Theology and Allegory:

Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the unity and diversity of Scripture[1]

Abstract

Origen and Gregory of Nyssa use allegorical exegesis to derive a unified meaning from the diversity of the scriptural text. However, they have different answers to the question of where, or in what, scripture's unity lies, which lead to different styles of interpretation and which reveal their broader theological concerns. The question of the unity and diversity of scripture is thus not just a textual or hermeneutical one but is related to central theological issues. Furthermore, allegorical interpretation does not obfuscate the text, but aims to relate the salvation-history recounted in it to the history of its reader.

Over the past few decades there has been growing interest in early Christian interpretations of Scripture. This has been directed not only at an understanding of patristic hermeneutics in its own right, but also – especially in the cases of Origen and Gregory of Nyssa – at producing a more integrated understanding of each writer's thought. The question is no longer whether Origen was a speculative Platonist who opportunistically used allegorical interpretation to read pagan ideas into the Bible, or a pious apologist for Christianity against gnostic heresy and other threats to the faith. Rather, discussion has turned to the pivotal and unifying role which hermeneutics played in Origen's thought. And

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with Gregory too there has been an increasing concern to see him as a writer for whom doctrine and spirituality were not only interconnected, but virtually indistinguishable, and who saw Scripture and philosophy as complementary and overlapping means of expressing and grounding his theological beliefs.

This growing desire among scholars to hold together Bible, philosophy and doctrine in their assessment of patristic theology has coincided with a renewed interest in those theological approaches to modern biblical criticism which have arisen in response to dissatisfaction with the results of historico-critical methods. It has become increasingly common for writers to suggest the fruitfulness of comparisons between patristic and very recent hermeneutics. Two areas in particular are most usually cited: first, the practice of reading the Bible in its 'final form', particularly in its form as the canon of Scripture (as opposed to a serendipitous collection of texts); and secondly, the focus on the multi-valency of meaning in Scripture, as revealed in the complex relationship between readers and the biblical text. The former has been the focus of canon or canonical criticism; the latter has been particularly the concern of various strands of post-modern biblical hermeneutics. These sympathetic comparisons are made, however, against the background of a long tradition of more hostile reactions to patristic hermeneutics – especially to the use of allegory.

This paper will examine the hermeneutics of Origen and of Gregory of Nyssa and in particular their use of allegorical exegesis as a means of deriving a unified meaning from the text. It will demonstrate some important differences between their approaches which are not usually noted, and will thus show that the same fundamental theological principles can give rise to two rather different methods of interpretation. This not only indicates the danger of generalising about allegorical hermeneutics, but it also raises an important question about the unity of the text: if it is important to read Scripture as a whole, where, or in what, does its unity lie? Origen and Gregory have different answers to this question, which lead to different

styles of interpretation and which reveal their broader theological concerns. Consequently, this paper will emphasise that the question of the unity and diversity of Scripture is not just a textual or hermeneutical one but is related to central theological issues – not only for Origen and Gregory but also for any theologian reading the Bible.

<center>I</center>

The basic shape of Origen's exegesis is well known. His fundamental hermeneutical assumption is that the *whole* of the Bible is divinely-inspired: 'It is proper to believe that there is no letter in Scripture which is empty of the wisdom of God'.[2] Origen points out that Jews and heretics reject various parts of Scripture because they judge them not 'useful' or 'salvific'.[3] By contrast, Origen's key hermeneutical text is 2 Timothy 3:16: 'All Scripture, being inspired by God, is useful and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness'.[4] This educational purpose of the inspiration of Scripture is directly parallel to (and is a supreme example of) God's pedagogy in the world in general.[5]

However, according to Origen, God has two aims in inspiring Scripture: the first is to teach the mysteries of salvation to those who are capable of receiving them; the second is to hide them from those who are 'unable to endure the burden of investigating matters of such importance'.[6] The text which hides these mysteries is in general narrative or law (understood in the broadest sense) and is easy to read.[7] However, the Word of God has also included in this layer a number of 'stumbling blocks… and hindrances and impossibilities' which can

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[2] *Philokalia* 1:28:19-20; see also *Philokalia* 10 and 12.

[3] *Philokalia* 11:1:4; see also *Philokalia* 11:1:10-11 and 11:2:16-19.

[4] See *Philokalia* 12:2:10-11

[5] *De Principiis* [=*DP*] IV:1:7; see also Marguerite Harl, ed. *Origène: Philocalie 1-20* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1983), p.77.

[6] *DP* IV:2:8 G.W. Butterworth tr. (Gloucester, MS: Peter Smith, 1973).

[7] *DP* IV:2:8

actually point the way to the discovery of a more profound coherence in Scripture.[8] This can only be found by those who search hard; nevertheless, it is here that the normative teaching or the spiritual meaning of the Bible lies. Between the two purposes of God - to reveal and to conceal - and between the two layers of the text there is what Origen describes as a 'kinship' or a 'bond'.[9] It is the task of the exegete to discover that bond and to unveil the spiritual meaning of the text.[10] Here the role of the Holy Spirit is vital, inspiring the human reader of the text as much as its human writer.

Beyond these foundational assumptions about the inspiration of Scripture, Origen's precise exegetical technique is more complex and has been subject to various interpretations, many of them focusing on the vexed nature of his so-called 'allegorical' exegesis. Problematically, the passage from *De principiis* which discusses his exegetical method is particularly opaque.[11] In it Origen seems to indicate a three-stage process: first, the identification of 'impossibilities' in the literal meaning of the text; second, the discovery of the true or spiritual meaning of those impossibilities by relating them to the meaning of similar expressions as they are used elsewhere in Scripture; third, the creation of an 'entire' spiritual meaning by connecting this allegorical meaning of the impossibilities to an allegorical reading of those parts of the text which are literally true. In other words, the individual impossibilities within the text point to and justify an allegorical reading of the whole passage. In this context then, 'allegorical interpretation' simply indicates that the interpreter is not taking words to mean what they at first appear to mean *in that particular*

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[8] *DP* IV:2:9

[9] See Harl *Origène: Philocalie 1-20*, pp.86-89.

[10] Scholars have debated whether Origen consistently envisages two or three layers in the text; for our purposes it is sufficient to note that there is always *at least one* hidden layer, for Origen uses the same techniques to discover a deeper meaning, regardless of whether it is 'moral' or 'spiritual'.

[11] *DP* IV:3:5

context. It does *not* necessarily imply a metaphorical or typological reading, because Origen could be connecting the 'impossible' literal meaning of a word in one place to another, literal meaning elsewhere.[12]

With regard to the first stage, Origen thinks that there are various difficulties in the text which render its meaning unclear and thus justify the rejection of its literal interpretation. First, there are cases where the literal meaning of the words of the text is in the form of a parable , a 'similitude', or a metaphor. Secondly there are passages whose literal meaning is, he claims, impossible – either in a straightforward physical or logical sense, or because incoherent with the orthodox doctrine of God or because uninstructively immoral, or because the sequence of a text does not make sense.[13] Thirdly, there are cases where Origen assumes that the text is obscure and therefore not useful. Finally, there are grammatical faults and ambiguities, which he argues were intentionally included by the Spirit for instruction.[14] The second stage is to look elsewhere in the Bible for other occurrences of the words which appear in the problematic text. Thus, for example, Origen links the saying about the pearl of great price to Jesus' instruction to his disciples not to cast pearls before swine (Matt. 7:6). The comparison thus becomes in Origen's eyes an instruction about the true disciple looking for a true doctrine (the pearl) as opposed to those who are not true disciples (the swine).[15] Sometimes Origen hits on a particularly fertile biblical metaphor, such as the idea of 'living water' to mean spiritual refreshment and can thus offer an extended interpretation of an

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[12] See Harl on meanings of nomÒj in Origen's *Commentary on Romans*: 'Origène et la Sémantique du Langage Biblique' in Harl *Le Dechiffrement du Sens. Études sur l'Hermeneutique chrétienne d'Origène à Grégoire de Nysse* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 1993).

