

Alexandrian and Antiochian approaches to hermeneutics as deployed by John Chrysostom and Gregory of Nyssa as they work with the Beatitudes

Typically, the view of Alexandrian and Antiochian hermeneutics has been one of dichotomy: Alexandrians were allegorical, and Antiochians were literal-historical. However, Patristic scholars have been arguing for at least sixty years that this is far too simplistic and that, whilst there were some differences, the two schools had much in common, if indeed two schools existed at all.¹

This essay focuses on Gregory of Nyssa (ca 335-384), associated with the Alexandrian school, and John Chrysostom (350-407), associated with Antioch, and considers how their *Homilies on the Beatitudes* might reflect the two schools. There is more to contemplate than just how literal or allegorical they were; as Florivsky encourages, we will try to enter into their mindset (*phronema*) and experience of faith (*vioma*) because I agree with Jasper that 'the way in which we read and interpret is dependent on how we see the world and our place in it' as individuals and not because we are members of a 'school'.²

We will look at the following: the basis of their hermeneutic, the purpose of it, their method, their theology and their style.³ I will argue that whilst there are some differences in hermeneutical approach, it is actually the style of their homilies which differentiates them most strongly, and that these fathers have more in common than not.

Basis of hermeneutics

- apostolic tradition and the rule of faith

Firstly, let us look at the basis for patristic hermeneutics. Irenaeus (ca135-200) established that it should be based on apostolic tradition and the rule of faith, and Chrysostom and Gregory would both agree on this.⁴ Chrysostom was concerned 'to

¹ Donald Fairburn, "Patristic Exegesis and Theology: the cart and the horse," *WTJ* 69 (2007), 8.

² David Jasper, *A Short Introduction to Hermeneutics* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 39.

³ Georges Florivsky quoted in Theodore Stylianopoulos, "Comments on Chrysostom, Patristic Interpretation and Contemporary Biblical Scholarship," *GOTR* 54 (2009): 189-204, p. 192.

⁴ Frances Young, "The 'Mind' of Scripture: Theological Readings of the Bible in the Fathers," *IJST* 17 (2005): 126 - 140, p. 129.

hear apostolic voices⁵ and refers to Paul and Timothy.⁶ Gregory also often cites Paul and refers to him as 'the sublime thinker'.⁷ Both were staunch supporters of the Nicene faith.⁸

- the unity of scripture

Irenaeus also established that the Jewish scriptures, and the stories of Christ and the Church, are 'a single narrative with an over-arching plot'.⁹ Again, both fathers would agree on this and that the 'mystery of the saviour' was in the Old Testament, although Alexandrians were perhaps prone to see Christ on every page of the Old Testament, whereas the Antiochians would be more cautious, and be concerned with tracing the prophecies of Christ.¹⁰ In these homilies, both Chrysostom and Gregory frequently link their points to scriptures from both testaments.

Purpose of hermeneutics

– ethical and spiritual growth

The purpose of hermeneutics must also be considered. For the church fathers, this was ethical and spiritual transformation, and again Gregory and Chrysostom would agree.¹¹ For Gregory, the purpose was to have 'knowledge of the mysteries' and a 'pure way of life,'¹² applying it to self and 'the management of ecclesiastical and human affairs.'¹³ Chrysostom too was concerned about the church and the imperial court's 'lack of spiritual fervor and every virtue'.¹⁴

The Antiochians may generally have focused more on the intent of the biblical author, and the Alexandrians on the effect on the readers, but for both these fathers,

⁵ Anthony C. Thistleton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 2009), 112.

⁶ John Chrysostom, "Homily 15 on Matthew ." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*. Vol. 10. Translated by George Prevost. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888. Accessed through <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/200115.htm> (accessed 16/10/14).

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Beatitudes. An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, Paderborn, 14 - 18 September 1998*. (ed. Hubertus R. Drobner; Boston: Brill, 2000), 66.

⁸ Stylianopoulos, "Comments on Chrysostom," *GOTR*, 80.

⁹ Young, "The 'Mind' of Scripture," *IJST*, 129.

¹⁰ Hieromonk Patapios, "The Alexandrian and the Antiochene Methods of Exegesis: Towards a reconsideration," *GOTR* 44 (1999): 187 - 191, pp.187 - 8 and Guillet quoted in Fairburn, "Patristic Exegesis," *WTJ*, 8.

¹¹ Young, "The 'Mind' of Scripture," *IJST*, 139-40.

