



## The Senses of Scripture

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The Church has a rich tradition of interpreting Sacred Scripture. That tradition had begun already in the New Testament, as the Old Testament was interpreted in relationship to Christ, and it was further developed by the early Church Fathers and systematized in the medieval period. Though modern and contemporary biblical scholarship both have adopted “new means and new aids to exegesis”<sup>1</sup> as encouraged by Pope Pius XII, the foundation laid by the early Church Fathers and the medieval Church continues to support subsequent inquiries into the meaning of the biblical text. The early Church Fathers were not bound to one meaning of the text but rather allowed the biblical text to speak its message in various ways. These various ways correspond to the levels of meaning in a text; these levels of meaning we call “the senses of Scripture.”

There are two basic senses of Scripture: the literal sense and the spiritual sense. The *literal sense* refers to the sense of the words themselves; it is “that which has been expressed directly by the inspired human authors.”<sup>2</sup> It has been variously described as the verbal or grammatical sense, the plain sense, the sense the human author intended, the sense the divine author intended, the historical sense, and even the obvious sense. Underlying these various descriptions is the notion that “the literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture.”<sup>3</sup> The literal sense is discovered by careful and attentive study of the biblical text using all interpretive tools available, such as grammatical aids, archaeological evidence, historical and literary analyses, sociological and anthropological studies, and whatever else can be called upon to expand one’s knowledge of the historical and literary context of the text and thereby gain a better understanding of the literal sense of the biblical text.

The importance of the literal sense was long ago underscored by St. Thomas Aquinas in his recognition that “all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those

intended in allegory.”<sup>4</sup> This importance was reiterated in Pope Pius XII’s exhortation to Catholic biblical scholars: “let the Catholic exegete undertake the task, of all those imposed on him the greatest, that namely of discovering and expounding the genuine meaning of the Sacred Books. In the performance of this task let the interpreters bear in mind that their foremost and greatest endeavor should be to discern and define clearly that sense of the biblical words which is called literal.”<sup>5</sup>

The *spiritual sense* refers to when what is signified by the words of a text, the literal sense, also has a further signification.<sup>6</sup> As it developed within Christianity, the spiritual sense pertained to “the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.”<sup>7</sup> Spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament was especially prominent for the Church Fathers, for the Old Testament was believed to contain God’s preparation for his Son. The early Church Fathers used many terms to refer to the spiritual meaning of the text, such as allegorical sense, mystery or mystical sense, and *theoria*.<sup>8</sup> The lines between these various terms are blurred, and their meanings often overlap. Indeed, at times these terms were used interchangeably by the early Church Fathers.

By the medieval period, three distinct spiritual senses emerged: the allegorical sense (which included typology), the tropological or moral sense, and the anagogic or future sense.

The *allegorical sense* refers to the meaning that is hidden beneath the surface of the text. The search for the allegorical meaning of texts finds its origin in the Greek world, especially in Platonic philosophy as it was understood in the

1 Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), no. 33, trans. National Catholic Welfare Conference, in *The Bible Documents: A Parish Resource* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2001), 22.  
 2 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), no. 131, in *The Bible Documents*, 162.  
 3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2nd ed.) (Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000), no. 116.

4 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. English Dominicans (New York: Christian Classics, 1981), I, 1, 10, ad. 1.  
 5 Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, no. 23.  
 6 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 10.  
 7 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, no. 135.  
 8 From Raymond Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture* (Baltimore, MD: St. Mary’s University, 1955), 46: Sometimes *theoria* is used in the same sense as allegory, but in the Antiochene school it specifically refers to the “perception of the future which a prophet enjoys through the medium of the present circumstances which he is describing.”

Hellenistic period. Allegorical interpretation was employed to make sense of the Greek myths in which the gods often appeared crude and their behavior immoral. Underlying the allegorical method is the notion that the writers of an earlier age composed their works in a veiled language. They wrote one thing but intended another. In order to hold on to the stories of old, and yet to allow these stories to speak to a new age, it is necessary to find a meaning beyond what the written word said. In order to uncover the true meaning of those ancient myths, it is necessary to treat the written word as a symbol for a deeper reality; it is necessary to find a deeper meaning below the surface or literal meaning of the text. By means of allegorical interpretation, truth is unveiled; where there was mystery now stands revelation.

