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Can Anything Good Come out of Allegory? The Cases of Origen and Augustine

Whatever its importance for the formulation of Christian doctrine, the patristic period has not been renowned for its biblical exegesis. This is hardly surprising when we consider how poorly equipped and even indifferent the early church was to handling the text of the Hebrew Scriptures. With a very few exceptions it preferred to work from the familiar Septuagint.

But there is an even more fundamental reason why the patristic period has such a poor reputation as far as hermeneutics goes. This was a period when Christian and pagan alike were loath to accept that their authoritative texts were to be taken at face value. A deeper meaning or even the one true meaning was thought to lie beneath the surface of the narrative. As a result interpretation often appeared more a revelation of the exegete's ingenuity and imagination than a disciplined inquiry controlled by the text itself.

I would not dissent from such criticisms of the Patristic era. Yet I feel it would be unfortunate to dwell on these negative features. If we do grant the early church notable achievements in the field of Systematic Theology, this surely means that in some areas at least they did grasp the essential message of Scripture. There were constraints operating on their interpretation of Scripture, however much the allegorical method might seem to open the door to anything and everything. Some recent studies have highlighted the importance of hermeneutics in certain of the doctrinal debates of this period. These have made it clear that patristic exegesis was neither uniform nor unsophisticated. I do not have the time to deal with these here. Instead, I will be concerned with allegory as it appears in the writings of two of the early church's leading figures — Origen and Augustine.

Origen and a rationale for allegory

It is the name of Origen which is most commonly associated with allegorical exegesis. And there can be no doubt that Origen was the

supreme embodiment of the allegorical tradition which flourished in the Alexandrian Church. In Protestant circles that has rarely been a claim to fame, but more an invitation to notoriety, since we tend to look on allegory as a crude device to foist one's own interpretation upon a passage of Scripture.¹

Origen, however, did not take a light attitude toward the Scriptures. On the contrary, his predilection for allegory derived in large measure from his high view of Scripture and from his insistence on tackling head-on apparent difficulties in the Scriptural text. Since the Scriptures were the composition of the Holy Spirit, it was for him axiomatic that their every word had significance and that they contained nothing unworthy of God.² That did not mean they were straightforward to understand; they reflected something of the profundity of the mind of God. Yet, the same God had indicated in the Scriptures the appropriate principles to ensure a correct approach.³ The result included a firm endorsement of allegory. This conclusion was based not simply on some isolated proof texts like Paul's treatment of Sarah and Hagar in Galatians 4; Origen believed that allegorical method permeated Scripture.⁴ Did not Jesus use parables for the specific purpose of differentiating between classes of hearers? The procedure even went back into the Old Testament. From the beginning of the long Psalm 78, where we find the words *I will open my mouth in a parable; I will utter dark sayings from of old*, it was clear to Origen that the Psalmist had discovered a hidden meaning to the historical narratives of Exodus and Numbers.

Origen made a basic distinction between the literal historical record and the eternal spiritual truths which must be gleaned from it. The value of such a distinction is obvious. Otherwise, the historical events of Scripture remain particular occurrences with no relevance beyond their immediate context. They need to be interpreted or transformed if they are to become vital realities to the church of a later day. To his basic distinction Origen added a further refinement whereby he recognized a tripartite structure in Scripture.⁵ For this too Origen adduced Scriptural proof notably, the Septuagint version of Prov. 22:20, which reads *Describe these things in a threefold way*, and the trichotomist view of man as body, soul and spirit, which in turn was suggested by

1 For a more constructive approach to allegory as a literary mode see Gerald Bostock, 'Allegory and the Interpretation of the Bible in Origen', in *Journal of Literature and Theology* 1, (1987), 39–53.

2 Origen's most systematic treatment of Scripture and its exegesis is to be found in *On First Principles*, 4:1–3.

3 *Ibid.*, 4:2:4.

4 Gal. 4:21–31, the only place in Scripture specifically to mention allegory. For further passages of Paul which Origen cites as instances of allegory see M. F. Wiles in *The Cambridge History of the Bible Vol 1*, (Cambridge 1970), 466.

5 Cf. Bostock *art. cit.* 43–4.

1 Thessalonians 5:23.⁶ This implied a division of Scripture into a literal (or historical), a moral and a mystical sense. To illustrate this, at Song of Solomon 2:5 the foxes that destroy the vines are interpreted on a moral level as the sins that corrupt the soul, and then on a mystical level as the heresies that beset the church.

Origen did not, however, systematically apply this threefold division.⁷ Indeed, he recognized that some passages did not admit of a literal sense.⁸ Thus, Origen took the account of the wedding at Cana in Galilee (from John's gospel) as a testimony to the possibility of either a twofold or a threefold sense of Scripture, because the stone jars which feature in the story held *two or three measures each*.

Origen also urged that church tradition supported his viewpoint. In the preface to his work *On First Principles* he could state that it was one of the plain teachings of Christianity that *The contents of Scripture are the outward forms of certain mysteries and images of divine things. On this point the entire church is unanimous, that while the whole law is spiritual, the inspired meaning is not recognized by all, but only by those who are gifted with the grace of the Holy Spirit in the word of wisdom and knowledge.*⁹ Later in the same work Origen was bold enough to affirm that even the dumbest believer was convinced that there were certain mystical arrangements which the Scriptures disclosed.¹⁰ Origen could, therefore, claim the support of past tradition as well as current attitudes within the church. Herein he was perfectly justified, at least as far as the church of Alexandria was concerned.¹¹ That is not to deny that allegory had its critics in Origen's day both inside and outside the church.¹² Origen recognized the challenge they posed and characteristically met it head on. To him the recognition of different senses in Scripture was a matter of spiritual life and death. The reason for the unbelief of the Jews, as well as of the Marcionites and gnostics, was their bondage to the literal sense of Scripture.¹³ In line with this, Origen regularly interpreted the contrast between 'spirit' and 'letter' in Paul's letters as the contrast between two very different hermeneutics the spiritual and literal interpretations of Scripture.¹⁴

6 Origen, *op. cit.*, 4:2:4.

7 For the limits of these distinctions and their relationship to later medieval schemes for the understanding of Scripture see Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, (ET, Edinburgh 1989), 79–80.

8 Origen, *op. cit.*, 4:2:5.

9 Origen, *op. cit.*, pref. 8. This and other translations are taken from that of G. W. Butterworth (London, SPCK, 1936).

10 *Ibid.*, 4:2:2.

11 Cf. Hanson *op. cit.*, 248–50.

12 Bostock, *art. cit.*, 48.

13 Crouzel, *op. cit.*, 64.

14 Crouzel, *op. cit.* 62 rightly warns that for Origen the distinction between the literal and the spiritual meaning does not exactly correspond to our modern usage.

