



## The Four Senses of Scripture

By Jerry Truex

If we are to be rooted and grounded in the Word, I believe we need to read scripture at four levels: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the mystical.

The **literal sense** refers to the historical message of the passage “back-then-and-there.” It is the plain meaning of the text. If scripture describes Jesus casting demons, it is about Jesus factually and concretely driving out evil. Of course, understanding the literal sense can be enhanced by Bible experts and commentaries.

The **allegorical sense** refers to a hidden meaning beneath the surface. Discovering this sense is particularly important when a literal interpretation is obscure or yields a meaning unworthy of God. With an allegorical reading, the literal stands for something else. For example, early church leaders thought the crossing of the Red Sea in the OT pointed allegorically to Christ’s redemption in the NT.

The allegorical sense can also point to elements of your own life, something the authors of scripture never explicitly foresaw or intended. This is easily demonstrated. Notice that when you read scripture to apprehend its plain meaning (literal sense), it often dawns on you that the passage illuminates your own experience and life circumstances (allegorical sense). When you read that Christ drove out demons (the literal sense), you may see Christ is also driving out “demons” in your own life (allegorical sense).

But how do you know if the allegorical reading you discover is correct or wholesome? Augustine offers this advice: An allegorical reading is correct if it increases your love of God and neighbor, or if it decreases your selfish desire. James recommends praying for wisdom (Jam. 1:5). And Paul encourages communal discernment: “We have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16).

The **moral sense** refers to how the passage shapes your values and behaviors. If scripture was “written for your instruction” (1 Cor. 10:11), it is important to listen to the teachings of Moses, the prophets, and Jesus for how you ought to live. If you come to believe that Christ is driving out “demons” in your our life (allegorical sense), you might also hear Christ teaching about changing your attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors (moral sense). When you embrace the moral sense, you become a “doer of the word and not a hearer only” (James 1:22-25).

The **mystical sense** focuses on God’s future or last things. However, as the NT reveals, the “last things” have dawned in Jesus Christ and the “last things”—do not read this literally—point to the unification of all beings and realities in God now and in the future (Col. 1:17; Eph. 1:10).

When we grasp the mystical sense of scripture, I believe we are grasped by God; we glimpse our unity in the One Reality of Being and Consciousness, the One that unites all-in-all (Col. 1:19-20). In this way, scripture is mystical and symbolical discourse, communicating a direct intuition of God by the writers of scripture, intending to awaken the same intuition of God in the mind of the reader. The passage is no longer about Christ casting out demons (literal), nor about Christ casting out personal demons (allegorical), nor about doing the Word (moral), but about union with God, about our direct and

personal experience *within* God as God renews the image of God *in* each of us and all humanity (mystical).