When Allegories Attack: Hagar and Sarah in Galatians 4:21-31
Introduction

When it comes to theological studies, it is difficult to find any position where there is consensual agreement among its adherents. One thing is certain. Everyone, in some way, shape, or form, will disagree on how to properly interpret the Bible. Biblical theologians will approach the Bible from a certain hermeneutical lens that systematic theologians will not. Interpreting the Bible can lead to much disagreement since each theologian comes to the text with their own set of biases, presuppositions, and ulterior motives. The question of who has the proper interpretation can often lead to the question of who has the power to make their particular school of thought as the dominant way of exegeting the text.

Biblical exegesis has been profoundly influenced by the Reformation and modernist thinking. Especially within the North American evangelical context, any discussion of proper or improper way of exegesis will somehow end up revolving (or devolving?) around the Reformed school of thought. With the rise of post-modern readings of the Bible, its power has slightly waned. Yet, as we look back to the early days of Christianity, we are quick to realize that the way they interacted with the Sacred Scriptures is somehow different, and to be honest, strange to how we think exegesis should be done. The use of allegory, in particular, is so foreign to our modern sensibilities that we eschew such exegetical methods because it does not align with the prevailing views on biblical interpretation. Yet, this exegetical method was used prolifically by the early church fathers. From Origen to Augustine, allegory was used by the church’s early theologians to help give us a better understanding of the Christian sacred texts.

This paper was born out of a question I encountered while studying the Donatist Controversy. In particular, I am intrigued by Augustine’s allegorical interpretation of Hagar and
Sarah in Galatians 4:21-31. Initially, Augustine did not advocate for the use of force against the Donatists. Yet, later on in his ministry, he changed his mind. He uses the story of Hagar and Sarah as his proof-text for his change of heart. This event aroused my curiosity about the question of allegory and how our particular hermeneutics affect the way we understand and interpret the Bible.

The first section of this paper will provide a brief background on Augustine and the Donatist Controversy. The second section will provide a brief exploration into the world of allegory and how it has been understood within Patristic hermeneutics and Henri de Lubac from the Nouvelle Théologie movement. The final section will re-visit the Hagar-Sarah allegory through the feminist lens of Letty Russell. The purpose of this paper is to examine how we can learn and benefit from the use of allegory as a legitimate exegetical tool in interpreting the Bible while also exploring the limitations and boundaries of allegorical readings as it pertains to biblical exegesis.

**The Donatist Controversy: A Brief Overview**

During the Great Persecution instituted by Diocletian in 303 AD, Christians were faced with the option of recanting or being tortured or killed by the state. Confiscation of sacred scriptures played an integral role in the state’s attempt to eliminate Christianity. There were some Christians who recanted and handed over sacred scriptures to evade the state-sanctioned persecution. There were also others who only pretended to give up sacred scriptures; in reality, they gave Greek treatises that looked like it was sacred scriptures. The Edict of Milan, enacted in 313 AD, put an end to the state’s oppressive acts against Christians.
While the state’s role in persecuting Christians officially ended in 313 CE, the churches’ role in persecuting other Christians was about to begin. As a result of the Edict of Milan, the church was confronted with the problem of figuring out how to deal with the *traditores* (traitors) and the *lapsis* (lapsed). One faction argued that it is possible to re-admit them back to the church, provided they underwent penance, the conditions of which are determined on a case-by-case basis. Another faction disagreed with this idea. Those who abandoned the faith when it was inconvenient for them to maintain it should not be re-admitted back into the fold now that it is convenient for them to do so. Over time, this faction would be called the Donatist Movement.

The beginning of the Donatist Controversy is usually attributed to the appointment of Caecilianus as bishop of Carthage. According to the rules, three bishops must be present in order to appoint someone as bishop. The bishop of Numidia is customarily invited and a key part of the appointment ritual. However, in an attempt to fast-track Caecilianus’ appointment, the bishop of Numidia was not invited. Instead, only two bishops were present. To complicate things further, one of the bishops who appointed Caecilianus was accused of being a traitor himself. Caecilianus, having been appointed by a traitor, cannot be properly acknowledged as a bishop since the ones who are able to proclaim him as bishop has forfeited his ability to act within that capacity since he is a traitor himself. Since Felix’s role as bishop is compromised, then the process by which Caecilianus was made bishop is also suspect and illegitimate. Caecilianus’ rival, Majorinus, was elected as the “true” bishop of Carthage. After Majorinus died, Donatus came into power, and it is through him that we derive the term Donatists.

