The Problem of Allegory in Origen

Allegory has often been considered a corrupt biblical interpretation, as it was charged that it denied the historicity of the biblical text. The claim has been that allegory is incompatible with history, as it sacrifices the objective truth of a specific event in order to elicit from it a spiritual, universal dimension. Critics have attacked the reading into the text (*eisgesis)* as detrimental to what they considered to be legitimate exegesis.

In this paper, I will explore some aspects of the criticisms of allegory, and attempt to investigate the legitimacy of those charges, especially in regards to historicity and *eisgesis*. Further, I will try to find what Origen initially intended when using the allegorical method. By doing so, I will suggest a new understanding of allegory as helpful and even advantageous in contemporary preaching, as far as the contemporary application of the biblical truth is concerned. My position is that, for the benefit of the contemporary audience, an 'interpretation' of the past biblical truth is necessary in the light of its intended universality, making it possible for the preacher and the audience to revive and experience that truth in the present context of preaching.

I will argue in this paper that allegory (sometimes dabbed heretical and pagan) does not deserve its negative connotation and, in the contrary, should recover its legitimate place in preaching. I will further attempt to demonstrate that allegory has not always disregarded the historical literal truth, but was rather used as an instrument to assign contemporary meaning to the biblical truth by interpreting it for the immediate

audience, which is, as modern rhetoricians maintain, an example of 'rhetorical situation.' I will propose that the audience of a preaching event, alive 'here and now,' is a totally different entity than that of two thousand years ago. This undeniable cultural gap requires preachers to offer a contemporized interpretation of the Bible in order for the audience to be able to internalize the biblical truth and live and act according to it. Consequently, I will propose throughout this paper that the allegory may be reassessed and reintroduced as a significant resource for the contemporary preaching ministry.

Criticisms against Allegory

Edwin C. Dargan, historian of Christian preaching at the turn of the 20th century, was one of the staunch detractors of allegory. He held that the use of allegory was a form of bible abuse. According to him, "Centuries must pass before the pulpit could be delivered—and even yet it is not wholly delivered!—from bondage to this [allegory] ancient and trenched abuse of Scripture."[1] Yngve Brilioth, another preaching historian, also maintained that the interpretative method led the exegetical preaching on the false path of allegory for hundreds of years.[2] Another church historian, Adolf Harnack, equated the allegory with 'biblical alchemy.'[3] R.P.C. Hanson also lashes out sarcastically at this 'alchemy,'

[1] Edwin C. Dargan, *A History of Preaching* (Grand Rapids:Baker House, 1904; reprinted 1954, 1968), Vol. I, p.190)
[2] Yngve Brilioth, *A Brief History of Preaching*, trans, Karl E. Mattson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1945, ET 1965), p.25. See also, pp.91-92, where Brilioth shows how the allegorical method—degenerate as it had become in its function of proof-texting church traditions—held sway over Meister Eckhart, Tauler, and even Wycliffe.
[3] Cf., Leslie W. Barnard, "To Allegorize or not to Allegorize," *Studia Theologic*a 36 (1982), p, 5.

> Where the Bible did not obviously mean what he thought it ought to mean...he had only to turn the magic ring of allegory, and –Hey Presto!—the desired meaning appeared.[4]

Gerald Bostock goes even further, in that he sees the use of allegory as an example of pagan philosophy breaching the walls of the simple apostolic faith, allowing the firm foundations of the historical Gospel to be undermined by esoteric speculations. For him, the use of allegory alters the obvious meanings of the Bible.[5] Another modern biblical scholar, C. H. Dodd also condemns the allegorical method on the grounds that its use is contrary to the nature and interpretation of the sacred parables.[6]

A historical examination reveals that a strong criticism against allegory was first raised in the Early Christian era by the Church of Antioch, where historical and literal interpretation of the Bible was valued. As Leslie W. Barnard explains:

> …Theodore of Mopsuestia, the leading interpreter of the School of Antioch, insisted upon the historical reality of the biblical revelation. The Antiochenes were more Aristotelian than Platonic; strongly indebted to Jewish exegesis, they were unwilling to lose historical reality to a world of symbols and shadows. So they used typology, i.e., sought correspondence between events recorded in the Old Testament and their fulfillment in the New Testament.[7]

Barnard proposed that the philosophical background of the Antiochenes determined their typological 'literalism' and their opposition to the symbolic allegorism of Origen and his followers.[8] The first official charge from the church council against Origen and his preaching method was the condemnation of the Second Council of

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[4] R.P.C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (SCM, London, 1959, 2002), p.37.
[5] Gerald Bostock, "Allegory and The Interpretation of The Bible in Origen," *Literature & Theology*, (March 1987), vol.1, no.1, p.47.
[6] C.H.Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Nisbet, London, 1936), pp.11ff.
[7] Barnard, p.2
[8] Ibid.

