Introduction to the Four Layers of Interpretation: An Overview

During the late Middle Ages, just as their Jewish counterparts did, Christian interpreters of the Holy Text identified multiple layers of meaning in the biblical text. This approach is well demonstrated by Guibert of Nogent’s *Ad Commentarios in Genesim* (Commentary on Genesis). In a short treatise he added to his commentary, *Liber quo ordine sermo fieri debeat* (A Book about the Way a Sermon Ought To Be Given), Guibert determines:

There are four ways of interpreting Scripture; on them, as though on so many scrolls, each sacred page is rolled. The first is History, which speaks of actual events as they occurred; the second is Allegory, in which one thing stands for something else; the third is Tropology, or moral instruction, which treats of the ordering and arranging of one’s life; and the last is Anagogy, or spiritual enlightenment, through which we who are about to treat of heavenly and lofty topics are led to a higher way of life. For example, the word ‘Jerusalem’: historically it represents a specific city; in allegory it represents the holy Church; tropologically, or morally, it is the soul of every faithful man who longs for the vision of eternal peace; and anagogically it refers to the life of the heavenly citizens, who already see the God of Gods, revealed in all his glory in Sion. (Murphy 1988, 362; original in PL, CLVI, cols. 25–26).

This approach was soon adopted in literary texts also, and we find Christian scholars who identified three or four layers of meaning in a given text. Thus, in the prose prologue to his *Anticlaudianus*, Alan of Lille, the twelfth-century champion of Neoplatonic thought, finds it necessary to warn his readers as follows:

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1 On medieval interpretation views and methods, see Caplan 1927, 292–293; Caplan 1929; Dronke 1974, ch. 1; Robertson 1980; Eco 1990, 11–14.
For in this work the sweetness of the literal sense will soothe the ears of the boys, the moral instruction will inspire the mind on the road to perfection, the sharper subtlety of the allegory will whet the advanced intellect. Let those be denied access to this work who pursue only sense-images and do not reach out for the truth that comes from reason, lest what is holy, being set before dogs be soiled, lest the pearl, trampled under the feet of swine be lost, lest the esoteric be impaired if its grandeur is revealed to the unworthy. (Alan of Lille 1973, 40–41; original in Alain de Lille 1955, 56).

Alan identifies three layers of meaning; it is important to realize that what Alan calls Allegory is, in fact, Anagogy in the sense Guibert defined it. However, the ‘fourfold method’ reappears in Dante’s Convivio (The Banquet) and in a letter known as the Epistola a Cangrande. Leaving aside here the problem of the writer’s identity, be it Dante or not, the letter illustrates the adaptation of the fourfold interpretive method into the reading of non-sacred texts. In the exposition of the Convivio that serves as a commentary to his own canzoni, Dante reminds the readers of the traditional fourfold interpretive method: ‘As I stated in the first chapter, this exposition must be both literal and allegorical. To convey what this means, it is necessary to know that writings can be understood and ought to be expounded principally in four senses.’ (Dante 1998, book 2, chapter 1). The Épistola a Cangrande, in which the writer discusses the appropriate way to comprehend the Commedia, illustrates once again the conscious adaptation of the fourfold interpretive method regarding non-sacred texts, though the writer seems to integrate the three inner senses into one unit: ‘And although these mystical senses are called by various names, they may all be called allegorical, since they are all different from the literal or historical’ (Dante 1973, 99). The importance of these late examples lies in the fact that the fourfold method is employed to read not only literary texts but even those texts that were written in the vernacular. Through these examples we clearly see that in the Middle Ages thinkers and writers approached the text as a dispenser of a multiple message with several layers of meaning and that the textual strategy required the advanced reader to seek more than just the literal sense of the text. At this point one may also call to mind Umberto Eco’s words on the matter. According to the Italian semiologist, the most distinctive cultural phenomena of the Middle Ages consists in the allegorical-symbolical frame of mind of medieval man. Moreover, Eco stresses the fact that this need for an epistemological comprehension is strictly combined with the need for a deep aesthetical pleasure: