

THE SPIRITUAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE¹

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DURING the last ten years or so there has been a greatly increased awakening, among Christians all over the world, to the importance of the spiritual sense of Scripture; to the value of the symbolic approach to Scripture, and to a consciousness of the influence of biblical symbolism upon the spiritual life of the Christian. The fact that the deliberations of this meeting are devoted to a study of the relationship of Scripture to the spiritual life is one more witness to this renewed interest. It is all the more important that we should have in our minds clear ideas about the nature of the spiritual sense, especially in view of the neglect of such studies during the nineteenth century and until recent times, and also because of the accusation of fancifulness which is easily levelled against its exponents in the present, as it was in the earlier ages of the Church. Furthermore, great prudence is needed in a spiritual exposition, as the recent papal encyclicals have warned us, so that any irresponsible fancies may be avoided. The modern study of biblical symbolism is still a new science and its methods have not yet been fully worked out: yet, even if we have not at present got a complete grammar of the subject, there are certain plain principles which give us lines along which we can work.

We might profitably begin by reminding ourselves of the elementary principles which any textbook will give us. First of all, there is the literal sense, which is 'what the passage means' as it stands. Jonas was swallowed by a big fish. That is what the passage means, and the discussion at this level is one of history and of natural history. The spiritual sense appears when we realize that Christ makes use of the story of Jonas as a type or symbol of his own resurrection (Matt. 12, 40). It is fairly evident that the writer of the Book of

¹ The text of the opening lecture of THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT Conference, Bishton Hall, 15th September, 1953.

Jonas did not, as he wrote, intend to convey this typical or symbolic sense: he was concerned with the telling of his story, and it is only when we see God himself as the ultimate author of the whole of Scripture that we can see the intention of the divine author to convey an inner sense, unknown to the human author, to be fulfilled in a subsequent passage. The spiritual sense is, therefore, not 'what the passage means as the words stand', but 'what the passage signifies symbolically'. This symbolic sense (or typical, typological, spiritual or mystical sense—all these terms in this context mean the same thing) is usually divided by the textbooks into a moral sense (what we can learn from this biblical event), an allegorical sense (where the person or thing or event is a type or allegory foreshadowing something in the New Testament, like Jonas), and an anagogical sense (in which, for instance, the 'heavenly Jerusalem', i.e. heaven, is symbolized by the city on earth). But these distinctions need not detain us here: we are mainly concerned with the allegorical sense, in so far as the great symbols in the Old Testament run through the whole Bible to find their perfection in the New Testament, and in the spiritual life of the Christian.

We should, however, pause to mention the term 'plenary sense' used by some modern authors. This is an extension of the literal sense, in so far as it is a deeper meaning conveyed by the words themselves—and not (as in the spiritual sense) signified only by the symbol which is conveyed—but the plenary sense (like the symbolic) is unknown to the human author as he writes. A classical example is that of Genesis 3, 15, where the literal sense plainly describes a future struggle of man with evil, while the plenary sense, discoverable in the light of subsequent revelation, indicates the coming of the Redeemer. This is not a symbolic sense in so far as the words do not so much convey a symbol, verified in the Redeemer, but themselves convey such a sense when the later revelation has been given.²

A third meaning may be given to the words of Scripture,

² There is a particularly good technical exposition of the Senses of Scripture in Fr Reginald Fuller's article on 'The Interpretation of Scripture' in the *Catholic Commentary*, esp. 39c-40k. The example of Genesis 3, 15 for the plenary sense is taken from there (39k).

in addition to the literal (which includes the 'plenary' if we use the term) and the spiritual. This is the accommodated sense—or, better, 'accommodation', since it is not really a 'sense' of the words at all. A passage is 'accommodated' when it is taken right out of its context and used merely as an 'apt quotation'. Our everyday language, and especially English, is full of such accommodations. We say, for instance, 'Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof' when we have finished for the day with an exacting task, little caring about the context in the Sermon on the Mount about trust in God (Matt. 6, 34); and we daily use many other more outrageous accommodations than this.

