

## How to Read the Bible

by Robert Louis Wilken

Copyright (c) 2008 First Things (March 2008).

Allegory fell on hard times in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although the charm of beloved works of English literature such as Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* lies in the imaginative use of allegory, biblical scholars banished the term from their vocabulary. *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, for example, published in the 1980s by leading scholars of the Society of Biblical Literature, does not even have an entry under the word.

The neglect of allegory in modern times is not surprising. With the emergence of historical criticism as the dominant form of biblical interpretation, allegory was discredited as a feckless style of medieval exegesis that twisted the words and phrases of Scripture into arbitrary symbols of hidden truths. As one biblical scholar put it: "Where allegory and its variations come into play, the meaning of the text is murdered."

In truth, the abandonment of allegory was a revolt against the Church's tradition, including the tradition that is found in the New Testament itself. The practice of allegorizing the Old Testament—giving certain passages a meaning other than the plain sense—was not an invention of the Church Fathers or the Middle Ages; it was the work of the authors of the books of the New Testament. And in their exegesis of the Old Testament, patristic commentators consciously imitated what they had learned from the New Testament.

Origen of Alexandria, the first major interpreter of the Bible in the Church's history, said that "the apostle Paul, 'teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth,' taught the Church . . . how it ought to interpret the books of the Law." In 1 Corinthians, Paul had written that the Israelites in the desert "drank from the supernatural Rock which followed them, and the Rock was Christ," to which he added that these things were "written down for us as types."

Paul knew, of course, that the events recorded in the Book of Exodus had taken place centuries earlier. God had delivered the Israelites from the oppression of the Egyptians and led them safely through the Red Sea into the Sinai Desert. While they made their way back to the land of Israel, God sustained them with manna from heaven and water drawn from rocks. Nevertheless, St. Paul says that what happened in the desert centuries ago is not simply past history. These ancient events are dramatic rehearsals of the deeds of Christ, the Son of God.

Accordingly, Origen believed that Paul, by his example, had provided a "rule of interpretation" for understanding the Old Testament. "Take note," he writes, "how much Paul's teaching differs from the plain meaning. . . . What the Jews thought was a crossing of the sea, Paul calls baptism; what they supposed was a cloud, Paul says is the Holy Spirit." And what Exodus calls a "rock," Paul says was "Christ." Christian interpreters, says Origen, "should apply this rule in a similar way to other passages." In other words, Paul has given the Church a model of how the Old Testament is to be interpreted, and it is the task of later expositors to discern how other passages are to be understood in light of Christ's coming. Augustine made precisely the same point on the basis of the passage from 1 Corinthians. How Paul understands things in this passage, says St. Augustine, "is a key as to how the rest [of the Old Testament] is to be interpreted."

Following St. Paul, the Church Fathers argued that a surface reading of the Old Testament, what Origen calls the "plain" meaning, missed what was most important in the Bible: Jesus Christ. The subject of the Scriptures, writes Cyril of Alexandria, is "the mystery of Christ

signified to us through a myriad of different kinds of things. Someone might liken it to a glittering and magnificent city, having not one image of the king but many, and publicly displayed in every corner of the city. . . . Its purpose is not to provide us an account of the lives of the saints of old. Far from that, its purpose is to give us knowledge of the mystery [of Christ] through things that make the word about him clear and true.”

To drive home the point, the Church Fathers also cited the passage in Ephesians where St. Paul interprets the famous words about the institution of marriage in Genesis as referring to Christ and the Church. The text in Genesis reads: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.”

Paul comments, “This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church.” In Paul’s interpretation, the words from Genesis do not simply signify Christ but are speaking about Christ; that is to say, marriage takes its meaning from the mystery of Christ. At the beginning of his *Literal Commentary on Genesis*, St. Augustine cites this passage from Ephesians and the text from 1 Corinthians 10 to show that the Old Testament cannot be understood in a strictly literal or historical way. “No Christian will dare say that the narrative must not be taken in a figurative sense. For St. Paul says, ‘Now all these things that happened to them were symbolic.’ And he explains the statement in Genesis ‘And they shall be two in one flesh’ as a great mystery in reference to Christ and to the Church.”

The customary term for this kind of exegesis is *allegory*, a word first introduced into Christian speech by St. Paul in the Epistle to the Galatians: “It is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory; these women are two covenants.” The root meaning of *allegory* is that there is another sense, another meaning, besides the plain sense. Sarah and Hagar are not simply names of the wives of Abraham; they also signify two covenants, one associated with Sinai and the other with the Jerusalem above. The rock in the desert that Moses struck and from which water flowed is not simply a rock; it is also Christ.

