

## Allegory and the Book of Exodus

Let's start with a quote from St. Augustine:

For the feeding and fanning of that ardent love by which, under a law like that of gravitation, we are borne upwards or inwards to rest, the presentation of truth by emblems has a great power: for, thus presented, things move and kindle our affection much more than if they were set forth in bald statements, not clothed in sacramental symbols. Why this should be, it is hard to say; but it is a fact that anything which we are taught by allegory or emblem affects and pleases us more, and is more highly esteemed by us, than it would be if most clearly stated in plain terms. I believe that the emotions are less easily kindled while the soul is wholly involved in earthly things; but if it be brought to those corporeal things which are emblems of spiritual things, and then taken from these to spiritual realities which they represent, it gathers strength by the mere act of passing from one to the other, and, like the flame of a lighted torch, is made by the motion to burn more brightly, and is carried away to rest by a more intensely glowing love. Letter LV, Chap. XI, 21.

What was important for Augustine in exegesis was not just cognitive understanding, but the incendiary quality of one's work. A good piece of exegesis sets the reader on fire, or using another metaphor, it "lifts" one into Transcendence. St. Paul does this a number of times in his Epistles, and each time, readers "get a lift" if they are not offended by what too many of us is strange methodology, and abandon themselves to its effects. For instance, in the famous passage in Galatians 4:21ff., Paul wishes to drive his doctrine of grace and promise into the hearts of his readers by moving from Sarah to covenant to the Jerusalem above, who is "our mother." This is very powerful when one considers that Paul was appealing to those who thought his doctrines were new and radical and wished to play it safe by hanging on to the old ways of thinking. What is "mother"? Where is our home? What is truly legitimate? Ah, it has been, and always will be, God's grace! These images have timeless power as well, for they are important to us who have home and mothers, and are moved by the whole idea of great cities.

We must abandon our prejudice that allegory is spurious exegesis. Paul uses allegory in crucial places in his letters to lift his readers into the greatness and timeless quality of his arguments. He does so in Romans 7:1-6 in discussing the whole idea of Old Testament Law, and in II Cor. 3 where he describes our life in the spirit as one of "unveiled faces" who see "the glory of the Lord." We must assume that Paul freely used allegory in his teaching and preaching. Rather than some bastard method of exegesis, allegory lies at the very heart of a truly Christian hermeneutic, and it was so from the beginning. At issue is the Old Testament as a Christian document. Grammatical-historical exegesis as it is presented in the academy, must, by its very nature, treat the Old Testament as a specifically Hebrew book with little or no natural connection to the New Testament. New Testament writers and the ancient Church commentators assumed that the Old Testament was fundamentally a Christian book, that the Spirit wrote it for the Church, and that Christ was its fulfillment.

The difference between the ancient Church and the modern academy is no small one. What is at stake is spirituality. The ancient Church likened Holy Scripture to the scroll in the Book of Revelation that was written on the inside and the outside.<sup>1</sup> The outside corresponds to the “letter of the law” (II Cor. 3), and the inside corresponds to the spiritual depths. That which was written on the outside, the “letter,” or the “literal” meaning is very important and must never be denigrated or marginalized.<sup>2</sup> That which is written on the inside is the sublime inner sanctuary to which the outer meaning intends to lead the reader. The distance between the inner and the outer meaning is vast and can be reached only in degrees as the exegete grows in the virtues and spiritual depth. To reach the inner sanctum must be the prime goal of every teacher or preacher . . . everything depends on this.<sup>3</sup>

This understanding is very natural and corresponds to the development of a human being. Children, when they first learn to talk, think in very literal terms. By and large, their world is a concrete one, and they have very little ability to understand abstract concepts or comprehend invisible realities. Their minds do not tap into the world of metaphor; they are too busy trying to size up the basic mechanics of life. In fact, it takes years to develop this, and in many cases, this ability to understand deeper meanings in language never matures but remains on an adolescent level. Likewise, those who remain on the surface level of Scripture, obsessed with grammar and history, are condemned to superficiality in spiritual matters. What is more, such obsessions produce breeding grounds for great scholars to turn their bored minds to new and obtuse historical theories, as has been done in the academy since the Enlightenment. Superficiality, boredom, and even heresy can come from Scripture only if one doesn’t turn his obsessions toward Transcendence. Humans are meant to grow high and tall, reaching the very heavens themselves, and not stagnate or grow deformed, bent to the earth.

## Preparation for Allegory

### The Book of Exodus Historically and Typologically

Allegory is a tool by which we ascend to God in our exegesis. It opens up the ancient text so that light from on high can flood the soul. In particular, it shows us that Christ is, in fact, the very core of all Scripture. Let us take, for instance, the Book of Exodus. On the literal and historical

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. 5:1. Henri de Lubac develops this idea in his *Medieval Exegesis*, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup> It must be admitted that many early exegetes, including even Origen himself, used language that *seemed* to minimize the “literal” and historical meaning of the text in favor of the spiritual. It is against this *seeming* prejudice that Silva criticizes allegorists as “downplaying” or “rejecting” the historical (*FCI*, p. 58). That Origen spent himself on his great *Hexipla*, which paralleled six different textual traditions so as to get the best possible reading, proves that he was interested in the “letter.” In fact, for him the “literal sense is the source of the spiritual” (See Crouzel’s *Origen*, p.61), and he always displays the historical and literal meaning as a starting point in his exegesis.

<sup>3</sup> De Lubac, p. 226.

levels, we have a nation that is oppressed and enslaved in Egypt. God calls Moses to be a deliverer, and after many signs and wonders, the nation escapes Egypt and finds itself in the desert on a pilgrimage to the Promised Land. At the foot of Mt. Sinai, the nation enters into covenant with God, receiving His Law. On the mountain YHWH gives to Moses directions on how to construct a Sanctuary so that He might dwell in the very midst of His people. As Moses delays coming down, the Israelites sin by making the golden calf. Moses breaks the tablets when he sees this, and must intercede for people, for God wishes to destroy them and begin anew with Moses. Moses succeeds, and the rest of the book records in great detail how the Israelites actually built the Sanctuary on the directions given earlier to Moses on the Mount. The book ends with the glory of God filling the Sanctuary.

On a literal-historical level, what happens in Exodus cannot be overestimated. YHWH broke into history and delivered his people, thus fulfilling His promise to the Patriarchs. Moreover, YHWH broke into history not only to deliver, but also to enter into covenant. God would again dwell with humanity as before the Fall, and covenant provides a structure by which Divinity and humanity could co-exist. That this covenant was precarious is proven by the people's inability from the beginning to abide by the terms of the agreement. Still, God forgave upon the intercession of His prophet, and things proceeded to the end of the book where YHWH's glory cloud entered the Sanctuary. If all this didn't happen historically, then all further talk about Israel's subsequent history and Christianity is completely meaningless. Moreover, the more we study these events both on a grammatical and historical level, the deeper will be the potentiality of our spiritual connection through the text. One can never get enough of historical-grammatical study.

However, if this is where our exegesis stops, then we become antiquarians studying the language, history and religion of an ancient people. It has nothing to say to us now, and soon we become bored. The fact is it wasn't written just for the Hebrews of the Bronze Age. God so ordered the historical events in this Book to introduce us to what He had planned from the beginning of time—the advent and work of Jesus Christ. We are now entering what is called the typological significance of the Old Testament texts. Israel is a type for all peoples in spiritual bondage, and Moses is a type for Christ, who became the real “Antitype.”<sup>4</sup> The Red Sea becomes our baptism, and the journey through the desert becomes a type of our pilgrimage to Heaven. The Sinai covenant becomes a type of the greater antitype of the New Covenant in Christ, but far superior in that the sacrifices instituted in Exodus (type), were but a glimpse of the true sacrifice of Christ (antitype). The dwelling of the theophanic glory cloud becomes a type of the indwelling of Christ, who “tabernacles” in us as New Testament believers.

