THE FOUR SENSES OF SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION AND THE MEDIAEVAL THEORY OF PREACHING

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Guibert de Nogent, in his Liber quo ordine sermo fieri debeat, which forms his Prooemium ad Commentarios in Genesis, a work designed to supply the preacher with sermon materials, urges the preacher to use for his moral aim any or all of the four senses of Scriptural interpretation. A late Dominican tractate professing the influence of St Thomas Aquinas, which is a complete and highly organized Ars Praedicandi and a more representative manual than Guibert’s Prooemium, contains the same precept in its natural place in a topical system of amplification, such as mediaeval preachers used to fill out the analytical design of their sermons. As a means of dilatatio, and even in its own topical division into four, the principle of employing the kinds of explication may be considered to belong in a theory of rhetorical inuentio, as understood and applied by the classical rhetoricians.

The compiler of the ‘Aquinas’-tract offers nine methods of expanding a sermon: (1) through concordance of authorities, (2) through discussion of words, (3) through explanation of the properties of things, (4) through a multiplication of senses, (5) through analogies and natural truths, (6) through marking of an opposite, (7) through comparisons, (8) through interpretation of a name, (9) through multiplication of synonyms. At present we are concerned only with his development of the fourth method.

1 Migne, Pat. Lat., clvi, 25, 26.
Senses are multiplied in four ways: (1) according to the sensus historicus or literalis, by a simple explanation of the words; (2) according to the sensus tropologicus, which looks to instruction or to the correction of morals. It is well to introduce the ways of the world, in order to dissuade the hearers from vice. This sense may be used either mystically or openly. Openly: ‘Just as David conquered Goliath, so ought humility to conquer pride.’ Mystically: ‘Let thy garments be always white’ (Eccles., ix, 8) is explained: ‘At all times let thy deeds be clean’; (3) according to the sensus allegoricus. Exposition by this sense is exposition by a ‘sense other than the literal.’ ‘David rules in Jerusalem,’ which according to the literal sense is to be interpreted exactly as the words sound, by the allegorical sense signifies that ‘Christ reigns in the Church Militant.’ The sensus allegoricus uses exemplification by simile, as when the life of Christ, or lives of the Saints, are introduced, with an injunction that the hearer follow in their footsteps. With (4) the sensus anagogicus, used mystically or openly, ‘the minds of the listeners are to be stirred and exhorted to the contemplation of heavenly things.’ So, ‘Blessed are they that wash their gowns in the blood of the Lamb that they may have right to the tree of life’ (Vulg. Rev., xxii, 14), in the mystic use of this sense, means ‘Blessed are they who purify their thoughts that they may see Jesus Christ, who says: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” ’ (John, xiv, 6). Openly, explain it as ‘Blessed are they of clean heart, for they see God.’

In similar fashion Guibert illustrates how to interpret the word ‘Jerusalem.’ Literally, it is the city of that name; allegorically, it represents Holy Church; tropologically, it signifies the faithful soul of whosoever aspires to the vision of eternal peace; anagogically, it denotes the life of the dwellers in Heaven who see God revealed in Zion.

Considering how common this method of hermeneutics was in the exegetical theory of the Middle Ages, one as a matter of course expects thus to find its rôle in the theory of preaching equally important. The purpose of a multiple exposition was for the most part so obviously persuasive that its adoption into oral discourse was a very natural procedure. Thus Gregory the Great justifies the multiple method (in his case, tripartite) by its effect upon the hearer:
First we lay the foundations in history; then by following a symbolical sense, we erect an intellectual edifice to be a stronghold of faith; and lastly, by the grace of moral instruction, we as it were paint the fabric in fair colors. . . . For the word of God both exercises the understanding of the wise by its deeper mysteries, and also by its superficial lessons nurses the simple-minded. It presents openly that wherewith the little ones may be fed; it keeps in secret that whereby men of loftier range may be rapt in admiration.

