

Medieval Hermeneutics

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Augustine’s (354–430) *On Christian Teaching* was the first major text of medieval hermeneutics and shaped all debates that followed. Augustine was at the forefront of the debates against heresies. He had advantages his precursors lacked—an established Biblical canon and Jerome’s (347–420) definitive Latin translation of the Bible—key resources as all debates over orthodoxy ultimately had to be resolved on scriptural grounds. His text, which laid out the principles of reading scripture, was meant, among other things, to forestall further interpretive blunders. Yet Augustine was already standing on the shoulders of giants. He had been trained in Roman law and Roman rhetoric; Origen’s (184–253 CE) Alexandrian interpretation of scripture, based in part on Jewish hermeneutics and the apostle Paul (5-67 CE), had been passed along through Hilary of Poitiers (300–368) and Ambrose (340–397). Diodorus of Tarsus (d. 390CE) had just spelled out the rival Antiochene hermeneutics. Galen (129–216CE) had authored a number of interpretative commentaries discussing the authenticity of Hippocratic texts. The commentary tradition had been producing interpretations of Plato and Aristotle for over 200 years. Finally, debates over how to distill the moral insights of Homer had been ongoing for at least 700 years. Whether interpreting Paul’s Epistles, the Talmud, Plato and Aristotle, Hippocrates, Roman Law, or Homer, they had in common the exact same starting point: what they were reading was true. The only interpretive issue was determining what the text meant.

The truth of the texts rested on an unwavering acceptance of authority. No one doubted Homer’s or Aristotle’s or Paul’s authority; if a text was to be questioned it could not be that Paul was mistaken, but instead that the text was not authentically Paul’s, that it was interpolation. Debates about what is the authentic text were common as Roman historians and scholars

attempted to purge the actual history of Homer from its saturation with myth (especially important to secure the legitimacy of the self-conception of Rome as founded first by Aeneas). The principles by which one selected authentic from inauthentic texts would be reflected in the principles by which one interpreted texts.

Since the authority of a text sprung from the authority of the author, interpreting texts was always a case of interpreting the author's intended meanings. The exceptional cases are often the sources of the most hermeneutic controversy. Homer invokes the muses in the opening sentence of the *Iliad*. Is he the author or are the muses? Could the human author of the Jonah story in the Hebrew Bible have intended it to be a metaphor for Jesus's death and resurrection? It would seem not, so another kind interpretation must be provided, one that credits a divine author who populates the world with meanings waiting to be interpreted. Could the author of the Roman law written on the eighth table "If a person has maimed another's limb, let there be retaliation in kind" have intended it to apply equally to two people, if two people do the maiming? Laws always have to be interpreted to address new cases; some interpretation, other than finding the intention of the author, must be used. But lest I give the wrong impression, in all these cases the emphasis on the acceptance of an authority is simply shifted from the author to an authoritative interpreter. In Biblical interpretation Augustine reads the Jonah story as an analogy to Jesus's death on the authority of none less than Jesus, who draws the connection in Matthew 12: 39–40. In Roman legal interpretation when Valentinian III (419–455) passed the Law of Citations to standardize almost a 900 years of Roman Law, he did so by ordering all legal interpretation to follow the majority opinion of the five great Roman jurists, Ulpian (170–223), Gaius (130–180), Paulus (c. second to third century), Papinianus (142–212), and Modestinus (c. 250). Understanding medieval hermeneutics requires understanding the place of authority.

Biblical interpretation has dominated the discussion of medieval hermeneutics; there were two distinctive interpretive questions the early Christians had to answer. First, how do the teachings of Jesus, relayed through the Gospels and the Epistles, relate to the writings of the Hebrew Bible? How were followers of Jesus to understand the relationship between the commands and laws of the Hebrew Bible and the teachings of Jesus? Jesus was supposed to be the Messiah, foretold in the Hebrew Bible, yet it seemed to some of his followers that he was promoting a religion to replace Judaism. The orthodox view became that the Hebrew Bible was to be understood as prophesy, indirectly referring to Jesus; the new revelations of Jesus and his followers were the keys to understanding the prophesies for the first time. For Christian interpreters, then, not only did they know the Hebrew Bible was true, they knew what it meant. The interpretive task was simply one of uncovering those hidden prophetic meanings. The second distinctive question facing Christian hermeneutics was the relation between the canonical scriptures and pagan writings. To what extent can or must scriptural interpretation depend on nonscriptural sources? Augustine gives the first answer to both these questions in the context of a theory of exegesis, one that will serve as a cornerstone for all further Medieval exegetical theories, certainly in part because Augustine, as a Latin Church Father, held authority.

