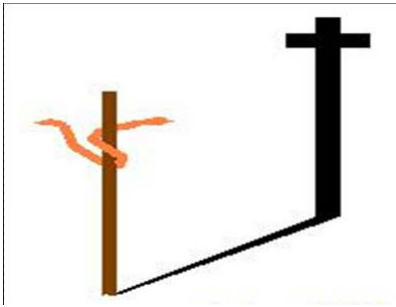


How To Read Scripture Like Jesus And The Apostles

Steven Kellmeyer (abridged)



"We need to read Scripture the way God intended it to be read," said one of my friends from amid piles of concordances, grammar books, and Greek and Hebrew dictionaries. "Hey, why are you laughing?"

He didn't see the incongruity. While the tools he has at his disposal are useful, they weren't at Augustine's elbow, or at Paul's. Scripture does not describe Jesus whipping out a grammar book on the road to Emmaus. We don't need to be ancient language scholars in order to read Scripture as Jesus and the apostles did; we need only a good translation and an ear for the four-fold sense.

Before you read any further, get out your copy of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and read (or, hopefully, re-read) 115-118. The concept of Scripture's two-fold meaning presented here is grounded in a solid understanding of Jesus' dual natures and in how he came to have those dual natures. Because Jesus is the Logos, the Word of God incarnate, and Scripture is the word of God written, there is a correspondence between Who Jesus is and what Scripture is. Jesus Christ has two natures, a fully human nature and the fully divine nature. His human nature is a conduit for his divine nature - that is, everything he did as a man reflects or portrays some aspect of the invisible God.

Scripture works in a similar way. The *Catechism* speaks of two senses in Scripture: the literal sense and the spiritual sense. The spiritual sense, in turn, is made up of three kinds: the allegorical (or "typological" sense), the moral (or "tropological" sense), and the anagogical (or "heavenly") sense. Thus Scripture, the book that tells us about Jesus, also has two "natures": a literal meaning and a spiritual meaning. We might summarize things this way:

- The **literal sense** of Scripture is the meaning conveyed by the words, discovered through sound interpretation. All other senses of Scripture are based on the literal. This literal sense accurately describes what took place. It also points us to deeper spiritual meanings.
- The **allegorical sense**, especially of the Old Testament, signifies a foreshadowing or "type" that will be fulfilled by Christ in the New Testament.

That is, the Old Testament event points us to something Jesus did or made clear in the New Testament.

- The **moral sense** of Scripture is recorded for our instruction. It moves the Christian to act justly in the life of the Church by indicating to us what ought to be done.
- The **heavenly** (anagogical) **sense** of Scripture leads us towards heaven and our fulfillment in heaven in the way that it tells us about the coming of Jesus.

These senses apply most clearly in the Old Testament but may be used in the New Testament as well. How does this work in practice? We begin by observing certain similarities between Old Testament and New Testament passages.

In Genesis 1:1-2 and Matthew 3:16 the Spirit of God descends on water - the seas of the formless earth in the first case and the waters of the Jordan River at Christ's baptism in the second. At first glance, that is the only correspondence between the two passages. However, further reading and reflection reveal that these are the only two places in Scripture that describe the Spirit of God moving over water. Because the Old Testament points to the New, and we have found a unique correspondence between these two passages, it seems reasonable to conclude that the Genesis passage is meant to help us interpret the passage in Matthew.

We can see the correspondences in each sense of Scripture. The literal sense: Each passage describes something that actually occurred - the Spirit of God moved over the waters. The allegorical sense: The description of the original creation of the world foreshadows the new creation we become through the sacrament of baptism. The moral sense: Just as creation was "baptized" into existence, so we must be baptized in order to become a new creation in Jesus Christ. The heavenly sense: In this baptismal (re)generation, God adopts us as his child, a beloved son or daughter in whom he is well-pleased, and brings us into union with him. Thus the story of creation in Genesis tells us that, from the very beginning, even before God formed man, God always intended created man to be in unity with him, and that he accomplishes this unity through baptism.*

If this is a valid way to read Scripture, we should find evidence for such readings within Scripture itself; and so we do.