The Donatists claimed that they were the true and pure Church. This is the claim that animated and defined their thoughts and their actions. The Roman Catholic Church, with their refusal to agree with their theological convictions concerning impurity as evidenced by their
appointment of Caecilianus and acceptance of traditiones and lapsis, forfeited their claim of being faithful Christians, and of being the true church, by their actions. Furthermore, they were the true African church. They traced their lineage back to Cyprian, an African, and not to a foreign power like Rome. Their desire for purity informed the way they spoke and acted out against those who opposed them.

**Augustine and the Donatist Controversy: Hagar and Sarah according to Augustine**

By the time that Augustine dealt with the Donatist Controversy, Donatism had been around for eighty years. Charles Scalise comments that “During the early years of his controversy with the Donatists (392-404 CE) Augustine clearly advocates a position opposing religious coercion.”¹ Yet, by 408 CE, Augustine's sentiments would completely change. By this time, he held the position, once foreign to him, that violence can be used to promote religious unity. Any change in thinking for Augustine necessitated a shift in his theological thinking. If it is appropriate to use violence in certain situations, he needed to ensure that he had a biblical basis for his change of heart. By looking at Sarah and Hagar’s relationship in the Old Testament, Augustine had the exegetical proof text he needed to bolster his new position.² His exegesis of this passage would provide him the necessary theological foundation he needed to advocate the use of violence against those who opposed the ways of the Roman Catholic Church.

In his letter to the Donatist bishop, Petilian, Augustine argued, “See then that we act not with the sword, but with the word.”³ Later, he would change his stance and say these words

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¹ Steinke, *Congregational Leadership*, 497.
should act by speaking, fight by debating, and prevail by our reasoning, for fear of making pretended Catholics out of those whom we know as open heretics. *But this opinion of mine has been set aside, not because of opposing arguments, but by reason of proved facts.*

When exegeting the Galatians passage concerning Hagar and Sarah, Augustine said

Did not Sara readily punish her rebellious handmaid when the authority was given her? Yet she obviously did not hate her cruelly, since she had previously done her the kindness of allowing her the opportunity of becoming a mother, but she restrained the pride of her maid for her own good. You know that these two women, Sara and Agar, and their two sons Isaac and Ishmael, are figures of the carnal and spiritual, and although we read that the handmaid and her son suffered harsh treatment from Sara, the Apostle Paul says that Isaac suffered persecution from Ismael: “But as then he that was born according to the flesh persecuted him that was after the spirit, so also it is now” [Gal. 4:29]. Let those who are able understand that it is rather the Catholic Church which suffers persecution through the pride and wickedness of the carnal-minded, and that it attempts to correct these through temporal penalties and fears.

As Scalise opines, “Through a clever exegetical reversal, which follows the pattern of Paul's interpretation of the Sara-Hagar story, Augustine manages to convert the Catholic Church's sufferings from the Donatist schism into a warrant for persecuting the Donatists.” To further bolster his claim, Augustine compares what happened to the Catholics as to what happened with Daniel. In *Epistle 185*, Augustine notes

The same thing happened to the Donatists as happened to the accusers of holy Daniel. Just as the lions were turned against the latter, so the laws by which they tried to oppress the innocent were turned against the former, except that, by the mercy of Christ, those laws which seemed to be against them were rather favorable to them, since many through them have been and are daily being converted…

Through these works, we see how Augustine’s interpretation of Hagar and Sarah served as his scriptural reasons for advocating the use of force against the Donatists.

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Allegory: A Brief Exploration

Since Augustine was willing to use an allegorical method to further understand the passage in question, the purpose of this section is to try and better understand what the definition of an allegory is and how it has been employed to better understand the story of Hagar and Sarah. Allegory is a Greek term meaning “other-speaking” and is defined as “the search for secondary and hidden meaning underlying the primary and obvious meanings of a narrative.” Betz comments that “The term ἀλληγοροῦμενα (“interpret allegorically”) is a hapax legomenon in primitive Christian literature.” Furthermore, he states that

The method rests upon the assumption that the material to be interpreted contains a “deeper meaning” not visible on the surface. The allegorical method was believed to be able to bring this deeper meaning to light. The fact is, however, that for the most part the deeper meaning is secondary to the material which it claims to explain, and that the deeper meaning has its origin in the interpreter and his ideas and frame of reference.

