Is Allegorizing A Legitimate Manner Of Biblical Interpretation?

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The question of whether the allegorical method is ever a legitimate device to use when interpreting Scripture is one that may sound completely rhetorical to anyone schooled at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. "Of course not!" we might reply, remembering our course in hermeneutics. "Why even ask such a question?"

But the fact is that an allegorizing approach to interpretation is making a comeback in the church. Various reasons may be cited for this. Among Catholics there has been a renewed interest in reviving the church through a fresh examination of its two-thousand year tradition. One of the strongest exponents of this *"resourcement* theology," Henri de Lubac, made a concentrated effort in his lifetime to rehabilitate the allegorical method.[1]

One might also point to a wave of "postcritical" reading strategies that have followed after postmodernism. Postmodernism repudiated the whole idea of finding objective meaning in texts. Radical postmodernists asserted that all meaning is merely subjective interpretation, and that one is unable to escape the presuppositions and cultural biases of one's tribe or group. In so doing, they dethroned the modernist, rationalist biblical critic whose supposedly objective "point of view" enabled him to get at the historical truth that lay behind the text—or so he claimed.

Weary of modernist interpretation that atomized the text of Scripture, but unwilling to indulge in the individualistic postmodern gamesmanship of Derrida and other deconstructionists, many more traditionally-minded church men have found refuge in a postcritical, "located" hermeneutics. That is to say: they have self-consciously located themselves in the context of a given churchly tradition. If all truth is tribal, then why not belong to a church tribe and cherish its traditions? They point out (and rightly so) that even Origen on his worst days is more edifying that Bultmann on his best. As David Steinmetz of Duke University puts it:

> The medieval theory of levels of meaning in the biblical text, with all its undoubted defects, flourished because it is true, while the modern theory of a single meaning, with all its demonstrable virtues, is false. Until the historical-critical method becomes critical of its own theoretical foundations and develops a hermeneutical theory adequate to the nature of the text which it is interpreting, it will remain restricted—as it deserves to be—to the guild and the academy, where the question of truth can endlessly be deferred .[2]

In the comments above, note the association between the "modern theory of a single meaning" and the historical-critical method. It seems that, in Steinmetz's opinion, the post-Reformation theologians' emphasis on the single, literal/historical meaning of the text *(unus sensus simplex)* led directly to the historical-critical method of the Enlightenment.[3]

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[1] See, for example, his massive work *Medieval Exegesis,* especially Volume 2: The Four Senses of Scripture. First published in 1959 in French, it came out in English translation in 2000, published jointly by Eerdmans and T & T Clark, Ltd. For a more recent example, see Luke Timothy Johnson's "So What's Catholic About It? The State of Catholic Biblical Scholarship," *Commonweal*, Vol. 125, Issue 1, January 16, 1998.

[2] David Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Theology Today*, Vol 37, No. 1, April 1980, p 38. Accessed online at: http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/apr1980/v37-1-article2.htm. The medieval theory he refers to is the "fourfold meaning," most classically described in the following ditty:

> Littera gesta docet
> Quid credas allegoria
> Moralis quid agas
> Quo tendas anagogia.

The literal meaning speaks of what happened. The allegorical meaning speaks of what you should believe. The moral meaning tells you what you should do. The anagogical meaning speaks of where you yearn to be.

[3] For more on this idea, see "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis? Sic Et Non," by Daniel James Trier in *Trinity Journal*, Spring, 2003. He writes, "The Reformation is faulted not only for individualism but also for modern foundationalism, as an outgrowth of

Since the Lutheran church does not exist in a vacuum, one would also expect its hermeneutics to be affected by these larger trends. In an apparent retreat from the idea of a "single sense," James Voelz of Concordia, St. Louis speaks instead of "levels of meaning."[4] In a postmodern move to locate himself within a given tradition, he first asserts, "Communities are very key. Communities teach … readers to read a text." He then identifies the proper reading community as "those who confess the faith which [the church] has sworn to confess…. Historic Christianity, true 'catholic'—universal—doctrine and belief, these are the womb of the church's book."[5]

Given the way these hermeneutical winds have been blowing, it really should not surprise us to see a resurgence of the allegorical method also within the Lutheran church. It's a traditional approach. It's a communal approach. It's a self-consciously churchly approach. It can point to practitioners over the centuries in an unbroken line from St. Paul to Origen to Augustine, to Gregory, to Bede, to Aquinas, to Luther.[6] Advocates of allegory say that while Luther may have excoriated the allegorical method on many occasions, he was ultimately criticizing only the mechanistic use of it. Simply because the method was abused does not mean it can't be properly used.[7] In fact, some say, "Luther encouraged his students…to understand allegory… [for] it provided one way to see the spiritual dimension of a text. It opened up the reader to see beyond the account to the gospel truths that God revealed."[8]

Clearly, then, any attempt to answer the question posed by the essay is going to have to grapple with Luther's attitude toward allegory. Before we do that, however, it will be useful to review the genesis of the allegorical method as well as examine how it was actually used by people like Origen and Augustine. Along the way it will also be important for us to define terms like *allegory, typology,* and *application,* since a great deal depends on whether or not a person sees those ways of dealing with a text as different from one another.

I. The Origin of the Allegorical Method

We should begin here by drawing a distinction between allegory as *a method of writing* and allegory as *a procedure for interpretation.* As Frances Young puts it:

> Compositional allegory [is] a figure of speech deliberately adopted by the author for effect. Allegorical interpretation…suggests that the whole text has an "undersense", or hyponoia, and should therefore not be read according to what might seem to be its obvious meaning.[9]

No interpreter has ever argued against interpreting as an allegory a piece that an author composed to be an allegory. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress,* for example, is falsely read if treated as a genuine travelogue. Don McLean's "American Pie"—with its bizarre and colorful imagery—was never intended to be a literal description of "the day the music died."

That there are biblical allegories—texts in which the writer himself makes it clear that his 'story' is not to be taken literally—no one doubts. One might point here, for instance, to Ezekiel's allegory of the sisters in chapter 23, or to his allegory of the two eagles in chapter 17. One might legitimately discuss whether or not the Song of Songs is to be read as allegory. But even in cases where there is strong textual evidence to suggest that we

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sola scriptura…. [According to Andrew Louth] *sola scriptura* 'reinforces the abhorrence of allegory because of the way [allegory] seems to ignore the objective meaning of Scripture' [in which Louth also sees] 'an alliance between the Reformation and the Enlightenment: not something that inspires confidence.'" The entire article is available online at http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3803/is_200304/ai_n9221345.

[4] See for example Chapter 6 of *What Does This Mean?* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1995).

[5] "What Does Biblical Scholarship Today Offer the Church?" *Cresset,* Easter (April) 1996, p 13.

[6] We may dispute the fairness of including the first and last members in the chain of tradition, but this, nevertheless, is the assertion of those who are attracted to the practice in the Lutheran church.

[7] For the full argument see Timothy H. Maschke's article, "The Authority of Scripture: Luther's Approach to Allegory in Galatians," *Logia,* Vol IV, No. 2, April, 1995, p 25-31.

[8] Ibid., p 28.

[9] Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) p 177.

are dealing with a biblical allegory, however, one should be careful not to attach a mystic sense to every single detail of the story or to every last feature of the plot, as allegorizing interpreters are accustomed to do. The larger point is more important than the details, and the interpretation of the details should not overwhelm the point the holy writer is making. This is the first issue with allegorizing interpretation.

The second issue with allegorical interpretation is whether or not it is permissible to treat other texts that way—even texts that present themselves as real depictions of actual events—without some textual sign "that this figure of speech [is] in play."[10]

In the Greek world, this method of interpretation really began as a way of rehabilitating Homer. In the early 5th century BC Eleatic philosophers began to question the appropriateness of Homer's depiction of the gods and heroes. Xenophanes, for example, said,

> πάντα θεοῖς ἀνέθηκαν Ὅμερός θ᾽ Ἡσίοδός τε
> ὅσασα παρ᾽ ἀνθρώποισιν ὀνείδεα καὶ ψόγος ἐστίν,
> κλέπτειν μοιχεύειν τε καὶ ἀλλήλους ἀπατεύειν

> All things both Homer and Hesiod ascribed to the gods—whatever is shameful and cause for blame among people—stealing, adultery and deceiving one-another.

This was unworthy of the deity, since:

> αἰεὶ ἐν ταύτῳ μίμνει κινούμενος οὐδέν
> οὐδὲ μετερχεσθαί μιν ἐπιπρέπει ἄλλοτε ἄλλη
> ἀλλ᾽ ἀπάνευθε πόνοιο νόου φρενί πάντα κραδαίνει

> (God) always remains in the same place, entirely unmoved nor is it fitting that he move about from one place to another, rather, he sets all things in motion with his mind, without effort of thought.

