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INNOVATION IN TRADITION: GREGORY THE GREAT'S USE OF CLASSICAL AND
PATRISTIC THOUGHT IN HIS COMMENTARY ON THE SONG OF SONGS

Caleb N. Zuiderveen

Innovation in Tradition: Gregory the Great's Use of Classical and Patristic Thought in His Commentary on the *Song of Songs*

by
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¹ Mark DeCogliano, "Introduction," *Gregory the Great: On the Song of Songs* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012), 85.

To follow the example of Jesus and to draw closer to God in a meaningful relationship was the ultimate goal of the monastics. Starting with St. Anthony and spread by St. Athanasius in the fourth century CE, Egyptian monasticism was established in the deserts of North Africa. Around the fifth century, these monastic ideas disseminated within the western monastic world. John Cassian had brought the ideas of the east to Gaul, establishing a monastery, while Jerome translated the works of these desert monastics into Latin.¹ These monks employed eastern monastic theology in order to help interpret the Bible, especially the use of allegory and typology, which interpreted that the Old Testament as foreshadowing the New Testament. Monks made commentaries on different books on the Old Testament, demonstrating its prefiguration of the Gospel revealed by Jesus Christ. However, many monks avoided reading or commenting on the *Song of Songs*, saving it as one of their last books to study. Because of its erotic imagery and sexual content, abbots and monks worried that reading this book would threaten their chastity and thereby threaten their salvation as a whole. Ascetics like Augustine preferred to use the text in parts while explaining other Scriptures or in their own works on the contemplative life. However, earlier ascetics, such as Origen and Ambrose, wrote entire commentaries on their interpretation of the *Song of Songs*. All these authors agreed that, although the literal meaning is explicit and can be a stumbling block for Christians, the *Song of Songs* should be read allegorically in order to understand its true meaning. By using this idea of allegorical interpretation, theologians examined the spiritual truths found in the *Song of Songs* including the relationship between God and the Church, the mystical union between God and an individual soul, or a representation of the Virgin Mary's intimate spiritual relationship with God

¹ Mark DelCogliano, "Introduction," *Gregory the Great: On the Song of Songs* (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012), 85.

before the birth of Christ.² Teachers then taught these allegories to spiritually mature students, who would sustain the allegorical tradition of this book for future generations.

In the sixth century, Gregory the Great delivered his allegorical interpretation in his *Commentaries on the Song of Songs*. Historians have debated whether Gregory actually wrote the commentary, as this work was not explicitly mentioned in early medieval biographies on Gregory and because of the stylistic differences between his text and the style of his other, more famous, works such as the *Dialogues* or *Moralia*. This, in addition to the brevity of the work and the sudden ending, hints that it was not part of Gregory's list of works. Bernard Capelle resolved this conundrum in 1929, when he determined that verses one through eight were authentic, while other parts were just additions to Gregory's work.³ However, the abrupt ending in the middle of the first chapter of the *Song of Songs* may imply that this is only a surviving fragment.⁴

Historians have different opinions on the originality of Gregory the Great and other theologians of his time. In *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought*, Homes Dudden looks at Gregory the Great and sees no original contribution to the idea of the monastic, contemplative life.⁵ For him, Gregory was merely compiling the ideas of previous patristic fathers in his works and not adding anything new to the study. Beryl Smalley argued that Gregory the Great borrowed greatly from, but interestingly altered, the ideas of Augustine regarding *lectio divina* in his exegeses; that the study of the Scriptures is the highest form of

¹ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Weston, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1978), 26 and 32.

² E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 11.

³ DelCogliano, "Introduction," 30.

⁴ Ibid., 13.

⁵ Homes Dudden, *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought*, vol. 2 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1967), 173.

gaining wisdom in this world, in order to create a new understanding of this term.⁶ Although her observation on Gregory's writing shows that he did use ideas from previous patristic fathers, Smalley emphasizes Augustine and Cassian. However, Carole Straw in *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection*, reveals the influence of many other patristic fathers, in addition to Cassian and Augustine, on the theology of Gregory. Straw argues that Gregory's writing style and theology was greatly influenced by Ambrose as well as Augustine and Cassian. In addition to the emulation of those figures in his writings, she believes Gregory knew the translations of some of the Desert Fathers including Origen, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa.⁷ In addition to these patristic influences, Straw also highlights Gregory's knowledge of classical thought throughout his works, using philosophies such as Stoic and Platonic thought.⁸ Gregory simply took these theological "pieces" and put them together, creating a unique theology.⁹

Such borrowing and piecing together of patristic and classical tradition was used in the classical to medieval period. Pierre Hadot argues in his essay, "Philosophy, Exegesis, and Creative Mistakes," that the teachings of Plato and Aristotle formed the exegetical foundation of Early Christian to medieval theologians. In this tradition, pupils of a philosopher wrote a commentary on a classical work by using previous commentaries, then wove their new interpretation in different parts of their commentary.¹⁰ Also, E. Ann Matter, in *The Voice of My Beloved*, states that originality in the medieval eye was not creating something totally different,

⁶ Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1978), 26 and 32.

⁷ Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰ Pierre Hadot, "Philosophy, Exegesis and Creative Mistakes," *Philosophy: As a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 72.

but instead was the process of borrowing other theological ideas and finding a way to fit them together into a single theological interpretation.¹¹ Thus, although the new commentator's work was very similar to that of his master, there were different pieces of interpretation that distinguished his work from his predecessors. When comparing the commentaries of two authors, "mistakes" or "errors" in texts may not be errors. Instead, it is the latter's creative analysis which accounts for his divergence from the former's original interpretation.¹² Hadot realizes that this classical philosophical tradition was passed onto Christian spirituality because of the influences of Egyptian monasticism, primarily through the works of Origen and Clement of Alexandria.¹³ In his works, Gregory followed this tradition, as his overall theology hearkened back to classical and patristic tradition.

