

# Symbolic Exegesis: cosmogony and soteriology

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Biblical traditions offer a range approaches to the reading Scripture. Rabbinic Judaism refers to PaRDeS typology: *Peshat* (the simple or literal reading), *Remez* (allegoric meanings), *Derash* (the comparative or midrashic [homiletic] meaning), and *Sod* (the mystical meaning). In Christian tradition, St. Augustine says that the Old Testament has a fourfold division, ‘according to history, aetiology (causation), analogy and allegory’.<sup>1</sup> Dante Alighieri famously describes the *Quadrigo* or “four senses”: literal, moral, anagogical and allegorical.<sup>2</sup>

Modern exegesis has tended towards the literal and moral. In his 1988 Ethel M. Wood Lecture, *Exegesis and Imagination*, Dr Robert Murray, SJ, observed the following dominant trends of modern biblical exegesis (each seeing itself as the “right way” to read Scripture): historicism; classification into form and genre; readings concerned with redactional activity; and post-modern structuralism and deconstructionalism.<sup>3</sup> Modern approaches to religion and, in turn religious studies, including exegesis, tend to be characterised by

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<sup>1</sup> *De utilitate credendi* (On the profit of believing) III, in Aquinas, *Summa Theolica*, 1.1.10.

<sup>2</sup> *Il Convito*, II.2-5.

<sup>3</sup> The “right way” to read was seeking what would cast light on the historical development of ancient Israel and its religion, and then of Judaism and Christianity; or the “right way” was to learn to classify passages or books by their form and genre; and try to identify their original contexts and uses in life and worship, employing canons and categories worked out by modern scholars; or the “right way” was to search for signs of redactional activity, so as to argue back to a putative original form of the text, to reconstruct a history of the text’s development, and to treat the final text as reflecting the interests of redactors.

## Symbolic Exegesis

rationalistic and analytical methodologies. Within modern academia, symbolic interpretation has become a practice to be studied rather than a mode of study itself. Its veracity is questioned because in the minds of the modern rationalist it lacks the type of objective correlative that might make it a verifiable approach.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this idea is based on an assumption that is itself unverifiable.

The modern mentality puts the question of the reality of God into the mix of exegesis. In contrast, the traditional mind starts from the reality of the God and proceeds thus to exegesis. In the traditional mind the objective correlative of symbolism is firstly God or Revelation, and, secondly, the precise complex of metaphysics. To communicate the ineffable requires an appropriate language. This is symbolism.

The traditional understanding of symbolism entails much more than a simple relationship between signifier and signified. According to the traditional mentality a symbol differs from a “sign” in that the symbol partakes of its referent, whereas, for a sign the signifier and signified are necessarily and by definition distinct. As Professor Isaiah Tishby, remarks:

There exists a permanent, integral relationship between the symbol and the thing symbolised, for a symbol has its symbolic character impressed upon it from the very beginning of its existence. Consequently, symbolic usage does not divorce the symbolic significance from the actual object utilized. On the contrary, by disclosing the symbolic relationship it has with the hidden divine being, one reveals the real nature of the object, in all its perfection. In mystical symbolism one does not exchange one meaning for another, but one adds to the common, revealed meaning a revelation of its own internal hidden mystery.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Schuon: ‘The symbolic language of the great traditions of mankind may indeed seem arduous and baffling to some minds, but it is nevertheless perfectly intelligible in the light of the orthodox commentaries; symbolism—this point must be stressed—is a real and rigorous science, and nothing can be more naïve than to suppose that its apparent naïvety springs from an immature and “prelogical” mentality. This science, which can properly be described as “sacred,” quite plainly does not have to adjust itself to the modern experimental approach; the realm of revelation, of symbolism, of pure and direct intellection, stands in fact above both the physical and psychological realms, and consequently it lies beyond the scope of so-called scientific methods’ (from ‘No Activity without Truth’ in *The Sword of Gnosis*, ed. J. Needleman, Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1974, p.28).

<sup>5</sup> I. Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p.285.

## Symbolic Exegesis

I have spoken of these ideas in more detail in my ‘Understanding “Symbol”’ (*Sacred Web* 6, 2000). In the current paper I focus on the actively transformative effect of symbolic exegesis, or what is sometimes, more broadly, called “creative hermeneutic.” Although “exegesis” specifies written text, and especially the text of the Bible, I have in mind the wider understanding of symbolism. Nevertheless I have used the term “exegesis” to focus on the spiritual process of engaging with Scripture, whether this be biblical or otherwise.

