

## *A Modern Reflection on Premodern Allegory*

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### ABSTRACT

*Modern Bible readers and scholars often view premodern exegesis with a jaundiced eye because of its heavy reliance on allegorical interpretation. However, patristic and medieval interpreters were serious students of scripture. Although their methods are sometimes strange by contemporary standards, their efforts are worthy of continuing respect and careful consideration.*

Keywords: Allegory, Augustine, Exegesis, Gregory of Nyssa, Hermeneutics, Premodern, Song of Solomon

### INTRODUCTION

Allegorical interpretation is perhaps the most prominent aspect of premodern biblical exegesis for many modern readers. Allegory involves the symbolic interpretation of a story's details.<sup>1</sup> Like typology, allegorical exegesis begins with the presumption that a text's ultimate message lies beneath or behind its literal meaning.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, figural readings are needed to uncover the deeper senses in scripture.

While this approach to biblical interpretation is often dismissed and discredited by modern exegetes, it was common in some prominent ecclesiastical circles for over a millennium. According to Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, allegory "was clearly favored by the Apostolic Fathers and in second-century culture in general."<sup>3</sup> Donald H. Juel affirms symbolic interpretation "was an accepted strategy for dealing with texts up to the

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<sup>1</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. and exp. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 323.

<sup>2</sup> Henry A. Virkler and Karelynn Ayayo, *Hermeneutics*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 47. "Instead of what is actually meant, something else, more tangible, is said, but in such a way that the former is understood." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, 2nd ed. (New York: Continuum, 2006), 63. While typology and allegory originate from the same hermeneutical impulse, some argue there is a sharp distinction between the two. According to Gerhard F. Hasel, for instance, "Typology must be sharply separated from allegory, because it is essentially a historical and theological category between OT and NT events. Allegory has little concern with the historical character of the OT." Gerhard F. Hasel, *Old Testament Theology: Basic Issues in the Current Debate*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 192.

<sup>3</sup> Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, "Introduction and Overview," in *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Ancient Period*, eds. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 43.

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time of the Enlightenment.”<sup>4</sup> Hence, the church was substantially fed and strengthened by allegorical readings for a long time, from the patristic era—beginning about 100 CE—until the Renaissance and Protestant Reformation.

Modern skepticism regarding figural methods is understandable since ancient techniques do not always comport with contemporary standards. Patristic and medieval interpretations may seem strange to readers shaped by the influence of historical-critical practices over the last two centuries, but the prevalence of allegory in the life of the Christian church and the history of biblical interpretation is undeniable. This influence merits continued, respectful reflection among modern audiences. Certain weaknesses are rightly associated with premodern exegesis—just as future exegetes will associate specific weaknesses with modern approaches to scripture—but modern criticisms should be tempered by humility, an appreciation of the factors that motivated ancient methods, and awareness of their anticipated benefits.

This essay presents two examples of premodern allegory, offers a brief critique of the practice, and considers the propriety of its use before concluding that premodern allegorists, who labored long before modern historical-critical methods became common, still deserve a seat at the proverbial table of biblical exegesis.

## TWO ILLUSTRATIONS OF PREMODERN ALLEGORY

An allegory is essentially an extended metaphor.<sup>5</sup> In assessing its utility for interpreting scripture, it is helpful to consider a couple of specific examples. First, Augustine’s reading of John 2 in the early fifth century CE “reflects the basic method of allegorical interpretation, which involves unpacking the information that the reader presumes lies latent within the textual image or pattern.”<sup>6</sup> According to Augustine, the six water jars at the wedding feast in Cana of Galilee represent six different eras of prophecy since the Creation. He writes,

From there up to this time in which we now live there are six ages, as you have often heard and know very well. The first age is reckoned from Adam up to Noah, the second from Noah up to Abraham; and as the evangelist Matthew follows the series of generations and divides them, the third runs from Abraham up to David, the fourth from David up to the deportation to Babylonia, the fifth from the deportation to Babylonia until John the Baptist; the sixth from there till the end of time...So then, those six jars signify the six ages in which prophecy has never been wanting. The six periods of time, therefore, arranged and distinguished, as it were, by six hinges, would be like empty vessels, unless they were filled by Christ.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Donald H. Juel, “Interpreting Israel’s Scriptures in the New Testament,” in *A History of Biblical Interpretation: The Ancient Period*, eds. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 289.