Augustine

Just as Augustine set the stage for the next 1000 years of hermeneutics; working through Augustine's *On Christian Teaching* will put the main issues of medieval hermeneutics on the table. The text divided into four sections. The first has to do with our understanding of things, for Augustine will argue that things bear a symbolic relationship to God, and that the figurative meaning of words builds upon the symbolic character of things. Lambs, for example, are meek

animals, thus they are suitable as symbols for meekness as a virtue. As when Jesus is referred to as the Lamb of God. Medieval hermeneutics is not just a hermeneutics of text, but a hermeneutics of things. In the second and third sections Augustine turns to language, conventional signs as opposed to natural signs. He treats unknown signs in the second book and ambiguous signs in the third book. The final section, written much later but part of the original plan of the book, addresses the question of how we communicate the teachings of scripture. Augustine says that "There are two things on which all interpretation of scripture depends: the process of discovering what we need to learn, and the process of presenting what we have learnt" (Augustine 1995, 14). Trained in rhetoric, Augustine knew that any interpretation was always for a particular purpose and for a particular audience. Rhetoric, as study of how to tailor a message to an audience, is not secondary to exegesis, but part and parcel of it. In addition to being called the first book on hermeneutics, *On Christian Teaching* has also been called the first book on Christian rhetoric and the first book on homiletics.

Augustine opens *On Christian Teaching* with a defense of the need to develop a biblical hermeneutics, a theory about how to read scripture. He gives preemptive responses to the concern that scripture is so transparent that one suitably graced by God would have no need for techniques of interpretation. His reply is that even those people learned from humans how to speak, read, and understand, so learning from humans rather than angels or God is not foreign to them. Moreover since they teach what they know about scripture they should not deter Augustine from doing the same, for each is teaching what he or she knows. Augustine, however, is teaching with the humility that comes from recognized human understanding, not from the pride that comes from thinking one has received divine understanding. Augustine is providing his readers with the tools to "unerringly arrive at the hidden meaning ... or at least avoid falling into

incongruous misconceptions” for the sake of the service to the love of God (Augustine 1995, 11). Already Augustine’s argument relies on logical principles that reflect hermeneutical principles: first, parallel cases should be treated in the same way—learning from humans is acceptable and teaching what we know is appropriate; second, the moral character of the action matters—teaching out of humility, not out of pride; and third, the goal, the love of God, is what ultimately determines the propriety of an action.

Augustine’s theory of interpretation falls under a more general theory of signs. Signs can be natural or conventional. Rain clouds are natural signs of rain; the word “rain” is a conventional sign of rain. Signs can also be proper or figurative. Signs are proper when they point out what they are “designed” to point out. They are figurative when they point to something other than what they are “designed” to point out. In his example, the word “ox” is a proper sign for an ox. It is a figurative sign for a preacher, in the sense of Deuteronomy 25:4, “Thou shall not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain.” To understand the proper signs we need to know the original languages for the words, Greek and Hebrew, for the Latin translations vary so widely that we need to understand how each translation does or does not capture some of the original meaning. Augustine argues that multiple translations are useful as every good translation will capture something and there is no perfect translation. Ambiguities exist in Greek and Hebrew, as well as Latin, and they can never be fully disambiguated. If we do not speak the language, then the signs are not ambiguous but unknown.

In the third book Augustine turns to ambiguous signs, as opposed to unknown signs. These are signs where the meaning is known, but the meaning is ambiguous. In the case of ambiguity, first consult the meaning in the less ambiguous passages to make sure the interpretation of the ambiguous sign is consistent with other passages. If there are still

ambiguities we must be sure to interpret along the guidelines accepted by the teachings of the Church, for "Scripture enjoins nothing but love. . . . It asserts nothing except the catholic faith, in time past, present, and future" (Augustine 1995, 36). This is referred to throughout the middle ages as the "analogy of faith" or the "rule of faith." Augustine's example is in how to read John 1:1. As there was no punctuation in the Greek, the phrase "Deus erat Verbum hoc erat" could be "Deus erat, Verbum hoc erat" ("God was. This word was...") or "God erat Verbum. hoc erat" ("The word was God. The same was..."). The reading could go either way, but only the first is consistent with Church doctrine on the Trinity, so according to Augustine it must be the right interpretation. If there are still multiple readings consistent with Church teachings, then we must consider the textual context, the passages surrounding the ambiguous meaning. If the context does not determine it the interpretation is left to the reader, for as Augustine says God must have know that the passage could lead to multiple true interpretations.

