

## The Literal Sense and the Senses of Scripture

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St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) famously said that he knew what ‘time’ was until someone asked him about it. For then, on enquiry, the meaning of time slipped away, its nature becoming ever more perplexing and unreal.<sup>1</sup> Augustine admitted to such ignorance in his *Confessions* of 397–8, and his subsequent meditation on temporality occurs in the course of reflecting on the story of the world’s beginning in the book of Genesis. ‘Let me hear and understand’ – he beseeches God – ‘the meaning of the words: In the beginning you made heaven and earth.’<sup>2</sup> He implores to know their meaning – not their literal meaning, but just their meaning. If Moses were still around, Augustine would ‘lay hold of him . . . and beg and beseech him to explain those words’. We might have given up thinking that Moses wrote Genesis, and we might suppose that the meaning of the text is its ‘literal sense’. But we might also have to admit, as does Augustine of time, that we know what the *literal sense* means until someone asks us to explain it.

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. R.S. Pine-Coffin, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961, bk XI, ch. 14, p. 264.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, bk XI, ch. 3, p. 256; citing Gen. 1:1.

The word ‘literal’ means according to the letter, from the Latin for the latter, *littera*. So to read for the literal sense is to follow the letter of the text, the way the words go; and following the words is literal reading, which surely is just what reading is. For what else do we do when we read, if not follow the letters on the page or the screen, on whatever it is we are reading? We always begin with the literal sense. It is the foundation of reading. It is the base on which the sense of the text is built, and the idea of this – as it were – literal foundation was also an assumption of those ancient and medieval Christian writers who long pondered the senses of Scripture, and with whom much of this chapter is concerned.

Origen, in the second century, was one of the first to offer this view of the literal as foundational, and the foundational as the record of history. ‘Let us see the reports that are related about [the ark], . . . so that, when we have laid such foundations, we may be able to rise from the text of the history to the . . . sense of spiritual understanding’.<sup>3</sup> This image of the literal–historical

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<sup>3</sup> Origen quoted in H. de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. M. Sebanc and E.M. Macierowski, Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998–2009, vol. 2, p. 47; see Origen,

as the foundation for all other meanings in Scripture became foundational in the tradition, a constant and uninterrupted usage in ancient and medieval authors. And from the first, the historical was the meaning of the literal. But history is another seemingly straightforward but on inspection puzzling category, and it too, like literality, has a history. But before further considering this puzzling category we should briefly outline the other, spiritual senses that Origen supposed resting upon the foundation of history.<sup>4</sup>

## **MULTIPLE MEANINGS**

Today, many are familiar with a distinction between the literal and metaphorical senses of a text. The literal is the obvious, straightforward sense, the plain, undisputed meaning; while the metaphorical is a more contentious, less agreed sense, because it is an interpretation of the first,

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Origen, *Homilies on Genesis*, trans. R.E. Heine, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982, Homily 2.1, p. 72.

<sup>4</sup> We should note however, that others favored an organic rather than architectural figure for the relationships between the senses, thinking the spiritual meanings to lie within the husk of the literal sense. The reader has to peel open the text in order to find the mysteries within.

taking things and events, and the relationships between them, as standing for something else. Thus, at the literal level, Noah might have built an ark, but when the ark is taken as a metaphor it can become almost anything; it can become the ark of salvation, the Church. The ark becomes a metaphor, a word on the move; it becomes a figure for something other than itself, and in a sense becomes that other thing through figuring it.

All ancient and medieval Christian readers understood the distinction between the literal and the figural, and when they wrote they assumed the difference between the historical and spiritual senses of a text. The spiritual was so named because it concerned not what had happened, but the meaning of that happening for Christian life in the present, at the moment of reading. The text became a teaching about the pursuit of God through love of neighbour.

A metaphorical or figural reading of the literal sense was also known as an allegorical interpretation, and it was in thinking about this kind of interpretation that there developed a complex, sometimes contradictory, set of views about different allegorisms, different ways of interpreting the figural, and different ways of dealing with the dilemmas that such interpretations raised. Allegory – an other (*allos*) speaking (*agoria*);

speaking an other sense – is a grammatical term, used by St Paul (Gal. 4:24), but originating in non-Christian contexts before it became subject to Christian use and development. And in that development, allegory (*allegoria*) became more than a trope, a figure of speech; it became the practice of so reading the Scriptures that they everywhere disclosed the Christian mystery (*mysterium*).

‘Allegory exists when the present sacraments of Christ and the Church are signed by means of mystical words or things.’<sup>5</sup> And it was in detailing how the mystical words or things could sign Christ, the Church and Christian hope, that different authors produced different accounts of the allegorical. Some adduced more and some fewer senses, and some contradicted themselves as to the number. But in the course of time – a course that is exhaustively explored by Henri de Lubac (1896–1991) in his magisterial and monumental *Exégèse médiévale* (1959–64) – the Church more or less settled on three allegorical senses in addition to the literal, giving Scripture four senses that matched the four gospels of the canon. By the thirteenth century Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) could confidently assert that these

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<sup>5</sup> Amalarius of Metz (died 850) quoted in de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 91.

senses were: ‘the historical or literal, the allegorical, the tropological or moral, and the anagogical’.<sup>6</sup>

As already suggested, these senses were ways of reading Scripture so as to produce more than one meaning. Thus the allegorical sense was concerned with Christ, with showing how the Old Testament bespeaks the New. The third sense – the second allegorical practice – came into play when it was needful to show how ‘the things done in Christ and in those who prefigured him are signs of what we should carry out’.<sup>7</sup> This was the moral or tropological sense, which took this name because ‘allegory’ was already taken. Tropology might as easily have been called allegory, or allegory called tropology, since tropology is simply the science of *tropes*, figures of speech or turns of phrase.<sup>8</sup> Medieval *tropologia* is speech that is – as de

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<sup>6</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.1.10 in *Summa Theologiae* 1: *Christian Theology*, trans. T. Gilby OP, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 37.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1a.1.10, *responsio* (p. 39).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, it is the possible confusion of these terms that occurs in my earlier exposition of Aquinas, where the allegorical becomes the tropological. See G. Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology*,

Lubac has it – turned around or that turns something else around. It is ‘a “turned” or “turning manner of speech”.’<sup>9</sup> Finally there is anagogy (*anagōgia*), which concerns the things that are to come; heavenly matters to which we must ascend. It is named for the Greek *anagōgē*, taken to mean a climb rather than a journey. This third sense – which again names an interpretative practice – refers to both the things of heaven and the means by which they may be known; it names the eschatological mysteries and the manner of their contemplation.<sup>10</sup>

But now we turn back to the words of Scripture, to the literal sense, and to the claims that it is history and the foundation of everything else. For if God had not created the world and got caught up in its story there would be nothing to expound, no path for our ascent.