[13] On ¢nakolouq…a (especially in Romans) see: Harl 'Origène et la Sémantique du Langage Biblique', p.63, 66-7, 71.

[14] Ambiguity: *Comm. Matt.* XI:3 (on the feeding of the five thousand); grammar: *Philokalia* 4 and 8.

[15] *Comm. Matt.* X:8, p.171.

episode such as Isaac digging wells, by referring to an abundance of other biblical texts both from the Old and the New Testament.[16] The third stage is 'to grasp the entire meaning' by gathering together these meanings and 'connecting [them] by an intellectual process', into a spiritual interpretation which forms the coherent, albeit hidden, heart of the Bible.[17] We will return to Origen's method for this connecting process later on.

For the time being the important point is that Origen's technique is not only based on a theory of the unity of the Bible as a theological datum, but also in practice reads Scripture as a highly interconnected collection of texts, phrases and words.[18] One can view this method from two perspectives: on the one hand, Origen's Bible can appear highly 'atomistic', being formed from many interconnected yet discrete units;[19] on the other hand, it can seem to be an 'inseparable unity', as Hanson claims:

> A modern theologian might think of the unity of the Bible as like the unity of a tapestry in which there are a multitude of different strands, and different colours and patterns woven by these strands into a single theme or picture. Origen's conception of the unity of Scripture is more like that of a steel shell of a ship in which a number of different but uniform plates of steel are welded into one.[20]

In fact, the truth of the matter lies somewhere between these two view-points. Origen's

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[16] *Hom. Gen.* XIII; see also Homilies X and XI.

[17] *DP* IV:3:5 (cited above page 5).

[18] Marguerite Harl claims this as Origen's fundamental hermeneutical principal: 'l'exégète s'efforcera de retrouver la cohérence invisible non pas d'une partie du texte, mais de la totalité des textes bibliques, abordés comme un seul texte: chaque morceau s'expliquera par la découverte de ses connexions avec son contexte, qui est l'ensemble de la Bible, livre unique' Harl ed. *Origène: Philocalie 1-20*, p.74.

[19] John Barton *The Spirit and the Letter: Studies in the Biblical Canon* (London: SPCK, 1997), p.154

[20] R.P.C. Hanson *Allegory and Event: a Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM, 1959), p.198-199.

method relies both on a conviction of the indissoluble unity of Scripture and on a recognition that Scripture as a unity is formed from very many seemingly *diverse* units. He himself seems to view the Biblical text as a textile woven by the Spirit, in which very many different strands form one coherent whole. The Spirit even weaves into the fabric apparent faults in order to draw us to look at the textile more closely and to identify a deeper pattern within it.[21] Curiously then, Hanson's description of the 'modern' view of Scripture as a tapestry seems to be almost exactly what Origen thinks - with the proviso that, according to Origen, the woven picture is not clearly visible on first inspection.

Two more metaphors reinforce this idea of the interconnectedness of Scripture and the related fact that the network is not random but ordered - even if the order is not immediately apparent. First, Origen speaks of the 'body' of Scripture, on one occasion likening it to the Passover lamb, whose bones God ordered to remain unbroken (Exodus 12:46):

> We must approach the whole of Scripture as one body, we must not lacerate nor break through the strong and well-knit connections which exist in the harmony of its whole composition, as those do who lacerate, so far as they can, the unity of the Spirit that is in all the Scriptures.[22]

Secondly, Origen likens reading Scripture to the creation of musical harmony:

> Those who do not know how to listen to harmony of God in the holy Scriptures, think that the Old Testament is discordant with the New, or that the Prophets are discordant with the Law, or that the Gospels are out of harmony with one another, or that an apostolic writing is discordant with the Gospels or with another apostolic book. But he who comes educated in divine music… learns from this to strike the strings at the right moment, now those of the

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[21] *DP* IV:2:9; IV:3:1; IV:3:4; see also Harl ed. *Origène: Philocalie 1-20*, pp.91-93

[22] *Comm. Jo.* X:13, ANCL additional vol., p.390; SC 157, XVIII (107), p.446; cited in part by Harl ed. *Origène: Philocalie 1-20*, p.73.

Law, and now those of the Gospels which are in harmony with them…[23]

This metaphor is particularly important because it stresses the skill of the interpreter: rather than simply listening to the individual strings of Scripture, which then seem to be discrete and discordant, the exegete must skilfully play them in order to draw out the latent harmony.[24]

These texts also seem to suggest that the order to be found in the text of Scripture is of a particular type: it is order in the sense of an interlocking arrangement of many units, each one connected with several others, as opposed to the order found in a sequence of units.[25] One might say that the text has shape (*taxis*), but not sequence (*akolouthia*). This seems to be confirmed by the fact that the metaphors which Origen usually uses for this are spatial, rather than temporal. Even the musical metaphor makes the same point, for the distinguishing characteristic of a harmony is its *synchronic* relations to other notes, as opposed to a melody which is distinguished by its *diachronic* relations to form a sequence of notes. There is no 'right order' in which to play the notes of a chord – they are simultaneous – yet they are clearly ordered, not chaotic, nor random.

There are two obvious objection to this analysis of Origen's perception of unity and order in the Bible. Firstly, Origen states that one of the reasons one should look for a spiritual meaning in Scripture is the fact that the text *lacks* order.[26] This can be answered

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[23] *Philokalia* 6:1:6-9 and 6:2:1-20

[24] C.f. Le Boulluec, who claims that the aim of Origen's exegesis is a harmonious collection of meanings, in contrast to Chrysippus' search for one 'ligne tendue': Alain Le Boulluec 'Les répresentations du texte chez les philosophes et l'exégèse scriptuaire d'Origène. Influence et mutations' in R. J. Daly ed. *Origeniana Quinta* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), p.108.

[25] See Harl ed. *Origène: Philocalie 1-20* , p.73, of Origen's view of the Bible: 'elle est un seul tout cohérent, où chaque partie joue son rôle, reliée à toutes les autres parties de façon organique'.

[26] *DP* IV:2:9: 'But if… the sequence and ease of the narrative were at first sight clearly discernible throughout, we should be unaware that there was anything beyond the obvious meaning for us to understand in the Scriptures.' See also *Philokalia* 9:3:26-31. See above, footnote 13.

simply, however. Origen is objecting primarily to the lack of *sequential* order in the text, whereas the order that does exist is that of a network, not a sequence. Furthermore, he does not say that the text *is* fundamentally chaotic, rather that it *appears* so.[27] The reason why it is difficult for one to be aware of order in Scripture is precisely because one needs to be aware of the whole interconnected collection of texts to discover its arrangement. One needs to 'search the Scriptures'. If Scripture were arranged sequentially, this ordering would be easier to spot.