In the case of figurative signs, extensive background knowledge is required for making sure our figurative interpretations are accurate. First, we need to know the symbolic meaning of names and terms. For example, the name Adam means red, as in the color of earth; Jonah means dove. These are essential to understanding their symbolic meanings. We must also have natural knowledge about the properties of things. When Jesus says we should be as wise as serpents we need to know that snakes sacrifice their bodies to protect their heads. In addition to natural knowledge, we need knowledge of numbers for recognizing the numerical patterns throughout creation, for example that 40 stands for the knowledge of all things (40= 4, which stands for the four parts of a day, x 10, which is the sum of the Trinity plus the soul/mind/heart plus the four bodily temperaments). We must know history to date the events discussed in the Bible. We must know the rules of logic and inference to avoid sophistical interpretations. Moreover we must

have read the whole Bible, even if we have not understood everything, because we can only understand the meaning of the parts of the Bible in light of the whole collection of books. We should commit as much as we can into memory. The canon is to be read before the apocrypha to insure that the former will guide the understanding of the latter. We are to focus first on the plain texts that extol the virtues of hope and love. Then we can move to the more obscure passages using the straightforward passages as an interpretive guide.

Reading scripture properly depends not just on background knowledge, but on good character. He quotes Psalm 110, "the fear of God is the beginning of wisdom," and it is only out of a proper fear of God that we put ourselves in a position to understand scripture properly. Fear of God leads to an awareness of our death, a sense of finitude, and as a result, a quelling of pride. With the diminishment of pride comes piety and the recognition that whether meaning the text has, it "is better and truer than any insights we may gain by our own efforts" (Augustine 1995, 65). Accompanying this idea comes the knowledge that we have often not lived up to the commandments to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves. Despairing our condition we gain strength and resolution in turning our minds away from things of this world toward eternal things. Next we devote ourselves to loving our neighbor. Once we can even love our enemies then we work on purifying "the eye by which God may actually be seen" (Augustine 1995, 67). At this point, with a "single and "pure" heart we are in a position to ascend to wisdom. Allegorical interpretation depended solely on the authority of the exegete, so the exegete must have a solid spiritual character to make the interpretations reliable.

Augustine says that once the background knowledge and character are in place there are rules guiding figurative interpretations. First, the passages to be read figuratively that we need to take the figurative meanings from the significations of the objects the text refer to. So if the text

refers to Jesus as a lion, we must use the significations of lions to determine the figurative meaning of the passage. Augustine points out how difficult this is as things may not just have multiple significations, they may have contradictory significations. He gives the example of serpents, which are used in scripture in different contexts to connote something good and something bad. Second, Augustine says that to guide figurative interpretation one should look elsewhere in scripture to find a place where the objects are referred to in less figurative ways. The text interprets itself, is the basic interpretive principles that goes back to the rhetorical interpretations of Homer. If anything was unclear in Homer, it was thought to be unclear *intentionally* to inspire the reader to seek the clue elsewhere in the text to resolve the interpretive mystery. The same principle guided all scriptural interpretation. Augustine goes so far as to say that if a figurative interpretation fits with other places the thing is mentioned in scripture and if it is in harmony with the truth, then even if it is not exactly what the author intended, it is an acceptable interpretation.

If it turns out that there are no places in scripture that can be used to clarify a word used figuratively then, Augustine argues, we can use reason to decide upon the meaning, but we must be careful. Augustine discusses at length the hermeneutic principles of Tyconius (4th century) the North African Donatist, who wrote the first Latin text on hermeneutics, *The Book of Rules*. The rules are effectively statements of theology—and it's important to note that all Medieval hermeneutic texts are centrally theological texts; the interpretation of scripture is inescapably a theological concern—for example that texts that speak of Jesus are at times also speaking of the Church; the texts that speak of or to one group may also speak to a different group (Egypt=all Gentiles; Israel=Christian community); that texts about the devil may also be about sinners on

earth. Augustine's general interpretive point he takes from Tyconius is that where the text speaks of one thing properly, it may be speaking of something else figuratively.

