



Hermeneutics of Scripture and its Relation to Personal Spirituality according to Gregory the Great

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This study aims to reconstruct the relationship between the reading of a sacred text and the personal spirituality of a Christian in the work of the early Christian writer Gregory the Great (540–604). Gregory was the first monk to become pope and to whom posterity attached the epithet “the Great”. We find the completion of early Christian Latin thought in his work. Gregory left his mark on Latin Western Christianity with a spiritual-monastic vision that suspended dialogue with the secular world. However, we also find ideas that have not been sufficiently analyzed in his work. These involve Gregory’s hermeneutics of the biblical text in its contribution to the personal spirituality of the reader. We consider this part of his thinking as essential for a contemporary biblical exegesis, which does not consider Gregory’s three-fold interaction between scholarly commentary on the sacred text, the commentator’s own religious convictions and service to others. Gregory first emphasizes the necessity of reading the Bible in the process of spiritual maturation, and in the next step he stresses the humility of the reader before the sacred text. Finally, Gregory recalls the interaction between the reading of the sacred text and the life practice of the reader. A comprehensive reading of Gregory’s body of work makes it possible to emphasize the essential point of his spirituality, which is the connection between the reading of the sacred text, the religious background of the reader and service to others. The wealth of his ideas not only enlivens the interaction between scholarly exegesis and lived spirituality, but it can also be useful in a dialogue with other religious systems in their connection to work with their own sanctified and sacred texts.



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1 Introduction

We do not know the exact date of Gregory's birth, but the year 540 is generally accepted. He came from a Roman patrician family. He was a functionary in the weakened Roman empire, where around year 570 he held the prestigious position of a Roman prefect. He was a helpless witness to the gradual decay of the civilization that had shaped him. Around the year 573, Gregory experienced an internal conversion and entered a monastery (Dagens 1969, 149–162). The conversion, which was fulfilled in the monastic profession, marked the whole of Gregorian theology (Gregorius 1979, 1). Abandoning the contemplative life for the difficult and laborious life of the Roman Bishop was understood by Gregory as a certain form of a cross (Gregorius 1982, 4, 5, 7–8, 9, 33–34, 36–37). Around year 579, Pope Benedict I or Pope Pelagius II received Gregory into service, ordained him as a deacon and sent him to Constantinople as an “ambassador” (Lat. *apocrisariate*) at the imperial court. He returned to Rome in about 586. In 589, a plague broke out in Rome, to which Pope Pelagius II succumbed on 7 February 590. The deacon Gregory was chosen by the people of Rome as his successor, and on 3 September 590, he was consecrated in the Basilica of St. Peter as a bishop and sat on the papal throne. Gregory died around year 604 (Labriolle 1924, 6–15; Drobner 2011, 657–670). His pontificate from 590–604 marks the end of the patristic Latin era, the subsequent influence of which was considerable in the Middle Ages (Lubac 1968, 14–15). Gregory's attempt to monasticize Western Christianity had a major impact on Western Christianity (Lichner 2019, 58; Lichner 2017, 380). Although he was significantly influenced by the thinking of St. Augustine in his own theological philosophy, unlike him, he did not try to convert ancient culture, but rather tried to “shape the behavior” of Christians (Lat. *conversio morum*), because the faith of that time coexisted with manifestations in the life of Christians that were too worldly (Lubac 1961, 571). We can thus consider him as the first Latin analyst of spiritual Christian experience in its connection to life practice.

2 Methodology

Gregory's ideas on the importance of the hermeneutics of the sacred text in spiritual life are dispersed throughout his exegetical commentaries and homilies. We studied these in a synchronic way by which we read the commentary or homily in its final version as a literary and theological text within a concluded corpus. We use the hermeneutic meth-

od of “emerging themes” in our studies, and this allows us to avoid the scholastic approach, in which the texts are approached with already prepared spiritual and theological ideas and only their confirmation is sought in the texts. The chosen method is based on a comprehensive and continuous reading of the texts, which gradually emphasized certain ideas and themes, underlining their importance by their frequency. Its advantage rests in the fact that the text itself justifies certain topics as essential, and the reader does not impose his or her own topics on the text (Borgomeo 1972, 16–17).