In this essay, I will use Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* as a case study to prove and expand upon Straw and Hadot's observations that Gregory the Great blends the classical and patristic ways of thinking with more recent theological ideas in order to create a unique, but familiar, way of looking at the contemplative life and the idea of predestination. I will also show that Gregory borrowed from and merged the spiritual and mystical ideas of the desert fathers and Cassian into two separate allegories. By merging eastern, mystical ways of thinking with ideas from ascetics like Augustine and Cassian, Gregory ultimately displayed his originality. His originality, not only in this commentary, but also in his other major works, made Gregory and his style of exegesis become the fulcrum of western spiritual thought, shifting Europe from the Late Antiquity into the medieval intellectual tradition.

¹¹ Matter, *My Beloved*, 6.

¹² Hadot, "Creative Mistakes," 75.

¹³ Pierre Hadot, "Ancient Spiritual Exercises," *Philosophy: As a Way of Life*, ed. Arnold Davidson, trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 140.

I will focus on two allegories present in Gregory's Commentary on the Song of Songs. The first allegory is Gregory's representation of the House of God. In this allegory, Gregory extensively uses and expands upon the ideas of the patristics and Cassian combining them into one grand allegory which deals with how grace functions for monastics in the contemplative life. At the end of the commentary, Gregory wrote an allegory of the chariot, using the concept of Plato's Chariot from the Patristic viewpoints of Evagrius and Ambrose, and combining these two ideas of the chariot into a unique allegory in order to help explain his view of predestination. Finally, I will conclude by showing how this attribute of Gregory's exegetical approach leads him to become the main transitional figure intellectually to the medieval mindset.

I: The Allegory of the House of God

The Church of God is like the house of a king. And in this house has an entrance. It has a staircase. It has a banquet hall. It has bedchambers. Everyone who has faith within the Church has already passed through the entrance of this house. For as an entrance gives access to the rest of the house, so faith is the gateway to the rest of the virtues. Everyone who has hope within the Church has already reached the staircase of this house. For hope lifts the heart such that it pursues the lofty regions and abandons the lowly. Every resident of this house who has charity walks as if in the banquet halls. For vast is the charity, which extends itself even to the love of enemies. Every resident of the Church who already scrutinizes God's lofty secrets, who already ponders his hidden commandments, has entered as if into the bedchamber.¹⁴

In part twenty-six of his *Commentary of the Song of Songs*, Gregory introduced an allegory displayed in *Song of Songs* 1:3cd. In this allegory he painted a picture of the House of God, framing this allegory around *1 Corinthians* 13:13: "And now abides faith, hope, and charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."¹⁵ Augustine used this verse in order to

¹⁴ Gregory the Great, "Commentary on the Song of Songs," *Gregory the Great: On the Song of Songs*, trans. Mark DelCogliano (Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2012), 128.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. 13:13

formulate and outline his work to Laurentius, *The Enchiridion*. In this book Augustine argued that the best way to worship God is through faith, hope, and charity and that the rest of the work is to help his pupil gain wisdom in these three areas of worship.¹⁶ Like Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, it also was a guidebook on how to live the Christian life and gain more understanding of God in order to draw closer to God's precepts.¹⁷ Augustine calls faith, hope, and love God's graces.¹⁸ This shows that these attributes are not earned by man's work, but are only given to man by God. However, Gregory changes this idea, calling them virtues rather than God's graces.¹⁹ Augustine's idea of using faith, hope, and love as a guideline to help others understand the Christian life was adapted by Gregory, as seen in the episodes in his *Commentary*. This is seen by the fact that one of the three—faith, hope, or charity-- is always present in any scene describing grace. Although these thoughts of Augustine, seen in *The Enchiridion*, influenced the development of Gregory's work, other influences and innovations can be seen throughout this allegory. Analyzing each of these episodes of grace separately, using the House of God analogy as a guide, Gregory's use and innovation on patristic theology becomes even more apparent.

The first part to Gregory's allegory of the House of God is the Entrance of Faith. One Gregory stated in his *Commentary* that everyone that has faith within the Church has already gone through this entrance.²⁰ However, the issue of who has this faith still remains. For

¹⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *The Enchiridion: on Faith, Hope, and Love*, ed. Henry Paolucci, trans. J. F. Shaw, (Washington D.C.: Regnery Gateway Inc., 1987), 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁹ Gregory, "Commentary," 128.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Augustine, faith was a grace that God had predestined, not something that could be chosen or earned.²¹ As such, it would be impossible to know until Heaven whether someone was saved or not. However, Gregory does not use Augustine's idea of faith; in its place, he argues that Jesus' victory over Satan allows faith for those who want it.²² Gregory displayed that it is the willing turn to God by people that gives them faith and that their future actions and works that sustain the faith in their soul.²³ This idea of the important role of human works and free will in salvation comes from the ideas of Origen and John Cassian. Origen, having a very Platonic view of salvation, argued that eventually every soul would be redeemed, as every soul worked to climb towards perfection.²⁴ Cassian revised this theory, not accepting the salvation of everyone. This theory was not only unbiblical in the eyes of Cassian, as Revelation²⁵ mentioned a set number of people saved and Jesus stated that only few people would actually take the journey down the narrow road, but also was anti-Catholic, as these ideas of Origen had been condemned by the Church for heresy.²⁶ Instead, Cassian valued the importance of human action and confession in salvation in conjunction with the grace of God. His *Institutes* mentioned a thief who was able to gain salvation via confession, and then God calls the former thief to the pursuit of perfection.²⁷

²¹ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 36-38.

²² Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism: Gregory the Great through the 12th Century* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), 52.

²³ Gregory, "Commentary," 143.

²⁴ David N. Bell, *A Cloud of Witnesses: An Introduction to the Development of Christian Doctrine to AD 500* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2007), 56

²⁵ Rev. 14:1.

²⁶ Matter, *My Beloved*, 23.

²⁷ Donald Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003),

As a monk continues in the pursuit of perfection it is God's grace which assists him and ultimately leads to the creation of virtue in the monk.²⁸ Thus, Cassian viewed the man's confession to the truth of God as the means to salvation with grace being God's gift to help advance the soul down the road of perfection and to help him bear spiritual fruit.

The second part of the allegory of the House of God is the Staircase of Hope. The virtue of hope is called a staircase because it lifts the soul from the lowly regions of the worldly realm and elevates them to that of the heavenly realm.²⁹ For Origen, the importance of Christianity is that it allows the soul to rise to perfection and achieve a higher condition.³⁰ Gregory's staircase of hope gives the transition from which souls rise from the worldly level of Christianity to the contemplative. Souls who achieved contemplation give hope to young souls who watch the Bride enter the bedchamber of the King.³¹ This sight of other souls entering the bedchamber not only creates the staircase of hope for other witnesses to ascend but it also gives the witnesses hope for grace and forgiveness. Augustine also uses hope as a connecting point between faith and charity. However, Gregory's idea of hope differs from that of Augustine in this section as well. In *The Enchiridion*, hope is only found through God, and not revealed in the self or others.³² However, in Gregory's allegory, hope is revealed not directly through God, but through an intermediary person, either through Christ or the Bride.³³ In addition, Augustine's graces are in direct relation

²⁸ Ibid., 147.

²⁹ Gregory, "Commentary," 128.

³⁰ Matter, *My Beloved*, 20.

³¹ Gregory, "Commentary," 130.

³² Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 132.

³³ Gregory, "Commentary," 130.

with charity, in that hope cannot exist without charity.³⁴ These three graces work together in his theology. However, for Gregory the Great and his allegory of the House of God, the virtue of hope was a transition to charity. Faith was on the ground level while charity was a second level of the house, separating the future Bride with the King's bedchamber. However, it is the grace of God that brings a soul to these steps, and that ultimately leads the soul up towards the high places.

After ascending the staircase, the soul makes its way through the vastness of Charity. Before describing the journey itself, there are at least two times in which Gregory directly stated or inferred that compunction helped start the soul on the journey through the vastness. This idea of compunction originally comes from the Bible verse Acts 2:37 in which all the people in the house were "pricked in their hearts" on the day of Pentecost (*compuncti sunt corde*).³⁵ The concept of compunction was later expanded upon by Cassian. For Cassian, compunction was an important part of the Christian monastic life leading to "fiery prayer" and, as an ultimate result, a deeper contemplation for God.³⁶ This part of the life was not dictated by what a person did, but instead was entirely the grace of God, not achieved through human actions. However, there were many avenues through which the Spirit of God gave the grace of compunction to a soul journeying through the monastic life. These included events like hearing the spiritual conference of an elder, death of a loved one, meditation, and singing hymns.³⁷ For Cassian, the grace of compunction was one major part of the Christian journey, divinely propelling a soul towards God through contemplation and fiery prayer.

³⁴ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 135.

³⁵ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 48.

³⁶ Columba Stewart, *Cassian the Monk* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 125-6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Gregory adds this idea of compunction to the House of God allegory in order to help the readers understand how the grace of God works to advance the contemplative life. For Gregory, the Bride's love and longing for the King's presence and intimates is an allegory for the true meaning: the soul's compunction for God and his presence in its contemplative life.³⁸ Gregory's notion of compunction, unlike that of Cassian, did not just embody fiery prayer or sorrow for sins; compunction was the desire for total commitment to Christianity.³⁹ Gregory first mentioned compunction when he described the soul's compunction to learn more about God. While listening to a preacher, a soul long's for the understanding of God, not via a preacher, but in her own through the grace of God.⁴⁰ Gregory then compares this longing sensation with the verse from *Song of Songs* 1:1a where the Bride says "Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth."⁴¹ In this passage, we can see the influence of Cassian in the writing of Gregory. Gregory first shows how the words of a preacher, like that of a wise elder, can bring a soul to compunction. However, Gregory introduces this theme into the *Song of Songs*, a work rarely discussed by Cassian. Although the soul longs for God, it is ultimately God's decision to provide the compunction. In the verses and in Gregory's explanation, God is the actor who decides to answer the longing. However, this is not the only time that Gregory mentioned compunction. A little later, he dedicated a whole section of the commentary to compunction. He mentioned that although converts start out fearing God, through the grace of charity, one feels compunction to further

³⁸ Matter, *My Beloved*, 95.

³⁹ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 48-49.

⁴⁰ Gregory, "Commentary," 120.

⁴¹ Ibid.

explore the mysteries of God and pursue this relationship.⁴² Both charity and compunction are related, for without charity one cannot experience compunction. These two episodes showed the great influence that Cassian's works had on Gregory the Great, and how he used and modified Cassian's view of compunction in order to help explain how God's grace helps souls go on the journey through the Vastness of Charity.