Since Homer was "the poet" for the Greeks, and a foundational author in Greek *paideia,* it was only natural that there were those who came to his defense. A key weapon in his defenders' arsenal was the use of allegory. Theagenes of Rhegium (c. 525 BC) is usually credited as being the first to practice it. "Homer didn't mean all these things to be understood as having actually happened," ran the argument, "What he *really* meant was…." This move left the commentators on Greek myths free to interpret their poets by looking for the meanings that lay hidden beneath the surface of the text.[11]

Often texts would be explained in psychological or rational (i.e., more scientific) terms. In Euripides' *Heracles,* for example, Lycus (the villain of the piece) dismisses the idea that Heracles actually strangled the Nemean lion with his bare hands. What really happened, Lycus says, was that he trapped the lion.[12] The names of gods and goddesses, places and people would be etymologically unpacked to discover the "hidden" meanings. The name of ΖΕΥΣ, ΔΙΟΣ, for example, was explained as teaching that the god was the one through [διά] whom all things came.

The important things to note here are 1) allegory began as an attempt to defend important poetic texts that had come under attack; 2) allegory looked "beneath" the text for hidden philosophical, scientific, or moral truths that the poets had embedded in their work. What the text said on the surface mattered not half so much as the

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[10] Ibid., p 177. It should probably be noted for fairness sake that Young would probably count herself among those who see no great hermeneutical divide between allegory and typology, or between the Alexandrian or the Antiochene schools—a thesis with which I disagree.

[11] In fact, the term "allegory" arrived on the scene rather late. The first Greek term for this practice was ὑπονοία—hidden meaning; an understanding that lies beneath the surface.

[12] The words for "strangle" and "trap" in Greek are similar. See *Heracles,* lines 153ff.

symbolic meanings to which the literal narrative pointed; 3) by the time of Origen, allegory had already been used for nearly seven-hundred years among the Greeks as a legitimate way of interpreting texts.

II. Christian Allegory

Origen

Space does not permit us to discuss in detail Philo's (fl. 25 BC) unique blend of Judaism and philosophy through allegorical interpretation. It is well-known that Philo was able to interpret nearly every detail of the Old Testament narratives symbolically, so that each became representative of a timeless truth. For example:

> In the Genesis story of the man and woman eating of the tree of knowledge, Philo sees the serpent as a symbol of desire, the woman as a symbol of the senses, and the man as a symbol of the mind. Thus desire becomes the origin of sin by deceiving the senses; then the senses captivate the mind.[13]

It is sufficient simply to mention in passing that, in Alexandria, the practice of allegorizing the Old Testament was not without precedent well before Origen arrived upon the scene.

Before we evaluate Origen's practice of Christian allegory, it's important to mention that we are looking at only one aspect of his interpretive method. While we encounter a number of things in his allegorizing that we do not like, there is still a great deal in his entire method to applaud. Origen was committed, for instance, to the verbal inspiration of the Old and New Testaments.[14] He also believed in the unity of the Scriptures: that all the ancient Scriptures had been written for Christian learning and had the message of Christ at the center. He confessed that the Creator God, the God who gave his law to Israel, the God of the prophets was the very same God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. "He did not want to reduce the miracles of Jesus…to allegory, because he genuinely believed that God had intervened in human history."[15] Furthermore, his *Hexapla* stands as powerful evidence of his commitment to a scholarly study of the text and words of Holy Scripture. Finally, Origen was a Christian teacher and wanted his students to see how the text applied to them.

What led Origen to allegorize? Besides the fact that allegory was simply part of the Platonic air Origen breathed in Alexandria, there are also a number of practical reasons why he would find this approach useful. As Greek allegory protected the text of Homer, so it served Origen with the text of Scripture, especially in confronting the Jews and in combating the heresies of the day:

> Allegory enabled him to appropriate the Old Testament from the Jews by giving even the most arcane provisions of the Law a Christological interpretation. It also enabled him to purge the Bible of the morally offensive elements which estranged the Gnostics and to demonstrate to pagans that it contained teachings consistent with the deepest insights of Greek philosophy. Since prejudice against the supposed barbarities of Scripture often made Gnosticism more appealing to classically educated persons than was orthodox Christianity, the two latter concerns often merged. Origen won over his patron, Ambrose, from Gnosticism by means of his allegorical interpretation much as the allegorical interpretation of a later Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, weaned the classically educated young Augustine from Manichaeism.[16]

In fact, Origen even went so far as to say that God had purposefully put obscure and difficult

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[13] Matthew B. Schwartz, "Greek and Jew: Philo and the Alexandrian Riots of 38-41 CE," *Judaism,* Spring, 2000, accessed online at http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0411/is_2_49/ai_64332273. The article also gives a helpful history of Alexandria and the two worlds—Greek and Jew—that met there.

[14] Patrick Terrell Gray, "A Meaning Worthy of God: Origen and Biblical Integrity in a Pre-Constantinian Age," *Quodlibet Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 4, November, 2002. Accessible online at http://www.quodlibet.net/gray-origen.shtml.

[15] Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation, Past and Present,* Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1996, p 102. In other words, Origen did not discard history, nor did he transform every narrative into allegory.

[16] Joseph Trigg, *Biblical Interpretation,* Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1988, p 25-26.

passages into the text of Scripture:

> [The] divine wisdom took care that certain stumbling-blocks, or interruptions, to the historical meaning should take place, by the introduction into the midst (of the narrative) of certain impossibilities and incongruities; that in this way the very interruption of the narrative might, as by the interposition of a bolt, present an obstacle to the reader, whereby he might refuse to acknowledge the way which conducts to the ordinary meaning; and being thus excluded and debarred from it, we might be recalled to the beginning of another way, in order that, by entering upon a narrow path, and passing to a loftier and more sublime road, he might lay open the immense breadth of divine wisdom.[17]

"Impossible" ordinary meanings forced readers to rise higher and to seek the "loftier road" of the symbolic meaning.

Finally, a commitment to divine inspiration itself led Origen to allegorize. Since every word was God's word, every word must have a vital significance, and could conceivably point to a higher, symbolic meaning. Anyone schooled in a Platonic thought world would have readily understood this point of view.[18]

With this background, we are now ready to examine two instances in which Origen interpreted texts allegorically: the creation account and the parable of the Good Samaritan. I would not claim that these two texts alone can adequately capture or summarize Origen's practice of allegory. But they are fairly typical, and (more importantly) they show what could happen to the interpretation of Scripture if this approach becomes accepted among us as legitimate.

> For who that has understanding will suppose that the first, and second, and third day, and the evening and the morning, existed without a sun, and moon, and stars? And that the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? And who is so foolish as to suppose that God, after the manner of a husbandman, planted a paradise in Eden…and placed in it a tree of life, visible and palpable, so that one tasting of the fruit by the bodily teeth obtained life? … And if God is said to walk in the paradise in the evening, and Adam to hide himself under a tree, I do not suppose that any one doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance, and not literally…. And what need is there to say more, since those who are not altogether blind can collect countless instances of a similar kind recorded as having occurred, but which did not literally take place?[19]

Note that Origen is saying more than simply that there are anthropomorphic aspects in the telling of real, biblical history. He is saying that the account cannot be taken at face value, that—in fact—it did not take place as described. The history is mere "appearance." And since the text as it reads is unworkable—a stumbling-block—it must be referring to "certain mysteries."

Origen's commentary on Genesis has been lost, so we must piece together his unraveling of these mysteries from snippets found scattered in his extant work. He sees the "heavens and the earth" of the first verse as something to be clearly distinguished from "the firmament" and the "dry land" mentioned later.[20] In his *Homilies on Genesis*, he identifies "the corporeal heaven" or firmament with "our outer person" while the heaven made on the first day is "spiritual substance," or "our mind *(mens)* which is…spirit."[21] That this is an application of a more general idea which he holds seems clear enough from *De Principiis:*

> In that commencement [of creation], then, we are to suppose that God created so great a number of rational or intellectual creatures (or by whatever name they are to be called), which we have formerly termed understandings, as He foresaw would be sufficient. It is certain that He made them according to some definite number, predetermined by Himself.[22]

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[17] *De Principiis,* Book 4. Philip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers.* electronic ed. Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000.

[18] Patrick Terrell Gray, op. cit.

[19] *De Principiis,* Book 4. Philip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers.* electronic ed. Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000.

[20] *Contra Celsum*, VI, 49. Philip Schaff, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers.* electronic ed. Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000.

[21] *Homilies on Genesis*, I. 2; trans. R.E. Heine, in Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus,* Washington, DC, 1982,48-49.

[22] *De Principiis,* Book 2, 9. Schaff, Philip. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers.* electronic ed. Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000.

