

Four Senses of Biblical Interpretation

1. Literal/Historical Sense

Carefully read and meditate on the text.



BASIC CONCERN: What does this passage mean in its historical and grammatical context?



EXAMPLE: NOAH'S ARK

Literal: God judged the whole human race with a flood, but saved eight persons by bringing them safely through the water in an ark. With assurance from a dove, they stepped out onto an earth cleansed of evildoers.

2. Typological/Allegorical Sense

Contemplate Christ, the Church, and Sacraments.

What does this passage mean in light of the unified theology of the whole canon which centers on Christ?

Examples:

- “Adam ... was a type of the one who was to come” (Rom 5:14).
- “Now this may be interpreted allegorically” (Gal. 4:24).
- “the copies of the heavenly things” (Hebrews 9:23)
- “the ark ... in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this [lit., antitype], now saves you” (1 Pet. 3:20–21)
- “all were baptized into Moses ... ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:2–4)
- “I am the bread [manna] that came down from heaven” (Jn. 6:41)
- “just as Jonah ... so will the Son of Man” (Mt. 12:40; cf. John 3:14)
- “something greater than the temple is here” (Mt. 12:6; cf. 12:41, 42)



Typological: Christ and, by extension, his Body the Church are the ark of salvation. The Church is saved by passing safely through the waters of baptism. The dove is the Holy Spirit who comes to us in the baptismal waters.

3. Moral/Tropological Sense

Pursue virtue.

What is the moral of the story when read in light of the prior senses?

E.g., “For it is written in the Law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.’ Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not certainly speak for our sake?” (1 Cor. 9:9–11; cf. Deut. 25:4)



Moral: Repent of sin and enter into Christ and his Church by believing the gospel and passing safely through the waters of baptism. The Holy Spirit will come to you, bringing assurance of safety from judgment.

4. Eschatological/Anagogical Sense

Anticipate the end.

What does this passage mean in light of what God is doing to make all things new in Christ by the Spirit?

E.g., “as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man” (Lk. 17:26; cf. 2 Peter 2:5ff; 3:5ff)



Eschatological: Christ will judge the whole human race. The Church will pass through the judgment and inherit the new earth, cleansed of all evil.