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2nd edn, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 125. The earlier text should be corrected by the present one; corrected by Aquinas.

<sup>9</sup> De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 129.

<sup>10</sup> See further de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, pp. 179–87.

## FIGURING LITERALISM

Though once foundational, the literal sense is hardly this in the modern period. This is not because it has disappeared, but because there is nothing built upon it. If it is a foundation it is that of a ruin, of a building long gone. There is a story to be told about how the senses of Scripture were reduced to just the literal, and how it then became purely historical. The identification of the literal with the historical is ancient, as also scepticism about the historicity of the Scriptures, or parts of them. But what is new in the modern period is a determination by some to maintain the frankly incredible as the meaning of a text, and to suppose that this incredible history is the only sense that the text can have. This is modern literalism. This chapter cannot rehearse how such a situation has arisen,<sup>11</sup> but will instead consider the nature of the literal sense in days when it was but the first of several senses, the means to get at the symbolic or figurative. For then these were the senses that really mattered, that addressed the present and foretold the

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<sup>11</sup> For this story see Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, pp. 127–132; and behind this, H. Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974.



future. And our exploration of the literal sense will begin to show how it too is figurative, perhaps the most figurative sense of all.

What does it mean to read the Bible literally? How easy is such a practice? As we shall see, it is more difficult than might be thought. Almost any part of the Bible will show this difficulty, but one might as well start at its beginning, with the story of the start of all things, since this has become one of the most contested sites for the claim of the literal, for taking the Bible at its word. As is well known, Genesis – the book of beginnings – narrates the birth of the world twice over, and famously claims that God made the world in six days, resting on the seventh (Genesis 2:2). God makes Adam out of earth, and Eve out of Adam (Genesis 2:7, 21–2). The story seems straightforward enough, until we try to read it as history, which, as we have seen, is what most take literal reading to be. The story is of course extremely telegraphic, fragmentary. We have to fill in a lot of details in order to imagine a coherent, continuous narrative. But there are limits to this.

The creation is measured in days, but days depend on the earth revolving on its axis and around the sun, but the sun is not created until the fourth day. God made all the world's vegetation on one day, all the fish in the sea on

another, and all the land animals, including man and woman, on a third; and yet we know that life on earth evolved over millions of years. What are these ‘days’ in the beginning, that seem independent of the very things that make a day, and are not the same length as the days those things now make. This is to state the problems in a modern way, drawing on modern knowledge. But the problems were known much earlier, expressed in more ancient ways.

Augustine pondered the story of creation on several occasions, and most famously in the last three books of the *Confessions*. But there he doesn’t get very far into the text, being constantly distracted by the problems it poses. He had fared better in earlier expositions, in his commentary written against Manichean interpretations, and in his *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis* (composed 393–95 and revised in 426), where he had got as far as Genesis 1:26. Then in 401 Augustine began writing on *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, which he completed in 415, and in which he made it to the end of Genesis 3. But before completing the commentary, in 413, he began work on *The City of God*, which he completed in 426, and in this text too he dwelt upon the meaning of Genesis, providing us with some of his last thoughts on the subject. So it is to this work that we turn rather than the earlier commentaries, though we will have cause to mention them again along the way.

In the second part of *The City of God*, Augustine follows the Bible in telling the story of the world from its creation to the coming of Christ. But he is easily distracted from the narrative, turning away to consider various issues of interpretation or philosophy and theology. And yet, as we shall see, this is consistent with his approach to reading the Bible, for the Bible is always pointing beyond itself, being as much about present lives in the Church as about past ones in history.

Augustine notes that ‘the days known to us have no evening other than by the setting of the sun, nor morning other than by its rising.’<sup>12</sup> What then are these Genesis days, and how was light made on the first day, before the sun, which was made on the fourth day (Genesis 1:14–19)? Augustine sees the problems but might be thought to dodge them by saying that though we cannot ‘understand how it was’ – which is to say, how the story makes any literal sense – nevertheless we must ‘believe it without hesitation.’ But Augustine rarely resists trying to make sense of things, and immediately begins to speculate as to what this light before light, before the sun, might have been. Maybe it came from another source, from ‘the upper part of the

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<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed, R.W. Dyson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, bk XI, ch. 7, p. 457.

world', or from the place where the sun would be put, or perhaps it was from the 'holy city' of the 'angels and blessed spirits'. Any one of these things – the existence of which is covered by the fact that God made the heavens and the earth – might be what is meant by the 'light' created on the first day (Genesis 1:3). But is this to read 'light' literally? It is certainly an attempt to give it an historical reference, but it is to do so by the very means by which we get from the literal to the allegorical. It is to treat 'light' as standing in for something else, for a particular source of radiation. It is to treat it as symbolic, and so to lose the literal sense in the very attempt at its preservation. The historical has become allegorical.

But Augustine is still worried by thought of sunless days, and so offers yet another, more wonderful reading of the 'days' of creation.<sup>13</sup> Noting that night is not mentioned in measuring these days, but rather evening and morning, Augustine likens the rising and setting of the sun to the dawning of our darkling knowledge, for compared to 'the Creator's knowledge, the knowledge of the creature is like a kind of evening light.' To know things, and to know them in the 'light of God's wisdom', and in praise of God, is to know them in daylight. Each day is the dawning of such knowledge, of the things named for that day. When the creature praises and loves God in the

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<sup>13</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XI, ch. 7, pp. 457–458.