The typological significance of Exodus cannot be overestimated. Without this book, Christ simply could not have come onto the world scene. Practically every event and image in Exodus serves as a type by which we are introduced to Christ and His Church. Exodus sets the stage for Jesus; without it no one would have ever noticed the advent of God, and no one would have understood its significance if he had noticed. It is an old maxim that one cannot understand the

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<sup>4</sup> In typology, the “type” is the primal idea that is introduced early in history, and the “antitype” is the ultimate perfection and later fulfillment in history of that type.

New Testament until he has understood the Old, and this has everything to do with the typological power of the Old in setting forth images in people, places and events that point to a further fulfillment in history. Typology is eschatological and even prophetic in nature. It works under the assumption that God reveals Himself in patterns through time. Each pattern anticipates something like it, but superior to it, to be revealed further on in time.

However important the historical-grammatical and the typological significance of the text may be, we cannot leave our exegesis here. We must probe deeper, or else the text will not speak to us beyond the advent of Christ and the birth of the Church two thousand years ago. The Book of Exodus must transcend history and reveal deep truths to me now as I struggle in my spiritual life as a Christian. Here we must employ allegory, which is closely related to typology, but differs from it in that allegory abstracts the elements of the text from history completely. Typology is eschatological, while allegory belongs to the timeless dimension of spiritual truth. Christian allegory, however, rests on the historical-grammatical and typological shoulders of Old Testament interpretation and is therefore not subject to winds of spiritual relativity and rootless mythology, if it is done with integrity.

### The Book of Exodus: An Allegory

The Book of Exodus is, in fact, a mirror of the soul as it progresses from the darkness to light. In short, all that is within the Book is within me; every part of it corresponds to a part of my interior. The Book opens with the soul in its natural state: without grace, all gloomy, in despair, humiliated, in bondage, without hope. The birth of Moses is the birth of the new “mind,” or “intellect” (Greek *nous*)<sup>5</sup> by the Holy Spirit, whose task is to integrate the fragmented and chaotic soul into conformity to Christ. The Israelites at this stage symbolize the initial stages of the soul as it is awakening. Notice how the mother saw “that he was good,” and placed him in an “ark” (Heb. *Teba*, cf., Gen. 7:1), letting him loose in the waters of the Nile. These allusions to creation and deliverance from the Flood bring up to the consciousness of the reader the image of the Spirit of God hovering over the chaos of watery deep, contemplating the creative act of separating out the new nature from the chaos surrounding it. At first a small, frail, imperceptible speck tossed about by the watery deep, this divinely energized “intellect” will, like the creation of the earth, grow into something glorious and powerful.

This, however, takes time. As the intellect grows and becomes aware, it begins to see its plight and acts on its own, blundering as it stretches out by its own power and sense of justice. It rises

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<sup>5</sup> By “intellect” we understand it to mean what the Greek Fathers understood *nous* to mean: the highest faculty in humanity, through which, when purified, we know God. It must be carefully distinguished from “reason” (*dianoia*), which formulates ideas and abstract concepts by methods of deduction. Rather, “it understands divine truth by means of immediate experience, intuition, or simple cognition,” and dwells in the depths of the soul, constituting the innermost aspect of the heart. This definition is taken from the glossary at the end of vols. 1&2 of *The Philokalia*, trans. and ed. by G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1981).

up against the powers of darkness that surround it, that is, Egypt, and strikes out at it, failing miserably. Like Moses, our intellect ends up in the wilderness, licking its wounds, and perhaps forgetting that it had ever entertained thoughts of freeing itself from the tyranny of slavery. We become satisfied with domestic things like marriage and family and spend our time watching transient things, like Moses watching the sheep, thinking that this is all there is in life. In this state, God unexpectedly breaks into its consciousness and commissions the intellect to go back to its divine duty. God promises to “go with” it and empowers it for the impossible task.

