

Hermeneutics – Allegorism & Spiritualism

Allegorical Hermeneutic Definition

“Allegorical interpretation is the interpretation of a document whereby something foreign, peculiar, or hidden is introduced into the meaning of the text giving it a proposed deeper or real meaning.”

— Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 175.

Allegorical Dangers

“an entirely foreign subjective meaning is read into the passage to be explained,”

— Geffcken, Allegory, Allegorical Interpretation, Hastings Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, I, 328.

“Allegorical hermeneutics fail to place the interpreter in submission to the text. The result is a subjective interpretation that undermines the authority of Scripture.”

— Jon Winkelmann, The Superiority of a Literal Hermeneutic as Observed Through Contrast with Other Methods (BIBL5301: Advanced Prolegomena January 2016), 5.

“... the allegorical method was not born out of a study of the scriptures, but rather out of a desire to unite Greek philosophy and the Word of God. It did not come out of a desire to present the truths of the Word, but to pervert them. It was not a child of orthodoxy, but of heterodoxy.”

— J. Dwight Pentecost, Things to Come, with an Introduction by John F. Walvoord (Findlay, Ohio: Dunham Pub. Co., 1958), 23-24.

“In allegorical exegesis of this kind, the text becomes a coat-hook on which the interpreter hangs his own ideas; the exegete can draw from the parable almost whatever he likes. Interpretation becomes an ‘in-game’.”

— Graham N. Stanton, Presuppositions in New Testament Criticism, in New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods. ed. I Howard Marshall (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1977), 63.

“The allegorical method, then, in origin, was a submission of the Divine Text to the pervading philosophies of the day in order to justify the Text with the perceived world around it.”

— Christopher Cone, Prolegomena on Biblical Hermeneutics and Method, 2nd ed. (Hurst, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2012), 216.

“He motivated this view by appealing to the principle of divine inspiration and by affirming that often statements made by the biblical writers are not literally true and that many events, presented as historical, are inherently impossible. Thus only simple believers will limit themselves to the literal meaning of the text.”

— Ronald E. Diprose, Israel in the development of Christian thought (Rome, Instituto Biblico Evangelico, 2000), 87.

“What I protest against is, the habit of allegorizing plain sayings of the Word of God concerning the future history of the nation of Israel, and explaining away the fullness of the contents in order to accommodate them to the Gentile Church. I believe the habit to be unwarranted by anything in Scripture, and to draw after it a long train of evil consequences.”

— J. C. Ryle, Are You Ready For The End Of Time? (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2001), 107-108.

“Aquinas put forward a threefold argument against allegory: (1) it is susceptible to deception; (2) without a clear method it leads to confusion; (3) it lacks a sense of the proper integration of scripture.”

— E.R. Fairweather, ed., A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956); Etienne Gibson, Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages (New York, 1938); P. Synave, La Doctrine de St. Thomas d'Aquin sur le sens littéral des Ecritures, Rev Bib 35 (1926).

“This error [of allegory] has been the source of many evils. Not only did it open the way for the adulteration of the natural

meaning of scripture but also set up the boldness in allegorizing as the chief exegetical virtue. Thus many of the ancients without any restraint played all sorts of games with the sacred Word of God, as if they were tossing a ball to and fro. It also gave heretics a chance to throw the Church into turmoil, for when it is accepted practice for anybody to interpret any passage in any way he desired, any mad idea, however absurd or monstrous, could be introduced under the pretext of allegory. Even good men were carried away by their mistaken fondness for allegories into formulating a great number of perverse opinions."

— John Calvin, Commentary on 2 Corinthians 3:6; Corpus Reformatorum, 50.40-41. Translation from David Puckett, John Calvin's Exegesis of the Old Testament (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 107.

"The Bible treated allegorically becomes putty in the hands of the exegete."

— Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 30.

"The allegorical system that arose among the pagan Greeks, copied by the Alexandrian Jews, was next adopted by the Christian church and largely dominated exegesis until the Reformation, with such notable exceptions as the Syrian school of Antioch and the Victorines of the Middle Ages."

— Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 38.

"...to state that the principal meaning of the Bible is a second-sense meaning, and that the principle method of interpretation is "spiritualizing," is to open the door to almost uncontrolled speculation and imagination. For this reason we have insisted that the control in interpretation is the literal method."

— Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 65.

