The Spiritual Sense (Sensus Spiritualis) of Sacred Scripture: Its Essential Insight

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Introduction: The Background of the Term Sensus Spiritualis

The basic meaning of sensus which often translates the Greek term nous is given variously as: intellectus, action de sentir, the faculty or power of perceiving. The notion of “meaning” is found seventh in a list of seven possibilities in a recent dictionary.\footnote{Albert Blaise, "Sensus," in Dictionnaire Latin-Français (Turnholdt: Brepols, 1954). See also Dominus Du Cange, "Sensus," in Glossarium Mediae et Infimae Latinitatis (Paris: Librairie des Sciences et des Arts, 1938), Jacobus Facciolatus and Aegidius Forcellinus, "Sensus," in Totius Latinitatis Lexicon, ed. Jacobus Bailey (London: Baldwin et Cradock, 1828).}

Thus, in patristic and medieval Latin we find as synonyms of sensus spiritualis, expressions such as intellectus/ intelligentia spiritualis: “spiritual understanding.” From an epistemological point of view this is important. For the ancients the accent in the phrase sensus spiritualis is on the act of knowing and therefore on the act of coming into contact with the reality mediated by the text. Thus, even when the nuance of the expression would demand that we translate sensus spiritualis as “spiritual meaning,” we may not forget that the phrase comes with the notion of “understanding” always present. This may seem overly subtle, but it will help us avoid one of the pitfalls of modern literary and biblical criticism which often restricts itself to what George Steiner characterizes as, “words about words.”\footnote{George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; reprint, Paperback 1991).}

It is important to note, then, that nous pneumatikos, sensus spiritualis, spiritual understanding, refer to a Spirit-conferred faith experience of the reality mediated by the Sacred Text, and a perception of how that reality shares in the mystery of the Whole Christ.

The New Testament

The foundation for the Christian use of the expression “sensus spiritualis” is, of course the view of the New Testament regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. There is no need to establish this fact here.\footnote{Studies which are helpful include: Pierre Grelot, Sens Chrétien de l'Ancien Testament. Esquisse d'un Traité Dogmatique, ed. P. Glorieux et al, Bibliothèque de Théologie, Serie 1, Vol 3 (Paris/New York: Desclée & Cie., 1962). Paul Beauchamp, L'un et l'autre Testament. Volume 2 Accomplir les Écritures (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990).} An enormous work, however, remains to be done consisting of a careful analysis of the manner in which the various New Testament writings actually view the events and persons of the Old Testament and refer to them in many obvious and subtle ways. I select here but one text, in the First Letter of Peter, which manages to express the presence and activity of the Holy Spirit in the Old Dispensation preparing for the New Dispensation which in turn also awaits
The prophets who prophesied of the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired about this salvation; they inquired what person or time was indicated by the Spirit of Christ within them when predicting the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glory. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things which have now been announced to you by those who preached the good news to you through the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. Therefore gird up your minds, be sober, set your hope fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (1 Pet 1:10-13).

This threefold view of salvation history, past, present, and yet to come, is implicit in many texts and also found clearly expressed in the Letter to the Hebrews 10:1: “The Law, having a sketch (skian) of the good things to come, and not the image itself of the realities (autēn tēn eikona tōn pragmatōn).” The Law possessed only a shadow or sketch, we possess the realities but “in icon,” that is, we possess them, not according to their proper mode of existence, but rather in another mode, in signs and symbols, until we are with Christ in heaven. This understanding of the Hebrews text was expressed by Ambrose who spoke of: “shadow,” “image,” and “truth.”

**Irenaeus and Origen**

Despite the witness of the Gospels and Letters, which were on their way to becoming a universally recognized canon of teaching, there was a widespread lack of clarity in understanding the role of the Old Testament. By the middle of the second century two diametrically opposed ways of understanding the Old Testament arose. Both of these were wrong in the premise they shared, namely, that the Old Testament as it stood, had nothing to offer Christians. They were also wrong in the opposite solutions they proposed. Marcion took the whole of the Hebrew Scriptures literally and rejected them as being unworthy of the God revealed in Christianity. The Letter of Barnabas took the Old Testament to be a great and incessant allegory that must be interpreted in a Christian, often moralistic, key.
The Church, however, under the guidance of the New Testament writings, managed to steer a middle path between these extremes. It was, however, left to Irenaeus (d. 200) to begin a theoretical elaboration of the relation between the Testaments. He was confronted with a widespread Gnostic view of humanity, which essentially denied the goodness of human corporeality and thus its historicity, and which saw these as a trap from which only specially endowed people could escape. Basing himself on the reality of the Incarnation, Irenaeus understood human history, especially that related in the Old Testament, to be recapitulated by the real human life and suffering of the Word of God made flesh, now consummated in glory. Thus, the text that tells us of this history is important because it reveals to us the presence and activity of that same Word initiating and carrying out the plan of the Father:

At the beginning, God, out of his generosity, formed man. For their salvation, He chose the patriarchs. And to teach the ignorant to follow God, He formed a people in advance… For those who were pleasing to Him, He sketched, like an architect, the plan of salvation. In Egypt, to those who could not see Him, He gave Himself as guide…In all these different ways, He prepared mankind for the harmonious music of salvation (cf. Lk 15:25). St. John therefore says in the Apocalypse: ‘His voice was like the sound of many waters’ (Apoc 1:15). Yes, the waters of God’s Spirit are many, for rich and great is the Father. At every stage the Word ungrudgingly gives his assistance to those subject to Him by drawing up a law adapted and appropriate to every creature.7

Ultimately, however, it was Origen who “assured the Old Testament a permanent place in the Christian church not by an abstract theory but by working his way through the entire Old Testament book by book, sentence by sentence, and word by word.”8 It is important, however, to realize that for Origen this painstaking activity was inspired by a profound and mystical understanding of history, rather than text. Though his thought was refracted through a Platonic understanding it was not dominated by it. For Origen, the contrast between shadow and reality was temporal rather than cosmic; it was between two aspects of the saving plan of the Creator acting in history rather than between two levels of ideas. Because of the importance of this difference I wish to develop this notion further.

The difference between the metaphysics of Plato and that of Origen is encapsulated in Origen’s reply to a remark of Celsus which refers to the Platonic theory of knowledge by citing enigmatically a brief quote from Plato’s Letter VII:

It has occurred to me to speak about these things at greater length,9 for possibly the matter I am discussing would be clearer if I were to do so.


8 Lienhard, “Origen.” p. 362

9 “These things” refers to the need and the difficulty of attaining to a knowledge of the “real,” indeed the impossibility of attaining to it save by way of mystical intuition.
There is a true teaching/reason (logos), which I have often stated before, that stands in the way of the man who would dare write even the least thing on such matters, and which it seems I am now called upon to repeat.

