

Analyse one or two examples of symbolic or sacred texts or images using the four senses hermeneutic

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Luke 1:26-55, 2:1-7 - The annunciation and virgin birth

Mary the Mother of Jesus - few spiritual figures have attracted such adoration and appropriation. In only a few verses in the New Testament she makes her mark on the Gospel narrative and the world. Her name has been used to epitomise feminine spirituality and courage, an inspiration to women seeking to connect with the divine. However, her story, as portrayed through the narratives of patriarchal religion, has led to the veneration of submission and virginity as female virtues, allowing female spirituality to be subjugated beneath the male gaze. Using the four senses hermeneutic to reinterpret these verses allows for a deeper and broader interpretation of the text, and it is my intention to show how this text has inspired my own spiritual life, and how we can avoid the pitfalls of patriarchal readings and understand Mary as a link to the divine feminine, informing and empowering female spirituality.

In Luke's account here we see Mary, a virgin engaged to Joseph, visited by the angel Gabriel, who announces that Mary will be pregnant and will give birth to the Son of God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and Mary submits to this (1:27-38). Mary then goes to stay with her cousin Elizabeth (1:39-45), whose own child leaps in the womb as she greets Mary. This section is remarkable in that it is a conversation between two named female characters, which is rare for literature from this period.¹ Indeed, the "song of praise" that follows (1:46-55), and has become known as the Magnificat, is still part of this conversation. Mary is not singing to God here, she is expounding her joy in the Lord and her understanding of the significance of her pregnancy to Elizabeth. Mary and Joseph then travel to Bethlehem to be registered in the census, where Mary gives birth to her child and lays him in a manger because there is no room at the inn (2:1-7).

¹ If we apply the Bechdel test (to pass the narrative must include two named female characters who talk to each other about something other than a man) to the Bible, only the book of Ruth passes (Birkholz, 2014). This passage arguably fails because the topic of conversation is their male children, but it is still among only a few narratives in the Bible where named female characters speak to each other at all.

The Four Senses Method of Interpretation (697)

The literal sense tells us of events; the allegorical teaches our faith; the moral tells us what to do; the anagogical tells us where we are going.

These words, attributed to Nicholas of Lyre and translated here by Eco (1988, p. 145), show us clearly the structure of the four senses hermeneutic - the perspective from which each sense approaches the text and the layers of meaning the reader is able to draw from the text at each stage. Cornelius notes that this method of biblical interpretation is “the descendant of a much wider tradition of thinking” (1994, p. 265) which has its roots in Judaic midrash and was developed further by Origen and Augustine (Cornelius 1994, p. 266), both of whom rejected an interpretation of the Bible that remained at the level of the literal, or tried to move from the literal to the moral without the expansion of mind and heart that was possible at the allegorical level. Cornelius also notes that this method also served to bring unity between the Old and New Testaments (1994, 269), which enables Christians to see the Old as a type of the New (for example, the crossing of the Jordan as a type of Christian baptism). It also means that the potentially problematic material in the Old (God-sanctioned violence, blood sacrifices, isolationism) can be reinterpreted in the light of the more inclusive and compassionate teachings of Jesus.

This tradition of interpretation seems to have been forgotten by many fundamentalists today, perhaps as a result of Luther’s doctrine of *sola scriptura* and the perceived need to see the truth of the Bible undiminished in the face of rapidly changing scientific paradigms. Indeed, many see the four senses hermeneutic as expanding and enhancing the interpretation of biblical texts and it has the capacity to do this for Christians today, but Eco notes that originally the four senses were perhaps intended to contain the limitless interpretations of the text within the boundaries of the understood “message” of Christianity (1988, p. 146). If we truly understand any sacred or symbolic text as having the capacity to connect us with the infinite divine then perhaps we should also understand the significance of the instructive function of the four senses. For Eco, the four senses provide us with a “kind of guarantee of the correct decoding of the scriptures.” (1988, p. 145). Milbank notes that this understanding of the limitless interpretations of scripture, for the Christian, depends on an understanding that all scripture points to Christ, as “Christ himself embodies an inexhaustible range of meanings which anticipates every individual and collective future” (1997, p.