<sup>5</sup> Virkler and Ayayo, *Hermeneutics*, 160; Dan McCartney and Charles Clayton, *Let the Reader Understand: A Guide to Interpreting and Applying the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2002), 157.

<sup>6</sup> R. R. Reno, “From Letter to Spirit,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 4 (2011): 466.

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, “Homily 9: On John 2:1–11,” in *Homilies on the Gospel of John 1–40*, trans. Edmund Hill, vol. 12, *The Works of Saint Augustine* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009), 187–188.

Augustine asserts that the notion of six prophetic epochs was commonly taught and accepted in his time. Moreover, he claims God progressively reveals himself and his will throughout the six periods, and the meaning of all those prophecies culminates in Christ. These are not radical theological assertions. However, nothing in the text of John 2—beyond the number six—seemingly correlates with the spiritual significance Augustine ascribes to the jars.

The second example concerns the Song of Solomon, a book typically interpreted allegorically by premodern writers. Historical allegorical midrash interprets the verses of Songs individually without accounting for chronological development or context.<sup>8</sup> Christian writers like Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century CE follow the Jewish trajectory and apply the book to the Christian era and its interests. In discussing Songs 4:5 and its reference to the bridegroom's compliment of his bride's breasts, which his contemporaries might have considered salacious, Gregory explains:

Since then, the business of discerning eyes that can distinguish exactly between lily and thorn is to choose what is saving but dismiss what is destructive, for this reason our text refers to the person who, after the fashion of the great Paul, becomes a breast for the little ones and feeds the church's newborn with milk as a pair of breasts that are born together and likened to the fawns of a deer. In this way it bears witness to the esteem that belongs to such a member of the church: both because in each case, seeing sharply and distinguishing the thorn from nourishing food, he shows the way toward the pasture of pure lilies; and also because he refers himself back to the ruling power, whose symbol is the heart that itself gives nourishment to the breasts—and further still because he does not imprison grace within himself but offers the teat of the Word to those in need of it "as a wet nurse takes care of her own children" (1 Thess 2:7), just as the apostle said and did.<sup>9</sup>

As this excerpt indicates, Gregory thinks the true meanings of ostensibly erotic statements in Songs are highly spiritual and directly relevant to Christian growth and development. Again, nothing in Songs guides a reader into this "deeper" meaning.

There may be nothing heretical—or even concerning—to modern readers about the doctrines conveyed by Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa in the selected examples. If the bare assertions made by each exegete were untethered and presented independent of the proffered Bible texts, the declarations would easily resonate with Christian communities during virtually every time and in almost any place. However, the writers' exegetical methods in arriving at their conclusions are clearly speculative and quite unorthodox by contemporary standards.

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<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Jacobs, "The Allegorical Exegesis of Song of Songs by R. Tuviah Ben 'Eli'ezer: *Lekah Tov*, and Its Relation to Rashi's Commentary," *AJS Review* 39, no. 1 (2015): 77.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, "Homily 7," in *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris Jr., vol. 13 of *Writings from the Greco-Roman World* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 251–3.

## A CRITIQUE OF PREMODERN ALLEGORY

There are legitimate and compelling reasons to be wary of the methods employed by Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa in the selected examples. As an initial matter, allegorical readings that are not compelled by the subject text—whether explicitly via intra-textual explication or implicitly based on context—are not subject to meaningful scrutiny. According to Christopher A. Hall, “The danger of subjectivism is apparent” where early interpreters seek a deeper, latent sense in the biblical text that only they can see.<sup>10</sup> For instance, Philo claims he was able to unfold the sacred messages of Moses and reveal things unknown to the masses because of his heavenly ascents (*Spec. Leg.* 3.1–6). If interpreters rely on insights ostensibly available only to them, then each interpreter’s perception is supposedly dispositive of the biblical authors’ intents.