Even in the schools — surely this was true in the twelfth century — these multiple senses were used as separate artistic disciplines, the tropological or moral being considered as the especially useful instrument of the preacher. In his system of instruction Hugh of St Victor utilized the arts of the trivium and the quadrivium in support of his larger principle of the threefold criticism of divine science. Should an extended study of mediaeval sermons be made, with the aim of learning how general the use of the four-fold sense of Scripture was in the actual practice of preaching, I venture to predict that the results would show a greater correlation between theory and practice than was admitted by Diestel to be true of exegetical practice in the large. Diestel says: ‘Doch wird in der exegetischen Praxis diese Vierfachheit selten durchgeführt.’

The prevalence of the multiple method is traceable to Alexandrian philosophy and theology, in which, in the reconciliation of Christianity and Platonism, allegory was long regarded as essential.

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1 I use the excellent translation by F. H. Dudden, Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought (New York, 1905), i, 193, of Gregory, Epp. 5, 53a (the dedication of his lectures on the Book of Job, the Magna Moralia, to Leander of Seville).


3 Ludwig Diestel, Geschichte des Alten Testaments in der christlichen Kirche (Jena, 1869), p. 163.


5 Clement sought authority in Psalms lxviii, 2: ‘Howbeit we speak wisdom among them that are perfect: yet not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to naught;’ and in 1 Cor. xi, 6: ‘I will open my mouth in a parable: I will utter dark sayings of old.’
to the attainment of *gnosis*. Ultimately, of course, allegory in her-
meneutics must be referred to Jewish haggadic exegesis, which had
had an established history of allegorical interpretation for several
generations before Philo viewed persons and things in the Old Tes-
tament as *τρόποι* of the soul, and sought to prove that Greek philo-
sophical ideas, through the *ντόνοια*, underlay the story of the Old
Testament; although Philo was also influenced by Stoic rules of
interpretation that had evolved from the study of Homer. I recall
Philo because of his influence on Origen. Origen, great allegorist
of Christianity, brought the multiple sense of Scripture to the Chris-
tian Church, and firmly fixed the nature of Scriptural exegesis for suc-
ceding centuries. From a double division of *sensus historicus* or liter-
alis, and *sensus spiritualis*, he developed a trichotomous scheme: the
literal, *σωματικόν*; the moral, *ψυχικόν*, *τροπολογία*; and the spirit-
ual, *πνευματικόν*, *αλληγορία*, *ἀναγωγή*. Augustine and Jerome
continued the practice of multiple explication. Indeed, Augustine
used four topics: *historia*; *aetiological*, which considers causes; *analogia*,
which studies a text from the point of view of congruence of the Old
and New Testament; *allegoria*, which is figurative interpretation. But
this was not the quadruple system we have in our treatises and which
persisted in the Middle Ages. Rather, when the Augustinian topics
were considered, as they were by St Thomas Aquinas, the first three
topics were comprehended under the first. But, on the other hand,
the quadruple method of the kind noted in our tractates on preaching

known commentary on a book of the New Testament, that of the Gnostic Heracleon (about
170 a.d.) on St John, the allegorical method is already full-blown.

2 Such as were applied by Crates of Mallus. See D. W. Bousset, *Jüdisch-Christliche Schul-
betrieb in Alexandria und Rom* (Göttingen, 1915). On Philo and Heraclides Ponticus, see

3 See C. G. A. Siegfried, *Philo von Alexandria als Ausleger des Alten Testaments* (Jena,
1875), and Z. Frankel, *Über den Einfluss der palästinischen Exegeese auf die Alexandrinische
Hermeneutik* (Leipzig, 1851).

4 E.g., *De principiis* iv, 11 ff., ed. Lommatzsch, *Origenis Opera Omnia*, xx i (Berlin, 1849),
500 ff. Origen classed Philo with the Christian Fathers.

5 *De Utilitate Credendi* v ff., ed. J. Zycha, *C.S.E.L.* xxv (1891), 7 ff.