"In the history of allegorical interpretation of Scripture it is not denied that there is a literal, historical, or grammatical sense to Scripture, but it is depreciated. It is the 'fleshy' or the 'superficial' understanding of Scripture."

— Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 3rd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 124.

"It's not too difficult to account for the widespread approval of the spiritualizing method adopted by many conservative theologians as well as liberal and Roman Catholic expositors. Fundamentally its charm lies in its flexibility. The interpreter can change the literal and grammatical sense of Scripture to make it coincide with his own system of interpretation."

— John Walvoord, The Millennial Kingdom (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 60.

"Among non-literal prophetic interpreters, a state of virtual interpretive chaos exists. It is rare, for instance, to see a well-ordered or definitive work by an amillennial interpreter setting forth positively and consistently his prophetic interpretations. On the contrary, the amillennial writings usually concentrate on attacking and ridiculing the premillennial position. This approach is probably one of necessity, for amillennialists seldom agree with each other in specific interpretations of prophecy except to be against the earthly millennium."

— Paul Lee Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy (Dallas, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1993), 73.

"Gerard Stanton warns that "men who are prone to drift in their biblical interpretations from the sure anchorage of the literal method would do well to consider the theological company in which they have chosen to travel, and the strange destinations arrived at by some."

— Paul Lee Tan, The Interpretation of Prophecy (Dallas, TX: Bible Communications, Inc., 1993), 39.

"When the historical sense of a passage is once abandoned there is wanting any sound regulative principle to govern exegesis.... The mystical [allegorical] method of exegesis, is an unscientific and arbitrary method, reduces the Bible to obscure enigmas, undermines the authority of all interpretation, and therefore, when taken by itself, failed to meet the apologetic necessities of the time."

— K. Fullerton, Prophecy and Authority, 75.

Allegories of the Early Church Fathers

"Two things may be said for the allegorizing of the Fathers: (i) They were seeking to make the Old Testament a Christian

document. With this judgment the Christian Church has universally agreed. (ii) They did emphasize the truths of the Gospel in their fancies. If they had not done this, they would have become sectarian."

— Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 39.

"The difficulties with the method are many. (i) There was a lack of a genuine historical sense in exegesis. The historical connections of a passage of Scripture were usually completely ignored. (ii) Their method of citing the Old Testament revealed that they had a very infantile understanding of the progress of revelation. They had the basic understanding that a great shift had taken place from the Old to the New Testament. But citing verses in the Old Testament, in themselves frequently very obscure, as if superior to verses in the New, revealed no understanding of the significance of historical and progressive revelation for hermeneutics. (iii) They considered the Old (especially) and the New Testaments filled with parables, enigmas, and riddles. The allegorical method alone sufficed to bring out the meaning of these parables, enigmas, and riddles. (iv) They confused the allegorical with the typical, and thus blurred the distinction between the legitimate and the improper interpretation of the Old Testament. The "allegorical," the "mystical," the "pneumatic," and the "spiritual," are practically synonymous. (v) They believed that Greek philosophy was in the Old Testament and it was the allegorical method which discovered it. (vi) In that the method is highly arbitrary, it eventually fostered dogmatic interpretation of the Scripture.

— Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 39-40.

Alexandria School

"In the last ten years of the second century and in the third century, the heretical school of theology at Alexandria, Egypt, advanced the erroneous principle that the Bible should be interpreted in a nonliteral or allegorical sense."

— John Walvoord, Every Prophecy of the Bible: Clear Explanations for Uncertain Times.

"... a chaos of elements unconsciously borrowed on the one hand from Philo and on the other hand from rabbis and kabbalists."

— Frederic Farrar, History of Interpretation (1886; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), 165.

"Unhappily for the Church, unhappily for any real apprehension of Scripture, the allegorists, in spite of protest, were completely victorious. The School of Antioch was discredited by anathemas... And we soon descend to allegorical dictionaries of the threefold sense."

— Frederic Farrar, History of Interpretation (1886; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), 239-240.

"The catechetical "school" located in Alexandria found in allegorical exegesis a way of making the OT a Christian book. The theologian and exegete Origen (c. 185-c. 254) gave it shape. The principles which guided Origen's work were laid down by the Jewish exegete Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 B.C.-A.D. 54). Attempting to accommodate the Jewish Scriptures to Hellenistic canons of knowledge, Philo argued for the importance of a deeper spiritual or allegorical interpretation behind the history or letter of the text. A text which said anything unworthy of God, which presented difficulties or contradictions, or which was patently allegorical in nature was to be given this deepened spiritual understanding."