3 Bible Reading as a Foundation for Personal Christian Spirituality

According to Gregory, the Holy Scriptures are the basic formative instrument for shaping the personal spirituality of a Christian. He starts from the situation of man after original sin, who is able to spiritually return to God through reading the Holy Scriptures. In the *Regula Pastoralis*, he constantly emphasizes that a person to whom authority is entrusted should read and meditate on the Holy Scriptures again and again, because this is a necessary means of personal Christian spiritual growth. Gregory no longer develops Christian faith based on the exegesis of the Holy Scriptures, but he emphasizes its importance for the moral and spiritual transformation of the reader (Vrégille 1960, 172–173). Gregory adopts an Augustinian understanding of Holy Scripture as a “mirror” (Lat. *speculum*) of our soul (Augustinus 1887, 3). In an interpretation of the Old Testament Book of Job that he wrote during his stay in Constantinople in the years 579–585, he writes (Gregorius 1979, 59): “*Holy Scripture is offered to the eyes of our soul like a mirror: we can contemplate our inner face in it. There we see both our ugliness and our beauty. From there we perceive what kind of progress we have made and how far we are from the goal. He tells of the deeds of the saints and urges the hearts of the weak to imitation... Sometimes he not only shows us their virtues, but he even reveals to us their downfalls, so that we can understand what we should imitate in their strong triumphs and what we should fear through their falls.*” The excerpt of the text indicates that the author emphasizes the allegorical and topological interpretation and does not look for the elementary literary meaning of the text. The Christian reader thus reads the sacred text and finds in it Old Testament and New Testament examples of lives, that is, biblical hagiography, which helps him avoid mistakes and orientate his own spiritual journey to God; in the same chapter the Pope continues: “*Job grew with the temptations; King David was knocked to the ground: the first example gives us hope and the second keeps*

us humble” (Gregorius 1979, 59). The plurality of biblical hagiographic descriptions corresponds to all life situations of a person, and every reader will find there what he needs at the given moment (Gregorius 1985, 1169–1170).

The sacred text preserved God’s testimonies, which are offered to the reader so that he may enter into continuity with the biblical history of salvation. In this we perceive the clear influence of the work of St. Augustine *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed* from the year 399, in which he recommends that the catechist retell to the person interested in baptism the history of salvation from the Holy Scriptures and remind him that this does not end with the ascension of Christ but continues until the arrival of this person to the catechist (Lichner 2015). However, Gregory emphasizes much more than Augustine hagiographic models of moral behavior, the knowledge of which thus becomes an indispensable means of the spiritual growth of a Christian. In his interpretation of the Book of Job (Lat. *Moralia in Job*), Gregory quotes the verse Psalm 104:18 “*The high mountains are for the wild goats*” and interprets it with the following words: “*The high mountains can be understood as high sentences (that is, difficult to understand) of the Holy Scriptures, about which the psalmist says: ‘The high mountains are for the wild goats’, because those who already know how to jump into contemplation ascend to the high mountains of God’s sayings as if to the high peaks of the mountains*” (Gregorius 1983, 1534–1535).

From the quoted text, it could seem that only a few select readers of the sacred text could experience the peaks of contemplation. Usually, however, Gregory presents the Holy Scriptures as a cure for our diseases, as a faithful companion of humanity on its earthly journey: “*If the Church were not flooded with the joys of the Word of God, it could not rise to the heights from the desert of this world. It is thus flooded with joys and rises, and this is why it feeds on mystical meanings every day and rises to the contemplation of the good things from above... This is why the psalmist says: ‘The night will shine like the day’ (Psalm 139:11), because when an attentive soul finds its food in mystical understanding, the darkness of the present life will be illuminated in it by the brightness of the day that comes, so that in the midst of the darkness of our depravity the power of the future light breaks into his understanding*” (Gregorius 1979, 813).

