes every effort to remain faithful to the content of each biblical pericope and to bring to light the interconnection existing in this symphony of faith witnesses. The canon to Saint Elijah is a model of what modern criticism would call the "Canonical Approach." The canon writer shows a high level of knowledge, not only in the field of biblical theology, but also in the field of the interpretation of history in the Christian Tradition.

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