94). However, I think it is possible to understand scripture that is fundamental to the Judeo-Christian tradition as, like all sacred and symbolic texts, pointing us toward the infinite divine; initiating us into a greater mystery beyond the realm of language. Indeed, Rose in her reflection on Milbank notes, “Milbank thinks that when we read Scripture allegorically, tropologically, and anagogically as well as literally, it becomes possible for us to read it as the story of our lives rather than just a story about dead people” (Rose, 2009). I think the verses pertaining to Mary and the virgin birth can offer the reader an opportunity to do just that.

The Literal Sense (1498)

In the literal we understand the events and the characters, the bones of what is happening or what is being said. In this case the narrative is easy to understand, especially as it is familiar to many through nativity plays and television dramatisations. However, it is important that we also understand the significance of the narrative for its author and initial readership so that we can see how it may then be understood in our own time. The areas I would like to focus on here are firstly the person and character of Mary herself and secondly her partaking in parthenogenesis, or virgin birth.

Although Boss claims that Mary’s discipleship is of little significance compared to her motherhood (2004, p. 57), I think it is important for women reading the Gospels to see the female characters as persons in their own right rather than supporting characters (wives, mothers, daughters, love-interests, etc.) in the lives of men. The grace with which Mary accepts her destiny was gifted to her by God (Boss commenting on Suarez, 2009, p. 259), but perhaps it is precisely Mary’s character, who *she* is, that has made her the ideal woman to bring to Son of God into the world. With only a limited understanding of the context of Luke’s Gospel, we can see that Mary is not a timid creature. In a genre where angels introduce themselves with “do not be afraid” (an indication that the presence of such a being might be terrifying - Luke 1:30; see also 2:10, Matthew 28:5), Mary asks a question which could even be interpreted as sceptical or insubordinate (Luke 1:34). She also demonstrates remarkable understanding in her song of praise, with frequent allusions to the Hebrew scriptures. In a context where Jewish girls were not usually educated (Horn and Martens, 2009, pp. 28-29), Mary either had the benefit of a teacher or had taught herself. Perhaps the author had put these words in her mouth to develop his themes, but he could easily have

given them to Joseph or another male character. Instead a literal reading shows this understanding clearly belongs to Mary herself. She has her own understood faith, not merely inherited, but owned. This is all the more remarkable considering she is likely to be in her early teenage years, girls being considered adults at the point of marriage, which was considered acceptable from the age of twelve (Horn and Martens, 2009, p. 35). Arguably it is exactly this capacity, whether it be through circumstance or character, that caused God to choose Mary for this divine mission.

The idea of a virgin birth is not at all unique to Christianity. Throughout human history parthenogenesis has been a recurrent theme in mythological stories and we will consider the symbolic significance of this in the next section. However, particularly within Christianity the literal sense of this text has been problematic in its implications for women. It is clear that an obsession with the physical fact of Mary's virginity has been present within Christian theology for most of its history. Indeed, many of the Church fathers, including Augustine, Ambrose and Jerome (Beattie, 2009, pp. 95-99), argued in support of Mary's perpetual virginity. Ambrose even defends her virginity *in partu*, meaning that her physical virginity (presumably her hymen) was preserved even during childbirth (Beattie, 2009, p. 98). That a woman's worth lies in her virginal status is a notion that I would like to believe we have moved beyond, but we continue to see examples of virginal status being used to judge women's purity (see Ayuandini, 2015 and Shrayber, 2015 for recent examples). That there is not a male equivalent goes without saying, and an over-reliance on a literal understanding of the virginity of Mary can reinforce these damaging ideas.