What Origen means here is that, in the first verse of Genesis, the word "heavens" really means "rational beings," or "intellectual natures." These existed prior to the rest of creation. The *Catholic Encyclopedia* further unfolds Origen's thoughts on this verse:

> In the beginning all intellectual natures were created equal and alike, as God had no motive for creating them otherwise *(De Principiis,* II, ix, 6). Their present differences arise solely from their different use of the gift of free will. The spirits created good and happy grew tired of their happiness *(De Principiis*, I, iii, 8), and, through carelessness, fell, some more, some less *(De Principiis* I, vi, 2). Hence the hierarchy of the angels; hence also the four categories of created intellects: angels, stars (supposing, as is probable, that they are animated, *(De Principiis,* I, vii, 3), men, and demons. But their roles may be one day changed; for what free will has done, free will can undo, and the Trinity alone is essentially immutable in good.[23]

There can be no doubt that Origen's allegorizing here is an evasion of the text rather than an exegesis of it. His thoughts on the preexistence of spirits owes everything to Plato, and nothing to Moses. The historical nature of the narrative has been lost. In its place, the words of the text have become signs and symbols, enabling Origen to find in them meanings that he considers to be more "worthy of God"[24]—a completely subjective criterion. In this respect it is not hard to detect the basic kinship between early Greek allegory and Christian allegory.

The second text for our consideration is Origen's "Homily on the Good Samaritan." Although it is fairly long, I believe there is some use in presenting it—if not in its entirety, then at least in an excerpted form sufficient to give you a genuine feel for Origen's method:

> "[So far as the man who was going down is concerned] we should not think that it applies to every man. For, not every man "goes down from Jerusalem into Jericho"….[No] the man who "went down"…"fell among robbers" because he himself wished to go down.[25] But the robbers are none other than they of whom the Savior says, "All who came before me were thieves and robbers." "They robbed him and inflicted wounds on him." What are the wounds that have wounded a man? They are vices and sins....

> But it happened that first a priest and then a Levite were going down on the same road. Perhaps they had done some good to other men, but not to this man, who had gone down "from Jerusalem to Jericho." For the priest saw him—I think this means the Law. And the Levite saw him—that is, in my view, the prophetic word. When they had seen him, they passed by and left him.

> Providence was saving the half-dead man for him who was stronger than the Law and the prophets, namely for the Samaritan. The name means "guardian." He is the one who "neither grows drowsy nor sleeps as he guards Israel."…He went down to rescue and care for the dying man. The Jews had said to him, "You are a Samaritan and you have a demon." Though he denied having a demon, he was unwilling to deny that he was a Samaritan, for he knew that he was guardian.

> So when he had come to the half-dead man and seen him rolling about in his own blood, he had pity on him. He drew near to him, in order to become his neighbor. "He bound his wounds, poured in oil mixed with wine"….The Samaritan is that man whose care and help all who are badly off need….He cleans the wounds with oil, to reduce the swelling of the wounds, but also with wine, adding in something that stings. And the man who had been wounded "he placed on his own beast," that is on his own body, since he deigned to assume humanity *[Hominem assumere].* This Samaritan "bears our sins" and grieves for us. He carries the half-dead man and brings him to the *pandochium*—that is, the Church, which accepts everyone and denies its help to no one….

> After he has brought him in, he does not depart immediately. He remains for a day at the inn with the half-dead man. He cares for his wounds not only during the day but also at night. He devotes all his attention and activity to him. And when he wants to set out in the morning, "he takes two denarii" from his tested silver, from his tested

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[23] Accessed online at http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11306b.htm.

[24] *De Principiis,* Book 4, 15. Schaff, Philip. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers.* electronic ed. Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000.

[25] Origen is explicating the opinion of "an elder" that "the man who went down" was Adam.

money, and pays the inn-keeper. Without a doubt the inn-keeper was the angel of the Church, whom the Samaritan bade to care for the man diligently and bring him back to health…. "Two denarii" appear to me to be knowledge of the Father and the Son, and understanding of how the Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father.

The Samaritan "who took pity on the man who had fallen among thieves," is truly a "guardian," and a closer neighbor than the Law and the prophets. He showed that he was the man's neighbor more by deed than by word. According to the passage that says, "Be imitators of me, as I too am of Christ," it is possible for us to imitate Christ and to pity those who have "fallen among thieves." We can go to them, bind their wounds, pour in oil and wine, put them on our own beasts, and bear their burdens. The Son of God encourages us to do things like this. He is speaking not so much to the teacher of the Law as to us and to all men when he says, "Go and do likewise."

Granted that this is a parable. Yet it is a parable whose details come from the everyday life of Jesus' listeners. The emotive power of the story only grows when a person becomes aware of the historical and cultural background of Jesus' audience. And yes, obviously, I also grant that Jesus is illustrating a larger point with this story.

But look what happens with Origen's interpretation. There's really no thought of looking for the main point of the parable. Each facet of the story needs to be interpreted; every detail corresponds to something else. The man going down represents how people fall into sin out of free will. Robbers are false teachers. The wounds are sins and vices. The priest is the law. The Levite represents the prophets. Perhaps realizing the tenuousness of this identification, Origen adds "in my view" or "I think" for these correspondences.

But there is no such hesitation of the identification of the Samaritan: he is the Lord. The oil and wine is the comforting, yet stinging help the Lord brings to sinners.. The beast of burden is the incarnation. The pandochium (inn) is the Church. The innkeeper is the angel of the Church. The two denarii represent the knowledge of the Father and the Son, and of their περιχώρησις.

In applying the truths of the parable, Origen first points to Christ's superiority over the law and prophets because he showed himself to be a "closer neighbor" than the priest and Levite. This might be considered (although he doesn't identify it as such) the spiritual truth. The moral truth of the parable is for us to be imitators of Christ by going out and doing likewise. Here we might notice how allegorizing interpretation often amounts to what we might view as homiletical application.

More importantly, observe the "proofs" that are brought to bear. Passages are quoted to elucidate (like John 8:48,49, "You are a Samaritan"). Yet these are based not on any real similarity of context or thought, but on mere concordance—in this case the fact that the word "Samaritan" is found in both passages. Etymology also plays a useful role. Since the Lord is a true guardian for his people, and since (according to Origen) Samaritan is a name that means guardian, the Samaritan must be the Lord Jesus.

Etymology is an interpretive strategy we noted already in Greek allegory. It's based on the ancient idea that a word's etymology is the key to its "true" meaning. This was especially felt to be so with the names of places and people. Now it's true enough that, in Hebrew culture, places and people were often given descriptive names. But this does not mean that in every context in which a name is found, its descriptive component must be in play. And often, as in this case, the etymologies were forced and far-fetched. Yet it was so common a practice in the ancient world that most scholars assume that ancient scholars had available to them lists of etymological derivations for biblical people and places. These would be handy helps for people like St. Augustine who knew no Hebrew.

Most importantly, observe how the historical aspects of the text are almost completely ignored. There is no real discussion of the setting or the occasion of the parable: that of a legalistic lawyer wanting to "justify himself." In his haste to identify the Samaritan with Jesus, Origen misses the power of Jesus' law-preaching here. To a calculating man who wanted to set some reasonable limits to neighborly love, Jesus vividly depicts a hated Samaritan in the role of loving neighbor to a Jew who desperately needed such a love. Drawing the lawyer in through the power of a narrative, Jesus forces him to grapple with the paradoxical concept

of a neighborly love even for one's enemies. By way of contrast, notice how Origen's "this is that" allegorizing approach completely buries the power of the story under the sheer weight of all the details that he so painstakingly identifies—without any contextual support. In place of a vivid story told within a particular context, Origen leaves us with a static collection of timeless truths.

Augustine

The power of Augustine's mind and the great debt the church owes him for his confession of the truth of God's Word can hardly be exaggerated. Yet even the greatest church fathers had their flaws. One of St. Augustine's was his spiritualizing approach to the interpretation of Scripture.

In this respect, we must understand St. Augustine as a child of his times. According to his own words, taking the Scriptures at face value was extremely difficult for him. In fact, the "insight" gleaned from Ambrose that he could transcend the literal meaning of the text and interpret it spiritually was a key factor in his conversion to Christianity. To understand this, we first must grasp what the Bible—and in particular the Old Testament—must have sounded like to a cultured teacher of rhetoric living in Milan in late antiquity. His difficulties with the text can be roughly classified as being either of an aesthetic or of a moral nature.

Aesthetic Difficulties

Augustine, both by training and by native ability, was a master with words. Because of this, he was highly sensitive to texts on an aesthetic level. This attitude would pose some difficulties for him when he turned to the Scriptures to find wisdom, as he did after reading Cicero's *Hortensius*.[26] He says he found them *indigna quam Tullianae dignitati comparerem. Tumor enim meus refugiebat modum eius.*[27] Having grown used to the stately phrases and hypotactic style of the great Latin exemplars, the paratactic presentation of the Old Testament seemed far too childlike[28] to be worth anything.

Moral Difficulties

One of the criticisms the Manichees leveled against the Old Testament Scriptures, was that it ascribed immoral actions to heroes of faith and even to God. At one time, Augustine found this line of thought unanswerable. In *De Doctrina Christiana* he also speaks of "things which seem as if they were immoral to the inexperienced, whether they are only said, or also done, whether they speak of the person of God or of men whose holiness is recommended to us."[29] From the same book *(De Doctrina Christiana)* we also get some of the specifics. Apparently the marriage of Hosea to a prostitute was hard for him to handle, as was the drunkenness of Noah.