The second objection is that Origen sometimes seems to point to and capitalise on the fact that there *are* certain sequences in the text of Scripture. Some of these are narrative sequences – for example the journey of the Israelites in Numbers 33 – others are more of a logical sequence – for example, the famous 'trilogy' of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs. In her detailed study, Karen Jo Torjesen rightly shows how Origen interprets these and other parts of Scripture to reveal the spiritual meaning of the text, which is a description of the journey of the soul.[28] Thus, the trio of wisdom books together indicate the three stages of the soul's journey – purification, education, divinization/perfection – in which the soul successively gains virtue, wisdom, and its original likeness to God.[29] Likewise Origen divides the Israelites' journey into three stages which correspond to the same spiritual progress.[30] However, in both cases (and, indeed, in the other ones which Torjesen cites) I think it can be shown that Origen does not think that the *text of Scripture itself* exhibits a coherent sequence. Rather, the text reveals an *underlying* sequence, which is the journey of

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[27] *Philokalia* 9:3:32-3

[28] Karen Jo Torjesen *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1986). In Chapter III she shows 'how the exegesis of each of these books [Numbers, Jeremiah, Song of Songs and Luke] is determined by Origen's doctrine of the journey of the soul and by his concern for the progress of his hearers towards perfection', p.71.

[29] p.71-72

[30] p.74

the soul. The trio of Wisdom books, after all, is not obviously in a sequence and one can say the same of the smaller sections of Scripture from which Origen derives a spiritual sequence, for example Psalm 37.[31] In Numbers, clearly the journey of Israelites is a sequence and a progress, but here one must not confuse the sequence of events depicted by text with the structure of the text itself. Torjesen herself comments that 'it is not the words of the text which provide the initial basis for the interpretation, as in the Psalms and the Song of Songs, but rather the history which they recount…. The units of interpretation are built upon the various facets of the history, rather than upon the sequence of verses in the text. It is this history which forms the literal sense in Numbers'.[32] This view is reinforced by the fact that Origen's exegesis of this book is thematic and not line by line. Furthermore, if the structure of the text of Scripture itself were important, one would expect it to dictate Origen's exegesis in a consistent manner. Nevertheless, while Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* presupposes that the whole book indicates the soul's progress in knowledge (the second stage of its journey), each of his *Homilies on the Song of Songs* (which deal with sections of the book) attempts to depict the whole journey of the soul from first to last. This suggests that there is nothing in the structure of the text itself which has a particular determined sequence. It is not even the case that Origen's commentaries cover a whole book: there is good reason, for example, to suspect that his *Commentary on John* does not go beyond chapter 14 of John's gospel.[33] Finally, the sequence of various books (as opposed to the sequence within individual books) does not imply that Origen thinks that they have to be read in that order, one straight after the other. Rather, it can be shown that different books are relevant to

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[31] p.22-34

[32] p.52-3; see also p.96: 'unlike the homilies on the Psalms, [Origen's] interpretation here is not based on the words given in the text, but on the history behind the text, whose details he must sufficiently reconstruct as the material basis for his interpretation'.

[33] J. A. McGuckin 'Structural Design and Apologetic Intent in Origen's Commentary on John' in Gilles Dorival and Alain Le Boulluec edd. *Origeniana Sexta* (Leuven: Leuven University Press / Uitgeverij Leuven, 1995), pp.441-58.

different types of reader, or readers at different stages of their spiritual development.[34] Ronald Heine thus describes the sequence which Origen discovers between certain books as an order of perspective rather than an order of reading.[35]

In sum, I am suggesting that, for Origen, progression or sequence is a perspective on the *content* (or spiritual meaning) of the text, not on its *form*. On the whole, the text of Scripture itself lacks a sequential order (*akolouthia*) and this points to a deeper sequence. But Origen would not have been able to discover this spiritual sequence had he not already come to Scripture with the presupposition that it depicts the journey of soul. Although this may seem an unjustified assumption, for Origen it is no more than saying that Scripture is about a progressive redemption.[36]

How, then, does the idea of the journey of the soul, which Torjesen describes as Origen's 'fundamental principle of exegesis', fit with the other principle which we have identified, namely, that one must read Scripture canonically? The answer lies in the fact that Torjesen also calls the concept of the soul's progress as an 'organising principle or framework'.[37] Origen does not suggest that the structure of the actual text of Scripture depicts the journey of the soul; rather, the idea of that progress serves as his interpretative framework for connecting the seemingly diverse and discrete elements of Scripture. In other

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[34] See: Torjesen on the sequence of the Wisdom books: *Hermeneutical Procedure*, p.71-2; Ronald Heine on the gospels 'The introduction to Origen's *Commentary on John* compared with the introductions to the ancient philosophical commentaries on Aristotle' in Dorival and Le Boulluec edd. *Origeniana Sexta*, p.9; Judith Kovacs on the relation of 1 Corinthians and Ephesians 'Servant of Christ and Steward of the Mysteries of God: the purpose of a Pauline letter according to Origen's *Homilies on 1 Corinthians*' in Paul Blowers, Robin Darling Young and Angela Christman edd. *In Dominico Eloquio / In Lordly Eloquence: Essays On Patristic Biblical Interpretation In Honor Of Robert L. Wilken*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

[35] Heine 'The introduction to Origen's *Commentary on John*', p.9

[36] See Torjesen *Hermeneutical Procedure*, p.76: 'the journey of the soul is itself the process and movement of redemption'.

[37] *Hermeneutical Procedure*, p.92 and throughout Chapter III.

words, once the exegete has identified places where the text is unclear or impossible (stage 1 above) and solved these with reference to other relevant passages (stage 2), the idea of the journey of the soul is used as the best way of gathering the meaning together into an ordered sequence (stage 3). The application of this hermeneutical key to the text is perhaps the 'intellectual process' mentioned in *De principiis* IV:3:5. When analysing Origen's view of Scripture, one is justified, therefore, in distinguishing not only between the apparent and the real nature of the text, but also between its form and content. Thus the form of Scripture (the text) appears disordered and discordant, but is in fact an ordered and harmonious arrangement of interlocking units. Nevertheless, this shape reveals the true content of Scripture: the spiritual meaning which is gathered together into a harmonious sequence by the reader.

II

Gregory of Nyssa largely shares Origen's basic hermeneutical ideas and even defends them in similar ways. For example, he argues that since all parts of Scripture are inspired by God, all must be useful and must contain truth - even if that truth is hard to access.[38] Similarly, he advises the reader to reject the literal meaning of the text if it is a theological impropriety, a physical or logical impossibility, useless or immoral and, like Origen, Gregory seems to assume that these impossibilities point towards the spiritual meaning of Scripture.[39] Both theologians are fond of defending the spiritual meaning with recourse to quotations from Paul and both capitalise on Paul's sympathetic use of allegory in Galatians.[40] Origen's view of Scripture sees a close analogy between God's power in the Bible and his power in the world as a whole; likewise, Gregory agrees that this presence is all-pervasive, right down to the smallest creature in the cosmos or the most insignificant mark in the text.

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[38] *C. Eun.* III, GNO 2, p.163:5ff; NPNF V, p.192.