Gregory divides the journey through the vastness of charity into four stages. Reaffirming the stages of contemplative growth, as seen in his *Moralia in Job*, the soul's journey through charity is characterized by this formula: know Him through hearing, love him through knowing, seek Him through loving, and gain Him through seeking.⁴³ The soul knows God through Hearing during the previously mentioned episode where soul is led, by compunction, to know Him more through listening to the preacher.⁴⁴ The soul then loves Him through knowing during the episode where the soul grows nearer to God through compunction through the grace of charity.⁴⁵ Then she seeks him through loving by perfecting charity, for it is only through the perfection of charity that one can enter the bedchamber.⁴⁶ Finally, the soul gains access to God through seeking when it finally arrives to the bedchamber and experience more lofty secrets about God and His nature.⁴⁷ All these scenes, though disconnected in the commentary, come together through the theme of grace and its guidance of the soul through the vastness of charity. Although this chain of progression may seem like a new idea given upon by Gregory in the *Moralia*, the idea of a

⁴² Ibid., 122.

⁴³ McGinn, *Growth of Mysticism*, 58.

⁴⁴ Gregory, "Commentary," 120.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 122.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 129.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

four-fold path to the life of a Christian was given by Augustine and later innovated by Gregory to fit his theological views on the spiritual journey of a Christian. In the *Enchiridion*, Augustine gives four, rough stages of the Christian: before the law, under the law, under grace, and full, perfect peace.⁴⁸ However, Gregory's allegory does not deal explicitly with a Christian's conversion as seen in Augustine's version. Instead, Gregory focuses on the stages of the contemplative life of a soul going through the vastness of charity. As the audience for this work was not the laity but instead the hierarchy of the Church, Gregory's focused on God's grace for a Christian and not on the conversion of a new soul.

Finally, Gregory completed his allegory of the House of God with an exegesis of the Bedchamber of the King. In this section of the allegory, Gregory expanded 1 Corinthians 13:13 by adding the bedchamber as the final step of the soul's ascension towards God. In this section he includes the mystical interpretations of the *Song of Songs* given by patristics such as Origen and Ambrose in addition to the ideas of a more personal relationship between a soul and God as seen in the theology of Cassian. Ambrose and Origen used the erotic imagery of the *Song of Songs* in order to describe a union between a soul and its union with God.⁴⁹ In Origen's *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, he argued that the sexual language of the *Song of Songs* was an allegory of the mystical union between Christ and His Bride, the gentile Church.⁵⁰ Ambrose, using Platonic ideas concerning the symbolism of *eros*, speaks on the soul's ascension to God and eventual unification with God. Like Origen, Ambrose's commentaries on the *Song of Songs* showed that

⁴⁸ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 137.

⁴⁹ F. B. A. Asiedu, "The *Song of Songs* and the Ascent of the Soul: Ambrose, Augustine, and the Language of Mysticism," *Vigiliae Christianae* 55, no 3 (2001): 300.

⁵⁰ Mark S. M. Scott, "Shades of Grace: Origin and Gregory of Nyssa's Soteriological Exegesis of the "Black and Beautiful" Bride in *Song of Songs* 1:5," *The Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 1 (2006): 65-66.

the Bride represented the soul of the Church, and the bedchamber was when the Church became one with her groom, Christ.⁵¹

However, for Augustine, the language of a union with God is absent from his works altogether, and the soul can, at best, capture momentary glimpses and visions of God because of a person's fleshly body.⁵² After love for holiness, there was no further a soul could go towards God without the ascension of the soul to heaven because of the death of the earthly bodies.⁵³ Although this idea of divine revelations and visions from God is present in Gregory's notion of the bedchamber, the lack of intimate language by Augustine set his ultimate result of contemplation apart from that of Gregory. The ideas of Cassian, however, revived the notion of an intimate relationship with God, although he made only a few comments on the *Song of Songs* itself. Cassian argued that a Christian did not have an impersonal relationship with God found only through the Church, instead, a soul could actually have a personal, intimate relationship with God through contemplation.⁵⁴ Unlike previous authors, Cassian's emphasis is not on the Church but on the individual's soul and her personal, contemplative journey towards God. God is not solely interested in the good of the body of the Church, but he cares for individual members individually and wants all who believe in God to experience a closer relationship with the divine.

Gregory takes Cassian's idea of the personal relationship with God and merges it with the allegorical erotic language seen in Origen and Ambrose's commentaries on the *Song of Songs*. Continuing with his House of God allegory, Gregory's innovation is to take these ideas of

⁵¹Asiedu, "Ascent of the Soul," 303.

⁵² Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994): 230 and 233.

⁵³ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 137.

⁵⁴ Fairbairn, *Grace and Christology*, 160.

intimacy and put them in a specific place seen in the *Song of Songs*: the bedchamber.⁵⁵ In the bedchamber, the soul finally perfects charity and then comprehends the mysteries of God, while at the same time feeling humility as the soul perceives how precious this union with God is and his unworthiness for this event.⁵⁶ The bedchamber encounter was the result of a soul's blossoming relationship with God. As Christian souls contemplated God through monastic spiritual exercises, God would occasionally grant some souls grace, which, after the perfection of charity, would lead them to the bedchamber where God and human soul interconnected, giving the souls mystical visions and revelations while also teaching the soul humility. Gregory combined ideas from Origin, Ambrose, Cassian, and the physical bedchamber of a house, to break from Augustine's idea of faith, hope, and love; instead, changing it to faith, hope, love with the perfection of these resulting in the bedchamber of God. However, reaching this bedchamber was the ultimate result of the grace of God, for it not only required continence, sexual purity of the body, but chastity, sexual purity of the mind.⁵⁷ People devoting their lives to God could discipline their bodies and fight spiritual forces with humility in order to achieve continence. However, they also understood that it was only by the gift of God's grace that one was able to gain chastity.⁵⁸ This was only for a short time, for worldly lusts and pride would take away that gift until the Christian would be spiritually ready to accept God's gift of chastity.⁵⁹ Thus, this final bedchamber could not be reached by man's work alone, for the bedchamber was reserved for those who, by God's determination alone, attained the grace of chastity.

