

TO THE NEW STUDENT OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

• Hugh of St. Victor •

To the eager student, first of all it ought to be known that sacred Scripture has three ways of conveying meaning—namely, *history*, *allegory*, and *tropology*.

Often, in one and the same literal context, all may be found together, as when a truth of history both hints at some mystical meaning by way of allegory and equally shows by way of tropology how we ought to behave.

To be sure, all things in the divine utterance must not be wrenched to an interpretation such that each of them is held to contain history, allegory, and tropology all at once. Even if a triple meaning can appropriately be assigned in many passages, nevertheless it is either difficult or impossible to see it everywhere. It is necessary, therefore, so to handle the sacred Scripture that we assign individual things fittingly in their own places, as reason demands.

It ought also to be known that in the divine utterance not only words but even things have a meaning—a way of communicating not usually found to such an extent in other writings. The philosopher knows only the significance of words. But the significance of things is far more excellent than that of words because, while the latter was established by usage, nature dictated the former. The latter is the voice of men, the former the voice of God speaking to men. The latter, once uttered, perishes; the former, once created, subsists. The unsubstantial word is the sign of man's perceptions; the thing is a resemblance of the divine idea.

Therefore, what the sound of the mouth—which all in the same moment begins to subsist and fades away—is to the idea in the mind, the whole extent of time is to eternity. The idea in the mind is the internal word, which is shown forth by the sound of the voice, that is, by the external word. And the divine wisdom, which the Father has uttered out of his heart, invisible in itself, is recognized through creatures and in them.

From this it is most surely gathered how profound is the understanding to be sought in the sacred writings, in which we come through the word to a concept, through the concept to a thing, through the thing to its idea, and through its idea arrive at truth. Because certain less well instructed persons do not take account of this, they suppose that there is nothing subtle in these matters on which to exercise their mental abilities; they turn their attention to the writings of philosophers instead, precisely because, not knowing the power of truth, they do not understand that in Scripture there is anything beyond the bare surface of the letter.

That the sacred utterances employ the meaning of things, moreover, we shall demonstrate by a particular short and clear example. The Scripture says: "Watch, because your adversary the Devil goeth about as a roaring lion" (1 Pet. 5:8). Here, if we should say that the lion stands for the Devil, we should mean by "lion" not the word but the thing. For if the two words "Devil" and "lion" mean one and the same thing, the likeness of that same thing to itself is not adequate. It remains, therefore, that the word "lion" signifies the animal, but that the animal in turn designates the Devil. And all other things are to be taken after this fashion, as when we say that worm, calf, stone, serpent, and other things of this sort signify Christ. . . .

The Foundation Is History

In the order of study of sacred Scripture, history precedes allegory and tropology. In this question it is not without value to call to mind what we see happen in the construction of buildings—where first the foundation is laid, then the structure is raised upon it, and finally, when the work is all finished, the house is decorated by the laying on of color.

So too, in fact, must it be in your instruction. First you learn history and diligently commit to memory the truth of the deeds that have been performed, reviewing from beginning to end what has been done, when it has been done, where it has been done, and by whom it has been done. For these are the four things which are especially to be sought for in history—the person, the business done, the time, and the place.

Nor do I think that you will be able to become perfectly sensitive to allegory unless you have first been grounded in history. Do not look down upon these least things. The man who looks down on such smallest things slips little by little. If, in the beginning, you had looked down on learning the alphabet, now you would not even find your names listed with those of the grammar students. I know that there are certain fellows who want to play the philosopher right away. They say that stories should be left to pseudo-apostles. The knowledge of these fellows is like that of an ass. Don't imitate persons of this kind. "Once grounded in things small, you may safely strive for all."¹

But, you say, "I find many things in the histories which seem to be of no utility: why should I keep busy with this sort of thing?" Well said. There are indeed many things in the Scriptures which, considered in themselves, seem to have nothing worth looking for. But if you look at them in the light of the other things to which they are joined, and if you begin to weigh them in their whole context, you will see that they are as necessary as they are fitting. Some things are to be known for their own sakes. But others, although for their own sakes they do not seem worthy of our labor,

¹ Marbodius, *De ornamentis verborum*, Prologus (P.L. CLXXI, 1687).

must by no means be carelessly skipped—because without them the former class of things cannot be known with complete clarity. Learn everything. You will see afterwards that nothing is superfluous.

