

Methods of Interpreting Scripture

4 traditional Senses or Levels of Interpretation:

proposed by John Cassian (ca. 360-435) and taught by St. Thomas Aquinas

1. **literal:** the plain (or historical) sense of the words

Asks: What meaning is conveyed by the words?

Teaches: What happened (whether historical or fictitious); “It means what it says.”

2. **spiritual senses:**

a. allegorical or typological -- looks for the hidden (deeper and spiritual) meaning of images, metaphors, events, symbols, even in the obscure/“inappropriate” texts

allegorical = the written word stands for something else

typological = foreshadow/points beyond itself (manna → Bread of Life Jn 6:48-51)

Asks: Do Old Testament persons/events foreshadow what was fulfilled in the NT?

Teaches: What to believe

b. moral or tropological – a bridge to personal meaning

Asks: How does this apply to me? To my own life circumstances?

Teaches: How to respond as followers of Jesus, Christian attitudes and behaviors

c. mystical, anagogical, or eschatological/ refers to Eternal Life, our origin and destiny

Asks: Where did we come from? Where are we going?

Teaches: How can I participate in the heavenly realities here and now?

Modern methods:

1. 18th century **historical-critical method** (for more information, see pp. 20-21 of NAB)

aim: to get into the author’s world behind the biblical text; to determine the precise sense the words were intended to convey at their time and place of origin

a. Asks: Who wrote it? To whom? When? Where? Why?

b. Problems: 1) “Scholars using historical-critical methods challenged many presuppositions about the reliability of the biblical texts and about the formulation of doctrines that are biblically based.”

2) Led to fundamentalism (an insistence upon the inerrancy of scripture)

3) “Intimate friendship with Jesus on which everything depends is in danger of clutching at thin air” (Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. xii).

2. Early 20th century: **sensus plenior** of Scripture: The “fuller sense” is defined as the deeper meaning of the text intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author.

(i.e. Matthew’s use of Isaiah 7:14 to refer to the virginal conception of Jesus (Mt1:23)).

3. **Canonical exegesis:** The OT and NT move in a single overall direction and must be studied as a whole, as the authoritative scripture of a believing community. “The Word gradually unfolds its inner potentialities already present like seeds, but needing the challenge of new situations, experiences, and sufferings in order to open up in light of Jesus Christ” (Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, p. xix).