Constantinople in 553.[9] As John J. O'Keefe points out, the Origenists' inclination towards Platonism was the major feature of their preaching style.[10]

In O'Keefe's view, the unfortunate condemnation of Origen and Origenism by the official church had a significant impact on the reception and transmission of Origen's exegetical project, even though, by the time it occurred, its basic principles had been largely absorbed into the mainstream of the Church practice.[11] As a result, according to O'Keefe, subsequent generations of interpreters, eager to avoid the charge of Origenism, preferred the more neutral term, *theoria* (instead of *allegoria*), while the actual exegetical practice remained virtually unchanged.[12]

The most serious charge against allegory, however, was brought by the historical-critical hermeneutics of the Enlightenment. As O'Keefe points out, the prevailing view was essentially incompatible with Origen's interpretative style.

> Origen's penchant for looking beyond the literal to the spiritual meaning of the text strikes many modern readers as arbitrary. Allegory, when viewed from the standards of modern historical criticism, appears to be nothing more than a creative fantasy, destructive of the integrity of the text.[13]... Moreover, the essentials of Origen's style continued to be practiced in both the Eastern and Western church until the advent of historical-critical inquiry. When judged in historical terms, Origen's method seems to be nothing more than pious fantasy.[14]

The historical-critical interpretation of the sacred texts seems to have stamped out the allegory with its persuasive tools of accuracy, truthfulness and objectivity. Since then, the modern method rests upon the assumption that history is the primary locus of

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[9] John J. O'Keefe, *The Westerminster Handbook of Origen*, edited by John Anthony McGuckin (Louisville: Westerminster John Knox Press, 2004), p.196.
[10] O'Keefe, p.196.
[11] Ibid.
[12] Ibid., p.197.
[13] Ibid., p.194.
[14] Ibid., p.197

revelation and that correct reading of a text depends upon a careful reconstruction of historical context. From this perspective, the ancient practice of allegorical reading appears to be nothing more than subjective *eisegesis*—a 'reading in' of meanings rather than an honest 'reading out.' As a result of this, many modern critics have dismissed ancient exegetical practices as unsalvageable.[15]

According to Philip V. Miller, *eisegesis* is instilling or reading into a scriptural passage one's own feelings, opinions, belief, or judgment.[16] The *eisegesi,s* with its corollary default in historicity, is the crucial point of contention in regards to allegory. The above account of the widespread criticism brought against Origen's approach demonstrates how seriously at one time or another the Church regarded the deviation from its preaching practices. Further, we will attempt to discover the reasons behind this opposition, that is, why the Church felt threatened by a more liberal approach towards presenting its textual revelations. To this purpose, it would be helpful to look into how the allegory functions, how Origen aimed to use it in the service of the Church, and whether or not the charges against it are legitimate.

Definition and Function of Allegory

First and foremost, we will note that the allegory is not the exclusive territory of the church and of preaching. By its primary definition, the allegory is a literary unit that has a hidden, figurative, or symbolic meaning,[17] and as such, it has a function outside the

[15] Ibid., p.49.
[16] Philip V. Miller, "A New Hearing for the Allegorical Method," *Perkins Journal*, (Winter 1976), p.26.
[17] Ibid.

church. As Philip V. Miller elaborates, an allegory is "one thing is said," according to Mark, "another is intended,"[18] that is, "a tale with a hidden meaning."[19] The allegory is thus generally considered in rapport with the literal meaning of the 'thing said.' As such, the allegory has been frequently regarded, both in ancient and modern writings, as another version of the metaphor.[20] As a literary form of expression in itself, we suggest, the metaphor is neutral in meaning and function, and can be employed either skillfully or poorly in the service of both right and wrong. The allegory, as well as the metaphor, uses analogy, simile, and symbol. Thus, allegorical reading is figurative and symbolic reading. As Mark Julian Edwards puts it:

> It may be said that, even if metaphors work by juxtaposition and allegory by substitution, the two have this in common, that they illuminate the subject by comparison, and whether the relation be implied or stated, both must therefore posit some resemblance, correlation or community of attributes between the things compared.[21]

Understanding allegory properly requires careful discrimination. It may be that this is exactly what Origen had in mind. For Origen, the allegory is not so much a property of the text such as the hermeneutic lens through which one seeks the universal in the particular,[22] but an instrument that mediates between the corporeal parsing of the text, which some would term the literal reading, and the spiritual divination of its mysteries, which is otherwise called typology.[23] For Origen and other ancient interpreters, the term *allegoria* referred to the exegetical practice of discerning, in the text of the Bible, meanings that were not immediately evident and could not be uncovered

[18] Mark Julian Edwards, *Origen Against Plato* (Oxford: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), p.123
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid., p.124
[22] Ibid., p.126

without the application of a theologically enhanced exegetical gaze.[24] Consequently, condemning the allegory itself from the theological perspective may mean closing the door to the things 'intended.'

Furthermore, allegory was not a creation of Origen. Throughout history, allegory has been used with various purposes. Often it has concealed meanings which were not popular with the mainstream culture, or it made abstract, deeper messages more accessible to people. The allegory was a popular means of expression among Greeks and the Greek mythology is quintessentially allegoric. As a figure of speech in philosophy it pre-dates Socrates. Cynics and Stoics developed the allegorical method before it was used in Alexandria.[25] Through the use of allegory, the Stoics had succeeded in making Homer the Bible of the Greeks.[26] However, this ubiquitous Greek cultural feature had been 'syncretized' in the pluralistic, diverse city of Alexandria. As Miller explains it:

> Since Palestinian rabbis were literalists and regarded the Torah as God's word spoken directly to Moses, they never would have agreed to the adoption of the allegorical method as developed in Greece, where the literal meaning of a passage was held to be less valuable than the deeper, figurative meaning.[27]

Furthermore, the Septuagint (LXX) was in fairly widespread use, particularly in Alexandria, by the early part of the third century, B.C. The apparent motive was to de-literalize the 'anthropomorphic' and 'anthropopathic' imagery used to speak about God. Thus a foundation of allegorizing had been laid within Judaism before the times of the

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[23] Ibid.
[24] John J. O'Keefe, "Allegory," *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, John Anthony McGuckin ed.(Louisville: Westerminster John Knox Press, 2004), p.49.
[25] Edgar, J. Goodspeed, *A History of Early Christian Literature*, rev. by Robert M. Grant (University of Chicago Press, 1942, 1966), p.138.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Miller, p.27

New Testament.[28] It has already been noted that the allegory existed in the Old and New Testament as well as outside of Church in the Greek period. Not only that allegory has had its own history within and without the church, but the Bible itself has made use of it in some situations. . As Miller points out:

> In the New Testament the allegorical method is more obviously suggested. For example, compare Paul's interpretation in 1 Cor. 9:8-10 of the say in Deut 25:4 with its literal meaning, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Paul rejects a literal interpretation of this commandment in favor of an application to the responsibility of the people to protect the apostles.[29]

Miller continues by giving examples of allegory from Paul. Paul used allegory in his comparison of Ishmael and Isaac as to the old and new covenants. Paul employed allegory to free certain Old Testament texts from their literal meaning and to show their contemporary application to Christians. He treats "the Old Testament in a manner similar to the treatment of Hesiod and Homer by the Cynics and Stoics."[30] If allegory has been used in the Bible as an instrument of communication of biblical truth, then using allegory for the purpose of preaching cannot possibly be considered heretical.

In analyzing Origen's 'heresy' in preaching method, one should take into consideration not only that the allegory had a functional role in the Bible before Origen, but also that outstanding church fathers had already used the method and gave it legitimacy. Thus, Origen, far from being a dissenter, has drawn his inspiration from the Bible itself, and even from practitioners of the eminently literal Judaic tradition such as Rabbi Phil. On his account only, attacking Origen for his use of allegory is unreasonable.