Let us rehearse the traditional understanding of symbol. Through its participation in both the sensible and the supra-sensible orders of existence, the symbol acts as a vehicle by which the human may be lead back to the Divine. The symbol operates analogically and anagogically in both horizontal and vertical valences; it operates according to the laws of analogy: parallel or direct analogy, in respect of content, and inverse analogy, in respect of relationship. The symbol is revealed and adequate (“ad-equate,” a “making equal to”) in the sense of producing in a qualified and receptive person an *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, which is to say a condition of true, intellectual knowledge. Symbolism is the language of the Divine and the human.

The clarification between the anagogical nature of “mystical symbolism” and allegory is vital in our current context. As Gershom Scholem observes,

If allegory can be defined as the representation of an expressible something by another expressible something, the mystical symbol is an expressible representation of something which lies beyond the sphere of expression and communication, something which comes from a sphere whose face is, as it were, turned inward and away from us. A hidden and inexpressible reality finds its expression in the symbol. If the symbol is thus also a sign or representation it is nevertheless more than that.<sup>6</sup>

This “more” resides in the symbol’s identity with it’s transcendent referent. This identity is direct and immediate and simultaneously extended through the hierarchy of Existence. It is like a ray of light: on the one hand it is identical with its source; on the other hand it is

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<sup>6</sup> G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, p.27.

## Symbolic Exegesis

removed from the source according to the distance between the source and the eye that beholds it. By virtue of an unfolding or unveiling of Reality through a progression of symbolic initiations, the symbol acts like so many rungs on a ladder leading “upwards” to the Divine. In this way the symbol is anagogic: from the Greek *anago* (“to lead up to”), as in leading the understanding up to a metaphysical meaning. Anagogy entails a transformative relationship with the symbolic. We must be careful not to confuse this with a purely emotive “feeling” of being “uplifted,” although our emotional response can be an expression of this existential transformation. Again, the anagogic reading is not necessarily distinct from allegory inasmuch as the act of processing allegory is one of “identification,” and even if the figurative representation is not identical with the literal referent, nevertheless, the process of reading allegory can awaken one to the unity of reality and, one might even say, is, consciously or not, an act of participation in this Unity.

This act of participation in Unity is, as it were, the inert aspect of symbolic exegesis in contrast to the “living” growth of identifications, understandings, realisations and revelations involved in the process of exegesis. The act of participation is like the container in which the wine of knowledge transforms, grows and flows, during fermentation.



If the essence of symbolism resides in identity its mechanic is based on analogy and correspondence. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, analogy, which allows one to ascend from the knowledge of creatures to that of God, is ‘nothing but a symbolic mode of expression based on the correspondence between the natural and the supernatural orders.’<sup>7</sup> To say correspondence is to say *ratio*, which is to recognise that symbolism is “rational” and far from arbitrary. In the same way metaphysics is “logical” in both the common sense of the word and in terms of it being of the *logos*; this is to say, it embraces the rational while at the same time transcending it. This is most evident when considering the nature of paradox: It is part of the perfection of Being that there is imperfection in it (Ibn Arabi); the All-Possibility must by definition and on pain of

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<sup>7</sup> Cited in R. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, p.16, n.5.

## Symbolic Exegesis

contradiction include its own impossibility (Schuon); again, the Absolute must contain the Relative to be Absolute. These are all logical formulations; yet they are irrational, or rather they are arrational. The logic of metaphysic includes the logic of paradox, the logic of mystery. To engage with this requires, on the one hand, precision and rigor and, on the other hand, imagination. Imagination that opens the exegete to the level of mystery beyond subjective relativity; and, at the same time, imagination—that personal engagement which understands that the *raison d'être* of Scripture is that the individual, in the glory of all their idiosyncratic subjectivity, may know God.

Murray argues for the reintroduction of “imagination” into the work of exegesis. He is far from arguing for some sort of laissez-faire relativism. ‘Biblical hermeneutics’ he says, ‘concerns both translation and interpretation.’ But this “interpretation” can not just be anything; it should seek to “realise the potentialities of the text” rather than simply express some sort of “free creativity.” Murray turns to midrashic exegesis seeking to recognise how exegesis operated for those people for whom the words of the Bible were divinely inspired. As he notes, ‘The modern critic may ask whether the midrashic method is not give to producing meanings which are not there; but what is meant by “there?”’ He continues to stress, ‘The method is not bound by theories of what an individual author intended in his historical context, but rather by a sense of the Bible as a coherent body of revelation.’ Similarly, Schuon declares that the keys to Bible are precisely symbolism and Revelation.



What then is it that is symbolised? The multivalent nature of symbolism allows for an array of interpretations that may all be valid, even when they contradict each other. But in the final analysis the purpose *par excellence* of Scripture can be summed up by the Patristic formula: ‘God became man so that man might become God’: Transcendence became Immanent so that Immanence might become Transcendent. Creation and Return, cosmogony and eschatology, cosmogony and soteriology. At its deepest level Scripture offers a coherent description of the cosmogonic act unfolding in ever increasing degrees of complexity.