Seeing that allegory met with widespread approval in the church of Origen's day and for that matter among educated pagans, we might be tempted to conclude that Origen used allegory because it was conventional to do so. But this overlooks the positive enthusiasm Origen had for allegory. He was confident that allegory, the key to the spiritual meaning, put into true perspective those problems which critics encountered with the bare text of Scripture. Moreover, allegorization was exactly the procedure Origen expected to have to bring to writings penned by a God whose being was beyond man's comprehension and whose ways were unfathomable.¹⁵

Origen's use of allegory

Origen's approach did generally work well when Scripture clearly intended a metaphorical sense. For example, the offending eye or hand, which Christ warns his disciples to cut off if they are not to end in hell, cannot represent an actual limb of the body. Origen prefers to apply it to a relative or friend who may be trying to divert us from the true path.¹⁶ Allegory again seems appropriate in the mild form where Origen proposes a generalized application of a particular incident. Thus, the account of Christ walking on water and the reaction of his disciples in the boat (from Matthew 14) may yield lessons for Christians in times of difficulty or temptation.¹⁷ Many preachers today would follow a similar tack. But such general lessons are less common in Origen than we might expect.

We would, however, be less happy with Origen's readiness to exploit the slightest of hints to go in search of an unexpected hidden meaning. We might think that Matthew supplies an excellent key to understand Christ's parable of the wheat and the tares, but Origen takes the concluding phrase 'He who has ears, let him hear' as a summons to explore a deeper meaning. This leads Origen to work with the phrase 'the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their father' quite independently of its original context.¹⁸ As a result, our minds are turned away from the original thrust of the parable to a new emphasis which is Origen's own.

Origen also used allegory to justify some of the more unattractive features of Scripture. This emerges even from a comparatively minor point the poor literary style of Scripture as it was seen by those trained in the canons of ancient rhetoric. This posed no problem personally for Origen, as it was to do later for another scholar, Jerome. But Origen

15 Origen, *op. cit.*, 4:3:14.

16 Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*, 13:24-5.

17 *Ibid.*, 11:5.

18 *Ibid.*, 10:2-3.

knew that this difficulty was keenly felt by some. And he did not try to deny that it had a basis. He explained it along the lines used by the apostle Paul to highlight the contrast between the splendour of the gospel message and the frailty of the evangelist — *We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us.*¹⁹ There was a similar contrast between the unprepossessing external form of the Scriptures and the glorious riches underneath. The discerning reader would know thereby that he was not to remain content with a literal understanding. He was meant to look deeper. As a further corollary to this, the spiritual or allegorical understanding was far more important than the literal.

We might feel that this approach was not too far-fetched, but Origen was on more shaky ground when he adopted a similar approach to those places where Scriptures said things that were unreasonable or impossible if taken in their literal sense. For Origen believed and was not ashamed to say that Scripture recorded events which either could not have possibly happened, or if they could, had in fact not been the case since they were unsuited to the characters concerned.²⁰ A good example of this is the story of Jesus' Cleansing of the Temple. Origen believed that the Johannine account of this was totally inconsistent with that found in the Synoptics — *I for my part assume that it is impossible for those who admit in these matters no sense beyond that of straightforward narrative to establish that the apparent contradiction is really consistent.*²¹ He concludes that John's account is allegorical, though he is uncertain what the allegory represents. He offers several possibilities, including that of Christ's supersession of the Mosaic Law, since Christ threw out animals which were to be sacrificed.²² We might think this is a good example of an impossibility Origen has discovered by dint of careful biblical scholarship, and certainly he has been praised on that very account.²³ But I wonder if this touches on the real reason for Origen's rejection of the historicity of this incident. It would not have been difficult for him to harmonize John with the Synoptics — a technique he is happy to use elsewhere.²⁴ Origen throws a rather different light on his outlook when he states that the incident was impossible because it was unlikely that Jesus would have been allowed by the authorities to clear out the court as he was *thought by them to be of humble origin*. This seems to me a strange argument, illustrating how subjective his criterion of unreasonableness could become.

19 2 Cor. 4:7 cited in Origen *op. cit.*, 4:1:7.

20 *Ibid.*, 4:3:4.

21 Origen, *Comm. on John*, 10:20–25.

22 A full list is given by Wiles *op. cit.*, 469.

23 E.g. by Hanson *op. cit.*, 212–224, who talks of Origen's 'rationalism'.

24 Cf. Wiles, *op. cit.*, 471.

mere text and historical narrative; for each event to those who read the Bible more intelligently is clearly a symbol of something as well. Thus in this way his Crucifixion contains the truth indicated by the words 'I have been crucified with Christ' and by the sense of the words 'far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world'. His death was necessary because 'the death he died, he died to sin once for all', and because the righteous man says he is 'becoming like him in his death' and 'if we have died with him, we shall also live with him.'³¹ Origen is not emphasizing our modern insight that history requires some interpretation if it is not to remain a jumble of miscellaneous facts. His point is a different one. History (or perhaps we should say the historical record) is only meaningful as a pointer to deeper, spiritual truths belonging to a world more permanent than the material world of our senses. History, as Hanson puts it, is *meaningless unless a parable is derived from it, unless it is made into an allegory.*³² This is further evidence that allegorization plays a vital part in Origen's spirituality; it is not simply a handy device to tackle some of the problems in Scripture.

Origen affirmed that the laws as well as the historical narrative of Scripture contained aspects that were unreasonable or impossible.³³ Needless to say, all commands in this category, whether they be laws of Moses or commands from the Sermon on the Mount, were to be allegorized. The examples provided by Origen again illustrate some subjectivity in his approach.³⁴ Into the unreasonable commands go the prohibition against eating the kite, which no one would want to eat anyway, and the command to kill all Jewish children still uncircumcised after the eighth day, on the rather different ground that such action would be cruel. Among impossible commands feature the permission to eat the goat-stag, which Origen claims to be non-existent, and the prohibition against eating the gier-eagle, which Origen says has never been captured by man. Perhaps Origen would have been less confident in dismissing the literal sense in these commands if he had had greater knowledge both of the biblical text and of the realities of the natural world. In some of his New Testament examples he betrays an insensitivity to Jewish idioms. He complains, for example, that it would be useless to cut out only the right eye if it caused someone to stumble through (say) adultery — both eyes would have to be removed if the temptation were to be averted! Again, the command to turn the left cheek after the right has been struck seems nonsensical to Origen on the curious ground that it is always the left cheek that is struck in such cases.³⁵

31 Origen, *Against Celsus*, 2:69.

32 Hanson, *op. cit.*, 280.

33 Origen, *On First Principles*, 4:2:9.

34 The subsequent examples all come from *ibid.*, 4:3:2-3.

35 Cf. Hanson's remark at *op. cit.*, 240 — *Alexandria must have been singularly deficient in left-handed men of uneven temper!*

Just as Origen did not want his readers to run away with the impression that he denied the historicity of everything in Scripture, so he was adamant that some laws were to be taken literally. Again, our inclination must be to ask what criteria he set out for this. He does not mention any in the relevant section from his work *On First Principles* which deals with biblical exegesis, but in his *Commentary on Romans* he makes much use of the idea of a natural law available in some way to everyone. This innate sense of natural justice determines which laws are to be taken literally and which not — *What is more consonant with our natural feeling than that men should not do to others what they would not have done to themselves? Natural law then can agree with the law of Moses according to the spirit, not according to the letter.*³⁶ Though Origen's point is fair enough, it will be criticized by some as an insufficient safeguard against subjectivity.