⁵⁵ Gregory, "Commentary," 129.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Stewart, *Cassian the Monk*, 71.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Through the allegory of the House of God, Gregory adapted classical ways of scholarship and commentary in order to expound and combine previous patristic theology. Classical philosophers wrote commentaries on their previous master's work, adding new interpretations to the original.⁶⁰ Through his basic classical education, in addition to studying works by Stoic Christian theologians like Ambrose and Augustine, Gregory was continually exposed to the classical ideas of learning and thought.⁶¹ Jaroslav Pelikan explained that in order to see Gregory's designs of doctrine in the historical framework of the seventh, eighth, and ninth centuries, one must look at his works as "Augustinian traditionalism."⁶² However, when analyzing Gregory's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* Pelikan's statement is somewhat mistaken. This allegory showed that Augustine was not the real master whom Gregory tried to comment upon in the classical tradition. Instead, Augustine's thoughts made up the bare framework of the building. Gregory constructed the rest of this theological building out of the ideas of Origen, Ambrose, and Cassian. Whereas in every part of faith, hope, and love Gregory changed some of Augustine's theological ideas, Gregory only slightly changes the ideas of Origen, Ambrose, and Cassian, fitting more with classical scholarship. Gregory had the Latin texts of Origen, translated by Jerome. Thus, he would have been able to easily find specific theological ideas pertaining to this theme.⁶³

Henri de Lubac expressed the influence of Origen in Gregory's work by stating that the exegesis of Gregory so resembled that of Origen that Gregory relied more on Origen than on

⁶⁰ Hadot, "Creative Mistakes," 72.

⁶¹ Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 15.

⁶² Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 350-351.

⁶³ DelCogliano, 85.

Augustine.⁶⁴ Gregory also used Ambrose extensively, even almost copying Ambrose's exegesis on the *Song of Songs* word for word.⁶⁵ However, as seen in his commentaries on *Song of Songs* 1:2, Gregory does occasionally change the ideas of Ambrose, emphasizing the importance of God's love over Ambrose's other explanations for the kiss of God.⁶⁶ Also, as was mentioned before, in these passages describing the House of God, Gregory changed the focus of the exegetical interpretation of *Song of Songs* from one about the Church, as was seen in Origen and Ambrose, and instead chose to relate it to the individual's relationship with God. Gregory also combined their commentaries and exegeses on the *Song of Songs* with the theological ideas of Cassian, including compunction and Cassian's ideas of grace in the monastic journey towards perfection. Thus, Gregory brought together the theological ideas of Origen and Ambrose's with those of Cassian, within the framework of Augustine. Although Gregory only showed variations on patristic themes, these changes created a unique distinctly Gregorian style.⁶⁷ By combining these theological interpretations together, creating his own piece to the allegory, and adding his own new exegesis of the addition of the bedchamber, Gregory developed a unique understanding of how 1 Corinthians 13:13 applies to a Christian's contemplative journey ascending towards God.

II. The Allegory of the Chariot

And so, God has chariots. He is the conductor of holy souls and travels around everywhere by means of holy souls... Pharaoh has chariots. But his chariots were submerged into the Red Sea insofar as many wicked people have been transformed by baptism... In other words: "While you were

⁶⁴ Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, trans. Marc Sebanc (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 153-4.

⁶⁵ DelCogliano, "Introduction," 93.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁶⁷ Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 13.

still in the chariots of Pharaoh, while you were still enslaved to demonic works, I associated you with my cavalry. For I consider what I will have accomplished in you through predestination. And so I have placed you among my horses.” For God sees that many are still servants of self-indulgence and greed, and yet by a secret judgment considers what he has already worked in them. For God has horses but he sees many are still the horses of Pharaoh.⁶⁸

Gregory used the allegory of the chariot in order to explain his ideas of predestination, or, as Gregory conceived it, God’s knowledge of who is truly saved and who is damned. This theme of the chariot was not new to Gregory, or to the rest of society during Late Antiquity. It was first introduced by Plato in his *Phaedrus* dealing with the soul and its flight towards the beloved. Plato wrote this allegory in order to illustrate the human’s soul’s plight to reach the *Logos*, or the supreme Form.⁶⁹ Plato argued that the soul needed to rid itself of its fleshly body and worldly lusts, in order to follow what the soul truly desired: the reunion of the soul with the *Logos*. Later classical philosophers implemented and slightly altered Plato’s ideas in order to fit their philosophies.⁷⁰ Classical Christian theologians, especially those influenced by Stoicism, took Plato’s metaphor and used it to describe the soul and its need for salvation, which ultimately influenced the ideas of Gregory the Great. This section will look at the chariot metaphors of Plato, Evagrius, and Ambrose, showing how they influenced Gregory’s concept of the chariots of God and Satan.

Plato’s model chariot is of two horses and a charioteer heading with desire towards the true beauty, the soul’s beloved.⁷¹ The charioteer embodies intellect and reason, guiding the soul

⁶⁸ Gregory, “Commentary,” 142-143.

