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ALLEGORISING: THE RELEVANCE OF AN OLD METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

ABSTRACT

The question about what texts mean for us in the present as distinct from the question what they originally meant has again come into the focus of attention. This broadening of the focus is very important for understanding religious texts as texts about God's transforming relationship to people. This article considers the Biblical interpretation of the Church Fathers, and particularly their use of allegory, as this may inspire us to develop ways of interacting with the Biblical texts as religious texts meant to speak to our times.

1. INTRODUCTION

The value of allegorical interpretation for our times lies among other things in the fact that it aimed at letting the texts of both the Old and New Testament become the Word of God for Christian readers of later generations. Although allegorical interpretation can no longer be simply re-imported, a careful consideration of what it aimed at and how it functioned within the broader understanding of reading sacred texts can stimulate the development of insights and approaches which may help us move beyond the historical meaning of the text. In recent decades a variety of exegetical approaches have been developed which attempt to move beyond a strictly historical meaning of the texts. The allegorical interpretation can find a meeting point in these approaches.

2. WHY ALLEGORISING WAS A GENERALLY APPRECIATED METHOD, HOW IT BECAME DISCREDITED, AND HOW IT HAS RE-EMERGED IN RECENT DECADES

Allegorical interpretation has been a very important and respected way of interpreting the Bible from New Testament times until well into the nineteenth century. Although concerns were raised about the method in the history of theology by the School of Antioch, Thomas of Aquino, and Luther (see Steiger 1999),

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these intended to restrain its use rather than reject it outright. It was not until the time of Jülicher that allegorical interpretation was simply rejected. The fundamental reason for the appreciation of this method was its usefulness to draw out the full meaning of the texts, which can only be discovered in the light of Christ. Unlike in our historical critical view, history was seen as the divine-human interaction whereby God through the Word was present as Creator and Saviour, from the beginning until now. It is to this history of the Logos with humanity that the words of Scripture witness. According to Origen, for instance, the very words of Scripture witness to this divine — human history:

> They do not arise out of an exclusively historical process, but rather have their origin in historical-spiritual process, in the historical moment of inspiration. The words are chosen both by the human writer and the Holy Spirit for one and the same purpose, to teach succeeding generations the mysteries of the Logos. The words themselves from the point of their origin already point to the Logos. It is the very literalness of Scripture which demands spiritual interpretation (Torjesen 1986:139).

As Jesus had declared that love of God and love of neighbour was the greatest commandment on which "hang all the law and the prophets" (Mt. 22: 34-40; see Gal. 5:14), Origen developed his method of interpretation to lead people not only to know about this but to live it. Likewise for Augustine, "What matters is not the meaning discovered but the transformation of the reader" (Waaijman 2002:728).

Allegorical or typological interpretation, furthermore, was useful in various ways. It provided the means for interpreting the whole of the Old Testament in a Christological way so that the Christian church was understood as rooted in, and in continuity with, the Old Testament against the positions of the Marcionites and the Gnostics. This was sustained by another fundamental conviction and presupposition of early Christianity, viz. their faith that the whole universe and its history was in the hands of God as the Creator, in which Jesus was fundamentally involved as the Wisdom or Word of God (1 Cor. 8:6; Jn 1:1-18; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 1:1). Allegorical and typological interpretations were also the means by which the Old Testament law and rituals were reinterpreted in line with the developing Christian practice (circumcision, sacrifices, etc.).

Furthermore, and very importantly, allegorical interpretation also enabled Christian interpreters to link up the Scriptures with their own cultural context by weaving links between the Scriptural texts and the language and learning of their own times. Origen, for instance, could interpret the three books of Solomon as corresponding to the three parts of Greek philosophy: Proverbs as ethics, Ecclesiastes as physics, and the Song of Songs as enoptics (*De principiis* 4:2,4; see Crouzel & Simonetti 1989).

