In volume 249 of Cistercian Studies, Brian Kerns OCSO translates the first half of Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 143, consisting of the Preface and first five books of Gregory the Great’s, Moralia in Iob, as well as his dedicatory letter of 596 to Leander of Seville, which has served traditionally as an introduction to the work. The volume is a fitting addition to a series already noteworthy for publishing the only English versions of Gregory's Forty Gospel Homilies, as well as his commentary On the Song of Songs. While these five books are but Part 1 of Gregory's six-part work comprising thirty-five books, it is an auspicious beginning. Kerns is a gifted translator, with a sound understanding of how Gregory thinks and writes. He has previously translated biography, Dom Gabriel Sortais: An Amazing Abbot in Turbulent Times by Guy Oury. Mark DelCogliano has written the excellent introduction accompanying Kerns' superb translation. DelCogliano’s translation and introduction to Gregory’s commentary On the Song of Songs appears in Cistercian Studies 244.

Until recently, English speakers have lacked a convenient translation of Gregory’s Moralia (even as they lacked a modern edition of the Latin until Corpus Christianorum Series Latina published volumes 143, 143A, and 143B between 1979 and 1985). While the Library of the Fathers published an anonymous translation at Oxford in 1844, copies were difficult to find. None is listed in the WorldCat database, for instance. Today’s technology provides us with a different story. One can find the old Oxford text on the internet (http://www.lectionarycentral.com/GregoryMoralialIndex.html and http://www.ecatholic2000.com/job/untitled-53.shtml). Moreover, the Oxford text became available again in 2012 and may be printed on-demand. One can even read a Kindle edition of the Library of the Fathers translation for ninety-nine cents. While the old Oxford edition remains valuable for being complete, the new translation by Kerns is vastly preferable for the clarity of its language as well as Kerns’ implicit understanding of Gregory and how he develops an argument.

DelCogliano’s introduction gives us a comprehensive yet succinct overview of the Moralia--its author, his methods of composition and his exegesis, the nature and place of the work in Christian tradition, etc. The Moralia is a classic; Gregory "recapitulates the best of patristic theology and monastic spirituality [transforming it] in light of his own experience, bequeathing his vision to the Middle Ages and beyond; even Christianity today has been deeply shaped by the Moralia" (1). The Moralia was Gregory’s magnum opus, although he may be better known for his Pastoral Care, or Dialogues, which includes the Life of St. Benedict. He also wrote books of homilies on the Gospel, Ezekiel, and the Song of Songs, and left a register of over 600 letters. Considered the fourth great doctor of the church, he is credited as "the Great" for his achievements as a writer and as pope (590-604), which included the conversion of the English, the reorganization of the papal patrimony and the administration of its laws, and reform of the Roman church along monastic lines. Gregory had been a civil servant--probably urban prefect--before his sudden conversion to monastic life (573). Ironically, he was ordered to return to secular service a few years later, becoming a deacon, then papal legate to the imperial court in Constantinople (579). He returned to Rome (585/6), and was later elected pope (590). Despite all his service in the world, he always remained at heart a monk.

The influence of the Moralia has few rivals; more than 500 manuscripts survive. It was "a hit" from the beginning, traveling to Spain in the late sixth century and England in the seventh century; Bede owes much to Gregory. Especially important in disseminating Gregory’s influence were the compilations by Paterius, his secretary, by the Irish monk, Lathcen, and Taio of Saragossa, all in the seventh century, as well as later florilegia by William of St. Thierry and Peter of Waltham in the twelfth century. The excerpts of Gregory figure prominently in the Glossa Ordinaria, and as this was the standard commentary on the Bible for monks, scholars, and preachers of all kinds, the Glossa served to diffuse Gregory's teaching most widely. Gregory was a favorite among Carolingians, and onward to Sts. Anselm, Bernard, Thomas, Francis, Theresa, the Victorines, Rupert of Deutz, and John of the Cross; even Erasmus read Gregory.