For each thing that exists there are three elements by which knowledge of it comes about. The fourth is the knowledge itself; and fifth we must pose the object itself as knowable and really existing. First, then, is the name (onoma), second the definition (logos, the expression of the thing in itself), third is the image (eidōlon), and fourth is the knowledge (epistēmē).10

Origen ceases to quote Celsus at this point and it is probable that Celsus gives only this brief citation, presumably aware that his audience is familiar with the passage and the platonic theme it sums up. Plato’s text goes on to illustrate his meaning through an example. The name “circle” evokes a reality in the minds of its hearers. The logos of circle can be expressed through nouns and verbs, namely: something that has everywhere equal distances between its extremities and its center. The image is a material thing that gives expression to the reality; it could be drawn or turned on a lathe. Such images can be erased or destroyed; they do not affect the reality itself which is different from them. Knowledge, understanding, correct opinion (epistēmē, nous, αληθῆ δοξα) form a class apart, for they do not exist in either sounds (onoma), or bodily figures (eidōlon) but rather in souls. Of these elements then, it is understanding that most closely approaches the fifth level (the “real circle”) in regard to both affinity and resemblance, but this too is deficient since it must proceed by why of nouns, verbs etc. What is, is beyond definition and name and is agnôstos, unattainable by the human mode of knowing: what is knowable and true exists purely in the world of Ideas, a world sometimes glimpsed by those who are faithful to the discipline of philosophy.11

Why does Celsus cite this text? In this letter, Plato, already an old man, is summing up a position that he had held his whole life long, namely that access to the real is only through an “ecstasy” of mystical insight and union with the One, the Good, and the Beautiful.12 Celsus, shocked by the notion of God incarnate and despising the idea that knowledge of God can take place by simply believing rather than through the spiritualizing ascesis insisted upon by Plato, sees in Christianity a threat to the whole world order he holds dear. Origen’s reply is at least as enigmatic Celsus’ objection.

10 Plato, Letter VII, 341, a-b. Translation is basically my own in consultation with several other translations.

11 “But even to the one who as an ‘inner affinity’ with it ‘the light of understanding’ does not come passively but after much effort on his own part; though equally it is as a kind of grace, when as a result of continued application to the subject itself and of communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden (exaiρήσεις), as light that is kindled by a leaping spark and thereafter it nourishes itself.” Hans Urs von Balthasar, The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics, trans. Oliver Davies John Riches, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, Rowan Williams, vol. IV. The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 180. (Quotation marks within the citation indicate the text of Plato’s Letter VII).

12 For a complete treatment of this notion and an analysis of other texts where Plato sounds this theme see André-Jean Festugière, La Révélation D’Hermès Trismégiste, vol. IV, Le Dieu Inconnu et la Gnose (Paris: Gabalda, 1954), 79-91.
In keeping with such a presentation we may say that “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” is John introduced before Jesus who corresponds (analogon) to the name in Plato’s text. The second, after John and pointed out by him, is Jesus to whom is applied the phrase, “The Word became flesh.” This corresponds to the logos of Plato. Plato calls the third, eidōlon. However, we who use this word in another sense (idol), would say with greater clarity that there is question here of the imprint (typon) of the wounds which occur after (the hearing of) the Word, that is to say the Christ in each one coming from Christ the Word. He who is able will know whether the Christ, who according to us is wisdom residing in “those who are perfect” (1Cor 2:6), corresponds to Plato’s fourth aspect, namely knowledge (epistēmē).13

Henri Crouzel has put us all in his debt by pointing the way to an understanding of this passage in which Origen seems purposely to be evasive.14 In dependence upon Crouzel’s explanation, I will attempt to comment on this text because of the importance it has not only for an understanding of Origen but for the whole Christian understanding of Scripture.

We first note that Origen says nothing explicit about Plato’s fifth element, the reality itself as it exists beyond the world of image and thought. It is clear, however, that for Origen this realm of “true reality” is the Word himself:

One could ask the question whether, in a certain sense, the First-born of all creatures is not himself a world, especially since he is Wisdom, a multiform Wisdom, by the fact that he contains in himself the logoi of all things according to which God made the universe, as the prophet says, “You have made all thing in Wisdom.” Thus, he would be a world in himself, a world that is more varied and elevated than the sensible world.15

By considering the object of Plato’s earnest striving to be a personal and not merely an inaccessible “world,” Origen has already subverted, while keeping intact, the schema embraced by Celsus and, indeed, the whole of Greek philosophy. In contrast to this philosophy, and in the light of the biblical principle of creation and the fact of the Incarnation, Christianity puts the accent on the individuum, the concretely existing reality related to its Creator, rather than the particular, which is rather an instance of a category,

13 Contra Celsum IV.9 (Sources Chrétiennes 147,200)


15 Commentary on John CGS IV, 323. This way of speaking contains its ambiguities though Origen is not alone in using such platomic terms. It is interesting that Thomas Aquinas, who roundly condemns Origen’s opinions as he had access to them via the tradition, says himself: “So God makes nothing except through the conception of his intellect, which is an eternally conceived Wisdom, that is, the Word of God and the Son of God. Accordingly, it is impossible that he make anything except through the Son. And so Augustine says in The Trinity that the Word is the art full of the living patterns of all things.” (Comm. On John Lecture 1, No.77). Translation in Thomas Aquinas, Commentary on the Gospel of John, trans. James A. Weisheipl and Fabian R. Larcher (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1980), 52. For a good clarification of Origen himself see Henri Crouzel, Origen. The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian, trans. A.S. Worall (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 191.
and ultimately for Plato a deficient imitation of the Idea. The *individuum* has a history, it is created not *in* history but *with* history, the particular exists in time, but is indifferent to history. This is the fundamental, though here unexpressed, principle that can help us interpret Origen’s reply to Celsus’ use of Plato, and indeed understand why Christian thought, based on the realities of creation and Incarnation, is both more transcendent and more immanent than pagan thought both ancient and modern.

The first factor of knowledge in this world, the *name*, is John the Baptist insofar as he represents the whole of the Old Testament. The mystery of salvation or Life, that is, ultimately, union with God in the Word, is already “named” in the Old Testament but this is not clear until salvation is given an essential expression, a *definition*, by the Word of God made flesh. Origen’s thought here is echoing 1 John 1: 1-2: “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have beheld, and our hands have felt concerning the word of life -- and the Life appeared and we have seen and we bear witness and we proclaim to you the Eternal Life which was with the Father and appeared to us.” Contrary to the fundamental principle of all platonic thought, the supraterrestrial world of Ideas has entered the world of matter: he is Jesus, the Eternal Life.

The *image* of the Word incarnate, the Life which has appeared, is found in the imprint of the wounds (*tōn traumatōn typon*), “that is to say the Christ in each one coming from Christ the Word,” received in faith by each believer. The word *typos* is probably being exploited by Origen to refer at one and the same time to the imprint of Christ’s wounds and to the fact that this imprint is itself a “type” or figure of the union with Christ that will be effected in heaven. In either case the notion that the mystical, and in some cases the very real physical, wounds born by the believer are already imprinted by Christ who pre-exists him and has now the glorious wounds as the “Lamb standing with the marks of slaughter upon him” (Rev 5:6). At the same time the glory of the Lamb’s wounds make of the believer’s wounds the figure of the glory that awaits him. It is possible that Origen is thinking of Galatians 6:17: “Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus,” about which Robert Jewett wrote: "Already it is evident that the body of man, the focus of suffering in this world, was viewed by Paul as the sphere where Christ's rule becomes visibly evident." It is, then, particularly in relation to *image* that we see Origen elaborating a metaphysics that includes the physical: spiritual and material participation in the mystery of Christ is already a share in the

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16 “*Cum igitur Deus, in cuius aternitate nulla est omnino mutatio, creator sit temporum et ordinatur... procul dubio non est mundus factus in tempore sed cum tempore.*” Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* 11.6.