With the development of historical-critical scholarship this whole traditional Christian pre-understanding of Scripture faded away in the light of a new pre-understanding. Within this new pre-understanding allegory lost its function, which was precisely to transcend the historical meaning. From then onwards it was seen in a totally negative way as an outmoded, pre-critical, naive way of approaching texts. Most commonly the objection against it was articulated in terms of its arbitrary character, arbitrary because in this new pre-understanding the only meaning of a text was the meaning intended by the human author. This meaning had to be reconstructed by means of historical research, which was meant to be objective, that is, unaffected by one's personal faith or absence of faith. Furthermore, the ultimate authority which guided and judged this research was reason, as opposed to the authority of tradition or of a Magisterium. Allegorical interpretation was therefore experienced as an imposition of foreign meanings on the original meaning. In traditional allegorical interpretation, however, the ultimate interest was not the meaning understood at the moment of the production of the text but the meaning for the present day readers in their growth towards a deeper love for God (the usefulness of the text). Furthermore, the type of rationality appropriate for the understanding of Scripture was not scientific knowledge but practical wisdom, which came from long experience of a life in the Spirit.[1]

In this "modern" intellectual climate it also became common to assert that Jesus did not use allegories but told parables and similes.[2] Allegories were seen as deliberately obscure and pedantic. In the course of the discussion allegory and typology were presented as two radically different approaches; allegory was seen as a foreign, Greek import, while typology was seen as rooted in Biblical thinking.[3] However, in more recent years these negative views on allegory have been replaced by more nuanced approaches.[4] In the last forty years much work has been done on the subject of metaphors and this affects our view on allegory, which is a complex of metaphors. Instead of being seen as mere conventional illustrations, metaphors are now seen as poetic means which are more apt to express deeper insights than precise, technical language. For instance,

1 See Waaijman (2002:518-534), who, following Aristotle, distinguishes scientific knowledge from practical wisdom.

2 This was the view of Jülicher (1888, 1899), and he has been followed for some time by many. For recent challenges to his contrast between metaphor an allegory as "uneigentliche Rede" and simile and parable as "eigentliche Rede," see Meurer (1997: 247-253) and Liebenberg (2001:50-76).

3 See the works of Goppelt (1939) and Daniélou (1960). De Lubac has opposed such simplistic contrasts; neither the Church Fathers nor the mediaeval interpreters made such distinctions; see Voderholzer (1998:465-470).

4 Lemmer (1998: 95) discusses the "literary 'operation' of allegory through metaphor, and the particular heuristic it could provide for the religious belief of its readers".

"The Lord is my rock" may be able to express more powerfully for a person the meaning of God than a technical book on divine providence is able to say. Since the meaning of metaphors (and narratives) is open, they interact with the person's understanding of them and they involve the readers in such a way that the meaning becomes contextualised in their lives. The meaning of "The Lord is my rock" is filled by the reader with nuances which speak to his or her life here and now. As a further illustration of this, it may be useful to look at the Parable of the Sower (Mt. 13:1-9,18-23; Mk 4:1-9,13-20; Lk. 8:4-8,11-15). We can observe how the story gave rise to subtly different interpretations in the three Gospels and these affected the way the parable and its interpretation were recorded in the three Gospels. For Luke (8:15), the good soil becomes an image of an honest and good heart. He is not interested in the varying degrees of fertility but in the perseverance and patient endurance of the listeners. Luke's particular context led him to emphasise and re-shape those aspects in the parable which were of particular relevance to his situation. The metaphors and stories tease Luke as a listener and reader — as we are — to re-think the traditions and to understand his situation and himself in new ways by means of these.

Furthermore, one of the basic principles of historical critical exegesis, that is, that a text has only one meaning, the one intended by the author, has been challenged. For instance, Paul Ricoeur, one of the influential writers on this issue, has argued that the fact that a text is written down de-contextualises it to some extent: It becomes independent from its original context in a threefold way: from its original author, from its original readers and from its original historical context. This then enables it to be re-contextualised in new contexts, that of the reader (Trigg 1988:52-53). The Gospel of Mark, for instance, is available to us now as a written work; as such it is no longer dependent for its meaningfulness on the author, the original audience and the original context. Present-day readers may be able to read the text (that is all that is left of the author) in their own context and give it new meaning in terms of that context. This should be most obvious, for instance, in the Psalms. Psalm 22, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me, ..." makes sense in various ways. We could try to establish the original meaning, but that will need a lot of imagination; we can try to understand the way Jesus was praying it according to Mark 15:34; we could also make the words our own in a particular situation. From a theological point of view, the meanings the words take on in the context of the present readers are part of the authentic meaning in an eminent way. The words of Scripture are meant to be life-giving words for the present reader, not merely historical records to be examined as objects by specialist historians.