In Proverbs 1:1-6 Solomon tells us that he is writing the book of Proverbs in order to teach us how to understand a proverb: That is, he will use proverbs to explain proverbs. Jesus was a wiser man than Solomon (cf. Matt. 12:42), and he taught constantly using parables (Matt. 13:34 - 35). Yet Scripture witnesses again and again how he had to explain every figure he used (e.g., John 10:6). This is important for two reasons.

First, it confirms what both Luke and Matthew were inspired to record about Jesus: "the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light" (Matt. 4:16; Luke 1:79). Many of the people of Christ's time, who lived under the Old Testament dispensation, were incapable

of reading Scripture with the necessary New Testament understanding. Their minds needed to be enlightened to understand the parable they and their ancestors daily lived out.

Second, as Matthew 13:10 records, Jesus gave the apostles the ability to understand what the Old Testament "parables" pointed to. Indeed, Jesus promises exactly that in John 16:25 - there would come a time when he would speak to them plainly and not in any figure. However, he makes this promise, just scant hours before the Twelve break and run like water. The promise is fulfilled only after the Resurrection: "Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures" (Luke 24:45).

Unfortunately, not all new Christians shared this apostolic gift. The Thessalonians in Acts 17 who rejected apostolic guidance in how to read Scripture continued on in darkness, while the Bereans, who desired the full understanding of Scripture, were unable to attain it without the guidance first of Paul and then of Silas and Timothy. Scripture itself underscores the extent to which this apostolic guidance is necessary. No person or group of people in Scripture attained an accurate understanding of who Jesus was or what he did without authorized guidance, despite the fact that knowledge of Jesus was widespread ("This thing was not done in a corner" [Acts 26:26]).

This apostolic gift: explains why the epistles are rich in the four-fold sense of Scripture. The whole letter to the Hebrews, especially passages like 8:4-5, 9:24, and 10:1, refer repeatedly to the Old Testament through the four-fold sense. And though Colossians 2:16-17, Galatians 4:24-30, 2 Peter 2:6, James 5:10, and Jude 7 all demonstrate the concept, 1 Corinthians 10:1-11 shows the principle at its clearest.

Here Paul talks of the Israelites being "baptized into Moses" when they crossed the Red Sea, yet Exodus never speaks of this. Similarly, Exodus does not describe any food or drink as "supernatural," nor does it describe a rock that followed the Israelites. Paul is seeing the Old Testament in a new way. This is why he lists several of the excesses of the Israelites and remarks, "Now these things happened to them as a warning, but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come" (1 Cor. 10:11).

The Old Testament is written for our instruction. It is a morality play in which every event really happened and at the same time points beyond itself to eternity. Peter, Paul, James, and Jude - each was inspired by God to demonstrate this new clarity of vision. Through the epistles, God shows us that the four-fold sense of Scripture is necessary for an accurate understanding of New Testament events. Indeed, even simple references to Jesus like "Lamb of God," "the Good Shepherd," and "the Paschal Victim" are shallow at best outside of the four-fold sense.

The apostles, through the assistance of the Holy Spirit, were inspired to begin unlocking Scripture. This process continued throughout the early Church. The great Christians of the first millennia knew the technique intimately and wielded it like a two-edged sword against heretical opponents. They saw the apostolic reading of the Old Testament as the beginning of a process they were to bring to fruition.

This is why we never see Jesus or the apostles whipping out a dictionary to check the gender of a noun or the aorist tense of a verb. Paul never diagrams a sentence. The task begun by Jesus and the apostles is not yet complete - indeed, it may never be complete. It is still necessary for us today to search out the four-fold sense of Scripture in order to grasp the fullness of the divinely intended meaning in the Old and New Testaments.

* Catholic speaker and author Dr. Edward Sri, in an article on the same subject, gives the following illustration:

The classic example to demonstrate the four senses is the temple. In the literal sense, the temple was the actual building that once stood in Jerusalem, in which the Israelite priests offered sacrifice, the people worshipped, and God dwelt in the Holy of Holies.

But this temple of the Old Testament has even higher importance because God has used it as a sign to tell us about greater 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).

.... 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 about 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).

(Edward Sri, "Making 'Sense' Out of Scripture: The Four Best Kept Secrets in Biblical Studies Today." *Lay Witness*, October, 1996)