¹² Margaret Beirne, "Spiritual Enrichment through Exegesis: St Gregory of Nyssa and the Scriptures," *Phronema* 27 (2012): 83 - 98, p. 95 and Verna E. F. Harrison, "Allegory and Asceticism in Gregory of Nyssa," *Semeia* 57 (1992): 113 - 126, p. 115.

¹³ Stylianopoulos, "Comments on Chrysostom," *GOTR*, 196.

¹⁴ Stylianopoulos, "Comments on Chrysostom," *GOTR*, 198.

homiletic reading was 'concerned both with detailing a Christian way of life, and with spelling out the consequences of failing to live according to that way'.¹⁵

- progression up a ladder or mountain towards God

Gregory says that his purpose is to find treasure, and that the treasures are virtues.¹⁶ Both he and Chrysostom shared the idea that acquiring virtues and controlling passions was like progressing up a ladder or mountain. Gregory believed that we experience the world and ideas in a logical or chronological progression (*akolouthia*) with theological significance.¹⁷ This also links to his idea of "perpetual progress" (*epektasis*), where throughout our lives we can progress in holiness by studying and obeying scripture.¹⁸ Gregory therefore interpreted the beatitudes as a chronological development of ideas, rungs on a ladder to God.¹⁹ However, there are problems with this interpretation. Whilst it may seem logical that being poor in spirit/humble is a logical starting point because it tackles pride, the problem is that he then considers the next two beatitudes out of sequence; his second homily deals with the third beatitude and his third homily with the second.²⁰ Sometimes it seems that he is forcing the structure on the text, such as finding an explanation for why the reward of the land is a higher reward than the heavens, or why the first reward is the same as the last.²¹

Chrysostom also considered sequence important and shared the idea that the pilgrimage of faith was a ladder leading to reconciliation with God.²² To some extent he sees the beatitudes in this way, but he does not force this structure on every step. He sees the first beatitude as a foundation, suggesting that one makes a progression from this point in a similar way to ascending up Gregory's ladder or mountain.²³ He also links beatitudes together; for example, you need to hunger and thirst for

¹⁵ Thistleton, *Hermeneutics*, 106 and Frances M. Young, "Patristic Biblical Interpretation," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Co, 2005), 566 - 570, p. 567.

¹⁶ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 24, 26.

¹⁷ Beirne, "Spiritual Enrichment," *Phronema*, 87-88.

¹⁸ Beirne, "Spiritual Enrichment," *Phronema*, 95 and Kristina Robb-Dover, "Gregory of Nyssa's "Perpetual Progress"," *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 213 - 225, p. 213.

¹⁹ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 32.

²⁰ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 32, 39.

²¹ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 32, 84.

²² Stylianopoulos, "Comments on Chrysostom," *GOTR*, 198 and Frances M. Young, *Brokenness and Blessing: Towards a Biblical Spirituality* (Grand Rapids: MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 45-6.

²³ Chrysostom, John, *Homily 15*

righteousness to be able to be merciful.²⁴ In terms of the basis and purpose of interpretation, then, these fathers were generally agreed.

Method of interpretation

We now consider the traditional dichotomy of method to see what differences, if any, arise here. It seems that 'the fathers were agreed, whether practitioners of allegory or not, that the 'wording' points beyond itself to another dimension of reality',²⁵ so they looked for the *theoria*, the connections between the literal and spiritual meanings of the texts.²⁶ However, where Alexandrians would frequently use allegorical readings, the Antiochians would typically use allegory 'only when the text itself indicated it was present'.²⁷ Diodore of Tarsus argued that concern for the spiritual meaning 'led too easily to becoming a mirror of the interpreter's or reader's concerns', which is still the primary fear today.²⁸ They perhaps also saw it as a pagan and Jewish method they wanted to distance themselves from.²⁹

Gregory would cite Apostle Paul in defence of an allegorical meaning and Chrysostom would also recognise this but would differentiate between typology and allegory, and say Paul was referring to a type.³⁰ Gregory did not care what the method of finding *theoria* was called, saying that 'the fruits of exegesis are more important than the particular method'.³¹

The test of whether their methods of interpretation are really that different lies in a comparison of the conclusions these father reach in terms of the meanings of the beatitudes and their rewards. In fact, there is very little divergence. They agree on the meaning of each beatitude although, in Alexandrian fashion, Gregory occasionally takes the meaning further, for example saying that mourning is not just over sin, but everything that has been lost because of the fall.³² As regards the rewards, they mostly agree except when Chrysostom, in Antiochian style, tries a literal reading of inheriting the earth and not hungering or thirsting, whilst Gregory

²⁴ Chrysostom, John, *Homily 15*

²⁵ Young, "Patristic Biblical Interpretation," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 139.