⁶⁹ Charles Freeman, *The Greek Achievement* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 271.

⁷⁰ Hadot, “Creative Mistakes,” 72.

⁷¹ Plato, “Phaedrus,” *The Dialogues of Plato, vol. 1, translated into English with Analyses and Introductions by B. Jowett, M.A. in Five Volumes*, 3rd edition, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1892), accessed April 28, 2013, http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=111&chapter=39485&layout=html&Itemid=27.

to his beloved, the object of his desire. The two horses are dualities of each other. The horse on the right is white, upright, honorable, of noble breed, modest, and obedient. The horse on the left, however, is exactly the opposite, being black, crooked, of ignoble breed, insolent, and disobedient.⁷² When the charioteer is moved by desire and memory to draw near to and experience the vision of love he seeks to behold, he urges the two horses on with modesty. However, during this time the dark horse pushes on faster and uncontrollably while the white horse and charioteer get hurt and tossed around as they are not able to gain any control of the dark horse's urge. Because of this, the charioteer must pull the reins violently in order to regain some semblance of control; however, while the white horse obeys the command, the black horse is full of wrath and reproaches.⁷³ The next time they pursue desire, the black horse violently pulls the bit violently with his teeth, injuring the charioteer and bloodying his own mouth. This event, ultimately leads to the charioteer punishing the black horse severely.⁷⁴ According to Plato, this cycle repeats until the charioteer eventually gains control over the dark horse and it able to finally follow his beloved "in modesty and holy fear."⁷⁵

This allegory of the chariot, though very influential in, classical philosophy was reappropriated to give educated Christians a better understanding of their souls as they try to draw closer to God. Evagrius, an ascetic monk living in Egypt, gave an example of a rational soul in his work, *The Praktikos*. Although this allegory is not explained as a chariot, he uses the same tri-part formula as Plato. Interestingly, in this version the duality is not between virtue and

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

vice but instead between two different types of virtues. In this allegory, there are two “horses:” one embodying rational thought and the other concupiscible thought.⁷⁶ The rational part, when fully developed, leads to the fruits of prudence, understanding, and wisdom. Prudence protected and warred against the hostile powers of the world, understanding directs all the spirit’s actions towards perfection in order to achieve their heavenly aim, while wisdom allowed for the contemplation of meaningful structure in corporeal and incorporeal objects.⁷⁷ The developed concupiscible “horse” leads to the fruits of temperance, charity, and continence. Temperance being the ability to look upon worldly affairs free of passion, charity shows the love of God to every image of God, while continence allows the soul to refuse, with joy, the pleasures of the world so that she can focus on the heavenly.⁷⁸ The charioteer, deemed the “irascible part” by Evagrius, embodies virtue, courage, and patience.⁷⁹ This part, working in relationship to prudence, helps to cultivate and defend the virtues that are being cultivated by the rational and the other concupiscible parts and to attack any vice that would act against the virtues. Justice could be seen as the reins of the chariot, ultimately holding everything together in perfect harmony.⁸⁰ As the whole system is working together as a result of justice, the Christian man of wisdom ultimately gains knowledge from God as a result.⁸¹ As seen, Evagrius employed the basic model of Plato’s chariot in order to construct a vision of the wise man. This man, through disciplining his soul, is now able to lead a fruitful life for Christ with both “horses” helping him

⁷⁶ Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos: Chapters on Prayer*, trans John Eudes Bamberger, (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1981), 38.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid., 38-39.

to achieve a fruitful relationship with God. Although Evagrius does employ the chariot idea, Neoplatonic ideas like dualism, *logos*, and *nous* are absent in this allegory. However, not all theologians had this optimistic view on the human soul. Pessimism on the condition of the human soul can be seen in Ambrose's version of the allegory of the chariot in his work, *On Virginity*. In his version, there are four horses pulling the chariot instead of the previous two. These horses represent four vices, or four affections of the soul: anger, desire, pleasure, and fear.⁸² The horses are unmanageable and damage each other and the chariot itself. The charioteer, unlike the other two, does not represent reason and virtue but instead is a weak soul who is weighed down by his perishable body. The charioteer is tossed and heaved around by the horses of affection as he is assailed with fear.⁸³ Consequently, the soul is destined for destruction at the hands of the original charioteer because he is too weak to control his horses.

However, the soul can solve this problem by accepting the power of the Word to take charge of the chariot. The Word, unlike the human's soul, is a skilled charioteer who is able to teach the soul to use reason in order to gain control of the horses.⁸⁴ Ambrose actively used Neoplatonic thought in this allegory, bringing up the ideas of *logos* and *nous*. The Word in the Greek was *logos*, which Christians associated with the Scriptures, Jesus, and God, as referenced in John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God."⁸⁵ However, it also hearkened back to the *logos* used by Plato in his writings. As the true and perfect form, the *logos* also had perfect intellect, or *nous*. Origin proposed that when a Christian receives the truth, through the scriptures, the *logos* imparts some of its *nous* to help

⁸² McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 123.

⁸² Ambrose of Milan, *On Virginity*, trans. Daniel Callam (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing, 1996), 43.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, "Commentary," 142.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, *Study of the Bible*, 162.

⁸⁵ John 1:1

restore the fallen *nous* of the human.⁸⁶ Ambrose's chariot displayed this fact, as the *logos* imparted its *nous* to the charioteer. Consequently, the driver, who is now enlightened by the Word, then steers the horses towards the "field of truth" in order to appease the horses of affection and keep them from turning down the crooked paths of deception. This field is not straight, however, and veers from the heights down to the valleys below, and it is only through the skillful mastery of the Word that the soul can arrive at the Lord's stable.⁸⁷ Here, bread from heaven comes down to feed the horses and the whole of the soul is saved from destruction and nourished after the long and fretful journey.

