

Church History: the Patristic School of Alexandria, Part II

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As the Gospel spread throughout the known world (cf. Mt. 28:19; Acts 1:8), Christians settled in different locations such as Alexandria in Egypt, and began to “live out” and explain the “deposit of faith” found in Divine Revelation. The School of Alexandria, by the end of the 2nd century, had established itself as a main source for this meditation and development of Catholic theology. Perhaps the most noteworthy characteristic of the Alexandrian School was its Biblical hermeneutics (i.e. exegesis or interpretation), specifically, an emphasis on the “spiritual sense” of the Sacred Scriptures. This spiritual sense, which sees the realities and events beyond the words themselves, is commonly called allegory.

The Biblical exegesis of Alexandria, which attempted to explain the different layers of meaning (or senses) found in Holy Writ, was not unique to Alexandria. Examining the Scriptures, beyond the grammatical-historical sense (literal meaning), can be traced back to the Old Covenant era. Alexandrian Jews, who were “Hellenistic” (i.e. influenced by Greek thought), practiced an interpretation of the Old Testament that went beyond the literal words of the inspired text. A couple of these distinguished Hellenists were Aristobulus (flourished circa 150 B.C) and Philo (born circa 25 B.C).

Old Testament spiritual exegesis is found in the New Testament itself. St. Paul makes use of the spiritual sense of Scripture several times: Romans 5:14 (e.g. Adam as the coming Messiah), 1 Corinthians 10:4 (e.g. a rock as Christ), and Galatians 4:24 (e.g. Hagar and Sarah as two covenants). The early Christian theologians, the Fathers of the Church, continued this method of exegesis. Two notable Church Fathers to come out of the School of Alexandria, who refined spiritual exegesis within a Christian ethos, were St. Clement of Alexandria (d. A.D. 215) and Origen (d. A.D. 254).

St. Clement asserted in his work *Miscellanies*, Book 5, that there were different senses in the Holy Bible: literal and spiritual. Following his teacher St. Clement, Origen reiterates these senses in *The Fundamental Doctrines* 4.1.11. This spiritual (or allegorical) principle from Alexandria asserts that types or prefigures of things are found in historical events. This was noted in St. Paul’s letters.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Nos. 115—118, gives us the proper understanding of the senses of Sacred Scripture. Taking the best insights of the Fathers and distinguished theologians throughout ecclesiastical history (e.g. St. Thomas Aquinas), the *Catechism* names and explains four senses: the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical. The latter three are subdivisions of the spiritual sense.

The literal sense of Holy Writ, usually the most obvious, is the “meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation” (*Catechism* No. 116). An example of this literal sense is the Lord’s divine miracle of the actual multiplication of the loaves and fishes in John 6:1-14.

The allegorical sense of God's written word, moving beyond (but never contradicting) the grammatical-historical meaning, helps us "acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ" (*Catechism* No. 117). Christian baptism, prefigured in the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus 14:21-31, is an example of this allegorical sense.

The moral sense of the *Sacra Pagina*, crucial for one's devotional life, are the "events reported in Scripture [which] ought to lead us to act justly" (*Catechism* No. 117). The perseverance of God's faithful, a moral sense that is applicable to every believer, is discovered in detail from Hebrews 11—12:2.

The anagogical sense of the Bible, pointing to our final end, is the notion that we can "view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland" (*Catechism* No. 117). An example of this anagogical sense is the Catholic Church below, pointing to the heavenly Jerusalem above, in Revelation 21:9—22:5.

The School at Alexandria left a great legacy for understanding the senses found in the Bible. The *Catechism* explicates these exegetical insights. In the future, a great school of thought in Antioch (Syria) would also contribute to understanding the senses of Sacred Scripture.

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