18 Robert Jewett, *Paul's Anthropological Terms. A Study of Their Use in Conflict Settings*, vol. 10, *Arbeiten zur Geschichte des antiken Judentums und des Urchristentums* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1971), 251. See also 2Corinthians 4:10-11: "... always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh.”
eternal Gospel (Rev 14:6) whose eikōn is the reality we experience now in Christ, that is, the temporal Gospel.19

Finally, “he who is able will know whether the Christ, who according to us is wisdom residing in ‘those who are perfect’ (1Cor 2:6), corresponds to Plato’s fourth aspect, namely knowledge (epistēmē).” What Plato considered to take place in the soul by way of familiarity and resemblance actually happens through an indwelling of the Logos incarnate, the Christ “the wisdom of God” (1Cor 1:24). There is thus a continuity and not an estrangement between the name, the essential expression (logos), the image, knowledge, and the reality itself. This continuity is established because being at all its levels is a successively profound or elevated realization of the incarnate Logos “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3).

The importance of Origen’s re-interpretation of Plato’s Seventh Letter lies in the fact that it demonstrated a maturing of the nascent intuitions of a Justin or an Irenaeus into what would become a consistent world view. The Incarnation reveals the true nature of cosmic and mental reality as well as language, and it introduces an understanding of history, learned from the Old Testament and transposed in the New Testament.20 We will return to this later in the study; I wish now to look briefly at Origen’s exegetical practice.

In a recent study Elizabeth A. Dively Lauro helpfully sums up one of Origen’s ways of expressing the levels of meaning he found in the sacred text, namely by using the terms, “somatic, psychic, and spiritual”:

[O]ne must begin with the purpose of Scripture for Origen. As direct and sole author, the Holy Spirit has imbued Scripture with a spiritual character, the purpose of which is to guide human beings to ‘perfection’ and ‘salvation.’ This spiritual purpose of Scripture demands a ‘spiritual’ method of interpretation. Origen’s exegesis, therefore, analyzes a Biblical passage in a way that edifies the soul of the hearer and so serves Scripture’s purpose by imparting the knowledge, virtue, and wisdom that lead to perfection and, ultimately, salvation. To this end … the somatic sense conveys historical knowledge or instruction on virtue; the psychic

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19 Henry Chadwick in his translation of Contra Celsum (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953, p.323, n.5) suggests that Origen in his commentary on Song of Songs 2:5 (“I am wounded by love”) may be developing what he says here of the “wounds” which make up the “image.” This is likely, and sheds light on what Origen may mean by equating this interior reality with the eidoilon of Plato. I give a portion of that text here. It should be noted that Origen goes on to speak of being wounded by “wisdom,” “might” and “justice”: “If there is anyone anywhere who has at some time burned with this faithful love of the Word of God; if there is anyone who received the sweet wound of Him who is the chosen dart; if there is anyone who has been pierced with the loveworthy spear of His knowledge, so that he yearns and longs for Him by day and night, can speak of nought but Him, would hear of nought but Him, can think of nothing else, and is disposed to no desire nor longing nor yet hope, except for Him alone – if such there be, that soul then says in truth: ‘I have been wounded by love.’” Origen. The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies. Translated by R.P. Lawson. Edited by Johannes Quasten and Joseph C. Plumpe, Ancient Christian Writers 26. Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1957, 198.

20 For a reflection on this aspect of Christian thought see John D. Zizioulas, Being As Communion, Contemporary Greek Theologians, 4 (Crestwood,NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), Chapter One.
sense inspires the temporal fight for *virtue* against vice; and the pneumatic sense inspires *wisdom* regarding the Incarnation and the Eschaton.21

We may observe here that the pneumatic sense, in its primary application refers not to a different *sense* of Scripture but to a deeper capacity to understand the text and the realities it mediates.22 What is mediated directly belongs to what, as we have seen, Hebrews 10:1 calls the *skia* of “the good things to come.”23 The further difference between *eikon* and *pragmata* (termed by Origen the “temporal Gospel” and the “eternal Gospel”) is one of *epnioia*, our manner of knowing, while Origen can characterize the difference between the “shadow” and the *eikon* as on of *hypostasis* or substance.24

Origen’s reading of the Old Testament is thorough, tending at times to be atomistic, seeking to find everywhere a presence of Christ in the events, personalities and even the objects spoken of in the text. In regard, for instance, to Genesis 18:5 (“Abraham stood… under the tree.”), he comments: “What does it help me who have come to hear what the Holy Spirit teaches the human race, if I hear that ‘Abraham was standing under a tree’”?25 Such earnestness and faith deserve emulation even if our understanding of inspiration is not as close to dictation as that of Origen and many early Fathers.26 Furthermore, our first approach, through critical historiography, is less concentrated on individual components of the text and is, in a certain manner, more sensitive to ancient oriental literary *genres*.27

My main point here is to establish clearly that for Origen the primary reality designated by the expression “spiritual sense” is the resemblance between the content of the Old Testament text and the mystery of Christ. This relationship is perceived through an experiential knowledge conferred by the Holy Spirit of the reality mediated in and through the Old Testament now understood in the light of Christ. This Spirit-conferred knowledge is described by Henri Crouzel in the striking image of “prophecy in reverse”:

21 Elizabeth A. Dively Lauro, "Reconsidering Origen's two higher senses of scriptural meaning: identifying the psychic and pneumatic sense,” in *Studia Patristica XXXIV*, ed. M.F. Wiles and E.J. Yarnold (Louvain: Peeters, 2001), 306-17. Citation is on 308-09, italics in original.


24 See Crouzel, *Origen*, 68.


26 It should be noted, however, that the early Christian thinkers never thought of this process in terms that would place the Old Testament prophet in a purely passive or mantic state.

27 I will explain this remark later on.
Spiritual exegesis is in a kind of way the reverse process of prophecy: the latter looks to the future, but the former looks back from the future to the past. Prophecy follows the course of time forwards and in a historical or contemporary event sees darkly the messianic or eschatological fact that is prefigured. Spiritual exegesis follows the course of time backwards and, starting from the Messiah already given to the People of God, recognizes in the old Scriptures the preparations and seeds of what is now accomplished. But this accomplishment is in part prophetic in relation to what will take place in the end time.28

The principle that it requires a certain prophetic grace in order to understand the Scriptures has become a commonplace in the Christian tradition.29 Origen’s irreplaceable role in Christian thought is found in his prophetic understanding of what we call today the economy of salvation, and thus bring to greater consciousness and clarity the plan of God in regard to Israel and its Scriptures in that economy now seen in Christ. He was able to articulate the New Testament presupposition that the events and persons mediated to us in the Old Testament are somehow anticipated and partial realizations of the mystery of Christ, now fully present in history which yet awaits its own completion at the end of history. To this basic contribution, established by authors such as Crouzel and de Lubac, we must add a profound philosophical insight, fully articulated later by the Cappodocians, that was able to preserve and yet completely invert the Greek philosophical system by bringing it, as I have said, into the biblical understanding of creation and Incarnation. Lastly, Origen along with the other great theologians of antiquity, mediate to us their experiential knowledge of the Mystery, its “name,” its “Logos,” its “image” and its “knowledge.” They show us in this way the reality to be contacted in and through the text for the building up of the Church, the Body of Christ.

It should be pointed out in addition, however, that the very authors who have such a profound appreciation of Origen and the theological approach that grew out of his insights are also well aware of the deficiencies and shortcomings of his method. There is, first of all, his lack of terminological precision in speaking about the “literal” and “spiritual” senses of the text. For Origen, in the phrase of Henri Crouzel the literal sense is “the brute materiality of the words.”31 Since Origen appears to bypass what we are intent upon discovering, namely the intention of the human author, it may seem that he pays no real attention to what we call the literal sense. In fact, however, he would accept

28 Crouzel, Origen, 71.

29 Ibid. 73-74. To anticipate somewhat, we may consider this text of Aquinas who specifically attributes the understanding of Old Testament prophecy to a prophetic gift: “They are also called prophets in the New Testament who expound the prophetic sayings because Sacred Scripture is interpreted in the same Spirit in which it is composed.” On Romans 12:8. Thomas Aquinas, Super Epistulas S. Pauli Lectura (Rome: Marietti, 1953), # 978.


31 Crouzel, Origen, 93.
as actual historical happenings more events in the Old Testament than any modern
critical interpreter would be prepared to acknowledge: “For the passages which are
historically true are far more numerous than those which are composed with purely
spiritual meanings.” Fernand Prat responds partially to the difficulty caused by Origen’s
termology in his discussion of what Origen intended by the expression *nous pneumatikos*:

Just so he [Origen] does not attach to the words *spiritual meaning* the
same signification as we do: for him they mean the spiritual sense properly
so called (the meaning added to the literal sense by the express wish of
God attaching a special signification to the fact related or the manner of
relating them), or the figurative as contrasted with the proper sense, or the
accommodative sense, often an arbitrary invention of the interpreter, or
even the literal sense when it is treating of things spiritual. If this
terminology is kept in mind there is nothing absurd in the principle he
repeats so often: "Such a passage of the Scripture has no corporal
meaning." As examples Origen cites the anthropomorphisms, metaphors,
and symbols which ought indeed to be understood figuratively.

Another of Origen’s shortcomings is his conviction, as we saw above in regard to
Abraham standing under the tree, that each discrete unit of the text must stand for
something. This is due to his philosophical orientation and his over use of the concept of
allegory. Since these are the objections made in antiquity by the Antiochene school, I
will defer a discussion of them until we have assayed this school of thought in its
strengths and weaknesses.

**The School of Antioch**

Origen died in 253/54, the result of torture endured in prison during the
persecution under Decius. His legacy has left an indelible imprint on theology. In the
East, Didymus the Blind was a disciple and Athanasius was deeply influenced by him
while the four great Doctors of the Latin Church, along with Hilary and others evince
direct dependence on Origen. Nevertheless his name has been associated with
controversy from a very early date. The only aspect of controversy that need occupy us
in seeking clarity on the ancient understanding of the spiritual sense of Scripture is that
between the followers of Origen, or the Alexandrian school (found throughout the
Empire), and the fourth century Antiochene school whose most prominent though diverse
representatives included Eustathius of Antioch, Theodoret of Cyrrhus, Diodorus of
Tarsus and his two pupils Theodore of Mopsuestia and John Chrysostom.

The two principal objections of the Antiochenes are based on Origen’s tendency
to search for a higher, allegorical (in the Pauline sense) meaning in small, discrete

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33 *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York; Robert Appleton, 1911), Vol XI. Online edition
copyright 2003, by K. Knight, article on “Origen.”

34 A good history of these controversies can be found in the article by Prat referred to above.
portions of the biblical text. They countered this by insisting first, on the _historia_ or narrative logic of the texts and on the _theoria_ by which they meant the contemplative vision of the future of God’s plan. While these are serious differences we should bear in mind that this quarrel was between men who had received the same basic rhetorical formation.  

Origen, concentrating on the unified _skopos_ of the Holy Spirit in composing the whole Bible, looked upon the text and parts of the text as necessarily concerned with this _skopos_ and was philosophically oriented to look for a higher meaning (anagogē). To this contemplative activity he most often gave the name _allégoria_. The Antiochenes paid more attention to the intrinsic historical reference of the text (Origen, as we have seen, was serious about historicity in his own way), and to its _historia_ by which they meant the overall logic of the text as opposed to its discrete units. They too looked for anagogē but they found it in the discovery of the higher meaning intended by the author and revealed by his use of “excessive” language (hyperbolē) to describe a person or event, seeing in such hyperbolic language the author’s hint that, behind the event or person described, there was a deeper and more divine reality. They thus located the contemplative insight into the future relevance of the event or person in the original author considering it as an extended literal meaning of the text. They generally acknowledged the authority of the New Testament authors to see that intention even where their own methods could not find it.

Certain conclusions are evident at this point. First it should be clear that neither the Antiochenes nor the Alexandrians had any notion of or interest in what we call today the historical critical method. Everyone grants this is regard to Alexandria but it is also true of Antioch:

> [M]y suggestion that the exegetical debate reflected a difference within Greco-Roman culture about how to treat texts, means that the question of method remains relevant, and also accounts for those features of Antiochene exegesis which sit so ill at ease with attempts to characterize it as if it were the precursor of modern historico-critical method. There was no genuine historical criticism in antiquity. The Antiochenes do take _historia_ seriously, but in the sense of _to historikon_. (The coherence and argument of the text)

Secondly, the foundation of the debate lay in the fact that the Alexandrians, following Origen, were _philosophically_ oriented and sought for a meaning in the realities as they were portrayed by the biblical text while the Antiochenes were _rhetoricians_ more attentive to the _hypothesis_ of the text, its basic message, and its _akolouthia_ or inner

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36 Theodore of Mopsuestia was reluctant in this regard and earned the censure of later ages. See de Margerie, _An Introduction_, 170-81.

37 Young, "The Rhetorical Schools." 189.
coherence. Both parties made significant contributions to the Christian reception of the Bible and both need correction.

Thirdly, both parties, true to their respective assimilation of the Greco-Roman rhetorical principles, saw the Christological dimension of the Old Testament differently. For Alexandria, as I have said, it lay in the realities as they were mediated by the Sacred Text, for Antioch it lay in the vision of the authors of the Old Testament themselves. In the light of what we now understand about the need to re-route historical criticism in the direction of understanding the realities as they were purposely mediated by the Old Testament authors rather than our reconstruction of these realities, the difference between these approaches many not be insurmountable. We can already see the possibility of some reconciliation in the fact that neither school of thought actually expounded the text in strict conformity with its own theoretical description of its method.

Thirdly, both schools of thought maintained that there were texts in the Old Testament that referred to the Christ event. For Antioch this was due to the contemplative insight (theoria) given to the authors of Scripture by which they perceived that what they spoke about was a figure of something to come. Interpretation meant sharing the contemplative vision of the Old Testament author. For Alexandria it meant entering into the interpretative manner of narrating that we find in the Old Testament itself and seeing the reality so narrated as a participation in the coming Incarnate Word.

**Thomas Aquinas**

It is certainly of great importance to trace the development of the understanding of the spiritual sense of Scripture, as well as the abuses of the term, and the confusion, exaggerations and misapplications that often go under the title of “spiritual” or especially

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38 For a study that challenges an overly optimistic assessment of Antiochene exegesis see John J. O'Keefe, "A Letter that Killeth: Toward a Reassessment of Antiochene Exegesis, or Diodore, Theodore, and Theodoret on the Psalms," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2000): 83-104. In the opening summary the author states: “It [Antiochene exegesis] tended to sever the linkages uniting the Old with the New and weakened the ability of the Bible to function as a Christian text. Rather than seeing Antiochene exegesis as a forward-looking project that was suppressed, we should consider it instead to be a backward-looking project that failed.”

