

Returning to Our Senses

Reading the Bible from the Heart of the Church

Of all the books you'll ever read, the Bible is unique. Most books have only human authors. The Bible alone can truly claim to have both human authors and a divine author, the Holy Spirit.

Thus, if we want to get to God, the Bible is the one book we can't do without. Saint Jerome said that "ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ."¹ And it's true: You can't understand one without the other. Jesus Christ is the Word of God incarnate, fully divine, yet fully human—like all of us, except without sin. The Bible is the Word of God inspired, fully divine yet fully human—like any other book, except without error. Both Christ and Scripture are given "for the sake of [our] salvation" (*DV*, 11).

So when we read the Bible, we need to read it on two levels at once. We read the Bible in a *literal* sense, as we read any other human literature. But we read it also in a *spiritual* sense, searching out what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us through the words.

What the soul is to the body, the spiritual sense is to the literal. You can distinguish the two; but if you try to

¹ Saint Jerome, prologue to *Commentary on Isaiah*, as quoted in Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), no. 25 (hereafter cited in the text as *DV*).

Scripture Matters

separate them, death follows. God “has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. 3:6, NIV). As Saint Augustine taught, the literal sense without the spiritual is not only dead, but deadly.²

Before we can read the Bible’s spiritual sense, we need to develop a “sacramental imagination” so that we can learn to interpret history and creation in terms of the sacred symbolism of Scripture. For God wrote the world the way men write books—to convey truth and love. Thus, nature and history are more than just created things—God fashions them as visible signs of other things, uncreated realities, which are eternal and invisible. But because of sin’s blinding effects, the “book” of nature must be translated by the inspired Word of Scripture. Likewise, Scripture illuminates the spiritual significance of God’s saving deeds in history—for example, the Flood or the Exodus. This is where our sacramental imagination comes in, enabling us to interpret history and creation in terms of the sacred symbolism of Scripture.

Eyes to See, Ears to Hear

You see, the deeds and the events we read in the Bible are charged with meaning. In essence, that meaning is Jesus Christ and the salvation He won for us. This is true especially of the books of the New Testament, which explicitly proclaim Jesus; but it is true as well of the books

² Cf. Saint Augustine, *On the Spirit and the Letter*, chap. 22, 23, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser., vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 92–93 (hereafter cited as *NPNF*).

of the Old Testament, which speak of Jesus in hidden ways. The human authors of the Old Testament told as much as they were able, but they could not clearly discern the shape of all future events. However, the Divine Author—the Holy Spirit—could and did tell of the saving work of Jesus Christ, beginning with the first page of the Book of Genesis.

Thus the New Testament did not abolish the Old. Rather, the New fulfilled the Old, and in so doing, it lifted the veil from the face of the bride. Yes, the veil is beautiful; but remove the veil, and you're suddenly able to see a world charged with grandeur and sublime meaning. Water, fire, clouds, gardens, trees, hills, doves, lambs—all of these things are important details in the history and poetry of the Chosen People. But now, seen in light of Jesus Christ, they are so much more. For the Christian with eyes to see, water symbolizes the saving power of Baptism; fire, the Holy Spirit; the spotless lamb, the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. This is powerful. It is also personal, intended for you, as if you were the only person Jesus came to save.

Type Casting

The spiritual reading of Scripture is nothing new. The first Christians read the Bible this way. Saint Paul describes Adam as a “type” of Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:14). A *type* is a real person, place, thing, or event in the Old Testament that foreshadows something greater in the New Testament. From *type* we get the word *typology*, the study of Christ's foreshadowing in the Old Testament (cf. *Catechism*, nos. 128–30).

When men write words in order to express love, they usually resort to poetry. And in a real way, the same is true with God. Mark Twain once said, “History doesn’t repeat itself, but it does rhyme.” Our ears must be attuned to this divine poetry. Salvation history is a sacred mystery, conveyed in the divine poetry of Scripture. In typology, we discover God’s rhyme scheme.

For instance, Saint Paul tells the story of Abraham’s sons and then declares that “this is an allegory” (Gal. 4:24). He is not suggesting that the story of Abraham never really happened; he is saying that the events happened, but they pointed to something far greater.

Later in the New Testament, the tabernacle and its rituals are described in Hebrews as “types and shadows of heavenly realities” (8:5, author’s translation), and the law as a “shadow of the good things to come” (10:1). Saint Peter, in turn, noted that Noah and his family “were saved through water,” and that “this prefigured baptism, which saves you now” (1 Pet. 3:20–21, NAB). (Peter’s word translated as “prefigured” is actually the Greek word for *typify*, or “make a type.”)

Yet we need not look to the apostles alone to justify the spiritual reading of the Bible. Jesus Himself read the Old Testament this way. He referred to Jonah (Mt. 12:39), Solomon (Mt. 12:42), the Temple (Jn. 2:19), and the brazen serpent (Jn. 3:14) as “signs” that pointed to Him. We see in Luke’s Gospel, as Our Lord comforted the disciples on the road to Emmaus, that “beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (Lk. 24:27). After this “spiritual reading” of the Old Testament, we are told, the disciples’ hearts burned within them.