After treating how to interpret proper signs, figurative signs, signs of either type that are unknown and signs of either type that are ambiguous, he address a concern about mixing up proper signs with figurative signs. There are problems each way. To treat something proper as if it were figurative is to risk interpretive and theological excess. To treat something figurative as if it were proper is to run the risk of making the text sound ridiculous. Augustine came to Christianity from Manichaeism. The Manicheans often ridiculed the Jews and Christians for their views about God. Augustine only came to feel comfortable defending Christianity when he heard Ambrose argue that the key to interpreting scripture is found in Paul's Second Epistle to the Corinthians: God "hath made us able ministers of the new testament; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (3:6). Seeing the controversial passages in a spiritual light, rather than in a literal light let Augustine reply to the Manichean's mocking interpretation of scripture.

Augustine gives a clear rule for when to treat a passage figuratively and when to treat it literally:

Therefore in dealing with figurative expressions we will observe a rule of this kind: the passage being read should be studied with careful consideration until its interpretation can be connected with the realm of love. If this point is made literally, than no kind of figurative expression need be considered. (Augustine 1995, 54)

So scripture is only to be read figuratively if reading it literally would lead us away from loving God. That the same text may have multiple kinds of meanings had already been established by Origen, the Church Father most closely associated with the practice of allegorical readings. Although Augustine's first-hand awareness of Origen's writings was limited, he certainly was

aware of the debates over Origen's views. The freedom Origen's allegorizing lent to interpretation was seen as contributing to the Arian heretical interpretation of scripture. Just as Arius denied the reality of Jesus' physical body, the Origenists diminished the significance of the flesh of the word, the literal meaning abandoned for the spiritual. Medieval hermeneutical debates were theological debates at their core. It is against this background Augustine makes his argument that we must not confuse literal texts for figurative.

There are a number of general hermeneutic principles we can distill from Augustine's Biblical hermeneutics. For example, we should look to straightforward passages to help make sense of more obscure ones. We should understand the goals of the text as a whole when interpreting the parts of the text. When the point of a text is a certain kind of action, we can evaluate interpretations of the text by how well they promote those actions. Material outside the text could be useful for understanding the meaning of the text, both in its proper and its figurative meanings. The attitude of the interpreter affects the interpretation. We should be aware of how others have interpreted the text to see how our interpretation squares or differs from theirs. We should allow for the possibility that a passage has legitimately multiple meanings. Finally, we should strive as much as possible to render the text consistent and coherent.

ORIGEN

In the background of Augustine's hermeneutics is the Church Father widely considered to be the first major Christian exegete, Origen. Certainly throughout the medieval period Origen's allegorical interpretations hold sway against those who dismiss the Bible as . Origen's criticism of Marcion of Sinope (85-160) prefigure Augustine's criticisms of Manichaeism, as both Marcion and the Manicheans rejected the Hebrew Bible as relevant for the new Christian religion. Both

valued Paul's epistles over the gospels. Marcion accepted only a heavily redacted version of Luke; the Manicheans rejected all of the gospels as later Jewish writings posing as writings by Jesus' followers. Both Marcion and the Manicheans went to great length to show all the contradictions both between the Hebrew Bible and Jesus' teachings and between what they took to be the authentic writings of Paul and what they took to be inauthentic interpolations. Here they were following a classic rhetorical strategy: find contradictions to de-legitimize a source. Cicero stressed this rhetorical tack. He also stressed the strategy of contrasting the author's intention to the author's words, the response made by Origen.

Origen applied the Platonic division between the body, soul, and spirit to the interpretation of scripture. There is the literal meaning of the text, the body, the moral meaning of the text, the soul, and the spiritual meaning of the text, the spirit. To rest with the literal meaning is to find contradictions, just as our bodies are rife with contradictory passions and perceptions. The truth can only be found if we leave the body behind and move to the moral and spiritual meanings of the text. Origen's neo-platonic hermeneutic theory moved Biblical exegesis beyond what had been inherited from ancient rhetoric. Before Origen, sacred texts were understood to hold moral truths and secret meanings that could be expertly deciphered—the same had been said for hundreds of years about Homer's writings. Origen built upon Jewish principles of interpretation and Roman rhetorical theory to produce an exegetical practice that moved the interpreter from the text to the higher spiritual truths. Jewish interpreters and the Hebrew Bible were too closely wedded to the letter of the law; Christian interpreters had to see the law as foretelling something new, revelatory, and latent in the symbols of the Hebrew Bible.

There were already two important Jewish forms of interpretation that systematically called for interpreters to move beyond the historical meaning—Philo's allegorical interpretation

and the *peshet*, eschatological interpretation of the Qumran Cave scrolls. Philo of Alexandria read all the events of the Hebrew Bible as moral allegories. For example, Philo treats Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as allegories for three ways of acquiring virtue: through study, innately, and through practical activity. The historical sense was not as irrelevant to his interpretations as it would have been to, say, the Christian interpreters providing allegorical readings of Jesus' parables. Rather the historical question belongs to the same place that it held when applied to the moral interpretation of Greek myth. For the Roman's, whether Oedipus actually lived was beside the point. What mattered were the moral truths to be gained from the story.