The Moralia is Gregory's longest work, and the longest exegesis of Job, even though the book had provoked comments of varying lengths (if not commentaries) from the church fathers East and West. Origen’s twenty-

The copyright holder is strictly prohibited.
two homilies have not survived, nor has Hilary of Poitiers' Tractatus in Job, but for a few lines. Augustine’s brief Adnotationes in Job is extant, as are two works by Arians (one named Julian and the other anonymous) and one by the Pelagian, Julian of Eclanum. Gregory follows early Christian writers in seeing Job as a model of "the virtues of justice, righteousness, humility, kindness, fear of God, detachment, wisdom, and, above all, patient endurance in the midst of suffering; suffering was furthermore seen as beneficial, medicinal, and pedagogical (see Jas 5:11)" (15). Still, Gregory considered Job "an obscure book that had hardly been discussed" (Ad Leand. 2.49), and believed his work filled a need.

Gregory’s composition of the Moralia varied with his circumstances. He delivered—preached—the earlier parts to the audience of fellow monks who accompanied him to Constantinople. Notaries took shorthand and later transcribed his oral commentaries through book 16. But he dictated the remaining books to notaries directly. After returning to Rome, he succeeded in revising the first ten books of the notaries’ transcriptions, aiming to achieve uniformity with his dictated manuscripts by "adding a great deal" and polishing its style. He was unable to revise books 11-16; these remain as the original transcriptions of his oral commentaries as he preached them. He divided the work into six parts (Part 1: preface and books 1-5; Part 2: books 6-10; Part 3: books 11-16; Part 4: books 17-22; Part 5: books 23-27; Part 6: books 28-35). While the manuscript was complete enough to be copied by 591, that he continued making changes is suggested by references to events that took place late as 596 and 597. Complete copies were in circulation by 602.

DelCogliano’s introduction is extremely valuable for his treatment of Gregory’s exegesis, particularly his excellent exposition of how classical grammatical reading techniques inform that exegesis. To comment on a biblical verse, one must first establish the correct text, and then determine exactly what the text is saying. Acting as text-critic, Gregory may compare different versions of a text (Jerome’s Vulgate, the Old Latin, and occasionally, the Septuagint). He then analyzes the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of the sentence to answer any number of implicit questions—about the persona of the narrator (i.e., prosopographical exegesis), the referents of pronouns, the subjects and objects of verbs, the significance of word-choice, the attribution of adjectives and adverbs, the meaning of a verb in a particular context, the identification of styles and genres, and so on. Furthermore, Gregory uses the grammatical techniques of paraphrasing a verse to explain a meaning, and cross-referencing events, people, words, ideas, etc. Identification of the skopos or the hypothesis of a text—its plot—is essential, if one text is supposed to illuminate another. Such lines of inquiry and methods of analysis are those of the grammarian, as Henri Marrou, Rober Kaster, and others have described them, and they are how—the tools, or the means with which—Gregory explores the meaning of a text, whether it be on a literal, figurative, or moral level of interpretation. Few treatments of Gregory’s exegesis are as illuminating as DelCogliano’s work here.

Gregory describes his approach to scripture in his dedicatory letter to Leander of Seville. This key passage is often quoted by scholars, and it allows us to appreciate Brian Kerns’ skill as a translator. After the Latin, the first translation is the anonymous Oxford text of 1844, the second is Kerns’ new translation:

Scienium uero est, quod quaedam historica expositione transcurrimus et per allegoriam quaedam typica inuistigatione perscrutamur, quaedam per sola allegoricae moralitatis instrumenta discutimus, nonnulla autem per cuncta simul sollicitus exquerentes tripliciter indagamus. Nam primum quidem fundamenta historiae ponimus; deinde per significationem typicam in arcem fidei fabricam mentis erigimus; ad extremum quoque per moralitatis gratiam, quasi superducto aedificio colore uestimus. (Ad Leand. 3 [CCSL 143:4]).

But be it known that there are some parts, which we go through in a historical exposition, some we trace out in allegory upon an investigation of the typical meaning, some we open in the lessons of moral teaching alone, allegorically conveyed, while there are some for which, with more particular care, we search out in all these ways together, exploring them in a threefold method. For first, we laid the historical foundations; next, by pursuing the typical sense, we erect a fabric of the mind to be a stronghold of faith; and moreover as the last step, by the grace of moral instruction, we, as it were, clothe the edifice with an overcast of coloring. (Epistle to Leander 3, Morals on the Book of Job, trans. Anonymous, Library of the Fathers [Oxford, 1844], p. 7.)