In imitation of Christ, the apostles continued the tra-

dition of reading and understanding the Old Testament through the “spiritual lenses” ground by Christ. The Holy Spirit then transmitted this vision, pure and whole, to future generations through the bishops and the Fathers of the Church.

Saint Justin Martyr, for example, writing around 155, explained that the Temple sacrifices of ancient Israel were foreshadowings of the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ and its re-presentation in the liturgy: “And the offering of fine flour . . . which was prescribed to be presented on behalf of those purified from leprosy, was a type of the bread of the Eucharist, the celebration of which our Lord Jesus Christ prescribed.”³

A More Sensible Approach

Spiritual interpretation is a science that is not just analytical, but also spiritual. And it is not just a science, but an art, one that is rooted in contemplation. Some typology is the fruit of scientific exegesis in the Spirit; other typology represents the fruit of personal contemplation. Not all types are created equal.

In order to clarify the discernment of spiritual senses, the Fathers distinguished three spiritual senses: the allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Thus, in addition to its literal sense, a given passage could also convey a *moral* truth, about how a Christian should live; an *allegorical* truth, about the life or person of Jesus Christ; and an *ana-*

³ Saint Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, chap. XLI, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 215 (hereafter cited as *ANF*).

gogical truth, about heaven. Ephrem, Athanasius, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Cassian all used spiritual exegesis to draw doctrinal and mystical riches from the Bible. Augustine went so far as to say he couldn't have become a Christian without first learning the spiritual exegesis of the Old Testament—so scandalized had he been by the wrongdoings of the Hebrew patriarchs.⁴

Of course, not all spiritual exegetes were as brilliant and artful as Augustine. Some allegorical commentary is overwrought, some is weird, and some is just plain wrong, based on mistranslations or misunderstandings of the biblical books. A few early commentators habitually applied the allegorical method to the exclusion of the literal, historical sense. This made for some unfortunate results in spiritual exegesis that flatly contradicted historical fact. Saint Thomas Aquinas spoke against such abuses when he argued for the primacy of the literal sense: "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal."⁵

The excesses tended to give spiritual exegesis a bad name. As a result, among scholars, its popularity has had ups and downs throughout history. The twentieth century tended to be a downer, when commentators, by and large, overly concerned themselves with the literal sense of Scripture. Among some, this played out in rationalism run amok: a slavishly historical reading of the Bible, ignoring the action of a God who transcends history. At the

⁴ Cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 5, chap. 11, trans. John K. Ryan (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1960), 128; see also Augustine, *Confessions*, bk. 6, chap. 4 and 5, 137–40.

⁵ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 1, 10 *ad* 1, as quoted in the *Catechism*, no. 83.

opposite extreme, the overemphasis of the literal became a fundamentalist pursuit of the “plain sense” of Scripture, forgetting that what seems “plain” to us moderns might seem perfectly wrong to a long-ago Israelite or Christian.

The Integral Meaning

Yet the Catholic Church has never thrown out the proverbial baby with the allegorical bathwater of some commentaries. The Church has consistently encouraged an integral reading of Scripture, which includes the literal and spiritual senses.

This integral meaning, according to Tradition, is reading Scripture as if God mattered. Or, in the gentler words of Vatican II, it’s reading the Bible “with its divine authorship in mind” (*DV*, 12).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* unhesitatingly endorses the spiritual exegesis of the Bible: “According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral, and anagogical senses. The profound concordance of the four senses guarantees all its richness to the living reading of Scripture in the Church” (no. 115, emphasis omitted). The Bible in “all its richness.” Now, that’s some guarantee!

The *Catechism* follows up its guarantee with specifics: “By this re-reading in the Spirit of Truth, starting from Christ, the figures are unveiled [cf. 2 Cor. 3:14–16]. Thus, the flood and Noah’s ark prefigured salvation by Baptism [cf. 1 Pet. 3:21], as did the cloud and the crossing of the Red Sea. Water from the rock was the figure of the spiritual gifts of Christ, and manna in the desert prefigured

the Eucharist, ‘the true bread from heaven’ [Jn. 6:32; cf. 1 Cor. 10:1–6]” (no. 1094).

You Can Have It All!

Practically speaking, what does all this mean? Jesus wants you and me to read the Bible in its fullest sense. He wants us to see what the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins called “the dearest freshness deep down things”⁶—not just the surface beauty, though that, too, can be delightful. He wants us to have it all.

Learning to read the Bible this way means learning to read, and even to see, all over again. Yet this is not merely a technique. It’s a grace, and we’ll never gain it on our own steam. So we must begin with prayer. Such was the advice of Origen, the third-century Scripture scholar, who wrote that “the spiritual meaning which the law conveys is not known to all, but to those only on whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed in the word of wisdom and knowledge.”⁷ That’s why most of the old Catholic Bibles came with the “Prayer to the Holy Spirit” printed up front.

In the Spirit, we’ll learn to do more than look *at* the things of this world; together, we’ll learn to look *through* them to God.

⁶ “God’s Grandeur,” in *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, eds. W. H. Gardner and N. H. Mackenzie (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 66.

⁷ Origen, preface to *De principiis*, no. 8, in *ANF*, vol. 4, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 241.