This may become clearer by recalling Ricoeur's perspective on interpretation. He argues that all understanding is ultimately about our lives and about our efforts to live a meaningful life. We develop such an understanding by reflecting upon the various manifestations of life which surround us and which we

have to interpret; texts are one kind of such manifestations. The aim of understanding texts is not so much to reach "the original intentions of the author,[5] but rather to expand the conscious horizons of the reader by incorporating the world which the text unfolds" (Thompson 1981:55). This is not, however, what has been called "eis-egesis" as opposed to "ex-egesis." What Ricoeur has in mind is that instead of simply imposing their views on the text, the readers are invited to develop their self-understanding under the objective guidance of the text. The aim is a transforming interaction between the self-understanding of the reader and the text.

The one-sided emphasis on the origin of the texts was challenged in the sixties by structuralism, which called for a study of the texts as they now stand. A number of contemporary scholars, like Northrup Frye, have called for priority to be given to the finished product as it lies before us, to the Bible as a whole (Trigg 1988:53-54).[6] This is very much in line with the general approach to the study of literature. A poem or a novel is studied first and foremost in their present form and not primarily from the point of view of their sources or the stages of their composition. However, while "the Bible can be understood like any other book, not every understanding of it is a Christian understanding" (Wood 1993:26). Various understandings have their value and importance: historical, structural, literary, sociological, psychological, ..., but Christian understanding requires furthermore that it is integrated within the total discipline of theological reflection (Wood 1993:28). To put it more simply, a Christian interpretation of the Bible means to let God address us in the text, to be reminded of who God is for us and who we are before God, to understand our vocation in life and to be empowered to live it out.

The purpose of allegorical interpretation was precisely to meet the two challenges just mentioned, that is, to understand the particular texts as part of the whole of the Scriptures[7] and to let the texts speak to the present as God's Word in order to transform the lives of the readers. Nowadays, therefore, there is a greater sensitivity to what the allegorists of earlier periods intended with their allegorical interpretations, without simply endorsing the ways in which they went about doing it. In our present context, we cannot bypass the contributions of modern critical exegesis, but these must be placed in a wider perspective.[8] Mo-

5 The originally rather broadly understood "literal sense" of Scripture was identified with the "original sense" only as the result of the Enlightenment preoccupation with history and origin (see Brown & Schneiders 1990:1148-1152).

6 Other voices in favour of a such a holistic approach have come from canonical criticism (e.g., Childs 1979).

7 For Christians this meant to interpret the Old Testament in the light of the Christ event.

8 It is very interesting to see how the document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission of the Roman Catholic Church on *The interpretation of the Bible in the church* (1994) defends the importance of the historical-critical method against those who would

dern critical exegesis only answers the question: "What did the text mean? What is its historical meaning?" However, a further question needs to be answered by the present day reader: "What does it mean for us now?" It is this second question which was foremost in the minds of the allegorists.

3. ALLEGORY, ALLEGORISING, ALLEGORESIS

Klauck (1978) has introduced these distinctions in order to discern between an acceptable and an unacceptable or problematic use of allegorical interpretation. He wanted to show that the tendencies in the Gospel parables do not have to be judged in the same way as the allegorical activity of Philo, Origen, or the later Christian tradition. He therefore proposes that we distinguish between allegoresis and allegorising.

Allegoresis is the interpretation of a text or some of its elements in a non-literal, that is, in a way which goes beyond the "intentional texture of the text." According to Klauck, this entails three aspects: the intention of the author, the structure of the text and context, and the horizon of expectation of the original addressees. Allegoresis interprets the images or words in the text, in terms of ideas, concepts, and systems of thinking which are foreign to the text in its original context.