Along with subjectivism comes the danger of eisegesis—reading meaning into a text rather than drawing intended meaning from it. Matthew W. Bates explains the inevitability thusly:

Whether used as a compositional rhetorical trope or as an interpretative reading method in which the trope is identified, the allegorical mode employs an alien code to invest the linguistic tokens with an alternative meaning than that which is supplied by the host text...by substitutions predicated on points of imitation. Since the alien code is always present before the encounter with the host text, a certain amount of eisegesis is inevitable when allegory is utilized with respect to the host text. In other words, allegory can never be the most primal interpretative move with respect to the host text; the alien code always precedes it.<sup>11</sup>

While some Bible passages were undoubtedly penned to be read figuratively, most were not. Consequently, when an interpreter predetermines to approach passages allegorically and receive the subsequent findings as if they are the originally encoded messages, the ensuing conclusions will not accurately reflect biblical writers’ intended meanings.<sup>12</sup>

Unwarranted resort to symbolic interpretation obscures the intended meanings of biblical texts, and exegetes—beginning with the Reformers, who largely stress the literal sense—consistently level this criticism.<sup>13</sup> However, categorical aversion to allegory

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<sup>10</sup> Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 115.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew W. Bates, *The Hermeneutics of the Apostolic Proclamation: The Center of Paul’s Method of Scriptural Interpretation* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 151.

<sup>12</sup> “If there is reason to believe that a passage contained allegory, or double meanings of some kind, then that is how it should be interpreted. But ‘allegorizing’—the reading in of a second or deeper level of meaning where it was not intended—risks eisegesis (reading into rather than *out* of the text).” Craig Blomberg and Jennifer M. Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 228.

<sup>13</sup> “As is well-known, the Reformers increasingly attacked the use of allegory as obscuring the Word of God, and emphasized the literal sense of the text. Since the Enlightenment the developing historical critical method laid stress on recovering the historical sense and generally dismissed the allegorical as fanciful. Occasionally in the nineteenth century a defence of the applicative senses was attempted, but the approach remained suspect to most critical scholarship.” Brevard S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 13.

inexorably leads to distortion of intended messages as writers may use their preferred methods, including allegory, to encode meanings.<sup>14</sup> Ultimately, the biggest concern should not lie intrinsically with the use of allegory; instead, it is with the abuse of allegorical techniques.

In some cases, the people who originally produced a biblical text might have intended to report a simple historical fact or convey a basic truth. If they so intended, then reimagining a direct assertion and suggesting the authors intended something “deeper” misrepresents the authors, distorts the text, and marginalizes its intended message. As Brevard S. Childs cautions, “The problem with traditional Christian allegory was its refusal to hear the Old Testament’s witness, and to change its semantic level in order to bring it into conformity with the New Testament.”<sup>15</sup> This concern exists even when the aggrandized meanings are otherwise orthodox and edifying.<sup>16</sup> Misapplication of allegory eventually makes individual interpreters—along with their prejudices, perspectives, and limitations—the final arbiters of texts’ intended meanings rather than the texts’ authors.

### THE CULTURAL PROPRIETY OF PREMODERN ALLEGORY

Not all premodern exegesis was allegorical. Some ancient interpreters enthusiastically embraced and encouraged allegory while others were highly critical of it and favored literal approaches. These camps roughly correspond to “two key interpretive centers in the ancient Christian world, Alexandria and Antioch.”<sup>17</sup> The dichotomy between the schools was not so stark as some suppose, because neither relied wholly on one approach or the other. Yet, the Alexandrian school and its disciples relied far more heavily on allegory than the Antiochenes and their disciples. To better understand imaginative interpretations like Augustine’s reading of John 2 and Gregory of Nyssa’s interpretation of Songs 4:5, modern exegetes must consider the methodological presuppositions animating premodern readings of scripture.<sup>18</sup>

First, early Christian rhetoricians and writers were schooled in Greco-Roman rhetorical techniques that included allegory as a standard tool.<sup>19</sup> No matter how strange Augustine’s and Gregory’s interpretations are to modern minds, these writers were not doing something novel or unprecedented in their cultural contexts. In fact,

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<sup>14</sup> “People who claim that the ‘literal’ meaning of the text is always the correct or best interpretation *either* mean that they are seeking what the author was actually trying to communicate, so that the literal interpretation of a metaphor is metaphorical (recognizing the metaphor as metaphor) or *else* they are just plain wrong.” Blomberg and Markley, *A Handbook of New Testament Exegesis*, 228.