Following Origen, another great church father, Augustine also appropriated the

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[28] Ibid., p.28.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.

allegorical use in his preaching. Granting us a deeper insight into the allegorical style used in preaching, Barnard gives the example of the Good Samaritan parable used by Origen and Augustine. This is the way Origen interprets the parable:

> The Good Samaritan is Jesus Christ. The man who is attacked on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho represents those who have sinned voluntarily, those men who wanted to be on the road. The wounds inflicted on the man represent vices and sins. The priest who comes along the road stands for the Jewish Law and the Levite for the Prophets. Providence, however, left the man to the care of Jesus Christ, who is stronger than the Law and the Prophets and who came down to help the dying. The oil, wine, and bandages were carried by Jesus, not only for this particular man but also for others who have been wounded, so representing his care for mankind. The donkey on which the wounded man is placed is the Lord's body, for he has taken humanity on himself. The inn is the Church, which welcomes all and refused help to none. The two pence represent the knowledge of the Father and the Son, and the innkeeper the angel of the Church. Origen concludes with a call to Christians to imitate Christ's action in bearing the burdens of the world."[31]

As shown above, the function of allegory is "didactic,"[32] the elucidation of truth for the audience, rather than the simple transmission of historical facts. In the case of the Bible, seen as the instrument of man's spiritual edification, the didactic function of literature is central and the case for allegory is thereby strengthened.[33] The purpose of an allegory in preaching is to provide a soaring definition, an interpretation of the human experience that possesses a resonance and a significance that cannot be achieved by a bare and unadorned narrative.[34] The allegory's function lies therefore in that it gives the audience contemporary, existential (spiritual) meaning related to historical (literal) facts. Inasmuch as we have shown that allegory is a literary figure of speech used both by the Bible and by the church fathers, we have attempted to demonstrate that the method is a

[31] Barnard, p.4. Origen 's Sermon.
[32] Bostock, p.40
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid. p. 42

practical tool of which function is to communicate symbolic meanings. The next issue in regards to Origen's criticism is whether or not Origen neglected 'historicity' of the Bible, making himself guilty of reading-in (*eisegesis*).

Historicity and *Eisegesis*

I will analyze here whether or not Origen neglected or totally negated the historicity of the Bible by doing *eisegesis*. According to Origen, the interpretation of the Scripture takes place at three different levels: that of the letter, that of the soul, and that of the spirit. The second and third levels in Origen's scheme are similar; both are part of a category which modern scholars would call 'figural reading.'[35] In Origen's work, one can see that there is a place for the letter, that is, for the literal, historical meaning, as well as spiritual and allegorical meaning, which is developed as a higher and deeper truth. For this matter, Adele Monaci Castagno maintains that the strategy adopted by Origen was a dual one. On one hand, Origen left a certain space for literal interpretation, above all in the moral field, holding personages and situations from the Old and New Testaments as exempla for his audience. On the other hand, Origen subordinated doctrinal orthodoxy and membership of the church to the acceptance of the allegorical interpretation of the Scripture.[36] Origen's use of both literal and allegorical method is revealed also by Wai-Sing Chau's investigation.

> Despite Origen's invention of this device, he seldom uses it to dismiss the literal sense. On the contrary, he maintains that there are more historical texts than non-

[35] O'Keefe, p.49
[36] Adele Monaci Castagno, "Origen the Scholar and Pastor," trans by Frances Cooper, *Preacher and Audience: Studies in Early Christian and Byzantine Homiletics* (Brill::Leiden, 1998), p.75

> historical, more literal precepts than non-literal, more sense-palpable prophecies and fulfillments than spiritual, and 'it is possible for those ambitious of a deeper meaning to retain the profundities of the wisdom of God, without setting aside the commandment in its literal meaning.' We can see him defending the literal measurement of Noah's ark, yet at the same time allegorizing it. This corresponds to his incarnational understanding that the letter is basically not an illusion.[37]

To those who see Origen as a sheer Platonist, literal and historical meaning may have to be sacrificed on behalf of higher spiritual allegorical meaning. However, scholars who see Origen in disagreement with Plato, such as Mark Julian Edwards, contend that Origen, far from the perspective of a hierarchical dualism by which the material is a vulgar illusion, has impartially considered two aspects of a harmonious entity. Edwards uses the following analogy to describes Origen's inclusive method:

> Just as souls and bodies do not dwell in parallel worlds, but one is immanent in the other as the source and pilot of its vital functions, so the allegorical sense is not at war with the literal, but on the contrary endows it with the coherence and vitality of truth."[38]