A clear example of this is Philo's interpretation of Genesis 16:

> In Philo's *On mating with the Preliminary Studies*, Abraham's wife, Sarah, symbolizes virtue or philosophy and her handmaiden, Hagar, symbolizes the encyclical studies (mathematics, astronomy, and the like) that prepare for philosophy. Abraham himself symbolizes the soul that learns by instruction. Sarah, although fruitful, cannot bear progeny for Abraham until he is prepared for her; philosophy is barren to the soul unready for it. She, therefore, gives him her handmaiden, Hagar, so that he may be prepared for philosophical studies by the preliminary studies on which it depends (Trigg 1988:15).

This was a creative, imaginative way of working with texts, which was quite acceptable in the Hellenistic world. It was also a powerful tool for contextual interpretation of the texts. Nowadays, it is generally seen as arbitrary, as not respecting the text, as too fanciful.

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favour an *exclusively* synchronic approach: "... diachronic study remains indispensable for making known the historical dynamism which animates Sacred Scripture and for shedding light upon its rich complexity ..." (1994:37).

Allegorising, on the contrary, is the expansion of allegory by means of additional metaphors belonging to the same field of images in the culture to which the text belongs. An example of this would be the way in which the Parable of the Great Supper (Mt. 22:1-14, compare Lk. 14:16-24; Gospel of Thomas 64) has been developed in Matthew. In Matthew the one planning the supper has become a king; the great supper has become a wedding feast; Matthew has two groups of servants: The first group is sent to call them to wedding (they represent the Old Testament prophets); the second group announces that the meal is now ready (they represent the Christian missionaries). Matthew adds that the second group of servants was killed, and that the king, in his anger, destroyed the city (a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem). Matthew's text invites us to read the parable as an outline of the history of salvation from the time of the Old Testament prophets, including the calling of the Gentiles and the destruction of Jerusalem, until the final judgment. The allegorising transformations of the text are means of suggesting how the story could speak in a new context. It remains a story, but now it is a story which invites the readers to look at that particular story in a specific way. There were a number of models for allegorical narratives available for this in the Old Testament and the intertestamental literature. Ezekiel 16, for instance, tells the story of Jerusalem as that of a woman, who in childhood was cared for and in young adulthood was taken as bride by God. However, she became unfaithful and ended up in shame, but God forgave her. The story is told in such a way that no explanation is needed. We could refer to a number of other texts, like Ezekiel 18, 23, 27, and later texts like 1 Enoch 85-90.

Another form of allegorising can be seen in the way the healing of the blind man of Mark 8:22-26 is used in the story of Mark's Gospel in order to symbolise the inability of the disciples to understand Jesus' teaching about his death and resurrection and their very slow enlightenment. In fact, a few verses before, in Mark 8:18, Jesus has been challenging their lack of understanding with words and imagery taken from Scripture (Jr. 5:21; Ezk. 12:2): "You have eyes and you do not see; you have ears and you do not hear."[9]

9 As Jesus and the disciples are starting the last stage of the journey towards Jerusalem, we find another healing of a blind man (Mk 10:46-52), which ends with the words: "And he followed him along the road." The road is the road to the cross and resurrection.

4. ALLEGORISING AND THE EXPLORATORY OR REVELATORY POWER OF IMAGES

In the past, it was thought that metaphorical ways of speaking did not contribute deeper knowledge; their importance was seen simply in terms of aesthetic pleasure. In more recent years, scholars like Ricoeur have emphasised the exploratory value of metaphors.[10] It was thought in the past that an allegory, like the Parable of the Sower, expresses something which is perfectly clear to the mind of the writer in obscure terms. Allegorical interpretation is then like translating back into clear language what was expressed in an obscure way. In other words, once we have the explanation we could let go of the obscure story. However, it is significant that in the examples given above both the story and its interpretation have been preserved. It might be better to say that an allegorising interpretation sends us back to the images but now with a certain direction for our reflection. After the "explanation" of the parable, we can return to the images and continue the work of understanding. The Parable of the Sower and its interpretation invite us, tease us even like a puzzle, to work out the similarities and dissimilarities between the response of the soil to the seed and our response to God's Word. This is not meant to be a merely academic exercise, because interpreting Scripture is about understanding and transformation of our lives. The story of the sower invites us to see our life in a new way, in the light of these images. The images guide us as it were in our exploration, which is never finished or complete. After all, understanding our lives by means of these images is the ultimate aim of understanding and it is a never-ending task. It is important to bear in mind that interpretation of Scripture was seen as an endless task, inviting ever deeper exploration.