You ask if I have any opinion about the books which are useful for this study. I think the ones to be studied most are: Genesis, Exodus, Joshua, the Book of Judges, and that of Kings, and Chronicles. Of the New Testament, first the four Gospels, then the Acts of the Apostles. These eleven seem to me to have more to do with history than do the others.

This, then, my student, is what I propose to you. All things were brought forth in order: move along in order yourself. Following the shadow, one comes to the body: learn the figure, and you will come to the truth.

I am not now saying that you should first struggle to unfold the figures of the Old Testament and penetrate its mystical sayings before you come to the gospel streams you must drink from. But just as you see that every building lacking a foundation cannot stand firm, so also is it in learning.

The foundation and principle of sacred learning is history, from which, like honey from the honeycomb, the truth of allegory is extracted. As you are about to build, therefore, “lay first the foundation of history; next, by pursuing the ‘typical’ meaning, build up a structure in your mind to be a fortress of faith. Last of all, however, through the loveliness of morality, paint the structure over as with the most beautiful of colors.”²

Until the End of the Ages, God’s Mercies Do Not Slacken

You have in *history* the means through which to admire God’s deeds, in *allegory* the means through which to believe his mysteries, in *morality* (*tropology*) the means through which to imitate his perfection.

Read, therefore, and learn that “in the beginning God created heaven and earth” (Gen. 1:1). Read that in the beginning he planted “a paradise of pleasure wherein he placed man whom he had formed” (Gen. 2:8). Him sinning God expelled and thrust out into the trials of this life. Read how the entire offspring of the human race descended from one man; how, subsequently flood destroyed sinners; how, in the midst of the waters, the divine mercy preserved the just man Noah with his sons; next, how Abraham received the mark of the faith, but afterwards Israel went down into Egypt; how God thereafter led the sons of Israel out of Egypt by the hand of Moses and Aaron, brought them through the Red Sea and through the desert, gave them the Law and settled them in the land of promise; how often he delivered them as sinners into the hands of their enemies and afterwards freed them again when they were penitent; how first through

² Gregory the Great, *Moralium libri*, *Episula missoria* iii (*P.L.* LXXV, 513C).

judges, then through kings, he rules his people.

“He took his servant David from following the ewes great with young” (Ps. 78:70-71). Solomon he enlightened with wisdom. For the weeping Ezekiel he added on fifteen years. Thereafter he sent the straying people captive into Babylon by the hand of Nebuchadnezzar. After seventy years he brought them back. At last, however, when that time was already declining, he sent his Son into our flesh, and he, having sent his apostles into all the world, promised eternal life to those repentant. He foretold that he would come at the end of the ages to judge us, to make a return to each man according to his deeds—namely, eternal fire for sinners, but for the just, life and the kingdom of which there shall be no end. See how, from the time when the world began until the end of the ages, the mercies of God do not slacken.

The Mysteries of Allegory

After the reading of history, it remains for you to investigate the mysteries of allegories, in which I do not think there is any need of exhortation from me, since this matter itself appears worthy enough in its own right. Yet I wish you to know, good student, that this pursuit demands not slow and dull perceptions but matured mental abilities which, in the course of their searching, may so restrain their subtlety as not to lose good judgment in what they discern. Such food is solid stuff, and, unless it be well chewed, it cannot be swallowed. You must therefore employ such restraint that, while you are subtle in your seeking, you may not be found rash in what you presume; remembering what the Psalmist says: “He hath bent his bow and made it ready. And in it he hath prepared the instruments of death” (Ps. 7:13-14).