Whether intentionally or otherwise, Origen emphasized those discrepancies and 'absurdities' he found on the face of Scripture. This might seem to us an error of judgment, since it could lead to an undervaluing of Scripture and its authority. Yet, Joseph Wilson Trigg has pointed out that in his own day Origen's approach formed an effective apologetic stance on two fronts.³⁷ He could agree with those critics inside and especially outside the church who found inconsistencies and statements unworthy of God in the literal text of Scripture. But at the same time Origen could stand alongside those believers who held that every word of Scripture had been inspired of God. Origen could accommodate both positions with his insistence that God had deliberately planted such absurdities in Scripture so as to stimulate us to look for a deeper meaning. I doubt, however, if Origen would today satisfy either biblical critics or upholders of biblical inerrancy. In the third-century the situation was very different; there was a long tradition of pagan allegorizing of key texts like Homer for very similar motives to those which prompted Origen and others to find allegory in the Bible.

Different types of Christian

Origen, as we have seen, found Scriptural warrant for allegorization. He also found a rationale for its practice in the delineation in Scripture of different categories of Christian. In particular, he pointed to passages like Hebrews 6:1f. which distinguished between the 'elementary doctrine' of Christ and teachings suitable to maturity. Another favourite passage was 1 Corinthians 2:6f. with its talk of the mature being able

³⁶ *Comm. on Rom.*, 2:9.

³⁷ J. W. Trigg, *Origen — The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church* (SCM, London, 1983), 127.

to discern a 'secret and hidden wisdom of God'.³⁸ Such passages, combined with church tradition and pastoral experience, illustrated that there were different levels of spiritual understanding. The literal sense of Scripture remained useful in that it did give adequate knowledge for the salvation of simpler believers. In the preface to his work *On First Principles* he writes — *The holy apostles, when preaching the faith of Christ, took certain doctrines, those namely which they believed to be the necessary ones, and delivered them in the plainest terms to all believers, even to such as appeared to be somewhat dull in the investigation of divine knowledge.*³⁹

Sometimes for whatever reason believers did not progress beyond this sense. Here I find something of an unresolved tension in Origen.⁴⁰ If he had followed the passages in Hebrews and 1 Corinthians, he should have argued that maturing in Christian knowledge was a duty on all disciples and that it was their fault if they did not make progress. And Origen did take that line on many occasions, emphasizing and himself exemplifying the duty to search the Scriptures.⁴¹ He also slated certain literalists for Judaising and yet others for a crude version of the 'Health, Wealth and Prosperity' gospel.⁴² He clearly felt the norm was to begin with the literal sense of Scripture, and then on finding that this threw up certain inconsistencies or impossibilities, to look into the spiritual sense. But there remain other passages in which Origen does suggest that it is a matter of divine gift as to who could delve more deeply into Scripture.⁴³ So, this deeper sense would not be open to everyone. It was a simple matter of experience that some believers did not progress to the spiritual or allegorical sense. Origen did not, however, write them off and had no doubt on occasions to minister to them — one of the great boons resulting from theologians having to preach to all sorts and conditions of men!

Effectively, Origen combined the valid insight about our having to work at Scripture if we are to unlock its treasures with a rather more dubious theory of a hidden meaning. In the process he tended to deter the very research into the plain text of Scripture which would have ironed out many of the inconsistencies and impossibilities he claimed to find. Origen's being a pioneer in the field of extensive biblical exposition made his example the more unfortunate. Richard Hanson has observed that Origen lived at a time when even ordinary believers

38 E.g. Origen, *On First Principles*, 4:1:7.

39 *Ibid.*, pref. 3.

40 Wiles finds a similar inconsistency — cf. *op. cit.*, 468–70.

41 Origen, *op. cit.*, 4:3:5.

42 Cf. Hanson, *op. cit.*, 149–52.

43 E.g. Origen, *op. cit.*, pref. 3, where he mentions the gifts of 'language, wisdom and knowledge.' cf. the *Philocalia* 10, where Origen says that the effective Scripture reader has to have skills like that of a specialist herbalist or a surgeon.

engaged in much bible reading.⁴⁴ Origen took this for granted, and could not imagine a situation when Scripture would become a closed book as far as the man in the pew was concerned. Though this was far from being his intention, Origen did open the door for Scripture to be enshrouded in mystery as far as the ordinary believer was concerned, while preachers exercised their imagination and ingenuity in allegorizing the biblical text. Origen may be congenial to many today with his relatively undogmatic approach.⁴⁵ This followed from his acknowledgement that the depths of the knowledge of God were unfathomable and allowed him to accept several possible senses for a particular passage.⁴⁶ But, as we have seen, this is balanced with a reverence for the traditional Rule of Faith in the church. In our post-Reformation era, with its plethora of denominations, we are more suspicious of church traditions. We could not easily revert today to Origen's practice. There is neither the basic Scripture knowledge even from people in the pews nor the confidence that the whole of Scripture sets forth a coherent message. In our times allegorization would plunge us further into a sea of subjectivity, where Scripture would lose its remaining credibility in the eyes of the ordinary believer.

Pre-judgments

Modern insights on hermeneutics have highlighted the pre-judgments brought by the interpreter to the sacred text. These pre-judgments may have come from the interpreter's own religious tradition (including the Rule of Faith) or more generally from the society of which he is a member. No doubt, this can be applied to Origen. For example, his penchant for allegorization reflected Alexandrian Christianity. But there is a more serious way in which Origen's exegesis was affected by presuppositions. Origen believed that earthly and temporal realities were but pale shadows of the heavenly and the eternal. In effect, he subscribed to a form of Christian Platonism.⁴⁷ No doubt, this offered a helpful approach to certain parts of Scripture, but Origen tended to downplay those features of Scripture which highlight our earthly pilgrimage. Moreover, he assumed that those themes which he considered priorities would be included in Scripture.⁴⁸ If they were not apparent on the surface of Scripture, then they had to be excavated from under the surface by means of allegory. It was, for instance, to Origen's mind ridiculous to attribute to mere human

44 Hanson, *op. cit.*, 359–60.

45 Crouzel, *op. cit.*, 76.

46 Origen, *op. cit.*, 4:3:14.

47 Cf. Bostock *art. cit.*, 42 and 50.

48 Cf. *ibid.*, 4:2:7 for a list of those issues of doctrine Origen considers important.

beings the statements made of the King of Babylon in Isaiah 14 and of the Prince of Tyre in Ezekiel 28. These must refer to a spirit being, in this case Satan — an interpretation which persists in some quarters to this day.⁴⁹

But the suspicion remains that Origen has not allowed Scripture to set its own priorities. He has gone looking for what he considers important, and has duly found it, the only constraint on his subjectivity being his respect for what the Alexandrian church at that time considered orthodox doctrine and practice.⁵⁰

Nor is this danger unique to Origen. In the 17th century when debates over proper church government were intense with obvious political implications, the Scriptures were assumed by many (though certainly not by all) to speak directly to the issues raised in these controversies. As a result, the proper balance of Scriptural teaching tended to be obscured. Any scriptural hermeneutic must not only let Scripture set its own agenda but also respect the silences of Scripture under the principle the Reformers called 'the sufficiency of Scripture'. For this reason biblical theology must always have priority over systematic theology. With Origen I feel this position was reversed.

