

## Let's Be Sensible About Scripture

“We need to read Scripture the way God intended it to be read,” said one of my friends from amidst a mound of concordances, grammar books, and Greek and Hebrew dictionaries. “Hey, why are you laughing?” He didn’t see the incongruity. While the tools he has at his disposal are certainly useful, these tools were not available to most Christians until the modern era. They certainly weren’t at Augustine’s elbow, nor at Paul’s, and Scripture does not describe Jesus whipping out a grammar book on the road to Emmaus. We don’t need to be ancient language scholars in order to read Scripture as Jesus and the Apostles did; we need only a good translation and an ear for the four-fold sense. Unfortunately, while none of our separated brethren understand how to identify the senses of Scripture, very few Catholics are skilled in the apostolic techniques either. Many of us have read #115-119 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)*, but the information presented there is simply not sufficient for the typical Catholic to get a good grasp of how to do what the Faith requires. Fortunately, both the theory and the technique are rather simple.

The concept of Scripture’s four-fold meaning is grounded in a solid understanding both of Jesus’ dual natures, and in how He came to have those dual natures. Because Jesus is the Logos, the Word of God, and Scripture is also the Word of God, there is a correspondance between who Jesus is and what Scripture is. Jesus Christ has two natures: a fully human nature and the fully divine nature. His human nature is a conduit for His divine nature, that is, everything He did as a human being on this earth reflects, portrays, or helps us understand some aspect of the invisible God.

Scripture works in a similar way. The *CCC* speaks of two senses in Scripture: the literal sense and the three-fold spiritual sense. This three-fold spiritual sense is made up of the allegorical (or “typological” sense), the tropological (or “moral” sense), and the anagogical (or “heavenly”) sense. Thus, Sacred Scripture, the book which tells us about Jesus, also has two “natures”: the literal meaning and three kinds of spiritual meaning. The literal sense of Scripture means exactly what it says - we must accept the literal meaning of the words of Scripture as they are presented to us in their various literary styles, just as we must accept the full humanity of Jesus as it is presented to us in its Jewish Eastern Mediterranean style. Just as every action of God the Son is focused through Jesus’ humanity, so the literal meaning of Scripture forms the basis for every spiritual understanding of Scripture. But just as there is more to the Logos than meets the eye, so there is more to the literal meaning of the Word than we might initially expect.

The Second Person of the Godhead incarnated through the power of the Holy Spirit at the command of God the Father. The three-fold spiritual sense of Scripture illustrates this reality. The allegorical or typological sense of Scripture has a certain correspondance to the Second person of the Trinity incarnate. The moral sense corresponds to God’s desire that we walk with Him in the Spirit. The heavenly sense reminds us we are to be brought into union with the Father. This is the theory which lies behind the four-fold sense - the meaning and purpose of Scripture bears a real correspondance to the meaning and purpose of the Incarnate Word. Every event and circumstance of the Old Testament points to a fulfillment in the New. We come to understand the people and events of the Old Testament by reading the New Testament, and thinking about the Old Testament in light of the New. The literal meaning of the New Testament helps us identify and think about the three spiritual senses of the Old. We might summarize things this way:

- **The literal sense** of Scripture is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture, discovered through sound interpretation. All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal. This literal sense accurately describes what took place. It also points us to deeper spiritual meanings. There are three kinds of deeper spiritual meanings: the allegorical, the moral, and the heavenly.
- **The allegorical sense** is the literal sense of the Old Testament which signifies a foreshadowing or type fulfilled by Christ in the New Testament. That is, the Old Testament event begins to point us toward something Jesus did or made clear in the New Testament, a doctrine we need to understand and believe.
- **The moral sense** is the literal sense of the Old Testament recorded for our instruction. It moves the Christian to act justly in the life of the Church. It indicates to us what ought to be done.
- Finally, **the heavenly sense** is the literal sense of the Old Testament leading us towards heaven and our fulfilment in heaven in the way that it tells us about the coming of Jesus.

These senses apply most clearly in the Old Testament, but may be used in the New Testament as well. How does this work in practice? We begin by observing certain similarities between Old Testament and New Testament passages. For example, consider Genesis 1:1-2 and Matthew 3:16. At first glance, the only correspondance between the two passages is the presence of water in both. However, further reflection upon the passages reveals that in both passages, the Spirit of God is moving over the water. In fact, only two places in Scripture describe the Spirit of God moving over water, at the creation of the world and at the baptism of Jesus. Because everything in the Old Testament points to the New, and we have found a unique correspondance between these two passages, it is safe to conclude that the Genesis passage is meant to help us interpret the Matthean passage.

By applying the four-fold principle, we can see the deeper correspondances. The *literal sense* of each passage: each actually occurred, the Spirit of God moved over the waters. The *allegorical sense*: The description of the original creation of the world foreshadows the new creation we become through the sacrament of baptism, as the foundation for creation in each passage, the land/Jesus, rises out of the waters. The *moral sense*: Just as creation was baptized into existence, so we must be baptized in order to become a new creation in Jesus Christ. The *heavenly sense*: In this baptismal (re)generation, God adopts us as His child, a beloved son or daughter in whom He is well-pleased, and brings us into union with Him, becoming one with the Father as Jesus is one with the Father. Thus, the story of creation in Genesis tells us that, from the very beginning, even before God formed man, God always intended created man to be in unity with Him; He accomplishes this unity through baptism.