[39] *In cant.* Prologue

[40] Gal. 4:24; Gregory of Nyssa *In cant.* Prologue, GNO 6, pp.5-6; Origen *DP* IV:2:6

Nevertheless, despite these similarities, Gregory departs from Origen in the particular way in which he views the unity of Scripture and uses it in his exegetical method. When Gregory employs the analogy between text and world, he emphasises that the divine power causes (and is thus manifested by) order (*taxis*) in the universe, in history, in human reasoning and in the text. The difference is two-fold. First, Gregory puts more of an emphasis than Origen on order in the world and in the text – or rather he thinks that that order is more obvious.[41] The second difference is that Gregory thinks that there is a sequence (*akolouthia*) in the form of the text itself, not merely in the meaning underlying the text.[42] Consequently, Gregory does not always distinguish very clearly between *taxis* and *akolouthia*, because they are found together, whether in the text or in the world. For Gregory, temporality - and thus sequence or *akolouthia* - is that which separates the creation from the creator; yet paradoxically it is the rational order of that sequence which is the mark of the creator on creation.[43] Consequently, with regard to history and the text of Scripture, *akolouthia* means that God is acting in it: the word *akolouthia* is almost synonymous with *oikonomia* in Gregory's writings.[44] Furthermore, since *akolouthia* is the result and proof of God's purposeful action, the beginning of a such a sequence is more than simply a start in time: it is a creative act, the creation of a seed from which the rest of the sequence grows.[45] Similarly, the end of such a sequence is more than a simple cessation: it becomes the

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[41] Possibly this is due to his different context: whereas Origen argues against the gnostics that apparent evil in the world and apparent atrocities in the Old Testament were not signs of an evil demiurge and thus were not justifications for the rejection of the Old Testament, Gregory is concerned not so much that the overly-literal interpretation of Scripture will result in rejection of various parts of it, but that it will lead to incorrect doctrine.

[42] Jean Daniélou *L'Être et le Temps chez Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1970), p.38: 'L'Écriture est composée de façon ordonée et progressive, comme le monde lui-même. Elle présente une *akolouthia*'.

[43] Daniélou *L'Être et le Temps* chapter II.

[44] Daniélou *L'Être et le Temps*, p.34

[45] See *In Hexameron* PG44, 69d on the initial words of Genesis.

consummation of all that has gone before.[46] On the level of human and salvation history this interest in *akolouthia* is demonstrated in Gregory's interest in human anthropology - particularly the creation of humankind - and in his equal fascination with eschatology. In the context of his spirituality, it becomes the basis for his belief in the possibility of marking the soul's ascent to or progress towards God by a series of stages. Finally, Gregory assumes that because God acts throughout Scripture, in the sense that the Spirit has inspired every part, the text of Scripture itself has an *akolouthia* which can (indeed, must) be identified by the reader and the exegete. The presence of this *akolouthia* gives particular significance to the beginnings and ends of individual books and passages.

Consequently, Gregory's exegesis is focused on finding the overarching aim (*skopos*) of a text, which is revealed in the *akolouthia* of the words, phrases and other units of which the text is made up. Although Gregory sometimes uses the word *skopos* impersonally, as if he meant merely a dominant theme in a passage or book which can be identified by the reader, underlying this meaning is his assumption that the *skopos* is the *divine* purpose of the text. Origen sometimes uses the word *skopos* in a similar way and in his work it can be loosely equated to the idea of the journey of the soul: the aim of the Spirit is to hide and reveal the progress of the soul.[47] However, Origen does not discuss how the *skopos* of a particular book of Scripture can be defined, nor does he use it to govern his exegesis in such systematic detail as Gregory does.[48] Indeed, the difference between Origen and Gregory appears to lie specifically in the relation between the *skopos* and the order of the text. Origen

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[46] See *De beat.* VIII:1

[47] Sometimes the stated *skopos* of a text is more specific, but can be drawn under the general heading of the journey of the soul: e.g. the *skopos* of John is to reveal the divinity of Christ, completing the revelation begun in the other gospels (Heine 'The introduction to Origen's *Commentary on John*' p.9-10).

[48] Heine suggests that Gregory 'has refined and expanded Origen's use of the concept of the *skopos* of Scripture and its individual books by applying to it the various principles derived from Iamblichus': Heine ed. and tr. *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p.40.

homes in on impossibilities in the text (stage 1) and finds the meanings of difficult passages by referring them to other connected passages in Scripture, thus creating a network of reference (stage 2) which he then gathers together in a spiritual meaning using as an organising principle the *presupposed skopos* of the text – that is, the journey of the soul (stage 3). Gregory on the other hand, notes the impossibilities which point to a hidden meaning (stage i), then tries to *discover* the *skopos* of a text by means of investigating its *akolouthia* (stage ii). Finally, individual passages or phrases of the text are interpreted in the light of its overall *skopos* (stage iii). Thus, whereas Origen's hermeneutical principles are the unity of the text and the concept of the journey of the soul, Gregory's are the unity of the text and the assumption of *akolouthia* in the text of Scripture. In fact, Gregory frequently (although not always) thinks that the *skopos* of Scripture is to reveal the journey of the soul, but he seems to think this becomes evident from the structure of the text itself, rather than treating it as a presupposition of his exegesis. This method seems to underlie most if not all of Gregory's exegesis, but it is most prominent in his spiritual works and - unsurprisingly, given his interest in beginnings and ends - in his works about the creation. I will demonstrate the workings of Gregory's method with reference to four of his works: *De vita Moësis*, *In hexameron*, *In inscriptiones psalmorum*, and *De beatitudinibus*.

De vita Moësis is an extended reflection on the entirety of Moses' life, using it as a template for the spiritual journey of the individual Christian. In it Gregory makes his famous distinction between the history in the text and its spiritual meaning or hidden meaning (I:14-15). The spiritual meaning is pointed out by the impossibility of anyone exactly imitating Moses' life (I:14, II:1) (stage i), it is then found by following the sequence (*akolouthia*) of the literal or historical account of Moses' life, which will reveal the *skopos* of that account (stage ii):

Those things which we have learned from the literal history of the man we

have retraced in summary for you, although we have of necessity so amplified

the account as to bring out its intention (I:77).

That intention or *skopos* is 'that the one who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and that the divine is there where the understanding does not reach' (I:46). This lifts Moses above the role of being a moral exemplar and sees his journey in terms of the journey of the individual soul. Having established the *skopos* of the account of Moses' life, Gregory next states that 'the [whole] narrative is to be understood according to its real intention' (II:2) (stage iii). He thus interprets the sequence of Moses' life as both hiding and (to those who look hard enough) revealing the sequence of the life of a soul ascending to God (II:52).

There are some general similarities with some of Origen's methods here (in addition to the idea that impossibilities in the text point to a deeper meaning): in particular, the way in which the story is extracted from a biblical text, not traced through it line by line; and the fact that the *skopos* of the text is the journey of the soul. However, although Gregory clearly edits the story of Moses (drawing from the text of Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy and Leviticus), the verses – and especially their sequence – are more important than in, for example, Origen's *Homilies on Numbers* where the author interprets the *story* extracted from the text, proceeding thematically, not verse-by-verse.[49] Thus, although Gregory is quite happy to pass over those parts of the biblical text which do not provide him with material which fits his purpose, he insists on following the sequence in the biblical account, working his way systematically through the books, starting with Exodus 2:2 and ending with Deuteronomy 34:5-7.[50] The sequence of the text allows Gregory both to make an exegesis of individual

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[49] See above, p.10.

