History of Christian Thought I

Discussion II: Origen & Gregory of Nyssa

To begin with, a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, Aphorism 84 ("The Philology of Christianity"):

> *The philology of Christianity*. How little Christianity educates the sense of honesty and justice can be gauged fairly well from the character of its scholars' writings: they present their conjectures as boldly as if they were dogmas and are rarely in any honest perplexity over the interpretation of a passage in the Bible. Again and again they say 'I am right, for it is written ' and then follows an interpretation of such impudent arbitrariness that a philologist who hears it is caught between rage and laughter and asks himself: is it possible? Is this honourable? Is it even decent? How much dishonesty in this matter is still practised in Protestant pulpits, how grossly the preacher exploits the advantage that no one is going to interrupt him here, how the Bible is pummelled and punched and the *art of reading badly* is in all due form imparted to the people: only he who never goes to church or never goes anywhere else will underestimate that. But after all, what can one expect from the effects of a religion which in the centuries of its foundation perpetrated that unheard-of philological farce concerning the Old Testament: I mean the attempt to pull the Old Testament from under the feet of the Jews with the assertion it contained nothing but Christian teaching and *belonged* to the Christians as the *true* people of Israel, the Jews being only usurpers. And then there followed a fury of interpretation and construction that cannot possibly be associated with a good conscience: however much Jewish scholars protested, the Old Testament was supposed to speak of Christ and only of Christ, and especially of his Cross; wherever a piece of wood, a rod, a ladder, a twig, a tree, a willow, a staff is mentioned, it is supposed to be a prophetic allusion to the wood of the Cross; even the erection of the one-horned beast and the brazen serpent, even Moses[43] spreading his arms in prayer, *even* the spits on which the Passover[44] lamb[45] was roasted all allusions to the Cross and as it were preludes to it! Has anyone who asserted this ever *believed* it? Consider that the church did not shrink from enriching the text of the Septuagint[46] (e.g. in Psalm 96, verse 10[47]) so as afterwards to employ the smuggled-in passage in the sense of Christian prophecy. For they were conducting a *war* and paid more heed to their opponents than to the need to stay honest.

43. Moses (*c.* 13th century BC): Hebrew judge and lawgiver who led the Israelites out of Egypt and into the promised land of Canaan. Received the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. The Torah the first five books of the Old Testament is attributed to him.

44. Passover: in Exodus 12:2327, the exemption of the Israelites from the slaughter of the first-born in Egypt. An annual religious and agricultural festival that celebrates the liberation of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and begins on the 14th day of the month of Nisan.
45. Passover Lamb: the sacrifice at the Passover feast. Also refers to Christ in 1 Cor. 5:7.
46. Septuagint: Greek translation of the Old Testament, including the Apocrypha. The name has as its root *septem*, seven, and refers to the 70 or so Jewish scholars who are said to have translated the Old Testament into Greek at Alexandria. Prepared for Greek-speaking Jews of Egypt who could not read Hebrew.
47. *Psalms* 96:10: "So among the nations, 'Yaweh is King.' The world is set firm, it cannot be moved. He will judge the nations with justice" (New Jerusalem Bible).

And now some stuff to think about:

1. In light of this extreme opinion of Nietzsche's, what can we say about the ways of reading the Hebrew Scriptures that we have encountered thus far? Are any of our early Christians guilty of the above sins? What differences are there between the ways that Justin and Irenaeus appropriated these Scriptures, and the way that Origen did? (Origen obviously had a much firmer grasp—cf. the Hexapla. Justin, meanwhile, may have just had a premade compendium of source-texts. But how much does Origen's textual sophistication matter in this context?)
2. Both in Origen (p. 93-94; 160-161) and Gregory, we find an emphasis on free will and choice. Origen may have been fighting against some fatalistic, 'gnostic' bogeyman; Gregory's motivations seem more pastoral (he wants to emphasize moral responsibility). But the purpose of freedom for both—though perhaps especially for Gregory—is a greater obedience to the Law, properly understood. How do they mediate between freedom and submission to divine law? And how does their mediation relate to that attempted earlier by Paul? (Part of this has to do with their reshaping of what the Law could be, in light of their spiritual interpretation of Scripture.)
3. How does Origen's account of free will (or: what is up to us; *to eph' hemin*, a Stoic expression) mesh with his account of prayer? (The problem of prayer is: how can an immovable God be 'moved' by our petitions and so render our prayers effective? The connection probably comes because God has instituted human freedom and does not violate it. Instead, he foresees our free action and "meets" it, cooperates with it perhaps, so as to bring about a certain effect. Is this freedom as we understand it? Is prayer free?)
4. How does Origen's doctrine of freedom survive his simultaneous belief in ministering angels and pestering demons that influence our actions this way and that? Does freedom enter in before, after, or during our interaction with these spiritual beings? (p. 95-96)
5. At times, Origen's understanding of the Son's relation the Father veers away from what would later be deemed orthodox. (p. 111-112) Yet he does provide Gospel citations to back up his claim that the Son is somehow subordinate to the Father. What does this tell us about the role of authoritative texts in establishing doctrinal orthodoxy? (It tells us that authoritative texts were not sufficient in themselves, because there was always room for interpretation. And interpretation was mediated by communities and institutions—the councils, for example.)