It is, obviously, not always possible to declare infallibly that this or that passage of Scripture shows the working of the spiritual sense, or of the plenary sense, or is an example of a mere accommodation. There is often room for differences of opinion, but there are certain principles in the matter, to which we shall return presently, when we shall find that the differences of opinion arise from differences in the application of these principles.

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An interest in biblical symbolism is by no means new in the Church. It was in fact first in the field among Christian interpreters of the Bible, and the Alexandrian School with Clement (†215) and Origen (†255) became famous for its spiritual interpretation and 'allegorizing'. There is a passage of Origen (*De Princ.* IV, 12), where he says that often there is no literal sense at all, but all that matters is the spiritual. In reaction there grew up the Antiochene School of literal interpretation, with Epiphanius (†405) and Chrysostom (†407), although in the early centuries in the East all the writers make use of both methods, and even Origen was careful to insist (*De Princ.* IV, 19) that the literal sense, the obvious meaning of the words must be searched for first of all. It was the Latin Fathers, especially Jerome (†420) and Augustine (†430), who achieved a synthesis, although even here we find Jerome, with all his interest in the linguistic side, emphasizing the literal sense, while Augustine, by

nature a mystic, stresses the symbolic.³ Yet it was the scientific Jerome who said that 'the very shell of Scripture is magnificent, but the real sweetness lies within' (*Ep.* 58), and it was Augustine, the lover of symbolism, who wrote the warning that 'he is mistaken, who gives to Scripture a meaning, however truthful or however edifying, which was not intended by the sacred author' (*De Doct. Christ.* I, 35). Thus from the patristic age the medieval tradition inherited the double approach to Scripture, that of the literal and that of the spiritual sense.

In the later Middle Ages there came a change, and gradually about the fourteenth century we find life becoming divorced from liturgy.⁴ This meant that the spiritual life of the faithful became divorced from the Bible, which is the source of the greater part of the old liturgical formulae, and various private devotions came to take its place. Even within the liturgy itself a more personal piety becomes apparent, as the later prayers in the text of the Mass show. Thus there grew up what Dom Charlier calls a 'Jansenistic' approach, that is, an 'Exclusivist' attitude, which made the Bible the preserve of the learned and the initiate, remote from the everyday piety of the faithful. When the Reformation came, many Catholics had already become ignorant of the Bible, and in consequence when the reformers held up the Bible as the sole source of faith, the Catholics for the most part came to regard the 'Good Book' with suspicion. There are still traces of this in some Catholic countries, where the simple folk regard the Bible as a 'Protestant book'.

The Counter-Reformation immediately set to and warned

³ Those who read the Breviary know so well St Jerome's preoccupations with the 'son of Barachias' in Matthew 23, 35 (Homily for December 26th), and with the meaning of *Volo mundare* in Matthew 8, 3 (Homily for Third Sunday after Epiphany); and likewise St Augustine's symbolic interpretation of the man's thirty-eight years of illness in John 5, 5 (Homily for Friday Ember-Day in Lent), and his explanation of Jacob's *mysterium non mendacium* (Second Sunday of Lent).

⁴ For this and the subsequent historical analysis I am indebted to Dom Célestin Charlier's book *La Lecture Chrétienne de la Bible* (Third Edition, 1951), the opening chapter. An article written *à propos* by the present writer in *THE LIFE OF THE SPIRIT* for February 1952 goes into the historical question more fully than in the present paper.

the faithful against indiscriminate use of the Bible and private interpretation. This was, of course, a necessary caution, but in the circumstances, when everyone was ignorant of the Bible and on the one hand the reformers were inviting all and sundry to read it and find therein salvation, the Catholics were still more afraid lest they should fail to read it aright and be led thereby to perdition. Thus the 'Jansenistic' approach had borne its full fruit: not only were the faithful ignorant of the Holy Word of God, but they became afraid of it.

