

TURNING POINTS IN THE HISTORY OF THE LITERAL SENSE

Karlfried Froehlich

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Anyone who engages in the task of biblical exegesis today knows that his or her first and primary task is the investigation of the “literal sense” of the passage under scrutiny. This truism is as old as the rise of modern biblical criticism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Frederick Farrar, the author of a standard *History of Interpretation* in English which has only quite recently been replaced by newer textbooks, stated it categorically in 1886: “We may therefore assume that all Exegesis must be unsound which is not based on the literal, grammatical, historical contextual sense of the sacred writers.” (p. xxv). Of course, this proud conviction of the monopoly of the literal sense is no longer shared today, and the question of other “senses” of Scripture finds much interest as our two sessions here at Kalamazoo demonstrate. It was not the conviction of the earliest Christians either. Their Bible were the Jewish Scriptures, and their interpretation of those writings was anything but “literal.” In fact, it could not be literal. Early Jewish Christians who were convinced that with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the messianic age had dawned tied their oral tradition about this Jesus to the Jewish Scriptures with the hermeneutical key of promise and fulfillment. This move shifted the center of Scripture away from Torah to the prophetic writings and began to separate Christians from the mainstream of Jewish biblical exegesis. With the step beyond the Jewish matrix into the pagan world, Christian scriptural interpretation applying the principle of promise and fulfillment proved a very effective tool of mission and apologetics. The biblical argumentation in the works of Justin Martyr and other apologists makes that clear. These writers profited from the respect Jews had secured for their Scriptures in the culture of the Empire by emphasizing their antiquity. Christians did not have to keep the holy book of the Jews once their

converts came primarily from non-Jewish backgrounds. But the book was too good a tool to discard for the missionary enterprise if one had the key which would give it a Christian meaning. In the apologetic use of the Jewish Scriptures by Christians, the “letter,” or literal sense, inevitably played a *negative* role. “Literalism” was the characteristic of the Jewish interpretation which Christians had left behind. Paul’s rhetoric of opposing letter and spirit in 2 Corinthians 3, whatever else may have to be said about the passage, claims the superiority of the Christian reading of Jewish Scriptures “in the Spirit” over that of the synagogue. When Origen developed his threefold sense of Scripture on the model of the anthropological division of body, soul, and spirit, he did not hesitate to identify the first level, the literal sense, with “flesh,” the other negative term Paul regularly opposes to “Spirit.” The “letter”, the bodily sense of the text is the fleshly sense which must be left behind in the interpretive motion as quickly as possible.

Origen did urge careful attention to the details of the Biblical text as clues to their higher meaning. But the turn to the “literal sense” as a *positive* concept is a later phenomenon. Let me mention three stages of this important turning point. The first is connected with the supposed hermeneutical war between the schools of Alexandria and Antioch in the fourth and fifth centuries. Recent scholarship has established that the rift was by far not as deep as former generations thought. We know of sharply polemical treatises by Antiochian exegetes against Alexandrian allegory, but nothing of a similar polemic from the other side. The background of the difference is the concept of a textual commentary, in Greek: *hypomnema*. The genre was a product of Alexandrian scholarship, its creator being Aristarchos (died 144 B.C.), the fifth director of Alexandria’s *mousaion*, the Institute of Advanced Study associated with the greatest library in antiquity. Aristarchos was a *grammatikos*, interested in the *text* of Homer. He was what we would call a philologist, interested in what Homer *said* and how his poems were transmitted, not what Homer *meant* for Hellenistic culture. It seems that the Antiochian biblical commentators regarded themselves as the true heirs of this venerable tradition. They respected the Old Testament as a document of ancient Jewish history, for which they were promptly denounced as “Judaizers.” In the Psalter, they tried to reconstruct the original order using innerbiblical clues, and they considered only very few Psalms to be “messianic” in the sense of predicting the coming of Christ. Still, they had no problem with the divine