Rollinson claims that “The Galatian church to which Paul wrote was beset by a Judaizing, legalizing group which was perverting the gospel of liberty in Christ by demanding ritual and legal observances from the Old Law as prerequisites to salvation. Paul’s letter argues against this legalizing perversion.” To counteract the Judaizers, Paul gives a non-historical interpretation of the story of Hagar and Sarah in the Genesis account. Since “Allegory may also exist as a concept in the mind of the interpreter before and during the allegorical interpretation of a piece of literature,” it has the potential to influence the explication of the text in question.

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8 Lampe and Woollcombe, Essays on Typology, 40. Jeremy Tambling speaks of how “The ‘other meaning’ of allegory may conceal a secret significance, in that it may persuade readers to probe for another meaning, it may enrich the meaning that has been given, or it may draw attention to a split between the surface meaning and what is underneath.” Tambling, Allegory, 6.
9 Betz, Galatians, 243.
10 Betz, Galatians, 243.
11 Rollinson, Classical Theories of Allegory and Christian Culture, ix.
For Paul, the story of Hagar and Sarah is the story of the present Jerusalem and the Jerusalem above; it is the story of two covenants. Hagar, the slave woman, represents the present Jerusalem, the law, and the old covenant. Sarah, the free woman, represents the Jerusalem above, the promise, and the new covenant. For Christians, their mother is not the slave woman, bound by the law’s chains; for Christians, their mother is the free woman, she whose son was born through the promise. Their lineage is not earthly in nature; instead, their lineage is heavenly. The offspring of these two mothers testify to that reality.

Fung remarks that “In Paul’s treatment of the Hagar-Sarah story, the main point remains the contrast between the two branches of the Abrahamic family, and it is to this that Paul returns in his final summation of the argument.” Although Ishmael was the first born, he does not represent the line of Abraham. It is Isaac, the son born through the promise and not of the flesh, who is Abraham’s true heir. In this passage, Paul turns the table against the Judaizers. Longenecker argues that “The Judaizers had evidently contemporized the Hagar-Sarah story in their argument to prove that since the promises were made to Abraham and his seed . . . Gentile Christians had no share in the promise unless they submitted to the Mosaic law given to Isaac’s posterity and were circumcised.” In a sense, they were partly correct in their understanding that Abraham’s line is through Isaac. However, they had a wrong understanding of what it meant to be in the line of Isaac. Paul, in a clever maneuver, paints the Judaizers as those who came from

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12 “Paul is not interested in the two women as historical persons, but in the two worlds they represent. The two covenants amount to two diametrically opposed systems: an “old covenant” and a “new covenant.” Betz, Galatians, 243. However, Dunn disagrees with Betz’ understanding of the two covenants: “It is tempting to understand the two covenants as old and new covenant. But in fact only one covenant is at issue here – the covenant with Abraham and his seed promising blessing to the nations; strictly speaking there was no covenant with Ishmael. It is the single issue of relationship to and descent from Abraham which is refracted into two contrasting sequences. What Paul describes as two covenants for the purposes of his exegesis are in effect two ways of understanding the one covenant purpose of God through Abraham and for his seed. What Paul is about to argue is that the Abraham covenant seen in terms of freedom and promise is a fuller expression of God’s electing grace and a fuller embodiment of the ongoing divine will than the Abraham covenant seen in terms of law and flesh.” Dunn, Galatians, 249.
13 Fung, Galatians, 215.
14 Longenecker, Galatians, 207-208.
the line of Ishmael and it is the Gentile Christians, who belong to the line of Isaac. Moreover, Paul definitely puts himself within that stream as well. The new covenant meant a new way of understanding and embodying God’s covenant. As Dunn remarks, “the crucial theological point of Paul is . . . that the understanding of God’s purpose in terms of promise brings us closer to the heart and character of that purpose than an understanding in terms of the Torah.”\(^{15}\) Paul’s allegorical reasoning created the theological space for the church of Galatia to conceptualize what it meant to be a true Christian.

