

THE SPIRITUAL SENSE IN DE LUBAC'S HERMENEUTICS OF TRADITION

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In the introduction to the first volume of *Exégèse Médiévale*,¹ Henri de Lubac, S.J., observes that the surge of interest in the scientific study of Scripture during the mid-twentieth century had the unfortunate consequence of casting long shadows upon the ancient hermeneutic of the Church, making it appear quaint, outmoded, and even obsolete.

Some critical exegetes even expressed the opinion that ancient spiritual exegesis was a kind of pedagogue or temporary substitute for scientific exegesis. Its historical role was to “preserve the Bible within a very pure and very exalted sphere of ideas and sentiments, until minds reached sufficient maturity to be able to understand the past and to be given the direct explanation of the texts.”²

Others seemed to assume that the ancient distinction between literal and spiritual senses can be entirely attributed to ignorance in the field of science; hence the conviction expressed by a few scientific exegetes that the progress made in their particular discipline has shattered the traditional distinction in its very principle.

De Lubac frankly thinks that such ideas smack of “a modern self-sufficiency” and “a-priori thinking.”³ While he is ready to grant that ancient commentaries obviously contained outmoded elements—“to tell the truth, a lot of trash”⁴—he staunchly maintains that not everything about the ancient expositors can be explained simply by the fact that they lived in a “pre-critical” age.

¹ *Exégèse Médiévale*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959-1964). English translation (partial): Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, trans. M. Sebanc (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998, 2000).

² Dom Wilmart, “Un repertoire d'exegese compose en Angleterre vers le debut du XII siecle,” in *Memoriale Lagrange* (Paris: J. Gabalda, 1940), 312, cited in de Lubac, *The Sources of Revelation* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 65. *Sources*, an accessible English translation which I will use throughout this paper, is an anthology of which draws from the four volumes of *Exégèse Médiévale* and *Histoire et Esprit* (Paris: Cerf, 1950).

³ *The Sources of Revelation*, 65, 150.

⁴ *Exégèse Médiévale*, 1/2:661.

Beneath exegetical procedures which seem so strange to us today, de Lubac argued, we find a “deeply pondered theology” which retains a “permanent value” and lies not only at “the heart of all Christian exegesis, but at the heart of Christian faith itself.”⁵ Speaking elsewhere of the traditional commentators, de Lubac likewise affirms that “a sacred element lies at the heart of their exegesis, an element which is one of the treasures of the faith.”⁶ Considered in its doctrinal foundations rather than in its implementation, ancient exegesis for de Lubac touches upon the substance and rhythm of the Christian mystery and thus must be perpetually retained by the Christian community.

Thus, de Lubac sees the ancient doctrine of the dual meaning of Scripture—spiritual as well as literal—as a non-negotiable part of the Christian patrimony. Indeed, he says, it is an “inalienable datum of tradition.”⁷ In support of this contention, de Lubac recalls that allegorical or spiritual interpretation of the Old Testament is precisely the usual exegetical practice of the New Testament authors themselves.⁸ For him, it is axiomatic that “the exegesis of all Christian generations will have to conserve as an absolute norm the exegesis of the first generation.”⁹

He also points to the fact that such has been the unanimous teaching of the fathers and doctors from the first centuries of the Church down to the present day and has been recently confirmed by the very papal documents which legitimized and mandated the development of scientific exegesis within the Catholic Church. He quotes Pope Leo XIII who, speaking of the allegorical or figurative sense of Scripture, affirms that “this

⁶ *The Sources of Revelation*, 66-67.

⁷ *The Sources of Revelation*, 158.

⁸ De Lubac rejected efforts to attribute “allegorical interpretation” to the influence of Greek philosophy on the early Church. He traces the origin of Christian allegorism back to Paul, to the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, and to other writers of the canonical New Testament texts. De Lubac points out that the belief of the Christian allegorists that everything in the Old Testament is a figure or “type” of Christ and the Church comes from Paul’s figurative interpretation of the symbols of the Exodus and desert trek in 1 Cor. 10:1-11. Moreover, both the word and the concept of allegory were inserted into the Christian exegetical tradition by Paul when he interpreted Hagar and Sarah as an allegory of synagogue and Church in Gal. 4:21-24: “Both the word and idea of Christian allegory come from St. Paul.” See “Hellenistic Allegory and Christian Allegory,” in *Theological Fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 165-6; See *Exégèse Médiévale*, 2/2:62.