You remember, I suppose, that I said above that Divine Scripture is like a building, in which, after the foundation has first been laid, the structure itself is raised up; it is altogether like a building, for it too has its structure. For this reason, let it not irk us if we follow out this similitude a little more carefully.

Take a look at what the mason does. When the foundation has been laid, he stretches out his string in a straight line, he drops his perpendicular, and then, one by one, he lays the diligently polished stones in a row. Then he asks for other stones and still others; and if by chance he finds some that do not fit with the fixed course he has laid, he takes his file, smoothes off the protruding parts, files down the rough spots and the places that do not fit, reduces to form, and so at last joins them to the rest of the stones set into the row. But if he finds some to be such that they cannot either be made smaller or be fitly shaped, he does not use these lest perhaps while he labors to grind down the stone he should break his file.

Pay attention now! I have proposed to you something contemptible to gapers but worthy of imitation to those who understand. The foundation

is in the earth, and it does not always have smoothly fitted stones. The superstructure rises above the earth, and it demands a smoothly proportioned construction. Even so the divine page, in its literal sense, contains many things which seem both to be opposed to each other and, sometimes, to impart something which smacks of the absurd or the impossible. But the spiritual meaning admits no opposition; in it, many things can be different from one another but none can be opposed.

The fact, also, that the first course of stones to be laid upon the foundation is placed flush with a taut cord—and these are the stones upon which the entire weight of the others rests and to which they are fitted—is not without its meaning. For this is like a sort of second foundation and is the basis of the entire superstructure. This foundation both carries what is placed upon it and is itself carried by the first foundation. All things rest upon the first foundation but are not fitted to it in every way. As to the latter foundation everything else both rests upon it and is fitted to it. The first one carries the superstructure and underlies the superstructure. The second one carries the superstructure and is not only under the superstructure but part of it.

The foundation which is under the earth we have said stands for history, and the superstructure which is built upon it we have said suggests allegory. Therefore, that basis of this superstructure ought also to relate to allegory. The superstructure rises in many courses of stones, and each course has its basis. Even so, many mysteries are contained in the divine page and they each have their bases from which they spring.

Constructing the Spiritual Building

Do you wish to know what these courses are? The first course is the mystery of the Trinity, because this, too, Scripture contains, since God, three and one, existed before every creature. He, from nothing, made every creature—visible, namely, and invisible. Behold in these the second course. To the rational creature he gave free judgment, and he prepared grace for it that it might be able to merit eternal beatitude. Then, when men fell of their own will, he punished them; and when they continued to fall, he strengthened them that they might not fall further.

What the origin of sin, what sin, and what the punishment for sin may be: these constitute the third course. What mysteries he first instituted for man's restoration under the natural law: these are the fourth course. What things were written under the Law: these, the fifth course. The mystery of the incarnation of the Lord: this, the sixth course. The mysteries of the New Testament: these, the seventh course. Finally, the mysteries of man's own resurrection: these, the eighth course. Here is the whole of divinity, this is that spiritual structure which is raised on high—built, as it were, with as many courses of stones as it contains mysteries.

See now, you have come to your study. You are about to construct the spiritual building, the spiritual structure. Already the foundations of history have been laid in you. It remains now that you found the bases of the superstructure. The very bases of your spiritual structure are certain principles of the faith—principles which form your starting point. Truly, the judicious student ought to be sure that, before he makes his way through extensive volumes, he is so instructed in the particulars which bear upon his task and upon his profession of the true faith, that he may safely be able to build onto his structure whatever he afterwards finds.

Do you wish that I should teach you how such bases ought to be laid? Look back at those things which I listed for you a moment ago. There is the mystery of the Trinity. First learn briefly and clearly what is to be believed about the Trinity, what you ought unquestionably to profess and truthfully to believe. Afterwards, when you have begun to read books and have found many things obscurely, many things clearly, and many things doubtfully written, take those things which you find clear and, if it should be that they conform, add them to their proper base. The doubtful things interpret in such a way that they may not be out of harmony. Of those things that are obscure, if you cannot penetrate to an understanding of them, pass over them so that you may not run into the danger of error by presuming to attempt what you are not equal to doing. Do not be contemptuous of such things, but rather be reverent toward them, for you have heard that it is written: “He made darkness his hiding-place” (Ps. 18:12). But even if you find that something contrary to what you have already learned should be held with the firmest faith, still it is not well for you to change your opinion daily—unless first you have learned what the universal faith, which can never be false, orders to be believed about it.