### Allegory vs. Typology: The debate concerning Gal. 4:21-31

Richard Hays, in his book *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*, argues against the idea of allegory being used in the passage. Instead, we should view Paul’s “allegory” as typology.\(^{16}\) Mickelsen states that

> in typology the interpreter finds a correspondence in one or more respects between a person, event, or thing in the old Testament and a person, event, or thing closer to or contemporaneous with a New Testament writer. It is this correspondence that determines the meaning in the Old Testament narrative that is stressed by a later speaker or writer.\(^{17}\)

A key point in understanding the concept of typology is its rootedness in history. “The correspondence is present because God controls history, and this control of God over history is axiomatic with the New Testament writers.”\(^{18}\) Since “Paul is dealing with the correspondence between figures past and present rather than timeless spiritual truths,” this passage should not be seen as an allegory but as a typology.\(^{19}\)

It must be noted that when I invoke the concept of history or historicity of the texts, I do not mean it in the modern sense by which we understand these concepts. Neal MacDonald notes

\(^{15}\) Dunn, *Galatians*, 248.


\(^{17}\) Mickelsen, *Interpreting the Bible*, 237.


\(^{19}\) Gignilliat, “Paul, Allegory, and the Plain Sense of Scripture,” 137.
that “In the pre-critical perspective, the biblical world and the real historical world are one and the same . . . Accordingly, there is no conceivable ‘epistemic space’ in this world, no ‘geographical point’ as it were, that does not take place within the realm of the biblical world.”

As a modernist, our basic hermeneutic is one of suspicion. The opposite is at work in the pre-critical world. The historicity of the texts was a pre-supposition that was not only present, but viewed as integral in performing basic exegesis. To make any point that matters, the text is assumed to be both real and sacred.

According to Jean Daniélou, a key figure in the nouvelle théologie movement, “The object of typology is the research of the correspondences between the events, the institutions, and the persons of the Old Testament and those of the New Testament, which is inaugurated by the coming of Christ and will be consummated with his parousia.” There are certain aspects in the Old Testament that can be linked to the New Testament through the figure of Christ. Although typological exegesis within the Old Testament was evident, there was a new typological emphasis in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, we have the figure of Adam; in the New Testament, Jesus is seen as the second Adam. In the Old Testament, we have the figure of Noah; in the New Testament, Jesus is seen as the second Noah. In the Old Testament, we have the figure of Moses; in the New Testament, Jesus is seen as the second Moses. For Daniélou, there are two types of typology in the New Testament. The Matthean typology was grounded in the idea that the events in the Old Testament corresponded with the events in Jesus’ life. For example, Rachel weeping for her children pre-figured the massacre of infants by Herod.

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21 Daniélou, “Qu'est-Ce Que La Typologie?,” 199.
typology in the Johannine literature saw events in the Old Testament not necessarily as figures of circumstances in Jesus’ life but rather the mysteries in that life. For example, the “serpent in the wilderness was a figure of the mystery of salvation.”

No matter which type of typology one finds in the Old Testament, Daniélou notices the widespread use of typology within the Church, whether East or West, in Antioch or in Alexandria, and rightly argues that it should still be normative for Christian biblical scholarship today.

Wolfgang A. Bienert made a notable distinction between allegory and typology. Allegory “is the vertical manner of interpretation, since it establishes unhistorical-timeless relationships between images (allegories) and their spiritual archetypes” while typology “is the horizontal matter of interpretation, since it transports the historical events of the past into the present and future.” Daniélou’s distinction between typology and allegory was based on whether the referent was Christological (typology) or non-Christological (allegory); Bienert’s distinction was dependent on whether the referent was historical (typology) or unhistorical (allegory).

Frances Young’s understanding of typology follows the same line of thought as that of Daniélou and Bienert. According to Young, typology “requires a mirroring of the supposed deeper meaning in the text taken as a coherent whole, whereas allegory involves using words as symbols or tokens, arbitrarily referring to other realities by application of a code, and so destroying the narrative, or surface, coherence of the text.” In her description of allegory and typology, there are two things worth noting. First, she insists that both allegory and typology are concerned with the texts. Second, she argues that typology is more sensitive to the narrative

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25 Daniélou, “Qu'est-Ce Que La Typologie?,” 200-2.
27 Bienert, Didymos, 42. As quoted in Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction,” 290.
29 Young, Biblical Exegesis, 162.
coherence while allegory does violence to the text.\(^{30}\) This type of thinking lends itself to the belief that typology is a legitimate reading of the text since it preserves and safeguards history while allegory destroys and negates history.\(^{31}\)