In the service of an apology, one may need to consider the two extremes that stand to be mitigated by Origen's approach: the Judaism, which dabbed in radical, fundamental literalism as far as to cause rejection of the Old Testament by the Christian Church; and the Gnosticism, which refused to adopt the Old Testament, by imputing the existence of two different gods. However, from Origen's perspective, allegory saved the Scriptures for the Church. This is an amazing argument for allegory. [39] By using the allegory, the Bible could survive the attack of both Jewish controversialists and the educated Greeks. The allegory could also resolve the serious problem of Gnosticism and Marcionism's attack

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[37] Wai-Shing Chau, *The Letter and the Spirit:A History of Interpretation from Origen to Luther* (Peter Lang:New York, 1995), p. 23, Cf. Origen, De Princ. 4.1.19, p.368.
[38] Edwards, p.126
[39] R.B Tollinton trans. and intro."Origen as Exegete" xxxiv, *Selections from the Commentaries and Homilies of Origen* (London:The Macmillan Co.,1929).

against Christianity, on account of seemingly two conflicting gods, the creator god of the Old Testament and the good-saving god of the New Testament.[40] The perception of a dual god, under attack from many heretics, may also have been solved through the use of allegory. Origen's intent in employing allegory was to save the Scripture from Judaism, keeping the unity between the Old and New Testament, as well as defend it against the Gnostic rejection of the Old Testament.

In Origen's time, the church was finding her own identity among contenders, on one hand against the Judaism with which the church shared the same Scripture, and on the other hand, against Gnosticism, which had challenged the continuity between Christ and the Old Testament. The church, striving to avoid both extremes, tended to maintain continuity between the law and the gospel, yet insisted on the superiority of the gospel over the law.[41]

According to O'Keefe, although Origen is not a true Platonist, some influence of Christian Platonism transpires from his work, as a clear line is drawn between letter and spirit:

> Origen's interpretive method rests upon the basic Pauline tension between the spirit and the letter. According to Origen, literal interpretation begins at the base meaning of the text or the "plain sense." While often obvious, meaning at this level is helpful to simply Christians or to those Christians just beginning to explore the spiritual life, but it is not sufficient for those who were seeking to grow spiritually. Since Scripture at the literal level often contained contradictions and errors, the text could actually be a stumbling block to intelligent readers. Scripture, then, has another, spiritual layer of meaning above the literal.[42]

As to this matter, Chau claims that Origen's doctrine of the letter and the spirit is not Platonic, but is rather informed by the Christian notion of incarnation. Chau further

[40] Tollinton, xviii.
[41] Chau, p.29

contends that in Origen's *On First Principles* many instances can be noted where he rejects the Platonic conclusions and follows the scriptural and ecclesiastical teaching.[43] According to the incarnation theology, as there is descending in incarnation, so there seems to be ascending search for the truth, which does not separate letter and spirit, but dialectically combines both upward. Chau furthermore argues that it would be good for all to know the spiritual meanings, but for the sake of the weak, the literal meaning has to be taught also, as this is the first rung of the ladder to the spiritual realm. Chau's understanding of the blending of spiritual and literal meaning is remarkable in that he stresses that a good teacher should not be ashamed of condescending to those who are simple, but to teach each person according to his/her capacity. For Chau, this corresponds to the teaching of incarnation of the spirit through a multitude of methods, so as to lead people at different stages of aspiration, to the same understanding of the spirit.[44]

Some insight into the preacher's call can be gleaned from Bostock's comparison between the role of the theologian and the poet and that of the historian and the philosopher:

> Theologian, like the poet, must both instruct and inspire his readers, in order to do this he must illuminate particular events with the light of a universal God. And in this respect the function of the theologian resembles that of the poet rather than that of the historian or the philosopher, whose primary concerns are with the particular and the general respectively rather than the relationship between them.[45]

Bostock's understanding is that just as the poet must combine particular examples with general notions, so the theologian must relate particular historical facts to general

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[42] O'Keefe, pp.193-194.
[43] Chau p.19.
[44] Ibid., p. 23

spiritual truths.[46] According to Bostock, the means adopted by Origen and by subsequent theologians of relating the particulars to the general was the symbolic method. What Origen did was to use symbolism, against the background of Christian Platonism, to transform the facts of history into images of experience. In this way he was able to build a bridge between ancient history and modern experience.[47] According to Bostock, the symbolic method offers a valid interplay between history and philosophy.[48]