Like the ancient Greek myths, many passages in the Jewish Scriptures are obscure or seemingly inconsistent, or the content of the passage is seen as unacceptable when judged by the standards of a later age. Use of the allegorical method to interpret the Bible in the early Church could explain away its inconsistencies, the questionable behavior of its characters, and its crudeness. The greatest proponent of allegorical method of interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures was Philo of Alexandria. In his search for the deeper significance of the text, Philo identified biblical characters with abstract virtues or with the soul in its journey through life. Names, numbers, measurements, and seemingly mundane details were explored for their hidden meaning and given cosmic or mystical significance.<sup>9</sup> The allegorical method of Philo of Alexandria was influential in the development of Christian allegorical interpretation.

Allegorical interpretation is already found in the New Testament. For example, Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians says,

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by a freeborn woman. The son of the slave woman was born naturally, the son of the freeborn through a promise. Now this is an allegory. These women are two covenants. One was from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; this is Hagar. . . . But the Jerusalem above is freeborn, and she is our mother. (Gal 4:22-26)

The allegorical method of interpretation dominated in the early Church from the time of Clement of Alexandria (150 to 211/215 CE) through the fourth century. Origen, living in the 3rd century CE, is perhaps the greatest representative of this kind of interpretation.

9 James L. Kugel, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 82.

Though today scholars make a distinction between allegorical and typological interpretation, such a distinction was not made in the early Church. The early Church Fathers spoke of “types,” but they did not distinguish between allegory and typology as scholars have recently begun to do. What is distinctive to typology is the notion that what preceded Christ was but a shadow of what was to come. Persons and events of the Old Testament are understood to be “types” of persons or events in the New Testament, which are then “antitypes.” The Old Testament, interpreted typologically, is said to anticipate or to foreshadow events to come. The crossing of the Red Sea is seen as a type of Baptism; Isaac carrying the wood for his sacrifice in Genesis 22 is seen as a type of Jesus’ carrying his cross to Calvary. Some representatives of typological interpretation are Diodorus of Tarsus, St. John Chrysostom, and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Typology is found in the exegetical work of St. Augustine and St. Jerome alongside allegorical interpretation.

Allegorical interpretation gave the early exegetes a way to find meaning in the Bible, including its obscure and unseemly passages; but because of this method’s focus on the deeper spiritual meaning of a text, the literal sense became viewed as insignificant. Typological interpretation, by contrast, maintained a greater respect for the literal sense because this method of interpretation is more firmly grounded in the literal sense of the text. Both typology and allegory, however, went beyond the literal sense of the text in the early Church. For typologists the written word pointed beyond itself; for allegorists the written word stood for something else.

The other two spiritual senses, the tropological sense and the anagogic sense, are defined in terms of their focus. The *tropological sense* is concerned with the moral lessons that can be drawn from the biblical text. If events in Israel’s past “were written down to instruct us” (1 Cor 10:11), then we can learn how we ought to live by paying careful attention to the history of Israel, the words of the prophets, and the exhortations found in Israel’s wisdom traditions—indeed, to the entire Bible. The *anagogic sense* represents a shift in focus to the future, specifically to the end times or last things. It looks to the goal of our journey through life as we are “led up”<sup>10</sup> to our heavenly home.

The fourfold senses of Scripture—the literal, allegorical, moral (tropological), and anagogic senses—were first proposed by John Cassian (ca. 360-435). By way of example, Cassian wrote, “The one Jerusalem can be understood in

10 The Greek word *anagoge* means “leading up.”

four different ways, in the historical sense as the city of the Jews, in allegory as the Church of Christ, in anagoge as the heavenly city of God ‘which is the mother of us all’ (Gal 4:26), in the tropological sense as the human soul.”<sup>11</sup> St. Augustine set forth a similar fourfold division in *De Genesi ad litteram*: “In all the sacred books, we should consider eternal truths that are taught, the facts that are narrated, the future events that are predicted, and the precepts or counsels that are given” (1.1).<sup>12</sup>

The exegetes of the medieval period seem to have taken these statements as programmatic for interpretation. Though some spoke of as many as seven senses of Scripture, it became commonplace to refer to the fourfold senses of Scripture. A simple poem attributed to Augustine of Dacia captures the medieval commitment to the four senses of Scripture: “The letter teaches events; allegory what you should believe; morality teaches what you should do, anagogy what mark you should be aiming for.”<sup>13</sup> In the medieval period there were some, such as Hugh of St. Victor and his followers, who leaned toward a more literal interpretation; others, such as Bernard of Clairvaux, leaned toward a more spiritual interpretation. More often, though, these various senses of Scripture were set side by side; and all of them were seen as viable, even if very different, ways in which to understand the biblical text.