**Allegory: Paul and Philo**

In his commentary on Galatians, Martinus de Boer spoke of the widespread use of allegory among the ancient Greeks and the Jews in Diaspora. Alexandrian Jews eventually adopted the method from the Greeks. It is not surprising, then, that one of “the best-known practitioner of the method from the ancient world” was Philo of Alexandria.\(^{32}\) Daniel Boyarin notes that “the congruence of Paul and Philo suggests a common background to their thought in the thought-world of the eclectic middle-platonism of Greek-speaking Judaism in the first century.”\(^{33}\) Douglas J. Moo somewhat agrees with Boyarin’s thought when he states that “Philo employs the method in a distinctive manner to contemporize the scriptural narrative in the direction of a Platonizing and moralizing meaning.”\(^{34}\)

David Dawson makes an interesting observation in his book, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*. He observes that “literature was understood as a fundamentally rhetorical exercise — as a kind of speech delivered in writing to an audience of readers — lack of clarity or obscurity was a significant literary vice.”\(^{35}\) In fact, “This rhetorical understanding of allegorical composition and reading was the widely prevailing norm through antiquity.”\(^{36}\) Dawson suggests that it is the analogy of a palimpsest that can aid us in visualizing

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\(^{30}\) Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction,” 291.

\(^{31}\) Gignilliat, “Paul, Allegory, and the Plain Sense of Scripture,” 138.


\(^{34}\) However, he is quick to add that “it would be a mistake to think that Paul is claiming to do what Philo was doing.” If Paul is indeed using an allegory, it is an allegory “tempered fundamentally by typology.” Moo, *Galatians*, 300.

\(^{35}\) Dawson, *Allegorical Readers*, 76.

\(^{36}\) Dawson, *Allegorical Readers*, 76.
“this complex mode of revision.”

A palimpsest refers to “a surface that once contained writing but was erased and written upon again.” Thus, when we read allegorically, it can be said that the Scripture is the re-writing. “For example, although one could say that the “other” meaning of a certain passage of scripture is identical to Plato’s theory of the soul, one might say instead that Plato’s theory of the soul has been rewritten by Moses, that is, that it was once written by Plato in the Phaedrus but is now written by Moses in Genesis. Genesis thus becomes a palimpsest that is written over the now-erased text of the Phaedrus.” Philo’s use of allegory reveals his desire to contextualize the scriptures to speak to his current culture. In the same way that most North American evangelicals seek to understand the Bible in its particular context and are beset by questions of having to appropriate the lessons from a book written thousands of years ago to our contemporary situation, the allegorist faces this same problem. In both cases, the exegete is forced to uncover the deeper meaning of the text. In this way, the text is given life once again as it is read through the eyes of a different generation but imbued with the same heart and spirit of their ancestors. Through the use of allegory, we move beyond a sensus literalis (literal sense) reading of the text; in turn, we become the blessed recipients of a sensus plenior (fuller meaning) understanding.

**Allegory: Its place in Patristic Hermeneutics**

The modern North American evangelical theologian is well-aware that the Bible — written in a foreign language, amidst a foreign culture, during a foreign time — can only be properly understood when situated within its own particular social and cultural context. The process of exegeting the text is concerned not only with what the text says but also its original, intended meaning. Through the use of various textual criticisms, the theologian attempts to better

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38 Dawson, *Allegorical Readers*, 73.
understand the text. However, the process of understanding the text also involves understanding
the particular cultural and social milieu in which the text was written in, along with its intended
audience during the time of its writing.

The patristic commentators may not have the same concerns that we do concerning
history and culture but they are well aware that “the literal content of the Bible needed
explanation for later generations.”40 While some might turn to the historical-grammatical method
to exegete the Scriptures, the patristic commentators turned to their rhetorical training to help
them understand the grammatical and stylistic features of the Bible.41 “For ancient critics the
biblical text was mediatory of God’s message through the intricacies of a specific language that
called for the skills of a translator.”42 They were well aware of the need to carefully scrutinize
the sacred text they were handling. While sometimes our desire to correctly interpret the
Scriptures lay a great deal in our chosen methodology, the exegetes of the early church held the
firm belief that the very act of attempting to correctly interpret the text was “in itself a spiritual
exercise.”43 For them, the decidedly human text they were interpreting was also filled with divine
mysteries. The act of exegesis was one steeped in the deep understanding of the deep mysteries
of the divine.