Amongst the overwhelming presence of male theologians weighing in on Mary's virginal status, we do have some alternative voices. Rigoglioso has conducted intensive research into parthenogenesis in the ancient world and has come to some remarkable conclusions. She claims that "certain specialized [sic] priestesses in ancient Greece may have endeavoured to conceive children in various non-ordinary ways" in order to try to bring to life a hero or spiritual leader (2009, p. 2-3). This certainly mirrors parts of Mary's narrative in Luke, as Jesus is both a hero in the mythological sense and a spiritual leader. Rigoglioso (2010) and Gimbutas (1999) both demonstrate that virgin mother goddesses are prevalent in religion and mythology across cultures, and Gimbutas even makes the claim that "the Parthenogenetic Goddess has been the most persistent feature in the archeological record" (1999, p. 147).

Although Rigoglioso and Gimbutas at the very least refuse to rule out the possibility of parthenogenesis for women, it is difficult from their work to claim that women ever have or ever could self-conceive. Rigoglioso in particular is keen to point out that the purpose of her work is not to claim that parthenogenesis physically happened in the past nor should it be sought in modern times (2009, p.3-4). If this were possible it would transform the literal meaning of Mary's conception into something truly empowering for women today. Dworkin claimed that for women, "sex itself is an experience of diminishing self-possession, an erosion of self" (1987, p. 84). If this is the case then the idea that parthenogenesis might be physically possible could be seen as liberating women from sexual domination by men. Women can self-conceive through their own spiritual empowerment and agency, bringing forth life of their own making. However, I would lean more to the position of Firestone who would see pregnancy and raising children (rather than sex itself), as the factor that disempowers women and that the sexes will only be fully equal when we have made artificial reproduction possible (1997). I would disagree with the extremes of her argument, but I do think that the practicalities of pregnancy and raising children, when not adequately compensated for, have led to women being disadvantaged economically and in their influence in society. In reading the text in Luke it is also made very clear to the reader that Mary does not bring this event about herself, other than perhaps by being the right kind of person for the job, but it is done at the will of God by the power of the Holy Spirit (1:35). She is not a parthenogenetic goddess here.

The experience of Mary in being subjugated beneath the male gaze is one that many women today experience. Women are still vilified for their sexual agency and for having children outside of marriage, and many women today can empathise with Mary's choices - to be courageous in doing what she thought was right, even where she might be misunderstood or made to feel ashamed. Some feminist theologians like Tribble would claim that even the biblical "texts of terror", where women are abused, mutilated, raped and murdered at the hands of men, can be read by women in a way that empowers them, precisely because women today also experience these things (1984). Mary's narrative is not a text of terror in this sense, but we can still understand her courageousness in finding joy and hope in a situation not of her own choosing. Fiorenza presents her as a "young pregnant woman, living in occupied territory and struggling against victimization [sic] and for survival and dignity" (1995, p. 187) and sees the literal facts of the story, not the venerated saint that Mary has become, as being crucial in moving towards a more gender-inclusive Christian theology (1995, p. 187-9). However, I have sympathy with Hampson's view that we need to

in some cases “escape the text” because some things cannot be redeemed and must instead be dismissed (1990, p. 105). If we read Mary’s story only on a literal level this could easily reinforce sexist ideas about the supposed female virtues of virginity, submission and motherhood at the expense of women’s empowerment and agency. We can see clearly here the need to move on to the other senses.

The Allegorical Sense (1184)

In the allegorical we move to the symbolic meaning of the text, but more than this - as Eco translates, it “teaches our faith” (1988, p. 145) or informs our beliefs, connects the surface meaning of the literal with our wider understanding of faith and spiritual things; ourselves and the workings of the world. Allegory is the “displacement of identity” (Ward, 2000, p. 12); using one idea to express another. For Origen this means strictly seeing the Old Testament as a type of the New, and specifically of Christ (Ward, 2000, p.12), but for Aquinas in the medieval period the four senses were not so much a way for the reader to move on in their understanding of the text, but to position the text in a different time and location. Where the literal focused on the historical moment, the allegorical brings all scripture to the time of Christ’s intervention (Ward, 2000, p. 13). Although for Aquinas it would not make sense to see the incarnation as representing anything other than the birth of the Son of God into the world (this event, for him, is already positioned at the moment of salvation), Cornelius has a broader interpretation. For him, “the symbol points to an unknown content, which of its nature cannot be otherwise or be better represented than through the symbol” (1994, p. 275). To apply this understanding to the text in Luke gives us scope to understand the story of Mary as being of much deeper and wider significance for us today.