‘knowledge of itself, that is the first day.’ ‘When it does so in the knowledge of the earth, the sea, and of all the things that spring from the earth and have their roots in it, that is the third day.’ And so on. The days are entirely symbolic. They are not durations but intelligences, and indeed prayers. Their light is the light of God, informing the minds of those who sing God’s praise. They have, as we might say, an existential rather than historical reference.

God rested on the seventh day (Gen 2:2). Taken literally, that would seem to imply an exhausted God, tired out by the labour of making the world. But this would be to understand the story in a ‘childish’ way, Augustine notes. ‘Rather, God’s rest signifies the rest of those who rest in God, just as the joy of a house means the joy of those who rejoice in the house.’<sup>14</sup> God’s resting is a figure of speech, in which the effect is transferred to its cause. Our resting becomes God’s. But does this mean we have moved from a literal to a symbolic meaning, or does this figure of speech belong to the literal?

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<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XI, ch. 8: p. 458. Augustine often describes as childish what might be thought the literal reading of a text. Figural readings are adult readings.

Faced with the opening stories in Genesis, Augustine makes some feint toward a literal sense, but very quickly turns to symbolic readings, which save the text and clearly interest him much more. For Augustine is convinced that the stories have a purpose, and that purpose is our edification. Nevertheless, he does want to find a historical meaning if at all possible. We can see this when he comes to relate the story of Noah and his ark (Gen 6). Augustine is clearly aware that the story must seem fanciful, if not preposterous. He rehearses the sceptical questions of others. Could there have been a flood so great as to cover all the land, including the highest mountains, which are above the clouds from which rain comes? And surely the ark would have been too small for all the animals it had to contain? And how could anyone have built such a large vessel? And would there not have been a need for more animals than those decreed, in order to feed the animals that live off the flesh of others?<sup>15</sup> And why did God have to preserve the animals in this way? Could God not have simply created them again, as he had at the first? No doubt some of these questions were also Augustine's, and against them all he insists that no one should think the story of the flood 'unhistorical', its language 'merely figurative'.<sup>16</sup> He goes to some lengths to establish the plausibility and so the historicity of the story.

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<sup>15</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 27, pp. 689–692.

<sup>16</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 27, p. 689.

If mountains can get as high as they do, why not also the waters that covered them? After all, water is lighter than earth, and so can rise higher.<sup>17</sup> This is not for us a convincing response, and we would have to allow that Augustine's 'adversaries' have the better case. But as to the size of the ark, it was larger than the objectors think, 900 x 150 cubits when all three floors are taken into account, and Mosaic cubits – Moses being the author of Genesis – may have been up to six times bigger than Augustinian ones. No one really knows the size of the ark. It was large enough. As for its building, that took a hundred years, and so was not impossible, and once afloat it was 'steered by divine providence rather than by human prudence, lest it incur shipwreck'.<sup>18</sup> As for the carnivorous animals aboard the ark, they may have become vegetarian for the duration of the voyage, as it is not unknown for

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 27, pp. 689–690.

<sup>18</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 27, p. 690. It may be noted that while Augustine is prepared to allow that past cubits may have been larger than present ones, he is not prepared to allow that present years might be longer measures of time than more ancient ones; a supposition that would reduce the recorded ages of men like Noah – 950 when he died (Genesis 9:29) – to more credible numbers. See bk XV, chs 12–14. Noah needs time in which to build the ark.

such animals to eat ‘vegetables and fruit, especially figs and chestnuts.’<sup>19</sup> As to why God chose this laborious method to repopulate the earth, rather than creating land animals anew, as initially, this is not really answered by Augustine, other than by saying that a ‘most sacred mystery was being enacted’.<sup>20</sup> But in fact there is a reason, and it is entirely literary.

Augustine insists upon the historicity of the flood story, despite all evidence to the contrary. He rejects the view that the story has only a symbolic meaning.<sup>21</sup> And yet it is the symbolic meaning that most interests him, since of course it is the symbolic that saves the story from being merely antiquarian. ‘[W]e are to believe that the writing of this account had a wise purpose; that the events recorded are historical; that they have a symbolic meaning also, and that the symbolic meaning is intended to prefigure the Church.’<sup>22</sup> The historical makes the symbolic possible; but it is because of the symbolic meaning that the historical came to pass, for the sake of the ‘most sacred mystery that was here being enacted’.<sup>23</sup> The historical – or

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 27, p. 692.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 27, p. 691.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 27, p. 692.

<sup>22</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 27, pp. 692–693.

<sup>23</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 27, p. 691.



literal – is the means by which God’s wise purpose is brought to pass. This is why God chose to save the animals by gathering them, two by two, aboard the ark, so that they could be symbols for future readers. For the ark, without doubt, is a symbol of the ‘City of God on pilgrimage in this world: that is, of the Church which is saved through the wood upon which hung “the Mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”.’<sup>24</sup>

Augustine explains that everything about the ark, its dimensions and structure, symbolises the body of Christ. The door in its side is the wound in his, pierced by a spear (Jn 19:34). It is the means by which we enter into salvation, for out of the wound there flowed the sacraments of the Church. ‘Again, when it was commanded that square wood be used, this signifies the stability of the lives of the saints; for in whatever direction you turn that which is square, it will remain stable. And all the other details mentioned in connection with the building of the ark are signs of things in the Church.’<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 26, p. 687; citing 1 Timothy 2:5.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 26, p. 687. As Augustine notes, these signs are further detailed in his *Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon* (*Contra Faustum manichaeum*); see this in P. Schaff (ed.) *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996, vol. IV, pp. 155–345; bk 12.14, p.

Augustine has no difficulty in finding churchly equivalents for the ark's details, including its three storeys, which bespeak married chastity in the bottom storey, widowed chastity above, and virginity on top. And what controls such interpretations is not, as we might think, that they cohere with the text, but that they can be 'reconciled with the harmony of the Catholic faith.'<sup>26</sup>

The *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis* opens with a summary of the Catholic faith, since it is this that must measure any literal reading of the text, guarding against wayward, heretical interpretations. And such a guard is needed because the text is so difficult to construe, its literal meaning so uncertain. The story of the world's making, along with the mysteries of the world that is made, are best 'discussed by asking questions [rather] than by

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188. Augustine's reading of the ark as Christ's body, the Church, was already an established interpretation, offered, for example, by St Cyprian in the third century. See Cyprian, *Epistles* in A.C. Coxe (ed.) *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.5, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995, epistle 75.2, p.398.