Augustine — the development of his views on the Bible

The young Augustine had far more problems than Origen with accepted Christian teaching. Interestingly, exegetical considerations played a prominent part in his spiritual odyssey prior to his conversion to the catholic faith. He tells us in his *Confessions* that his first serious study of the Scriptures undertaken in his youth left him unimpressed; they seemed too simple and lacking in the grandeur of style he had found in Cicero.⁵¹ This early exposure to the Christian Scriptures also made him vulnerable to the objections of the Manichees, who delighted in highlighting the crudities of the Old Testament —

Where does evil come from? and is God confined within a corporeal form? has he hair and nails? and can those [patriarchs] be considered righteous who had several wives at the same time and killed people and offered animals in sacrifice?⁵²

Questions such as these left Augustine troubled until he stumbled upon the preaching of Ambrose, Bishop of Milan. The latter's use of allegory, backed up by insistence on that favourite text of allegorists *the letter kills but the Spirit gives life* opened for Augustine a whole new

49 *Ibid.*, 1:5:4–5 and 4:3:9.

50 Hanson, *op. cit.* 371–3.

51 *Confessions*, 3:5.

52 *Ibid.*, 3:7. The translation is that of Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1991).

vista on the Old Testament.⁵³ It began to be a treasure house of mysteries rather than a collection of crude absurdities.

The influence of Ambrose's preaching proved gradual. Augustine tells us that this was a time of great personal agnosticism, but he was at least convinced that there was a God who cared for mankind and was sovereign over all. This God, he believed, would not have allowed the Scriptures to be regarded with such authority throughout the world if it had not been his will for men to come to know him through these very Scriptures.⁵⁴ It seems that the testimony of the church along with a belief in divine providence induced Augustine to accept the Scriptures as the word of God. Augustine would never cease to stress the testimony of the church. Thus, he preferred the Septuagint version to the original Hebrew of the Old Testament because he believed only the Holy Spirit would have wanted this to be so widely disseminated in those parts of the gentile world where people were destined to believe in Christ.⁵⁵ If this text had been used by the church over so many years with manifest profit, that was good enough for him.

To return to the text of the *Confessions*, Augustine used the memory of Ambrose's preaching as an occasion for further meditation on the character of Scripture. He represents the following as his own thoughts at the time, though no doubt they were influenced to some extent by later reflection. At least, his ideas on Scripture crystallized quickly, and did not alter significantly thereafter —

The authority of the Bible seemed the more to be venerated and more worthy of a holy faith on the ground that it was open to everyone to read while keeping the dignity of its secret meaning for a profounder interpretation. The Bible offered itself to all in very accessible words and the most humble style of diction, while also exercising the concentration of those who are not 'light of heart'. It welcomes all people to its generous embrace, and also brings a few to you through narrow openings. Though the latter are few, they are much more numerous than would be the case if the Bible did not stand out by its high authority and if it had not drawn crowds to the bosom of its holy humility.⁵⁶

Thus Augustine combines the perspicuity and the profundity of Scripture. Here is a book from which the simplest reader can draw benefit, provided he approaches it with an attitude of faith. Here too is a book whose depth is inexhaustible and which will tax the greatest of minds. But, unlike Origen, Augustine makes little of the notion that there will be different levels of meaning or of understanding in Scripture in

53 *Ibid.*, 6:4.

54 *Ibid.*, 6:5.

55 *De doctrina christiana*, 2:53-55.

56 *Confessions*, 6:5.

proportion to different intellects.⁵⁷ Indeed, that is an idea normally downplayed by Augustine, who was keenly aware of the danger of intellectual pride and who could say that it was written on almost every page of Scripture that God wars against the proud but gives grace to the humble.⁵⁸ Characteristically, Augustine emphasizes the willingness to learn as the key element in the progress a person will make in the understanding of Scripture.⁵⁹

Augustine on allegory

Profundity entailed allegory or *locutio figurata* as Augustine would have put it. With him there was never a question as to whether allegory was allowable; the real question was where it was appropriate. So important to him were exegetical questions that he devoted a treatise *De Doctrina Christiana* (on Christian Instruction) to this. The first part of this, published in 396, the year after he became bishop of Hippo, sets out general principles of biblical exposition. In 426, toward the end of his life, he reissued the work with an extensive addition advising the preacher on how to present his material. This work (from which I will be drawing heavily) thus represents Augustine's thinking on the subject throughout his active life as a bishop.

Here Augustine presents a number of reasons why the Holy Spirit should deliberately have included obscure passages. The hard work, he suggests, in unravelling them served to counteract both pride and the mental sluggishness which would arise if understanding came too easily.⁶⁰ It is no surprise to find Augustine highlighting the dangers of spiritual pride; the other danger to which he alludes (*fastidium* or the boredom which leads to lack of effort) may appear more unexpected until we consider Augustine had some experience of trying to instruct youngsters! A less important reason for biblical obscurities concerned unbelievers. A veil was thrown over their minds by the obscurities of Scripture either so that they might be stimulated to conversion or excluded altogether.⁶¹

But alongside these obviously spiritual considerations there appears, surprisingly, a matter of taste. This emerges under the guise of an indisputable psychological principle — *It is pleasanter in some cases to have knowledge communicated through figures, and what is attended with difficulty in the seeking gives greater pleasure in the finding. For those who seek but do not find suffer from hunger. Those, again, who do not seek at all because*

57 But cf. *ibid.*, 13:18.

58 *De doctrina christiana*, 3:75.

59 *Ibid.*, 4:63.

60 *Ibid.*, 2:10 and 4:27.

61 *Ibid.*, 4:61.

they have what they require just beside them often grow languid through satiety. The key words are *libentius* (more readily or willingly) and *suavius* (more pleasantly).⁶² Clearly there is a sort of aesthetic value in obscure expressions. As an illustration, Augustine takes a passage from the Song of Songs — *Thy teeth are like a flock of sheep that are shorn, which came up from the washing, whereof everyone bears twins and none is barren among them.*⁶³ He explains that this refers first to the saints (the teeth of the Church, tearing men away from their errors, and bringing them into the Church's body with all their harshness softened down, just as if they had been torn off and masticated by the teeth) and then to baptism (sheep that have been shorn, laying down the burdens of the world like fleeces, and coming up from the washing of baptism, and all bearing twins i.e. the twin commandments of love, and none among them barren in that holy fruit). All of this, Augustine agrees, could be found elsewhere in Scripture in plainer language. (This is one point at which he differs from Origen.) But under the images of the Song of Songs these truths become more appealing and so more memorable.