While this is accurate and very close to the Latin, it does not help the reader understand what Gregory means. To the modern ear, the English of the 1844 version is overwritten and archaic, even redundant and confusing. Questions arise: Is allegorical the same as typical? What is the meaning of the second sense, allegorical or typical, if the third, moral sense is also allegory? Kerns helps us understand by translating the meaning of Gregory’s Latin into idiomatic English:

We must make it clear that some passages are subjected only to a brief literal commentary and others to a thorough allegorical interpretation in order to bring out the typical sense; others are discussed using only the tools of allegory to make clear the moral sense, and others again are interpreted using all these means together,
the three senses that we diligently search out. First and foremost we base ourselves on the sacred history, then we elevate the mind’s construction into an edifice of faith through the typical meaning, and finally we adorn the building with an exterior color through the charm of moral action. (Moral Reflections, p. 51).

Kerns’ translation communicates the meaning of Gregory’s Latin with admirable clarity, but, admittedly, questions still remain. Here, DelCogliano provides an explanation of Gregory’s three senses of scripture that is truly helpful by defining the subject matter of each sense. The first historical sense refers to the literal meaning of the text, not the actual historical context. The second allegorical or typical sense pertains to doctrine and beliefs, while the third moral sense applies to human behavior. Both typical and moral senses are allegorical readings of texts for the inner meaning hidden behind external symbols (18). Gregory intended to treat every verse in these three senses sequentially, but soon abandoned this plan when the historical meaning became onerous.

As one can see from the passages just cited, Gregory’s Latin can be difficult to translate into fluid English prose, even though dictionaries may offer scholars several alternative English translations for one Latin word. The choices translators make depend on the context and their own knowledge of the author and subject matter. Kerns rarely makes a dubious choice; although one may prefer another word, his choices are legitimate and generally the difference is insignificant. An exception is his translation of Job 30:29, Frater fui draconum et socius struthionum, a verse Gregory cites at the very beginning of his exegesis (Mor. 1.1.1), whose images recur as markers of Job’s identity. Granted, authoritative dictionaries validate the possibility of Kerns’ translation, "I was a brother of snakes and a companion of birds." But a search of the Brepols database, the Library of Latin Texts, points in a different direction. The beasts appear together eleven times; alone, each appears over forty times, and always with the same identities. Struthio symbolizes the duplicitous hypocrite, a simulator whose apparent goodness cloaks true evil. Gregory describes the land-bound ostrich, whose puny wings are too feeble to lift a body so huge and heavy with wickedness. It lays the eggs of its good works in the sand and then abandons them, because it lacks "the compassion of love." In contrast, the draco symbolizes the open, obvious evil of the old serpent, Satan, Antichrist, wicked people, thoughts and deeds, etc. To identify the draco, Gregory cross-references the apocalyptic dragon of Revelations, whose tail drags the third part of heaven’s stars (Rv 12:4), who is imprisoned and held fast in the bottomless pit (Rv 20:3). He also cites Jer 14:6, where dragons conduct the wind, and Is 43:40 predicting that dragons and ostriches will honor God. The Brepols database is essential in determining Gregory’s understanding of a word’s meaning.

Certain words are so weighty that they qualify as concepts. This specialized vocabulary is the stuff of scholarly articles and the occasional book. Among these are discretio, compunctio, stabilitas, compassio, adversitas, prosperitas; and one should add the related verbs. Kerns translates them simply with their English equivalents and this is commendable. Readers will be able to follow Gregory’s arguments more carefully if discretio is always "discretion," rather than "discernment," "judgment," "difference," or "discrimination." Readers may also wish to track the translation of pietas, which ranges from a classical sense of "doing the right thing," to piety, and even occasionally, pity (compassion being the right behavior for Christians). Similarly, misericordia ranges from pity to mercy to compassion in shades of meaning.

The book includes an index of references to the Bible. Kerns has a few footnotes dealing with variants of the Bible, and he notes a couple of borrowings from Jerome. Otherwise, he simply translates the text. Often Kerns succeeds in making Gregory sound better in English than he does in Latin. We can only hope that the succeeding books in the project meet the high standard this book sets for a translation and introduction to the remaining thirty books of Gregory's Moralia.

This file is of PDF file extension. You can download the file by clicking on the green button labelled Direct Link. You can also upload it to your Google Dive.