Transcending the Text

Most of his moral and aesthetic objections to the Old Testament on Manichean grounds were removed through Ambrose's sermons, especially the great church father's emphasis on distinguishing between "the spirit" and "the letter" in getting at a text's "true" meaning. Since this is a key to understanding Augustine's approach to Scripture, we

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[26] *S. Augustini Confessionum* 3.4 (paragraphs 7 and 8).

[27] *S. Augustini Confessionum* 3. 5 (paragraph 9) "unworthy of comparison with the dignity of Cicero. For the swelling of my pride was repelled by their restraint."

[28] *S. Augustini Confessionum* 3. 5. In the section, speaking as someone who has worked out his difficulties,, he describes Scripture's *"rem"* as *"incessu humilem successu excelsam"* "lowly when you first approach them, lofty when you try to master them." He also speaks of the need to *"inclinare cervicem"* "bend low the neck" to understand it. Finally, he speaks of Scripture's capability of being understood by *pueris* and *parvulis:* children and little ones. He has transformed his original distaste for the books' childish style into an argument against the pride of one who believes himself too clever for them.

[29] *De Doctrina Christiana* 3. 12, *quae autem quasi flagitiosa imperitis videntur, sive tantum dicta, sive etiam facta unt, vel ex Dei persona, vel ex hominum quorum nobis sanctitas commendatur.* Henry Chadwick, in a note on his translation of the *Confessions,* describes some of the moral conundrums posed by the Manichees against the Old Testament as having to do with "the suicide of Samson, or the sacrifice of Isaac or the fate of Jephthah's daughter" (Oxford, 1992, page 48, n. 39).

will examine two of his statements on the matter:

> *Et fidem catholicam…iam non inpudenter asseri existimabam, maxime audito uno atque altero, et saepius aenigmate soluto de scriptis veteribus, ubi, cum ad litteram acciperem, occidebar. Spiritualiter itaque plerisque illorum librorum locis expositis, iam reprehendebam desperationem meam illam dumtaxat, qua credideram legem et prophetas detestantibus atque irridentibus resisti omnino non posse.*

> I now thought the Catholic faith not an impudent thing to assert, especially when I had heard one passage after another from the Old Testament interpreted allegorically, in places where, when I had taken them literally, killed me. And so when many passages in those books had been spiritually explained, I now began to be critical of my lack of faith, in this respect, that I had believed the law and the prophets incapable of being defended against those who despised and laughed at them.[30]

Similarly, he writes:

> *Gaudebam etiam, quod vetera scripta legis et prophetarum iam non illo oculo mihi legenda proponerentur, quo antea videbantur absurda, cum arguebam tamquam ita sentientes sanctos twos; verum autem non ita sentiebant. Et tamquam regulam diligentissime commendaret…: Littera occidit, spiritus autem vivificat, cum ea, quae ad litteram perversitatem docere videbantur, remoto mystico velamento spiritualiter aperiret.*

> I rejoiced because your ancient texts were set before me to be read, not with that kind of gaze by which they formerly seemed absurd: when I used to censure them as though your saints held certain opinions they most certainly did not…. And [I heard Ambrose] as though he were most carefully inculcating a principle, "The letter kills, but the spirit gives life," as he, removing the mystic veil, expounded those passages spiritually, passages which—if taken literally—seemed to teach something perverse.[31]

Most interesting for the purpose of our study is Augustine's admission that, on the literal level, the text appeared to teach something perverse. Only when interpreted allegorically could the passage reveal the hidden kernel God had put there for the nourishment of Christian love.[32] We observe that, at this stage of his life at least, allegory did not so much help Augustine get into the meaning of the text as to get around it.

We may now observe his treatment of the creation account in Genesis and of the Good Samaritan. Concerning the first verse in Genesis, he says:

> The narrative does indeed tell us that light was created by God….But what kind of light that was…and what was the nature of this evening and this morning—these are questions beyond the scope of our sensible experience. We cannot understand what happened as it is presented to us; and yet we must believe it without hesitation. For either there was some material light…or else the word "light" here means the Holy City…. [The cogency of] this latter interpretation depends on our being able to discover some appropriate meaning for "the evening and the morning of this day." Now the knowledge of the creature is a kind of twilight, compared with this knowledge of the Creator; and then comes the daylight and the morning when that knowledge is linked with the praise and love of the Creator.[33]

There is no great need to comment. We see Augustine present two possible interpretations here.[34] Either the light is material, or a spiritual meaning is indicated here. Apparently preferring the spiritual meaning, Augustine identifies the light with the Heavenly Jerusalem. "Evening" and "morning," then, refer to the creature's knowledge of God. Our natural knowledge is a kind of twilight that is transformed into the full light of day when "linked with the praise and love of the Creator."

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[30] *S. Augustini Confessionum* 5. 14 (paragraph 24).
[31] *S. Augustini Confessionum* 6. 4 (paragraph 6).
[32] *De Doctrina Christiana* 3. 12, *quorum ad caritatis pastum enucleanda secreta sunt.*
[33] *The City of God* 11.7; as translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Books, 1972.
[34] *S. Augustini Confessionum* 12. 17. 24, as translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford: Ozford University Press, 1991.

Augustine is aware that some may take issue with his spiritual interpretation. In the *Confessions,* he refers to those who say, "Although this may be true, yet Moses did not have these things in mind.... By the word 'heaven' he did not mean the spiritual or intellectual creation which continually looks on God's face." He defends himself by saying that one text may have multiple meanings, all of which were intended by the author. If a meaning does not contradict either the *regula fidei* or the law's demand for love of God and one's neighbor, it should stand. Perhaps all the meanings are right:

> May all of us who…perceive that these texts contain various truths show love to one another, and equally may we love you, our God, fount of truth…. So when one person has said "Moses thought what I say," and another "No, what I say," I think it more religious in spirit to say "Why not rather say both, if both are true?" And if anyone sees a third or fourth and a further truth in these words, why not believe that Moses discerned all these things…. When he wrote this passage, he perfectly perceived and had in mind all the truth we have been able to find here… [as well as any other truth we] have not as yet been able to discover.[35]

Clearly, the *unus sensus* simplex is not part of Augustine's thought-world.

Augustine gives a similar treatment to the words "light" and "day" in the creation account:

> The obvious conclusion [after probing the difficulties of the text's lack of mentioning the angels' creation] is that…they are that light which received the name of "day." And the unity of that day is underlined by its not being called "the first day" but "one day." Thus the second day, and the third, and the rest are not different days; the same "one day" was repeated to complete the number of six or seven, to represent the seven stages of knowledge, the six stages comprehending the created works and the seventh stage embracing God's rest.[36]

So the angels are the "light" and the seven "days" are not to be taken literally, but as a way of expressing stages of knowledge.[37] We observe the familiar allegorizing pattern: "This is not this, but that." The letter of history has passed away. What remains is the way the text conveys the eternal symbolism of the neo-Platonic world that is far above all the *Sturm und Drang,* the incidents of history. If I may be permitted a side-comment here, I believe it's worth mentioning that Augustine's allegorizing of "day" has been used today even by some conservative scholars to make a case for the church adopting or at least tolerating a less literal interpretation of the six-day creation described in Genesis.[38]

Augustine's treatment of the Good Samaritan need not detain us long. We will observe him using many of the same procedures as Origen. But it is worth pausing to look at it just the same so that we can have very firmly fixed in our minds what will inevitably happen when allegorizing interpretations are allowed to stand as a legitimate form of hermeneutics:

> *Homo quidam descendebat ab Jerusalem in Iericho, ipse Adam intellegitur in genere humano; Jerusalem civitas pacis illa caelestis[35], a cuius beatitudine lapsus est; Iericho luna interpretatur et significat mortalitatem nostram propter quod nascitur, crescit, senescit et occidit; latrones diabolus et angeli eius, qui eum spoliaverunt immortalitate et plagis impositis peccata suadendo reliquerunt semivivum, quia ex parte qua potest intellegere et cognoscere Deum vivus est, homo, ex parte qua peccatis contabescit et premitur mortuus est, et ideo semivivus dicitur[36]. Sacerdos autem et levita qui eo viso praeterierunt sacerdotium et ministerium Veteris Testamenti significant, quod non poterat prodesse ad salutem. Samaritanus custos interpretatur, et ideo ipse Dominus significatur hoc nomine. Alligatio vulnerum est cohibitio peccatorum; oleum consolatio spei bonae propter indulgentiam datam ad reconciliationem pacis; vinum exhortatio ad operandum ferventissimo spiritu. Iumentum eius est caro in qua ad nos venire dignatus est. Imponi iumento est in ipsam incarnationem Christi credere. Stabulum est Ecclesia, ubi reficiuntur viatores de peregrinatione in aeternam patriam*

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[35] *Ibid.* 12. 30.41 to 31.42.

[36] *The City of God* 11.9, *op. cit.*

[37] In other places Augustine makes it clear that he favors the notion of an instantaneous creation.