By the nineteenth century, the new Science had come into its own, and Rationalism was denying the whole supernatural order. The Bible soon fell under the axe. Nobody believed it any more. The Catholics, still uncertain, felt that they must believe it, but in any case the Bible was something remote and had little to do with their own personal piety. Towards the end of the nineteenth century we find a sudden reaction. The 'Scientific' attitude of the Rationalists must be fought with their own weapons. In the name of science and progress the Bible had been shown to be but a 'myth' (and in popular language that word still means something quite unbelievable—but popular language is always fifty years behind the times). Now science and progress in studies must be used to show that truth is one, be it truth demonstrated by experiment and discovery, or be it truth revealed supernaturally. So among Catholics there developed an assiduous study of the text, history, archaeology, and so forth, going by the name of *La Méthode Historique*, the title of P. Lagrange's book which was published in 1902. Pope Leo XIII in 1893 had issued his great call to Catholics to make full use of all modern studies and equipment to vindicate the truth of the Bible. That was the Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*, which gave a new impetus to biblical studies in the Church.

The important thing to notice in the context of our present study is that the whole emphasis of Catholic biblical scholarship at the turn of the century was on the vindication of the truth of the literal sense. For the first thirty years of the present century the battle was still on, and scholars had no time to think about the long-forgotten subject of the

symbolism of the Bible. But by the time of P. Lagrange's death in 1938 the battle had in great measure been won. Outside the Church Rationalism had borne its fruit, and the man-in-the-street still today vaguely supposes that the Bible cannot be true. Among many Protestants in more recent years an 'orthodox' view of the biblical data has come to prevail. The time was ready for men once again more peacefully to investigate the inner meanings and symbolism of the Scriptures, now that the literal sense could again be taken for granted.

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The papal documents from 1893 reflect the phases of the struggle, and the possibility of a re-awakening of interest in symbolism. Yet right up to *Humani Generis* of 1950, we find careful warnings against any abandonment of the literal sense, which might bring us back to the more extreme positions within the Alexandrian School.

The passages in the great encyclicals relevant to the study of the spiritual sense may be quickly glanced at here, in relation to their general context.

Leo XIII in *Providentissimus Deus* of 1893 is primarily concerned with historical truth and supernatural revelation in the Bible, defending these against the destructive criticism of the nineteenth-century Rationalists. He then goes on to quote St Augustine to say that 'the literal and, as it were, obvious sense should not easily be abandoned', and he adds that the student 'should not neglect the allegorical sense, especially when it is based upon the literal and has the support of many authors, since the Church has followed the Apostles in making use of this kind of interpretation, as the liturgy shows'. It is plain that at the time of Pope Leo, although the allegorical sense is to be esteemed on account of tradition, the main emphasis was on the historical approach.

Benedict XV wrote *Spiritus Paraclitus* in 1920, to commemorate the fifteen hundredth year from the death of St Jerome. The battleground had shifted slightly from the position at the time of Leo. The struggle for the truth of the Bible had in great part been won, but a few adjustments were necessary with regard to the accuracy of biblical history.

Pope Benedict then says that 'once the literal or historical sense has been established, it is time to investigate the inner and more sublime meaning', adding the passage from Jerome quoted above about the 'real sweetness' lying within. But we are warned that 'due moderation must be used in regard to the inner sense lest, (quoting Jerome) seeking the richness of the spiritual, we should seem to despise the starkness of the mere historical', for St Jerome, he says, was 'quick to condemn those mystical interpretations which have no basis in the literal sense', and pointed out that although Christ and the Apostles 'saw in the Old Testament a preparation and a foreshadowing of the New, and therefore interpreted a number of passages in a symbolic sense, they did not suppose that everything in the Old Testament can have a symbolic meaning'. Here we find a greater insistence, with St Jerome, on the value of the spiritual sense—and it is interesting again to notice the reversal of the usual roles of the two Doctors, showing the degree of synthesis they achieved. At the same time we notice the more elaborate caution, rejecting spiritual interpretations which have no basis in the literal, while Leo recommended those 'especially' which have a basis in the literal.