39 This new sensitivity to the actual mode of mediation in assessing the event as it is passed on to us is well expressed by K. Lawson Younger, Jr: “While it is perfectly valid (and important) to ask questions concerning which events were narrated, it is equally valid and important to ask questions concerning the way in which events were narrated. In fact it is the latter questions which reveal the texts’ ultimate purpose. K. Lawson Younger, Jr., Ancient Conquest Accounts. A Study in Ancient Near Eastern and Biblical History Writing, JSOTS 98 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 63. Cited in Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), 1 (italics added).

40 The divergence between Origen’s principles in the *Peri Archón* and his practice has been frequently noted. In regard to Antioch we read on p. 179 of De Margerie’s *Introduction*: “It would appear then that it is not so easy to find an example of *theoria* proposed by an Antiochian author that fulfills all the conditions supposedly laid down by the school.”
its synonym “allegorical” exegesis. However, my goal in this short study is to begin to establish the theology of history that underlies and legitimates that understanding of the Scriptures of the Jewish people which the Christians, following the lead of the New Testament, embrace as constituting the major portion of their own Scriptures. For that purpose I will go to the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas both because he is a clear exponent of the Tradition and because of his respect for the work of God in the Jewish people.

For this study, I will take what is probably Aquinas’ earliest treatment of the question of the “senses” of Scripture, namely the three articles of Question 6 of Quodlibetum 7, probably delivered in Paris not later than Advent of 1275. I will comment on these briefly and adduce some other places in his writings which are relevant to our purpose which, to repeat, is to show that the basic understanding of the spiritual sense of Scripture is that of a Spirit-conferred experiential understanding of the relation between the reality mediated in the text and the mystery of Christ. Question 6 is framed this way: “De sensibus sacrae Scripturae” and the articles are: 1) “Whether besides the literal sense in the words of sacred Scripture other senses lie hidden (lateant)?” 2) “On the number of senses of sacred Scripture.” 3) “Whether these senses are found in other writings?”

In regard to the first consideration, Aquinas invokes as his authorities first, the Vulgate of Daniel 12:4, “Many shall pass through and knowledge will be multiple.” He then cites Jerome, speaking of the Apocalypse: “In each word there lie multiple understandings.” In his argument he invokes the principle that Sacred Scripture is so composed that the truth necessary for salvation is manifested in it, and then goes on to state that the manifestation or expression of the truth can take place “by means of things and words (rebus et verbis)” insofar as words signify things and a thing can be a figure (figura) of something else. The Maker (Auctor) of things can not only employ words to signify something, but can also so dispose things that they are a figure of something else. And thus in Sacred Scripture the truth is manifested in two ways: in one way the realities (res) are signified by words and in this consists the literal sense; in another way the


42 I recognize that this second point is controverted, especially among some Jewish scholars. While I will not be entering into this debate, I think that what I say here may place it in a broader and more theological context.

43 For a discussion of the Quodlibeta and the dating of the text we are considering, see Jean Pierre Torrell, Initiation à saint Thomas d’Aquin. Sa personne et son œuvre, ed. Pierre Hadot et al., Vestigia 13 (Éditions Universitaires / Cerf: Fribourg Suisse/ Paris, 1993), 305-06.

44 As often as possible I translate Aquinas’ latin allegoria, allegorice, etc. as “allegory,” “allegorically” etc. to give the reader the sense of how thoroughly the Tradition, basing itself on Galatians 4:24, had Christianized the term to refer to a specific mode of biblical interpretation.

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realities (signified) are figures of other realities, and in this consists the spiritual sense. And in this way it belongs to Sacred Scripture to have many senses.

In answer to the objection that if Sacred Scripture had many senses there would be a multiplicity of statements in the same utterance, Aquinas responds that the spiritual sense is always founded upon the literal sense, and thus the fact that it be expounded both literally and spiritually does not produce a multiplicity of senses. To the objection that a plurality of senses would result in the fact that understanding would be confused, he answers with Augustine that difficulty in interpreting Scripture has many advantages such as avoiding boredom or pride as well as obscuring the text in the sight of unbelievers; in regard to this last he cites Matthew 7:8. The third objection alleges that the presence of any sense except the literal could lead to error. Aquinas answers, again with Augustine, that what is said in a hidden way in one part of Scripture is said openly in another, and thus a spiritual interpretation must have a foundation in some literal interpretation, and in this way error is avoided.

In the fourth objection the statement of Augustine is adduced to the effect that the authority of Scripture has greater authority than any human insight. But is not fitting that Scripture have a sense that has no authority for establishing something (ad aliquid confirmandum) However, only the literal sense is suitable for arguing (argumentativa) as Dionysius says, and thus Sacred Scripture has only a literal sense. Aquinas responds by pointing out that it not because of a defect in the authority of Scripture that one cannot draw an argument from the spiritual sense. It is rather because of the ambiguity in the nature of similitudes which can signify many things and not just one thing, such as the word “lion” which, for different reasons, is applied to Christ and the devil. What Aquinas does not point out, however, perhaps presuming it to be obvious, is that Sacred Scripture is not intended to be merely “argumentative,” that is, useful for establishing a truth, especially in discussion with heretics. Scripture “manifests” (note the “disclosure” language) the truth and it does so in an abundance of different ways (e.g., the Psalms) in order to lead the believer into a deeper participation in the truth. It suffices for instance to glance at Aquinas’ own commentaries on Scripture, which are mostly his editing of disciples notes taken in class, to see how he actually expounds the Sacred Text, leading his students to a grasp on the abundant truth mediated by the text and freely making use of such expressions as “spiritualiter” or “mystice” to characterize his exposition.

The last objection states that any meaning derived from a text that does not correspond to the intention of the author is not a proper meaning. Aquinas’ answer is twofold. First, the author of Sacred Scripture is the Holy Spirit who can intend many things that exceed what the interpreters of Scripture can make out. Secondly, it is not unfitting that a human author who is the instrument of the Holy Spirit understand many things in one expression as Jerome points out in stating that the prophets spoke of present

46 For an insight into way St. Thomas means by “argument” one could consult Summa Theologicae 1,1,8 on the “argumentative” nature of Sacred Doctrine. See also, Francis Martin, “Sacra Doctrina and the Authority of its Sacra Scriptura in St. Thomas Aquinas,” Pro Ecclesia 10, no. 1 (2001): 84-102.
realities (factis) in such a way that by their statements they also intended to signify future things. Jerome’s statement, endorsed by Aquinas reflects in some ways the Antiochene understanding of prophecy mentioned above.47

In the second article Aquinas treats of the four senses of Scripture listing them as “historialis vel litteralis, allegoricus, moralis et anagogicus.” As authorities for this understanding he cites both Augustine and Bede. He then proceeds by returning to the principle propounded in the first article, namely that Sacred Scripture manifests the truth which it mediates (tradit) in a twofold manner: through words and through the figures of things (per verba et per rerum figuras). That manifestation which takes place through words gives us the historical or literal sense, and therefore all that is rightly understood from the signification of the words belongs to the literal sense. The spiritual sense, on the other hand, consists in the fact that certain realities are expressed through the images (figurae) of other realities because, as Dionysius says, visible things are wont to be figures of invisible things, and thus that meaning which is understood (accipitur) from figures is called the spiritual sense. Furthermore, the truth of Scripture is ordained to two goals, namely right belief and right action. This latter sense, namely, right action is called the moral sense also known as the tropological sense. The first sense, that is, right belief is twofold. Since the state of the Church on earth lies midway between the Synagogue and the Church triumphant, the Old Testament may be said to be a figure of the New Testament while both Testaments are a figure of heavenly realities. The spiritual sense can be founded in the manner in which the Old Testament is a figure of the New, and this is called the allegorical or typical sense, or it can, along with the New Testament, be a figure of the Church triumphant and this is the anagogical sense.