<sup>26</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, bk XV, ch. 26, p. 688.

making affirmations.’<sup>27</sup> This observation and injunction starts Augustine’s commentary, and it is one that Augustine follows throughout, as also – and as we have seen – in his later musings on the Scriptures. It is a remarkably tentative, cautious approach for an author given to strong views, and it is an approach that modern critical readings can only confirm, and should emulate more than they do.

Behind Augustine’s insistence on retaining the literal, historical sense of Scripture is Paul’s admonition that ‘the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’ (2 Cor 3:6). This might have been understood as requiring Christians to abandon the literal in favour of spiritual or figural readings of the text. It was certainly used as encouragement to such readings, but Augustine and his predecessors took the verse to mean that the letter taken alone kills, but the letter as means to the spiritual is vivifying. Indeed the spiritual depends on the literal, which is, as we have already noted, the foundation for the figures it supports. For these Christian readers it was the Jews who made the mistake of reading no further than the literal sense. ‘The Jews’ – Origen explains with regard to the Book of Judges – ‘read these things “as histories

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<sup>27</sup> Augustine, *Unfinished Literal Commentary on Genesis* in *On Genesis*, trans E. Hill, ed. J.E. Roelle, The Works of St Augustine 13, Hyde Park NY: New City Press, 2001, 1.1, p. 114.

of things done and gone” whilst we, for whom they had been written, apply them to ourselves.<sup>28</sup> Origen does not deny the historicity of Judges, but rather points out that ‘things done and gone’ have more significance for the Church than the merely historical.

Henri de Lubac, in discussing the literal sense of Scripture, is concerned to establish that the patristic authors always had a concern for the historical sense, and he is somewhat reluctant to allow that on occasion they did admit defeat in this regard. Thus notoriously Origen denied historical reference to several passages, and not surprisingly to much of the story of creation.

‘Now what man of intelligence will believe that the first and the second and the third day, and the evening and the morning existed without the sun and moon and stars?’<sup>29</sup> More surprisingly, he also doubted stories in the New Testament, such as that the devil took Jesus to the top of a high mountain and showed him the kingdoms of the earth (Matt 4:8).<sup>30</sup> The astute reader

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<sup>28</sup> Origen quoted in de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 52; see Origen, *Homilies on Judges*, trans. E.A.D. Lauro, Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009, Homily 2.5, p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G.W. Butterworth, Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973 [1966], bk 4, ch. 3, sec. 1, p. 288.

<sup>30</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, bk 4, ch. 3, sec. 1, p. 289.

‘will detect thousands of other passages like this in the gospels, which will convince him that events which did not take place at all are woven into the records of what literally did happen.’<sup>31</sup> It is a perhaps alarming principle that the Scripture mixes fiction with fact, but such fictions were never thought to be untruthful, only unhistorical. Origen supposed that the absurdity of such stories pointed to their figural nature, to the demand that they be read allegorically.<sup>32</sup> They convey the mysteries of faith.

De Lubac will admit that the ‘Latin Middle Ages have, like the age before it, and even more than it, made an often intemperate use of allegorism, for which they have brought into play some quite questionable methods.’<sup>33</sup> But he will not allow that it was an allegorism that sucked out ‘the letter, the historical tissue’.<sup>34</sup> ‘For the Middle Ages’, de Lubac insists, ‘the ‘historical sense is solid’ and ‘the solidity of the history is not violated’ by the expression of the spiritual sense.’<sup>35</sup> De Lubac can seem over sensitive on

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<sup>31</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, bk 4, ch. 3, sec. 1, pp. 289–90.

<sup>32</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, bk 4, ch. 3, sec. 4, pp. 293–96.

<sup>33</sup> De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> C. Spicq, *Esquisse d’une histoire de l’exégèse latine au moyen age*, Paris: Vrin, 1944, p. 28, note 2.

<sup>35</sup> De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 56; quoting Prudentius of Troyes.

this point, and he may have been more concerned with honouring the historical than were those about whom he writes, for he is anxious to insist on the literal in a way that they were not. They valued the figurative, and thought that it saved the text from being about mere happenings, about which there could always be questions, doubts. Augustine's own questions about the literal sense, and eagerness to get on to the symbolic, are testimony of this. Moreover, allegory distinguished Christian from Jewish reading, and made it possible to convert the entire Bible to the Christian outlook. Yes, it told of things from before Christ, but those things – rightly interpreted – told of Christ. In 'the Old Testament is concealed the New, and in the New Testament is revealed the Old.'<sup>36</sup> De Lubac, on the other hand, is writing after the fall of such reading, writing for people who have grown suspicious of flights of fancy, as they may often seem, and who value the historical as history, and not as a means to something else. De Lubac is trying to save the historical in order to save allegory.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Augustine, *Instructing Beginners in Faith*, trans. R. Canning, Hyde Park NY: New City Press, 2006, 4.8, p. 70.

<sup>37</sup> The second part of de Lubac's *Exégèse médiévale* (vols 3 and 4) is devoted to arguing that the diminishment of the allegorical senses in favor of the literal – which is said to have led to the modern division between theology and biblical studies – occurred in the fourteenth century and not, as many supposed, in the twelfth. De Lubac sought to save Hugh of St Victor

## SIGNIFICANT THINGS

Augustine's reading of Noah's ark opens an ambiguity in thinking of the literal sense as historical reference. Does the sense reside at the level of the text, or at the level of the events that the text narrates? It would seem that it has to be both, for the text picks out some things and not others, and orders them through its telling of them, but they themselves are already ordered by divine providence. God is the author of the story because first the author of the events that the story tells. We can further explore this view through considering Thomas Aquinas's account of the literal sense.