Through creative hermeneutic the exegete conforms to God, being “made in the image.” The exegete becomes symbol. Thus they have

## Symbolic Exegesis

both a direct and an inverse analogy. The partake directly of the creative act, in respect of the content of their interpretation. Simultaneously, in respect of relationship, what is divine radiation is inverted so that the act of exegesis effects a concentration of the individual upon the divine Unity. Like the cosmogonic *tsimtsum* of Luranic kabbalism, the practice of symbolic exegesis is simultaneous centrifugal and centripetal, Radiation and Contraction. In the final analysis these are contained in Unity.

It is not uncommon to see the Biblical account of Creation portrayed as a linear development or progression from a first point. In the beginning there was void and darkness, and then this, and then this, and so on... This has a value but it is no doubt a much less profound reading than that which recognises the manner in which the entire Torah, and thus all Creation, is contained and prefigured in the *Bereshit*, the Hebrew term usually translated as “Beginning.” According to a story from the Zohar a group of rabbis were engaged in reading the Torah when one suddenly declared, ‘The entire Torah is contained in the opening lines of Genesis.’ This met with general approval. Then a second added: ‘All that is in the Torah is contained in the opening lines of Genesis, and these are contained in the opening word, *Bereshit*.’ More nodding and murmurs of approval. Then one of the most respected rabbis said: ‘All that is in the Torah is contained in the opening lines of Genesis, and these are contained in the opening word, *Bereshit*, and *Bereshit* is contained, like a seed contains a tree, in the first letter, *beth*.’ This was roundly applauded. But then, Rabbi Shimeon bar Yochai, the most respected rabbi of the time, spoke up and said: ‘All that is in the Torah is contained in the opening lines of Genesis, and these are contained in the opening word, *Bereshit*, and *Bereshit* is contained in the first letter, *beth*, but the *beth* is prefigured in the unspoken *aleph*.’ Here the Torah, which is a symbol of all creation, is identified *in divinis* with the transcendent God.<sup>8</sup>

According to this way of thinking the story of the creation of the world in six days is not a mere metaphor describing six longer periods.

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<sup>8</sup> ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, is not one particular area divorced from the Torah, and the Torah is not outside Him, nor is He something outside the Torah. It is for this reason that the kabbalists say that the Holy One, blessed be His name, is the Torah.’ Rabbi Menahem Recanati, *Sefer Ta’amei ha-Mizvot* (Basle 1581), 3a, cited in Tishby, *The Wisdom of the Zohar Vol.1*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p.284.

## Symbolic Exegesis

Instead this is—at least at one level, for it is multivalent—a precise description of the very spatio-temporal principle. The six days are the six directions of three-dimensional space, described by sphere; by being extensions and durations they express distinction, difference and movement. The seventh day is the centre, at complete “rest.” Philosophically speaking this is Aristotle’s “unmoved mover.”<sup>9</sup> We might note that the story of the Deluge, which describes a resolution of manifest forms at the end of a cycle of existence gives us a return to the state of rest, for the meaning of the name Noah is “rest.”

Again, according to this type of symbolic mentality the modern debate about the “two” accounts of the creation of man in Genesis Chapters 1 and 2, misses the point that these express two complementary expressions of the anthropomorphic cosmogenesis viewed respectively *ad extra* (Genesis Ch.1) and *ad intra* (Genesis Ch.2).

The respected Biblical scholar, Gerald von Rad, claimed that the description of the four rivers which flowed out of Eden had ‘no significance for the unfolding action’ of Genesis.<sup>10</sup> Yet the movement from Eden is a movement from Unity to multiplicity, a movement that is traditionally symbolised by an axial descent and a horizontal expansion. It is little surprise then that the name of these four rivers describe just such a schema, and in fact suggest the sense of centrifugal “whirling,” in a manner that may be compared to the analogous symbolism of the Masonic plume line set swinging in increasing or “expansive” continuous spirals.

This type of symbolism can be found throughout the numerous episodes of the Bible, including those which are commonly taken as “history.” This is not to deny the historical reading for, from the traditional position, history is simply another level of expression of the cosmogonic principle. But to simply study Scripture to know about it is to understand nothing of its purpose. While the various modes of reading have their place, it is, nevertheless, through symbolic exegesis that one can begin to *engage* in Scripture in a truly intellectual sense—a way that is imaginative, orthodox, creative, and transformative

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<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 3. 10. This, says Aristotle citing the authority of Parmenides and Melissos, is the “first principle,” “one” and “unmoved” (*Physics*, 1.2; 184B 16).

<sup>10</sup> G. Von Rad, *Genesis*, tr. J. H. Marks, London: SCM Press Ltd, 1963, p.77.