

Toward the Spiritual Sense in the Old Testament: The Last Battle in Zion

— Five Texts, One Story

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ABSTRACT: Drawing on patristic and modern hermeneutical frameworks, this article argues that a full interpretation of Old Testament texts requires moving from their literal sense to their spiritual sense, understood as the deeper meaning opened up by the unity of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit. Focusing on the motif of “the last battle in Zion,” the study traces the intertextual chain of this theme from Isaiah’s image of the Lord’s punishing army through Nahum’s destruction of Nineveh and Joel’s eschatological “day of the Lord.” The article then illustrates how the same spiritual logic appears in the Song of Songs and the Wisdom of Solomon, where human narratives concerning Solomon, Lot, Jacob, and Joseph are read in the light of the broader scriptural witness. In sum, the text-internal connection between literal and spiritual senses, together with the Bible’s inherent openness to metaphor and echo, discloses a story of divine victory in Zion that is both historically grounded and eschatologically oriented.

KEY WORDS: Spiritual sense, literal sense, typology, intertextuality, echo, Old Testament, Song of Songs, prophets, Isaiah, Nahum, Joel, last battle in Zion.

1. Introduction

God is the ultimate author of the Bible, and He inspired human authors to write down what He wanted to reveal himself to mankind. Thus, the Bible is the text written by God and human authors that creates a space of infinite communication between

God and us. When reading any text of the Bible it's important to keep in mind that in a limited number of words (written by a human author inspired by God) there's an infinite meaning (that stems ultimately from God and reveals Him). The Bible is therefore a finite text and the infinite text at the same time.

The Bible is the infinite text because it's the word of God, that is the second person of the Holy Trinity; therefore, the meaning it contains must be somehow inexhaustible, as the person of Jesus is. John had an intuition of this when he wrote in his gospel *"but there are also many other things which Jesus did; were every one of them to be written, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written"* (Jn 21:25). If it was impossible to write everything Jesus did, somehow it must have been also impossible to perfectly grasp and write everything Jesus said and meant, which brings us back once again to this reality: the text we have in front of our eyes when we read the Bible is the infinite text. The Bible is indeed the infinite text, meaning it will always be open to a better understanding of God in our end, because it is God who ultimately speaks and reveals Himself through it.

The Bible is not only the infinite text, but it is also a finite text in the sense that every text has a beginning and an end, and so does the Bible: *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth"* (Gen 1:1) and *"Amen"* (Rev 22:21).

2. Literal sense and spiritual sense

If the Bible is a finite text and the infinite text at the same time, then the Bible contains human and divine language. If the Bible contains human and divine language, then the Bible has a finite sense and an infinite sense at the same time, which is the literal sense and the spiritual sense the fathers of the Church spoke of from the very beginning, as Origen pointed out: "The Scriptures were written by the Spirit of God and have not only that meaning which is obvious, but also another meaning which

is hidden from the majority.”¹Let’s put it this way, there’s something unique that happens in the Bible: through a divinely inspired finite text, with beginning and end, with finite sense (literal sense) we enter a space of infinite communication with God where God reveals himself to us (spiritual sense).

It is in the Bible that readers have a dialogue with God, which is what God wants. As Michelangelo Tabet says: in the Bible, *“Human words preserved the original meaning intended by the human writer and the historical context in which they were written, while also achieving a greater richness according to divine intention.”*² This statement comes with three consequences.

First, literal sense and spiritual sense in the Bible come together. There’s no such a thing in the Bible as a text with only literal sense or as a text with only spiritual sense. Both senses are found together in the one text God inspired to the human writers. This is so because the Bible is the word of God. As it is impossible to separate in the person of Christ his human nature and his divine nature, so it is to separate the literal and the spiritual senses of the Bible.

Second, literal sense and spiritual sense are connected. If both senses go hand in hand, the work of exegesis demands to find the connection between them. The connection between literal sense and spiritual sense must be found in the text itself and in the textual context of Biblical texts that is the whole Bible. The text is any given text of the Bible with its historical context; the textual context is the whole Bible, in its unity of Old Testament and New Testament. The work of exegesis starts in the study of any given text of the Bible, which is the study of the meaning of the words (literal sense); then, the work of exegesis gears up to the study of the meaning of those words in

¹ Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973).