²⁶ Young, "Patristic Biblical Interpretation," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 570.

²⁷ Young, "Patristic Biblical Interpretation," in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, 570.

²⁸ Thistleton, *Hermeneutics*, 109.

²⁹ Maijastina Kahlos, "Pagan-Christian Debates over the Interpretation of Texts in Late Antiquity," *Classical World* 105 (2012): 525 - 545, p. 534.

³⁰ Thistleton, *Hermeneutics*, 112.

³¹ Harrison, "Allegory and Asceticism" *Semeia*, 115.

³² Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 45.

goes only for the figurative meaning. The other occasion of difference is the final reward, which Chrysostom does not explain but where Gregory becomes more mystical.

- Chrysostom on literal or allegorical method

As would be expected of an Antiochian, Chrysostom does take some note of grammar and historical context. Sometimes he focuses on specific clauses, notes the significance of tenses, and he generally examines the meaning of key words.³³ He is more aware than Gregory of the historical setting, reminding us twice that Jesus is talking to his disciples.³⁴

Chrysostom's approach, however, does not ignore the spiritual meaning. He makes reference to different levels of understanding, implying that different levels of meaning are available.³⁵ He also notes that whilst addressing his disciples, Jesus 'is discoursing not for them only, but also, through them, with all the world', thereby defending the applicability of the scriptures beyond their original context.³⁶ Also, his focus goes beyond the literal story from the start: Going up the mountain is not just about finding more space, but about withdrawing from the 'tumults of everyday life' (he and Gregory both conveniently ignore Luke saying they went *down* from the mountain (Luke 6: 17)) and the disciples go to Jesus as they 'desired also to hear some great and high thing', Chrysostom's intention too.³⁷

For most of the beatitudes he goes beyond the obvious meaning, so those who mourn are not just meant in the usual sense but in reference to sins.³⁸ However, he does emphasise that not everything is a spiritual reference: 'Neither in speaking of any spiritual thing does He exclude such as are in the present life', and that 'inherit the earth' is not just figurative because 'nowhere in scripture do we find mention of an earth that is merely figurative'.³⁹ Chrysostom says the beatitudes give practical

³³ Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

³⁴ Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

³⁵ Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

³⁶ Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

³⁷ Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

³⁸ Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

³⁹ Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

advice for living on earth now as well as the one to come: 'Christ also with the things spiritual has mingled the sensible'.⁴⁰

Generally, I find Chrysostom inconsistent. For example, he says the reward for being merciful is mercy from God, but the practical aspect of receiving mercy back from others is not mentioned, nor is the obvious literal reward for peacemaking.⁴¹ Also, he will sometimes be overly specific; for example, although he acknowledges that 'righteousness' could mean all virtues, he focuses on it meaning 'not being covetous' which then links a little too conveniently with the next beatitude of being merciful, because, like Gregory, he wants there to be some sort of sequence. At other times he is overly literal, such as saying that those who hunger and thirst will literally not be poor or hungry, though how this might be the case is unclear, and he does not draw out the more obvious spiritual meaning here that they will be satisfied in God.⁴²

- Gregory on literal or allegorical method

So let us look now at Gregory. His sister, Macrina, insisted on interpretation with 'logic and sound principles' and he sought to do this.⁴³ In his *Homilies* he warns that error arises when we do not grasp the true meaning.⁴⁴ He defended the literal sense, saying if it 'should be of any use, we will readily have the object of our search', and had specific criteria for rejecting it.⁴⁵

In his *Homilies* Gregory says 'let the obvious things be guide to what we do not understand'.⁴⁶ When discussing the word 'peace' he urges, 'Do not, please, let the saying be made too complicated by searching for a deep interpretation; the immediate meaning is quite sufficient to enable us to obtain benefit.'⁴⁷ Like Chrysostom, Gregory also put some focus on grammar and word studies, and the first section of each homily is on the *historia*, or literal-historical meaning.⁴⁸ In fact, he

⁴⁰ Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

⁴¹ Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

⁴² Chrysostom, *Homily 15*.

⁴³ Beirne, "Spiritual Enrichment," *Phronema*, 94.

⁴⁴ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 58.

⁴⁵ Alexandre quoted in Ronald E. Heine, "Gregory of Nyssa's Apology for Allegory," *Vigiliae Christiannae* 38 (1984), 360.

⁴⁶ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 42.

⁴⁷ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 78.