In these views Augustine has unconsciously reflected the mindset of his own highly educated class. One of the most outstanding historians of Augustine's age, Peter Brown, has written of this — *A Late Roman writer no longer needed to be explicit: only hidden meanings, rare and difficult words and elaborate circumlocutions, could save his readers from boredom, from fastidium, from that loss of interest in the obvious that afflicts the overcultured man. He (Augustine) would believe . . . that the sheer difficulty of a work of literature made it more valuable — a sinister way of thinking in an age when educated men tended to form a caste, rebuffing the outsider by their possession of the ancient authors.*⁶⁴

Perhaps it would only be fair to offset this picture by saying that Augustine was acutely aware that the audiences to whom he preached were far from being an educated caste. Thus, he recommended preachers in their style studiously to avoid the sort of obscurities they would encounter in Scripture; clarity was of the essence of their task.⁶⁵ At the same time there did linger in Augustine's own mind a delight in finding hidden meanings which was a product of his own education reinforced by his salutary experience of the allegorical expositions of Ambrose.

This may have seemed too flippanant for Origen, for whom allegorizing was not a matter of aesthetics but the key to spiritual health. On the other hand, Augustine would have seen dangers in Origen's

62 *Ibid.*, 2:11–15, cf. 4:48.

63 *Ibid.*. The passage is from Song 4:2.

64 Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, (Faber and Faber, 1967), 259–60.

65 *De doctrina christiana*, 4:61–2.

acceptance that God had implanted falsehoods or absurdities in Scripture to induce readers to search for a deeper meaning. For it was axiomatic to Augustine that the Scriptures were the work of a God who could not tell lies. Hence we find Augustine insisting that an allegorical approach to a narrative passage must never be at the expense of its historical truthfulness.⁶⁶

In spite of what we might think of the earlier example from the Song of Songs, allegorical exegesis was not to be an excuse to plunge into some fantasy land, still less into heresy. Augustine laid down rules of a general sort to determine both when allegorizing was appropriate and what constraints should then be applied. Thus, any passages of Scripture which could not be applied directly to purity of life (*morum honestatem*) or to soundness of doctrine (*fidei veritatem*) were to be construed figuratively.⁶⁷ This did not always work out well. Augustine was enabled to sidestep (for example) the problem that many of the Old Testament heroes of faith had at times behaved in ways which set a bad example.⁶⁸ Augustine also asserted that expressions like 'the wrath of God' were not to be taken at face value.⁶⁹ But there were other occasions when a more felicitous use was made of the principle. Clearly, the words in Romans 12:20 *if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink* were to be taken literally as they commanded a kindness; but the following words *in doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head* were equally clearly to be construed figuratively. Otherwise the apostle Paul would have been inculcating malice.⁷⁰

When a figurative (or for that matter any sort of ambiguous) passage was to be interpreted, clear limits were set. Augustine firmly believed that normally Scripture interpreted Scripture, the clear passages illuminating the more obscure.⁷¹ But, as he realized, this did not always work. Some ambiguities were not resolved by cross-reference from other sections of Scripture. Then it was permissible to seek help from reason, though Augustine did not hide his unease about such a procedure. It is just because man's reason is faulty and untrustworthy that God has given the authoritative revelation of the Scriptures. And certainly it is always safer to walk, where possible, in the light of the Scriptures.⁷² Yet Augustine did recognize that the exegete cannot always confine himself to Scripture. He did not fully resolve the difficulties this poses.

66 E.g. *de civitate dei*, 13:21 and 15:27.

67 *Ibid.*, 3:33.

68 *Ibid.*, 3:74-5.

69 *Ibid.*, 3:40.

70 *Ibid.*, 3:56.

71 *Ibid.*, 3:83.

72 *Ibid.*, 3:86.

Allegorical or figurative interpretation, then, did not necessarily entail the danger of heresy. This could even be a bulwark against heresy as Augustine found in his dealings with the Manichees in his pre-conversion days. Besides, heresies could surface in many different ways. The sins of great men, if interpreted literally, could justify some in an evil course.⁷³ Heresy could even spring from wrong punctuation (say) of the first verse of John's gospel.⁷⁴ Augustine would not have been surprised by the techniques of the Jehovah's Witnesses! Again, literal expressions could be incorrectly classed as figurative if the reader wished to evade their practical implications.⁷⁵ Here Augustine anticipates the modern device of importing 'cultural relativism' to evacuate certain embarrassing parts of Scripture of their relevance. He can hardly be described as indifferent to heresy or to distorted exegesis. He did not see the allegorical approach *per se* as a particular hazard.

The real danger to his mind lay in a wrong spiritual attitude. Before going into the detailed problems faced by the exegete, he laid it down that the supreme end of Scripture is to inculcate love for God and love for neighbour. Here he took his cue from Paul's words to Timothy warning him against false teachers and sterile controversies — *The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.*⁷⁶ It followed that any interpretation which did not foster this love was incorrect.⁷⁷

Augustine did acknowledge that sometimes a wrong interpretation might inculcate love. Then, the exegete's motive was not to be faulted, but he was to be corrected. The reasons why correction was necessary are instructive. An exegete who was allowed to persist in a wrong interpretation would be bound to find in his subsequent Scripture reading contradictory passages. Such was human nature that he would be more likely to find fault with Scripture than with his own interpretation. If he persisted in this outlook, the result would be spiritual ruin because faith depended on the authority of Scripture. Should faith be allowed thus to totter, the man would lose his love since he could not love what he no longer believed to exist.⁷⁸ It was the exegete's responsibility, therefore, to find an interpretation which would not damage the authority of Scripture as a whole and thus his own faith and that of others would not be undermined. Scriptural exegesis could never become for Augustine a purely academic exercise. He would have

73 *Ibid.*, 3:63–4.

74 *Ibid.*, 3:5.

75 *Ibid.*, 3:35.

76 1 Timothy 1:5 cited (e.g.) at *de doctrina christiana* 1:95, and implicit throughout Book 1.

77 *Ibid.*, 1:86.

78 *Ibid.*, 1:88–9.

dismissed much modern academic research as *curiositas* or a love of learning for its own sake.⁷⁹ The issues at stake were too serious for that!