[38] For example, see Robert Letham's article "'In the Space of Six Days': The Days of Creation From Origen to the Westminster Assembly," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61:2 (Fall 1999), p 149-174.

redeuntes. Altera dies est post resurrectionem Domini. Duo denarii sunt vel duo praecepta caritatis, vel promissio vitae praesentis et futurae, secundum enim duas promissiones dictum est: Accipiet in hoc saeculo septies tantum, et in saeculo futuro vitam aeternam consequetur[37]. Stabularius ergo est Apostolus.[39]

A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho. We understand him to be Adam, as a type of all humanity. Jerusalem is that city of heavenly peace (heaven). From the blessedness of this city, he has fallen. Jericho is to be read as the moon, and signifies our human mortality, since it springs forth, grows up, grows old, and dies. The thieves are the devil and his angels, who robbed Adam of his immortality and in wounding him severely by persuading him to sin, left him half-dead. Half-dead because, by that part by which he is able to understand and recognize God, he is alive. A mere man because by that part in which he wastes away and is weighed down by sin, he's dead. And, so for that reason he's called "half-dead."

The priest, moreover, and the Levite signify the priesthood and ministry of the Old Testament, who pass by once they see the man. They are not able to help anyone to salvation. The Samaritan means "guardian," and so for that reason our Lord himself is signified in the name. Binding up of wounds is the restraint of sin; olive oil is the consolation of good hope on account of gracious forgiveness and peaceful reconciliation. Wine is the urging on to good works with the most fervent spirit. The beast of burden is the flesh in which he deemed it worthy to come to us. To be put upon the beast of burden is to believe in the incarnation of Christ. The stable is the church, where travelers are restored for their journey, as they return to their eternal homeland. The next day is the day after the resurrection of the Lord. Two denarii are either the two precepts of love, or the promise of temporal and eternal life. The innkeeper is the Apostle [Paul].

We first note the many similarities between Augustine's and Origen's approach, right down to the treatment of some details. Augustine adds the etymologies of Jerusalem and Jericho to his exposition. In addition he explains a few more details, such as why the man is "half dead" and what "the next day" must mean. The one significant (?) difference is his explanation of the two denarii.

The greatest flaw in the approach remains the same for both: we are left with a grab-bag of "correspondences" that cannot be contextually defended and that strip the story of its penetrating power. Historical context is lost as the symbolic meanings are teased out of the story. Furthermore, these correspondences are offered up as being what the text "MEANS." This IS that.

Concluding Remarks on Origen's and Augustine's Allegorizing Interpretation

If the allegorizing approach is legitimate, then words can mean virtually anything the interpreter wants them to mean, and any Scripture text a person wants to use can be cited to illumine virtually any other text, even if the two are not parallel. All meaning of all texts will ultimately dissolve into a radical kind of postmodern inter-textuality. This is why Origen's and Augustine's approach to interpretation was bound to lead to the embracing of parallel sources of authority alongside the Scripture. If any passage in the Bible can be read apart from its historical context and if even contextually-defined words like "day" in Genesis are capable of holding many meanings, then Scripture can no longer be relied upon as the last word. It is no longer clear. The pious will have to be directed instead to the teaching tradition of the community. Authority in the church, in a practical sense, will necessarily pass from the Word of God to the authorized readings of scholars within the community.

Theodore of Mopsuestia

The dangers of the allegorizing approach were recognized already in late antiquity. The Antiochene school in particular rejected it. Roughly contemporaneous with Augustine, Theodore of Mopsuestia was one of its leading lights. This school was familiar with the more literal approach of some Jewish rabbis and laid down its

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[39] S. Augustini, *Quaestionum Evangeliorum Libri Duo*, 2. 19. Available online at:
http://www.sant-agostino.it/latino/questioni_vangeli/index2.htm.

principles of interpretation in conscious opposition to the allegorically-minded school of Alexandria. Theodore was the pupil of Diodore, who had taught his students to distinguish between *allegoria* (the practice of finding other, higher meanings in texts) and *theoria* (the practice of contemplating the historical meaning of the text so as to discern its present-day application). *Theoria* was built on *historia.*

Without denying in principle the practice of seeing in some Old Testament statements direct prophecies of Christ, Theodore rigorously applied what he had learned from Diodore and severely limited the scope and number of those prophecies. He found only four direct references to Christ in the book of Psalms. He adopted a similar stance with respect to typological interpretation. Recognizing the growing tendency to see everything in the Old Testament as being a typological reference to Christ (and so to become another form of allegorizing), he restricted its practice to a large degree.

As an example, we could point to Theodore's interpretation of Zechariah 9. In common with the rabbis of his day, he saw the text (which speaks of a gentle king riding into Zion on a donkey) as having Zerubbabel as its prime historical referent. It pointed to Jesus' entry into Jerusalem only in a typological way. His own students were somewhat less rigorous in their approach.[40]

It would be a stretch, though some have tried, to see a resemblance between the Antiochenes and the practitioners of the historical-critical method. For Theodore and the others, the unity of the two testaments was not an issue. They firmly believed that the Holy Spirit had spoken by the prophets, and that there were direct prophecies of Christ's coming in the Old Testament. They also recognized typology (or *theoria*, as they called it) as a legitimate method of interpretation. Yet they distinguished it sharply from allegory which, they felt, was a matter of interpreters "dream[ing] up silly fables in their own heads and giv[ing] their folly the name of allegory…[thus] abolish[ing] all meanings of divine Scripture."[41]

Allegorizing, Typology, Application

It might be useful here to interrupt this historical review of allegorical interpretation in the church and offer a few definitions of terms. One of the problems that anyone has in dealing with the issue of allegorical interpretation is that the terminology people use is so fluid. Some people who have an affinity for allegorical interpretation—people like Frances Young and Henri de Lubac—do not see any great difference between allegory and typology. Others (like myself) see a great and important line to be drawn between the two words.

Another problem is that there was no consistent terminology employed by the ancients. If I see *aenigma* in Augustine, I will need to translate it as "allegory." If I see it in Diodore, I will need to translate it as "typology."[42] Finally, there are those expounders of the Scripture, like Luther, who use the term "allegory" very broadly at some times (to refer to a typological approach to interpreting Scripture) and very narrowly at others (to refer to the approach to interpretation used by Origen).

The best I can do, then, is offer my own definition of these terms, and why I think they need to be kept distinct. *Allegorizing* is the practice of finding symbolic or spiritual meanings in the text when there is no warrant in either text or context for doing so. It treats narratives as extended metaphors—with every point having some mystic significance—when those texts were never intended to be treated that way. If an author wants to compose an allegory, it is certainly legitimate to treat what he writes as having a point different than what a person might get from the literal reading. (Yet even here when it comes to biblical allegory—as I've mentioned before—I can still fall into the trap of allegorizing if I insist that every detail of the allegory must have some deeper significance.) But when the author signals his intention to write a historical narrative, it is clearly illegitimate to give his words an allegorizing spin.

Typology is the practice of seeing a divinely intended correspondence between two entities, one in the Old Testament, the other in the New. An Old Testament shadow (a person, an event, an institution)

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[40] Joseph W. Trigg, *op. cit.*, p 32-33.
[41] As quoted in Young, *op cit.*, p 180.
[42] While the words "type" and "antitype" were obviously used ever since New Testament times, the word "typology" was not coined until the 19th century. See note 50.

points ahead to the New Testament reality (Christ and his church). This correspondence is real and not symbolic. It is based on history. That is to say, it is based on the Spirit-worked conviction that our God is a God who works through history to bring about his eternal purpose. And as his Kingdom has unfolded through time, God has left his mark upon it in patterns that prefigured the fullness of time: the coming of his Son and the arrival of the New Testament era. These patterns are identified in the context of Scripture as types and antitypes.

On the difference between allegory and typology, Graeme Goldsworthy makes these cogent points:

> Typology is sometimes written off as just a variant form of allegory…. There are some similarities in that allegory…and typology…both recognize some kind of correspondences. The difference, however, is vital. On the one hand, allegory was a method that saw the old events and images as largely unimportant in themselves. They may have some significance but the real task was to get behind them to the deeper spiritual meaning. This deeper meaning was often quite unrelated to the original historical meaning…. The connection was often made on the most superficial grounds and tended towards a kind of free association of ideas. Typology, on the other hand, recognizes that the original historical meaning of the text is theologically related to the later expression that fills it out and usually completes it.[43]

Finally there is *application.* Application is the practice of showing how a text applies to current readers in their current situation. Proper exegesis carefully notes what the text meant in the original situation and what the author intended to say to his original audience. Application is the exegete's (or preacher's) move in pointing out the text's contemporary significance to his own audience. While a biblical text has one basic meaning, it may nevertheless have many applications.