² Michelangelo Tabet, *Introduzione generale alla Bibbia* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 1998), 233.

the context of the whole Bible, which is the unity of both Old Testament and New Testament (spiritual sense), study that leads to search out what the Holy Spirit is trying to tell us through the words.³ According to the PBC, the interpretation of the Bible is not complete if it stays at the level of philology or history.⁴

Third, the human writer was always aware of the literal sense but not necessarily aware of the spiritual sense, because the whole Bible was not yet closed when he wrote.

Based on the principles outlined above, the following section proceeds to examine both the literal and spiritual senses of selected texts from the Old Testament.

3. The two protagonists of the last battle in Zion

At first glance the *Song of Songs* is a love poem concerning King Solomon and one of his hundreds of wives. That's one of the contextual meanings of it, but there are more contextual meanings to it.

As Marcial Morera explains, words and texts are open to different interpretations because they have not only literal, but also figurative meaning. In his article *Understanding Word as a Text*, Morera speaks (from a semantics perspective) about the infinite referential capacity of both words and texts. Words and texts alike have the capacity to mean infinite concepts (extended meanings), because the connection between words and texts and their meaning is arbitrary. Indeed, I can use any given word and make connections between its main meaning and different realities in such a way that I will come up with new extended meanings for that given word, even if they are not yet registered in the vocabulary. Vocabularies do not register all

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), para. 115-119.

⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: St. Paul Books, 1993), 81-109.

the possible meanings, only the ones that are coined by their frequent use by the community of speakers. That's how metaphor works. For instance, I can use the word "*drug*" to refer to "my morning coffee" and I can say or write in a specific context "*my drug is the healthiest thing in the world to the point that sets me free and keeps me going*" and nobody would be surprised. Again, as Morera says, "*words and texts alike (especially poetic texts) have infinite contextual meanings.*"⁵

The consequences of this is that the *Song of Songs* is not only a love poem concerning King Solomon and one of his hundreds of wives, but also it can be read in an allegorical way as a love story between God and the soul and God and the Church.⁶ And that is not everything. The *Song of Songs* echoes in the New Testament, especially in one of the most important events in the history of our salvation, in a way not intended by the human author but inspired by God (spiritual sense).

As the narrative of the *Song* unfolds, the profile of this woman is further specified. The beloved (she) is portrayed as a warrior involved in some fight: "*the watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. They beat me, they bruised me; they took away my cloak, those watchmen of the walls!*" (Song 5:7) and "*you are as beautiful as Tirzah, my darling, as lovely as Jerusalem, as majestic as troops with banners*" (Song 6:4). The lover (he) is portrayed in army/chariot imagery: "*who is this that appears like the dawn, fair as the moon, bright as the sun, majestic as the stars in procession?*" (Song 6:10) and "*before I realized it, my desire set me among the royal chariots of my people*" (Song 6:12). The lover and the beloved perform similar actions: she desires to go out to see the fields in bloom: "*Let us go early to the vineyards to see if the vines have budded, if their blossoms have opened, and if the pomegranates are in bloom;*

⁵ Marcial Morera, "*La Palabra como Texto*", REVISTA DE FILOLOGÍA, 23, (2005): 206.

⁶ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermon 1 on the Song of Songs (Cistercian Fathers Series No. 4; trans. Kilian Walsh, OCSO; Spencer, MA: Cistercian Publications, 1971), 1.1–2.

there I will give you my love" (Song 7:12); and he goes to inspect the budding fields: *"I went down to the grove of nut trees to look at the new growth in the valley, to see if the vines had budded or the pomegranates were in bloom"* (Song 6:11). These warriors that contemplate the fields belong to each other: *"my beloved is mine and I am his"; "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine"; "I belong to my beloved, and his desire is for me"* (Song 2:16; 6:3; 7:10) and carry out something important together: *"who is this coming up from the wilderness leaning on her beloved?"* (Song 8:5). Finally, the action they are doing together out of love brings them death: *"For love is as strong as death, passion fierce as the grave."* (Song 8:6–7).