4 The Idea of the Sacred Text as a Gift from God

Therefore, in the next step, Gregory reminds us in a comment on the prophet Ezekiel of the difference between

created and uncreated light: “*The Holy Scripture has become a light on our path in the darkness of the present world... We know, however, that our lamp is itself dark, if the Truth does not illuminate our minds. This is why the psalmist says (Psalm 18:28): ‘You, Lord, keep my lamp burning; my God turns my darkness into light’. What is a burning lamp if not light itself!? However, the created light does not enlighten us if not it is illuminated by an uncreated light. Because Almighty God Himself created the utterances of the holy testaments for our salvation and made them available to us*” (Gregorius 1971, 93–94). Reading the Holy Scriptures is thus the beginning of a contemplative life, because through the created (written) text, a person enters into contact and a relationship with his Creator, who is uncreated light. It therefore becomes obvious that on the spiritual path one cannot avoid reading the Holy Scriptures, “*just as obedient servants are always attentive to the face of their masters in order to immediately understand and hurry to carry out their orders, so also the minds of the righteous try to closely follow the Almighty Lord and contemplate His face in the Holy Scriptures, so that they deviate as little as possible from His will, because God tell us everything He wants through the Holy Scriptures and they recognize His will in His word. His words therefore do not pass through their ears superficially but become fixed in their hearts*” (Gregorius 1979, 824). In line with St. Augustine (Augustinus 1956, 1922), who understood the Holy Scriptures as a letter from God, Pope Gregory wrote the following words to a doctor in Constantinople: “*What else is the Holy Scriptures if not a letter from Almighty God to his creation? And if your glory were based on another place, and you would receive a message from an earthly emperor, then you would not stop, you would not rest, you would not give sleep to your eyes, until you first read what the emperor wrote to you. The heavenly emperor, the Lord of angels and men, sent you his letters for your life, and yet, my glorious son, you neglect to read his letters fervently. Therefore, please, study daily and meditate daily on the words of your Creator*” (Gregorius 1982, 339–340).

The center of the Holy Scriptures, its fullness, is Christ; it is He who unites the Old and New Testaments, Gregory notes, and he refers to the apostle Paul. Gregory returned to this topic in the 25th homily, in which he explained a passage from the Gospel of John 20, 11–18 (Gregorius 1999, 208). He emphasizes that when Mary Magdalene entered the tomb, she did not find the body of Christ there, which had been placed in it a few days before, but found only the folded clothes and saw two angels who were sitting in the place of the head and feet of the previously placed body: “*We can discern in them the double law that simultaneously announces the incarnate Lord, the deceased and the resurrected one.*” (Gregorius 1999, 208). The Pope then quotes a passage

from the Old Testament, Exodus 25, 18–20, where the ark of the covenant is described as well as the fact that it is to be covered with a lid (mercy seat) and on which should be two cherubim, whose faces will be turned towards each other. With this connection, the Pope argues that just as the Ark of the Covenant contained God's word engraved in stone, so in the grave was God's word that became man and that is no longer lying there dead but has risen from the dead and is alive. The two angels from the Book of Exodus and from the Gospel of John point to the interconnectedness of the two parts of the Holy Scriptures, the Old and the New Testament.

5 Meanings of the Holy Scriptures

From the beginning, the Holy Scriptures allowed for a plurality of interpretive meanings. Gregory differentiates three senses in the biblical text: "In one and the same statement of Scripture, one finds food in history, another in allegory, and the third in morality" (Gregorius 1971, 88). The literary does not relate to the linguistic sign, but to the "intention" (Lat. *intentio*) that the words of the text carry. Literary meaning and history are therefore interchangeable. Although intellectual effort with clarification of this meaning is necessary and has its own meaning, it is not sufficient. The task of the Scriptures is namely to accompany man on his spiritual journey to God. He enumerates them in a letter to Bishop Leander of Seville accompanying his Commentary on the Book of Job: *literary, allegorical or typological and tropological or moral* (Gregorius 1979, 4). However, we sometimes find that he also mentions a fourth sense, which is *mystical* (Gregorius 1979, 813). These are passages, however, which cannot be interpreted only according to the letter, because they do not give meaning; they can be interpreted only allegorically. Gregory considers allegory as a kind of "pulley" (Lat. *quantam machinam*) which enables the soul separated by a great distance from God to rise to him (Gregorius 1963, 3). Allegory is thus not a rhetorical tool, but it helps to transform the soul; it does not change the text, but it transforms the reader's soul and helps him on his way to God.

Because the Holy Scriptures are God's letter to mankind, or a mirror, special attention must be paid to distinguishing the literary meaning from God's message. What Gregor calls "discernment" – Latin *discretio* – serves this purpose (Gregorius 1971, 315). This enables the reader to find an allegorical or moral meaning in the text along with the literary meaning: "If we wanted to understand everything literarily, we would lose the virtue of discernment; if we reduced everything

to a spiritual allegory, we would be bound by the stupidity of a lack of discernment" (Gregorius 1971, 35).

This is so due to the nature of the Holy Scripture itself, which is God's creation, and this is why it also contains facts that cannot be understood by humans, but only by spiritual beings – angels (Gregorius 1971, 139). Thus, a plurality of the same sacred text exists. Therefore, Gregory warns: "Some of those who read the texts of the Holy Scriptures understand the most complicated statements, are in the habit of disdaining out of their intellectual pride the humble recommendations that are given by the simpler ones and want to interpret them differently. If these people were to correctly understand the noble teachings Scriptures, they would not ignore even the smallest recommendations, because the divine commandments are in certain respects addressed in such a way as to educate the simple in other respects" (Gregorius 1971, 145).

6 Effects of Reading the Holy Scriptures

This *discernment* (Lat. *discretio*) is not achieved, however, by some study, nor by the intellectual capacity of the reader [1]. It is achieved through asceticism. In Gregory's view, unlike that of Cassian, asceticism does not lie in the practice of fasting or prayer, but exclusively in practical love for fellow human beings, in which one "ascetically" renounces the contemplation of God's love in favor of showing practical love for one's neighbors. Discernment, which is the distinguishing factor between the literary and allegorical understanding of the sacred text, is thus not found in the text itself, nor is it only in the reader's intellectual capabilities. Spiritual reading arises from the clash between the biblical text and the religious background of the reader who reads the text in a "certain spirit" (it will be read differently by a Christian and by a Jew). However, he adds a third component to this basic distinction, which was also recognized by authors before Gregory, which is his fundamental contribution to the hermeneutics of the sacred text. This third factor is the lifestyle of the reader. For Gregory, this means an ascetic lifestyle. Reading a sacred text is thus not only an intellectual act of appropriating the meaning of the text; its result is humble service to one's fellow man, during which the reader renounces the contemplation of God's love in favor of active love for one's fellow human beings (Nemec 2021, 58).

In Gregory's view, God "through the reading of the Scriptures grants humility to the proud, instils confidence in the fearful,

grants love of purity to the lustful, moderates the greed of the miserly with restraint, corrects the careless with honesty... because God puts the power of his word into each person in different ways, such that every person finds what he needs in Scripture, so that the germ of virtue can grow in it" (Gregorius 1979, 299). Therefore, in the Commentary on the prophet Ezekiel, he writes that "God's words grow with the one who reads them" (Gregorius 1971, 87). As can be seen, growth in the spiritual understanding of the Holy Scriptures is connected to the internal conversion of the reader, to his moral life, which is manifested in love. The double commandment to God and to the neighbor (Mt 22:37–40) is thus a source of spiritual growth in the understanding of the Holy Scriptures (Gregorius 1971, 278). In the Augustinian line, however, Gregory recalls, this love is an undeserved gift of God, and therefore intellectual humility is the basic condition for the growth of love in the heart of the reader. This is certainly not a resignation to intellectual inquiry; it is an awareness of the clash of created intellect with the uncreated word of God.