The limitations of words

Given this high view of Scripture, it may come as a surprise to read in the next section that he considered some people — he had in mind eremitic monks had dispensed with the need for Scripture.⁸⁰ They had attained such a firm grasp of the everlasting virtues of faith, hope and love that the only purpose they could have with Scripture would be to instruct others. Undoubtedly, Augustine took a starry-eyed view of such monks, very few of whom he had actually met. He was allowing himself an untypical gesture in the direction of perfectionism, though he tries to deny it later in the same section. But this only goes part of the way toward explaining his outlook. The Scriptures were for Augustine only a means to an end the practical end of loving God and one's neighbour. The means must never be confused with the end; Augustine was in no danger of bibliolatry. Indeed, he never tired of reminding others of the limitations of words. They were signs (*signa*) pointing to realities not realities (*res*) themselves. There was even a danger of spiritual bondage if honour was given to the signs rather than the realities —

The person who becomes preoccupied with, or reveres, a mere sign, without knowing what it means, is the slave of a sign. On the other hand, if he concentrates on, or reveres, a divinely appointed sign, whose power and significance he understands, he is not honouring something which is seen and then passes away. Instead, he is honouring that to which all signs ought to be referred.⁸¹

Augustine fully recognized that words were essential to human social intercourse and that God had taken advantage of this in giving man the Scriptures, themselves written in human words. But this step was necessitated only after man had shut himself out from direct knowledge of God by his disobedience in the Garden of Eden. The Scriptures were thus intended mercifully to bridge the gap which Adam and Eve had opened up by their rejection of the direct light of God's countenance. Sometimes God's people could attain to direct contemplation of God in this world, but these occasions were all too fleeting.⁸² For most of the time they had to rest content with the mediated knowledge

79 G. Bonner in *The Cambridge History of the Bible Vol 1*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. R. Evans, (Cambridge, 1970), 548.

80 *De doctrina christiana*, 1:93–4.

81 *Ibid.*, 3:30. The translation is that of G. Howie in *St Augustine on Education* (Gateway, South Bend, Indiana, 1969).

82 Brown, *op. cit.*, 261–2.

of Scripture. The latter's function is set out by Augustine in his allegorization of the Firmament of Genesis 1 as the Scriptures — *These matters you set out most wisely with us, my God, through your book, your solid firmament, so that we may discern everything by a wonderful contemplation, even though for the present only by signs and times and days and years.*⁸³ By contrast, there were angels who were so close to God that they had no need of the Scriptures — *They ever see your face, and there, without syllables requiring time to pronounce, they read what your eternal will intends. They read, they choose, they love. They ever read, and what they read never passes away. by choosing and loving they read the immutability of your design. Their codex is never closed, nor is their book ever folded shut. For you yourself are a book to them and you are for eternity.*⁸⁴

It has been well said that in Augustine we find traces of different and even rival theologies. Here surely is a hint of mysticism, but it is a mysticism checked by a consciousness of its very imperfect attainments in this life as well as by Augustine's duty as a bishop to preach to all sorts and conditions of men. We are also now in a position to say why allegorical exegesis never posed a problem to Augustine. In a sense he saw the whole of Scripture as allegorical, though he did of course believe that many passages were to be taken literally and was most at ease about allegorizing once the literal sense had been established.⁸⁵ Words were merely signs of a deeper spiritual reality. And that reality was mediated 'by a marvellous proliferation of imagery'.⁸⁶

While Augustine did search for the correct understanding of particular passages of Scripture, he had to recognize on occasions the possibility of more than one acceptable interpretation. This emerges from his attempts to exegete the early chapters in Genesis, on which Augustine wrote four works, if we include books 11–13 of his *Confessions*.⁸⁷ In his first two of these works he was concerned to refute some Manichaean errors, with which he had personally been familiar in his pre-Christian days. But it turned out that his own views did not please some of his fellow-Christians. Seemingly, the first chapters of Genesis were no less controversial among believers in Augustine's day than they are today! When he wrote the last part of his *Confessions*, Augustine responded to this criticism by expressing his distaste for those who insist that their interpretation is the only correct one. Even when they happen to be right, their attitude smacks more of arrogance than of

83 *Confessions*, 13:18.

84 *Ibid.*, 13:15.

85 David Wright in (ed.) Magne Saebø *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament — The History of Its Interpretation Vol 1*, (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1996), 726.

86 Brown, *op. cit.*, 262.

87 For more details see Wright *art. cit.*, 704–8. The list might be extended to five works if we include books 11–12 of *de civitate dei*.

insight. Augustine much prefers a charitable outlook whereby people with different insights may share in the hope that they may find mutual profit. God's truth, after all, is not to be any individual's private possession, but to be the public property of the whole church. He can even boldly assert that it was of the very richness of God's provision in Scripture to allow for, even to implant multiple meanings. Augustine speculates that if he had been given the authority of a Moses: *Certainly, to make a bold declaration from my heart, if I myself were to be writing something at this supreme level of authority I would choose to write so that my words would sound out with whatever diverse truth in these matters each reader was able to grasp, rather than to give a quite explicit statement of a single view of this question in such a way as to exclude other views — provided there was no false doctrine to offend me.*⁸⁸ From the way Augustine expresses his point, we might conclude that this was a matter of personal taste. Yet, this would be an inadequate viewpoint. At a later stage in the *Confessions* Augustine interprets the phrase 'increase and multiply' in Genesis 1:28 *of the capacity and ability to articulate in many ways what we hold to be a single concept, and to give a plurality of meanings to a single obscure expression in a text we have read.*⁸⁹ Augustine had reflected keenly on the nature of human speech and on the fact that God had chosen to address mankind through words. For all his reverence for Scripture, he did not attach a high significance to human words, seeing that they provided only a sort of indirect knowledge of God. Thus, Augustine took the unusual position of emphasizing the weakness of human words and at the same time upholding the Scriptures as the message of a God who would not lie. At certain points in Scripture where there were obscure expressions, God had deliberately intended that believers should examine them more closely and quarry from them a range of meanings.

It would, however, be misleading to say that Augustine regularly sought out a multiplicity of meanings. Where a passage of Scripture was straightforward with a clear meaning, he would be content with that. If, however, the passage was more obscure as with the early chapters of Genesis, a less dogmatic approach was welcome.⁹⁰ *Especially in the books that the authority of God has commended to us, he declared, rashness in asserting an uncertain and doubtful opinion scarcely escapes the charge of sacrilege.*⁹¹ There was, then, room not only for honest doubt but for a variety of interpretation, the only proviso being *doubt in inquiry ought not to exceed the bounds of the Catholic faith.*

88 *Confessions*, 12:31.

89 *Ibid.*, 13:37.

90 Cf. Augustine's comments on 1 John 5:7-8 at *Contra Maximum*, 2:22:3.

91 From the opening section of his *On the Literal Interpretation of Genesis: An Unfinished Book* — translation by R. J. Teske, (Washington, 1991).

A similar rationale can be discerned where there were variant, even contradictory, readings of a specific text. Augustine was not troubled, but was happy to use either of them as suited the occasion or even both, if some orthodox sense could be derived from them.⁹² His overarching principle remained if it makes sense in the context and if it coheres with orthodox doctrine, let it stand.