All these texts echo in the New Testament. Affirmative parallels emerge in three passages. Simeon prophesies that *"a sword shall pierce your soul"* (Lk 2:35); John recounts that *"near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene"* (Jn 19,25); and records Jesus entrusting his mother to the beloved disciple: *"Woman, behold your son,"* and to the disciple, *"behold your mother,"* after which the disciple received her into his home (Jn 19,26–27). At Calvary, Jesus and Mary engage in shared combat—Jesus bearing the principal burden, Mary offering steadfast support—to inaugurate the flourishing of new heavens and new earth, redeemed humanity. This paschal drama eschatologically expands verses such as Song 7:12 refracting the entire *Song of Songs* through a metaphorical lens that evokes Jesus's passion on Mount Calvary, Mary's supportive co-mission, and her intercessory role for humankind, which is to lead us to the new creation that starts in the passion of her son.

One of the contextual meanings of the *Song of Songs* is the love story of King Solomon and one of his hundreds of wives (literal sense), but at the same time and in the context of the whole Bible, the *Song of Songs* refers to Jesus carrying out the redemption of human beings and inaugurating the new creation while being helped by Mary who somehow supports her son in his mission (spiritual sense). We get to this contextual meaning

through metaphor and intertextuality (echo in this case) within the context of the whole Bible that is the unity of the Old Testament and the New Testament.⁷ As Goppelt argues, the Old Testament contains “types” that are revealed in Christ and the church in the New Testament.⁸

The human author of this text was aware of the fact that he was telling the love story between King Solomon and one of his hundreds of wives (literal sense). The fact that he is telling us also an important episode of the history of salvation of mankind is part of the spiritual sense, of which he was not aware.

4. The army of the Lord enters the city

The Lord uses as an instrument the nation of Assyria to carry out his plans in Is 5:25-30⁹. In this case God’s plan is to punish the nation of Israel and the people of Judah specifically (Is 5:7)¹⁰. The description of God’s punishment is a description of the efficacy of the Assyrian army in the following terms: at the presence of the army the mountains quaked and the corpses of the people were as refuse in the streets (Is 5:25); the army came swiftly, speedily (Is 5:26); the soldiers marched without stumbling, steadily and wearing fitted uniforms (Is 5:27); the soldiers carried weapons: sharp arrows, bows (Is 5:28); strong horses whose hoofs seemed like hard rock were pulling chariots (Is 5:28); again it was a very fast-moving army (Is 5:28); and their roaring was like a lion’s (Is 5:29).

Besides the historic context for the interpretation of this section of the prophet Isaiah —that is the Assyrian army in motion

⁷ Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms Through the Lens of Intertextuality* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2021).

⁸ Leonhard Goppelt, *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans, 1982).

⁹ Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1990), 237.

¹⁰ The Navarre Bible: *Major Prophets* (New York: Scepter Publishers, 2005), 64.

punishing the people of Israel and Judah specifically— (literal sense), it is important to take into account as well that Isaiah's text must have as well a spiritual sense connected to eschatological interpretation. Indeed, the invasion of the city and the roaring of the army make the mountains quake (Is 5:25); the power of the army is compared to a lion (Is 5:29). The description of the power of the army escalates into something cosmological when it is compared with the roaring of the sea, giving way to the darkening of the light by the clouds (Is 5:30) (NJBC, 1990:237). The text places the reader in front of something bigger than the punishment of Israel and Judah, and in front of something bigger than the Assyrian army. The openness of this text to an eschatological interpretation shows as well in the fact that other prophets picked up on Isaiah's lines to use the same theme not only in a historic, but also in an eschatological way.

Joel provides an abundance of details in his description of the day of YHWH. According to him, the day of the Lord is great and horrible at the same time; it's near and comes as destruction from God: *"Alas for that day! For the day of the Lord is near; it will come like destruction from the Almighty"* (Jl 1:15); *"the day of the Lord is coming; it is close at hand"* (Jl 2:1); *"the day of the Lord is great; it is dreadful; who can endure it?"* (Jl 2:11). The day of YHWH is an eschatological theme about the coming of the Lord at the end of times: *"the sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord"* (Jl 2:31). Finally, the day of YHWH according to Joel is described as a judgment: *"multitudes, multitudes in the valley of decision! For the day of the Lord is near in the valley of decision"* (Jl 3:14).