The first objection hinges on what is meant by figura. Many realities are spoken of in a figurative manner, for instance the he-goat of Daniel 8:5 is, in its literal sense a figure of the Greek empire. In the same way the figures indicating Christ in the Old Testament are to be understood literally, that is historically; they are not to be understood allegorically. Aquinas answers by making a distinction between those imaginary figures that stand for something else and those realities spoken of in a text which are also figures of something future.48 In regard to these latter he says that those things which happened in rei veritate (and not just in imagination) are ordered to Christ as a shadow to the truth (note the allusion to Heb 10:1) and designate either Christ or his members constitute a sense other than the historical namely the allegorical.49

47 For a treatment of nuanced manner in which Aquinas accepts the medieval understanding of the condemnation of Theodore of Mopsuestia, and yet his own understanding that some prophecies, notably the Emmanuel prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, have the future event as their literal meaning, see the forthcoming article by Daniel Flores to be published by The Thomist: “Aquinas and Theodore of Mopsuestia.”

48 He acknowledges that there are imaginary figures which designate Christ in the literal or historical sense, such as the rock “cut by no human hand” of Daniel 2:34. Actually, the rock “cut by no human hand” refers literally or historically to Israel and spiritually to Christ.

49 The constant use of the term “allegorical” as a synonym for “figural” or “spiritual” ought to be noted as well as the difference between this use and the later literary use of the term “allegory.”
The second objection wishes to equate the allegorical and the moral sense on the basis of the fact that Christ and his members make up one reality. Aquinas answers by pointing out that the spiritual or allegorical sense of an Old Testament reality applies to the Church as the Body of Christ, whereas as the moral sense refers to the individual acts of the members of Christ. The third objection states that there are many literal statements that regard morals and thus the distinction between moral and allegorical is not a good one. Aquinas replies that only those moral teachings that take place through the likeness of something done (ex similitudine aliquarum rerum gestarum), and I would add are narrated in Scripture, form a part of the spiritual sense. The fourth objection merely serves as the occasion for clarifying how the allegorical sense applies to Christ as head of the Church militant and the anagogical sense applies to him a hear of the Church triumphant.

The fifth objection cites a phrase of Augustine to the effect that in some texts only the literal sense is to be sought. The answer provides the occasion for setting for a theology of history. Aquinas begins by stating that not every text of Scripture has all four senses, and for enunciating the principle that most often the spiritual sense is found in an earlier text which somehow expresses something yet to come (recall Crouzel’s description of “prophecy in reverse”), and thus all four senses can be found in that which according to the literal sense treats of events (facta) of the Old Testament. In regard to the present state of the Church those things are prior which pertain to the Head in relation to the Body because those things that were accomplished in the actual (verum) body of Christ are examples (moral sense) for us, the mystical Body. In Christ moreover future glory is set forth for us and thus what is said literally of Christ the Head can be understood first, allegorically as pertaining to his mystical Body, second morally pointing to how our actions must be reformed, and third anagogically insofar as Christ is shown to us as the Way to glory. Whenever anything is said literally of the Church this cannot be expounded allegorically unless perhaps we can say that those things recounted of the primitive Church can be interpreted morally and allegorically in regard to ourselves. In a similar manner the examples of moral conduct set forth literally in the Sacred Text can be interpreted only literally. Finally, those things said literally of the state of glory are normally to be interpreted literally since they are not a figure of anything but are rather imaged (figurata) by everything else.

The third and last article of this question sets forth a remarkable principle in which Aquinas is able to set forth the traditional understanding of sacred history as being a unique work of God. The question addressed is this: “Whether these senses are to be found in other writings?” The authority invoked here is taken from Gregory the Great’s Moralia 20,1 (PL 76,135): “Sacred Scripture, in its very manner of speaking, is above all other sciences because in one and the same word, while it narrates an event, it sets forth a mystery.” (“Sacra Scriptura omnes scientias ipso locutionis suae more transcendit, quia uno eodemque sermone dum narrat gestum, prodit mysterium.”) The two words “event” and “mystery” refer in turn to the literal sense, the event, and then the same event as it is now seen to have been a participated anticipation of the mystery of Christ. Aquinas’ own answer is worth citing in full since it clearly shows that this manner of interpreting the Scriptures is founded on a faith view of history learned from the Scriptures themselves and not simply an exercise in intertextuality.
The spiritual sense of Sacred Scripture is derived from the fact that realities, playing out their own actions (*cursum suum peragentes*) signify something else and that something is arrived at through a spiritual meaning (*sensus*).

Things are so disposed in their own activities in such a way that from them such a (spiritual) meaning can be understood, and this is accomplished by him only who governs things by his providence, namely God alone. For just as a human being can use words or some fashioned likenesses to signify something, so God uses the very course of events (*ipsum cursum rerum*) which is subject to his providence for the signifying of other things.

The signifying of something through words or fashioned likenesses designed simply to signify effects only a literal sense as we have said. Thus, in no science which results from human effort can there be found, properly speaking, anything but the literal sense. Only in this Scripture whose author is the Holy Spirit and a human being the instrument (can there found a spiritual sense) as it says in Psalm 44 (45):2, “My tongue is that of a quickly writing scribe.”

The first two objections assert that sciences proceed by way of similitudes and that poetry uses various fashioned likenesses to mediate the truth, and thus these two have a spiritual sense. In his response to these, Aquinas returns to his basic principle that only in Scripture, over and above the literal meaning of the words, however image-laden, can the things or events spoken of actually signify other things or events. In response to Aristotle’s dictum that he who says one thing says many things, St. Thomas responds that that dictum applies to statements that contain in germ many conclusions that can be derived, but this is not one reality actually signifying another.

It seems clear that for Aquinas there are two basic aspects to the spiritual sense of Scripture. First, this sense of Scripture, often called allegorical, spiritual or mystical, extending to a moral or heavenly referent, can only be is unique to Scripture. Second, this sense derives from the special action of God in and through Christ by which he created and formed Israel, became incarnate himself in the union between his divine Word and the humanity of Jesus Christ, and formed a Church, the Body of Christ. The goal of this special divine action is the creation of a people who will eternally share in his divine life.