How, then, should allegory be understood within patristic hermeneutics? To answer this
question, I turn to Gerald L. Bruns who talks about allegory as radical interpretation. For him,
radical interpretation means “the redescription, in one’s own language, of sentences from an
alien system of concepts and beliefs.”44 It does not necessarily mean the recovering or preserving
of the original message; it is more concerned with integrating a text and its meanings “into a

44 Bruns, *Hermeneutics*, 83.
radically new cultural environment.”⁴⁵ In radical interpretation, there is a shift of emphasis from meaning to truth. The question changes from “What does this sentence mean?” to “How would this sentence have to be construed so as to be held true in our language?”⁴⁶ This type of thinking runs contrary to the modern theologian’s conceptualization of biblical exegesis.

Thomas Böhm’s hypothesis is that “The allegorical interpretation seems to presuppose a much stronger philosophical thrust than the so-called historical.”⁴⁷ Among the early church fathers, it is Origen who best exemplifies and embodies the allegorical method. Origen “believed that there were three levels of meaning in Scripture analogous to the body, soul and spirit . . . These three senses were literal, moral, and spiritual. Simple believers might remain at the level of the letter, but the elite should progress to the higher levels.”⁴⁸ Yet, Origen sometimes did not apply these three levels. It has been observed that in Origen’s commentaries and homilies, there is only a twofold interpretation.⁴⁹ M.F. Wiles notes that

He admits that the measurements given for the ark appear at first sight totally inadequate to house fourteen specimens of every clean and four of every unclean animal in the world, but claims on the authority of a learned Jew that the cubits there mentioned are to be understood as geometric cubits and therefore all the measurements need in practice to be squared.⁵⁰

For someone who is often accused of “evacuating the literal sense if it was difficult,” Origen took the time and effort to factor in the literal sense within his allegorical reading of the text.⁵¹ This should alert us to the fact that we need to be cautious about making a caricature out of a certain position which we may not necessarily agree with. Oftentimes, the allegorical approach has been derided for its seeming low view of history. Yet, even someone who embodied the

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⁴⁵ Bruns, *Hermeneutics*, 83.
⁴⁶ Bruns, *Hermeneutics*, 83.
⁴⁸ Young, “Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis,” 335.
⁴⁹ Young, “Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis,” 336.
⁵¹ Young, “Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis,” 336.
allegorical approach like Origen took note and struggled with the literal sense of the text, in the same manner as their “historical” counterparts.

**Henri de Lubac and Allegory: A Nouvelle Théologie Understanding**

Henri de Lubac’s first and fundamental principle of the allegorical sense of Scripture “is that it is not situated, properly speaking, in the text, but in the events themselves.” Allegory is not to be found in history as narrative, but in history as event. This type of thinking concerning allegory is markedly different from the previous generation’s definition of allegory. By rooting it in history, this would normally put it in the “typology” camp. “Such a distinction consequently sees allegory as nonhistorical and typology as historical. For de Lubac, however, Christian allegory is grounded in historical event.” He firmly believes that the allegorical sense “was the dogmatic sense par excellence rooted in history.” He disagrees with the notion that allegories compromise the historical foundation of the faith since “the allegorical sense assures the essentially historical character of the faith since it does not seek its referent apart from the literal or historical meaning, but within it, much as the Father is not found behind the Son, but in the Son.”

De Lubac’s second principle is that “the object of allegory is properly Christ and the Church . . . Christ is the principal and final cause providing the reference for the interpretation of historical events. The Church is included . . . by virtue of the mystery of the union of Christ and his Church.” The Church, as Christ’s bride, is forever intertwined with her Bridegroom. It is

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virtually impossible to understand one without understanding the other. To understand Christ is to understand the Church; to understand the Church is to understand Christ.

The third principle is that “the object of allegory in reference to the Old Testament is a reality in the future. Once again, this principle underlines the historical character of Christian allegory.” 58 Allegory, then, finds its referent to a historical event rather than a historical narrative. Even the subject of allegory — Christ and the Church — are historical realities. 59 The fourth principle is that “the structure of allegory is fundamentally sacramental. That is, the content or signification of both the historical event and the future historical reality of Christ and the Church to which the allegorical meaning refers exceed what is observable within history.” 60

De Lubac’s understanding of allegory provides us with the necessary rules and parameters by which we can engage in the act of allegorizing the Scriptures. In a way, he provides us with a sort of *regula allegoria*. 61 Not only does an allegorical reading provide us with a higher meaning of the text, but by using de Lubac’s principles we can be assured that our allegorical reading will also be Christological and ecclesial in nature.