Philo's diasporic, Greek allegorizing of the Hebrew Bible was not practiced in ancient Palestine. There one could find the official, rabbinical rules of interpretation and the eschatological interpretive practices of sects like the Essenes. The rabbinical rules typically followed the seven interpretive rules of Hillel the Elder. They are not presented in a way we would recognize today as rules of interpretation, so they themselves need some explanation. The seven rules are: (1) light and heavy; (2) equivalent regulation; (3) constructing a father from a passage; (4) constructing a father from two writings; (5) general/particular, particular/general; (6) similar in another place; (7) instruction from context. The first rule, light and heavy, means that something true in a "light" case, a less important case, will be true in a "heavy" case, a more important case. We can arrive at an interpretation of an important situation discussed in one passage by connecting it to the interpretation of a less important situation discussed in another passage. The second rule, equivalent regulation, means that if the same word is being used in two different passages, one passage could explain the other one. The third rule, constructing a father from a passage, means that we can find a general truth in a passage and use that general truth to interpret other passages. The fourth rule, constructing a father from two writings, means that we

can derive a general truth from two related passages. The fifth rule, general/particular, particular/general, means that we can derive general principles from specific principles and vice versa. Hillel himself famously said that the whole Torah may be summed up as do not do to others what you hate. The sixth rule, similar in another place, is like the second rule, though rather than connecting two usages of the same words, it connects two of the same ideas. The seventh rule, instruction from context, means that often the meaning can be explained by other passages around the text. Hillel’s seven rules are designed to show how the Torah is organized to capture a single, unified revelation. The focus is on the literal meaning of the text and the way it serves to organize Jewish life, not, as with Philo, how the text reveals universal moral and spiritual truths above and beyond specific religious practice.

In contrast to both rabbinical interpretive practice and Philo’s Alexandrian allegorical readings are the interpretations recently uncovered in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Among the variety of interpretive practices—expanding on stories, inserting poems, applying laws to current situations—the Qumran Cave scrolls are most well known for their eschatological interpretations, known as *peshet* interpretations. Convinced that the Essenes were in the times of the messiah and that other Jewish sects were missing all the signs, they all but ignored the historical meaning of the Hebrew Bible and emphasized instead the way it prophesized the contemporary historical situation of the Essenes. Much like an apocalyptic Christian preacher reading contemporary events back into the book of Revelation, the true and full meaning of the text lies in what it says about the contemporary times. Origen never allegorized to the degree of Philo because he was committed to saving the Old Testament as the prophesy of the New Testament. Nor did Origen provide what will later be called anagogical interpretations to the exclusion of other ones, as the *peshet* interpretations tend toward.

On the one hand, Origen’s emphasis on spiritual interpretation over literal interpretation will have a dominant place throughout in medieval hermeneutics, especially when debates arise over the contradictions in scripture when read literally. On the other hand, reactions against Origen and the fluidity of allegorical interpretations will have a dominant place throughout medieval hermeneutics. One of the many ways to read the history of medieval hermeneutics could be as a history of and reaction against allegorical interpretation.

Jerome raised concerns about excessive allegorizing, but the philosophers who most directly pitted themselves against Origen and the Alexandrian school of interpretation are those associated with Antioch in the fifth and sixth century, Diodorus of Tarsus, John Chrysostom (347–407), Theodore of Mopsuestia (350–428). As I mentioned, no interpreter doubted the truth of scripture, at least of canonical scripture. They debated what it meant and that often turned on a debate about what we are supposed to learn from scripture—historical facts, moral truths, spiritual insights, or all or some of the above at the same time? While Origen stressed that what we are supposed to learn are the spiritual truths, the Antiochenes argued that part of the point of scripture is to show us how Christianity is the successor to, and fulfillment of, Judaism. The Old Testament exists, then, to inform us of important events in God’s plan. Antioch was a Greek speaking city. The interpreters based there understood that the meaning of the Greek word *historike* is report. Historical exegesis is an investigation into what scripture reports about the past. These interpreters stressed literal and historical readings of the Hebrew Bible, even denying its prophetic role, for certainly what David had in mind when speaking of a Messiah could not have been someone like Jesus. For the Antiochenes, the historical story of Christianity is important. The fact that Jesus provided a new revelation is essential, so the Old Testament cannot be reduced to allegorical expressions of the later revelation. It needs to take its place as a

report. An important hermeneutic principle here is the idea that no matter what we discern from a text, a text has a significant meaning in the context in which it is produced. The contemporary meaning and the original meaning may not converge, but the contemporary meaning cannot float entirely free from the original meaning of the text.