Aaron represents the soul’s will, through which the intellect picks up and gives order to the fragmented pieces of the soul and in our story is the intellect’s spokesperson. The will does this by giving order to the passions,<sup>6</sup> which by nature are chaotic, and need to find their rest in God. In the end, Aaron will preside as priest, presenting the integrated soul to God in the innermost sanctuary. The intellect and the will, however, must first confront Pharaoh, who symbolizes the “old nature” within, which is bent on self-destruction. The old nature is that part of us that is totally unredeemable and must be destroyed, for it is absolutely in line with the demonic forces that are at war with God. It is obstinate, and though it may be subdued after great difficulty, it never really dies till the body dies, just like Pharaoh never dies in our story. The battle is fierce, and the old nature relents only when YHWH’s angel kills its offspring (Pharaoh’s son symbolizes the old nature’s hope for continued dominion in the soul). Even then it is dangerous and musters its dark forces against the intellect and the will as they lead the newly formed soul out of the domains of Egypt. All would be lost were it not for YHWH’s warrior prowess, for He deceives the deceiver by drawing its forces out after the fleeing soul, only to be destroyed by the watery deep (“Evil shall destroy the wicked” Psa. 34:21).

God directs the intellect and the will to bring the soul out into the wilderness after this great victory so that the newly formed soul might worship Him. The wilderness is a harsh place for the tender soul; God intends to strengthen it by testing. The soul cries out and complains, and God miraculously provides. Soon the soul finds itself before Sinai, the Mountain of God, which symbolizes Eden, the Holy Mount from which the soul was banished, and the place where God wishes to restore communion. Intimacy is intense – too intense for the young and inexperienced soul. The intellect is invited up and receives God’s laws, but the will and the rest of the soul stands back in fright of the intense glory of Uncreated Light. God wishes to create a place where He might come and actually live enshrined within the soul and shows the intellect a vision of heavenly realities. From this heavenly pattern the intellect must construct a sanctuary.

This sanctuary is, in effect, the blueprint for the final integration of the soul, the real sanctuary in which God has a passion to dwell. The sanctuary is to be set up right in the middle of the Twelve Tribes, as the soul is at the heart of our humanity. The outer walls symbolize the mysterious

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<sup>6</sup> According to St. John of the Cross, there are four great passions that the will must subdue by divine help and guidance. They are hope, fear, joy and sorrow. By nature these passions are self-oriented and not God-oriented. For instance, by nature, we hope for things that bring self-gratification, and not glory to God, we fear things that will undermine our control of things in our lives, and we do not fear God. See The Ascent of Mount Carmel in *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991).

dimension that separates, yet integrates, the physical and the spiritual. The description begins within the sanctuary itself, however, beginning with the holiest thing of all within the holiest chamber of all. This, of course, is the Ark of the Covenant with its Cherubim arched over the “propitiatory,” or “mercy seat,” made of pure gold. Here Transcendence actually comes into contact with the terrestrial, Soul touching soul. The terrifying Theophany of Sinai, to which Aaron, the “will,” is invited for the covenant meal, along with 70 elders that symbolize the totality of the inner soul, wishes to move off the mountain and take up residence within.

Next the holy place is described which is designed to be the quiet place where the soul waits on God, for continuous intimacy with God in the most holy place is too intense for mortal frame in this life.<sup>7</sup> The table on the right as you enter, upon which are placed the twelve loaves of bread, symbolizes God’s yearning to dine and commune with the human soul. The lamp stand of gold on the left, decorated with the floral designs of paradise, must burn every night; it symbolizes the light of God filling His sanctuary. It is to be observed that it is Aaron’s responsibility, that is, the will’s responsibility, to trim the light and never let darkness overtake the soul. As one looks forward toward the veil that separates the holy place from the most holy place, one will see the incense altar. The incense symbolizes the prayers of the soul, and again, Aaron, our “will,” must engage itself every morning and evening in burning the incense of prayer, for it is by constant prayer that our wills become one with God’s will. All around on the tapestry of the walls and on the veil are images of Cherubim. These are to show that all around us are God’s angels. Cherubim in particular are those closest to God’s holy presence and even protect it from that which is unholy (cf., Gen. 3:24). It is said that God is “enthroned above the Cherubim” (II Sam. 6:2).