In regard to the first aspect, we see Aquinas very much the schoolman, penetrating and furthering the tradition he had received. Ten years later, when establishing the nature of *Sacra Doctrina* in the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas articulates in the 10th article the same basic principle that we have just seen. In answering question: “Whether the Sacred Writings of this doctrine may be interpreted according to many meanings?” he cites the same text of Gregory we just saw above concerning the unique dignity of Sacred Scripture in that “*dum narrat gestum, prodit mysterium.*” Aquinas’ own answer is basically the same. He responds that God is able to have not only words signify, as humans can do, but also “*res ipsas,*” which, as we have seen, must be taken to mean “events” and not merely “things.” He then goes on to say that the first signification, that of the words, belongs to the first meaning (*sensum*)
“which is the historical or literal meaning.” The signification by which “the realities signified by the words in turn signify other things” (“res significatae per voces, iterum alias res significant”) is called the “sensus spiritualis” “which is founded upon the literal meaning and supposes it.” This understanding is consistent in Aquinas as studies have shown, but this text suffices for our purposes here.50

In regard to the unique providence of God in regard to Israel, St. Thomas’ second point, we can find remarks such as the following:

The Jewish people were chosen by God in order that Christ be born of them. Therefore it was necessary that the whole state (status) of that people be prophetic and figural as Augustine says in Contra Faustum (22,4).51 And for this reason even the judicial precepts handed on to that people are more figural than the judicial precepts handed on to other peoples. And thus even the wars and actions of that people are expounded mystically but not the wars and actions of the Assyrians or Romans even though they were by far better known among men.52

It is clear, then, that the life and history of Israel are different from that of the rest of humankind up to the coming of Christ. We will proceed to reflect on this in the concluding section of this study.

Theological Principles Underlying the Traditional Understanding of Sensus Spiritualis

There are two implicit principles that are operative in the traditional understanding of the spiritual sense; both of these must be recovered, and in a process of correlation, be brought to bear on this issue.53 They are, first, the ancient understanding, and specifically the biblical understanding, of how the past is present, and secondly, a more adequate theory of cognition and language. Treatment of these must await another study. There is, however, a third basic principle that merits at least brief treatment here. It is implied in the Thomistic text just cited above that the wars and actions of Israel must be expounded mystically, that is, spiritually, in relation to Christ. An understanding of this principle can be found principally in reflecting on the Body of Christ.

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51 “First of all, then, not only the speech of these men, but their life also, was prophetic; and the whole kingdom of the Hebrews was like a great prophet, corresponding to the greatness of the Person prophesied.” Translation in Andrew, please get this, it is in Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, vol? p.?

52 ST 1-2,104, 2, ad 2. Note that Aquinas is speaking here about realities (wars and actions), and not only of the words by which these realities are mediated.

The Body of Christ

As a guide in this reflection I will consider Aquinas’ treatment of the Body of Christ in Question 8 of the Third Part of the Summa Theologiae. In the third article of that question he addresses the topic whether Christ is the head of all men. As authorities for his positive response he cites 1 Timothy 4:10: “I mean that the point of all our toiling and battling is that we have put our trust in the living God and he is the Savior of the whole human race but particularly of all believers,” and 1 John 2:2 “He is expiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but for those of the whole world.” He concludes: “To save men or to be the expiation for their sins belongs to Christ as Head; therefore Christ is the Head of all men.”

In his own argument Aquinas points out that the first difference we must note between the natural human body and the mystical Body of the Church lies in the fact that in a natural body all the members are present simultaneously whereas in the Mystical Body the members are not present at simultaneously first, because “the Body of the Church is constituted by human beings “who existed from the beginning of the world until its end.” Secondly, the members are not all present at the same time because some are only potential members and may remain so until by death they lose even that potentiality. Thus, there are diverse degrees of belonging to the Body of the Church. First and foremost he is the Head of those who are actually united to him in glory. Second, he his Head of those who are actually united to him by love; thirdly, of those who are united to him by faith (as “dead members”), fourth those who are only united to him potentially but will be actually united, and finally, there are those who are only united to him potentially and will never be united actually.

In answer to the first two objections, one concerning non-believers and the other deriving from the description of the Church as having “no spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph 5:27), Aquinas simply applies to the first the notion of potential vs. actual and to the second the diverse degrees in being united to Christ. The answer to the third objection is, however extremely important for our consideration here.

The objection runs as follows:

The sacraments of the Old Law [all the liturgical observances] are compared to Christ as a shadow to “the body” as it says in Colossians 2:17. But the Fathers of the Old Testament used these sacraments in their time as it says in Hebrews 8:5, “They used an exemplar and shadow of the heavenly realities.” Therefore they did not belong to the Body of Christ, and thus Christ is not the Head of all human beings.

Aquinas answers:

It should be said that the holy Fathers did not stop at the sacraments of the Law as mere things, but as images and shadows of future realities. For the movement toward an image, in so far as it is an image, is the same as the movement toward

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54 For a more ample treatment of this topic in antiquity see Emile Mersch, The Theology of the Mystical Body, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis: Herder, 1952).
the reality as the Philosopher says in his work *On Memory and Recall*. And therefore, the ancient Fathers, by observing the sacraments of the Law, were brought toward Christ through the same faith and love by which we are still brought toward him. For this reason the ancient Fathers belonged to the same Body of the Church to which we belong.55

We find the same teaching in Aquinas’ commentary on the Letter to Colossians. Speaking about the term *principium* (archê) in Col 1:18, he remarks first that “it is the same Church” in the present and in glory, and goes on to speak of Christ as the *principium* of justification and grace “in the whole Church because even in the Old Testament there are some justified through faith in Christ (per fidel Christi).56

It is important to note, however, with Colman O’Neil that Thomas makes a distinction between the grace of Christ present in the Old Testament and the state of that grace which is characteristic of this time of revelation. Availing himself of the distinction we have seen frequently between *umbra*, *imago*, and *veritas*, Aquinas distinguishes the first stage as before the Law when individual persons or families were instructed by divine revelation, and the time of the Law. In regard to the threefold distinction itself (shadow, image, truth) we read in ST 1-2,102, 2 c, that the “truth” is the direct vision of the divine Truth itself and worship will not consist in anything figurative “but solely in the praise of God proceeding from interior knowledge and affection as it says in Isaiah 51:3, “Joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving and the voice of praise.” The Old Testament is called “shadow” because at that time “neither was the divine Truth manifest in itself, nor was the way leading thereto yet opened out.” The New Testament is called “image” because, though the manifestation of the divine truth, prophesied as in the Isaiah text above, as is not yet present, the Way to it has been made known, and with this manifestation goes a stable form of life (a state) that will perdure until it is perfected by the third stage, the Truth itself.57

As O’Neill points out in the study already referred to there are several differences between the New Law and the state of the New Law, between the shadow and the *eikôn* of the realities. The New Law is stable and not to be fulfilled by another dispensation on earth; it is now proposed to the whole human race; it is the Body of Christ, the Church; its sacraments contain Christ or the power of his mysteries and are not

55 I am indebted here to the study by Colman O’Neill, “St. Thomas On the Membership of the Church,” *Thomist* 27 (1963): 88-140. The latter part of Aquinas’ response is his translation. The notion that the Jews of Old Testament times belonged to the Body of Christ is not peculiar to Aquinas. Augustine says the same: “Nolite ergo putare, fratres, omnes justos qui passi sunt persecutionem iniquorum, etiam illos qui venerunt ante Domini adventum praenuntiari Domini adventum, non pertinuisset ad membra Christi. Absit ut non pertinet ad membra Christi, qui pertinet ad civitatem quaem regem habet Christum.” Enarratio in Ps. LXI, 4 (CCL XXXIX,774).


57 “It is accepted that the New Testament remains because it is begun here below and perfected in the fatherland.” Aquinas, Commentary on 1Corinthians 3:1-2, cited by Bourke and Littledale in the Blackfriars edition of the *Summa Theologiae*, Volume 29, p.119. I owe some of the translation of the Aquinas passage cited in this paragraph to the same volume.

figurative only of the heavenly realities; its Scriptures reveal the Way to eternal life by bringing us into contact with Christ now incarnate; it consists in the presence and action of the Holy Spirit who is now himself the New Law.

