



In this essay, I will examine the *senses of Scripture*, namely, the different manners in which one can read a particular passage in the Bible. Acknowledging that there may be numerous legitimate meanings of any given scriptural text will allow us to establish that we can read the creation narratives in different legitimate ways.

Following a long tradition, St. Thomas Aquinas recognizes a literal and a spiritual sense of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> These are often counted as “the four senses” of Scripture, *i.e.* the literal sense and three spiritual senses. But there are four possible divisions of the literal sense. Thus, by the time of Thomas, the Catholic tradition counted seven senses. Thomas follows St. Augustine in maintaining that, “all the senses are founded on one, namely the literal, from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those that are predicated according to the allegorical sense.”<sup>2</sup> Thus the literal sense is primary and is the only one suitable to making properly theological arguments, *e.g.* about the Trinity, the Incarnation, or creation.

For Thomas, the literal sense of any passage is what the author intends the words to mean. If the author intends to use a symbol in figurative speech, as in a metaphor or an allegory, then that figurative language is the literal meaning. For instance, if the author of the first creation account in Genesis intends the six days as a figure of speech in order to teach that God (and not a demon) created the material world, then the literal sense is not that the world was created in six days, but that God created the world. However, if the author intended the six days as six twenty-four hour periods, then such a timeframe would belong to the literal sense of the passage.

In order to understand the literal sense better, let us now distinguish it from the spiritual senses and review the four divisions it comprises. The three spiritual senses are the allegorical, the

moral (also known as the tropological), and the anagogical.

In allegorical interpretation, which enjoyed immense popularity among patristic exegetes in the earliest centuries of Christianity, “things of the Old Law signify things of the New Law.”<sup>3</sup> For instance: Isaac, who was to be sacrificed by his father; Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers and fed his people in the time of famine; and Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of the whale, all signify Christ. The allegorical sense is a true sense of Scripture,

# Reading the Bible and the Senses of Sacred Scripture

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and allegorical interpretation has often been brilliant. But, as Thomas explains, only the literal sense of the text can be the basis of theological argument. The language of the allegorical sense cannot be brought into conformity with the demands of syllogistic reasoning, since the meanings of its terms are not clearly fixed.

According to the moral sense, “things done in Christ or signifying Christ [in the sacred Scriptures] signify things we ought to do.”<sup>4</sup> Why does Thomas not simply say that things that Christ did signify what we should do? Because these exemplary actions of Christ are recommended to us under the literal sense, which of course can include moral exhortations or imperatives. Let us recall that if it was *the author's intention* for the reader to imitate Christ's action, such as carrying his cross or welcoming children, then taking Christ's action as signifying what we should do would fall under the literal and not the spiritual sense. The spiritual sense is naturally more symbolic and imaginative, as evidenced by an exam-



ple that Aquinas himself mentions in the *Catena Aurea*, ch. 27, lec. 7. There he reports Rabanus' interpretation of a passage according to the moral sense: "The Cross signifies cheerfulness of action in its width, because sadness makes narrow. For the width of the Cross is in the transverse beam, where the hands are pierced, and through hands we understand acts."

In the anagogical sense, things in "the New and the Old Testaments at the same time signify the Church triumphant,"<sup>5</sup> or pertain "to eternal glory."<sup>6</sup> For instance, "if it should be said that 'let there be light' means that through Christ we should be led to glory, it pertains to the anagogical sense."

So, these three senses: the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical, are examples of the spiritual sense of Scripture, where the interpretation goes beyond the literal sense, *i.e.* what the author intended the words to mean. Even so, as Thomas clarifies, all senses of Scripture must be based on the literal sense, and theological arguments can only be drawn from the literal sense. Aquinas identifies four possible divisions


of literal sense as: the historical, the etiological, the analogical, and the parabolical (also known as the metaphorical) senses.

In the historical sense, something is simply reported as having happened. So, Joseph was sold into slavery, and the Jews were enslaved by the pharaoh who knew not Joseph. Those are historical facts.

The etiological sense "assigns the cause of what is said" in the Bible, such as when Jesus gave the reason why Moses allowed wives to be divorced: the Lord revealed that it was on account of the hardness of men's hearts (**Mt 19:8**).<sup>7</sup>

In the analogical sense, "the truth of one Scripture is shown not to contradict the truth of another."<sup>8</sup> Here it is recognized that since God is the primary author of the Scriptures, despite the number and diversity of the books that constitute the Bible, there is one consistent message that is being communicated. So, when Paul talks about being saved by faith and not by works (**Rom 3:28**), and James asserts that faith without works is dead (**Jas 2:17**), we recognize that the literal meaning of "works" can be different in different contexts: Paul is discussing works of the Law, while James has works of charity in mind.

The parabolical sense refers to the author's use of symbols. That is, the literal sense includes symbolic and metaphorical usage of words. For instance, when Scripture speaks of "God's arm" (*e.g.* **Deu 4:34, Isa 40:10, Jer 32:17, Acts 13:17**), the author means to signify *God's power*, and does not believe that he who is pure spirit (**Jn 4:24**) has skin, bones, and a really big elbow.

In conclusion, of these seven senses of Scripture—three spiritual and four literal—only the literal can be the basis of a theological argument. That means that arguments about creation bearing on evolution must appeal to the *literal sense* of the biblical creation accounts, which can include symbolic language and figures of speech if it was the author's intention to use such language in the passage. E

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<http://www.thomsticevolution.org/disputed-questions/reading-the-bible-and-the-senses-of-sacred-scripture/>

<sup>7</sup> *Summa Theologiæ* I.1.10 ad 2.

<sup>8</sup> *Summa Theologiæ* I.1.10 ad 2.

<sup>4</sup> *Summa Theologiæ* I.1.10.

<sup>5</sup> *Quodlibet* VII, q. 6, a. 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Summa Theologiæ* I.1.10.

*Galatians*, ch. 4, lec. 7).

<sup>2</sup> *Summa Theologiæ* I.1.10 ad 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theologiæ* I.1.10.

<sup>1</sup> See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.

115. The spiritual sense also goes by the name "mystical" sense (*Commentary on*