<sup>15</sup> Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 78.

<sup>16</sup> “[Allegory] encouraged an irresponsible use of the biblical text by permitting interpretations which were fanciful, even if spiritually they were more helpful than harmful.” Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation Past & Present* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 103.

<sup>17</sup> Hall, *Reading Scripture*, 131.

<sup>18</sup> Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation Volume 1: From the Old Testament to Origen*, trans. Leo G. Perdue (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009), 40.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret M. Mitchell, “Patristic Rhetoric on Allegory: Origen and Eustathius Put 1 Samuel 28 on Trial,” *JR* 85, no. 3 (2005): 414–17. Kenneth Scott Latourette affirms early Christian thinkers were nurtured in Greek philosophy and their writings and formulations of religious beliefs “bore the unmistakable impress of the Greek heritage.” Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume 1: To A.D. 1500*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 150.

The methodology had already originated several centuries prior to its use by biblical interpreters in the difficulties that the oldest of the Greek philosophers, the pre-Socratics, had with the great works of mythic and epic literature: the poetic writings of Homer (eighth century B.C.E.), the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; and the *Theogony* of Hesiod (seventh century B.C.E.).<sup>20</sup>

In the first century CE, when the New Testament documents were written and first being interpreted, Jewish interpreters were already employing allegorical methods in reading the Old Testament. For instance, Philo—an Alexandrian-born Jewish philosopher—could be considered “the master practitioner of allegory.”<sup>21</sup> In working to reconcile the Old Testament with Greek philosophy, he argued Moses was the source of much of Greek philosophy, and some Christian writers of the first centuries adopted this understanding.<sup>22</sup> So then, early Christian interpreters read scripture within a cultural milieu that included, and even expected, allegorical readings.

Second, allegory was an accepted form of apologetics in Greco-Roman culture. As Hans-Georg Gadamer explains, “Allegory arises from the theological need to eliminate offensive material from a religious text—originally from Homer—and to recognize valid truths behind it.”<sup>23</sup> It was considered a legitimate method for patristic and medieval exegetes to make Christianity understandable and acceptable in their broader cultures. For instance, Philo and the Stoics used allegory in order to avoid plain meanings in some texts that would shock or offend cultural sensibilities and philosophies.<sup>24</sup>

By using symbolic interpretation, early Christians tried to present the gospel in ways their contemporaries could readily digest. While discussing patristic interpretation, Gerald Bray explains, “The strangeness of the Old Testament and much of the New had to be overcome, and this led to the development of allegorical exegesis.”<sup>25</sup> Christians have always navigated the tension between maintaining orthodoxy and making the teachings of scripture palatable for non-Christians around them. Modern Christians still experience this tension in their unique contexts. Therefore, in evaluating their premodern predecessors, contemporary readers should remain humble, knowing postmodern successors will scrutinize their best efforts and will not necessarily understand or affirm modern judgments.

Third, premoderns placed a substantial emphasis on recognizing the spiritual significance of Bible texts. While modern readers typically emphasize literal messages, Platonist assumptions in antiquity that heavenly truths were necessarily obscured fueled the pursuit of latent meanings.<sup>26</sup> The premodern quest for spiritual meanings does not mean the

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<sup>20</sup> Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*, 1:34.

<sup>21</sup> Hauser and Watson, “A History of Biblical Interpretation,” 44.

<sup>22</sup> Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, 15.

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 63.

<sup>24</sup> “When we think of allegory, we quite naturally envision the brand of allegory practiced by Philo and the Stoics, where allegorical exegesis served as an apologetic tool which allowed the exegete to claim that the text under examination in its entirety was one big allegory containing hidden philosophical doctrines.” Steven Di Mattei, “Paul’s Allegory of the Two Covenants (Gal 4.21–31) in Light of First-Century Hellenistic Rhetoric and Jewish Hermeneutics,” *NTS* 52, no. 1 (2006): 105.

<sup>25</sup> Bray, *Biblical Interpretation*, 96.