— Karlfried Froehlich, ed. and trans., Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); and Harry A. Wolfson, Philo, Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard, 1947) in Continuity and Discontinuity, Perspectives on the Relationship Between Old and New Testaments, 20-21.

Origen's Allegorical Interpretation

"A major change to prophetic interpretation occurred in the second and third centuries with Origen. He utterly ignored the literal, normal meaning of Scripture. It was his method of spiritualizing and allegorizing that became unusually excessive throughout the church."

— Ron J. Bigalke Jr., Ph.D, The Revival of Futurist Interpretation Following the Reformation (Journal of Dispensational

Theology, April 2009), 50-51.

"was that he used allegorical interpretation to provide a specious justification for reinterpreting Christian doctrine in terms of Platonic philosophy."

— Joseph W. Trigg, *Introduction to Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* by R. P. C. Hanson (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), vi.

"An attitude of contempt towards Israel had become the rule by Origen's time. The new element in his own view of Israel is his perception of them as "manifesting no elevation [of thought]". It follows that the interpreter must always posit a deeper or higher meaning for prophecies relating to Judea, Jerusalem, Israel, Judah and Jacob which, he affirms, are "not being understood by us in a 'carnal' sense." In Origen's understanding, the only positive function of physical Israel was that of being a type of spiritual Israel. The promises were not made to physical Israel because she was unworthy of them and incapable of understanding them. Thus Origen effectively disinherits physical Israel."

— Ronald E. Diprose, *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought* (Rome: Instituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, 2000), 89.

"Origen also followed Philo's allegorical method, but he gave it a biblical basis and declared that Scripture had a threefold sense: the corporeal or fleshly, the psychical, and the spiritual."

— Walter Kaiser, and Moisés Silva. *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. e-book, (Zondervan, 2007), 284.

"All biblical texts, according to Origen, have a spiritual sense, but not all have a literal sense as well. The fact that there were so many stumbling blocks with a strictly literal rendering of the Old Testament forced Origen into reading the text for a deeper understanding. The method Origen used for his biblical hermeneutics was that of anagomism ("ascent"), the ascent of the soul upward from the level of the flesh to the realm of the spirit."

— Walter Kaiser, and Moisés Silva. *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. e-book, (Zondervan, 2007), 285.

"We must, however, entirely reject the allegories of Origin, and of others like him, which Satan, with the deepest subtlety, has endeavored to introduce into the Church, for the purpose of rendering the doctrine of Scripture ambiguous and destitute of all certainty and firmness. It may be, indeed, that some, impelled by a supposed necessity, have resorted to an allegorical sense, because they never found in the world such a place as is described by Moses: but we see that the greater part, through a foolish affectation of subtleties, have been too much addicted to allegories. As it concerns the present passage, they speculate in vain, and to no purpose, by departing from the literal sense."

— John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, Translated From the Original Latin, and Compared With the French Edition, by the Rev. John King, M.A., of Queen's College, Cambridge, Incumbent of Christ's Church, Hull, 1st Volume (Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Grand Rapids, MI), 38.

"Origen was the first to lay down, in connection with the allegorical method of the Jewish Platonist, Philo, a formal theory of interpretation, which he carried out in a long series of exegetical works remarkable for industry and ingenuity, but meager in solid results. He considered the Bible a living organism, consisting of three elements which answer to the body, soul, and spirit of man, after the Platonic psychology. Accordingly, he attributed to the Scriptures a three-fold sense; (1) a somatic, literal, or historical sense, furnished immediately by the meaning of the words, but only serving as a veil for a higher ideal; (2) a psychic or moral sense, animating the first, and serving for general edification; (3) a pneumatic or mystic and ideal sense, for those who stand on the high ground of philosophical knowledge. In the application of this theory he shows the same tendency as Philo, to spiritualize away the letter of scripture, especially where the plain historical sense seems unworthy, as in the history of David's crimes; and instead of simply bringing out the sense of the Bible, he puts into it all sorts of foreign ideas and irrelevant fancies. But this allegorizing suited the taste of the age, and, with his fertile mind and imposing learning, Origen was the exegetical oracle of the early church, till his orthodoxy fell into disrepute."

— Philip, Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: Volume 2* (Peabody, MA; Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 521.

"Origen encouraged the allegorical interpretation of the Scriptures. Simply stated, this method of understanding the Scriptures holds that the literal meaning of the bible conceals a deeper meaning that can only be perceived by the mature believer."