5. ALLEGORISING IN THE EARLY CHURCH

Although the distinction made by Klauck is very interesting for contemporary readers, it would have held little interest for interpreters like Origen, Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine, as they were very keen precisely to present the meaning of the text in their own cultural categories. Like Bultmann, they translated the unacceptable statements of Scripture into statements meaningful for their

10 One has the impression that Augustine was pondering this question; he accepts the theory of aesthetic pleasure, but he also plays with the idea of the pleasure of discovery:

> What is not in dispute, all the same, is both that one gets to know things more enjoyably through such comparisons, and also that discovering things is much more gratifying if there has been some difficulty in the search for them (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2, 8; see Rotelle 1996:132-133).

cultural context and useful as life-giving words of God. However, the church Fathers did not reflect on the problem in terms of "cultural differences" between the Hebrew world view and their own Hellenistic world view (see Trigg 1988:51-52).

For the remainder of this article we will focus on the use of allegorising in the early Church and try to understand more clearly what they were trying to achieve by means of it.

5.1 The pastoral aim of all Scriptural interpretation

In order to appreciate the interpretation of Scripture in the early Church we have to realise that their aim was to guide the believers in their development towards a deeper commitment to God and towards a greater love for God (a pastoral aim). It was not simply a matter of getting to know the Scriptures as literary objects to be analysed for their own sake. The Scriptures were seen first of all as God's living Word addressed to us here and now in our own situation for our salvation. The type of knowledge aimed at by the traditional interpretation of Scripture was not simply the objective, factual information of modern historical exegesis but the personal knowledge which was part of desire, commitment and love. In other words, it was a knowledge which moved beyond the text to life.[11] Unlike factual knowledge this personal knowledge did not simply follow logical steps leading to the only possible logical conclusion. The spiritual sense of Scripture could only be understood by the spiritual person. Origen, the great master of allegoresis, explained it as follows in his *First Homily on the Song of Songs*:

> If you have despised all bodily things — I do not mean flesh and blood, but money and property and the very earth and heaven, for these things will pass away (cf. Mt. 24:35) — if you have set these at nought and your soul is not attached to any of them, neither are you held by any love of sinful practices, then you can acquire spiritual love (see Lawson 1957:270).

The spiritual love he writes about here goes hand in hand with spiritual insight and discerning the spiritual sense of Scripture.

11 Ricoeur (1974:87, 252-253) follows the distinction of Frege between the sense (inner-textual) of the text and the reference (truth). The process of understanding is clearly described by St. Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana*, 2:8-11 (Rotelle 1996:132-134).

5.2 All interpretation was seen as limited and partial

In order to understand this it will be useful to quote a passage from a Syriac work attributed to St. Ephrem (306-373), the *Commentary on the Diatessaron*. He contrasts the divine word with the human words with which we try to grasp the divine word. The divine word is compared to an abundant fountain to which we come to draw water; our human words are like the limited buckets with which we draw water from the fountain; of course, we are not able to take all the water from the fountain, but only as much as our buckets can take.

> Give thanks for what you have received and do not grumble for what remains. That which you have taken and carried away is your portion, and what is left is your inheritance too. What you have not been able to receive because of your weakness, receive it at other times thanks to your perseverance (Trigg 1988:38).

Augustine, for instance, would not dare to claim that his explanation exhausts the insights of Moses (*Conf* 12:24[33]; 12:31[42]; Rotelle 1997:332, 340).[12]

5.3 Allegoresis as a way of "preparing" the texts of Scripture to serve as food for Christian listeners

It was very difficult for Christians to know what to make of much of the material in the Scriptures, particularly in the Old Testament, but Jews seem to have experienced similar problems. Jewish and Christian teachers understood their task with regards to their listeners in terms of the image of preparing food. When you want to feed the family you do not just give them unprocessed grain to eat. As Gregory of Nyssa put it towards the end of his *Prologue to the Homilies on the Song of Songs*:

> If such an interpretation [allegoresis] is rejected, as some prefer, the result seems similar to me to what would happen if someone were to serve unprocessed grain as food at a meal for men, not grinding the ears, not winnowing the chaff from the grains, not thrashing the wheat on a threshing floor, nor preparing bread in the usual manner for use as food. Just as unprocessed grain is food for beasts, so someone might say

12 Cf. also Origen, *De principiis* 4:3.14 (cf. Crouzel & Simonetti):

> For however far one may advance in the search and make progress through an increasing earnest study, even when aided and enlightened in mind by God's grace, he will never be able to reach the final goal of his inquiries.

> that the divinely inspired words unprocessed by winnowing insight are food for the irrational rather than for the rational (Trigg 1998:150).[13]

5.4 How did they go about it?

Recognising metaphor works on the principle that a sentence must make sense. "That man is a lion" only makes sense if "lion" is taken in a non-literal sense. This was applied analogously to the Bible as a whole: If the Bible is taken as a whole and as God's Word for Christians in the present, then the various parts have to be read in such a way that they make Christian sense as part of the overall work and in terms of the basic tradition of the Church (the rule of faith). However, a number of texts taken in their literal sense do not fit or, at least, do not fit well. Allegorising, in that case, looked for a non-literal sense and argued that this Christian non-literal interpretation made better sense of the Bible.

Allegorising was a well known and appreciated method of interpretation in that cultural context and it proved to be very useful for Christians to make sense of the Biblical texts according to their perspectives. Allegorising flourished first of all in the arguments with the Jews over the interpretation of Scripture; the main issues were Jesus as the promised Messiah and the interpretation of the Law. *The Epistle of Barnabas* (130 A.D.) is a forceful example of this approach and stresses again and again that the Christian interpretation is the one which makes real sense, as opposed to the Jewish interpretation. Barnabas develops a typology by which many figures of the Old Testament are seen as shadows and prefigurations of Jesus, the Christ. With regard to the interpretation of the Law, the New Testament had left some clear principles, for instance in Mark 7:15: "Nothing that goes into someone from outside can make that person unclean; it is the things that come out of someone that make that person unclean." In the light of this principle the texts about purity and impurity of food had to be reinterpreted in a non-literal way. The prohibition of pork is explained as follows:

> He mentioned the swine for this reason; you shall not consort, he means, with men who are like swine, that is to say, when they have plenty they

13 Fishbane (1989:37-38) quotes a midrashic comment:

> When the Holy One, blessed be He, gave the Torah to Israel, he only gave it as wheat from which to extract flour, and as flax wherewith to weave a garment.

St. Jerome seems to use the same metaphor when he writes "... in ecclesiastical matters it is words that are sought not meanings. That is, life must be sustained by bread, not by husks" (Letter 21:42, cf. Mierow & Lawler 1963). Earlier on in that letter, he has interpreted the husks as the classical literature, which needs to be carefully sifted to make it useful for Christians (21:13).

> forget the Lord, but when they are in want they recognize the Lord, just as the swine when it eats does not know its master, but when it is hungry it cries out, and after receiving food is again silent (10, 3, see Lake 1912:375).

Irenaeus of Lyon (130-208) had to face another challenge, that of the Gnostics, who considered the God of the Old Testament as an inferior god, different from the true God, the God of Jesus Christ and of the New Testament. It was the inferior god of the Old Testament who was responsible for the creation of the world and had therefore to be blamed for the imperfection and chaos in this world. The Gnostics therefore saw a radical discontinuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Against this Irenaeus used typology to show how the Old Testament prefigured the New Testament and how there was therefore a profound continuity between the two Testaments. According to him, the imperfection of the Old Testament was part of God's strategy, of his economy of salvation; God worked gradually, he began in a limited way and gradually worked towards perfection. In this way Adam was a figure of Christ, the second Adam. The first Adam was created imperfect but in the second Adam God brought his creation to its perfection (see 1 Cor.15:44-49).