The literal facts of the virgin birth are problematic in the light of modern science. In first century Palestine, women were understood to be the carriers for the germinating male seed, inputting no qualities of their own (Lincoln, 2013, p. 196).² Understanding the virgin birth of Christ as a literal fact leads to unhelpful questions (for example, does God have DNA?). However, if we understand this one thing to represent another, and here the literal birth of the Son of God as the birthing of the divine into human experience, we avoid these problems

² Although if Rigoglioso and Gimbutas are correct and parthenogenetic cults were widespread, perhaps there was a plurality of understandings of conception.

and arrive at a much deeper significance. The title of Theotokos, or the “one who gave birth to God” (Price, 2009, p. 56) is significant here. Although Nestorius objected to it as it is illogical (Price, 2009, p. 58), and of course in a literal sense he is right, we can see Mary here as representing humanity, and her pregnancy and the child she gives birth to as the divine. We see a similar idea in Nestorius’ firmly Christocentric Mariology, as he saw Mary’s giving birth as an encouragement to believers to receive Christ ‘in the womb of faith’ (Nestorius’ Letter to Cosmas, as quoted in Price, 2009, p. 65). It is an allegory of the believer spiritually bringing Christ into the world. This links with other New Testament passages where the Church is described as the “body of Christ” (for example in 1 Corinthians 12:27); the embodiment of the spiritual Christ on earth, fulfilling his purpose and mission to reveal the love of God for humanity. In a broader sense this could mean seeing human beings as conduits of the spirit, birthing God into the world and bringing forth divine wisdom and love into the realm of human experience.

We can make a further connection between Mary as the Theotokos, and divine wisdom, which is often personified in feminine form. There is a clear literary connection between divine wisdom in the Hebrew Bible and Jesus in the New Testament. Fiorenza, in her feminist characterisation of Jesus as “Sophia’s Prophet” (1995) attempts to trace the wisdom traditions in Hebrew literature in order to reconstruct these, along with the Gospels, into a narrative that empowers rather than subdues female spirituality (1995, pp. 131-132). She sees wisdom literature as being found predominantly in post-exilic and apocalyptic literature (1995, p. 133), both of which are genres which emerged in times of oppression and persecution. It is here, with the loss of the monarchy and a move towards a family-orientated (and therefore mother-centred) social structure that the feminine wisdom (Chokmah/Sophia) became more than just a grammatical function of language, but took on feminine form and qualities (1995, pp. 133-134). We can see this most clearly in the passages in Proverbs where the author claims that wisdom herself is precious and pursuit of is the secret to happiness (Proverbs 3:13-18) and that it was through her that the earth was created (3:19-20). Later wisdom herself speaks, calling humanity to seek her instruction (8:1-21) and expounding her role in creation, “The Lord created me at the beginning [also ‘as the beginning’] of his work, the first of his acts of long ago” (8:22). Schroer points out that Hebrew wisdom literature does not subordinate Chokmah to the male Yahweh - she is not a daughter or consort, she is “the God of Israel in the image of a woman and in the language of the goddess” (2000, p. 29). We can see this in other traditions too - in Hinduism it is Shakti, the goddess or divine feminine who “activates all gods and humans, and in union with the Male,

she too governs the universe” (Raman, 2009, p. 130). An allegorical reading of the story of Mary enables women to see themselves as continuing this thread of feminine divine energy and wisdom, the nurturing and forgiving, creating and bringing forth life.