In his commentary on *Song of Songs* 1:8, Gregory combines these chariot allegories together in order to create an analogy that explains the Biblical idea of predestination. In Gregory's allegory, there are not one, but two chariots, spiritual dualities of each other. The first chariot is God's holy chariot while the other one is Pharaoh's chariot, led by Satan.⁸⁸ This reference of Pharaoh alludes to the Exodus, when the Israelites were delivered out of Egypt. Christian theologians reading the Exodus argued that the story, though real was an allegory of a spiritual truth. They attributed the Israelites with the Christians while Egypt and Pharaoh were representations of the flesh and the world.⁸⁹ The horses that pull each chariot are individual souls who are identified by the fruits that they produce during their life on earth. For example, Gregory pointed out that the chariot of God contains holy souls pulling the chariot which can be identified by fervently seeking after the virtues of humility, chastity, or teaching.⁹⁰ That is, those souls

⁸⁶ McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism*, 125.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Gregory, "Commentary," 142.

⁸⁹ Smalley, *Study of the Bible*, 162.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

living in the House of God. However, Gregory characterized the horses pulling Pharaoh's chariot by the vices of self-indulgence, pride, greed, envy, and falsehood.⁹¹ In this allegory, Gregory reintroduced dualism into the charioteer analogy and used it to show how God knows those who are horses in his chariot, even when they still bound to Satan's chariot.

Gregory's adaptation of Evagrius' and Ambrose's chariots is seen in the section dealing with God's hidden predestination. In this section he stated that there are souls that have attributes that are seemingly virtuous, like preaching, wisdom, chastity, generosity, longsuffering.⁹² Because of these attributes, Gregory realized that other humans would be likely to identify them with the horses on God's chariot. These horses have virtues very similar to that of Evagrius's chariot which contained the virtues of temperance, charity, continence, prudence, understanding, and wisdom.⁹³ Gregory's allegory then speaks on the souls that have attributes that are seemingly vices, including greed, pride, envy, and self-indulgence.⁹⁴ Again, he repeated the idea that many people will look at these outward vices and would identify them as part of Satan's chariot which is bound for destruction. Not surprisingly, these vices mirror the vices found in Ambrose's chariot: anger, desire, pleasure, and fear.⁹⁵ Gregory was able to expand on these ideas, first, because other theologians, like Jerome, had made Latin translations of Greek texts, including works by Origen and Ambrose. Also, the vices seen in Ambrose's chariot mirror the seven deadly sins seen in Proverbs 6:16-19 and the vices recorded in Galatians 5:19-21.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Evagrius, *Praktikos*, 38.

⁹⁴ Gregory, *Commentary*, 142.

⁹⁵ Ambrose, *On Virginity*, 43.

Gregory With all this information at his disposal in the Scriptures or in translated texts, Gregory borrowed the theological ideas expressed in the chariots of Evagrius and Ambrose in order to help his audience understand a greater theological principle. Gregory the Great does not merely repeat the ideas of Evagrius and Ambrose. Instead, he adapted their allegories to show that the final deeds of a soul may change the chariot that she hitched to, arguing that people who appeared to be Pharaoh's horses may turn from evil to good and thus become part of God's chariot, while other people who seemed like to have virtuous souls ends up committing evils and returning to the chariot of Pharaoh.⁹⁶ He finished the commentary by saying that God already knew these actions of the soul before they happened, which refers the doctrine of predestination espoused by Augustine. Gregory is able to say to the Bride that God considered her a part of his cavalry while still being part of the chariots of Pharaoh.⁹⁷ Gregory the Great implemented classically-inspired ideas via the adaptations of two major figures in eastern Christian monasticism, Evagrius and Ambrose. Using this expanded chariot allegory, Gregory explained the theological idea of predestination.

Gregory applied and tweaked the idea of predestination from the theory as described by Augustine. In the *Enchiridion*, Augustine explained that predestination meant that it was solely up to God's will and grace to determine who was going to be saved and who would be condemned.⁹⁸ Because God is all powerful by nature, the decisions made by humans should not be able to interfere with the will of God, and by the same logic, God's decisions on who goes to Heaven or Hell cannot be questioned because God knows what is best for creation. However,

⁹⁶ Gregory, *Commentary*, 143.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 143-144.

⁹⁸ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 112-113.

Gregory noted in his allegory that a person's actions to, or away from, faith also have some importance, in addition to the grace given only by God.⁹⁹ In the third paragraph, Gregory states that because of a person's "holy conduct" in the future, a person may appear in Pharaoh's chariot but actually be in God's chariot.¹⁰⁰ However, in order to avoid being condemned as a Pelagian, he notes at the end of paragraph two that God "by secret judgment considers what he has already worked in them."¹⁰¹ Gregory thereby stated that although it was the person's holy actions that showed that he was on God's chariot, it was only by the secret grace of God that the person was able to do the "holy conduct." With this, he not only affirmed the necessity of God's grace, but also a person's need for the contemplative life in order to assure his place on God's chariot.