> It was the genius of Irenaeus to open out new lines of approach. And this was under the aspect of progress. If man has been created in a state of imperfection, it is not due to God's inability to create him perfect, nor to some catastrophe in a previous world, owing to some earlier sin: it is simply that it is of the very essence of created things to have a beginning, development and fulfillment (Daniélou 1960:33-34).

Origen (A.D.183-252) used allegory in his efforts to present the Christian gospel in a way which would be understood in his own Greek culture. In a way his approach is similar to the one adopted later on by Bultmann in his demythologising programme. Just as Bultmann interpreted the Bible in terms of existentialist philosophy, so Origen interpreted it in terms of Greek Platonic philosophy.[14] We have here an early example of inculturation. Many stories in the Bible, when taken literally, do not make sense. For instance, he writes about Matthew 4:8, where it is said that the devil took Jesus up to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the earth:

> For what man who does not read such passages carefully would fail to condemn those who believe that with the eye of the flesh, which requires great height to enable us to perceive what is below at our feet, the kingdoms of the Persians, Scythians, Indians and Parthians were seen, and the manner in which their rulers are glorified by men? And the careful reader will detect thousands of other passages in the Gospels like this,

14 See Hamerton-Kelly (1991:64) where he compares the allegorising of Philo, Bultmann and Girard.

> which will convince him that events which did not take place at all are woven into the records of what literally did happen (*De principiis* 4:3.1; Crouzel & Simonetti 1989).

As these texts cannot be taken literally, they invite a search for a metaphorical meaning which will be useful for the Christian in his spiritual journey. The kind of knowledge Origen is talking about is not merely objective knowledge, knowing all about God, but a knowledge which is inspired by desire for God and is completed in love for God.

The following passage from Origen's *First homily on the Song of Songs* illustrates what Origen means by the journey from the stage of the body, through the soul to the spirit:

> He, therefore, who can discern the spiritual sense of Scripture, or, if he cannot, yet desires so, must strive his utmost to live not after flesh and blood, so that he can become worthy of spiritual mysteries and — if I may speak more boldly — of spiritual desire and love, if such indeed there be [...] If you have despised all bodily things — I do not mean flesh and blood, but money and property and the very earth and heaven, for these will pass away (cf. Mt. 24:35) — if you have set these at nought and your soul is not attached to any of them, neither are you held by any love of sinful practices, then you can acquire spiritual love (Lawson 1957:270).

Origen's spiritual interpretation was creative, a kind of divination.[15] It was God's gift of wisdom for those who keep God's commandments (see the quote from Sir. 1:16 in the *Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs*). Interpretation of texts was dominated by his concern to lead his listeners further on their spiritual journey.[16] In interpreting a text he would look for the words and images which could articulate the three stages of the journey: purification

15 On the importance of the divinatory model for the interpretation of texts, see Struck (2004):

> Allegorists nearly ignore rhetorical thinking and draw instead on magic, ritual, esoteric philosophy and, as it happens, divination in order to generate their conceptual schemes for reading literary texts (2002).

There are interesting texts in both Josephus (e.g. Wars 3:351-54) and Philo (e.g. *De vita Mosis* 2:188) showing the importance of inspired exegesis. On the similarities between allegoresis and the interpretation of dreams, cf. Klauck (1987:67-91, 355).

16 Philo, Clement and Origen were shaped by the Stoic/Pergamene approach to the interpretation of texts with their primary interest in the moral and philosophical meaning, as distinct from the earlier Alexandrian approach, which was more influenced by Aristotle and did not focus on the philosophical or religious meaning. Later, more religious forms of Platonism were also influential. Cf. Kamesar (1997:143-45); Sellin (1997); Masi (1995:90, 92); Siegert (1996).

from sin, progress in knowledge, anticipation of the coming perfection. In doing so he could take apart the text's surface and hunt for the elements needed for his exposé. The School of Antioch reacted particularly against this disregard of the surface structure of the text (Young 1997).