7 The Relation between the Lecture and Personal Spirituality

However, according to Gregory, it is not sufficient to just read a sacred text; it must also bring about a moral transformation of the reader. We could even interpretively say that according to Gregory, the correct understanding of the Holy Scriptures occurs *only* if what is understood is put into the life of the reader: "Many actually read [note: the Bible], and after reading it they fast from the reading itself. Many hear the voice of the preachers, but after hearing it they remain empty. Although their bellies are full, their bowels are not filled, because although they perceive the meaning of the Holy Scripture with their minds, it is as if they forget them and do not keep what they heard and do not store it in the bowels of their hearts" (Gregorius 1971, 147). And so, in Gregory's view, knowledge of the Holy Scriptures that is not followed by an internal change to a better life is a direct sin. Although such a reader may have a correct understanding of the sacred text because he does not put what he has understood into practical life, he utters the holy words without loving them and thus "treads on them with his life". Such people are not tempted by the "ancient enemy" (the devil) in their intelligence, nor contradicted in their meditation on the sacred text. However, he destroys their life in the sense of action and practice of such people, who are praised due to their valuable knowledge but who remain completely unaware of the damage they cause by their actions (Gregorius 1979, 291).

Of course, Gregory is not the first who emphasized that ascetics should also devote themselves to the service of their neighbors, since prosociality is a modality of self-transcendence (Dojčár 2021, 298). However, while the pinnacle of spiritual life for Cassian is the mystical connection with God, for Gregory it is sacrificial service to others, and therefore its rejection is a manifestation of pride, which in turn makes the correct interpretation of Holy Scripture impossible (Gregorius 1971, 60).

8 Conclusion

The Holy Scriptures have been an inseparable component of spiritual formation in Christianity since the earliest times. The Gregorian corpus points to the fact that this sacred text offers not only intellectual education, but spiritual formation with an overlap into concrete life. The reader will find in it hagiographic models to be followed that draw the reader into the ongoing history of salvation, where he thus becomes an integral part of it. Gregory's emphasizing of the contingency of the created world and its vulnerability allows him to highlight the role of the Holy Scriptures in the image of a lamp that shows the right path, or a letter from God written to man. The Holy Scriptures as a whole include both the Old and the New Testaments, whose connector and finisher is the figure of the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. When working with a sacred text, in line with the already accepted tradition, Gregory speaks about the three senses of Scripture, starting with the literary one, that is, what the basic wording of the text says. Then there is the allegorical or typological sense, which searches the sacred text for types based on similarity. Finally, there is a tropological or moral sense, in which the reader tries to apply a particular sacred passage to his personal life. Between these senses is an inner connection that depends on the spiritual maturity of the reader. This requires "discernment" (Lat. *discretion*) of the right meaning, which is achieved by practicing asceticism in humility. Unlike the previous tradition, which understood asceticism as a set of practices, Gregory sees it as renouncing the joys of personal contemplation of God's love in favor of performing acts of love. Gregory's hermeneutics thus brings a clear novelty when the commentator of a sacred text connects not only the act of reading but also his religious beliefs and personal lifestyle. The results of our research revive the debate over the interaction between scholarly exegesis of a sacred text and lived spirituality, but they can be helpful in dialogue with other religious systems in their interpretation of their own sacred texts.

Note

- [1] “[T]he notion of discernment is closely linked to spirituality,” as Martin Dojčár notes in his preface to a pioneering collective publication on discernment (Dojčár 2022, 5).

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