6 See p. 287, n. 3.

7 *Summa Theologica* i, art. 10, Reply obj. 2.
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was used by Cassian, Aldhelm, Hrabanus Maurus, Bede, John of Salisbury, St Thomas Aquinas, Dante, and many others. Hugh of St Cher compared the four senses to the four coverings of the tabernacle, the four winds, the fourfold cherubim, and the four rivers of Paradise. Sabatier says that the first to introduce our quadruple method, which was merely another arrangement of the same elements as appear in Origen's triple scheme, involving the separation of anagoge from allegory — the first to set the style for the Middle Ages — was Eucherius of Lyons (died circa 449); but in the Preface to his *Formulae Spiritualis Intellegentiae*, Eucherius writes as if others had made the same classification. We do see it exemplified in his contemporary Cassian; but it must go back at least to Greek theologians of the fourth century. Alardus Gazaeus, the seventeenth-century editor of Cassian, gives these verses, still extant in his day (but made famous by Nicolas of Lyra and perhaps used by others before him), which are characteristic of the scholastic method, and no doubt served as a mnemonic aid to invention:

Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria,
Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia.

1 *Collationes* xiv, 8, *De Spirituali Scientia*, Migne, *Pat. Lat.*, xlix, 962. Cassian's exposition is very clear. He has the usual two primary classes: historical interpretation and spiritual intelligence. The last three senses are placed under spiritual knowledge.


5 *Policraticus* vii, 12, ed. C. C. I. Webb, ii, 666a.

6 *Summa Theologica* i, art. 10, Reply obj. 3. St Thomas accords with Cassian and the usual custom of placing the last three senses under the head of the spiritual.

7 *Convivio* Tract. ii; and the letter to Can Grande.


11 Ed. by C. Wotke (Vienna, 1894), *Præfatio*. The literal sense 'inculcat veritatem nobis factorum ac fidem relationem;' the tropological 'ad uitae emendationem mysticos intellectus refert'; and 'anagoge ad sacratiora cælestium figurarum secreta perducit.' 'Sunt etiam qui allegoriam in hoc scientiae genere quarto in loco adiciendum putent, quam gestorum narratione futurorum umbra praetulisse confirmunt.'

Thus also Hugh of St Cher in the thirteenth century taught: *historia docet quid factum, tropologia quid faciendum, allegoria quid intellegendum, anagoge quid appetendum.*

Now one can readily see that multiple distinctions, by their subjective nature, in the practice of arbitrary preachers, could easily breed confusion. Nor is a wide reading of mediaeval sermons necessary to prove as true of that era Farrar’s indictment:

Homiletics have been to an incredible extent the *Phylloxera Vastatrix* of exegesis, and preachers, with their habit of thrusting into texts an endless variety of commonplaces which have no connection with them, have become privileged misinterpreters. They have ploughed with the unequally-yoked ox and ass of science and sermon-making, and made texts an excuse for saying this or that as it pleased them, with no thought of the real meaning of them.

That the categories of allegorical and tropological, and allegorical and anagogical, might overlap was known to some observers in the Middle Ages; but that ambiguity and equivocation were created by the multiplicity was denied by St Thomas Aquinas:

The multiplicity of these interpretations does not cause ambiguity or any sort of equivocation, since these interpretations are not multiplied because one word signifies several things; but because the things signified by the words can themselves be types of other things.