Before we can even enter into the interiors of our sanctuary, however, we must first come to terms with the brazen altar upon which the blood sacrifice must be made in the courtyard before the entrance to the sanctuary. The profound thing about this altar is that it is part of the heavenly vision that Moses saw (cf., Ex. 24:9, 25:40, 26:30, and 27:8). There is something in the eternal realm that corresponds to this altar and sacrifice. These must represent the burning flames of love that the Holy Trinity has for one another, each Person loving the other in perfect self-sacrifice. Most poignantly for us, it represents Jesus Christ who gave Himself for us, thereby making an entrance to mystic union with the Father through His Spirit. Connected to this is the image of Christ being the “veil” that separates the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place. This veil, which was torn at the hour of His death (Lk. 23:45), is said to be “His flesh,” through which we gain intimate access to God (Heb. 10:10). Christ’s act of self-sacrifice opens the way for our self-sacrifice, for if we do not burn our “selves” on the altar in ardent flames of love and passion, then we will never enter the sanctuary. Moreover, we cannot enter without washing at the laver that stands between the entrance and the altar; it is by water and blood that we are saved (I John 5:6).

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<sup>7</sup> There have been instances where some have died as a result of intense, spiritual ecstasy. Most ecstatic experiences in this life are very brief, yet very life-altering. See Evelyn Underhill’s *Mysticism* (New York: Image Books, 1990 edition), chapter viii.

This whole vision given to the intellect (Moses) ends with an instruction to keep the Sabbath (Ex. 31:12ff.). The Sabbath rest is the ultimate symbol for paradise on earth, and everything was to be oriented to this last day of the week. Unfortunately, we immediately come upon the rebellion of the soul against the high calling which God, through the intellect, has called it. The passions, symbolized by the people of Israel, separate the will (Aaron), from the intellect. Instead of the will controlling the passions, the passions control the will. They demand that the will gather gold from their earrings and make an idol to worship YHWH in their own way. It becomes a power struggle; who shall rule the soul? Having committed such a crime, the intellect intercedes for the confused and rebellious soul and gains a new vision of YHWH—even a glimpse of His glory. Why is there such hope and possibility of restoration? It is because YHWH is gracious and has compassion. This is the crucial turning point for the soul. This episode of the golden calf symbolizes the war within the soul between the forces of the chaotic passions and the intellect that would subdue them and present them to God in the inner sanctuary. In the triumphant soul, the intellect comes down from the mount shining like Moses whose face shined because of his contact with God, and subdues the passions of the soul through the will.

Scholars are perplexed as to why such high drama is immediately followed by five chapters of material (chapters 35-39) that merely repeat chapters 25-31. We have in chapters 25-31 the intricate details of how to make the sanctuary; in chapters 35-39 we see that the Israelites actually build the sanctuary, detail by detail. The question is, why not just simply say that the people made the sanctuary according to the plans given to Moses previously? Why is there all the redundancy of repeated detail? Herein we have the greatest proof that we must look at this book as map for the progress of the soul. The book demands that once we emerge victorious from the fight, we must then go through the long and tedious work of erecting the sanctuary according to the plans laid out by God to the intellect. In other words, it is not enough to merely have the vision of what can be, but we must also make it a reality, piece by piece. Rather than giving the gold of our earrings to idols that glorify ourselves, we must forsake our ornaments (33:5) that symbolize our self-glorying.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, we must make offerings and sacrifices to the Lord which become the materials by which the inner shrine is built. Rather than chapters 35-39 being a long, repetitious waste of precious parchment, they become a symbol of the long and arduous task of putting into practice the reality of what we already know to be true. Many there are who have the vision and are content to know the truth, but few there are who make the vision a reality, and they are discontented till the sanctuary is completed within.