inspiration of both Testaments and the divine lessons provided therein for the Christian life. But the means by which God taught, according to them, was not the *lexis*, the words of the text, nor the *historía*, the narrative formed by the words, but the *pragma*, we would say: the historical facts reported. Interpreting Genesis 1-3, they accused the Alexandrians of denying the factual basis of the creation story. While acknowledging numerous rhetorical figures and metaphors in the text, they insisted that there must have been a real Adam, a real Eve, a real Serpent, and a real place where all of this happened, otherwise God could not make his point. And *what* does God teach? All *pragma* in the Bible is for the Antiochian exegetes an example, a model for Christian living. We have a treatise by Diodore of Tarsus on the *Pythonissa*, the woman necromancer whom Saul consulted (1 Samuel 28). Chiding Origen for finding divine mysteries behind every word of the story, Diodore declares that the words of a psychotic king and a wicked woman are not the Word of God but part of a *pragma* by which God warns every reader to shun such diabolical practices.

The second serious consideration of the literal sense as a positive concept belongs in the controversy over the Latin Bible translation. We must remember that the Septuagint, the basis for the early Latin versions of the Old Testament, was not regarded by Christians as a *translation* of an inspired Hebrew text, but as a different book with its own, superior inspiration. Augustine still regarded it as the normative text against which all Latin translations should be checked. Jerome, however, fought for the “Hebrew truth,” arguing from the analogy of a river’s water being purer near the source. We do not know the exact meaning of this phrase (how can “truth” be Hebrew or Greek?). It may be deliberate hypérbole to draw attention to Jerome’s own claims of having mastered the source. These claims, I am convinced, are vastly exaggerated. Like Aristarchos, Jerome was a gifted philologist, curious about the meaning of words. He certainly could decipher text written in Hebrew letters, he knew numerous words and phrases, and could ask Jews about etymologies and name lore. But would you call this “knowing Hebrew”? Beryl Smalley still praised Jerome as the “man of three languages” but noted quite correctly that the real progress in the knowledge of Hebrew among Christians came in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The

objective of her book, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, she says herself, was to trace the contribution of medieval Christian Hebraists as “the story of a stage in the secularization of medieval thought.” This is one way of looking at it, much in line with Farrar’s assumptions about the evolution of historical-critical exegesis. There are other ways. One of Smalley’s discoveries, Andrew of St. Victor, who knew far more Hebrew than Jerome, wrote commentaries on most books of the Old Testament, sticking doggedly to a literal exposition. He says that he did so not because he preferred the literal sense over the spiritual, but that this practice was an ascetic feat, an exercise in humility, and thus a fitting expression of his monastic calling.

The decisive establishment of the positive appreciation of the literal sense did not come with Jerome. It came, paradoxically, with Augustine. The way Augustine himself explains his hermeneutical conversion in the *Confessions* seems to suggest that he embraced even more fervently than others the traditional negative evaluation of the literal sense: “Ambrose taught me that the letter kills, but the spirit gives life, when he removed the mystical veil and uncovered the spiritual sense of those things which *ad litteram* (as the words read) seemed to contain perverse doctrine.” But the later story belies this impression. As is well known, Genesis 1-3 was the testing ground for the rejection of the Old Testament by the Manicheans because of their insistence on a literal reading which Augustine shared for several years. As a Christian, however, he wrote three commentaries on these chapters (counting Book XII of the Confessions, four), listing in the preface to his third commentary, “On Genesis *ad litteram*,” three groups of interpreters: literalists, allegorists, and people who recognize both a literal and a figurative sense. He placed himself in the third category because he had finally come to realize that *ad litteram* means both: according to what the story says (*secundum historiam*) and what its prophetic implications are (*secundum prophetiam*). The surprise here was the discovery of the power of the literal sense, not its supposed weakness.

According to Augustine, the *littera*, the literal sense of a text, is not necessarily restricted to one understanding only.