If this is a valid way to read Scripture, we should find evidence for such readings within Scripture itself; and so we do. Consider Psalm 78:1-4. This Psalm has the prophet David “opening his mouth in a parable,” yet if we read the whole Psalm, the one thing David most assuredly does *not* do is tell us a parable. The entire Psalm recounts actual events of salvation history. It is not a “once upon a time” story, it is fact. Why did God inspire the prophet to call it “a parable”? Because, as St. Bonaventure says, God writes the world like men write words. The story of our salvation is a true story, but the events of that story have more meaning than the people who lived out those events may have realized. Proverbs 1:1-6 provides additional confirmation. In this passage, Solomon, the wisest Old Testament man who ever lived, tells us that he is writing the book of Proverbs in order to teach us how to understand a proverb. That is,

he will use proverbs to explain proverbs. Jesus was a wiser man than Solomon (cf. Mt 12:42), and for a period of nearly 200 years before and after the Incarnation, He was the only rabbi who taught using parables (Mt 13:34-35). Jesus used parables to explain the parable of salvation history. In fact, the whole of Scripture is a parable which explains that one Parable.

Yet, even though Jesus spoke constantly in parable and figure - indeed, even the famous John 3:16 is immediately preceded with a typological analogy to the serpent that Moses lifted up in the desert - Scripture witnesses again and again how He continually had to explain every figure He used (e.g. Jn 10:6). This is important for two reasons. First, it confirms what both Luke and Matthew were inspired to record about Jesus: "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light" (Mt 4:14-16, Lk 1:78-79). Nearly all the people who lived under the Old Testament were incapable of reading Scripture with the necessary understanding. Their minds needed to be enlightened to understand the parable they and their ancestors daily lived out. Second, as Mt 13:10 records, Jesus gave the apostles a gift which none but the prophets who lived under the Old Testament had ever received - He gave them the ability to understand what the Old Testament "parables" pointed to. Indeed, Jesus promises exactly that in John 16:25 - there would come a time when He would speak to them plainly and not in any figure. However, He makes this promise just scant hours before the Twelve break and run like water. When is the promise fulfilled? Only after the Resurrection: "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures..." (Luke 24:45).

It is in the period between the Resurrection and the Ascension that Jesus teaches the Apostles how to read Scripture typologically, a skill which no one besides the prophets ever possessed. Even after His Resurrection, this skill was a uniquely apostolic gift. Thus, the Thessalonians in Acts 17 who rejected apostolic guidance in how to read Scriptures continued on in darkness, while the Bereans, who desired the full understanding of Scripture, were unable to attain it without the guidance first of Paul and then of Silas and Timothy, who Paul left behind to continue in their instruction. The extent to which this apostolic guidance is necessary is underscored by Scripture itself. No person or group of people in Scripture attained an accurate understanding of who Jesus was or what He did without apostolically authorized guidance, despite the fact that knowledge of Jesus was widespread: "this thing was not done in a corner" (Acts 26:26).

This apostolic gift explains why the epistles are rich in the four-fold sense of Scripture. The whole letter to the Hebrews, especially passages like 8:4-5; 9:24; and 10:1, refer again and again to the Old Testament through the four-fold sense. Col 2:16-17; Gal 4:24-30; 2 Pet 2:6; James 5:10; and Jude 7 all demonstrate the concept, while 1 Cor 10:1-11 shows the principle at its clearest. Paul talks of the Israelites being "baptized into Moses" when they crossed the Red Sea, yet Exodus never speaks of this. Similarly, Exodus does not describe any food or drink as "supernatural," nor does it describe a rock which followed the Israelites. Paul is seeing the Old Testament in a new way, a way to which he was blind prior to being knocked off his horse. This is why he lists several of the excesses of the Israelites and remarks, "Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come." The Old Testament is written for our instruction - it is a morality play in which every event both really happened and simultaneously points beyond itself to eternity. Peter, Paul, James, Jude - each was inspired by God to demonstrate this new clarity of vision. Through the epistles, God shows us that the four-fold sense of Scripture is necessary for an accurate understanding of New Testament events - indeed, even simple references to Jesus like "Lamb of

God,” “the Good Shepherd,” and “the Paschal Victim” are nonsensical outside of the four-fold sense.

The Apostles, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, were inspired to begin unlocking the Scriptures which had lain hidden in plain sight for so long. This process of unlocking Scripture continued throughout the early Church. The great Christians of the first millenia knew the technique intimately and wielded it like a two-edged sword against heretical opponents. They saw the Apostolic reading of Old Testament Scripture as the beginning of a process which they were supposed to bring to fruition. They knew this method to be the divinely inspired method. This is why we never see Jesus or the Apostles whipping out a dictionary to check the gender of a noun or the aorist tense of a verb. Paul never diagrams a sentence. The task begun by Jesus and the Apostles is not yet complete - indeed, it may never be complete. It is still necessary for us today to search out the four-fold sense of Scripture in order to grasp the fullness of the divinely intended meaning in the Old and New Testaments.