Allegory is not distinctive to Christian exegesis of the Old Testament. It was used by Greek literary scholars in the ancient world to interpret the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of Homer, and it was employed by Jewish thinkers—for example, Philo of Alexandria—to interpret the Pentateuch.

Christian allegory has similarities to this kind of allegory, but what sets it apart is that it is centered on Christ. Allegory in Christian usage means interpreting the Old Testament as a book about Christ. St. Ambrose wrote: “The Lord Jesus came and what was old was made new.” Everything in the Scriptures is to be related to him. As a medieval commentator put it, “All of divine scripture is one book, and that one book is Christ, because all of divine scripture speaks of Christ, and all of divine scripture is fulfilled in Christ.”

Allegory (or, if one prefers, “spiritual exegesis”) is interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the new reality of Christ. In the words of Henri de Lubac, the distinguished theologian and historian of early Christian exegesis: “The conversion of the Old Testament to the New or of the letter of scripture to its spirit can only be explained and justified, in its radicality, by the all-powerful and unprecedented intervention of Him who is himself at once the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last. . . . Therefore Jesus Christ brings about the unity of Scripture, because he is the end-point and fullness of Scripture. Everything in it is related to him. In the end he is its sole object. Consequently, he is, so to speak, its whole exegesis.”

For most of the Church's history (the early Church, the Church during medieval times, and the Reformation era), the Old Testament was read in this way—as a book about Christ and the Church. As the historical study of the Bible gained ascendancy in the twentieth century, however, the Old Testament came to be understood chiefly within the framework of ancient Near Eastern history, culture, and literature.

The books of the Old Testament were, of course, written before the coming of Christ; one task of interpretation, therefore, will always be to set them within the context in which they were first composed. The first Christians, however, recognized that these books were not simply documents from the past but living testimonies to the marvelous things that happened in their own time and continue to happen. St. Jerome said: "Isaiah is an evangelist and apostle, not only a prophet. . . . This book of the Bible contains all the mysteries of the Lord and proclaims him as Emmanuel born of a virgin, as a worker of glorious deeds and signs, as having died and been buried and rising from hell, and, indeed, as the Savior of all the nations."

In calling Isaiah an evangelist and apostle, Jerome reflects the practice of the New Testament. As the Book of Acts relates, after Christ's Ascension Philip met an Ethiopian who was returning home from Jerusalem. The Ethiopian was reading the Bible and came to the passage in Isaiah that read: "As a sheep led to the slaughter or a lamb before its shearer is dumb, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken up from the earth." When the Ethiopian read this passage, he asked Philip, "To whom do these words refer, to the prophet himself or to someone else?" Philip said they referred to Christ, and, beginning with this Scripture, "he told him the good news of Jesus." The Book of Isaiah spoke with uncommon clarity about Christ.

It was not only Isaiah, however, that spoke of Christ; the books of Moses, Ezekiel, and Jeremiah, the Minor Prophets, the Psalms, and the wisdom books also spoke clearly of Christ. According to Luke, when Jesus met two of his disciples on the road to Emmaus he instructed them in the Scriptures "beginning with Moses and all the prophets" and "interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself."

The Epistle to the Hebrews begins with seven quotations from the Psalms and other books of the Old Testament and applies them directly to Christ. "To what angel," he writes, "did God ever say, 'Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee'? To whom did he say, 'I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son'? Of the angels he said, 'Who makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire,' but of his Son he says, 'Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever.'" Both the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John interpret the words of Zechariah "Lo, your king comes to you, humble and mounted on an ass, and on a colt, the foal of an ass" as a depiction of Christ's entry into Jerusalem.

The Old Testament is a large book, and it is not obvious how everything in it derives its meaning from Christ. Just as St. Paul's letters gave early Christian commentators examples of how to interpret the Old Testament in light of Christ, so the Church Fathers stretch our exegetical imagination by showing how other passages can be read in that way. Consider Isaiah 63:1-3: "Who is this that comes from Edom, in crimsoned garments from Bozrah, he that is glorious in his apparel, marching in the greatness of his strength? 'It is I, announcing vindication, mighty to save.' Why is thy apparel red, and thy garments like his that treads in the winepress? 'I have trodden the winepress alone, and from the peoples no one was with me.'"

In the early Church, this passage was understood to refer to Christ's Ascension. The words "who is this that comes from Edom" were spoken by the angels who received Christ in heaven after his Ascension, and "crimsoned garments" referred to his garments stained by the blood of his passion. In answer to the questions of the heavenly host, Christ says, "I have trodden the winepress alone."