The Antiochenes naturally held that there are clues to God’s future plans in the historical events—they argued for typological connections between things and events in the Old Testament and things and events in the New Testament. A typological connection is a connection across a symbolic type or form. Typological interpretations pick up patterns in the Old Testament stories that prefigure events in the life of Jesus. Theodore typologically identified Moses crossing the Red Sea with baptism. It is crucial for a typological interpretation that the pattern connecting the meanings actual exists, which means that the historical interpretation must be preserved at the same time the typological interpretation is presented.

An example of the difference between the Alexandrian and Antiochene hermeneutics can be seen in two interpretations of the story of Jesus feeding the masses with a few fish and a few loaves of bread. On the one hand, Origen treats the story as an allegory for how in our spiritual desert we will be fed eternal life through the word of God. On the other hand, John of Chrysostom says Jesus performed a miracle by feeding the crowd, demonstrating his divine status, and distributing the food equally to teach them all the moral principles of equality and humility. Another example: Origen treats the Song of Songs as an allegorical love poem about the relation between Jesus and the Church. Theodore of Mopsuestia argues instead that it is simply a love song from Solomon to a lover. In the back and forth of debates over the place of allegory, Theodore’s interpretation was condemned in 553 and the Song of Songs was one of the most commented upon book of the Bible.

In the context of the concerns for the arbitrariness of allegory, we can appreciate Augustine's emphasis that we must be clear about what passages to read literally and what passages to read figuratively. We must keep in mind his emphasis that the figurative reading must be informed by other nonfigurative parts of scripture. In light of disputes over the various ways to interpret scripture, John Cassian (360–435) articulates the now canonical four senses of scripture: literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. The literal sense, as we've seen, was also called the historical sense. It is the sense of the text that refers to an actual event in time. The allegorical sense is the hidden, nonliteral meaning of the text. It would include what the Antiochene's called the typological sense. The tropological sense is the moral sense of the passage; the anagogical sense is the way the passage points toward the eschatological culmination of God's plan. A thirteenth-century poem captures the meaning of the four senses.

*Littera gesta docet,
Quod credas allegoria.
Moralia quod agas,
Quo tendas anagogia.*

The literal sense teaches what happened,
The allegorical teaches what to believe.
The moral teaches how to act,
The anagogical teaches where things are going.

Cassian's own example has become standard. Jerusalem, in the literal sense, refers to the city. In the allegorical sense it refers to the Christian Church. In the moral sense it refers to our soul. In the anagogical sense it refers to the kingdom to come. In theory, every passage of scripture can be read in all four senses; in practice medieval interpretation tended to focus on the literal and the spiritual meaning of a text, where the spiritual could include allegorical, typological, tropological, or anagogical interpretations. In practice, Gregory the Great's (540–604) three-fold

strategy of interpretation—start with the historical, discern the typological, and draw out the moral—would dominate the next four hundred years of Biblical hermeneutics. It was through Gregory the Great that thinkers in the Latin West still had access to the writings of the fathers after the fall of Rome. Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636), a contemporary of Gregory, published allegorical, numerical, and grammatical encyclopedias as reference tools for interpretation.

We’ve spent a significant amount of time on early medieval hermeneutics, the hermeneutics of the Church Fathers, because most of the main issues and terms of medieval hermeneutics were on the table by the fall of Rome. It will not be until the rise of universities that new ways of thinking about and practicing interpretation will arise. Before we move on the hermeneutics in the high middle ages it should be pointed out that not all medieval hermeneutics falls under Biblical hermeneutics. There are interpretive issues surrounding the pagan commentaries and interpretive issues around the interpretation of Roman Law. All share a common framework with scriptural hermeneutics: all hold the text is true, it is only a matter of determining what it means.