The School of Antioch came to prominence later on, during the fourth century, at a time when Christianity had been accepted as the official religion of the Roman Empire. It was also a time of intense Christological debate and in this debate the School of Antioch strongly emphasised the humanity of Christ. In line with their Christological position they were interested in the historical and literal meaning of the text and for this purpose they used the philological-grammatical method influenced by the philosophy of Aristotle. This method (originally developed by the librarians of Alexandria) was particularly interested in the texts in themselves and not merely in their philosophical or religious relevance. They were very critical of the allegorical approach and developed their own method which gave primary attention to the literal and historical meaning of the text and only afterwards probed for their usefulness and deeper meanings.[17] Among the representatives of this School were Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus, and John Chrysostom. St. Jerome, later on in his life, came more under the influence of Antioch. St. Augustine also moved from a predominantly allegorical approach (which was decisive in his conversion process) to a greater appreciation of the literal sense. In any case, the two approaches are not really mutually exclusive. Augustine wrote:

> The fact is, after all, that in the passages that are put plainly in Scripture is to be found everything that touches upon faith, and good morals, that is to say hope and charity ... Only then, however, after acquiring some familiarity with the actual style of the divine Scriptures, should one proceed to try to open up and unravel their obscurities, in such a way that instances from the plainer passages are used to cast light on the more obscure utterances, and the testimony of some undoubted judgments is used to remove uncertainties from those that are more doubtful (*De Doctrina Christiana* 2:14[9]; Rotelle 1996:135).

The School of Antioch played a useful balancing role in Christian exegesis in the attention it paid to the literal sense before moving to the spiritual sense,

17 They used the word "allegoria" to characterise Origen's exegesis, while they called their own search for a deeper meaning "theoria." Daniélou (1960) has tried to characterise the School of Alexandria and its opponent, the School of Antioch, in terms of an opposition between allegory and typology. He presented typology (the approach of Antioch) as rooted in the Biblical tradition with its emphasis on salvation history (the temporal dimension), while allegory was seen as a Greek method which neglected the historical aspect in favour of timeless truths (the spatial dimension: earth — heaven). However, Daniélou's views are no longer accepted as this opposition between typology and allegory is not tenable.

but it cannot be seen as a direct precursor of "modern" historical-critical exegesis. This whole trajectory cannot be dealt with here. I simply want to point out how Thomas of Aquino represents an important step in the direction of modern exegesis in two ways. First of all, for Thomas, with his Aristotelian approach, theology becomes very concerned with logically coherent argument which requires a clear starting point in an un-ambiguous text of Scripture. Therefore, secondly, he emphasises — developing Augustine — that theological arguments can be drawn only from the literal sense, not from the spiritual sense (*Summa* 1.1,10 ad 1), since all that is necessary for faith is already expressed somewhere in Scripture in the literal sense. In other words, allegory really becomes irrelevant for theology. Its use became more and more limited to devotional literature and preaching.

6. CONCLUSION

Let us now return to the present situation, from where we started. At the very moment when the "modern" historical-critical exegesis appeared to have won the battle and to have firmly established its claim that the historical meaning was the *only* valid meaning, counter-movements started developing challenging this claim. A survey of these contemporary approaches is provided for instance by Brown and Schneiders (1990:1158-1162), viz. the new (Heideggerian) hermeneutics; literary criticism (including contextual approaches); canonical criticism; liberation and feminist approaches. These approaches aim to achieve in contemporary ways what, broadly speaking, allegorising aimed to do in its time. In South Africa contextual exegesis and approaches which focus on the reader are among the methods which are very much alive.[18] Biblical interpretation as a spiritual experience belongs to a similar approach. Understanding the Bible in a religious and spiritual context is not merely about understanding concepts and teachings of the distant past, but ultimately about being touched and transformed by the encounter with God. What is needed is a "transposition" or an "ascent" from the level of the objective, historical to the existential present in which God opens a future. It is this transition and ascent which was a crucial concern for the Church Fathers and it was usually expressed as transition from the level of the letter to the level of the Spirit. Such a transition is not a merely logical process, but the fruit of wisdom, the fruit of God's Spirit. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to keep an eye on the readings of the Church Fathers, particularly of Origen, of Gregory of Nyssa, of Augustine. Although they can be accused of having gone beyond allegorising into allegoresis, nevertheless they remind us of what a genuine Christian interpretation of the Scriptures should aim for. The precise methods have to follow from such a vision.

18 See West (1999), with the literature listed there; also Prior (1999); King (1999).

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