The specific connection between Jewish wisdom literature and the birth of Jesus, although it may appear tenuous from a surface reading, is well-established. It is most clear in the prologue to the Fourth Gospel (John 1:1-5), which is understood by many to be a pre-existent hymn to wisdom (Bennema, 2002, p. 20). Bennema develops this further, arguing that Jesus also fulfils the soteriological functions of wisdom in that we are not just saved by faith or grace, but in the *understanding* of faith that Jesus makes possible (2002, p. 160). We should note the juxtaposition here between Mary as the mother of the male Jesus in the literal sense, and human women as the conduits of Sophia or Chokmah, both feminine, in the allegorical sense. It is in the allegorical that we move away from the problematic notion that women’s bodies and lives are used for the purposes of males (both human and divine), and we can see the synthesis of the physical female person and feminine spirit. Here Rigoglioso’s understanding of parthenogenesis makes more sense; the goddesses, and perhaps even human women, who were understood to be able to create life in their own wombs without the need for male intervention represent to us not the birth of literal children, but the outpouring of spiritual life and creativity from the minds and hearts of women. This is not to say that women are unique in this function, but while their contribution in childbirth is recognised and revered, their spiritual and creative contributions are still undervalued.

The Tropological Sense (675)

The moral, or tropological, sense then becomes about more than morality in the narrowest sense of the word (how *one* should act; what constitutes a right action) but is intensely personal. It is about how *I* am changed by an understanding of the text; an encounter with myth, truth and symbolic realm. As Cornelius notes, *tropos* is the “turn” of the soul toward truth (1994, p. 267). He continues, using an example from Psalm 114, “the soul comprehends and enacts its own ‘conversion’ from the state of estrangement ... to the state of grace” (1994, p. 267). For the Christian this is a move towards the mission of the Church and the expression of *agape* or *chesed*, the loving-kindness of God, and for Aquinas now we move to a different point in time - the moment of our own action (Ward, 2000, p. 13), perhaps in evangelism or compassionate deeds. More broadly we can understand the

tropological as the application of what we have learned in the allegorical, and specifically as women we start to see how we can live in the knowledge of ourselves as Theotokoi; those who birth the divine into our present reality.

My own tropological turn came when I encountered the story and person of Mary again in a lecture by Pádraig Ó Tuama, an Irish Catholic poet (2010). He expressed his own discomfort with the way in which Mary's virginal status had been the subject of discussion for centuries and the way in which it had shaped ideas of purity and holiness, particularly of women, commenting on the "ease with which we say things about her sexuality and what that meant and the trespassing upon something which should be private". As a gay man himself, he said that he understood something of what it might be like to have your virginity, or lack of it, and the specifics of your sex life, interrogated as if they were public property and used to cast aspersions on your purity or holiness. He refers to Mary as "Our Lady of the Queers" because LGBT people often share this experience in a way that heterosexual people do not. This resonated with my own experience, having recently separated from my husband and being in the process of coming out to friends and family, and I found then in the person of Mary something that I could relate to and connect with. He went on to discuss how an ordinary human life can be considered "the site of an incarnation" and that this understanding can enable us to live fuller and more generous lives. This helped me to understand that despite the apparent chaos and failure of my own life, which I had previously been taught to understand in terms of sin and guilt, my life was graced by God, as Mary's was, and I should live in the light of it. I can trace a few decisions back to that realisation. Firstly, I decided to change my name and gave myself the middle name 'Ariel' (the 'Lion of God' and one of the ancient names for the city of Jerusalem). I decided to reject the names by which others might refer to me as a divorced queer woman, and choose to define myself in line with my understanding of my own being as a site of incarnation. I also decided to become more involved in politics and activism, joining the Green Party, who I felt were the best advocates for economic equality and social justice, which I saw as the outworking of divine love and wisdom in the present, and starting an equality and diversity working party in the school where I taught. I felt that by doing this I was using my own self and experiences, and that which had been specifically given to me, as Mary's pregnancy had been given to her. Specifically I could use my experience as a queer woman to inform the challenging of homophobia in a school environment and empower students who may not have visible and successful role models.