[50] See, for example, *De vita Moësis* II:42

events and to construct a general shape of the book.[51]

Secondly, precisely because he follows the sequence of the text, Gregory cannot come to it with the presupposition that it depicts a three-fold journey of the soul – the story of Moses is simply too complicated. If he had followed Origen's method it would have been logical for him to stop with the first of Moses' encounters with God on Mount Sinai, which Gregory interprets as the gaining of knowledge of God (II:152). Instead, he deals with several other encounters with God and many trials further on the way and he concludes with Exodus 34:4-5:

> And the Lord said to him, 'This is the land I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, "I will give it to your descendants". I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not go over there.' So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab….

Hence, the goal of the virtuous life is 'being called a servant of God' (II:317). This leads to a slightly odd ending to *the Life of Moses* from a dramatic point-of-view – a gentle *diminuendo* rather than a grand finale – however, it fits with Gregory's belief that knowing and loving God is a journey to be travelled eternally.[52] This is symbolised by Moses' death on the brink of the promised land: he has reached his goal and yet he will never quite be there.

In *De vita Moësis* Gregory takes the impossibility of using Moses' life as an example of virtue to be imitated precisely to point to the fact that the narrative can be mapped on to the journey of the soul. Similarly, in his *In hexameron* Gregory treats apparent contradictions in the Genesis account of creation as 'impossibilities' which point to a more profound understanding of the text: rather than explaining them away individually by using a non-

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[51] A passage from Gregory's exegesis of the war with Amalek illustrates this well: II:148.

[52] For the famous idea of perpetual progress see *De vita Moësis* II:219-255.

literal reading of those words or phrases, he prefers to draw the problem verses into an ordered sequence and to show that Scripture is harmonious with itself.[53]

> For it is not my task to contrive agreement between those words which appear from their usual meaning to be contradictory. But let it be agreed that, so far as I am able, I examine the words' meaning according to their very aim. Perhaps it will be possible for us, with God's help, to find an expert and ordered spiritual meaning of the creation of beings, whilst the text retains its own [literal] meaning. (68d2-9)

Thus, as in *De vita Moësis* Gregory finds the *skopos* of the text by examining its shape and structure (stage ii): 'by seeking out the sequence in the scriptural ideas' and *not* by a thorough-going allegorical interpretation.[54] The sequence in the text is vital: not only did Moses write 'in the form of a narrative',[55] but he structured that narrative around the very words of God:

> But just as the necessary order of nature demands succession in what is created, so he says in the form of a narrative that each thing has come to be… And he wrote down the divine words which brought about each created thing… for there is a word corresponding to everything which came into being according to some sequence and the wisdom of God (72c9-13).[56]

Consequently, Gregory finds the *skopos* of the text by examining the words of these divine commands in particular: in this case, it is not the progress of the soul towards God, but rather the ordered progression of creation. Gregory pays particular attention to the first words of Genesis - 'in the beginning' - which indicate for him 'that everything is foreknown by the

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[53] *In hexameron* PG44, 61a5

[54] 124a15-b4

[55] 76c14

[56] See also 76c12-d1; 113b3-6

wisdom of God, and things come to pass through a necessary order according to a sequence' (76b14-17).[57] Consequently, the whole text must be interpreted in the light of this *skopos* and the apparent difficulties can be resolved by showing that Moses' words can be interpreted so that they refer to the ordered unfolding of the created order under the divine command (stage iii). As in *The Life of Moses*, despite the seeming impossibilities the sequence of the narrative can be mapped directly on to a profound theological reality.[58]

In inscriptiones psalmorum has a more complex structure and a more complex version of the same method lying behind it. In contrast with the biblical texts on which *De vita Moësis* and *In hexameron* are based, the Psalms appear not to be a sequence at all: there is no narrative in the conventional sense of the word and certainly no ordered account of the life of David, their supposed author. Gregory anticipates this question and replies that the Holy Spirit has 'no concern for these matters'; instead it has another purpose.[59] Arguing that there is a sequence in every purposeful activity aimed at a particular goal, Gregory asserts that, despite all appearances, Scripture proceeds by *akolouthia* towards its aim.[60] Thus the apparent lack of *akolouthia* is the 'difficulty' which points to a true *akolouthia* in the text of the Psalms which will reveal their *skopos*.

The important contrast with Origen here is that there is a sequence to be discovered *in the structure of the text* and not just in the spiritual meaning underlying it. Most importantly

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[57] See also 113c5-8.

[58] Gregory's method in *In hexameron* is summarised nicely by Monique Alexandre: 'Moïse, selon lui, donne dans la "cosmogonie", sous l'inspiration divine, un enseignement philosophique (PG44, 61a) en sciences de la nature (PG44, 72c); il le donne "sous forme de récit" (72c cf. 76c, 113b) avec en apparence des contradictions, en fait une cohérence profonde (61a). L'enchaînement du texte biblique manifeste l'enchaînement des réalités physiques; l'enchaînement du commentaire doit y répondre; c'est là le but propre du Grégoire (68d)', 'L'exégèse de Gen. 1:1-2a dans l'*In hexameron* de Grégoire de Nysse: deux approches du problème de la nature' in Heinrich Dörrie and Margarete Altenburger edd. *Gregor von Nyssa und die Philosophie* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1976), p.159.

[59] *In insc. pss.* II:xi; GNO V, p.115; Heine's English translation §132

[60] *In insc. pss.*, p.115-116; Heine §133-134

Gregory thinks that the whole aim or *skopos* of the Psalter is summed up in its first word (in the Septuagint) – blessed.[61] Blessedness (or 'likeness to God') is the aim of the virtuous life; thus he concludes that the aim of the Spirit's inspiration of the Psalms is to teach that life:

> The order of the Psalms is harmonious… since what is zealously pursued by the Spirit… is not to teach us mere history, but to form our souls in accordance with God through virtue. Consequently he seeks the continuity of the spiritual meaning of the things which have been written in the psalms; the historical sequence has no significance…[62]

Blessedness is the aim or goal of the Psalter in two interconnected ways: first, it is its over-arching theme, articulated in its very first word; secondly it is the conclusion of the Psalter. Thus we find that the last psalm is a hymn on blessedness, and more specifically on the blessedness of the soul's eschatological state.[63] This progression from the first part to the last is echoed in the various sub-divisions of the Psalter. Gregory inherits a five-fold division of the psalms inherited from previous exegetes such as Eusebius: he attaches particular importance to beginnings and ends of sequences, so he is sympathetic to the reason for this division, which is that the Psalm at the end of each section concludes with the same doxology.[64] Indeed, both the ends and the beginnings of these sections and even of some of the individual psalms become important for Gregory. Thus, when establishing the theme of each section, Gregory homes in on its beginning (the first verse of Psalms 1 and 41; the first

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[61] *In insc. pss.* I:i; GNO V, p.25; Heine §5; Gregory also attaches importance to the successive nature of the first three verse of Ps. 1: *In insc. pss.* I:ix; GNO V, p.67-68; Heine §120.