⁹ *Exégèse Médiévale*, 2/2:109.

method of interpretation has been received by the Church from the apostles and has been approved by her own practice, as the liturgy attests.”¹⁰

Pope Pius XII, observes de Lubac, says much the same thing in *Divino Afflante Spiritu*.¹¹ And in *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, de Lubac sees many aspects of the traditional hermeneutic endorsed as *necessary* for biblical interpretation today:

In two consecutive paragraphs devoted to scriptural interpretation, what, really, does the third chapter of *Dei Verbum*, on divine revelation, say if not that we must first, by purely scientific study, determine as best we can the “intention” of each of the human authors and that only then, in order to better grasp the meaning, should we read it and interpret it as a whole “in the light of the same Spirit who caused it to be written”? When the sixth chapter advised us to “study the holy fathers, those of the East as well as those of the West,” so as to obtain this increased understanding, does this not indicate that there must still be profit to be derived from a study of the exegetical tradition which stemmed from the fathers? And when we are told, in the constitution's introduction and frequently throughout the text, that the Word of God contained in Scripture is none other than the Word made flesh, and that “the entire revelation of the Most High God is fulfilled” in Jesus Christ, do we not hear the traditional theme of the *Verbum abbreviatum*?

¹⁰ Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), no. 322, cited in *The Sources of Revelation*, 150, n. 8. De Lubac also adduces this encyclical in support of the enduring relevance of patristic exegesis in *Exégèse Médiévale*, 1/1:357, n. 2.

¹¹ *The Sources of Revelation*, 150, n. 8. Though de Lubac does not quote any specific texts, he could have cited no. 26: “For what was said and done in the Old Testament was ordained and disposed by God with such consummate wisdom, that things past prefigured in a spiritual way those that were to come under the new dispensation of grace. Wherefore the exegete, just as he must search out and expound the literal meaning of the words, intended and expressed by the sacred writer, so also must he do likewise for the spiritual sense, provided it is clearly intended by God. For God alone could have known this spiritual meaning and have revealed it to us. Now our Divine Savior himself points out to us and teaches us this same sense in the holy gospel; the apostles also, following the example of the Master, profess it in their spoken and written words; the unchanging tradition of the Church approves it; and finally the most ancient usage of the liturgy proclaims it, wherever may be rightly applied the well-known principle: the rule of prayer is the rule of faith.”

. . . the Council, in its chapter on the Old Testament, using an expression whose most famous exponent was St. Augustine, no less forcefully declares the mutual implications of the two testaments: *Novum in Vetere latet, Vetus in Novo patet*. Thus it canonizes the key idea which, since apostolic times, has dominated the doctrine of spiritual understanding of the Scriptures as elaborated through the ages. The Council thus affirms—or rather confirms—the foundation of what was in the beginning and will always remain the Christian newness.¹²

Typology and the Dialectic of the Covenants

While de Lubac was encouraged by the various attempts during the forties and fifties to reappropriate the valid, fruitful insights of the traditional spiritual exegesis of the Church, he did not regard every approach as equally felicitous. He agreed with most commentators that “allegorical exegesis” ought to be ruled out as a name for this renewed figurative exposition given the connotations of artificiality and subjectivism that the term allegory had borne for the last century or two. Yet he had serious reservations about the widespread enthusiasm for the distinction whereby “typology” is promoted as an objective, biblical form of historical figurism and “allegory” is rejected as a Hellenistic form of *eisegesis* that evacuates history.

De Lubac perceived an inherent narrowness in the terminology of “typology.” First of all, this rather recent¹³ term refers solely to a result, namely a correspondence between different historical events, without in any way alluding to the spiritual process responsible for accomplishing that result. “Typology” does not explain the unique passage from prophecy to gospel. Therefore, it is not sufficient to show with proper forcefulness the work accomplished by Jesus Christ.

¹² *The Sources of Revelation*, viii-ix.

¹³ De Lubac is well aware of Paul's use of the words *typoi* and *typikos* in 1 Cor. 10:6 and 11 respectively. He also recognizes the subsequent use which the exegetical tradition has made of these terms and their Latin equivalents. What he perceives to be of recent origin is the practice of referring to the study of the correspondence between biblical events as “typology” and distinguishing this sharply from “allegory.”

It does not provide a fundamental explanation either of the New Testament's roots in the Old or, more importantly, of its emergence and sovereign freedom. Having assumed the task of establishing "corelations among historical realities at different moments in sacred history," it lacks the ability to show that the New Testament is something other than a second Old Testament which, at its term, would still leave us completely within the thread of history.¹⁴

Typology, as customarily defined, had already occurred within the Old Testament. To see the New Testament as a typological fulfillment of the Old, then, says nothing about the eschatological quality of the Christ-event and the definitive, final, and unsurpassable character of the new covenant which it initiated. In its exclusive emphasis upon continuity and correspondence, typology neglects the other side of the traditional dialectic of the covenants.