It appears that Bostock's solution has merit in resolving the problem of Origen's historicity and *eisegesis*, since in his bridge model, the tension between historical facts and universal (experiential) meaning is mitigated. Bostock goes on to state that

> The Bible must deal both with the facts of history and with general spiritual teaching. The facts of history have to be seen as images of experience and can naturally, and rightly, be treated as symbol. But the facts of history set out in the Bible have to be part of a total narrative, and symbol likewise must be part of a total world-view.[49]

On this point, Bostock connects symbol to allegory. He states that the symbols, however essential, are separate elements in a total process, in which they stand as static foci of experience. They need to be woven into a coherent whole that can express movement, direction and purpose. In order to do this, Bostock claims, we need allegory as an interpretative commentary on events and beliefs that can make them part of a cosmic whole and thereby give coherence to the Bible.[50] Therefore, as far as Bostock is concerned, true allegory does not dismiss the facts of history or the earthly levels of

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[45] Bostock, pp. 40-41.
[46] Ibid., p.41
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid.

reality.[51] I argue that in this respect, theology and poetry should be distinct from sheer history and totalitarian philosophy. Allegory, from this perspective, strengthens Christianity, in that it relates the particular to the universal. Neither mere history nor vague philosophy has meaning to those who live here and now. The allegory, however, without destroying historical facts, makes Christianity meaningful and alive to every generation.

C.S. Lewis also points out that, when one accepted the exodus of Israel as a symbol for the soul's escape from sin, he/she did not, on that account, abolish the exodus as a historical event. According to Lewis, it is a fatal error to suppose that in an allegory the author is 'really' talking about the thing symbolized and not at all about the thing that symbolizes. For Lewis, the very essence of the art of allegory is to talk about both.[52]

For Origen, the literal record is to be seen quite simply as the body of the Bible, and as such, it is comparable to the body of Christ in relation to his divinity. It has no value in itself, and yet it is of the greatest potential value because of its link with the Spirit of God.[53] Origen was fully aware of the dangers of dissolving history into timeless myth (the specter of Gnostic exegesis).[54] For him, however, history itself lacks an essential element. When Origen thus attempts to extend history beyond itself, he may indeed 'reduce the significance of history'. But then history is for him a mere appearance or a 'fantasy' without the vision of the spiritual values enshrined in it.[55]

In order to avoid the pitfalls of the allegorical method, Origen suggests three

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[51] Ibid., p.42
[52] C.S.Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (OUP, London, 1936), p.225.
[53] Bostock, p.44
[54] Henry. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (OUP, London, 1966), p.11.
[55] Bostock, p.50

safeguards:

1) The principle of the unity of Scripture. Origen believed that the unity and the harmony of all the constituent parts of the Scripture must be preserved (John com. 10, 18; com. 10, 42), and that Christian allegory, unlike the allegory of the heretics, was not to be applied to texts in isolation from the rest of the Scripture;[56]

2) The principle that the Scripture should always be interpreted by means of the Scripture. True exegesis in fact is to be carried out by 'comparing spiritual things with spiritual' (1 Corinthians 2:13; Matthew com. 14.14).[57] This means that one text must be used to interpret another text.[58] This leads to the practical conclusion that words and ideas must be correlated with similar words and ideas in the rest of the Scripture, while the principles of interpretation themselves must be derived from other biblical texts;[59]

3) The final safeguard that Origen applied was based on the correlation between his exegesis and the mind of the Church. In obedience to the Church's Rule of Faith, Origen submitted all his thinking to the consensus of the Christian tradition. This was perhaps the best safeguard and the most limiting factor in his allegorical exegesis.[60] This safeguard places the allegory within the safe boundary of the traditional method.

According to Bostock, initially, the Church turns to what is on the same level of reality with itself, since the Bible is but the human vessel of a divine mystery. At another level,

[56] Ibid., p.51
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid., pp.51-52.
[59] Ibid., p.52
[60] Ibid. Cf. Princ. Praef. 2

the Church turns to the Bible as a luminous mirror of the Lord.[61] This view reflects the principles of the Reformers, as well as those of the postmodern literary theory of community.