The Twelfth Century

The monastic use of scripture limited the need for interpretive innovation. The established texts of the fathers served the spiritual needs of the monks. In the educational context of the monasteries three new genres of writing emerged which would play an important role when questions of hermeneutics came to the fore again in the twelfth and thirteenth century. First was developed the questions—texts of questions and replies that explained difficult passages, teachings, or theological sticking points. Then came *sententiae*, which collected together theological principles, and were a theological version of the *florilegium*, sayings from scripture

and Church Fathers. Finally came glosses, which began as lecture notes and then became, in the case of the *Ordinary Gloss*, standardized commentaries published in the margins and between the lines of Biblical texts. For hundreds of years most Bibles read were read with interpretive glosses at hand. The interpretive changes that occurred in the twelfth and thirteenth century were motivated less by the problems latent in one-thousand years of established interpretation, and more by the rise of theology, especially in the wake of the recovery of ancient texts from the Crusade, and the view that scriptural exegesis can only take us so far in answering theological questions.

Let’s look at three hermeneutically important figures and events of the twelfth-century. First are the interpretive principles developed at the Abbey of St. Victor outside Paris, primarily by Hugh of St. Victor (1096–1141), but then taken in new directions by Andrew of St Victor (c. 1110–75). Second is Peter Abelard’s (1079–1142) *Sic et Non* and his conflict with Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153). Third is Peter Lombard’s (1100–60) *Sentences*, the link text between medieval exegesis and the scholastic theological *summa*.

The Abbey at St. Victor, founded by William of Champeaux (1070–1122), straddled the gap between monastery and university. Hugh of St. Victor came to the Abbey to study eventually rising to the head of the School of St. Victor. His *Didascalicon* revisits of the themes of Augustine’s *On Christian Teaching*, above all what knowledge is required for someone to accurately interpret scripture. Hugh considers the newly recovered pagan writings and argued for a structured education rooted in the liberal arts. Embodying his saying “learn everything,” the order of instruction is, first, education about the natural world, second, education about the allegorical relationships among things, and third, moral education. Hugh followed Augustine’s argument that the interpretation of scripture must be informed by knowledge of the natural

world, knowledge of the symbolic relation of things in creation. Such relations, following Augustine, were the guides for allegorical readings. Where the Church Fathers argued that allegories needed to be rooted by relation to other parts of scripture, Hugh argued there are two books—the book of nature and the book of scripture. The books cannot contradict; the interpretation of each must inform the interpretation of the other. Hugh’s broader goal was to show that everything from God, texts and creation, attested to the teachings of God. The principles of interpretation apply everywhere, not just in textual interpretation, and therefore an understanding in one context can be used to help facilitate understanding in another context. In addition to emphasizing the importance of knowledge of nature, for Hugh the study in philosophy and logic were necessary preconditions for any informed interpretation of scripture.

Hugh’s list of interpretive sense included the literal, the allegorical, and the tropological, and although he joins Augustine in arguing that the allegorical and tropological meanings derive from the symbolic character of things, his understanding of the literal interpretation moves away from the standard historical report. Instead, the literal meaning is the meaning intended by the author. Once the literal is understood that way, it means no allegorical interpretation could leave the literal behind, for the allegorical becomes simply understood as falling under the literal. The debates between literal and allegorical interpretations are put aside under a broader understanding of the literal sense. Andrew of St. Victor, one of Hugh’s students, produced commentaries on the Old Testament that were almost exclusively focused on the literal meaning. Andrew was working, for the first time in centuries, from Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible, especially those of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040–1105), Rashi, the greatest Jewish commentator.

The most notorious student of William of Champeaux was Peter Abelard. Abelard made

a quick name for himself by using his exceptional logical and argumentative skills to challenge William's views on the nature of universals. Abelard fully embraced the idea that philosophy and logic are preconditions for scriptural interpretation, arguing in the end that theological questions are going to have to be addressed independently from scriptural exegesis. His book *Sic et Non*, "For and Against," collects together 158 questions with contradictory replies drawn from the writings of the Church Fathers. He concludes by suggesting techniques based on logic and reason for resolving interpretive differences, but he makes it clear that "Our respect for [the Fathers'] authority should not stand in the way of an effort on our part to come at the truth" (Robinson 1904, 450). His commentaries were peppered with theological questions and answers.

His rival and strongest critic was Bernard of Clairvaux. Bernard was a French abbot famous for his role in ending the Papal schism in the 1130s. His approach to interpretation harked back to Origen and Augustine. He argued that "the letter kills" and philosophy and logic only work on the letter, not the true spirit of scripture. Bernard advocated allegorical readings guided by the love of God and the rule of faith. Bernard introduced Peter Lombard to teachers at the School at St. Victor. Lombard worked on the *Ordinary Gloss*, interacted with Peter Abelard, ascended to the position of the Bishop of Rome, and, above all for our concerns, wrote the *Four Books of Sentences*. Lombard's *Sentences* became the main theological textbook for three hundred years. It was the second most commented upon book, after the Bible. It systematically addressed hundreds of theological statements, giving reasons for each, and, most importantly, drew heavily on scripture and the Church Fathers. Lombard established a new way of using scripture such that issues of exegesis and homiletics are secondary to issues of theology. He is often considered the first scholastic.