III. Luther and Allegory

Luther's polemic against allegorizing has been de-emphasized by some,[44] while his use of it to the end of his life has been re-emphasized, usually as a warrant for rehabilitating allegory as a legitimate interpretative strategy. Steinmetz, for example, says:

> When we place Luther's exegesis [of Jacob's ladder in Genesis] in the context of such standard medieval commentators as Hugh of St. Cher, Nicholas of Lyra, and Denis the Carthusian, we are led to draw various conclusions…Luther not only tolerates the speculative exegesis of the standard commentators, but even indulges in a number of godly speculations of his own. There is not a hint in his lecture that he disapproves of the idea that Christians ascend and descend Jacob's ladder. The problem is not with the metaphor of ascent and descent but the notion that the ascent is helped along by the merit of good works…Christians ascend the ladder by the imputation of Christ's merits.[45]

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[43] *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture,* Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2000, p 77. For a similar treatment that is more sympathetic to allegorical interpretation, see also Gerhard Maier, *Biblical Hermeneutics,* Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994, p 87-90.
[44] Among them: Kenneth Hagen, *Luther's Approach to Scripture as seen in his "Commentaries" on Galatians 1519-1538,* Tübigen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1993, p 14. Hagen is keen to show the connection between medieval exegesis and Luther's. This really is a very useful book, making many good points. It emphasizes Luther's desire to let the text says what it means. It points out that Luther was not a "commentator" on Scripture as we have come to view that craft since the 19th century. He was more of a confessor and proclaimer of God's truth. His methods, then, should not be judged by modern standards, our drawing of distinctions between allegory and typology, between the historical meaning of the text and its application. Luther was rather someone who interpreted the text as *sacra pagina,* that is: as one submitting himself to the discipline of the sacred page. This means, among other things, he had a desire to read the text of the Scriptures meditatively and reverently, expecting to hear God's voice. Yet Luther would also become imbued with the style and argument of the human author. Paul's way of speaking became Luther's, since the Spirit spoke through Paul. The whole purpose of such reading of Scripture is to awaken and strengthen faith (from faith to faith). So Luther was always concerned about the application of Scriptures to his listeners, often moving from explication to application and back again, making no sharp distinctions between the two. On this same subject, see Gordon L. Isaac's article, "The Changing Image of Luther as Biblical Expositor," found in *Ad Fontes Lutheri: Toward the Recovery of the Real Luther, Essays in honor of Kenneth Hagen's Sixty-Fifth Birthday,* Frank Posset, ed. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2001.
[45] Luther and the Ascent of Jacob's Ladder," *Church History*, Vol. 55, No. 2, p 190.

Steinmetz further tries to prove that Luther is comfortable with the medieval tradition of speculative exegesis, suggesting that he offered "three interpretations of the ladder": a literal interpretation (the union of the two natures in Christ incarnate), an allegorical interpretation (the union of Christ and his church), and another "spiritual" interpretation (the gate of heaven is open wherever the Word is preached and the Sacraments administered).[46]

I believe that Steinmetz has overstated his case. Luther clearly says, on the authority of Christ's words in John 1:51, that he considers only the first interpretation to be "the chief and proper explanation of this passage."[47] Christ as the ladder, therefore, "is the historical, simple, and literal sense."[48] This last sentence might startle us a little, but it demonstrates two important points worth noting by the way: Luther did not consider Christ's typological reference to Jacob's ladder as giving the passage in Genesis a double meaning, but as itself being the *unus sensus simplex.* The ladder Jacob genuinely saw in his particular situation at Luz was a type or figure pointing ahead to Christ. That is the text's simple, proper meaning. Secondly, we note that, for Luther, the term "historical meaning" was not some literalistic notion or bare history. History was spiritual since it pointed to Christ, and so the literal history of the kingdom of God as recorded in the Old Testament—properly understood—is a proclamation of Christ.

Does Luther also speak of an "allegorical meaning" in this same connection? Yes he does. But knowing what Luther has said elsewhere about the primacy of the historical sense of Scripture and giving full weight to his warnings against allegory, can we possibly read Luther here as endorsing the medieval *Quadrigia* with its multiple senses? No we cannot. Is he advocating a symbolic treatment of the text where every "this" must mean "that"? No he is not. These are matters we intend to prove by studying what Luther himself has to say. It is sufficient for us to say here that Luther is comfortable with metaphor and is simply talking about the "allegorical" meaning here in order to make an application of the text's chief truth "for faith."[49] What happened to Jacob in the past is illustrative of what happens in the life of God's people in the New Testament. Jacob saw the ladder (Christ) and was convinced that he was in the house of God. Through the preached Word, we cling to the ladder (Christ) by faith, and we are united in his body the Church. The whole purpose of this type of allegory for Luther, as we shall see, is to adorn and illustrate the truth, never to establish it.

Permit me a few more remarks before we turn to Luther's own direct comments on allegory. We cannot fault Luther for not using our terminology. "Typology," for example, was not even coined as a term until the 19th century.[50] Nor was Luther concerned about writing "scientific" commentaries in our sense, making sharp distinctions between philology, grammar, explication, and application. Many of his "commentaries" were really put together from sermons. And even his academic lectures on various books have a proclamatory nature about them. Hagen rightly says that Luther was always conscious of publicly confessing the truth "from faith to faith."[51]

Luther's Rejection of Allegory

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[46] *Ibid.*, p 189.

[47] *LW* 5, p 222.

[48] *LW* 5, p 223.

[49] For another example of where Luther uses the term "allegory" where we would use the term "application" consult his remarks on Genesis 32:32, "But Jacob is a picture of the true posterity of Israel, that is, of all the saints and of us also who believe in Christ. Therefore Israel is in this temptation with Jacob when either the individual members are privately tempted or the whole church in general is tempted. In this struggle we conquer God, as previously stated, because we have the promise. Adhering to this in faith, we become stronger even in infirmity so that we conquer our heavenly Father and God's Son… This is a useful and good allegory, instructing and confirming consciences" *(LW* 6, p 153). Since Luther saw Genesis as the early history of the kingdom of God, the kingdom later fulfilled in Christ, such applications to the life of the church and to individual Christians were for him normal and natural—as I hope they are also for us.

[50] According to A.C. Charity, *Events and their Afterlife: The Dialectics of Christian Typology in the Bible and in Dante*, Cambridge, 1966, p 171, note 2: *typologia* appears for the first time in Latin in 1840. The distinction between "type" and "allegory," however, is found in Gerhard (1582-1637). Luther also sometimes uses the word "allegory" in places where we today would employ the term "typology." For example, he calls Paul's speaking of Adam as a type of Christ in Romans 5 as "allegory," see *LW* 1:233. See also *LW* 4:137, where he speaks of the ram Abraham offered as an "allegory" of Christ; or *LW* 2:151, where Peter speaks of the Flood as a "type" of Christian baptism. Luther calls this a "theological allegory."

[51] Hagen, *op.cit.*, p 48.

What, then, did Luther think about the allegorical method of interpreting texts? After completing his interpretation of the first three chapters of Genesis, he says,

> According to our ability, we have treated all these facts in their historical meaning, which is their real and true one. In the interpretation of Holy Scripture the main task must be to derive from it some sure and plain meaning, especially because there is such a variety of interpreters—Latin, Greek, and Hebrew too. Almost all of these not only do not concern themselves with the story but bury it and confuse it with their nonsensical allegories.[52]

In Luther's interpretation of Genesis, all the speculations of Origen and Augustine are gone. The heavens are the heavens. The earth is the earth. A day is a day. This is what he means by saying, "We have treated all these facts in their historical meaning." Only the historical meaning of Scripture is its "real and true one," to which responsible exegetes should devote themselves to as of primary importance. When the "sure and plain" meaning is ignored in favor of searching out a host of allegorical interpretations, the story itself becomes "buried and confused."

What's at stake for Luther in his critique of allegorical interpretation is the clarity and authority of the Scriptures. If multiple meanings are allowable, then there can be no sure and plain meaning. If the history is buried, then faith is lost since "faith rests upon history."[53]

As mentioned already, Luther does not view Bible history in some literalistic way, as if preachers should do nothing but repeat the bare facts of Scripture without prior meditation or spiritual application. That's because Luther does not divide "letter" (the text's historical meaning) from "spirit" (the text's supposedly higher and spiritual meanings and applications). This was the classic misinterpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6 common to most ancient allegorists. Instead, Luther asserts that true spiritual knowledge can come only through a proper (i.e., law/gospel, Christocentric) understanding of the history. In a statement that sounds very much like the interpreters of the Antiochene school, he says:

> The ridiculous procedure which Origen and Jerome follow in these chapters is well known. Everywhere they depart from the historical account, which they call "the letter that kills" and "the flesh"; and they bestow lofty praise on the "spiritual meaning," of which they have no actual knowledge…. The same thing happens in our time; those who are influential, either through their native ability or through their eloquence, strive with all their power to persuade their hearers that the historical accounts are dead matter and useless for building the churches. Thus it came about that with common zeal we rashly strove for allegories. When I was a young man, my own attempts at allegory met with fair success. It was even permissible to come up with foolish ideas, since these great teachers of the churches, such as Jerome and Origen, had at times given wide range to their imagination. And so anyone who was somewhat more skilled in contriving allegories was also regarded as a rather learned theologian.[54]

Observe Luther's pointed critique of allegory: allegorical interpretation is a subjective, speculative procedure that owes more to the eloquence, imagination, and rhetorical powers of the interpreter than it does to the true spiritual power inherent in the sacred text itself. It downgrades the importance of the historical account, urging readers to proceed higher in order to understand the more "spiritual" mysteries awaiting those who are capable of discerning them. In the process the actual spiritual message of the text—based as it is on the history—is lost.[55]

What's more, Luther also sees allegory contributing to a type of elitist thinking in the churches. There are some theologians who are truly "learned." Their claim to fame is the richness of their allegorical interpretations. Those who lack such eloquence are despised. In fact it was partly the influence of these more "skilled" and "learned" theologians that led Luther to follow their example

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[52] *LW* 1, p 231.