And so we come to Pius XII's encyclical of 1943, *Divino afflante Spiritu*, where in fact we find the clearest guidance regarding the spiritual sense. Pius XII, after enlarging on the necessary equipment for the Catholic scholar in accordance with the scientific advances since the time of Leo—exactly fifty years before—once more insists that the first task of the exegete is to discover fully the literal sense of the text. The next task, he says—and this is a new feature—is to investigate the theological content. After this 'he is to discover and expound the spiritual sense, provided that it is properly established that this meaning was given to the passage by God himself; for God alone could have known this spiritual meaning, and alone could reveal it to us'. This is in fact the most important teaching on the matter that has so far been issued. Pius XII then goes on to give us, as it were, guarantees of this divine witness to the true spiritual sense. These are (1) the words of Christ in the Gospels, (2) the Apostolic writings (i.e. the rest of the New

Testament), (3) the continuous teaching of the Church, and (4) ancient liturgical usage.

Pius XII, after exhorting the Catholic exegete to make known this true spiritual sense which is God-given, adds a warning against confusion with any accommodated sense. This is the first time 'accommodation' is mentioned in the papal documents. 'Any other accommodated meanings must on no account be proposed as genuine senses of Scripture', although, he adds, they may sometimes be useful to the preacher, but even this must be done with moderation. He explains that what men need to know is the meaning that God conveys to us in the Scriptures, rather than what the most eloquent orator may derive therefrom.

We therefore have a particular insistence on the part of Pius XII on the God-given nature of the spiritual sense, which must be attested by one or more of the divine guarantees, and is thus distinguished from an accommodation. Immediately following is a short passage, which may be interpreted by those who hold the 'plenary sense' (a meaning in the words themselves, though unknown to the writer, but yet not a symbol) in that way, for it speaks of the 'intrinsic meaning'⁵ which lies hidden in the sacred page, and is brought to light by the interpreter.

Lastly, in this series of papal declarations, we have Pius XII's Encyclical *Humani Generis* of 1950, already referred to, which utters a severe warning about an imprudent use of spiritual interpretation. There are not wanting, says the Pope, those who would have the traditional explanations of Scripture in the literal sense 'give way to a new kind of exegesis, which they call spiritual and symbolic, according to which the Sacred Books of the Old Testament . . . will now at last be thrown open to the understanding of all. In this way, they maintain, an end will be made of all the difficulties which so seriously entangle those whose only concern is with the literal sense.' That such views, he continues, are entirely alien to the teaching of the previous encyclicals, is evident to all. And alien they certainly are to the general teaching on an established and guaranteed spiritual sense.

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⁵ Canon G. D. Smith's translation (C.T.S. ed., n. 49) of 'nativus sensus'.

From the papal teaching sketched above, based as it is on the teaching of the Fathers, there emerge certain simple principles regarding the spiritual sense of Scripture:

- (1) The spiritual sense must be God-given (*a Deo datus*), and not dependent upon the fancy of this or that preacher or writer;
- (2) It must be based on the literal sense, as St Jerome already insisted; that is, the symbolic meaning must not be in conflict with the literal meaning of the text;
- (3) The only guarantee that a given text has a given spiritual sense is the use of that text symbolically in the New Testament, in the teaching of the Church, or in the liturgy;
- (4) Not everything in the Old Testament can be claimed to have a symbolic value.