In his commentary on Isaiah 63, Cyril of Alexandria writes: "His appearance was altogether strange and foreign to the powers above. They were astonished at seeing him come up, and said: 'Who is this that comes from Edom?' *Edom* can be translated either 'of wheat' or 'of earth,' Bozrah as either 'of flesh' or 'fleshly.' So they are asking, 'Who is this one from the earth, this earthling?' And the crimsoned garments from Bozrah mean that his clothes were reddened from flesh, or, rather, from blood. He is glorious in his apparel. The heavenly powers, strong and wise and filled with heavenly glory, were looking upon Christ, even in the flesh, as a mighty one, thoroughly invincible, who manifests his divinity as well as his humanity to them."

Although this interpretation of Isaiah 63 may be foreign to current readers, it was almost universal in the early Church. Just as the "suffering servant" in Isaiah 53 was interpreted in reference to Christ's passion, so Isaiah 63 was an oracle about Christ's Ascension.

A different kind of example can be found in an ancient paschal homily preached in the second century by Melito, bishop of Sardis in Asia Minor. Melito was a gifted orator who used his rhetorical skills to open the Scriptures to his congregation: "If you wish to see the mystery of the Lord, look at Abel who is similarly murdered, at Isaac who is similarly bound, at Joseph who is similarly sold, at Moses who is similarly exposed, at David who is similarly persecuted, at the prophets who similarly suffer for the sake of Christ. Look also at the sheep which is slain in the land of Egypt, which struck Egypt and saved Israel by its blood." Here specific moments in Christ's suffering and death are seen foreshadowed in the lives of great figures in the Old Testament.

Some books—Proverbs, for example—do not yield readily to allegory. The passage "If one gives answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame" stands quite comfortably on its own. Likewise, there is much in the historical books of the Bible that is spiritually and morally applicable in its own right, such as the story of Joseph in Genesis or of David in 2 Samuel. Such books as Leviticus and Song of Songs, however, cry out for spiritual interpretation if they are to be read profitably by Christians. Leviticus, taken only in its literal sense, is more of an obstacle to faith than a means of exhortation or edification, as Origen once observed. It is surely significant that Leviticus and the Song of Songs are seldom read in Christian worship today. Without allegory, a spiritual interpretation related to Christ, they languish.

The early Church read the Old Testament as the Word of God, a book about the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the God who "was and is and is to come." What the text of the Bible meant when it was written, as far as that can be determined, is part of interpretation, but it can never be the last word, nor even the most important word. A historical interpretation can only be preparatory. A Christian understanding of the Scriptures is oriented toward the living Christ revealed through the words of the Bible and toward what the text means today in the lives of the faithful and what it promises for the future. God spoke once, said St. Bernard, "but he speaks to us continually and without interruption."

Song of Songs uses the phrase "well of living water"; in its original literary setting, this image is crowded in with others and seems rather innocuous. But the phrase "living water" also occurs in Jeremiah 2:13 ("they have forsaken me, the fount of living water"), in

Zechariah 14:8, and in Jesus' discourse with the Samaritan woman in John 4:7-15. All of which suggested to Christian commentators that the expression "living water" called for a deeper understanding than the plain reading would allow. Accordingly, Gregory of Nyssa takes "living water" to be an image of the divine life, which is "life-giving." In his homilies on the Song of Songs, he writes: "We are familiar with these descriptions of the essence as a source of life from the Holy Scriptures. Thus the prophet, speaking in the person of God, says: 'They have forsaken me, the fountain of living water.' And again the Lord says to the Samaritan woman, 'If you knew the gift of God, and who it is saying to you, "Give me a drink," you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.' And again the Lord says, 'If anyone thirst, let him come and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, "Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water."'" By relating what is written in the Song of Songs to other passages from the Old Testament, and especially to the words of Jesus in the Gospel of John, Gregory is able to interpret the phrase "living water" as life flowing from the divine Word of God like water to refresh the soul.

Once a deeper significance of a word or phrase or image is discerned, texts from the Old Testament resonate with a fullness that could be found only in Christ. The Bible becomes a vast field of interrelated words, all speaking about the same reality: the one God revealed in Christ, whose work was confirmed by the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church.

The task of an interpreter is to help the faithful look beyond the surface, to highlight a word here, an image there, to find Christ unexpectedly, to drink at the bountiful spring whose water is ever fresh. Though early Christian exegesis may on first reading appear idiosyncratic and arbitrary, it arose within the life of the Church and was practiced within a tradition of shared beliefs and practices, guided by the Church's faith as expressed in the creed. Exegesis was not about novelty but about finding the triune God in new and surprising places within the Scriptures.

---

ROBERT LOUIS WILKEN *is the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of the History of Christianity at the University of Virginia. This essay is adapted from The Church's Bible (Eerdmans).*