Thus should you do concerning the mystery of the altar, thus concerning the mystery of baptism, that of confirmation, that of marriage, and all which were enumerated for you above. You see that many who read the Scriptures, because they do not have a foundation of truth, fall into various errors and change their views almost as often as they sit down to read. But you see others who, in accordance with that knowledge of the truth upon which, interiorly, they are solidly based, know how to bend all scriptural passages whatever into fitting interpretations and to judge both what is out of keeping with sound faith and what is consonant with it.

Ezekiel and the Spirit of Interpretation

In Ezekiel you read that the wheels follow the living creatures, not the living creatures the wheels. It says: “When the living creatures went, the wheels also went together by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels also were lifted up with them” (Ezek. 1:19). So it is with the minds of holy men. The more they advance in virtues

or in knowledge, the more they see that the hidden places of the Scriptures are profound. Those places which, to simple minds and minds still tied to earth, seem worthless—to minds which have been raised aloft seem sublime. For the text continues: “Whithersoever the Spirit went, thither as the Spirit went the wheels also were lifted up withal, and followed it: for the Spirit of life was in the wheels” (Ezek. 1:20). You see that these wheels follow the living creatures and follow the Spirit.

Still elsewhere it is said: “The letter killeth, but the spirit quickeneth” (2 Cor. 3:6), because it is certainly necessary that the student of the Scripture adhere staunchly to the truth of the spiritual meaning—the high points of the literal meaning, which itself can sometimes be wrongly understood too, should not lead him away from this central concern in any way whatever. Why was that former people—who received the Law of life—reproved, except that they followed the death-dealing letter in such a way that they did not have the life-giving Spirit?

I do not say these things in order to offer anyone the chance to interpret the Scriptures according to his own will, but in order to show the man who follows the letter alone that he cannot long continue without error. For this reason it is necessary both that we follow the letter in such a way as not to prefer our own sense to the divine authors, and that we do not follow it in such a way as to deny that the entire pronouncement of truth is rendered in it. Not the man devoted to the letter “but the spiritual man judgeth all things” (1 Cor. 2:15).

In order, therefore, that you may be able to interpret the letter safely, it is necessary that you not presume upon your own opinion, but that first you be educated and informed, and that you lay, so to speak, a certain foundation of unshaken truth upon which the entire superstructure may rest. You should not presume to teach yourself, lest perhaps when you think you are introducing you are rather seducing yourself. This introduction must be sought from learned teachers and men who have wisdom—who are able to produce and unfold the matter to you both through the authorities of the holy fathers and the evidences of the Scriptures and, once you have already had this introduction, to confirm the particulars they have taught you by reading from the evidences of the Scriptures.

So the matter appears to me. Whoever is pleased to follow me in this, I accept with pleasure. Whoever thinks things ought not to be done in this way, let him do what he pleases: I shall not argue with him. For I know that a number of people do not follow this pattern in learning. But how certain of these advance, this too I am not unaware of.

If you ask what books are best for this study, I think: the beginning of Genesis on the works of the six days; the three last books of Moses on the mysteries of the Law; Isaiah; the beginning and end of Ezekiel; Job; the Psalter; the Canticle of Canticles; two gospels in particular, namely those

of Matthew and John; the Epistles of Paul; the canonical Epistles, and the Apocalypse. But especially the Epistles of Paul, which even by their very number show that they contain the perfection of the two Testaments.³

³ *Original editor's note:* There are 14 Pauline epistles—the number 14 being twice seven, the perfect number, in biblical numerology.