<sup>26</sup> Ivor J. Davidson, *The Birth of the Church: From Jesus to Constantine, A.D. 30–312*, eds. John D. Woodbridge and David F. Wright, vol. 1 of *The Baker History of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 260–1.

ancients were cavalier about scripture. In fact, they may have been more invested than many of their modern counterparts. They were not merely hoping to find an interesting anecdote or pithy saying. They hoped to hear a deep word from God around which to order their lives. The attraction to allegory was only one part of a grander commitment to spiritual reading, and, as R. R. Reno notes, “It is the nature of spiritual interpretation to extend beyond the literal sense.”<sup>27</sup>

Fourth, it is essential to acknowledge biblical precedent for allegorical interpretation. While premodern exegesis sometimes involved an excessive use of the method—perhaps bounded only by their broad theological understandings—interpreters were not reading scripture in a way completely foreign to its own internal witness. For instance, Eccl. 12:1–7 is largely allegorical. While vv. 2–6 literally speak of celestial bodies, machinery, vegetation, and animal life, the references do not ultimately concern any of those things. Instead, each reference probably corresponds to an aspect of physical deterioration and human death.<sup>28</sup>

There are obvious allegories in the New Testament as well. Jesus sometimes uses allegory in his parables. In the Parable of the Sower, for example, he interprets a story that is literally about sowing seed symbolically. The seed represents the word of God (Luke 8:11); the birds that come and devour the seed represent the devil (Luke 8:5, 12); and the various types of soil where seed is strewn represent the varying conditions of people’s hearts (Luke 8:12–15). The Parable of the Tares works very similarly (Matt. 13:24–30, 36–43), and the Parable of the Wicked Tenants is also allegorical (Mark 12:1–12). Moreover, ancient readers could reasonably perceive passages like Gal. 4:22–26, 1 Cor. 2:7–8, 9:9–10, and Col. 2:17 as invitations to search for spiritual meanings through non-literal approaches to Bible texts.

Patristic and medieval writers who relied heavily on allegory approached the Bible in ways commensurate with their educations and cultures, using techniques typical of their times. Their contemporaries did not universally accept their arguments, but ancient allegorists were oftentimes making reasoned decisions about approaches to effectively communicate the gospel in ways their audiences could embrace. Their hermeneutical moves are often peculiar to modern readers, because modern readers are not immersed in premodern cultural contexts and do not communicate with audiences steeped in Greco-Roman philosophy and assumptions.

## CONCLUSION

Relating simple facts or concepts with more complex ones can be a helpful technique for aiding comprehension and memory. This is presumably why Jesus made copious use of metaphors and parables and occasional use of allegories. Each tool, if rightly employed, can be effective in impressing spiritual meanings on the minds of others. When early Christians approached scripture with this understanding, it drove them to peer through a distinctly spiritual lens in their quest for meanings directly applicable to their communities.

It is perfectly appropriate for modern critics to recognize the shortcomings of their premodern predecessors’ methods and, even accounting for the various motivations and contexts within which premoderns sometimes resorted to allegory, there are obvious concerns with their figural readings. However, it is essential to be fair and charitable when

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<sup>27</sup> Reno, “From Letter to Spirit,” 465.

<sup>28</sup> Knut Martin Heim, *Ecclesiastes*, vol. 18 of *TOTC* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 194; Choon-Leong Seow, *Ecclesiastes*, vol. 18C of *AB* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 372–3.

reflecting on premodern efforts. They were serious, sincere, and imperfect students of scripture. In this way, premoderns are at least the equals of modern critics, who may not always recognize they are also prone to excesses because of the cultural norms and expectations within which they read and discuss scripture today.

The importance of premodern scholarship must not be discounted in the continuing stream of solemn reflections on scripture. In fact, modern readers and scholars should intentionally engage with and seek to learn from their ancient predecessors. Even seemingly fantastic allegorical readings provide insights into how early Christians read scripture and worked to make its relevance clear to people in their cultures. Like all assessments on the meaning and application of Bible texts—including modern commentaries and sermons—symbolic interpretations should be carefully scrutinized and cautiously integrated, but premodern scholarship should be consulted along with modern reflections on the meaning and majesty of scripture.



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