We might perhaps grant St Thomas the truth of his contention with regard even to a fourfold interpretation, yet a denial of ambiguity and equivocation would surely seem of little avail concerning the ‘septem sigilli’ of Angelom of Luxeuil (ninth century): (1) *historialis;* (2) *allegorialis;* (3) a combination of *historialis* and *allegorialis;*
(4) with respect to the intimation, proper or tropical, of Deity; (5) *parabolaris*, when one thing is written in Scripture, and something else is meant; (6) with respect to the two comings of the Savior, when either the first or the second is prefigured, or both; (7) the method (allied to the *allegorialis*, but differing from it in serving morals proper rather than faith in general) which possesses a twofold preceptive quality, in that it both points a definite moral to correct living, and also carries a figure of a larger life meant to be foreshown. And Martin Marrier, seventeenth-century editor of Odo of Cluny, studies that abbot’s work through eight senses of interpretation: (1) *litteralis*, or *historicus* (as used by Jerome); (2) *allegoricus*, or *parabolicus* (as used by Gregory); (3) *tropologicus*, or *etymologicus* (as used by Ambrose); (4) *anagogicus*, or *analogicus* (as used by Augustine); (5) *typicus*, or *exemplaris* (as used by Basil and Bernard). Thus Christ refers to John the Baptist as Elias (Matt. xi, 14); (6) *anaphoricus*, or *proportionalis* (as used by Pope Clement), based on temporal relativity. The story of Isaac and Ishmael portends the relations of the Church and Synagogue; (7) *mysticus*, or *apocalypticus* (as used by Gregory of Nazianzen), *sensus totus divinus* . . . *atque ineffabilis*; (8) *boarcademicus*, or *primordialis* (as used by Jewish Cabalists), in which the point of view is that of eternal bliss and salvation. No conscious use of these eight senses is observable in Odo’s works (indeed one may not expect cabalistic influences in Christian works at a time when the Cabala was not yet in being), nor does Marrier suggest such a conscious use in Odo’s method. Yet this extension towards overrefinement is worth noting. We may, on the other hand, be certain that the belief in an unlimited sense of Scripture by John Scotus Erigena represents on the part of that great allegorist rather a refusal to yield to the mechanism of a formula than a desire to extend the number of *topoi*. To Erigena ‘the sense of the divine utterances is manifold and infinite, just as in one single feather of the peacock one sees a marvelous and beautiful

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1 Introd. to Odo’s *Moralium Epitome S. Greg. in Job*, Migne, Pat. Lat., cxxxiii, 105 ff.
2 In reply to a request for information concerning this unusual word, which I have found nowhere else, Professor Louis Ginzberg of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America suggests that it must represent הער כדמון (beur cadmon), almost literally: *sensus primordialis*. 

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variety of innumerable colors.' One may compare, in Jewish exegesis, the Zohar's seventy aspects of the Torah.

It is not surprising that the attitude of the Reformation was antipathetic to the use of the four senses. Melanchthon regards it as the trifling and vicious recourse to a monstrous metamorphosis on the part of inept illiterates, who have no science of speaking, and who do not even appreciate that ἀναγώγια, meaning petulantia, may not be used for ἀναγώγη.

Philo's rôle in the history of Christian exegesis is characteristic of the relation between Jewish and Christian hermeneutics through the long and rich histories of both, especially in the Middle Ages. In Jewish Biblical hermeneutics, there was a Midrashic, homiletical, type of interpretation which aimed at moral instruction. There was a similar long quarrel as to stress upon the peshat or primary sense, or upon the derash, or Midrashic sense. There were, especially from the thirteenth century on, Jewish scholars who drew upon Christian exegetical methods, and works criticizing Christian methods. There was prevalent the fourfold interpretation: peshat, derash, rational-philosophical, and cabalistic-mystical, and in the Zohar (which first appeared in the thirteenth century in Spain) there are found the almost exact equivalents of the patristic four senses: peshat, derash, remez (allegorical), and sod.