Conclusions

Origen and Augustine were very different personalities, each with his own distinct legacy to the church. In their approaches to Scripture, however, there were important broad similarities. Both firmly believed that the canonical Scriptures were divinely inspired. And yet both were alert to the problems of truth and reliability that the bare text of Scripture posed to outsiders, even to some within the church. Both agreed that the Bible contained vital truths which would benefit the simplest of believers. And yet both held at the same time that Scripture contained great profundities, which would require not only appropriate scholarship but spiritual maturity if they were to be unravelled. Among most evangelicals these views would receive at least notional assent. We are aware that many of the younger generation have grown up unfamiliar with the Bible and find it a strange and at times an offensive book. But we might wonder if the practice of churches today adequately reflects this complex character of Scripture. It is easy for a church to fall into one particular mould. Either it dishes out only the milk of the word and leaves believers complacent as to their understanding of the whole of Scripture. Alternatively, a church (especially one with an older generation of believers) may forget that young Christians still less, any outsiders who come into their midst are not ready for the solid meat on which they expect regularly to be fed.

Yet, stressing different attainments among Christians can be a hazardous business. With Origen it became the identification of a Christian élite, and it is little wonder that sometimes Origen's relations with the church hierarchy of his day were fractious. Augustine had a more salutary emphasis when he insisted on charity as the end of all proper exposition. It was the exegete's task to edify the whole congregation. Christ had given expository and teaching gifts to the church so that every member might upbuild the others in love.⁹³ This, of course, entails not only an appropriate demeanour on behalf of the preacher but a humble and teachable attitude on the part of the congregation. In a day of multiple denominations it is a temptation for Christians to

⁹² Bonner in *op. cit.*, 556-7.

⁹³ Cf. Ephesians, 4:7-16.

choose as their church one which will suit their own prejudices rather than challenge them to go more deeply into the life of the Spirit of God. By contrast, we must humbly admit our need of being taught together with other believers so that we may all attain a deeper discipleship.

There were other respects in which Origen placed before the church a more demanding outlook on the Bible than did Augustine. The latter, for example, did not insist that every detail of Scripture should be given a meaning. He allowed for incidentals.⁹⁴ He accepted the historicity of narratives he would allegorize. But Origen so developed his own understanding of the divine inspiration of Scripture that every detail of it had to have some special significance. *The pious man is a sort of spiritual herbalist, culling from the holy Scriptures every jot and every chance letter, and discovering the force of the letter and the purpose for which it can be used, and holding that nothing written is superfluous.*⁹⁵ As a result, the biblical text was smothered under the weight of interpretative keys Origen brought to bear on particular passages. In his *Commentary on John*, for example, the first volume was entirely taken up with examination of the terms 'beginning' and 'word'. Ironically, Origen's zeal for Scripture — in this case, John's gospel which he considered the profoundest of the four gospels — may have led to its being obscured and undervalued.⁹⁶ This remains a warning for preachers and perhaps especially for scholars that their working practices can have the effect of closing the Scriptures to less educated Christians.

Today we tend to separate the roles of the preacher and the scholar. That distinction would have been more of a luxury in the patristic era. Yet even then the beginnings of such a distinction were being made. Here Augustine's emphasis on Christian love is apposite. It is essentially the scholar's task using philological, historical and literary criteria to determine the meaning of the biblical text. Of its very nature this work will often be dogmatic and exclusive of what are considered false or unjustified interpretations. That must not be judged uncharitable; it is simply the demand of truth. The preacher, for his part, has a different task — to take the meaning scholars have unravelled and apply it to the people before him. The preacher will violate the rules of charity if he ignores the findings of scholars. That would, in effect, be to say that he does not need their work and can trust entirely to his own private judgment. The scholar for his part is also bound by the

94 Augustine, *de civitate dei*, 16:2.

95 Origen, *Philocalia*, 10:2.

96 Origen did try to encourage Christians to persevere with bible reading even when they encountered difficulties, but he did so by invoking an almost magical view that Scripture would benefit the reader even when he did not understand what he was reading — *ibid.*, 12.

obligation of charity. This will mean that like Origen and Augustine, he must work broadly within traditions of Christian orthodoxy. Where he has new insights to propose or wishes to challenge some accepted understanding, he must be ready to argue his case before the wider church and look for the same Holy Spirit as he believes has illuminated him to enlighten the rest of the believing community.

Both Origen and Augustine were alert to the dangers of false exegesis. Both devoted much of their writing to guarding the church against heresy and its consequences. And yet both were lovers of allegory. Indeed, both found it natural to allegorize Scripture. The reason lay in their Platonic cast of mind, whereby many features of the sensible world are reflections of or rather are modelled on more enduring realities in a distinct spiritual realm. Such allegorizing was not as remote to them from the grammatical text of Scripture as it would appear to us, because the language of Scripture permitted glimpses into the spiritual realm, even when it was referring directly to the material world. In short, words were in their eyes ambivalent in a way that we do not readily accept. (We return in effect to Augustine's ideas of words as signposts rather than as realities in themselves.) We tend to assume a different vocabulary for the spiritual than for the material realm. And when a connection is to be made, it must be spelt out in detail, as in the form of an extended simile. This means that we cannot straightforwardly adopt Origen's or Augustine's enthusiasm for allegory. But given the earthly or material nature of much of Scripture, it is imperative for any exegete to have some theory as to how it links with the spiritual realm or those unseen realities which are eternal. Origen was justified in thinking of God prattling to us like a father or a schoolmaster to his children by way of condescension.⁹⁷ That means that God will use words and images from our everyday experience. But that does not take us far enough. We need at least to sketch out an answer to this question why is this physical world such a useful source of ideas, illustrations and experiences that God can speak to us through it? Without some answer to this question we will not find it easy to see how passages of the Bible from history or indeed from the natural world have relevance to us now.

Allegory carried with it the implication of multiple meanings. And that is what most displeased Calvin (and other Reformation commentators) about the commentaries either of Origen or of Augustine. It is little wonder he preferred the work of Chrysostom which adhered more strictly to the text of Scripture. In his commentary on the allegory of Hagar and Sarah from Galatians 4 Calvin took the opportunity to lambast the practice of allegorical exegesis as it had emerged from

97 Origen, *Frag. on Deut.*, 1:21, (PG, 17:24).

Origen and been perfected in the medieval period. Augustine too was to receive criticism elsewhere for his speculative bent, his subtlety and his fondness for the Septuagint.⁹⁸ By contrast, Calvin set out his own position on the Scriptural text — *Scripture, they say, is fertile and thus bears multiple meanings. I acknowledge that Scripture is the most rich and inexhaustible fount of all wisdom. But I deny that its fertility consists in the various meanings which anyone may fasten to it at his pleasure. Let us know, then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and simple one (verum sensum scripturae, qui germanus est et simplex) and let us embrace and hold it resolutely. Let us not merely neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions, those pretended expositions which lead us away from the literal sense (a literali sensu).*⁹⁹ Calvin was unenthusiastic, to say the least, about multiple meanings, on the ground that they had led to the obliteration of the true meaning of Scripture; but since the apostle Paul makes use of allegorical exegesis in his treatment of Hagar and Sarah, Calvin could not altogether deny its place. He would probably have said that only a few parts of Scripture are to be understood allegorically.¹⁰⁰ His use of allegory was very near to what we would understand by metaphor — a reminder that allegory can imply different things to different people. Certainly, anyone reading Calvin's *Commentaries* is bound to be struck by the severity with which Calvin dealt not only with misleading interpretations but those he considered stupid. Effectively Calvin worked with the presupposition that each passage of Scripture had one plain meaning and it was his business as an exegete to elucidate it. This made for a rather different approach to most patristic commentaries. And no doubt this difference was due in part to the distinct contexts in which they were writing. Biblical commentaries were in their infancy in the Patristic era, whereas Calvin could look back on a long tradition of exposition which had lost its moorings in the biblical text.