De Lubac here stresses the critical necessity of preserving the perspective of the New Testament writers and the fathers of the Church—the Christian theology of history which, in large measure, consists in the theology of the two covenants and their interrelationship. In de Lubac's mind, it would be hard to exaggerate the importance of the relationship between the covenants for the thought of the early Church, or for that matter, the entire history of Christian thought. Fundamentally, he reminds us, both Testaments are only successive parts of one, unified divine plan of salvation. This profound unity of the divine plan compels recognition of both the organic continuity of New Testament and Old and "the unique and incomparable summit" of the salvation history in the coming of the Lord Jesus.¹⁵

Just as it fails adequately to account for the relation between the covenants, so does typology fail to express "the connection between spiritual understanding and the personal conversion of the Christian,

¹⁴ *The Sources of Revelation*, 144.

¹⁵ For a fuller treatment of de Lubac's understanding of the "dialectic of the two Testaments," see Marcellino D'Ambrosio, "Henri de Lubac and the Recovery of the Traditional Hermeneutic" (Ph.D. diss., Catholic University of America, 1991), 152-160.

or the relationship between 'New Testament' and 'new man,' between newness of understanding and newness of spirit." In fact typology really only corresponds to the first phase of the threefold spiritual sense which the medieval distich calls *allegoria*.¹⁶

To narrow down the figurative interpretation of the ancient tradition to typology would be completely to eliminate the existential, interior element from the interpretation process. This is completely unacceptable to de Lubac since, for the ancient tradition, personal assimilation, whether it take the form of moral application (tropology) or mystical "volatus"¹⁷ ("practical" anagogy), is *a sine qua non* of true understanding. Thus, in de Lubac's view, typology stops the spiritual impulse of traditional spiritual understanding at the half-way mark. "Even in its best features, it still remains apart from the great Pauline inspiration which gives life to the entire doctrine."¹⁸

De Lubac is equally cool to the attempt to account for traditional figurative exegesis by recourse to a *sensus plenior*. It seems to him that this well-meaning effort of certain scientific exegetes to preserve the spiritual sense by absorbing it into the literal meaning is doomed to failure. Though the spiritual meaning really is, in one sense, a *sensus plenior* and is contained within or under the letter of the scriptural text, it can only be perceived in the light of Christ, within the Church, by the Church. Faith, not exegetical science, is the key to its discovery, he argues.¹⁹

The Spiritual 'Understanding' of Scripture

If we want to obtain a complete view of the more-than-literal meaning of Scripture as passed on to us by the Church's traditional hermeneutic, there is, in de Lubac's opinion, only one truly adequate term by which this meaning can be designated—the *spiritual sense*. There are many reasons for this choice, not the least of which is that it is the term formally countenanced by Scripture itself, exploiting the Pauline distinction between the letter (or flesh) and the spirit while at the same time reminding us that we are dealing with the meaning that proceeds from the Holy Spirit.

¹⁶ See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 118.

¹⁷ *Volatus* is the term of Gregory the Great which de Lubac customarily employs to designate the more contemplative, existential dimension of anagogy. Aware, of course, that this terminology was far from universal, he insists nonetheless that this form of interpretation—which tends towards mystical union with the heavenly Christ is, in the main, an integral aspect of the traditional hermeneutic. See *Exégèse Médiévale*, 1/2: 639-640, citing Gregory, *Homilies on Ezekiel*, 1.1, h. 3, nos. 1, 15.

¹⁸ *The Sources of Revelation*, 144-145.

¹⁹ *The Sources of Revelation*, 150-152.

Given that there is an evangelical relationship between the notions of "spirit" and "truth," this terminology also alludes to the most essential characteristic of the figurative sense — that it proceeds from the "truth" of the New Testament, in contrast to the "shadows" of the Old. Moreover, in light of Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:17 that the "Lord is the Spirit," it is only appropriate that the meaning related to Christ be known as the "spiritual" sense.