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(c.1096–1141) from blame, and instead charged Nicholas of Lyra (c.1270–1349) with mainstreaming a development that can be traced back to Joachim of Fiore (c.1135–1202). For a discussion of this Lubacian plotting of exegetical history, and an attempt to rescue Nicholas from de Lubac's charge, see R. McDermott, 'Henri De Lubac's Genealogy of Modern Exegesis and Nicholas of Lyra's Literal Sense of Scripture', *Modern Theology* 29, 2013, pp. 124–56. Nicholas's concern with the literal was literally a concern with the letter on the page.

Andrew Louth once noted that many people seem to have a ‘fundamental distaste for, or even revulsion against, the whole business of allegory.’ They think that ‘there is something dishonest about allegory.’ For by allegory ‘you can make any text mean anything you like.’<sup>38</sup> Louth was writing in 1983. But ten years later, and Frances Young was arguing that the time was right for a return to allegory, for the context of biblical studies had ‘dramatically changed’.<sup>39</sup> People had a new appreciation for the literary quality of the biblical texts, and for how the interests of those who read them affect the meaning of what they read. However, the context may have changed less radically than Young thought, for almost twenty years later and we find Hans Boersma and Matthew Levering making a similar observation on the waning of historical-critical approaches to the Bible and an increased enthusiasm for its spiritual sense.<sup>40</sup> The return of allegory is still arriving. Its exponents still have to contend with the fear that allegory – the spiritual sense – is unconstrainable, that it takes away from the certainty

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<sup>38</sup> A. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 97.

<sup>39</sup> F. Young, ‘Allegory and the Ethics of Reading’ in F. Watson (ed.) *The Open Text: New Directions for Biblical Studies?*, London: SCM Press, 1993, pp. 103–120: p. 105.

<sup>40</sup> H. Boersma and M. Levering, ‘Spiritual Interpretation and Realigned Temporality’, *Modern Theology* 28, 2012, pp. 587–96: p. 587.



for which the fearful yearn. And such concerns have always attended the opening of the text to more than one sense.

‘Allow a variety of readings to one passage, and you produce confusion and deception, and sap the foundations of argument; examples of the stock fallacies, not reasoned discourse, follow from the medley of meanings.’<sup>41</sup>

This is Thomas Aquinas writing in the thirteenth century. But it is Thomas stating the position that he proceeds to reject. For he is quite certain that God is the author of Scripture and that since God ‘comprehends everything all at once in his understanding, it comes not amiss, as St Augustine observes, if many meanings are present even in the literal sense of one passage of Scripture.’<sup>42</sup> As he observes, Thomas is following Augustine, but Thomas brings a determined precision to his account of the literal and the spiritual senses, and to his attempt to avoid the dangers of the spiritual sense that he so succinctly states.

Thomas makes a sharp distinction between the text and the things to which the text refers, and it is these things that God adapts in order to convey meanings beyond the literal. ‘In every branch of knowledge words have

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<sup>41</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.1.10 (p. 37).

<sup>42</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.1.10, *responsio* (p. 39).

meaning, but what is special here is that the things meant by the words also themselves mean something.’

That first meaning whereby the words signify things belongs to the sense first-mentioned, namely the historical or literal. That meaning, however, whereby the things signified by the words in their turn also signify other things is called the spiritual sense; it is based on and presupposes the literal sense.<sup>43</sup>

The literal and figurative senses are divided between text and thing, *littera* and *res*. It is not the text that refers to Church (allegory), morals (tropology) and heaven (anagogy), but the things to which the text refers, for they too are signs. Genesis refers to the ark, but it is the ark that refers us to Christ and the life of the Church. This distinction between word and thing is long established in the tradition. ‘The actions speak,’ Augustine affirmed. ‘The deeds, if you understand them, are words.’<sup>44</sup> But we might wonder why either Augustine or Thomas bothered with the distinction. For if things are signs they are akin to words, and so not outside but inside textuality, like the

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<sup>43</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.1.10, *ad secundum* (pp. 39–41).

<sup>44</sup> Augustine quoted in de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 86.

spiritual senses they convey.<sup>45</sup> God may be able to move things around as we do words,<sup>46</sup> but the meanings that God thereby enables are disclosed only in texts such as those written by someone like Thomas, in his commentaries on the books of Scripture.<sup>47</sup>

Moreover, what about those textual signs that have no historical referents, but are indeed fables or fictions, ‘dreams in the night’ as Theodore of

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<sup>45</sup> It ‘is only the way the story is told in the biblical material that makes the events significant in any sense.’ Young, ‘Allegory’, p. 105.

<sup>46</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, Ia, 105, 2.

<sup>47</sup> The allegorical distinction (between things and words) is like that between history and historiography, the things that happened and the story that tells them; and without the story the things hardly come into view. There is no history without historiography (of some sort). The distinction is also like that between allegory and typology, the latter having been invented in order to escape the ignominy of allegory while retaining its effects. The figuration of the New Testament in the Old was supposed to be a matter of objective history, accessible – at least in principle – from outside the biblical text.

Mopsuestia put it?<sup>48</sup> It was supposed that in such cases we go directly to the figurative sense, bypassing the literal-historical, since it does not exist. But in such cases, it is not the thing but the sign (of the non-thing) that has figural meaning, and the passage into history is unnecessary, and if unnecessary in such cases then perhaps unnecessary in all. Whether or not there was an ark, the ‘ark’ figures the Church.

By making the distinction between the literal sense of words and the spiritual sense of things, Thomas is able to avoid – or so he thinks – the danger of ‘confusion and deception’ threatened by multiple meanings. For these meanings are in things and not the words. ‘Consequently holy

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<sup>48</sup> Theodore (c.350–428) is objecting to those – like Origen – whom he thinks turn all of Scripture into a dream rather than history. ‘When they start expounding divine Scripture spiritually – “spiritual interpretation” is the name they like to give to their folly – they claim that Adam is not Adam, paradise is not paradise, the serpent not the serpent.’ Quoted in P. W. Martens, ‘Origen against History? Reconsidering the Critique of Allegory’, *Modern Theology* 28, 2012, pp. 635–656: p. 638; see Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentary on Galatians* in H.B. Swete, *Theodori Episcopi Mopsuesteni in epistolas B. Pauli commentarii*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1880, vol. 1, 74.6–75.2.