6. How are we to read Origen's claim in *On First Principles* (177) that, if Christian Scripture had been better written, it would owe its victories to eloquence and wit, rather than to the power of God? What does this tell us about the relationship between this divine power (this providence, this effect on the world of freedom) and the letter of Christian texts? (Or even: about their message, their contents?)
7. For Gregory, it is clear that moral purification of some kind must precede his sought-after intellectual ascent to God. Why would this have to be the case? And where would we fit Gregory's emphasis on purity and even perfection into a narrative on early Christianity? (It makes somewhat of an odd fit with some of Paul's more ambiguous and reserved statements about moral strictness. But it does fall in line with the burgeoning ethos of the ascetic Holy Man of the fourth century. And also the Stoic ethos, as absorbed through Neoplatonism.)
8. Gregory portrays Moses as something of an ideal sage (a Stoic notion), a pattern to be imitated by Christians who strive for perfection. Yet, at the same time, his spiritual allegorization of Scripture makes Moses into a 'type' or prefiguration of Christ. Are these two figurative uses of Moses compatible? To what degree does this double use suggest that Christ can also be viewed as an ideal sage, a model for emulation? (Gregory's ethos does seem to suggest this, although this makes for poor Christology and a diminished doctrine of atonement. For Gregory, the message of the Cross is that we strivers should die to this life, and instead seek out something like apathetic *enkrateia*.)
9. Both Origen and Gregory at times suggest that there are different tiers of levels of Christian commitment. Origen has a tripartite schema of pneumatic, psychical, and material Christians, though Gregory's distinctions are less pronounced. Both seem to take much from Paul's suggestion that weaker Christians are given the milk of simpler doctrine, while more mature believers can handle the firmer food of more esoteric instruction. To what extent is this hierarchalization of the church justified? What problems could it have led to?
10. In the *De Hominis Opificio*, Gregory tells us that one of humanity's highest gifts is that that it is the image not just of any god, but of an incomprehensible God. (Ch. XI) The doctrine of the *imago dei* then means that the human mind is incomprehensible to itself, just as God is incomprehensible to it. (This incomprehensibility of God is expressed more fully in the *Life of Moses*.) Does this claim strike you as more philosophical than theological? Or do you see a theological consequence following from it? (Note: this is the Nyssa that a certain contemporary philosopher adores—along with *epektasis*!)
11. What do we make of Gregory's doctrine of *epektasis*, which states that since the Good is infinite, our eschatological entry into the Good (i.e. into God's presence) could only take the form of an ongoing progression without end? How does this relate to his ethos of moral progress in this life? And what remains of this vision of the afterlife? (It obviously stands in some conflict with the emphasis on God's serene stillness, and the concomitant idea that entry into the divine presence is something like pure stasis or rest. For one thing—what is progressive 'motion' without time?)
12. What are the limits of allegory for Origen and for Gregory? Are there any? Origen is willing to pass beyond the letter of Genesis in order to portray his spiritual creation; Gregory makes the whole life of Moses into one big moralizing allegory. Are they still able to hold on to Scripture beyond allegory, and if so, how?

An early Christian 'proof' for philosophical idealism?

1. For after all that opinion on the subject of matter does not turn out to be beyond what appears consistent, which declares that it has its existence from Him Who is intelligible and immaterial. For we shall find all matter to be composed of certain qualities, of which if it is divested it can, in itself, be by no means grasped by idea. Moreover in idea each kind of quality is separated from the substratum; but idea is an intellectual and not a corporeal method of examination. If, for instance, some animal or tree is presented to our notice, or any other of the things that have material existence, we perceive in our mental discussion of it many things concerning the substratum, the idea of each of which is clearly distinguished from the object we contemplate: for the idea of colour is one, of weight another; so again that of quantity and of such and such a peculiar quality of touch: for softness, and two cubits long, and the rest of the attributes we spoke of, are not connected in idea either with one another or with the body: each of them has conceived concerning it its own explanatory definition according to its being, having nothing in common with any other of the qualities that are contemplated in the substratum.

2. If, then, colour is a thing intelligible, and resistance also is intelligible, and so with quantity and the rest of the like properties, while if each of these should be withdrawn from the substratum, the whole idea of the body is dissolved; it would seem to follow that we may suppose the concurrence of those things, the absence of which we found to be a cause of the dissolution of the body, to produce the material nature: for as that is not a body which has not colour, and figure, and resistance, and extension, and weight, and the other properties, while each of these in its proper existence is found to be not the body but something else besides the body, so, conversely, whenever the specified attributes concur they produce bodily existence. Yet if the perception of these properties is a matter of intellect, and the Divinity is also intellectual in nature, there is no incongruity in supposing that these intellectual occasions for the genesis of bodies have their existence from the incorporeal nature, the intellectual nature on the one hand giving being to the intellectual potentialities, and the mutual concurrence of these bringing to its genesis the material nature.

- Gregory of Nyssa, *De Hominis Opificio*, Ch. xxiv