

Making “Sense” Out of Scripture

The Four Best Kept Secrets in Biblical Studies Today

by Edward Sri

ISSUE: What are the four senses of scripture?

RESPONSE: Traditionally, there are four senses of Scripture, which are outlined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 115-119:

1. **Literal Sense:** “[T]he meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture” (Catechism, no. 116), the actual event, person, thing described in the biblical text. The literal sense gives rise to the following three “spiritual senses.”
2. **Allegorical Sense:** How those things, events, or persons in the literal sense point to Christ and the Paschal Mystery.
3. **Moral Sense:** How the literal sense points to the Christian life in the Church.
4. **Anagogical Sense:** How the literal sense points to the Christian’s heavenly destiny and the last things.

DISCUSSION: Understanding the four senses of Scripture provides an interpretive key for unlocking many spiritual treasures in the Word of God. They can help one make vital connections between the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Catholic Faith, and individual spiritual life. With this approach, we see more clearly that the events and people mentioned in the Bible are intimately linked to our own Christian lives and serve as models for us to follow.

Although humans communicate primarily through words and actions, God communicates not only through His words and deeds (cf. Catechism, no. 1103), but also through the very things He has created. As St. Thomas Aquinas explained, “That God is the author of Holy Scripture should be acknowledged, and He has the power not only of adapting words to signify things (which human writers can also do), but also of *adapting things themselves* [to signify other things]” (*Summa Theologiae* I, 1, 10). In other words, because He is the Creator and the Lord of history, God not only communicates through the words of Scripture but He also gives special meaning to the things, people, and events mentioned in Scripture. He uses them as signs to tell us something about his plan of salvation. Because He inspired the human hand, this may occur even without the human author’s awareness.

A study of the Jerusalem temple provides a classic example to demonstrate the four senses of Scripture. In the *literal sense*, the temple was the actual building that once stood in Jerusalem. There, the Israelite priests offered sacrifice, the people worshipped, and God dwelt in the Holy of Holies.

This temple of the Old Testament has greater importance because God uses it as a sign to reveal important realities in the New Testament: Jesus and the Christian life. *Allegorically*, the temple points to Jesus, Who said He was the true temple which would be destroyed and raised up in three days (Jn. 2:19-21). Just as the Jerusalem temple was the place of sacrifice for the Jews, so does Jesus’ body house the everlasting sacrifice on Calvary for all humanity.

The moral sense of the temple is found in the Christian, whose body is “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 6:19). Just as the temple contained the awesome presence of God, so do the bodies of Christians hold the presence of the Holy Spirit by virtue of their Baptism.

Anagogically, the Jerusalem temple finds its eschatological meaning in the heavenly sanctuary, where God will dwell among us in our eternal home, as described in Book of Revelation (e.g., Rev. 21:22).

This method of uncovering the four senses of Scripture is sometimes called spiritual exegesis, typology, or *sensus plenior*. Rooted in Catholic Tradition, many saints, doctors, Fathers of the Church, and even Jesus and the New Testament writers themselves used this method. Unfortunately, this spiritual exegesis has become somewhat of a lost art, with many modern scholars either downplaying or ignoring it. Nonetheless, with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the Pontifical Biblical Commission recently calling our attention to the four senses of Scripture, there is

likely to be a renewal in this rich approach to biblical interpretation.

“SOMETHING GREATER IS HERE”: HOW JESUS INTERPRETED THE SCRIPTURES

Jesus Himself often viewed people and things of the Old Testament as signs which point to Him and shed light on His mission and identity. For example, Jesus refers to Jonah and the whale as prefiguring His own death and resurrection. “For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. . . . Behold, something greater than Jonah is here” (Mt. 12:40-41).

Similarly, the New Testament writers understood how God uses things, people, and events of the Old Testament to tell us something about His saving plan. For example, St. Paul describes Adam as a “type” of Christ (Rom. 5:14)—a sign telling us about Jesus: “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:19). Indeed, Jesus is the “new Adam,” the father of a new humanity in grace, righteousness, and life (cf., Rom. 5:15-19).

A few other examples: St. Peter views Noah’s ark, which saved people during the waters of the flood, as shedding light on Baptism, which now saves Christians by our passing through the waters of the New Covenant (1 Pet. 3:20-21). Hebrews describes Israel’s tabernacle, high priest, and sacrifices as “a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary” (Heb. 8:5). First Corinthians emphasizes how Israel’s experiences of trials and failures in the desert were recorded in Exodus, not for mere historical record, but to tell us something about the Christian life: “Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were *written down for our instruction*” (1 Cor. 10:13).