Gregory's allegory of the chariots presents an even more focused look at how Gregory used the classical method of scholarship to combine patristic philosophy and theology. Though this chariot allegory was originally developed from classical Greek philosophy, Gregory the Great looked at the chariot allegory through the lens of patristic tradition rather than through that of pagan classical tradition. Because he could not read Greek, Gregory did not have the ability to read Plato and the original chariot language. Consequently, Gregory experienced the allegory of the chariot via the examples of at least those of Evagrius and Ambrose. Evagrius, who created his version of the chariot, followed in the steps of Origen and Plato, as he not only was well versed theologically, but also had read Plato, as he knew Greek. Gregory expanded and reinterpreted Origen's idea of moving from the active Christian life to a contemplative life.¹⁰² Gregory's classical education is also evident as seen from his use of the tri-part soul, much like

⁹⁹ Gregory, *Commentary*, 143.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, *The Greek Achievement*, 365.

¹⁰² Fairburn, *Grace and Christology*, 135.

that of Plato. Because of this, Gregory was familiar with at least some of his works as accompaniment to that of Origen.¹⁰³ Through Ambrose, Gregory gained a further understanding of Platonic ideas.¹⁰⁴ However, the chariots also showed Straw's idea of Gregory's inherent fascination with the classical dualism of the universe.¹⁰⁵ Although, he may not have read Plato's chariot analogy from the Greek classical tradition, Gregory's interpretation hearkens back to Plato's dualistic metaphor in combination with theological interpretation of the Exodus by contrasting the chariots of Pharaoh with the chariots of God. His allegory also reflected the influence of Stoic thought on the ideas of Gregory, as Stoicism also emphasized the actions of a person and that only the soul without passion would be able to gain *arête*, or virtue.¹⁰⁶ However, uncontrollable forces actually determined the limits of human behavior, much like the mystery of God's grace allowed for the holy actions of a Christian.¹⁰⁷ Christians used these ideas of Stoicism to create the eastern monastic tradition. Because Gregory came from the monastic life, his ideas had been influenced by that of classical Stoicism as well as patristic theology.

Much like the House of God allegory, Gregory adapted previous theological ideas in order to merge them together as his own. Evagrius and Ambrose's chariot analogies contributed to Gregory's grand allegory of the chariots, expressing the theological idea of predestination. Gregory altered the patristic chariots into apparent virtues and vices found in a man's soul. Gregory then argued that a soul's actions late in life could enable it to switch chariots, whether it was the grace of God giving a soul the ability to perform holy actions to help gain salvation, or a

¹⁰³ DelCogliano, "Introduction," 85.

¹⁰⁴ Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 15.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁰⁶ Freeman, *The Greek Achievement*, 365.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

soul who appears to be following God but his worldly actions make him fall into destruction. While Plato, Evagrius, and Ambrose saw the chariot metaphor as a fixed state, with no changing of horses, Gregory's idea is much more fluid, allowing a soul's actions, in addition to grace, to have a great importance in its salvation or condemnation after death. This reflects the importance that Gregory gave to the monastic life, and its intrinsic Stoic ideals. Because monasticism emphasizes the necessity for virtuous human conduct in order to reach the "bedchamber" of the "House of God," it is not surprising to see Gregory advocate the importance of holy living. By combining these ideas with his own revelations, he applied these allegories on the chariot to the debated topic of predestination in order to create a new way of understanding predestination as it applies to the human soul.

In Gregory's *Commentaries on the Song of Songs*, he created unique theological themes by piecing together past patristic thought. By employing classical techniques of literary explication, as described by Pierre Hadot, Gregory the Great was able to innovate on the themes of his "masters," including Origen, Ambrose, Cassian, and to a lesser extent, Augustine. As Carol Straw explained "What is often the invisible architecture in earlier writers becomes in Gregory the visible Church, with the beams and buttresses clearly articulated."¹⁰⁸ As Pierre Hadot noted, this was not uncommon for grand structures of interpretation to be built on banal or easily understood phrases.¹⁰⁹ However, through this burst of creativity, Gregory fashioned a distinct style that set him apart from the patristic theologies that came before. Though every part of his allegory made use of Cassian, Origen, Ambrose, and Augustine in order to help explain

¹⁰⁸ Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 13.

¹⁰⁹ Hadot, "Creative Mistakes," 75.

¹¹⁰ Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 13.

aspects of a verse's meaning, Gregory unified all these theologies in one "building," the House of God.

Similarly, Gregory constructed the allegory of the chariot. By using the pieces of theology given by Evagrius and Ambrose set in the style of Plato's chariot, Gregory constructed a chariot allegory in order to help explain the soteriological conundrum posed by Augustine's theory of predestination. Thus, the subject and the exegesis that Gregory used were not the things that made him "original." Instead, as Matter noted, the writer's ability to borrow and rework old, distinct allegories and exegeses and unify them into a single teaching was what made his works unique.¹¹⁰ Gregory's original contribution to the idea of the monastic, contemplative life was his theological ideas that brought together combination of multiple, formerly held spiritual ideas thought to be intrinsically different or separate.

Through this process of combining pieces of the theological puzzle given by eastern fathers of mysticism, Gregory slowly helped change the theological debate of the Middle Ages. His small changes to medieval spirituality by the combination of theological ideas eventually led to even more drastic changes from the original ideas of spirituality suggested by classical and patristic theologians.¹¹¹ As Gregory created new theological ideas out of the pieces of the old, patristic tradition, his new theological "edifice" would overshadow the elements that made them. As these processes continued under and after Gregory, a new way of thinking had also been produced. Gregory's style of exegesis ultimately led to the shifting of Western European spiritual thought from Late Antiquity to the medieval world.

¹¹⁰ Matter, *My Beloved*, 6.

¹¹¹ Straw, *Gregory the Great*, 13.

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