The Anagogical Sense (792)

For Aquinas the anagogical sense brings us to the moment of a “fully realized [sic] future” (Ward, 2000, p.13) in which the text transcends its temporal limitations. Davies claims that the anagogical sense is at the heart of the Pentecostal interpretation of the text, which is coherent with the Pentecostal emphasis on religious experience and miraculous empowerment. He says, “our common heritage, then, has taught us the miracle and the mystery of personal experience of God’s presence, experienced and mediated through the biblical text among other ways, and, therefore, the value of knowing by perception over knowing by proof” (Davies, 2009, pp. 221-222). The Pentecostal Christian, when reading the scriptures, expects a direct experience of the presence and direction of God. He goes on to explain that in the Pentecostal understanding, due to a high theology of the agency of the Holy Spirit, it is perfectly reasonable to think that God may speak directly to the believer through the text, even to the point of changing its meaning to apply to the present context. Further still, the believer dialogues with the spirit through the text, bringing their own needs and questions to it and expecting answers (2009, p. 221). While this is anagogical in the sense that it emphasises the mystical and experiential aspect to an encounter with the scriptures, it does not seem to be fully compatible with an understanding of the four senses hermeneutic as a whole. For Origen the stages build upon one another (Ward, 2000, p. 13), and the Pentecostal approach seems to miss out the allegorical in its rejection of the intellectual (Davies, 2009, pp. 221-222), moving straight from a literal (and Pentecostals are known for their often fundamentalist approach to scripture) understanding of the virgin birth to a perceived direct encounter with the divine, who may or may not transform the text into something else entirely. The anagogical is deeply spiritual, experiential and mystical, a connection with the infinite, and as such is difficult to contain within a particular religious or philosophical worldview. Cornelius notes the “impossibility of describing the anagoge,” but continues, “it is close to all who have been touched by the genius of astrology” (1994, p. 275). The fourth sense, then, is difficult to examine here in its fullness because the mystical is by nature ineffable, although those who experience it know it in the deepest sense.

In lieu of my own lack of experience in this regard, I would like to offer something that is not in itself anagogical, because it is a description of an experience and not the experience itself, but might serve as an illustration of this sense. Again, returning to O Tuama’s lecture (2010), he describes an

experience that his mother had. She was a lifelong Catholic, familiar with the Gospel narrative, so we can see this as an extension of at least the literal and allegorical senses of the text, rather than as an isolated experience.

She had been suffering from post-natal depression, and as she was sleeping in the afternoon she saw an unfamiliar woman enter the room and felt her sit down on the bed. She knew somehow that the woman was Mary.

Mary spoke to her and said, "You never liked me much, did you?"

"No," O Tuama's mother responded, "I wasn't sure how to relate to my own mother and I don't know how to relate to you."

"It's ok." And Mary left her.

What is remarkable about this story is not that the mother had a religious experience, but that this experience was firstly based on an understanding of who Mary was, and secondly had transformative effects in her life. She understood Mary as a mother, and the Mother of God, but could not relate to her as described in the Gospels because she found her experience of motherhood to be painful and alienating. This experience is anagogical because it is rooted in an understanding of the text, but is positioned very much in the present moment and has transformative power for the future. O Tuama notes that his mother started to pray the rosary more, and seemed to have developed a more spiritual connection with Mary. He supposes that in Mary affirming her struggle in identifying with this holy image of motherhood, she began to think she was indeed "ok". She starts to feel more comfortable with her own motherhood and the motherhood of her own mother. O Tuama claims that the point of transformation was in telling the truth, and being able to "feel the depth of truthfulness in yourself". It was an encounter with the very presence and divine energy of Mary herself that was the catalyst for this change.

Conclusion (119)

In this exploration of some of the texts pertaining to Mary in Luke's Gospel, I have endeavoured to show that the four senses hermeneutic is invaluable for us, particularly as women today, in engaging with the transformative power of sacred texts. They can instruct us as to how to harness our very being to bring life and creativity into our own experience and that of those around us. While some believe these narratives to be fundamentally

patriarchal and oppressive, I think that moving them outside the paradigm of Christianity, and from overly literal interpretations, can enable us to redeem them from their context and see them as affirming and empowering our feminine life and energy.

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