When we consider the well-known types in the Old Testament, such as the Paschal Lamb, the Brazen Serpent, the Priesthood of Melchisedech, the Kingship of David, the Deliverance from Egypt and the Crossing of the Red Sea, we know well enough that these types are guaranteed as symbols in the New Testament itself. Similarly other types in the New as well as in the Old Testament, such as the blood and water from the side of Christ, or the Burning Bush, receive their guarantee from the teaching of the Fathers or from the liturgy. Yet it is not always quite so simple. Pope Pius says that a non-guaranteed spiritual sense is 'not genuine', and this may mean that it is but an 'accommodation'. Now it would seem that certain interpretations can be claimed as 'guaranteed accommodated', when the principles of spiritual interpretation are not verified. There seems to me one such case in Scripture itself: our Lord (in the Garden of Gethsemani, Matt. 26, 31) quotes: 'Strike the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered', which comes from Zacharias 13, 7. In Zacharias the context (actually attaching to 11, 17) is that of the foolish shepherd 'who will not take thought for the lost, nor seek out the injured, nor heal the maimed, nor take care of the hale, but will eat the flesh of the fat and rend them in pieces' (11, 15-16, Westminster Version). This shepherd can hardly be a type of the Good Shepherd, and the quotation seems to be no more than

an apt remark culled from the Scriptures: in other words, an accommodation.

In any case it would seem that between interpretations that are 'guaranteed spiritual' and those that are certainly merely accommodated (where the literal sense is in conflict with the symbolic), there is a wide 'no man's land'—Père Plé's phrase in this connection—where opinion may be divided about the genuineness of a proposed spiritual interpretation, and one will claim it as genuine, while another will consider it merely accommodated. And, when the 'plenary sense' is introduced, it is not always easy to decide whether or no the actual words will bear a given meaning, which is an essential feature, since this sense is but an extension of the literal. Furthermore, the widest of the guarantees is 'the teaching of the Church'. At what point do our own meditations, assuming them to be conducted *an mentem Ecclesiae*, enter into this category? How many, and which, teachers constitute a tradition in the Church? These questions alone show that, although the principles are simple enough, their application outside the plain guarantees within the Scripture itself, may cause immediate complications in the present study.

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Lastly, we come to what is really the crown of the whole of this study: the perception of that everlasting Mystery which runs through the whole of biblical and subsequent Christian revelation. In the present context it is more particularly within the Bible that we are seeking this continuity of symbolism, the *mysterium continuum* of the whole Scripture, from the first words of Genesis, 'In the beginning . . .' to the end of the Apocalypse, 'I am Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End' (22, 13), from the seven days of Genesis to the seven septenaries of the Apocalypse. Not for nothing does St John begin his Gospel with the same words as the beginning of Genesis and end his revelation with 'Come, Lord Jesus', that everlasting expression of 'Thy kingdom come' in eternity. Dom Charlier calls this *mysterium continuum* *Le Message du Verbe*, the same central mystery throughout, in which all things are 'recapitulated' or 'summed up' in Christ (Eph. 1, 10). The

great symbols and types of the Old Testament are thus all linked up in Christ and carried with him into eternity: the First Adam looks to the Second Adam, *Homo in fine temporum*, the waters of chaos, through the Flood, into the Jordan, become the water of regeneration, 'springing up into life everlasting' (John 4, 14). Fr Bernward Dietsche, o.p., with his studies of 'Angelology' some years ago in Germany, used to say that at intervals the heavens are opened and mankind has a glimpse within, and the prophet then describes his vision in his own symbolic terms: Sinai, Ezechiel, Zacharias, Paul, the Apocalypse; but it is always a vision 'which it is not granted to man to utter' (2 Cor. 12, 4) except in the obscurity of symbol. Yet it is always one and the same heaven. He also claimed that the very measurements of the tabernacle and the temple were in some way but a reflection on earth of the everlasting heavenly court, as the holy city is a reflection of 'that Jerusalem which is above' (Gal. 4, 26), and that this continued into the Christian apocalyptic tradition with, for instance, the Pseudo-Dionysius and the choirs of angels.

Thus, while studying the literal sense we come to realize the prodigious fact of the slow historical growth of a complete religious literature through many centuries, culminating in the Person of Christ; so when studying the symbolic sense we find the equally prodigious fact that this whole literature is after all One Book, penetrated throughout by the mystery that is the Beginning and the End—and all the eternity between.

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