St. Thomas Aquinas

The model for the split between exegesis and theology is St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1277).

Aquinas writes commentaries on scripture, but the central statement of Thomas’ hermeneutics is *Summa Theologica*, First part, question 1, article 10: “Whether in Holy Scripture a word may have several senses?” As is the format of the ST, Aquinas begins with objections, then “on the contrary” cites an authority, gives his explanation of why the authority is correct, and finally answers each objection. The first objection is that there cannot be multiple senses—Aquinas follows Cassian in listing the “literal or historical, allegorical, tropological or moral, and anagogical”—as if there were it could lead to “confusion and deception” and would produce fallacious arguments. The second objection is that Augustine’s division of historical, etiological, analogical and allegorical do not match Cassian’s division of literal, allegorical, tropological, and anagogical, so Cassian’s cannot be authoritative. The third objection is that the parabolical—in the manner of a parable—is not included in Cassian’s list, so, again, it cannot be authoritative.

Aquinas must find a way to reconcile Augustine with Cassian’s and Hugh’s later exegetical developments. His authority is Gregory the Great: “Holy Writ by the manner of its speech transcends every science, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery” (Aquinas *ST I*, q.1, a.10, s.c.). Aquinas follows Augustine in arguing that both words and things are signs and have symbolic meaning. Words pick out things, but things have meanings that connect them to other things. Aquinas neatly divides the four-fold meaning such that the meaning of words is always literal or historical. The meaning of things, in contrast, is the spiritual meaning. It can take the form of allegorical meanings when it connects the Old Testament to the New Testament, anagogical/moral meanings to the extent it directs us to act properly, and anagogical meanings if it points to “eternal glory.” Aquinas then follows Hugh in

part: "the literal sense is that which the author intend, and ... the author of Holy Writ is God" (Aquinas *ST I*, q.1, a.10, co.). Like Hugh, Aquinas subsumes under the literal sense much of what other thinkers would have subsumed under the spiritual sense. Unlike Hugh, who would claim there are two sets of intentions at work, the human author and the divine author, one establishing the literal sense, one the spiritual sense, Aquinas says it's the divine author who establishes the literal sense. Since God knows all significations of things, Aquinas can conclude that there is no problem of diversity of meaning, "for all the senses are founded on one—the literal" (Aquinas *ST I*, Q.1, A.10, ad.1) and "nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward by the Scripture in its literal sense" (Aquinas *ST I*, Q.1, A.10, ad. 2). With this shift Aquinas can say that Augustine's historical, etiological, and analogical sense all fall under the literal sense, while the allegorical alone falls under the spiritual sense. Moreover the parabolical sense, which corresponds to the figurative sense in Augustine, falls under the literal sense.

Take an example from scripture such as God's hand appearing and writing a message on the wall to Daniel. Augustine, Hugh, and Aquinas all would agree that the first meaning is the historical one: Daniel received a direct revelation. Augustine would say the arm is figurative, not historical. Hugh would say it is both literal as intended by the author of the book of Daniel, but spiritual as intended by God to signify strength, and Aquinas would say that the literal sense is "what is signified by this member, namely operative power" (Aquinas *ST I*, Q.1, A.10, ad.3). The differences between Aquinas's hermeneutics and Augustine's are not that great; as I said above most of the relevant views and debates were settled by the fall of the Roman Empire. Aquinas's systematization, however, brings together longstanding interpretive rivals under the broad umbrella of literal interpretation.

The next great revolution in the history of hermeneutics did not come for hundreds of years and it was a revolt not just against Scholastic interpretation, but against Scholasticism as a whole. In the early Church, theology and exegesis were fully intertwined. In Scholasticism they are separated. The reformers argued that exegesis must be the ground of theology. Erasmus, in his biblical commentaries rarely cites any interpreter of scripture after Jerome. Martin Luther, in his first lecture course on the Psalms, handed out copies of the text, formatted like the *Ordinary Gloss*, but the with the margins empty. Students were expected to follow him by interpreting from scratch, with *sola scriptura* in front of them. “Scripture without any glosses is the sun and the whole light from which all teachers receive their light, and not vice versa” (Luther 1970, 164), wrote Luther in the early 16th century.

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