[62] *In insc. pss.* II:xi; GNO V, p.116-117; Heine §135; 137; c.f. *In insc. pss.* I:i; GNO V, p.26 Heine §7

[63] *In insc. pss.* I:ix; GNO V, p.67-68; Heine §120-121

[64] See *In insc. pss.* I:v; GNO V, p.38, Heine §37.

word of Psalm 72, the title of Psalm 89 and the structure of Psalm 106)[65] and he asserts that 'the final statement of each section contains the cessation of the treatise as well as the basis of its meaning'.[66] He then concludes that there is a 'sequential order' (*akolouthos taxis*) within each section, which has the purpose of 'always carrying the soul on to what is more sublime until it reach the peak of good things.'[67]

There is a certain circularity in Gregory's approach here: sometimes he writes as if the aim of the Spirit is deducible from the order of the Psalms; at other times he asserts that one must grasp that its aim is to teach the virtuous life before one can understand the arrangement of the Psalms.[68] But the originality of Gregory's exegesis lies in the fact that he asserts that the five divisions 'surpass one another in an orderly sequence as if they were steps' and in associating each with a particular stage in the spiritual life (the third stage of his exegesis).[69] As Marie-Josèphe Rondeau points out, Gregory is unusual in proposing a five-stage spiritual ascent – most other spiritual writers proposed three stages. Hence, although he did perhaps come to the text of the Psalms presupposing that they taught about the journey of the soul, the adoption of a five-stage progress suggests that Gregory let the text dictate his interpretation of the precise nature of this spiritual ascent.[70]

This is perhaps the most complex example of Gregory's exegetical method at work. Yet the constant emphasis on the order and the intention of the Psalms' text prevents the reader from becoming lost: as Rondeau has aptly put it, the *akolouthia* becomes an Ariadne's

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[65] Rondeau 'Exégèse du Psautier et anabase spirituelle…', p.528.

[66] *In insc. pss.*, p.66; Heine §113

[67] *In insc. pss.* I:ix; GNO V, p.65; Heine §114

[68] *In insc. pss.* I: prologue; GNO V, p.25; Heine §3

[69] *In insc. pss.* II:xi; GNO V, p.116-117; Heine §135

[70] Rondeau, 'Exégèse du Psautier et anabase spirituelle chez Grégoire de Nysse' in Jacques Fontaine and Charles Kannengiesser edd. *Epektasis* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1972), p.518-19.

thread leading to beatitude.[71] Another appropriate image is used by Gregory himself in his homilies on the beatitudes:

> I think the arrangement of the Beatitudes is like a series of rungs, and it makes
> it possible for the mind to ascend by climbing from one to the other. If
> someone has in his mind climbed to the first Beatitude, by a sort of necessity
> of the logical sequence the next one awaits him, even if the saying at first
> seems rather odd (II:1).[72]

This image is extended in homilies V and VI to Jacob's ladder, leading up to God: consequently, 'to participate in the Beatitudes is nothing less than sharing in deity, towards which the Lord leads us by his words' (V:1).[73] Various oddities in the text of the Beatitudes suggest that there is no ascending sequence (for example, why is 'the land' promised after 'the kingdom of the heavens'? and why is 'the kingdom of the heavens' promised in both the first and the last beatitudes?), but these direct the reader to look more carefully for a spiritual meaning, in the light of which difficulties can be resolved (step i). Thus, on the assumption that the text is written in an ordered sequence, Gregory pays great attention to the structure of the text. As in *In inscriptiones psalmorum* the word 'blessed' is highlighted: it is the first word of each beatitude and thus also of the whole set. Consequently, Gregory finds that the text's aim is to teach blessedness, that is, participation in God through moral effort and the contemplation of God (step ii). Then difficulties are solved in the light of the overall *skopos* and each beatitude is interpreted at a practical and a theoretical level, the second level of

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[71] 'Chez Grégoire, tout est polarisé par le skopÒj, et l'¢kolouq…a, servante de ce skopÒj, devient systematique. C'est un fil d'Ariadne unique et continu, menant progressivement et inéluctablement au but: la béatitude.' Rondeau 'Exégèse du Psautier et anabase spirituelle…', p.519.

[72] tr. S.G. Hall in Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano edd. *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes.* (Leiden, Boston, Köln: E.J. Brill, 2000); see also VIII:1.

[73] Gregory also uses the image of a mountain, especially Mount Sinai: *De beat.* I:1, III:1, VI:1, VII:1

interpretation being an advance on the first, just as each of the eight beatitudes represents an advance towards perfection (step iii). In particular, the final beatitude is seen as a summing up and consummation of the whole series – this is linked in Gregory's mind with all the imagery associated with the eighth day as the day of Christ's resurrection. Thus, although 'the kingdom of the heavens' is the reward in both the first and the last beatitude, the last points to the fulfilment at an eschatological level of what is a hope and a promise in the first: 'here the eighth blessing has the restoration to the heavens of those who once fell into bondage…' (VIII:1). In sum, despite the apparent lack of sequence, the ascending order of the text of the beatitudes reflects the order of heaven, where 'all things… proceed on their proper course in series and order and sequence' (VIII:2).

III

Origen and Gregory base their hermeneutics on one fundamental assumption: that the whole of Scripture is inspired by God. From this they derive two principles: that Scripture is a unity and that all of it is 'useful' – that is, applicable to the life of the reader. Since they assume that no text can be useful if it contradicts other parts of Scripture, both writers presuppose a very high degree of coherence in the biblical text: it is not just to be read as a whole (i.e. reading all parts of it), but as a unity (with the assumption that each part fits with all other parts). Although they probably do come to the text with the expectation that it should be interpreted allegorically (at least in part) – for that was the usual textual approach of their times – the use of allegory is only *justified* because it is the method which allows them to read Scripture according to their principles. Allegory, then, is not an end in itself, but is arguably the *only* means by which they can derive a useful and coherent theological interpretation from the scriptural texts – for deriving unity from diversity.[74]

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[74] '[Gregory's] conviction of the necessary usefulness of everything in Scripture seems to

However, even if allegorical interpretation is justifiable in their own terms, that still leaves the question of whether it has any relevance for a twenty-first century reading of Scripture. The method has been roundly criticised, not least by Antiochene theologians against the Alexandrians and by many Reformers in opposition to some medieval traditions of interpretation. Its method seems fundamentally opposed to that of historical-critical methods. Even the various more text- and reader-oriented hermeneutics, which might be sympathetic to a more open approach to the meaning of a text, have seen faults in allegory.

The basic sense of allegory is 'meaning something other' – which is usually understood as 'meaning something other than the original human author intended'. Yet most, if not all, Antiochenes and Reformers *in fact* at times took the text to mean other than what the original human author intended, particularly, for example, by using typological and christological exegesis of the Old Testament. Indeed, some sense of taking the text to mean something *in addition to and beyond* the original author's intention seems vital to most 'theological' interpretations of Scripture, because only in this way can it escape being totally restricted by its historical particularity. It is precisely this lack of openness to a more universal perspective which has frustrated critics of an exclusively historic-critical approach to the Bible.

Hence attacks on allegorical interpretation usually do not object to interpretations which detect a meaning which goes *beyond* the author's intention. What they often claim is that allegorical interpretation leads to a major *distortion* of the author's intention: it takes his meaning, as it were, in a different direction from that in which it was heading, by means of harnessing alien ideas to the text. Are Origen and Gregory guilty of this charge? The answer, I think, is yes – but only in a very qualified sense. Both authors on occasion use

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derive from 2 Tim. 3:16…. Philo held a similar view to Origen… and *in all three cases it led inevitably to allegory*' Anthony Meredith *Gregory of Nyssa* (London: Routledge, 1999) note 35 p.158 (my emphasis).

contemporary philosophical and scientific concepts to explain individual points and this over-rigid application of different conceptual frameworks to the text often results in somewhat complex and bizarre exegesis. But it would be a great misunderstanding of their techniques to suggest that either writer geared his whole exegesis *systematically* around such ideas and it is better to criticise individual cases of bad or extreme use of allegory, rather than condemning allegory altogether.