It is only when we have built the sanctuary that we fully experience the celestial procession described in chapter 40, and the King of Glory comes in (Psa. 24:7-10). This glory is so intense that even the intellect, the instrument through which God molded the soul into a divine dwelling, cannot comprehend it. It stands with the fully integrated soul in worship as it experiences glory too magnificent to describe. The totality of the soul experiences a union so complete that it no

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<sup>8</sup> It is a striking inclusion of detail that the bronze basin for washing was finally made with the mirrors of the women who served at the entrance of the tent (38:8). This fact is not mentioned in 30:17-21. Surely this invites us to consider the truth that we must give up gazing at ourselves. Rather, we should wash ourselves from our self-love before we can commune with God within.

longer moves according to its own machinations, but moves harmoniously with the will of God, just as the Israelites spontaneously moved in the wilderness by the cloudy pillar by day and the fiery pillar by night.

### Some Reflections on Allegory

“The greater suggestive quality of the symbol used, the more answering emotion it evokes in those to whom it is addressed, the more truth it will convey. A good symbolism, therefore, will be more than mere diagram or mere allegory: it will use to the utmost the resources of beauty and of passion, will bring with it hints of mystery and wonder, bewitch with many dreamy periods the mind to which it addressed. Its appeal will not be to the clever brain, but to the desirous heart, the intuitive sense, of man.” Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: Image Books, 1990 reprint of original 1911 ed.), p.126.

Allegory is a difficult hermeneutical tool primarily because it is so misunderstood. We read the allegories of the Fathers, and at times we feel that they launch out into the upper stratospheres without any preparation or warning, forsaking with disdain the earth upon which we live. There is, indeed, a type of allegory that is antagonistic with history and the more “concrete” meaning of the text. There are other allegories that move in sympathy with the historical/literal, and tend towards integrating the earthly and the heavenly. It is this last type that I think is more powerful and moving. Below is a list of principles that might help us think our way through this issue. Read through them and feel free to add some of your own.

Principles for allegory:

1. The Holy Spirit’s illumination and inspiration to stimulate imagination.
2. Good allegory dips down into the paradigmatic substratum via a select number of allegorical archetypes. These archetypes are paths, doors into the inner life. A good expositor will realize what these are and how they affect the soul. Some of these archetypes are:
  - a. pilgrimage, quest
  - b. war, conflict
  - c. suffering, loss
  - d. love, esp. sexual/romance
  - e. historical person (e.g., Adam, Eve, Jacob, Esau, etc.)
  - f. geographic locations (e.g., Babylon, Egypt, Palestine, Rome, etc.) and places of buildings (Tabernacle, Temple, Palaces, etc.)



3. Good allegory is rooted in the depth of the expositor's experience in the above archetypes. The expositor has entered the inner life through personally identifying with the above archetypes and therefore is able to allegorize the text with integrity and believability. In other words, an allegorist is deep-souled and godly.

4. Closely connected with #2 above is that the good allegorist must not only enter into the depths, but also be able to move the audience along with him/her. The audience must feel the power and be translated beyond the everyday realm into the holy (cf., Augustine: the goal of allegory is to move one to love God). CAUTION: Do not try to go beyond your depth. Rather, go slowly and grow into it by meditating on the archetypes.

5. Good allegory never escapes the spirit of the text on the syntagmatic level. Although elements of the text may be atomized and fly away on the vertical (paradigmatic) level, the overall meaning of the allegory must be in sympathy with the overall meaning of the text on the historical/grammatical level.

6. Know your audience. Allegory that might have worked well in another place at another time might not have any impact on your audience.

7. Allegory must be in harmony with Scripture as a whole.

8. We must show sensitivity to genres (Narrative, poetry, and prophecy - yes; Epistles? probably not)