“When, from a single scriptural passage not one but two or more meanings are drawn out, ... there is no danger if any of the meanings may be seen to be congruous with the truth taught in other passages ... For the author himself may have envisaged several meanings in the words we seek to understand. And certainly the Spirit of God who works through that author, undoubtedly foresaw that this meaning would occur to the reader or listener.” (Robertson, p. 101f)

The quotation shows that Augustine links the literal sense to the intention of the author, even though the human author is of no great interest for him. What is important, however, is that language as such, through which truth is expressed, is a *human* phenomenon, a human *convention*, and for God to use it is an act of amazing condescension which should spur us on to ever greater love for him. This conviction was the place from which the epochal turn to a full, positive consideration of the literal sense in the Middle Ages began.

In the twelfth century, the system of the fourfold sense of Scripture was firmly established as a precious legacy of the early Christian age. But these senses no longer conveyed the simple idea of an ascent which, as Augustine had suggested, led from the literal level into a multiplicity of spiritual meanings, all “signs” in the movement from sign to thing pointing ultimately to God. The senses now were ordered. Scholasticism has to do with schools, and most ordering of intellectual subject matter is done for the sake of facilitating the learning process. The Middle Ages loved education, and medieval theologians loved schematic tables, outlines, and visual aids which helped in the clarification and memorization of subjects of knowledge. The most common organizing scheme to teach the four scriptural senses was the metaphor of a building. Jerome already spoke of the literal sense as a “foundation,” and Gregory the Great expanded the metaphor. First, the foundation is laid (*littera*), then the walls are erected (*allegoria*), then the house is decorated with paint (*tropologia*, the technical term for moral interpretation). Medieval authors added a fourth step: the roof is put on—*anagogia*. Hugh of St. Victor used the building analogy throughout his work to explain the structure of biblical interpretation. Time and again he returns to the importance of the literal sense, the foundation. It has two aspects. On the one hand, it has an absolute priority. There is and will be no building without a foundation. On the other hand, foundations are the lowliest part of the

building. They consist of rough stones thrown down into the pit without refinement--raw material for the real work, the careful construction of the superstructure. What is the foundational, the literal sense in the Bible? Hugh identified it with the historical—*sensus litteralis seu historicus*. This equation followed a patristic tradition which took up the terminology of the Antiochian theologians but differed from their conclusions: “The letter is the narration of things done—not the things, the *pragmata*, but the *narration*. This literal or historical sense of the Bible could be fitted together into a clear factual outline, something everyone could grasp. Hugh was very interested in having the *realia* of the biblical stories expounded: times, places, persons, circumstances, events. One reason was that he actually was a schoolmaster. He taught a young crowd at the school of St. Victor. Peter Comestor’s “*Historia Scholastica*,” a best-selling textbook of the high Middle Ages, was a narrative outline of Bible history with some world history interspersed, in Hugh’s terms a “compend of the literal sense.”

In light of this new emphasis on the letter as story, Hugh also reflected more deeply on Augustine’s model of the nature of language. Beyond sign and thing, a story also requires a story-teller, the involvement of an *auctor*, between the two. Hugh added a middle term, “*sensus*”, between the *littera* (Augustine’s “sign”) and its higher meaning or *sententia* (Augustine’s “thing”). *Sensus* was the word’s “primary” signification established by human convention, that is, what the word first of all says when an author chooses it to express what he or she intends to convey. It is the “inside” to the “outside” of the word.

Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century used this clarification and gave another boost to the growing preference for the foundational role of the literal in the system of the four senses. Letter and immediate signification together form the literal sense of all language: Fundamentally, one word equals one meaning. The expansion into multiple meanings, regulated in biblical interpretation by the three spiritual senses, can occur only after the literal meaning has been established. Thomas’ formula for this model is: “All spiritual senses are founded on the literal.” Thomas drew several conclusions from this insight: 1) Only from the literal sense can any

argument be constructed. Language needs an objective referent for a verbal exchange to allow a rational solution. People talking to each other acknowledge a common platform by using a common language. They must be able to trust it; else why talk? 2) Metaphor is part of the convention of human language. Therefore, metaphoric language belongs to the literal sense, because when people use such a convention, they intend the metaphor. 3) Thus, the role of the intention of the author is of utmost importance for the literal sense. Thomas already uses a new thirteenth-century definition: “The literal sense is what the author intends.” In relation to the Bible, this was an eminently theological statement since, for Thomas and his contemporaries, God is the true author of Scripture.