What Origen and Gregory *do* bring to the text as focal organising principles are their basic assumptions about what is 'useful'. Thus Origen's use of allegorical interpretation assumes that the Bible is about the journey of the soul and uses this as a framework for interpretation; Gregory tries to keep more of an open mind about the central theme of Scripture, but brings to it the assumption that it is ordered in a sequence and that this is what enables the reader to derive meaning from it – this is what makes it 'useful'. But the question is whether either of these ideas are fundamentally *alien* to the text. It seems in fact that any interpretation which seeks to relate the Bible to new readers will bring to the text assumptions about what is useful, theologically speaking: hence it has been suggested even of modern theological interpretation of Scripture that it is 'guided by interests external to the text' and that it too is thus, in a sense, allegorical.[75]

It may seem that this suggestion dilutes the meaning of allegorical interpretation so that it indicates merely the universalising of the text. However, allegory has a more specific and positive aspect, arising from the notion of 'useful' interpretation, which makes it slightly different from universalisation. Allegorical interpretation does not, as some of its critics have claimed, seek to draw a 'marrow' of universal and timeless truths from the historical bones of the text and then discard the bones. It does seek the truth out, but it is equally concerned to re-apply it to the current historical context of the reader. There is thus a movement from the

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[75] Robert Morgan with John Barton *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: OUP, 1988), p.37-8

particular to the universal and on towards a new particular: *not* a circle, because the two histories are not identical, but a journey in God's saving *oikonomia*. The fundamental reality of the original historical sense of the text must be preserved in order for the re-application to a new history to make sense. By this I do not mean that every detail of the historical accounts must be read as true (nor did Gregory and Origen); rather, they must believed to be based on a fundamentally true experience of God's saving actions in history.[76]

The reading of Scripture is in this sense sacramental: like baptism and the Eucharist it derives its validity from its historical origins and allows the reader or hearer to participate in the mystery of Christ. In each case the universal significance of the act is rooted in its historical origin (Christ expounded the Scriptures – relating them to himself – as well as instituting Christian baptism and the Eucharist), but supports and blossoms into a myriad different and new historical instantiations. Sometimes this association of Scripture with the sacraments is made more explicit: for example, patristic exegetes often link the manna in the wilderness to Christ, the 'bread of life', and thus to the breaking of the bread, his body. Erasmus, that great admirer of patristic allegorical exegesis, went one step further by associating the manna with Christ the Word of God specifically as he is present in Scripture:

> It is not absurd to believe that the Holy Ghost also desired scripture at times to
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> generate various senses (*varios gignat sensus*), to suit the disposition of each
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> reader, just as manna tasted as each one wished it to. Nor is this to be
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> attributed to the uncertainty of Scripture, but rather to its fertility (*nec haec est*

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[76] See, for example, Origen's view on discrepancies between the four evangelists' accounts: 'I do not condemn them if they even sometimes dealt freely with things which to the eye of history happened differently, and changed them so as to subserve the mystical aims they had in view… Jesus is many things, according to the conceptions of him, of which it is quite likely that the Evangelists took up different notions; while yet they were in agreement with each other in the different things they wrote.' (*Commentary on John* X:4; Ante Nicene Fathers, vol. X, p.383).

scripturam incertitudo, sed foecunditas).[77]

It is useful to bring Erasmus into the discussion at this point, because he was well aware both of the value and of the pitfalls of allegorical interpretation: he refused to condemn all of its diversity, whilst recognising the pernicious nature of some exegesis which invented further diversity for its own sake.[78] He spotted the paradox that in fact the sort of exegesis which led to the seemingly endless proliferation of arbitrary meanings was the result of an *overly*-rigid set of rules for allegorical interpretation: instead he advocated a move away from the 'old law' of scholastic allegory towards the 'new liberty' of a free and personal allegorical reading of the text (drawing a parallel with the ethical sphere where the formalism of Old Testament Law was replacement with the liberty of the Gospel of love).[79] The search, then, for 'good' allegorical interpretation, then, is a search for a method which gives full rein to the God-given openness of the text, allowing it to be related to the myriad particular situations of its readers, whilst recognising Scripture's own proper constraints. How do Origen and Gregory fare according to this criterion?

For both theologians, this paper has argued, allegorical interpretation is not just a problem-solving device, intended to resolve various difficulties in the text. These difficulties may indeed stimulate its use, but their role is to point to the spiritual meaning of the text

[77] Erasmus *Convivium Religiosum* in *Colloquies* tr. Craig R. Thompson (University of Toronto, Toronto, 1997) p.872. The sacramental connection is picked up by Terence Cave's analysis: 'Erasmus constructs a dynamic imitation or reproduction of Scripture. The text is to be wholly absorbed by the reader and to be located in the *pectus*, that intuitive focus of the self which is presumed to guarantee profound understanding and *living* expression. In other words, the scriptural text is made consubstantial with the reader and is then re-uttered in a speech-act grounded in the living-presence of the speaker': Terence Cave *The Cornucopian Text: problems of writing in the French Renaissance* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1979) p.85.

[78] Cave *The Cornucopian Text* p.86-8.

[79] Cave *The Cornucopian Text* p.91. As Cave points out, 'the new liberty of the reader, delimited by the circularity of a Christocentric Scripture, should ideally lead to unity and authenticity. Yet this liberty… acts as a solvent, breaking down the carefully elaborated structure of orthodox external constraints, and thus opening up the possibility of an infinite series of "authentic" readings…': *ibid* p.91.

which is hidden behind them and which is the goal of allegorical interpretation. This spiritual meaning is the result of the divine inspiration of the whole of the text, it is this in which the reader is asked to participate and it is in this that the openness of Scripture lies. The element of control which constantly remains in tension with the openness of the spiritual meaning is the unity of Scripture itself: both Origen and Gregory insist that they interpret Scripture by Scripture and, although it leads to different results in each case, it is this broadly 'canonical' approach which constrains their exegesis. For Origen, the unity of Scripture means that each passage, each word even, relates to and can be interpreted in the light of other similar passages or words. The text is a textile: woven from many threads, yet possessing a very practical and functional unity which educates the reader. Because the weaver, the Holy Spirit, acts in Scripture with this purpose, the weaving has order (*taxis*) – although this pattern in the weave may not be visible to everyone at first sight. There is a skill in appreciating the art of the weaver and making it clear to others. For Gregory, on the other hand, the unity of Scripture means the presence of a sequence (*akolouthia*) in the text. Passages and individual words are related to one another (and the connections are not just between adjacent passages and words), but these connections are subordinated to the sequence of the whole text. By following this sequence the exegete can discover the aim (*skopos*) of the Spirit in inspiring Scripture; consequently, everything must be read in the light of the text's *skopos* and *akolouthia*. The text is thus a ladder leading up to God.

This contrast in how the two theologians perceive the unity of the text affects their respective methods of exegesis. As we have seen, Origen's method focuses entirely on establishing the connections between various parts of Scripture; Gregory, on the other hand, first establishes the *akolouthia* and *skopos* of the text, before interpreting individual passages and words both in the light of the *akolouthia* and *skopos* and by reference to other passages and words to which the overall direction of the text points the exegete. Consequently,

Origen's approach often presents a kaleidoscopic perspective on a biblical text, offering a wealth of detail and frequently suggesting several interpretations of one verse. Gregory, by contrast, whilst also deriving very colourful meanings from the text, has a more controlled approach, because each of his interpretations is aimed at a single focal point.[80] Thus we might say that Origen's approach is predominantly *synchronic*, viewing the text as a whole from an apparently timeless perspective, while Gregory's method is thoroughly *diachronic*, reading the complete text as a journey of meaning in which the reader is thoroughly immersed.