From the above investigation, we concluded that Origen has never neglected or negated historicity. Far from being guilty of deliberate *eisegesis*, Origen merely related the facts of history to his contemporary audience in order to transcend the particular events and translate them into universal, spiritual truths. Origen, upheld both the past and the present for the sake of a higher meaning. Whereas the literalism is subservient to the past, and the Gnosticism denies history, the allegory allows history to survive in the present, making the Bible an ever up-to-date message.

I hope that the above analysis of Origen's model in terms of historicity and *eisgesis* may lead to a reevaluation of the allegory and to its incorporation into modern preaching practices. At this point in analysis, I will further discuss the practical application of the use of allegory.

Allegory as Contemporary Application

The allegory's main function was, as shown above, to connect the historical, literal facts to the contemporary audience through the use of imaginative, figurative, symbolic language. As to the importance of its application to preaching, Christian Breunigner, in his analysis of John Broadus'1944 sermon delivery lecture, points out that the weight of

[61] Bostock, p.52

Broadus's emphasis falls on exposition/explanation as opposed to its application.[62] Breunigner gives warning against the danger of the Enlightenment rationalistic preaching (the so-called Old Homiletic) that has harshly rejected the allegory in the history of Christian preaching. In the rationalistic age, in Breunigner's understanding, truth is preeminently noetic, and a responsible presentation of truth results in the listeners' cognitive assent to an idea about truth.[63] Breunigner further expresses his disagreement with the Aristotelian presupposition that conceptual truth is superior to practical truth.[64] Given such a presupposition, the proper goal of the sermon becomes a securing of the listener's intellectual assent. It is not surprising that the expository model, under the assumption of the superiority of concept over practice, neglects the dynamics of the application and appropriation of truth. [65] According to Breunigner, religious truth is not mere knowledge of historical fact, but rather an experience lived in the present.

Miller also criticizes the over-control of modern rationalism. He proposes that the allegorical method should be reconsidered today in the light of a rising consciousness of the power and the significance of symbolism within the Christian faith. Throughout four hundred years of rationalism, according to Miller, the significance of symbols as a part of our Christian heritage was minimized.[66] Miller contends that symbolism, such as that used in allegory, can connect the past and its historical facts to the present and the universal experience. Miller makes his point by arguing that,

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[62] Christian Breunigner, "Soren Kierkegaard's Reformation of Expository Preaching," *The Covenant Quarterly* (August 1993), p.21, Cf. John A. Broadus and Jesse Burton Witherspoon, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1944), pp. 144, 149.
[63] Breunigner, p.22
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Miller, p.35

> We should, of course, remain aware of the problem of all figurative speech, yet we must search of for lost insights as well. Thus might we empower our preaching with the innate power of symbols which speak to intellectuals as well as to common folk in the church and thus might we discover one means by which preaching will again ascend to the dignity it must have in the service of the Word.[67]

On the other hand, according to Kierkegaard, Christianity is not a doctrine, but an existence.[68] Christianity for him ought to mean: to step forth existentially according to one's conviction.[69] Similarly, Origen's most urgent concern was the application of a theologically enhanced exegetical gaze. For Origen and his students critical inquiry, on its own, could not preserve the Bible as a meaningful document for the Christian community.[70] Thus, O'Keefe proposes, Origen emerges not as a dangerous subversive who destroys the letter, but as the giant who helped the Christian Church preserve its mooring in the ancient text, and through that text, maintain its historical link to ancient Israel.[71]

On this point, postmodern homiletician Jeffrey F. Bullock criticizes Fred Craddock's inductive homiletic. Bullock contends that in Kierkegaard's practice, meaning is lifted from the text and the author's intent, and may be facilitated through the connection that occurs between the text and the reader at the moment of delivery. By contrast, as Bullock argues, practitioners of the inductive method continue to place meaning in the text and in the preacher's ability to plant the historical text in the listener's context.[72] Bullock thus criticizes the New Homiletic.

