

Allegorical Readings



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Principles of Typology

The Fourfold* Sense of Scripture

1. *Historia*: The literal narrative
2. *Allegoria*: Allegorical reading on the plane of salvation history
3. *Tropologia*: A moral reading instructive for the individual believer
4. *Anagogia*: A reading pertaining to the afterlife or the end of the world

* Not consistently four; the most widespread plane of typology is allegory.

The Exodus 1/2

1. *Historia*: The people of Israel cross the Red Sea (Ex 14)
2. *Allegoria*: Jesus's baptism by John the Baptist (Mt 3, Mk 1, Lk 3; cf Jn 1)
3. *Tropologia*: Baptism
4. *Anagogia*: e.g. Apoc 21/22 “the water of life” in the Heavenly Jerusalem

The Exodus 2/2

1. *Historia*: The Egyptian army is wiped out by the waters rushing in (Ex 14)
2. *Allegoria*: e.g. John the Baptist washes away the sins of multitudes in baptism
3. *Tropologia*: Baptism washes away one's sins
4. *Anagogia*: The wicked are destroyed at the end of the world

The Binding of Isaac

1. *Historia*: Abraham almost sacrifices his son Isaac (Gn 22)
2. *Allegoria*: The crucifixion of Jesus (Mt 27, Mk 15, Lk 23, Jn 19)
3. *Tropologia*: e.g. Mt 19:29 “everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children [...] for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life” (NIV)
4. *Anagogia*: cf. the common homiletic sentiment that a father will not be able to help a son or vice versa on Judgement Day

Samson's Visit to Gaza (Jdg 16)

1. *Historia*: Samson visits a sex worker in Gaza (Jdg 16:1)
2. *Allegoria*: Jesus descends down to hell (because “Scripture associates hell with the love of a woman,” or so says Caesarius of Arles, *Sermo 118*)
 1. *Historia*: Samson breaks through the city gates (Jdg 16:3)
 2. *Allegoria*: Jesus destroys the gates of hell (Caesarius, *Sermo 118*)
1. *Historia*: Samson carries the doors of the city gates up to a hilltop (Jdg 16:3)
2. *Allegoria*: Jesus ascends to heaven (Caesarius, *Sermo 118*)

Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*

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Now the order of interpretation requires that beginning afresh we should at this point open the secrets of its allegories.

15. Ver. i. There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job. We believe from the history that these things took place, but let us here turn to see in what way they were allegorically fulfilled; for, as we have said, *Job* is interpreted, “a mourner,” and *Uz* “a counsellor.” Whom else then does the blessed Job express by his name, saving Him, of Who the Prophet speaks, saying, *Surely He hath borne our griefs?*

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[L]et us now point out, how His Body, which we are, is set forth [...].

34. There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job. If “Job” signifies “grieving” and “Uz” “a Counsellor,” every elect person is not improperly represented by either name [...].

(Trans. Bliss)

Bede on the Song of Songs

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I rose to open to my beloved (Sg 5:5). Surely to open to the Lord here signifies to preach the word of the Lord.

(Trans. Holder)

The Book of Nature

Rm 1:20: For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse. (NIV)

The *Physiologus* and the Bestiary Tradition

- ▶ The phoenix is a type of Christ because it is resurrected.
- ▶ The pelican is a type of Christ because it sheds its own blood to resurrect its deceased young.
- ▶ The fox is a type of Satan because it plays dead to capture its prey.

Multiple Interpretation

[I]n the phrase “The whole world is the Church, and the whole world hates the Church” [...] “world” is to be understood in two ways [...] one referring to sinners, and one to saints. This effect comes about through the superimposition of *in malo* on *in bono*. Multiple interpretations “according to the properties of the passage” are an orthodox feature of Alcuin’s exegetical method.

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The house is a token of the moral life of its inhabitants, a type of the Church, or, if *in malo*, its opposite, and a microcosm of the city.

(Bolton 104)

→ Allegory need not be sustained or consistent.

High Medieval Allegorical Dictionaries

- ▶ Pseudo-Hrabanus, *Allegoriae in universam sacram scripturam*
 - ▶ The tree is Christ and the cross and the humble study of God and good will [...] and the multitude of sinners
 - ▶ Water is the Holy Spirit and Christ [...] and the study of heretics and the desires of sinners

Application to *Beowulf*

Obvious Connections

- ▶ Heorot as creation; Heorot as Eden
- ▶ Grendel as Satan; the dragon as Satan
- ▶ Beowulf as David/Christ?

Margaret Goldsmith: *The Mode and Meaning of “Beowulf”* (1970)

Reads the poem as “a Christian allegory of the life of man” in “contest with the Enemy.” Effectively a moral reading, viewing Beowulf and the Danes as flawed and overcome by the sins of pride and greed.

Whitney Bolton: *Alcuin and “Beowulf”* (1979)

Argues that eighth-century theologians would have found plenty of typological material in *Beowulf*, and that it need not be consistent or exclusive. Emphasizes *quo bono* reasoning: “if a heathen like Beowulf could be virtuous, then how much more virtuous ought we as Christians to be!”

Sylvia Horowitz: “Beowulf, Samson, David and Christ” (1978)

Points out a number of parallels in details of these figures, suggesting typology:

- ▶ Samson, like Beowulf, defeats a beast (lion) with his bare hands
- ▶ Samson puts his riddle to thirty men; Beowulf has the strength of thirty
- ▶ Samson wins thirty shirts and coats; Beowulf swims off with the gear of thirty
- ▶ Beowulf’s mother is called blessed in childbearing in a way reminiscent of Samson’s (and Christ’s)
- ▶ Beowulf’s fight with Grendel resembles David’s with Goliath in a number of ways: sluggish youth; up against a giant; rewards offered; foregoing sword and armour; take the giant’s sword and head

William Helder: “The Song of Creation in *Beowulf* and the Interpretation of Heorot”

Points to the commentary tradition surrounding Genesis 1 to connect Heorot with the Church by way of Creation.

Grendel 1/2

Þā se ellengāst earfoðlice
þrāge geþolode, sē þe in þystrum bād,
þæt hē dogora gehwām drēam gehyrde
hlūdne in healle; þār wæs hearpan swēg,
swutol sang scopes. Sægde sē þe cūþe
frumsceaft fira feorran reccan,
cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga eorðan worhte,
wlitebeorhtne wang, swā wæter bebūgeð,
gesette sigehrēþig sunnan ond mōnan,
lēoman tō lēohte landbūendum
ond gefrætwade foldan sceatas
lēomum ond lēafum, lif ēac gescēop
cynna gehwylcum þāra ðe cwice hwyrfaþ.

(86–98)

Grendel 2/2

Swā ðā drihtguman drēamum lifdon
ēadiglice, oððæt ān ongan
fyrene fremman **fēond on helle.**

Wæs se grimma gāst Grendel hāten,
māre mearcstapa, sē þe mōras heold,
fen ond fæsten; fífelcynnes eard
wonsāli wer weardode hwile,
síþðan him scyppend forscrifen hæfde
in **Cāines cynne**. þone cwealm gewræc
ēce drihten, þæs þe hē Ābel slōg;
ne gefeah hē þāre fāhðe, ac hē hine feor forwræc,
metod for þār māne, mancynne fram.
þanon untydras ealle onwōcon,
eotenas ond ylfe ond orcnēas,
swylce gīgantas, þā **wið Gode wunnon**
lange þrāge; hē him ðæs lēan forgeald.

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