2 See W. Bacher, 'L'Exégèse Biblique dans le Zohar,' Revue des Etudes Juives, xii (1891), 35.
3 Elementa Rhetorices, De Elocutione ii, De Quatuor Sensibus Sacrarum Scripturarum: 'Sed has nugas commenti sunt homines illiterati, qui cum nullam dicendi rationem tenereant, et tamen uiderebat scripturam plenam esse figurarum non potuerunt apte de figuris judicare. Itaque coacti sunt nouam quondam rhetoricam comminisci.' 'Errant autem in hac uoce cum dicunt ἀναγώγιαν pro ἀναγώγη, significat enim ἀναγώγια petulantiam, seu feritatem morum, ab ἀγώγος, quod est intractabilis et petulans.' 'Et hoc modo omnes uestris versus prodigiosa metamorphosi quadrifariam interpretabantur, quantumuis interdum dictum aliquod repugnaret illi metamorphosi.'
4 E.g., Isaac Abravanel (end of fifteenth century).
5 E.g., Abraham Ibn Ezra's (twelfth century) Commentary on the Pentateuch (Sefer Yashar).
6 E.g., the Commentary on the Pentateuch by Bahya ben Asher (Saragossa, end of thirteenth century). See P. Bloch-K. Kohler, art. 'Bahya,' Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. ii.
7 I. Broyde, art. 'Zohar,' Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. xii, calls remez 'the sense for allusion,' derash 'anagogical,' and sod 'mystical.'
(mystical), which W. Bacher¹ thinks were probably modeled upon
the Christian arrangement.² On the other hand, it was seen above,
in regard to Odo's editor, that one sense-topic was borrowed from
the Jewish Cabala.³

In the light of this interrelationship in Biblical exegesis and of
the natural use of preaching as a general medium of hermeneutical
practice in the religious activity of both Christians and Jews in the
Middle Ages, more information than we have on mediaeval Jewish
rhetoric, sacred and secular, would be very welcome.⁴ We know
there were scholars among the Jews who used rhetoric derived from
Arabic sources,⁵ and scholars who applied rhetoric to sacred elo-
quence.⁶ Great homiletical collections were extant, and highly
elaborated sermons expounding the Pentateuch text were delivered
by the Darshanim, among whom several great figures appeared in
the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly in Spain. Such
considerations, as well as the frequent intercourse between Jewish
and Christian scholars in the Middle Ages, and the attention gener-
ally given by Jewish philosophy to alien thought, suggest that there
was an interaction between these two religious systems, not only in
hermeneutics, but also in other departments of sacred rhetoric.⁷
A comparative study of Jewish and Christian preaching in that
epoch would prove fruitful.

¹ See art. 'Bible Exegesis,' Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. III; and also D. Philippson, art.
'Homiletics,' ibid., vol. vi.
² On the pardes, see W. Bacher, 'Das Merkwort Pardes in der jüdischen Bibelexegese,' in
D. B. Stade, Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, xiii (1893), 294–305. See also
A. Schmiedel, Studien über jüdische Religionsphilosophie (Vienna, 1869), p. 229; W. Bacher,
'Die Bibelexegese (Vom Anfange des 10. bis zum Ende des 15. Jahrhunderts)' in J. Winter
and A. Wünsche, Geschichte der rabinischen Literatur (Trier, 1894), ii, 239–339. For Jewish-
Christian interrelationship in Biblical exegesis, see L. I. Newman, Jewish Influence on Chris-
tian Reform Movements (New York: Columbia University Oriental Studies, vol. xxiii, 1925),
p. 183, n. 27; for Jewish influence upon Nicolas of Lyra, ibid., pp. 71 ff.
³ See A. Jellinek, 'Christlicher Einfluss auf die Kabbala,' in Beiträge zur Geschichte der
⁴ So also, for a later period, one would like to see a comparison of Judah Messer Leon
(the Nofet Zufem, ed. by A. Jellinek, Vienna, 1863) and his contemporary Reuchlin in their
dependence on the rhetorical theory of Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian.
⁵ E.g., Abulwalid Ibn Ganah (ninth century).
⁶ E.g., Moses Ibn Ezra (twelfth century) in his Rhetoric (Kitab al-Mukadarah).
⁷ See S. Maybaum, Jüdische Homiletik (Berlin, 1890), pp. 1–22.

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