The destruction that the day of YHWH brings about is described by Joel as a plague of locusts (Jl 1:4) and an army that enters Zion (the city of Jerusalem) and destroys it (Jl 2:1-11). Then, Jl 2:25 states that the locusts he was talking about in chapter 1 are the army of the Lord that he describes in Jl 2:1-11. After the passing of the army of the Lord that destroys everything,

the Lord promises fruitfulness (Jl 2:26), which is why the day of YHWH is great and horrible at the same time: horrible, because it destroys; great, because it works wonders for the people.

If we read these texts carefully, the first thing that we notice is that Joel is taking up the theme of the army of the Lord that Nahum developed (Na 2:3-13) and that goes back ultimately to Isaiah (Is 5:25-30).¹¹ Nahum talks about the destruction of Nineveh for Assyria's crimes against Israel and other nations, using the theme of the army of the Lord that Isaiah used to describe the Lord punishing Israel/Judah (Is 5:25-30).

Nahum's description of the army of the Lord echoes in Joel. Joel takes up the description of the army of the Lord following Nahum's pattern and also taking some elements from Isaiah. Indeed, Nahum describes the shields, the warriors with their uniforms, the chariots and the spears with eschatological imagery (Na 2:3-4) (NJBC, 1990:259); then Nahum says that Nineveh's troops stumble (Na 2:5); then there's the collapse of the palace (Na 2:6) and the stealing of the silver and gold (Na 2:9); and finally everybody trembles and every face grows pale (Na 2:10). Joel's description of the army of the Lord focusses as well in the warriors, that ride horses (Jl 2:2-5), march in line, scale the city walls (Jl 2:7-8), and enter the houses through the windows (Jl 2:9); which makes every face to turn pale (Jl 2:6) while the earth shakes, heavens tremble, the sun and the moon are darkened, and the stars shine no more (Jl 2:10), imagery that describes from a cosmic perspective the day of YHWH following Isaiah's style (NJBC, 1990:402); as a matter of fact, The Lord itself is the one that thunders his voice at the head of his army (Jl 2:11).

Nahum shows that the Lord punishes Nineveh with an army. For Joel, the army that destroys Jerusalem is the army of the

¹¹ James A. Nogalski, "Joel as a Hermeneutical Key to the Book of the Twelve," in *The Twelve Prophets as a Book*, ed. Paul L. Redditt and Aaron Schart (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 193-212.

Lord with the Lord itself at the head of the army. The army of the Lord in Joel is described with more eschatological motives than Nahum's, for instance, for the presence of the Lord in the midst of it, and for the apocalyptic elements in the description of the battle, such as *"before them the earth shakes, the heavens tremble, the sun and moon are darkened, and the stars no longer shine"* (Jl 2:10), which aligns with Isaiah's description of the army of the Lord: the earth quakes (Is 5:25), the roaring of the army is like the roaring of the sea and darkness covers the earth (Is 5:30).

Echoes of Isaiah in Nahum and in Joel emphasize the eschatological interpretation of the theme of army of the Lord (spiritual sense), rather than the historic one, although both interpretations are present in the texts. In the eschatological side, God destroys cities to bring lasting salvation, and Joel uses that theme to describe the ultimate destruction of Jerusalem—an eschatological one—that brings about God's wonders (Jl 2:26), meaning probably ultimate salvation, regardless the different destructions of the city of Jerusalem throughout history.

It is not surprising that texts of the older prophets echo in the newer prophets. Since all of them belong to the same canon, readings and interpretations of the older prophets inspire the newer ones. For instance, Nahum's lines echo in Joel's lines. Nahum describes the destruction of Nineveh with a powerful metaphor, that is locusts destroy everything (Na 3:15-17) (NJBC, 1990:260). Joel would use that analogy to describe the army of the Lord in motion, *"what the locust swarm has left, the great locusts have eaten; what the great locusts have left, the young locusts have eaten; what the young locusts have left, other locusts have eaten"* (Jl 1:4).