Scripture sets up no confusion, since all meanings are based on one, namely the literal sense.’ Arguments are to be drawn from the literal sense alone, and nothing serious is lost by not knowing the spiritual sense, ‘for nothing necessary for faith is contained under the spiritual sense that is not openly conveyed through the literal sense elsewhere.’<sup>49</sup>

Thus Thomas seeks to allay the fears of those who think that allegory leads to confusion about the plain meaning of Scripture, while also allowing for such plain meaning to open onto richer, spiritual insights. Indeed, Thomas’s literal sense is far from plain, for it is where one finds what we might call the metaphorical and which he calls the parabolic. This sense emerges in cases where there is no historical reference, where the figural – the thing figured – is the literal sense.<sup>50</sup> ‘When Scripture speaks of the arm of God, the literal sense is not that he has a physical limb, but that he has what it

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<sup>49</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.1.10, *ad primum* (p. 39). See also Ia.1.9, *ad secundum* (p. 35).

<sup>50</sup> These are Origen’s mysteries, signaled by the lack of historical reference. They are also evidence of that shifting of the allegorical from thing to text that Christopher Ocker sees in Thomas’s notion of the *sensus parabolicus*. See C. Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 41–2.

signifies, namely the power of doing and making.’ God has no arm, so there is no *thing* that could mean creative power; it is rather the text that means this, and its literal sense is the power of God. ‘This example brings out how nothing false can underlie the literal sense of Scripture.’<sup>51</sup>

We might enjoy the ingenuity of Thomas’s model – his distinction of the literal and figural along the axis of word and thing – but we might also think it strained or unnecessary. Why not simply say that these senses are effects of reading a text one way – as referring to historical or fictional events – and then another way – as evoking through those events present or future realities? But there are at least two lessons that we can take from Thomas’s attempt to free the literal from the figural – free except in the case of the parabolic.

First, and as already indicated, the signifying thing does not escape the letter, the textuality that alone provides the context in which things can come to mean anything at all. God gives meaning to things by bringing them into Scripture, and in finding them there we find them meaningful. It is because Jesus walks into Scripture that he becomes the long awaited

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<sup>51</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.1.10, *ad tertium* (p. 41).

Messiah (Luke 4:16–21<sup>52</sup>) and finally the word of God in flesh (John 1:1).

But that enfleshment is at the same time an enwording, a clothing in the textuality that gives bodies meaning.

When Jesus reads from the scroll in the synagogue we find that the things he does – bringing good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind – are not just his actions but God’s actions in him. Jesus is God acting in the world. But one does not see this by simply meeting Jesus. One has to

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<sup>52</sup> The story of Jesus preaching in the Nazareth synagogue, followed by his rejection, is also given in Mark (6:1–6) and Matthew (13:54–58). But only in Luke are we told what Jesus said that at first so pleased (4:22) his hearers: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor . . . . Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing’ (4:18–19, 21; quoting Isa. 61:1–2; Lev. 25:10). They reject him only after he has told them that they will, giving the sayings and texts he cites (1 Kings 17:9, 8–16; 2 Kings 5:1–14) a different literal meaning from their normal reference. Jesus applies the texts to himself and his audience. In this story the literal and figural are entangled from the start, and tangled by Jesus.

meet Jesus in a story, and in and through the Christian practice of reading that story; and Scripture has stories about this. Two disciples were walking to Emmaus, when a man they did not recognize joined them. But then, ‘beginning with Moses and all the prophets’ (Luke 24:27), he began to recount the Scriptures, and when, later that evening, he broke bread with them, they saw who he was.

Thus Thomas’s distinction between word and thing is not so much about separating the figural from the literal as it is about bringing the literal—historical into the realm of meaning, of scriptural textuality, where its significance can unfold. And indeed, Thomas is quite clear that the figural is always within the literal, for ‘it comes not amiss . . . if many meanings are present even in the literal sense of one passage of Scripture.’<sup>53</sup> This inclusion is especially evident with regard to the parabolic sense, when ‘the literal sense is not the figure of speech itself, but the object it figures’.<sup>54</sup> And this leads onto the second point, though it is not a path that Thomas followed: the literal is always already figural, even if it is the first figure. The plain sense is itself the result of a figuration, a set of conventions,

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<sup>53</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.1.10, *ad primum* (p.39).

<sup>54</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Ia.1.10, *ad tertium* (p. 41).



which are never entirely fixed, and by which we learn to interpret the words on the page as referring to events beyond them.

One way in which the literal is figurative is in the sense that the history recounted in the Old Testament was understood as a figure – or shadow – of what came after in the New Testament, but an after that is in a sense before, in that it is the reality to which the earlier history points.<sup>55</sup> But this means that the literal sense of the New Testament is already allegorical, being the spiritual sense of the Old Testament. It is historical and allegorical at the same time, and so its second sense is not the allegorical but the tropological, the moral. ‘Narrating the mysteries of our redemption, Scripture relates what has been done for us historically so as to signify what is to be done by us morally.’<sup>56</sup>

The Song of Songs is a fascinating site for finding the literal turning figural. From the earliest days of the Church this text was problematic for those who sought the literal sense. For it was impossible to take it at face value, as it

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<sup>55</sup> De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 53.

<sup>56</sup> Gueric of Igny (c.1080–1157) quoted in de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, p. 129; see Gueric of Igny, ‘Sermon IV for the Feast of the Purification’, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 3.1 (1968), pp. 104–8: p. 104.

seemed to relate a number of erotic encounters and missed opportunities.

Thus, apart from one or two expositors,<sup>57</sup> everyone read it allegorically, as about the relationship between Christ and the Church, or between the soul and Christ. Celibate monastics in particular found it an encouragement and wrote endless commentaries upon it.<sup>58</sup>

But in time the allegorical approach became doubtful, and in the nineteenth century a literal interpretation was increasingly favoured. As Stephen Moore argues, this connects with the ascendancy of an ever stricter heterosexuality, an ideology obsessed with separating the masculine from the feminine, and

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<sup>57</sup> Stephen Moore identifies Theodore of Mopsuestia and Jovinian (died 405) as attempting non-allegorical readings of the Song. See S.D. Moore, 'The Song of Songs in the History of Sexuality' in *God's Beauty Parlor and Other Queer Spaces in and around the Bible*, Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2001, pp. 21–89, 212–39: p. 74. Such readings may have withered under the glare of the Church, but continuing aspersions against such literal interpretations – offensive to pious ears – testifies that for some the Bible turned bawdy in the Song (pp. 74–75).