PATRISTIC INTERPRETATION

The Church Fathers made constant recourse to the four senses of Scripture. They believed that because the Bible is God’s Word, everything in it must have some significance for readers today. One of the most common themes found in the Fathers’ practice of spiritual exegesis is the relationship between the Exodus event and Christian Baptism. Just as the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt, passed through the waters of the Red Sea and headed toward the Promised Land, so are Christians freed from the spiritual bondage of sin and death by passing through the waters of Baptism to begin their journey to the ultimate Promised Land, their heavenly home with Jesus for all eternity.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem beautifully elaborated on this theme in catechetical instructions for early Church “RCIA classes.” For example:

You must know that the symbol of Baptism is found in ancient history. . . . There [in the Exodus] we have Moses sent by God into Egypt; here [in Baptism] we have Christ sent by the Father into the world; there is need to free the oppressed people from Egypt, here to rescue men tyrannized over by sin in this world; there the blood of the lamb turns aside the Destroyer; here the Blood of the true Lamb, Jesus Christ, puts the demons to flight; there the tyrant pursues the people even into the sea; here the shameless and bold demon follows them even to the holy fountains; one tyrant is drowned in the sea, the other is destroyed in the water of salvation (as quoted in Jean Danielou, S.J., *The Bible and the Liturgy*, Notre Dame, IN, University of Notre Dame Press, 1956, p. 96).

CULTIVATING ORTHODOXY

Cardinal Newman once said, “It may be almost laid down as an historical fact that the mystical interpretation [of using the four senses] and orthodoxy will stand or fall together.” Why would the four senses be so important to the Catholic Faith?

Discovering the connections between the Old Testament, Christ, and the Christian life shows the continuity in God’s plan of salvation. We see more clearly that from the very beginning—from Adam and Abraham to Moses and the prophets—God has been preparing humanity for Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church. That’s why studying the Old Testament is so important for understanding Jesus and many aspects of the Catholic Faith. Take, for example, the Old Covenant Passover lamb. In the literal sense, the paschal lamb was eaten by Israelite families as the central part of the yearly Passover meal, which commemorated Israel’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt. But the spiritual

senses show how God used that lamb as a preparation for understanding Jesus on the cross as the *true* paschal sacrifice and for understanding the Eucharist as the *true* Passover meal of the New Covenant, through which God delivers us from the *spiritual* bondage of sin.

Here we must emphasize that these connections between the Old and the New—between the past, present and future—are not arbitrary. They are rooted in history according to the plan of God. In other words, the four senses of Scripture uncover *the way things really are* by revealing the great unity in God’s salvific plan as carried out in history.

Indeed, as the Catechism explains, “Thanks to the unity of God’s plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs” (no. 116). Cardinal Henri DeLubac affirms:

[I]f, for example, the manna is really the figure of the Eucharist, or if the sacrifice of the Paschal Lamb really prefigures the redemptive death, the reason for this is not extrinsic resemblance alone, no matter how striking this might be. There is actually an “*inherent*” continuity and “ontological bond” between the two facts, and *this is due to the same divine will which is active in both situations and which, from stage to stage, is pursuing a single Design—the Design which is the real object of the Bible* (*The Sources of Revelation*, p. 37).

YOU CAN USE THE FOUR SENSES

No doubt, understanding the four senses of Scripture will transform your reading of the Bible. By using this Catholic approach to the Word of God, you can more easily overcome the distance of time and discover the intimate solidarity that exists between the people of God in the Bible and your life in the Catholic Church today.

With the four senses in mind, the Biblical narratives become much more than stories from the ancient past. Whether reading the accounts about Abraham, the temple or the flood, these age-old Biblical narratives can no longer be seen as far removed and detached from our lives today. Instead, they are intimately bound up with the present. As we saw above, the Passover is not merely a Jewish feast with little significance for Christians. Rather, it has become the essential backdrop for understanding the Eucharist. Similarly, as many spiritual writers have shown, Israel’s testing in the wilderness for 40 years is a model for the trials and purifications in the “spiritual desert” or “dark night” of the Christian life. Finally, the baptismal liturgy proclaims how the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan River are not only instruments of redemption for the Israelites under Moses and Joshua, but also serve as preparations for understanding the truly redemptive waters of Baptism.

All these examples point to the fact that the same God who was fathering the ancient Israelites continues to work in similar ways with His children today. By calling our attention to the profound connections between the biblical world and the Christian life, the four senses of Scripture ultimately should lead us to our knees—to a deeper level of praise and thanksgiving for God’s magnificent story of salvation which He continues to write in the fabric of history and in our very lives.

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