The Reformation brought with it a different interpretive focus, as Luther took Paul’s statement that “we have been justified by faith” (Rom 5:1) as the key to understanding all of Scripture. Luther and subsequent reformers moved away from allegorical interpretation, and the literal interpretation of Scripture began to receive more emphasis. Within Catholicism there was little change from the interpretive stance taken in the medieval period with its fourfold senses of Scripture. Moving into the Age of Enlightenment, reason was enthroned as the ultimate criterion of knowledge, and interpretive methods began to change. Authority and tradition were called into question, and scientific method began to dominate all fields of inquiry. The explosion of knowledge that accompanied the emergence of science, coupled with archaeological discoveries, raised critical questions about the factual and scientific accuracy of the Bible.

11 John Cassian, *Conferences*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 160.

12 St. Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 19.

13 Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 1. The Latin text reads: *Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quod tendas anagogia* (footnote 1, p. 271). It is found in the *Rotulus pugillaris* published in 1206 by Augustine of Dacia.

The *historical-critical method* that emerged in the eighteenth century has dominated the field of biblical interpretation since then, and it continues to influence contemporary biblical interpretation. The historical-critical method is not one method; it employs several methods in an attempt to interpret the Bible from within its historical and literary context and in a search for the meaning intended by the authors. The method attends to the history of the text and its formation from earlier oral and written sources; it discusses its forms and its redaction. It enlists the aid of many disciplines, such as linguistics, archaeology, sociology, anthropology, literary theory, and comparative religions, to try to determine the meaning of a passage in its historical and literary context. Those using this method have challenged many presuppositions about the historical reliability of the biblical text and the formulation of doctrines that are biblically based. As historical-critical method moved into the academy and began to dominate in Protestant seminaries, fundamentalism arose to insist upon the inerrancy of Scripture in every area of knowledge and to hold on to the fundamentals of Christian faith as they had been previously defined.

In Catholic circles in the early part of the twentieth century, biblical scholars began to discuss the fuller sense (*sensus plenior*) of Scripture. “The fuller sense is defined as a deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author.”<sup>14</sup> This fuller sense is to be found when a later biblical author confers on an earlier text a new meaning, such as Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14 (Mt 1:23) to refer to the virginal conception of Jesus; or when a meaning is given to a biblical text by later doctrine or conciliar definition, such as the definition of original sin based in Romans 5:12-21.<sup>15</sup> The distinction between the fuller sense and the spiritual sense is difficult to maintain, but it is said to stand between the literal sense and the spiritual sense.<sup>16</sup> The fuller sense allows the literal meaning to stand but maintains that the text acquired a new meaning after Christ. The fuller sense of a text, though intended by God, was not seen until the fullness of Revelation had been realized in Christ.

The discussion of the fuller sense continues, but it has been largely eclipsed by the adoption of the historical-critical method within Catholic circles in the middle of the twentieth century. Pope Pius XII published *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943, authorizing the use of contemporary biblical methods of interpretation:

14 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, no. 141.

15 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, no. 141.

16 Brown, *The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture*, 122.

As in our age, indeed new questions and new difficulties are multiplied, so by God's favor, new means and aids to exegesis are also provided. . . . Let the interpreter then, with all care and without neglecting any light derived from recent research, endeavor to determine the peculiar character and circumstances of the sacred writer, the age in which he lived, the sources written or oral to which he had recourse and the forms of expression he employed. (no. 33)

The position taken by Pope Pius XII was reaffirmed at Vatican II in the document *Dei Verbum*<sup>17</sup> and again in *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.

From the time of the early Church Fathers through the medieval period, to the modern world, and now into the contemporary age, biblical interpretation has grown and developed, with each successive age applying the best of the hermeneutical<sup>18</sup> principles of its time to determine the meaning of Sacred Scripture. The language of "senses of

Scripture" is not used by contemporary biblical scholars; and though those using historical-critical method have often insisted that a text has only one meaning, there is a growing recognition that there are multiple layers of meaning in a text. Contemporary biblical scholars who employ historical-critical methods stress what the text meant in its historical and literary context, but with the Bible we are dealing with a living text that continues to have meaning for the faith communities that hold it sacred. As such, we must attend not only to what the text meant, but also to what the text means for the believing community. We continue to move between the literal and spiritual senses of the text as we struggle to appropriate what God's Word has to say to us today.

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17 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation)*, in *The Basic Sixteen Documents: Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Costello Publishing Company, 1996). See especially 3:11-12.

18 Hermeneutics is the science or art of interpretation. It can refer also to the study of the principles that ground different methods of interpretation.