**Letty Russell and Allegory: Hagar and Sarah Re-visited**

This paper began with a look at Augustine’s view of Paul’s allegory concerning Hagar and Sarah. Augustine, upon reading this passage, eventually uses it as a means by which he ends up condoning the use of violence against the Donatists. Thus began an exploration into the world of allegory, its definition, and its place in Patristic hermeneutics. With everything I have laid bare so far, I want us to return back to the place where it all started. This time, however, it shall

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61 Rules of allegory
be through a new set of lenses. As we re-examine this allegory anew, we are forced to consider the ways in which this allegory has been used to attack the “other.”

Letty Russell in her chapter “Twists and Turns in Paul’s Allegory,” examines the allegory of Hagar and Sarah. If an allegory is defined as “a rendering of truth that asserts the truth is always somewhere else, something other than where or what appears,” like Elizabeth A. Castelli defines it, then it is helpful to note that its usage is linked to the author’s persuasion of the reader to “reimagine the meanings of a familiar tradition.”62 Paul reverses the Judaizers’ understanding of who counts as Abraham’s children. In a surprising twist, Paul announces the Gentile Christians as the ones who are born from the free woman, Sarah and the Judaizers are the ones who are born from the slave woman, Hagar. “By appealing to a familiar story that might have been used as a proof of Abrahamic descent by his opponents, Paul seeks to establish a new truth in the story. Hagar, already the castaway, becomes the ancestor of his opponents who want Gentile Christians to follow the law.”63 The allegory allows Paul to appeal to a “deeper, hidden truth: that the promise of God is fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Christ and is now offered to all believers without the need for them to fulfill the Jewish law.”64 This could not be done through a plain reading of the text.

However, Paul’s use of allegory in Galatians 4:21–31 has devastating consequences. Paul’s allegory, according to Sheila Briggs, “uses the socially accepted understanding of slavery, with freedom as its opposite.”65 Slavery, in Paul’s work, has been used as a metaphor of power and a metaphor of evasion. In Philippians 2:5–11, Christ gives up his power only to become a slave. Like a slave, he was persecuted and killed. Yet, unlike other Roman slaves, Christ is raised

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64 Russell, “Twists and Turns,” 78.  
up as Lord! Like Christ, Christians are also raised to new life. It is Sheila Briggs who also points that Paul’s rhetoric of evasion was similar to the Greco-Roman society who did not talk about the evils and brutality of slavery even though it was so rampant and pervasive. In the story of the return of Onesimus, a Roman slave, Paul does not “directly condemn the social reality of slavery beyond asking that slaves not be treated harshly.”

In addition to this, Paul’s allegory of Hagar and Sarah have been used in many circumstances as a proof text to cast out the “other.” Paul uses this allegory as a way to frame all who disagree with him as outsiders. Augustine is not alone in reading this Pauline allegory within the us-vs-them narrative framework. Elizabeth Clark notes that Cyprian uses Galatians 4 “to claim that the formerly barren church has birthed more children from among the Gentiles than the synagogue had formerly been able to produce.” She also mentions how the early church fathers used “Hagar” and “Sarah” as codes for “synagogue” and “church.” By doing so, they imply that the former has been abandoned, and not incorporated, into the latter. In short, this allegory has enabled and exacerbated Christian-Jewish tensions over the centuries.