— Stanford E. Murrell, *A Glorious Institution: The Church in History (Parts One and Two)*, 19.

"Origen, more than anyone else, helped make allegory the key method of interpreting the Bible down through the Middle Ages...Origen created interpretation, he did not seek interpretation."

— Mal Couch, *Classical Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2000), 272-273.

"Remember that spiritualizing is not such a wonderful display of ingenuity, even if you are able to do it well, and that without discretion it is the most ready method of revealing your egregious folly. Gentlemen, if you aspire to emulate Origen in wild, daring, interpretations, it may be as well to read his life and note attentively the follies into which even his marvellous mind was drawn by allowing a wild fancy to usurp absolute authority over his judgment; and if you set yourselves to rival the vulgar declaimers of a past generation, let me remind you that the cap and bells do not now command the same patronage as fell to their share a few years ago."

— Charles Spurgeon, *Lecture VII on Spiritualizing in Lectures to my Students*, Volume 1, 122.

"Origen had an elaborate eschatology. He believed in or at least hoped for the final restoration of all rational creatures, not only men but also demons, including even the archfiend himself. The pains of hell are disciplinary in purpose and will be temporary only, not everlasting. When the present world has come to an end the material substance of which it is composed will be employed for the formation of another world in which the spirits of men not yet perfected will be still further disciplined and so it will go on until all have been redeemed when matter being unredeemable will finally be destroyed. The future life will be a life of the spirit; the flesh will have no part in it. The joys of heaven and the pains of hell will be mental not material."

— A. McGiffert, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Scribner's, 1946), 231.

Augustine's Allegorical Interpretation

"For Augustine the Jews, like many of his Christian opponents, represent a view of biblical religion that is external, literal, and focused on temporal things. The proper reading of Scripture is more Platonist, seeking what is inward, spiritual, and eternal. In short, Judaism is related to Platonism as external to inward, letter to spirit, Law to grace."

— Philip Cary, *Inner Grace: Augustine in the Traditions of Plato and Paul*, (Oxford University Press, 2008), 23.

"Ambrose's allegorical interpretation helped Augustine to accept the Scriptures more readily. In his own work Augustine would often make free use of allegorism. This accent upon the spiritual value of the text (2 Cor 3:6) emphasized the underlying truth behind the symbols of expression. That truth could be unpacked through multiple meanings in the text given by the Spirit and discerned by the spiritual exegete."

— Rodney Petersen, *Continuity and Discontinuity: The Debate Throughout Church History, in Continuity and Discontinuity, Perspectives on the Relationship Between Old and New Testaments*, 23.

"Augustine was driven to the allegorical interpretation of Scripture by his own spiritual plight. It was the allegorical interpretation of Scripture by Ambrose which illuminated much of the Old Testament to him when he was struggling with the crass literalism of the Manicheans. He justified allegorical interpretation by a gross misinterpretation of 2 Cor. 3:6. He made it mean that the spiritual or allegorical interpretation was the real meaning of the Bible; the literal interpretation kills."

— Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 43.

"Unfortunately, Augustine argued for a fourfold sense of Scripture: historical, aetiological (an inquiry into the origins or causes of things), analogical, and allegorical. The set of four terms that eventually won out in the Western school of hermeneutics was literal, allegorical, tropological (moral), and anagogical (mystical or eschatological). The standard illustration of this fourfold sense first appeared around A.D. 420 in John Cassian's *Conferences* (14.8): Jerusalem literally means the city of the Jews; allegorically, it is the church (Ps. 46:4 -5); tropologically, it is the soul (Ps. 147:1 -2, 12); and anagogically, it is our heavenly home (Gal. 4:26). Cassian made it clear that the fourfold sense would not fit every passage of Scripture; attention must always be given first to the literal sense as emphasized by the Antiochian school. But the anagogical and allegorical senses kept alive the central concerns of the Alexandrians for the mystical and spiritual aspects of the text, while the tropological sense allowed Jewish and Christian moralists to uncover moral and ethical teachings from the text."

— Walter Kaiser, and Moisés Silva. *Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: The Search for Meaning*. e-book, (Zondervan, 2007), 288.