Biblical exegesis has moved on since Calvin's day. In the main, it has been concerned with a single sense; but as Frances Young has recently pointed out, the various critical disciplines which have become the accepted tools of the exegete (such as source-criticism, form-criticism etc.) have had an unhealthy reductionist effect.¹⁰¹ The grammatico-historical sense favoured by the Reformers has narrowed to the original meaning in its historical context. Young proceeds to develop a critique of the modern approach — *The 'original' meaning is the 'proper meaning' . . . Meaning rests in the 'original', and that outlaws eisegesis, and methods of interpretation like allegory which make the text mean something other than itself.*

98 Wright, *art. cit.*, 730.

99 *Commentary on Galatians*, 4:22 at p. 84–5 of Vol 11 of *Calvin's Commentaries*, (Oliver and Boyd, 1965).

100 Cf. *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospel*, Vol 13 p. 137, (on Matthew 26:29).

101 F. Young, *The Art of Performance*, (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 102.

*History provides constraints on interpretation.*¹⁰² Young is not against philological and historical work to ensure the proper understanding of the text in its original context. That is indispensable. But the work of the exegete and the preacher does not stop there. Young unashamedly contends that the exposition of Scripture, particularly in a liturgical context, demands imaginative interplay, even eisegesis, if the Bible is to ring true to the world we live in. Allegory is one of the tools Young commends for such application of Scripture in an ecclesiastical setting.

But allegory did not fulfil this function in Origen and Augustine. If we look for them to use allegory to suggest multiple interpretations to apply to different audiences, we will be largely disappointed. Instead, allegory was employed to bridge the gap between the material and the unseen worlds. Besides, they regarded the Bible as almost a self-contained manual of true religion given by a God who knew exactly the needs of humankind and used all the contemporary literary tricks of the trade to stimulate a willing audience to a deeper understanding. It was virtually an insult to God to suggest all his revelation should be made simple. The reader or hearer of Scripture had a responsibility to look deeply into Scripture. Origen and Augustine expected complexities in their reading of anything worthwhile, and the Bible was no exception. Given that the diverse parts of Scripture were all the work of one author who could be depended upon to speak with absolute consistency, the obscurities of Scripture were to be explained through interpretative keys from Scripture itself. Both Origen and Augustine saw their task as giving diligent believers access to these keys. It was the duty of their hearers to follow the injunction 'seek and you shall find' and prayerfully to apply themselves to the message of Scripture.¹⁰³ Then and only then would they see the relevance of Scripture.

It is easy for us to criticize these learned patristic writers for assuming the Bible was written for a circle of litterati like themselves. And there would be truth in that criticism. But we can admire their confidence in the overall harmony of Scripture. They believed that God must speak with one voice and approached the problems and apparent contradictions in Scripture with that faith. No doubt, as a result they underestimated the individual contribution of each book in Scripture, but that was a small price to pay at a time when attempts were being made to divide one part of Scripture against another. Moreover, allegory will do less harm when it operates within a clear doctrinal framework which is respected as the core of the Christian message.

102 *Ibid.*, 103.

103 Origen, *Philocalia*, 10:1. Augustine was fond of quoting Is. 7:9, which he read as 'Unless you believe, you shall not understand', in this connection — e.g. *Tract in Joh.* 29:6 and 45:7.

Implicitly Origen and Augustine remind us that there can be an overemphasis on the application of Scripture to our immediate situation. I am reminded of the troubled period in Scottish church history around the 1650's when clergy were expected to make detailed pronouncements on the political events of the day. One minister who stood apart from this trend, Robert Leighton, was criticized for not preaching up the times. Leighton, however, replied *Well, if all of you preach up the times, you may surely allow one poor brother to preach up Jesus Christ and eternity.*¹⁰⁴ Origen and Augustine would have been of one mind with Leighton. They would have seen the function of Scripture as to impart a new set of priorities, to allow the believer a glimpse into the eternal world. The popular cry to be relevant needs to be seen in this light.

With their concern for the great overriding themes of Scripture, Origen and Augustine were not easily troubled by the problems many in their time found in individual passages of Scripture. Allegory was one device they used to put these problems into a different perspective. Sometimes this did work well — notably in dealing with anthropomorphisms in biblical accounts of God, where allegory amounted to little more than an extended metaphor. Allegory, however, proved less successful in dealing with what we might call the moral problems of the Bible, especially that believers (even eminent believers) should behave occasionally in a reprehensible way, and some laws should be laid down that seemed pointless or cruel. Similar criticisms are levelled today. Origen and Augustine are models to us only in respect of their confidence that these difficulties can be answered by those who are prepared to seek in faith. They do, however, offer little help in their detailed answers. And that is because they do not provide an adequate rationale for their connections between the earthly events of Scripture (savory and unsavory) and those eternal realities to which they believe these events pointed.¹⁰⁵ It is incumbent on the church today to take up this challenge.

Abstract

Though allegory is regarded with suspicion in churches today, it was enthusiastically embraced by many in the early church, including Origen and Augustine, the subjects of this paper. Origen believed not only that an allegorical interpretation was demanded by inconsisten-

104 Quoted by J. D. Douglas, *Light in the North*, (Paternoster, Exeter, 1964), 195.

105 It is only fair to Augustine to point out that in his magnum opus, the *de civitate dei*, he did announce a principle to undergird the whole of Scripture, to bring together earthly and heavenly realities — the history and character of the two cities, the earthly city and the heavenly city.

cies and absurdities in the literal text of Scripture, but that Scripture itself enjoined this hermeneutic. It was God's way of stimulating believers to a maturer faith and discipleship. The rule of faith gave a framework in which error could be avoided.

Augustine shared Origen's respect for the church's traditional teaching. He differed, however, in the essentially aesthetic qualities he found in allegory. This was a technique he believed would give added pleasure to any worthwhile work of literature. He was also happy to accommodate a variety of suitable meanings in some passages of Scripture since he felt that human words were limited and sometimes obscure.

With their use of allegory, Origen and Augustine raise the question how do particular passages of Scripture set in a specific time and environment relate to the things that are unseen and eternal? They did, not, however, provide a suitable rationale to justify the various connections they made through allegory between diverse parts of the Bible.

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