Finally, "spiritual" also connotes "interior" and thereby recalls to our awareness the fact that "the Christian mystery is not something to be curiously contemplated like a pure object of science, but is something which must be interiorized and lived." The meaning which leads us to the realities of the spiritual life and which can only be the fruit of a spiritual life is aptly named the "spiritual sense."²⁰

Likewise, de Lubac thinks it appropriate to retain the traditional usage whereby the term "spiritual understanding" refers to the activity which leads both to the spiritual sense in its threefold extension and to the figurative literal meanings. This is because, "whether our purpose be to discover an advance indication of Christ, to abandon the seemingly carnal meaning of certain prophecies, to understand a parable, or to obtain greater penetration into the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount," the same intellectual process is at work under the influence of the same Spirit, despite the objective diversity of spiritual and figurative literal sense.²¹

This, for de Lubac, leads to what is perhaps the key point of all: if we hope to recapture anything of the ancient Church's spiritual exposition of Scripture, we must pass beyond an objective cataloging of symbolic correspondences to a reappropriation of this dynamic spiritual movement which animated traditional exegesis and is called "spiritual understanding."

All Christian experience, in all its phases, is comprised within this all-encompassing movement of the Spirit.

This amounts to saying that this understanding cannot lead to results which are completely controllable by a particular method or which are apt to be gathered together into a definitive canon. It amounts to saying that it can never be made completely objective. It always envelops and transcends what has been grasped, and is, at the same time, enveloped and transcended by what it has as yet been unable to grasp.²²

²⁰ *The Sources of Revelation*, 16-19.

²¹ *The Sources of Revelation*, 20.

²² *The Sources of Revelation*, 23.

While de Lubac does not deny that there are some spiritual interpretations of Scripture which have more objective validity than others, he frankly admits that spiritual understanding has an inherently subjective aspect which cannot be excised without neutralizing the entire process and rendering it spiritually profitless. Thus, it can never be judged from a purely objective viewpoint or reduced to a scientific discipline.

Here again, de Lubac insists on the distinction between the literal and spiritual senses—what he terms “the religious meaning of the Bible” (*sens religieux de la Bible*) and “the spiritual meaning of Scripture” (*sens spirituel de l'Écriture*).

The “religious meaning” is the meaning which Scripture had for its human author and its original audience. It essentially takes the form of a careful and scrupulously objective reconstruction of the religious consciousness and institutions of the Old Testament in their original context and for their own sake. The scientific exegete who carries out this important investigation “will always be attentive to differences in historical situations. . . . All his attention is directed towards reconstituting the past.”

Ancient Meaning ‘Received in Sign’

What de Lubac calls “the spiritual meaning” also has to do with the history of Israel’s religion, but is altogether different in its motivation and perspective. The investigator who seeks to uncover this meaning is driven by no backward-orientated curiosity, no desire to reconstitute the past for the past’s sake. Rather, by means of a deeply meditated Christian faith, he or she “interprets the Jewish past solely from the viewpoint of the Christian present.”

Instead of seeking to elucidate the feelings or thoughts of the Old Testament writers, the exegete will search the Scriptures for the deeper, symbolic meaning of the extrinsic facts and objective institutions of ancient Israel usually without making any attempt “to fill the gap between the primary meaning of those institutions or facts, as understood and lived by the majority of ancient Jews, and the Christian meaning received, in sign, by them.”²³

Moreover, the careful objectivity and reserve so necessary for the historian are basically inappropriate for us when we approach the text as spiritual interpreters. We must not hold ourselves at an objective distance from the text, but must rather allow God, through the text, to speak to us

²³ *The Sources of Revelation*, 26-27, 20-31.

here and now.

Thus, it would be inaccurate to say that in spiritual interpretation we question the text as we would any other document from the past. Rather, de Lubac says, making his own the words of the poet, Paul Claudel, "it would be more exact to acknowledge that it is Scripture which is questioning us, and which finds for each of us, through all time and all generations, the appropriate question."²⁴

The Christian is not simply to choose whatever of these two exegetical approaches is more congenial to him. For de Lubac, the spiritual sense ought normally to be the ultimate goal when Christians approach the Bible as Christians. We must, as believers, come to the Bible expecting to receive more than "understanding of the past" or even, for that matter, moral or doctrinal instruction. We must become aware that, in pursuing the spiritual sense, we "are accomplishing a religious activity according to the total logic of our faith."²⁵

For de Lubac as for his friend, Hans Urs von Balthasar, spiritual exegesis thus leads to an encounter with the living God, a meeting which changes us: "Just as the Eucharist is not a simple remembrance of something which happened in the past, but the perpetual reactualization of the body of the Lord and of his sacrifice, in the same fashion is Scripture less a question of history than of the form and vehicle of God's Word uttered unceasingly, and uttered even now."²⁶

De Lubac affirms, with the traditional hermeneutic, that before any such understanding of the Old Testament can be undertaken in the light of the New, the New must be understood historically in light of the Old. Here too we see the importance of the religious meaning — what the tradition calls the "literal sense"—of the Bible as the indispensable basis or foundation of the spiritual sense.