Middle Ages

“This spiritual or mystical interpretation which is an out-growth of the allegorizing of the early church became codified during the Middle Ages under three rules. (i) A passage may have an allegorical meaning. This refers to its future or prophetic meaning and includes allegorical and typological interpretation. In view of the abuses of the allegorical method many contemporary Catholics prefer the word typological to allegorical. (ii) A passage may have an anagogical (eschatological) meaning. It may “lead up” to the Church Triumphant. Thus the Church militant has features about it which anticipate the Church in glory. (iii) A passage may have a tropological meaning, i.e., teach a tropos, a way of life. This is the moral significance of the passage.”

— Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 47.

Augustine's Influence on Reformers

“Though the Reformers had come out of the interpretive darkness into the light of literal and historical hermeneutics, they still clung to allegorical details in their attempt to understand the book of Revelation.”

— Mal Couch, *How Has Revelation Been Viewed Interpretively?*, in Mal Couch, ed., *A Bible Handbook to Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2001), 40.

“It was particularly the allegorical use of the Old Testament that the Reformers objected to, and the manner in which Roman Catholic dogma was re-enforced by allegorical interpretation. Hence the “literal” directly opposes the “allegorical.” This was programmatic with Luther and Calvin, and it does not mean that these men had no lapses back into allegorical interpretation.”

— Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, 3rd rev. ed. e-book, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 101.

Spiritualization

“To the explicit statements of Old Testament prophecy. But it should be noted that Old Testament prophecy speaks in Old Testament terms, which we may not interpret literally. The Israel spoken of repeatedly is spiritual Israel. And when it is said that it shall return to its land, that the temple will be rebuilt, the office of priest restored, the sacrifices reintroduced, the entire Mosaic ritual renewed in detail, then one should either take all of this literally or, if one cannot or dare not do that, should also understand the return to the Holy Land less literally and more spiritually. All too literal interpretation here would undermine the perfect and final character of the work of the Mediator.”

— Vos, Geerhardus, and Richard Gaffin. *Reformed Dogmatics: Ecclesiology, the Means of Grace, Eschatology* – e-book, (Lexham Press, 2014), 1136.

“The New Testament views itself—and there can certainly be no doubt about this—as the spiritual and therefore complete and authentic fulfillment of the Old Testament. The spiritualization of the Old Testament, rightly understood, is not an invention of Christian theology but has its beginning in the New Testament. The Old Testament in spiritualized form, that is, the Old Testament stripped of its temporal and sensuous form, is the New Testament. The peculiar nature of the old dispensation consisted precisely in the fact that the covenant of grace was presented in graphic images and clothed in national and sensuous forms. Sin was symbolized by levitical impurity. Atonement was effected by the sacrifice of a slain animal. Purification was adumbrated by physical washings. Communion with God was connected with the journey to Jerusalem. The desire for God’s favor and closeness was expressed in the longing for his courts. Eternal life was conceived as a long life on earth, and so forth. In keeping with Israel’s level of understanding, placed as Israel was under the tutelage of the law, all that is spiritual, heavenly, and eternal was veiled in earthly shadows. Even though the great majority of the people frequently fixated on the external forms—just as many Christians in participating in the

sacraments continue to cling to the external signs—and while devout Israelites with their hearts indeed penetrated to the spiritual core that was hidden in the shell, they nevertheless saw that spiritual core in no other way than in shadows and images."

— Herman Bavinck, and Bolt. *Reformed Dogmatics: Abridged in One Volume. e-book*, (Baker Publishing Group, 2011), 746-747.

"The question whether the Old Testament prophecies concerning the people of God must be interpreted in their ordinary sense, as other Scriptures are interpreted, or can properly be applied to the Christian Church, is called the question of spiritualization of prophecy. This is one of the major problems in biblical interpretation, and confronts everyone who makes a serious study of the Word of God. It is one of the chief keys to the difference of opinion between Premillenarians and the mass of Christian scholars. The former reject such spiritualization, the latter employ it; and as long as there is no agreement on this point the debate is interminable and fruitless."

— Albertus Pieters, *The Leader*, September 5, 1931, as cited by Gerrit H. Hespers, *The Principle of Spiritualization in Hermeneutics* (East Williamson, NY: By the author, 1935), 5.

"If we preach the Bible literally, it is like telling the truth. You do not have to remember what you said. But if you spiritualize... what you said about a passage yesterday may be diametrically opposed to what you make it mean today... A man will find himself contradicting himself over and over again as he preaches through the years."

— W.A. Criswell, *Why I preach that the Bible is Literally True* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1969), 145.