Even in Thomas, however, the human authors of Scripture began to be appreciated. This trend soon became universal. The rediscovered Aristotle was a major factor here. Aristotle’s teaching on causality allowed the distinction between God as the primary author and the human writers as secondary and instrumental authors. The notion of a fourfold causality, when applied to the books of the Bible, naturally directed attention to the activity of the human authors. If the material cause was the substance of the story to be told, the efficient cause had to be the author, both God and the human writer; the formal cause was the method of treatment; and the final cause, God’s will to save. Discussing these “causes” gave considerable freedom to look at any book of the Bible as a work of literature, and literary analysis including grammar, style, logical progression, rhetorical structure flourished in the interpretation of the literal sense of the Bible at the same time when the vernacular literatures began to cut out their own independent niche.

The assumption of double authorship together with the definition of the literal sense as authorial intention, however, raised new difficulties. Can non-biblical literature have more than its literal sense? Can it claim to do more than to entertain? Can it teach truth? Many authors thought so, and many readers did as well. But theologians frequently objected. The Bible alone can have spiritual senses, they argued, because only God, its primary author, can make word-signs as well as the things signified signs of higher levels of spiritual meaning. While the culture in the fifteenth

century seemed ready to read other books besides the Bible and to treat the Bible itself more freely as a work of literature, some saw the gulf between the Bible and all other books widening ever more. If one had to read authorial intention in order to find the literal sense of a book, then any human author was suspect by definition, and so was the literal sense of his or her work. The Bible alone, reflecting God's eternal intention, could be supremely trustworthy.

With this distrust of human words because of the distrust of human intentions, the firm basis of Aquinas' literal sense (one word equals one meaning) was bound to collapse. In the fifteenth century, confusion if not chaos reigned in what people meant by the "literal sense" of Scripture. A striking example is the nomenclature of the much discussed "double literal sense." Scholars had long been aware of the presence of this term in Nicholas of Lyra. Lyra used the expression for prophetic utterances which have a double fulfillment, e.g., 2 Samuel 7:14f: "I will be a father to him, and he will be a son to me." This word to David is a prediction about Solomon; Hebrews 1:5, however, applies it to Christ. In his interpretation of the two witnesses of Revelation 11, Lyra again finds a "double literal sense." This prophecy, he says, was first fulfilled in two defenders of the Council of Chalcedon in the sixth century, but the more complete fulfillment will come in the future, when Enoch and Elijah will return to preach against the Anti-Christ. Another commentator, however, Alexander Minorita, while calling the first fulfillment *historia*, refuses to equate this "history" with the "letter," because it is the fulfillment of a prophetic prediction and therefore part of the spiritual sense. I have found in the documents of the Council of Constance a theory of a "double literal sense" which distinguishes a "mere grammatical, untrue, potentially deceptive literal sense" of words--the gobbledygook of mere words,-- from the "true literal sense" which conveys what the author wants to say. The lowest literal "sense" is declared to be no sense at all--that can only mean, it is non-sense.

Luther, it is well known, abandoned the system of the fourfold sense and redefined the single literal sense as *including* rather than *excluding* the dynamics of the spiritual ascent in its scope. God is present at the beginning of the interpretive process, giving the words as they are written, and God

stands at its end as the one who has to give the true understanding, certainly not without our serious work on text and grammar, but also against our works-righteousness and pride that go with it. In a way, the logic of the turning point in the High Middle Ages is reversed. There the new insight was that despite God's authorship, the rights of the human authors have to be respected. In Luther, the new logic is that despite the rights of human authors and interpreters, God remains the sovereign Lord over his Word.