It is not surprising either that all of this echoes in the NT in the following texts:

—Na 1:15 announces the coming from the mountains of the one who brings good news and peace and the one who puts to an end the invasion of the wicked, which echoes in Lk 2:34 when Simeon says that this Child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall and many to rise.

—The Lord utters his voice ahead of his army (Jl 2:11) echoes in Mt 27:50; Mk 15:37; Lk 23:46 where we read different versions of “*Jesus cried out again with a loud voice*”. The Lord is portrayed by Joel as a warrior and this warrior characterization of the Lord aligns seamlessly with early Christian interpretation. Indeed, Stephen’s accusers charged that he preached that Jesus would destroy “this place”—that is, Jerusalem—and alter the Mosaic customs (Acts 6,13–14).

—“*A day of darkness and gloom*” (Jl 2:2), “*the sun and moon darkened*” (Jl 2:10), “*the earth shakes*” (Jl 2:10) echo in the darkness that spread in Jerusalem during the passion of the Lord: “*from noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land*” (Mt 27:45) and other versions of the same theme in Mk 15,33 and Lk 23,44–45; and in “*the earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open*” (Mt 27,50–51).

Therefore, it is not a temerity to say that the theme “the army of the Lord” in the prophetic books is a “type” of the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord bringing first the destruction of an old world of sin and secondly the establishment of a new world of grace, the new heavens and the new earth. Davidson was right when he said that biblical typology is a real, text-based pattern built into Scripture itself, not just a later reader’s creative comparison and when he said that valid typology is grounded in history, rooted in Scripture, and shaped by a forward-looking prophetic-eschatological structure that connects Old Testament types to New Testament antitypes.¹²

¹² R. M. Davidson, *Typology in Scripture* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1982).

5. Victory in Zion

The human author of Wisdom 10:6 knew he was referring to Lot's story when he wrote: "*Wisdom preserved the righteous man from the wicked who were perishing,*" a story that occurs first in Genesis 19. The human author of Wisdom 10:10 also knew he was referring to Jacob's story when he wrote: "*when he fled down from his brother's anger*", a story that occurs first in Genesis 27:43-44. Finally, the human author of Wisdom 10:13-14 knew he was referring to Joseph when he wrote: "*She did not abandon a righteous man when he was sold, but rescued him from sin. She went down with him into the dungeon, and did not desert him in his bonds, until she brought him the sceptre of royalty and authority over his oppressors, proved false those who had defamed him, and gave him eternal glory,*" story that first occurs in Genesis 37-50. All of that is literal sense: what the human author of the Bible intended to say.

What the human author didn't know is that he was also telling the story of Jesus of Nazareth, the son of God, the Messiah: "*She did not abandon a righteous man when he was sold, but rescued him from sin*", which refers to Judas selling Jesus to his enemies (Mt 26:15); "*She went down with him into the dungeon, and did not desert him in his bonds, until she brought him the sceptre of royalty and authority over his oppressors, proved false those who had defamed him, and gave him eternal glory,*" refers to Jesus' death and resurrection and the outcome of it: now the Lord from heaven has the control over creation and over the enemy. All of this is the spiritual sense of these passages of the book of Wisdom and it's possible for us to figure it out through metaphor (openness of words and texts to many contextual meanings) and echoes (that create intertextual networks throughout the Bible connecting Old Testament texts with New Testament texts.)

Finally, Agostine was right when he spoke of the importance of getting to the spiritual sense of scripture and he warns us not to take a figurative expression literally, because that would lead to a carnal interpretation of Scripture and he quotes St. Paul who said “*the letter kills but the spirit gives life.*”¹³

6. Conclusions

1. A complete interpretation of biblical texts often involves a movement from the literal sense to the spiritual sense.
2. The connection between the literal sense and the spiritual sense must be found in the text itself and in its broader textual context, that is, the whole Bible. The inherent openness of words and texts to metaphorical meaning and to intertextual resonance—especially in the form of echo, where one text can shape the meaning of another—paves the way for the spiritual sense of biblical texts.
3. The sense of Scripture is inexhaustible; the Bible will always remain open to a deeper understanding of God, because it is God himself who ultimately speaks and reveals himself through the biblical text.

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