<sup>58</sup> See D. Turner, *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis of the Song of Songs*, Cistercian Studies 156, Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995.

so ever more uncomfortable with a text that, read allegorically, turned the male reader into Christ's would-be bride, imploring him for the kisses of his mouth (Song of Songs 1:1).<sup>59</sup> Literalizing the text and returning such verses to an entirely female persona could avert the horror, hide the temptation, of homoerotic yearning. But – as Moore points out with dismayed relish – the desire to return to the literal sense has led to an ever greater 'sexting' of the Song, as Kevin Vanhoozer has called it,<sup>60</sup> though perhaps without realising how far this has gone in some commentaries, which have found euphemisms in almost every line.<sup>61</sup> Read in such a way – as figured with innuendo – the literal text becomes explicitly pornographic. These readings are startling examples of what Moore calls the New Allegorism, when the

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<sup>59</sup> Moore, *God's Beauty Parlour*, pp. 80–82.

<sup>60</sup> K. Vanhoozer, 'Ascending the Mountain, Singing the Rock: Biblical Interpretation Earthed, Typed and Transfigured', *Modern Theology* 28, 2012, pp. 781–803: p. 785.

<sup>61</sup> See M.D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 36, Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986; M.H. Pope, *Song of Songs: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1977. See also L. Eslinger, 'The Case of an Immodest Lady Wrestler in Deuteronomy XXV 11–12', *Vetus Testamentum* 31, 1981, pp. 269–281; and R. Boer, *Knockin' on Heaven's Door: The Bible and Popular Culture*, London: Routledge, 1999.

literal is turned into its presumed opposite, but a turning that reveals the literal as itself always already figural.<sup>62</sup>

## **AUTHORING SCRIPTURE**

The ancient and medieval authors could move so easily – and eagerly – from the literal to the figural because they were in pursuit of Scripture’s spiritual sense, believing Scripture to have a divine author whose intentions were unconstrained by the human writers of the biblical texts. Indeed, just as there could be differences of opinion between the readers of a biblical text, so also between those readers and the text’s writer, and so, by implication, between the text’s writer and the divine author. But Augustine – for one – saw no harm in this. ‘Provided . . . that each of us tries as best he can to understand in the Holy Scriptures what the writer meant by them, what harm is there if a reader believes what you, the Light of all truthful minds, show him to be the true meaning? It may not even be the meaning which the writer had in mind, and yet he too saw in them a true meaning, different though it may have been from this.’<sup>63</sup> Discerning the divine mind is a matter of the communal mind, over time; a discerning by the body of

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<sup>62</sup> Moore, *God’s Beauty Parlour*, pp. 82–89.

<sup>63</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, bk XVIII, ch. 18, p. 296.

Christ. No one person, not even the inspired writer of Scripture, comprehends everything.

It was only later Christian readers who came not so much to doubt the divine authorship as collapse it into that of human intentionality. Of course, it was long held that the Bible's human authors were inspired in their penmanship, but just insofar as meaning became identified with human intentionality, it became increasingly difficult to suppose that human authors had entertained the bewilderingly diverse, seemingly infinite, range of meanings made possible through spiritual exegesis.

More recently – with the advent of what we can recognize as properly modern, historical-critical ways of reading – the only recognized intentionality was that of the Bible's human writers, and then even that began to slip away. For the biblical texts began to be read as not so much the work of authors – the Pentateuch penned by Moses, the Song by Solomon, the Gospels by Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – as that of compilers or editors. These anonymous individuals had collected and then stitched together what had come down to them, first in a rather haphazard fashion, and then with more design – as scholars moved to seeing them as more like novelists than mere reporters. Thus a certain kind of intentionality

returned to the texts, but it was that of their editors, reading communities and canonizers; or, if you will, of the scholars who reconstructed them.<sup>64</sup>

And these intentionalities were altogether human, subject to human interests and limitations, and analysable in terms of the cultural and social forces that shaped them.

Other forms of textual interrogation returned something more like a divine intentionality, but one without aid of human authors. Structuralist readings of Scripture would find in it meanings that, though they moved through human amanuenses, were not those intended by them. Structuralism is a kind of figural reading, but one that is less concerned than earlier interpretations with how a biblical text tells of the Church, of morality, or of things to come. (However, just in so far as structuralism supposes that its

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<sup>64</sup> See B.Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context*, London: SCM Press, 1985, and for more recent discussion L.M. McDonald, *The Biblical Canon: Its Origin, Transmission and Authority*, Peabody MA: Hendrikson, 2007, and L.M. McDonald and J.A. Sanders (eds) *The Canon Debate*, Peabody MA: Hendrikson, 2002. See also F. Watson, *Gospel Writing: A Canonical Perspective*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013.

texts – Amazonian myths or Christian gospels<sup>65</sup> – work to express and alleviate strains and tensions in the cultures that produce them, it practices something akin to that turning of the text to present interests that we see in the eagerness of an Origin or Augustine to explain what a story of the past – say that of the ark – has to say about Christian life in the present.)