That Gregory's approach has its advantages over Origen's might now be becoming clear. Origen's rigorous comparison of similar passages produces a brilliant, but bewildering and sometimes seemingly arbitrary multiplicity of meaning. In his case, the unity of Scripture often fails to control Origen's interpretation, and in fact generates the diversity of meaning. The interesting thing to note is that Origen clearly recognised this problem and attempted to draw his exegesis of individual passages or words into a diachronic synthesis through the interpretative framework of the journey of the soul.

Gregory, on the other hand, is keen to create a more positive dynamic between openness and control – indeed, this is one of his more general theological concerns. The supposed faults of Origen's cosmological and spiritual systems, together with the difficulty of knowing what he actually taught, have been well documented. It is not clear whether Origen

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[80] 'Ce que [Grégoire] perd en richesse par rapport à Origène, il le gagne en pureté de ligne': Canévet 'Exégèse et théologie dans les traités spirituels de Grégoire de Nysse' in Harl ed. *Écriture et culture philosophique dans la pensée de Grégoire de Nysse* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), p.165. The contrast between Gregory and Origen is between their *methods* – it lies at what we might call a 'macro' level. At the 'micro' level of the interpretation of individual verses and problem passages, Gregory in fact often borrows or adapts interpretations from Origen (Canévet 'Exégèse et Théologie…', p.145). Therefore the *results* of their exegesis seem very similar. Nevertheless, *which* particular Origenistic interpretation Gregory uses is dictated by the overall structure of his own exegesis; even his use of allegory is controlled by the precise character of the *skopos* of each text (Heine ed. and tr. *Gregory of Nyssa's Treatise on the Inscriptions of the Psalms*, p.49).

believed in an infinite series of worlds and in the possibility of further Falls, nevertheless this belief does seem to have been imputed to him by Gregory's day. His system could be interpreted as devaluing history by seeing it as a cycle of endlessly-repeating worlds. This tempts one to a synchronic 'reading' of the universe, not just of texts: to see the endless cycle as a generator of infinite meanings and to be more interested in drawing timeless comparisons between the cycles than with understanding the one direction of God's saving history.[81] Consequently, when Gregory writes of God's activity in the cosmos as a divine *akolouthia*, with a beginning out of nothing, an ordered history and an end in which God's plan is fully consummated, he seems specifically to be ruling out any speculation about further worlds and cycles and to be establishing a thoroughly diachronic reading of the world. However, one of the most interesting features of Gregory's theology is that although he believes that the universe will reach a final goal, he emphasises that at the individual level this will not be experienced as an absolute end. Rather, Gregory asserts that since God is infinite and the human soul finite, each person will experience a perpetual progress towards God. This journey will be endless, yet endlessly fulfilling. Thus, Gregory retains the concept of *akolouthia* even eschatologically, keeping the importance of the idea of the end (*telos*) of the universe and the goal (*skopos*) of life, but claiming that there can be some sort of progress and sequence even within this end or goal. By this means Gregory attempts to curb too much speculation about other worlds, whilst simultaneously proclaiming the infinitude and transcendence of God. Consequently, there is in his theology both a sense of control and openness: particularly with regard to human reason he stresses both its limits *and* its endless dynamic in its path towards understanding God.

Because Gregory sees the inspiration of the Bible as reflecting God's power in the universe, and the interpretation of the Bible as both mirroring and being part of the human

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[81] In fact, I think this is a distortion of Origen's theology, but it is one commonly imputed to him.

progress towards God, it is not surprising that one finds the same tension between control and endless depth in his hermeneutics. Over-speculative exegesis is ruled out by the controlling concept of the *akolouthia*, which is itself determined by the divine *skopos* in the text. (One result of this is that he is much more cautious than Origen about offering several interpretations of one text, or seek out several layers of meaning.) On the other hand, Gregory is quite sure that no human exegete will ever exhaust the meaning in Scripture, for that would be to know God fully. This is especially so because according to Gregory, words, as human inventions, do not have some inherent connection with their referents and can thus only mediate meaning, rather than fully contain it. In most cases this mediation is adequate, but in the case of God the inadequacy of human language is revealed. Although it is divinely-inspired, even Scripture is composed of human words and can thus only 'point towards' God. Its reflection of the divine is better than others, but can never comprehend God fully. Consequently, while the meaning of the Bible is to a certain extent controlled by the *akolouthia* in the text, its openness is not lost because for Gregory the pursuit of meaning is always eternal. As with the soul's desire for God in its eschatological state, the reader's desire for meaning is constantly satisfied despite never being sated.

These different approaches are also indicated by the dominant ideas in Origen's and Gregory's hermeneutics. Origen's almost obsessive devotion to the body of the text (revealed in metaphors such as that of the Passover lamb) suggests that he views the text as a new incarnation of the Word, an embodiment which not only mirrors the embodiment of Christ in humanity, but also that of the Word in creation as a whole.[82] The problem with this is that it might encourage a kind of idolisation of the text, according to which every single word and phrase is so studied and compared to generate a proliferation of meanings with no

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[82] Again, a series of synchronic rather than diachronic associations. See Raymond B. Williams 'Origen's Interpretation of the Old Testament and Levi-Strauss' Interpretation of Myth' in A. L. Merrill and T. W. Overholt (edd.) *Scripture in History and Theology: Essays in Honour of J. Coert Rylaarsdam* (Pickwick, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1977) p.283.

central focus and no direction. In this view, meaning is immanent in the text (although not absolutely comprehended by it) and, although Origen himself tries to avoid this impression, there is a tendency in this sort of view of Scripture to view interpretation as the peeling away of various layers until one reaches the ultimate true meaning. Gregory, on the other hand, expresses the openness of Scripture not in terms of several layers of meaning, but as an eschatological search: the spiritual meaning can never be more than an approximation to the truth, however much it is refined and improved. Thus meaning always lies beyond – or transcends – the words of the text. This is emphasised by recurrent eschatological motifs in his exegesis, particularly in his interpretation of ends of books, where the eschatological emphasis usually indicates a tension between closure and openness – both at the level of text and of history. Exegetes are on a journey of their own – perhaps, one might say, a perpetual progress of interpretation. They are guided by the Spirit, and their progress is always fulfilling but because of their own finitude they can never reach the goal.

Allegory, then, and the issue of the unity and the diversity of Scripture can be seen to be profoundly related to Origen's and Gregory's wider theological projects. Gregory's caution about his Alexandrian spiritual heritage is apparent in his eschatology and his hermeneutics and in both cases his caution is due to the same reason: that is, a desire to preserve a sense both of the infinitude of God and of the 'right direction' or proper goal of his saving *oikonomia*. Thus, the questions he raises about how one should read and respond to the scriptural text still have relevance to the modern theologian, even if they seem unfamiliar at first. We may not share Gregory's exact belief in the *inspiration* of Scripture, but his ideas about the relation between *meaning* and the text and the dogmatic concepts associated with them can I think usefully stimulate further thought on the subject by modern theologians. In particular, his overall method of reading Scripture points to the fact that what lies at the heart of allegorical interpretation is not the minute, complex and bizarre exegesis of problematic

passages but rather a prayerful, theological and sacramental reading which relates God's salvation-history to the history of the reader.