Allegory: Strengths and Limitations

Charles Cosgrove claims that in antiquity, allegories were typically used “to bring a revered tradition in line with accepted views (especially the “modern” world view or a particular philosophy). This means that the interpreter would make points via allegorical exegesis with which his audience was already in sympathy.” In many ways, Cosgrove’s assertion concerning allegory is helpful for us in trying to understand why Paul used an allegory in his Galatians letter. According to Davis, one of the allegorical techniques employed is providing “a statement that

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67 Clark, “Interpretive Fate Amid the Church Fathers,” 128.
68 Clark, “Interpretive Fate Amid the Church Fathers,” 129.
69 Clark, “Interpretive Fate Amid the Church Fathers,” 129.
70 Cosgrove, “The Law Has Given Sarah No Children,” 220.
either explicitly or implicitly counters conventional understanding about a text, a character, or an event.” Paul’s use of the Hagar-Sarah allegory shocks his audience and forces them to re-imagine the Old Testament in novel and nouvelle ways. The Judaizers would never have been able to conceive the thought that they could be the ones in the wrong; they were categorically and undeniably condemned by Paul as the outsiders whose very essence is the antithesis of everything that the Christian faith stands for and believes. The use of allegory allows for radical reinterpretations of what some may say as staid, comfortable, and safe texts. Allegorical interpretations can capture the mind of its readers and hearers anew to the potential that the sacred texts written thousands of years ago still have the ability to be relevant to their particular generation.

It has been said that one’s greatest strength can also be its greatest weakness. One of the strengths of the allegorical method is its ability to “update” the text and make it accessible to its current audience. Through allegory, the literature of the past is still relevant to today’s discussions on various subjects. However, the person who is allegorizing is limited by their own particular time and culture. They cannot speak of anything beyond what they already know. In this way, the timelessness of the Scriptures is exchanged for a timely exposition. The allegory becomes incredibly steeped in the allegorist’s cultural and social milieu.

Allegory seems to be an exegetical method that has the possibility of running amok in its interpretation. The allegorist is not bound by any rules. Distinguishing between a good allegory and a bad allegory can be a seemingly impossible task. Since allegory is already seen as rhetoric rife with subjectivity and disbelief, most people seem fearful in engaging in this ancient task. Henri de Lubac’s allegorical principles can perhaps help us move forward as it provides us with

72 Nouvelle is a French word for “new.”
a sort of *regula allegoria* that clearly demarcates the boundaries of what is acceptable or unacceptable in the act of allegorizing.

**Conclusion**

Augustine’s allegorical reading of Galatians 4:21–31 enabled him to advocate the use of force against the Donatists. This should alert us to the potential downfalls of allegorizing. We can unintentionally use this exegetical method to bolster our own ideas and preferences while simultaneously maintaining that this is what the Scriptures truly mean. However, to rebuke Augustine’s allegorical reading of Paul presents its own problems. It is easy to dismiss Augustine’s allegorical reading, yet what are we to do with Paul’s own allegorizing? If we disagree with the notion that allegory is a valid, legitimate tool in biblical exegesis, how can we explain Paul’s usage of allegory in Galatians 4:21–31?

According to Origen, since the Scripture sanctions the use of allegory, allegory must be understood as a divinely sanctioned mode of reading the Scriptures. Not only is it sanctioned, it is also encouraged and to be emulated.\(^73\) One of allegory’s salient feature is that the universal is not merely expressed but encrypted in the particular . . . that the deeper sense is felt as the discovery not the creation of the exegete, that it seems to be part of the fabric of the work, and hence . . . a ‘real presence’ that is waiting to be deciphered, not an arbitrary function that the reader has found it useful to impose.\(^74\)

Allegory, properly done, is not a mere creation of the exegete, but a discovery of the exegete as s/he attempts to better understand the text.

Although allegory may be an acceptable exegetical tool for the biblical exegete to use, we must be cautious in using ambiguous language where the meaning could be misinterpreted by the

\(^73\) Clark, “Interpretive Fate Amid the Church Fathers,” 130.

\(^74\) Edwards, *Origen against Plato*, 125.
audience. John Chrysostom, the Golden Tongue himself, said that Paul could have used clearer language than the one he used.⁷⁵

Christians are constantly urged to engage in the act of *theosis*. They are called to be more and more like Christ. They are to think like Christ, speak like Christ, and act like Christ. As Christians approach the Word of God, they are to exhibit and adopt a posture of humility and grace. The Scriptures are made of human letters under divine guidance. As discussions and debates continue concerning the place of allegory in biblical exegesis, these discussions must be fueled by the attempt to understand the other rather than merely trying to win the debate. One must be careful when engaging in the act of allegorizing, lest they fall into the same traps and pitfalls they condemn others of doing. Allegory, properly understood, is the human act of exploring the depths of God’s mystery while simultaneously acknowledging our human finitude and limitations.

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⁷⁵ Kepple, “Analysis of Antiochene Exegesis,” 244.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