It is because Scripture is divinely authored that it can be thought to tell a single story, to have a single meaning or *hypothesis*, despite the variety of its writers, forms and seemingly contradictory texts.<sup>66</sup> It is also why it can

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<sup>65</sup> See C. Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978; E. Leach and D.A. Aycock, *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>66</sup> Lewis Ayres notes how Irenaeus of Lyons (died 202) stressed the unity of the text – and of the Old and New Testaments – and did so through adapting classical reading practices, which in non-Christian contexts had not been used to determine a unified meaning across diverse materials. See L. Ayres, “‘There’s Fire in That Rain’: On Reading the Letter and Reading Allegorically”, *Modern Theology* 28, 2012, pp. 616–34: pp. 621–22. Such practices included correcting punctuation, determining who is speaking at any point, identifying figures of speech and quirks of style, clarifying obscure terms by reference to other parts of the text and relating obscure

be thought to have so many meanings. Of course it was possible to consider the interests of Scripture's human authors, but just as they had been inspired in the writing of Scripture, so too were its devout readers, who sought to read in the Spirit, discerning what the Spirit had to say now, through the Scripture, about the present and the future.<sup>67</sup> But it has to be understood that divine authorship undercuts intentionality as the measure of textual meaning, for divine intentionality is known only through human reading, 'the crucial locus in which meaning is generated.'<sup>68</sup> As such, divine authorship is formally indistinguishable from the interests of those who read the Scriptures, and so it may always be but 'human discourse writ holy.'<sup>69</sup>

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passages to a perceived overall meaning (pp. 620–21). Ayres proposes that there are intrinsic connections between these practices and the emergence of a revelatory canon (p. 623). It was in and through such practices that the Scripture became Scripture (pp. 626–67). And still today we have to say that it is only the Church's reading – reading in the Spirit – which turns the Bible scriptural, revelatory. See further Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, pp. 42–51, 116–19.

<sup>67</sup> For an earlier account of scriptural inspiration see Loughlin, *Telling God's Story*, pp. 109–119.

<sup>68</sup> Young, 'Allegory', p. 108.

<sup>69</sup> Vanhoozer, 'Ascending the Mountain', p. 783.



Nevertheless, the Church ventures upon such reading as a community, with each reader ideally listening to the interpretations of others. It is together that the faithful may hear the address of God in the words of Scripture. Such an undertaking cannot be the reading/hearing of a closed, hermetic community, for then it will only echo itself, narcissistically. It must not fear the questing, questioning nature of such an undertaking, seeking to police the possibilities of interpretation. For then it would indeed deny what the tradition has long held – from Jesus and Paul to Augustine and Thomas – that God’s authoring of Scripture is fruitful of multiple meanings, and that it is in the learning of these that the truth of Christ is slowly, painfully, joyously disclosed.

So how might we now read for the literal sense of Scripture? Well, we could hardly do better than take our lead from Augustine and adopt an interrogative mode. Such a mode cannot go back behind the forms of questioning that arose in the nineteenth century and continued throughout the twentieth.<sup>70</sup> We cannot unlearn the fictionality of the texts, the degree to

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<sup>70</sup> See Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 1, pp. xix–xxi. ‘[T]o be cool toward the scientific knowledge and the mental habits of our own time would not be a help in retrieving the mental habits of times gone by. To take refuge in an exegesis improperly dubbed “mystical” and made up “of human

which they are interested interpretations of what may or may not have happened. We cannot, therefore, escape the need for honest but *faithful* reading. But we need not think that in doing so we are abandoning earlier practice, for from the first, faithful readers have questioned the historicity of certain stories, and disagreed among themselves as to what was and was not plausible history, just as we will disagree with them, and disagree among ourselves.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, the seeming scepticism of historical-critical approaches can help us to see when we should read for the figurative, spiritual sense.

It is not new to say that discerning the history is an ever renewed undertaking, a communal labour of the body that must always be seeking the unity of Scripture and of Scripture with God's other testament, the world

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expedients and arrangements" would simply be ridiculous' (xix–xx; quoting Pius XII, *Divino afflante spiritu*, 1943).

<sup>71</sup> Aquinas seems to have thought the garden of Eden an actual place, near the equator; as signaled by the flaming sword of the cherubim set to guard its entrance. *Summa Theologiae* IIa-IIae.164.2, *ad quintum*, citing Gen 3:24. But Origen wondered who would be 'so silly as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, "planted a paradise eastward in Eden" (Gen 2:8), and set in it a visible and palpable "tree of life" (Gen 2:9)'. Origen, *On First Principles*, bk 4, ch. 3, sec. 1, p. 288.

as disclosed through human learning. Worldly knowledge is not less diverse than Scripture, but like Scripture the world may be assumed to have a truth and unity appropriate to being the creation of a God who walked the world in the cool of the day (Genesis 3:8) and in the heat of more troubled, more historical times. Since grace perfects nature, Thomas saw no incompatibility between faith and natural reason.<sup>72</sup> Thus when we read Scripture we should expect it to cohere with the way the world goes. In short, we should be guided by the axiom that ‘nothing false can underlie the literal sense of Scripture.’<sup>73</sup> This then means that when a historical reference would result in nonsense, as with talk of God’s right arm, or the ‘days’ of creation, the literal sense is – as Thomas argued – the figurative sense.<sup>74</sup> The literalist, in such cases, fails to grasp the literal sense.

Though many have looked for a return to more allegorical modes of reading – Andrew Louth in the 1980s, Frances Young in the 1990s, Hans Boersma

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<sup>72</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* Ia.1.8, *ad secundum* (p. 31).

<sup>73</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ* Ia.1.10, *ad tertium* (p. 41).

<sup>74</sup> For Aquinas’ rather painful attempt to figure out the days of creation see *Summa Theologiæ* Ia.65–74. The way the world goes now is not the way it went for Thomas, for whom the sun revolved around the earth (Ia.74.3, *ad septimum*).

and Matthew Levering in the 2010s – the Church is unlikely to ever go back to the rich, complex, multi-layered forms that such reading took when it was most abundant. But nor can it go back to a naïve literalism, for literalism always turns out to be a disguised allegorism, a figuration of the literal as unlikely history. We should read for the literal sense, but a literal sense that will often turn out to have a spiritual sense as well, or only a spiritual sense, as seems best on occasion. We can hardly do better than align ourselves with Thomas Gilby, and wish for what he – writing in the 1960s – perceived as a trend ‘towards giving the literal sense a fuller content, *sensus litteralis plenior*, reinforced with elements from the spiritual senses described by St Thomas.’<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> T. Gilby, ‘The Senses of Scripture’ in *Summa Theologiae 1: Christian Theology*, trans. Thomas Gilby OP, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, Appendix 12, pp. 140–41: p. 141.