[53] As quoted by Heinrich Bornkamm, *Luther and the Old Testament,* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969, p 91.

[54] *LW* 1, p 232.

[55] For similar statements, see *LW* 2:164, where he criticizes the fathers who, through their allegorizing, "call[ed] hearts away…making them flee from the historical account and from faith;" see also *LW* 5:345, "The examples…of the fathers frighten me…. By those speculations of their allegories they divert us from the doctrine and genuine meaning of the words."

when he was young. Luther also mentions the permission-giving power of tradition: all the "great teachers" of the past did it this way; why shouldn't we? Later, however, when he understood that the solid truth of Scripture was at stake, Luther had no hesitation in breaking with this tradition of the fathers—no matter how ancient and well respected they may have been:

> But, I ask you, is this not a desecration of the sacred writings? Origen makes heaven out of Paradise and angels out of the trees. If this is correct, what will be left of the doctrine of creation? Particularly for beginning students of the Sacred Scriptures it is, therefore, necessary that when they approach the reading of the ancient teachers, they read them with discretion, or rather with the definite intention to disapprove of those statements for which there is less support. Otherwise they will be led astray by the authority of the name of the fathers and teachers of the church, just as I was led astray and as all the schools of the theologians were.[56]

This is not bad advice for Lutherans of any generation!

But if Luther rejected this kind of interpretation, when did he make his break, and how decisive was it? Again, in his own words:

> Ever since I began to adhere to the historical meaning, I myself have always had a strong dislike for allegories and did not make use of them unless the text itself indicated them or the interpretations could be drawn from the New Testament. But it was very difficult for me to break away from my habitual zeal for allegory; and yet I was aware that allegories were empty speculations and the froth, as it were, of the Holy Scriptures. It is the historical sense alone which supplies the true and sound doctrine.[57]

Although the whole idea of Luther's progressive development as a theologian may have fallen on some hard times lately, it's impossible to argue against the thought that he matured over time in his thinking. That much seems clear enough from his own words above. Luther contrasts his earlier self—possessed of a "habitual zeal for allegory"—with his later self. He also tells us how difficult it was for him to shake the habit even when he became aware that allegories were "empty speculations" and "froth." Clearly the change did not happen all at once.

A great deal of this change we may attribute simply to the fact that he was a careful student of the Holy Writings. His struggles with the papal church certainly contributed towards moving him further in this direction. More decisive still were his hermeneutical battles from 1525 to 1529, first with Erasmus and then with the deniers of the real presence. Since Erasmus found so much that was unclear in Scripture, Luther came to a deeper understanding of the clarity of Scripture. Since the sacramentarians reinterpreted the word "body" in Eucharistic texts to mean "sign of the body," Luther became much firmer in his conviction that interpreters must let the words of Scripture stand as they read.[58]

But to be honest we must note that the break was never complete. It may be true to say, as Jaroslav Pelikan does, that "Luther's heart really wasn't in" his allegorizing of Noah's ark.[59] But Luther does it, all the same—even in his exposition of Genesis from his later years. And yet Gerhard Ebeling is certainly right when he declares that Luther allegorized "with decreasing frequency" through the years.[60]

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[56] *LW* 1, p 232; see also note 55 above. Similar warnings are found in many places in Luther's writings. This is not to say that Luther lacked respect for the father. Far from it! But he could not bear them when they were cited against the plain meaning of a plain text of Scripture, and he would not defend them when he knew that their interpretive methodology had caused great mischief in the church. In this he felt he was being more true to the fathers than those who cited them, since "The beloved fathers wanted to lead us into Scripture with their writings, but we use them to lead ourselves out of it" (WA VI, 461). See also *LW* 40:190. There, Luther says that he had earlier succumbed, through the power of tradition, into believing in an allegorical interpretation of Genesis. But he concludes: "Brother, the natural meaning of the words is queen, transcending all subtle, acute sophistical fancy. From it we may not deviate unless we are compelled by a clear article of the faith. Otherwise the spiritual jugglers would not leave a single letter in Scripture."

[57] *LW* 1, p 232-233.

[58] This is essentially Gerhard Ebeling's thesis in *Evangelische Evangelienauslegung: eine Untersuchung zu Luthers Hermeneutik*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1962.

[59] *Luther the Expositor: Introduction to the Reformer's Exegetical Writings*, Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1959, p 91.

[60] *Luther: An Introduction to his Thought*, Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964, p 108.

But he did not abandon the method entirely. We'll discuss this more in the next section.

First I want to pause a moment to emphasize once more what Luther's rejection of allegorizing did and did not mean to him. He was not rejecting a Christocentric approach to the interpretation of the Old Testament. He believed that when the Lord opened his disciples' minds to understand their own ancient Scriptures, he meant to teach us as well: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46,47).

Nor did Luther have any trouble in seeing the spiritual implications of God's dealings with his Old Testament people. He understood Paul perfectly when he wrote, "These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come" (1 Corinthians 10:11). These were the people of God. This was the early history of the kingdom of God. The temptations and stresses that God's people experienced in the Old Testament are common to all believers of all generations.

Luther's Continued Use of Allegory

Why then, if he was as critical of it, did Luther persist in using allegory? Why didn't he simply ban its use entirely? Just as Luther retained many other traditions and procedures of the mediaeval church, so also in this case. Luther felt no need to "forbid" allegories if they could serve some genuinely useful purpose. As with ancient ceremonies in the church that adorned the means of grace, Luther could see the usefulness of allegory in the realm of instruction. It could be used as a rhetorical device to illustrate the truth. Its practice must remain within strict limits, however:

> Yet these remarks must not be understood to mean that we condemn all allegories
> indiscriminately, for we observe that both Christ and the apostles occasionally employed them.
> But they are such as are conformable to the faith, in accordance with the rule of Paul, who enjoins
> in Rom. 12:6 that prophecy or doctrine should be conformable to the faith. When we condemn
> allegories, we are speaking of those that are fabricated by one's own intellect and ingenuity,
> without the authority of Scripture. The others, which are made to agree with the analogy of faith,
> not only embellish doctrine but also give comfort to consciences.[61]

Speculative allegory is clearly out. Allegory lacking any warrant in Scripture is out. Allegory contradicting scriptural truth is out. The legitimate use of allegory occupies a considerably narrowed field in Luther's mind. Most of what he does with it is simply what we would call typology or the application of the text, as I have shown above.[62] The rest of what Luther does when he allegorizes, I would put in the category of a sermon illustration: using a historical situation to illustrate and drive home a spiritual truth.

As he expresses it elsewhere:

> Therefore let those who want to make use of allegories base them in the historical account itself. The
> historical account is like logic in that it teaches what is certainly true; the allegory, in the other hand, is
> like rhetoric in that it ought to illustrate the historical account but has no value at all for giving proof.[63]

So Luther would allow for the use of allegory provided it kept a firm grip on the history of the account, and if it did not claim to say, "This is what the text means," but merely served to illustrate what the text meant. Allegories were never a means to arrive at truth; they were only adornments and

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[61] *LW* 2, p 151.

[62] See page 185 [page 14 of this document – WLS Library Staff]; also notes 49 and 50. I would also argue that what both Christ and the apostles were doing was not a matter of allegorizing, but a matter of seeing genuine types, that is: they noted historical patterns that were divinely intended to foreshadow New Testament realities. The one exception to this is Paul's use of allegory in Galatians, in which Paul uses a historical event to illustrate the gospel freedom Christians enjoy.

[63] *LW* 1, p 233.

illustrations of the truth. Only by attending to the history could Christians know what was "certainly true." Gerhard Ebeling concludes that Luther in his later years occasionally used allegory "as a homiletic device to obtain a more striking application if the text" but that he no longer recognized it as a "valid hermeneutic principle."[64]

Allegory Today

Should we rehabilitate the use of allegory in the church? Clearly not as a hermeneutic principle! But what about as a homiletical assist to come up with more striking applications? I still think it would be most ill-advised. Why? First of all because I don't think it would be an easy matter to keep our homiletic from affecting our church's hermeneutics if this manner of homiletical invention were to become common among us. Good hermeneutical practices should feed our preaching. The pastor's weekly sermon is where the hermeneutical rubber really meets the road. Yet the more pastors would habituate their minds to dubious practices in the homiletical treatment of some texts, the more easily they could be taken in by those today who advocate a decidedly harmful allegorical approach to all texts.