**Analogy and Participation**

Our second consideration in making explicit the traditional understanding of the spiritual sense more accessible is to recover the reality of Christ as the center of history, the reality in which all of God’s actions find their culmination, and participation in whom results in an eternal life of direct union with the Trinity. As Hans Urs von Balthasar expresses it:

The historical life of the Logos – to which his death, Resurrection and Ascension belong – is, as such, that very world of ideas which, directly or reductively, gives the norm for all history; yet, as not coming forth from some non-historical height above, but from the living center of history itself. Seen from the highest, definitive point of view, it is the source of history, the point whence the whole of history before and after Christ emanates: its center… For the business of theology is not to keep one eye on philosophy, but with its gaze obediently turned toward Jesus Christ, simply and directly to describe how he stands in time and in history as the heart and norm of all that is historical.59

Aquinas points out that God is present to his creation in three ways. He is present as cause of all that is, he is present as the object of knowledge and love in those human beings whose level of existence has been raised or intensified by grace, and he is present personally through the grace of union in the covenant between his eternal Word and the elect humanity of Jesus.60 It is to this third and unique presence known to us only by revelation that von Balthasar is referring in the text above. If we add to that the fact that Christ is the Source of all divine life conferred upon human beings we see that it is not enough to consider how all creatures participate in him as creator, we must understand that special providence working within creation to bring all those human beings who are willing to an eternal goal beyond their capacities.

Thus we answer affirmatively the question once posed by Jean Nabert: “Do we have the right to invest one moment of history with an absolute characteristic?”61 This does not imply that there is no such thing as a history with its own existence and intelligibility: if human existence were not something “other” the Incarnation would not be union but absorption. Because of Christ’s death and resurrection the very essence of human existence has been modified and thus there will come a moment when all of history reaches the goal set for it by God. Enlightenment historiography tends to look at agents rather than subjects and thus restricts its enquiry to a level of causality that,


60 *ST* 1, 8, 3, c and ad 4 where he mentions the *singularis modus essendi Deum in hominine per unionem* which he will consider in *ST* 3, 2.

because it seems to imitate that of the physical sciences, has no interior and no genuinely human dimension. But this is not history. History is the action of human subjects and thus necessarily has an interior dimension, what Jean Lacroix calls the “interiority of history.”62 And what Henri de Lubac has referred to as the “spiritual dimension of history.”63

This reality of history introduces us into a totally different understanding of time. Rather than a mechanical process moving from past to present and measured by production and progress, history, with the Body of Christ at its center, is a mystery of presence. The mystery of the presence of Christ obliges us to look at expanding what we usually understand by analogy and participation.

Gregory Rocca, paraphrasing Cornelio Fabro, states: “[P]articipation is especially the ontology of analogy and analogy is the epistemology and semantics of participation.”64 Participation is usually divided into predicamental and transcendental. In predicamental participation two realities are said to participate in the same notion: one may be the exemplar of the other. In transcendental participation one reality (God) possesses something totaliter (“Whatever is totally something does not participate in it but is essentially the same as it.”)65 while another reality shares in that something but not essentially. Here there is efficient causality in addition to exemplar causality. Participation in this case involves a dependence in being between the first reality and the second. As the phrase cited above indicates, this second type of participation is the “ontology of analogy,” allowing God’s being to be correctly though inadequately spoken

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62 Lacroix, is using the ancient Christian understanding of “mystery” as the divine and Christological dimension of history. I give here the complete text: “Un temps sans mystère, si même on pouvait le concevoir, serait un temps vide, strictement linéaire. Le mystère est ce qui ouvre la temporalité et lui donne sa profondeur, ce qui introduit une dimension verticale : il en fait le temps de la révélation et du dévoilement. Ainsi acquiert-il sens.” Jean Lacroix, Histoire et Mystère (Tournai: Castermann, 1962), 7.

63 “God acts within history, God reveals himself within history. Even more, God inserts himself within history, thus granting it a “religious consecration” which forces us to take it seriously. Historical realities have a depth; they are to be understood spiritually: historika pneumatikós... and on the other hand, spiritual realities appear in the movement of becoming, they are to be understood historically: pneumatika historikós ... The Bible, which contains revelation, thus also contains, in a certain way, the history of the world. (Catholocisme. Les aspects sociaux de Dogme chrétien (Paris: Cerf, 1938, 1941) 119. The translation is from Ignace de La Potterie, “The Spiritual Sense of Scripture,” Communio 23, no. 4 (1996): 738-56 at 743; emphasis is in the text.


65 Thomas Aquinas, Sententiae libri Metaphysicorum 1.10.154.
of on the basis of those perfections in creatures which participate, through God’s efficient causality, in something of which he is the ineffable exemplar.

In the light of the Incarnation a new dimension of reality is made available to humanity. I would wish to call this “economic participation.” Just as transcendental participation is an ontological reality now seen because of the revelation of creation, so economic participation is an ontological reality because of the Incarnation. Israel’s possession of a covenantal relation to YHWH, as Aquinas noted, is unique in the whole of the history of religion. This must be taken seriously. The covenant relation is itself based upon and expressive of acts of God in time, in history, and, as, we have seen, these events participate in a proleptic manner in the mystery of the Incarnation, and in its own highpoint in time: the death and resurrection of Jesus. There is thus an economic participation in which all God’s acts in human history are related to the supreme act, the cross, which realizes and is, “totaliter,” the economic action of God, the exemplar and instrumental efficient cause of all the other acts. It is because of this that there is a dependence in being, the being of grace established between Christ and every human being, actually or potentially. Thus, the relation between the Exodus and the Cross, to take one of the most frequently relations established in the New Testament, or the relation between Jesus and Moses or David are analogical and not merely intertextual. It was this understanding that led Origen to invert the platonic schema of being and knowledge and replace it with the presence and activity of the Logos incarnate.

Conclusion

It is my contention that this dimension of economic participation, the fact that the events and persons, “the wars and actions” as well as the persons of Israel share proleptically but metaphysically in the reality of Christ is the basis for the ancient understanding of the spiritual sense of the Old Testament. I would propose that a return to this strict understanding of the spiritual sense is the first step in achieving an integration between the undoubted advances brought about in the study of Scripture by critical historiography and the faith view of history characteristic of the Sacred Text. There is no need to return to some of the vocabulary (“allegory”) or the wider use of terms such as “mystical” etc. to designate extended applications of a text, though such practices are common in Aquinas himself in his own biblical commentaries. It is, however, important to regain the sense of transcendence and the experience of the mystery of Christ if we are to grasp and transmit the reality of God’s saving presence among us.

The pure white light of Christ, refracted through the text of the Old Testament, illumines that text first in the depth and attractiveness of its own theological and religious teaching. Only by appreciating the intrinsic worth of the Old Testament are we enabled to see it as already suffused by Christ and appreciate the love and reverence with which our forefathers looked upon this gift of God. It was precisely this that led the Church, under the guidance of Irenaeus and Origen, and later of the Antiochenes to make its way through the contradictory and erroneous views of Marcion, the Letter of Barnabas and others to an understanding of the gift of the Scriptures: "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses
and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.” (Lk 24:44-45). It is, finally, by experiencing the ultimate reality prophesied by both Testaments that we begin to know partially the truth of the promise: “When he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth. He will not speak on his own, but he will speak what he hears, and will declare to you the things that are coming.” (Jn 16:13).