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[67] Ibid., p.34
[68] Cf. Kierkegaard, *Journals and Paper*, vol. 1, entry no. 1061.
[69] Ibid, entry no.3694.
[70] O'Keefe, p.195
[71] Ibid.
[72] Jeffrey F.Bullock, *Preaching with a Cupped Ear:Hans Georg Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics*

> Yet, unlike New Homileticians who have yet to separate their understanding of experience from an innovative re-presentation of the text, Kierkegaard's stylistic conversation moves this experience of meaning out of the text and locates it in that moment of contact between the text and the reader. Kierkegaard calls this moment of contact contemporaneity and it is an extremely significant component to his postmodern view of communication.[73]

As with Origen, mere history and its particulars were not meaningful in themselves. Likewise, for Kierkegaard, history does not prove anything. The existence of Jesus 1800 years before Kierkegaard does not mean anything.[74] According to Bullock, for a person who is not contemporary with the absolute, the absolute does not exist, and instead there is only one time: the present. For Bullock, Christ is no play-actor, neither is he a merely historical person, in the contrary, he is an extremely unhistorical person. Bullock's view of history as compared with poetry is relevant as to the role of allegory in preaching. According to Bullock, while history is what actually happened, poetry is the possible, the imagined, and the poetized.[75] Similarly, with Origen, the present is of importance only because the allegory has connected it with the past, by merging the literal and historical meaning with the context of the contemporary audience. The allegorical interpretation of the Bible, in effect, may inappropriately be called 'biblical interpretation,' but rather 'application' of the Bible. Origen, as theologian and poet, has used allegory to find contemporary (ever hidden spiritual) meaning. Thus, according to Bullock, through the concept of contemporaneity, the past is fused with the present, and memory and expectation have merged into the experience of life.[76] With regard to the importance of contemporaneity, Paul L. Holmer also mentions that the faith relationship

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*as Postmodern Wor(l)d(*Peter Lang:New York, 1999), p.59.
[73] Ibid., p.63
[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., p.65, Cf. Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, pp.63-64.

for every believer, past or present, is a matter of contemporaneity with Jesus Christ.[77]

Bostock also considers allegory as being more real than the fact.[78] According to him, the allegorical fabric woven by Origen from Scripture and from philosophy inevitably fails the analytical reasoning of modern scholars.[79] Origen, unlike the Jew, is concerned with looking forwards, not merely from the Old Testament to the present, but from the Incarnation of Christ to a present and future participation in Christ.[80]

I propose that the rationalistic historical critical interpretation of the Bible could only benefit from the freeing of symbolic, figurative, allegorical, spiritual interpretation of the text, in the application of the biblical truth. As Mark Sheridan writes,

> Commenting on the exodus, as to the necessity of contemporaneity, Origen states, these words were not written to instruct us in history, nor must we think that the divine books narrate the acts of the Egyptians. What has been written has been written for our instruction and admonition.[81]

Origen's allegory merges two contemporaneities, the moment of the biblical writing and that of Origen's present.[82] According to Origen, since the text is 'for us', it must also have a meaning that is 'useful' to us.[83] Like Kierkegaard, Origen believes the biblical text has to have a meaning for its audience.

Modern preaching, a continuation of Old Homiletic, under the influence of Rationalism, tends to see allegory as illegitimate. Throughout this paper, we have attempted to reconsider this denigration in the light of the advantages we see in the act of interpretation. Although the method can be abused by some preachers, it is not evident

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[76] Ibid., p.64, Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp.127-128, 572.
[77] Paul L. Holmer, "Kierkegaard and the Sermon," *The Journal of Religion*, (January 1957), p.4
[78] Bostock, p.50.
[79] Ibid., p.51.
[80] Ibid., pp.50-51.
[81] Mark Sheridan, "Scripture", *The Westerminster Hand book to Origen*, p. 198.

that, in itself, the allegory, necessarily abuses the history or corrupts the biblical text through *eisegesis*. The mystery of the heavenly truth is meant to be communicated through an earthly, symbolic, and figurative way, as it was written as symbol and sign of mystery. Seeking multiple meanings (literal and allegorical) from the Bible is compatible with the scope and role of the preacher who attempts to harmonize the literal past with the present, alive audience.

Eisegesis, although, marred by Rationalistic mistrust, has applications in the modern world. Although allegorical preaching almost disappeared in modern times, some resurgence of it is evident in some Asian Christian and African American communities, all of whom have known opprobrium and humiliation but have survived perhaps due to their opposition to the critical exegesis as the only legitimate preaching style.

Modern pulpits have suffered under the loss of the symbolic power of religious mysteries. All safeguards considered, as Origen proposed, the allegory may be necessary in order to make our preaching truly contemporary and amenable to the present audience.

> For us the harbour of history is safer.
> We hesitate to slip the moorings of established fact
> for the vast ocean of mysteries!
> -Origen, Genesis homily, 9, I-

[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.

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