Secondly, I don't know that it would be all that easy for people in the pew to tell that the pastor is simply illustrating a point in a vivid way by this kind of allegory. I rather think they would begin to think that this is what the text actually means. Let me explain. A true allegorical treatment does more than simply say, "You know, when we look at this good Samaritan and how he loved, we are not only convicted of our own lack of neighborly love, we can't help but be reminded of the unstinting love our Savior showed us 'while we were yet enemies,'" Something like this I would expect every Lutheran (law/gospel) preacher of the good Samaritan text to do. What an allegorical treatment says is this: "Jesus is the good Samaritan." Allegorizing interpretation does not merely say, "Noah's ark was often used as an illustration of the truth that only in the Christian church will a person be saved." It says, "Noah's ark here *means* the Church."

Subjected regularly to such an approach from the pulpit, parishioners would either regularly leave befuddled, or (worse) in awe of the preacher's ability to unearth such hidden truths, truths that they would never have suspected as being there in the text. Clearly they would never be capable of finding such secrets in the Scriptures. Only the erudite, the truly *docti Doctores Ecclesiae* possess such skill. It's not hard to figure out what this would do to our people's desire to read the Scriptures for themselves and their confidence in its clarity. If people begin to feel that only the really educated in "things scriptural" are clever enough to detect the true meaning of Scripture, then they will be inclined to see the Scriptures as closed except to experts. If people become accustomed to interpreters pulling exegetical rabbits out of scriptural hats, they may well admire the expert who can see such hidden things, but they are also prone to believe any expert who can come along and plausibly expound his own notions, saying, "I had a dream."

Let us remember that we are engaged today in a spiritual and theological struggle that is every bit as grave as that which Luther faced. At stake is whether the Bible is a clear book or a dark book. Inseparable from the Bible's clarity is the Bible's authority. If the Bible is not clear, if its meanings are many, one cannot appeal to it to correct a belief or practice which is in error. Luther understood this. Do

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[64] *op. cit.*, p 108. A special case of allegorizing is found in Luther's treatment of the parable of the Good Samaritan. This may be an instance in which Luther feels he is following Christ's "occasional" use of allegory (see *LW* 1:151 above). Christ is telling a story that has a metaphorical point or meaning, and therefore Luther may conclude that he is justified in unpacking all the details of the story for their meanings, much like Origen and Augustine did (see Appendix #1). This was in fact the most common way to treat parables until relatively recently. Despite the Reformation's reclamation of the historical sense of Scripture, Robert Stein points out that "with regard to the parables the allegorical method continued to dominate." ["The Parables of Jesus in Recent Study," *Word & World* 5/3 (1985), p 249] It was only in 1888, ina massive two-volume work in the parables of Jesus entitled *Die Gleichnisreden Jesu*, that Adolf Jülicher "demonstrated once and for all that parables are not allegories" [*Ibid.*, p 249]. Jülicher us also credited as the first to have the insight that parables "have only a single point of reference" [*Ibid.*, p250].

we?

The move towards allegorical interpretation is part of the postmodern turn. Even many people in conservative churches no longer believe that the Scriptures have a "simple natural sense." They are much more open to multiple "readings"—write them all down; they might all be right! Everywhere in the visible church, people demonstrate a growing lack of confidence in Scripture's being able to yield certain and final truth. Finding transcendent meaning is dismissed as a futile quest.

But we cannot avoid succumbing to the postmodern despair of all truth by seeking refuge in the hallowed traditions of our tribe. That's running away from one postmodern ditch only to fall into another. The Scriptures alone have the power to bring light to this present darkness. That power is obscured through the use of allegorizing. I don't mean to say that all people who allegorize have lost confidence in the power and authority of Scriptures to make sense of the world. Yet when they try to validate present practices by pointing to the past, they are conforming themselves to a cultural Zeitgeist.

Simply saying "Luther did it" is not justification. Luther to us is not what Joseph Smith, Jr. is to the Latter Day Saints. If Luther could creatively engage with tradition, critiquing it on the basis of Scripture when necessary, so should we—even if it means critiquing father Luther! This in fact is what Luther urges us to do.

If we want to use Luther as a model, we will listen to him as he pointed his listeners to historical meaning of the text as the "real and true one." We will believe him when he wars, "Beware of allegories."[65] We will follow him when he urges, "Stay with the grammatical and historical sense."[66]

Appendix #1: Luther on the Good Samaritan

The foregoing is the first part of our Gospel lesson,[67] and it is a sermon on the law. The second part now follows, and it preaches the Gospel, how and whence we are to receive power to fulfill the Law. This the good Samaritan will teach us. How does this lawyer act now after the Lord had thus turned him away? He goes ahead, the Evangelist says, and desires to justify himself and says to the Lord: "And who is my neighbor!" The Lord answers and tells him a very beautiful parable, by which he shows that we are all neighbors among one another, both he who does another a kindness, as well as he who is in need of a kindness. By means of this parable the Lord concludes with the words, "Go, and do thou likewise," so that this lawyer did not only sin against God, but he did not love his neighbor, and never did him a favor…. Let us now see what the parable itself teaches. This Samaritan of course is our Lord Jesus Christ himself, who has shown his love toward God and his neighbor. Toward God, in that he was obedient to him, came down from heaven and became man, and thus fulfilled the will of his Father; toward his neighbor, in that he immediately after his baptism began to preach, to do wonders, to heal the sick. And in short, he did no work that centered on himself alone, but all his acts centered in his neighbor… This is the Samaritan who came uninvited and fulfilled the law with his whole heart… The man who here lies half dead, wounded and stripped of his clothing is Adam and all mankind. The murderers are the devils who robbed and wounded us and left us lying prostrate half dead… Such is the world, and it is thus finely portrayed in this wounded man, it lies in sins over head and ears and cannot help itself. But the Samaritan who ahs fulfilled the law and is perfectly healthy and sound, comes and does more than both priest and Levite. He binds up the sores of the wounded man, pours oil and wine,

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[65] *LW* 16, p 327.

[66] *LW* 16, p 327.

[67] i.e. Luke 10:25-28, the lawyer's initial interchange with Jesus concerning law. De-emphasizing the obvious connection between the two section (see verse 38), Luther decides to interpret the first part of the text as "law" and the story of the Good Samaritan primarily as pure "gospel."

lifts him upon his own beast, and brings him into the inn, takes good care of him, and when he departs he carefully commends him to the host, and besides leaves him a sufficient supply of money, while neither the priest nor Levite would do one of these kind acts. The priest signifies the dear sainted fathers before Moses; the Levite the priesthood of the Old Testament. All these however have accomplished nothing by their works and have passed by on the other side like this priest and Levite… But Christ, the true Samaritan, takes the poor man to himself as his own, goes to him and does not require the helpless one to come to him; for here is no merit, but pure grace and mercy; and he binds up his wounds, cares for him and pours in oil and wine, this is the whole Gospel from beginning to end. He pours in oil when grace is preached, as when one says: Behold thou poor man, here is your unbelief, here is your condemnation, here you are wounded and sore. Wait! All this I will cure with the Gospel. Behold, here cling firmly to this Samaritan, to Christ the Savior, he will help you, and nothing else in heaven or on earth will. You know very well that oil softens, thus also the sweet, loving preaching of the Gospel gives me a soft, mild heart toward God and my neighbor, so that I risk my bodily life for the sake of Christ my Lord and his Gospel, if God and necessity require it…. But wine is sharp and signifies the holy cross that immediately follows. A Christian need not look for his cross, it is always on his back. For he thinks as St. Paul says, 2 Tim. 3,12: "All that would live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." This is the court-color in this kingdom… Then the Samaritan lifts the wounded man on his beast. This beast is Christ the Lord himself, he carries us, we lay upon his shoulders, neck and body. There is scarcely a more lovely picture in the entire Gospel, than where Christ the Lord compares himself to a shepherd, in Luke 15, who carries the lost sheep in his shoulders back to the fold. He still continually carries his lost sheep thus at the present day. The stable or inn is Christianity, here in this world, where we must remain for a short time. The host is the preacher of the Word of God and of the Gospel, who is to purse and care for us. Now here we have the substance of the Gospel. The kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of mercy and grace, in which there is nothing but a continual carrying of the lost. Christ carries our infirmities and sicknesses, he takes our sins upon himself and has patience when we fail. We still always lay about his neck, and yet he does not become weary of carrying us, which should be the greatest comfort for us when we are in conflict with sin. Ministers in this kingdom are to comfort the consciences, deal gently with them and feed them with the Gospel, carry the weak, heal the sick, and know how to divide the Word rightly, and administer the same to every one according to his needs.

The Sermons of Martin Luther, published by Baker Book House (Grand Rapids, MI, 1983), Vol. V, p 19-35.