⁴⁸ Beirne, "Spiritual Enrichment," *Phronema*, 89.

sometimes examines the key words more than Chrysostom, such as what 'blessed' or 'seeing' God might mean.⁴⁹

However, whilst this shows that he did not ignore the literal meanings, the length of his explanations could be considered excessive. One could say that it is unfair to compare Chrysostom's single homily on all the beatitudes with Gregory's eight, but this in itself perhaps reveals Gregory's need to allegorise over Chrysostom's desire not to! It does feel at times that Gregory wanders too far, such as denouncing silver tableware whilst discussing the meaning of 'hunger and thirst'!⁵⁰ At times, his explanation becomes so involved that one feels a bit lost, such as linking Moses, unleavened bread and bitter herbs to mourning for sins.⁵¹ Also, despite such a lengthy exposition, he never mentions Luke's record of the beatitudes, which one would have thought would help his understanding.

Gregory believed that if meaning is hidden, covered or symbolic, then we must search the scriptures 'with every means at our disposal' to find it.⁵² An allegorical reading was also a way of making the Bible relevant to all people whatever their situation.⁵³ From the start of his homilies, Gregory reveals his love of the figurative, writing a long allegorical interpretation of the mountain which goes far beyond Chrysostom's.⁵⁴ The second parts of Gregory's *Homilies* focus on the deeper spiritual sense, the *theoria*.⁵⁵ He says that words are so limited and 'it is impossible to reveal literally to human beings those good things which are beyond human perception and knowledge' but words point towards God.⁵⁶

Occasionally Gregory's appeal to higher meaning seems a bit tenuous (e.g. Hab 3: 19) and we have already mentioned his problem with explaining how the rewards are the same for rung one as rung eight. Whilst I usually follow his spiritual links, this one seems stretched; he becomes mystical, linking this final beatitude to the 'mystery of

⁴⁹ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 66-67.

⁵⁰ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 51.

⁵¹ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 45 - 46.

⁵² Gregory of Nyssa quoted in Beirne, "Spiritual Enrichment," *Phronema* 87 and Harrison, "Allegory and Asceticism," *Semeia* 115.

⁵³ Harrison, "Allegory and Asceticism," *Semeia* 113.

⁵⁴ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 23.

⁵⁵ Robb-Dover, "Gregory of Nyssa's "Perpetual Progress"," *Theology Today* 214.

⁵⁶ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 33,43.

the eighth day', the day of circumcision and purification pointing to the day when humanity discards the dead skins put on at the fall and becomes pure.⁵⁷

We see, then, that Chrysostom does show Antiochian wariness towards allegorism, and Gregory shows more of a predilection for it, but that actually they both share the belief that both the literal and spiritual meanings are important.

Theology informing interpretation

Let us now consider the importance of theology to interpretation. Both fathers faced the same doctrinal debates about Christ and the Trinity. Gregory fought Arianism, upholding Christ's divinity, and Nestorianism, arguing that the two natures could not be divided and that the *Logos*, as well as the human nature of Christ, was active in salvation, including suffering.⁵⁸ This divide over Nestorianism has been seen as the other major distinctive between Alexandria and Antioch. Three of the four main Antiochian fathers were condemned for Nestorianism and this is why Fairburn argues that an Antiochian school should not even be mentioned.⁵⁹ However, this is unfair; as Thistleton points out, there is lack of evidence, and Diodore is said to have 'suggested a Nicene Christology and contributed decisively to the first ecumenical Council of Constantinople.'⁶⁰ Chrysostom avoided being 'tarred with the same brush' and was clearly a fervent defender of the Nicene faith.⁶¹

In their homilies, both fathers directly confront heretical ideas, and we catch glimpses of their Christology and Trinitarian doctrine. Chrysostom says Jesus 'stopped the shameless mouths of the heretics', presumably Neo-Platonists, by showing he cares about the bodies and souls of the people.⁶² He declares Christ's divinity as the 'Maker of the whole creation' and his equality in the Trinity by suggesting that Christ 'covertly signifies his own dignity, and his equality in honor with him who begot him.'⁶³

⁵⁷ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 84.

⁵⁸ Fairburn, "Patristic Exegesis," *WTJ* 11.

⁵⁹ Fairburn, "Patristic Exegesis," *WTJ* 15.

⁶⁰ Thistleton, *Hermeneutics*, 110.

⁶¹ Stylianopoulos, "Comments on Chrysostom," *GOTR* 191.

⁶² Chrysostom, John, *Homily 15*.

⁶³ Chrysostom, John, *Homily 15*.