Both the religious and the spiritual senses of Scripture are, then, irreducible in de Lubac's scheme of things. Though they are interrelated in a number of ways, they nonetheless have different ends and are attained by different methods. Their relative autonomy must be preserved. Spiritual exegesis must not interfere with or try to substitute for historical science.

On the other hand, the scientific exegete must bear in mind that his science does "not exhaust what the Christian is to expect from the Word

²⁴ Claudel cited in *The Sources of Revelation*, 73.

²⁵ *The Sources of Revelation*, 65, 73.

²⁶ Von Balthasar, "Die Schrift als Gottes Wort," *Schweizer Rundschau* (1949), cited and translated in *The Sources of Revelation*, 74. Von Balthasar's piece is translated as "Scripture as the Word of God," *Downside Review* 68 (1950).

of God. Whatever may be the superiority which we have acquired or which we still have yet to acquire from the scientific point of view, it is this that the ancients, including the medievals, never cease and never will cease to remind us.”²⁷

Henri de Lubac's voluminous study of ancient Christian exegesis is clearly more than a work of historical reconstruction. He has successfully demonstrated that the Catholic exegetical and dogmatic tradition is unanimous in affirming both literal and spiritual senses of Scripture and that this has been consistently reaffirmed over the past hundred years by the very same magisterial documents which have so zealously promoted a more rigorously historical and critical methodology for Catholic literal exegesis.

Moreover, his insistence that this hermeneutic is fundamental to the New Testament authors' understanding of Christ and the salvation history which led up to him seems unassailable. It is hard to see, in light of the evidence he adduces for this, how one could entirely reject spiritual exegesis of the Old Testament without completely rejecting the New Testament's interpretation of the Old and thereby endangering the foundation of the Church's faith.

All in all, de Lubac's proposal for the recovery of spiritual exegesis proves to be a modest and reasonable one which is historically well-informed and philosophically well-meditated. It is neither reactionary nor pre-critical, but rather proceeds from an enthusiastic acceptance of and broad acquaintance with modern critical exegesis. In fact, the recovery de Lubac envisions takes the form of a “fusion of horizons” between ancient and modern exegesis whereby each is critiqued, purified, and widened in light of the other.

Though many features of ancient exegesis inevitably succumb to the critique of modern historical science, the fundamental principles and structure of the traditional hermeneutic emerge from the crucible virtually intact. The primary impact of modern scientific exegesis upon this ancient hermeneutic is to increase the sophistication and religious value of this first phase of exegesis. As significant as this is, however, de Lubac contends that a focus on sound literal interpretation is not *per se* modern and constitutes no contradiction with ancient exegesis. Indeed, it marks no essential modification in the Church's traditional process of reading and applying the Scriptures:

If the impossible could have happened and the methods and results of the criticism such as we possess them today would have suddenly appeared to these ancients, they would have no doubt manifested the same ability to

²⁷ *Exégèse Médiévale*, 2/2: 93.

assimilate them as we. Yet, these ancients, who would have become the most shrewd in criticism and the most versed in biblical science of all those of our school, would have had to add the following in order to remain faithful to themselves: "This new world of human knowledge is precious to us. If it obliges us to revise many things regarding our opinion and exegetical procedures, our subtle principles will not be any obstacle to this at all, and we will labor with you to make this new science greater still. But, for our part, know that it does not substantially change an essential problem. And although these new lights which you bring to us can be a great help in the examination of this problem, it is essentially of another order."²⁸

In de Lubac's view, sound literal exegesis of the Old Testament, though more valuable today than ever, nonetheless remains preliminary and preparatory in the Christian's total approach to the sacred text. Despite its religious value, it remains primarily an exercise in historical reconstruction.

De Lubac is correct in insisting that the ultimate objective of the Christian must be the religious activity whereby the mystery of Christ—which is the ultimate object of the biblical text, is spiritually appropriated in faith: "The essential thing for the Christian who receives the Word of God will never cease to be the assimilation of the Spirit of which history is the bearer and to be nourished by the fruit which history has matured."²⁹

²⁸ *Exégèse Médiévale*, 2/1:128.

²⁹ *Histoire et Esprit* (Paris: Aubier, 1950), 282.