Gregory confronts Gnostics when he asks, 'What advantage shall we get...if the meaning inherent in the sayings is not made plain to us?'⁶⁴ He declares Christ's divinity and unity of natures, saying the *Logos* existed as God but took the form of a slave, that he was present to give precepts to Moses, that he is pure and undefiled but took on the stain of human nature.⁶⁵ He openly confronts Arianism by stating that some have been 'led astray into wrong notions, supposing such a being [Christ] to exist within the created order'.⁶⁶

In terms of the debate on free will, they both agree about human choice. Chrysostom talks of those 'who by choice humble and contract themselves' and Gregory of the ability to choose good rather than vice.⁶⁷ They also agree on aspects of the nature of humanity. Chrysostom talks of an immortal soul made mortal through pride, and Gregory of how humanity is become 'a clay doll, soon to be dust' but Jesus came to restore mortal to immortal.⁶⁸

There is nothing in these homilies to suggest that they disagreed theologically on fundamental issues, but their theology did affect their hermeneutical approach.

Personality and style informing interpretation

Finally, let us consider the style of these homilies. Both fathers were trained in rhetoric but Chrysostom restrains his 'golden mouth' here, perhaps deeming the use of strong rhetoric more appropriate for liturgy and liturgical homilies than biblical interpretation. He uses some rhetorical questions, analogies, and the occasional beautiful image like sorrows coming 'upon you by thousands like snowflakes', but these are only glimpses of his power.⁶⁹

Gregory's style, by contrast, is unrestrained, overflowing with rhetorical devices. He communicates an uncontainable imaginative personality, unable to stop the flow of lists, contrasting pairs, analogies, imagery, and questions and answers. For me, this stylistic difference is what differentiates them most. Gregory appears to be far more of an allegorical interpreter mostly because his style is more effusive.

⁶⁴ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 25.

⁶⁵ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 45, 27.

⁶⁶ Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 58.

⁶⁷ Chrysostom, John, *Homily 15 on Matthew 10*, vol. 10, 2 and Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 73.

⁶⁸ Chrysostom, John, *Homily 15 on Matthew 10*, vol. 10, 2 and Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa Homilies*, 28, 25, 76.

⁶⁹ Chrysostom, John, *Homily 15*.

Conclusion

Chrysostom and Gregory, then, have much in common. Some have seen Chrysostom as 'a mediating influence, close to his fellow Antiochians, but not too far from the Alexandrians'.⁷⁰ Traketellis believes that by the early fifth century, not long after Chrysostom's death, the concerns of both schools had been synthesised.⁷¹

However, I do not think that there is a synthesis in our churches today or sufficient consideration of biblical interpretation at all. I started theological studies because I hungered for more knowledge of historical contexts and literary traditions. I thirsted after knowledge of the mysteries of scripture revealed through the Spirit. I am frustrated at dull, superficial literal and moral readings, and a lack of engagement with historical- critical methods. But I am equally frustrated at how the use of the imagination, of letting your mind run with the Holy Spirit to spiritual and mystical meanings is viewed with suspicion, frustrated by the lack of consideration of the bible as a literary work of art, sparking ideas and associations beyond its words.⁷²

The challenge for the church now is the same as it was for these fathers – how to interpret the bible faithfully as an historic document and work of art, but also as the living Word pointing to the mysteries of God. The first step needs to be taking biblical interpretation seriously, using it to write sermons rather than assuming that our congregations cannot cope with depth, and teaching it to individuals for their personal studies.

As a mosaic artist, my heart resonates with what Gregory wrote to Ambrose of Milan:

I live on a diet of venerable texts. I chew for hours on their honey glaze and tart theory, if only to crack open the Spirit's riddling, to decipher his muted clues and occult codes. You see, I hunger to uncover, somehow, how an artisan God will again inlay, tessera by tessera, the mosaic that was our ancestral face.⁷³

⁷⁰ Thistleton, *Hermeneutics*, 112.

⁷¹ Traketellis quoted in Fairburn, "Patristic Exegesis," *WTJ*, 9.

⁷² Randall S. Rosenberg, "The Drama of Scripture - Reading Patristic Biblical Hermeneutics through Lonergan's Reflections on Art," *Logos* 11 (2008): 126 - 145, p. 139.

⁷³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Beatitudes. An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa, Paderborn, 14 - 18 September 1998.* (ed. Hubertus R. Drobner; Boston: Brill, 2000), *Letter of Gregory of Nyssa to Ambrose of Milan, 387AD*, p. xvii – xxii, p. xx.

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