Hermathena

A TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN REVIEW

The Literal Sense and the *Sensus Plenior* Revisited

by Tibor Fabiny

Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,
  And the configurations of their glory!
  Seeing not only how each verse doth shine,
But all the constellations of the story.

This verse marks that, and both do make a motion
  Unto a third, that ten leaves off does lie:
  Then as dispersed herbs do watch a potion,
These three make up some Christians destinie:

Such are thy secrets, which my life makes good,
  And comments on thee: for in everything
  Thy words find me out, and parallels bring,
And in another make me understand.

Stars are poor books and oftentimes do miss:
This book of stars lights to eternal bliss.

George Herbert: *Holy Scriptures II.*

This paper must begin with a confession, if not with a story of conversion. I have always radically rejected the 'literal interpretation' of the Bible because it has always appeared to me as a synonym for literal-mindedness, verbal inspiration or the fundamentalist reading. My recent hermeneutical and literary critical investigations into the meaning of biblical texts, however, have convinced me that a rediscovery of the proper sense of the literal sense is unavoidable. Therefore, the purpose of the present paper is a revisiting of the nature of the "literal sense" or what Frank Kermode, quoting Wallace Stevens, has called the "plain sense of things". (Kermode, 1986).

1. *What is the Literal Sense?* (Up to the Reformation)

The interpretation of biblical texts has always had to face the perplexing question of defining what is meant by the literal sense of Scripture. As Brevard Childs has recently shown it is both an ancient and a modern problem (Childs, 1976). Jewish exegetes around the fourth century (Longenecker, 1975, 31) began to distinguish between the *peshat,* that is, the plain, straightforward or

literal sense of Scripture and the *derash*, that is, the applied or homiletical sense. The original meaning of *peshat* is "to stretch out", "to flatten out", "to extend", "to make it plain" while the *derash* had to do with the imaginatively expositional elaboration of the *haggada* or moral exegesis. According to Raphael Loewe the plain, straightforward exegesis "corresponds to the totality of meaning(s) intended by the writer" (Loewe, 1964, 141). Based on the Pauline distinction between the "letter" and the "spirit" in 2 Corinthians 3:6 Christian exegetes have gradually begun to distinguish between the "literal" and the "spiritual" senses of Scripture. The antithesis *gramma- pneuma* occurs three times in the New Testament, in 2 Cor 3:6; Rom 2:29; Rom 7:6. The first centuries of Christian exegesis were not untouched by the hellenistic dualism of the body and the spirit. It was Origen, the author of the first biblical hermeneutics who, based on the Pauline anthropology in 1 Thess. 5:23 developed the idea of the threefold senses of Scripture: (1) the literal-historical sense (corresponding to the "body" [*sarks*]; (2) the moral-psychological sense, corresponding to the "soul" [*psyche*]; (3) the spiritual-allegorical-mystical sense, corresponding to the "spirit" [*pneuma*]. From time to time Origen dropped the moral sense and used the dualism of the letter and the spirit. For Origen the investigation of the spiritual sense (seeking "secret and hidden wisdom of God") is the highest form of exegesis reserved for a Christian "elite" who have the "mind of Christ" (1 Cor 2:16). According to Origen there are three groups that lapse into literalist or "carnal" misreadings: the Jews, the heretics (Marcion) and the primitive readers because they take the letter at its face-value. Origen illustrated the absurdities of the literalist misreadings with the example of his comments on Genesis. In the 19th century the liberal theologian Adolf Harnack found that Origen had gone too far in his fanciful-imaginative-spiritualist readings, that he preferred to choose Marcion rather than Origen's "biblical alchemy". The School of Antioch with Diodore of Tarsus (d.394) or Theodore of Mospusetia (c 350-407) protested passionately against the allegorical practice of Origen and the School of Alexandria. They all insisted on the primary of the literal and the historical sense and instead of allegory they invented the term *theoria* (vision) that would not conflict with the underlying historical sense. Jerome drew strongly on the literal sense of the Antiochians, Augustine did not reject the historical foundation entirely either, though he also drew a sharp distinction between the "carnally" and "spiritually" minded readers of the Bible especially in his *De Spiritu et Littera*. Augustine formally rebuked Philo's

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allegorizing but unconsciously he frequently adopted it by baptizing it. Thus he bequeathed a massive but frequently Platonistic exegetical tradition to the Middle Ages.

The idea of the *Quadriga*, the four sense of Scripture (literal, allegorical, moral, anagogical) goes back to John Cassian (c365-c435) a contemporary of Augustine, but it gained dominance throughout the Middle Ages. Due to the industrious research of Beryl Smalley we have come to know much about the re-emphasis of the literal sense by the Victorine school near Paris in the early twelfth century. Its most important representative, Hugh of St. Victor was strongly influenced by the Jewish exegete Rashi who had clearly distinguished between *peshat* and *derash* in order to free the Hebrew Bible from Christian allegorization. Hugh emphasized throughout his works, especially in his *Didascalicon* that a good exegete should always begin with the literal or the historical sense.

Thomas of Aquinas divided the senses of Scripture into literal and spiritual, the literal being conveyed by the *words (litterae* or *verba)* and the spiritual by the *things (res)* of Scripture. This Thomistic dualistic distinction seems to survive even in the recent 1990 edition of *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* where Raymond Brown defines the literal sense as follows: "The sense which the human author directly intended and which his words conveyed." (Brown, 1990, 1148). And the spiritual (or typical) sense is defined as: "the deeper meaning of the 'things' written about in the Bible when they are seen to have foreshadowed future 'thing' in God's work of salvation." (Brown, 1990, 1156). Aquinas stresses that the spiritual sense involves the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses.

An even more radical defence of the literal sense comes from Nicholas of Lyra (1270-1340) who never failed to acknowledge his debt to Rashi and the *hebraica veritas.* James Samuel Preus has demonstrated that Lyra in his fight against endless allegorizing invented the idea of *duplex sensus litteralis,* the double literal sense. Quoting 1 Chron. 17:13 "I will be a father to him" and its New Testament "fulfilment" in Heb. 1:5, Lyra stresses that this text refers both to Solomon and Christ because the letter can appeal to a second literal sense which is just as literal as the first. (Preus, 1969, 78). So there is a "Hebrew" and a "Christian" sense: Solomon being the historico-literal while Christ the edifying literal sense. Preus finds that this is "the first time . . . a New Testament reading of an Old Testament passage is dignified with the label 'literal'." (Preus, 1969, 69).

"If Lyra had not sung, Luther would not have danced" *(Si Lyra*

non lyrasset, Lutherus non saltasset), runs the proverb. Though the medieval Luther in his exegesis of the Psalms drew heavily of the four sense of Scripture, later he radically refused the *Quadriga* and rejected *allegorizare* as *origenisare* stressing the exclusive significance of the literal sense. Luther believed in the "plain sense" of Scripture and found that the "Holy Spirit is the plainest writer and speaker in heaven and earth". Erasmus, however, asked "if it is all so plain, why have so many excellent men for so many centuries walked in darkness?" (Kermode, 182-3). For Luther the literal meaning was basically the only meaning but his interest was not exclusively in the *sensus litteralis*, as for Lyra or the Jewish exegetes, but *sensus litteralis propheticus*, implying the *testimonia* or *promissio* which we could call the prophetic aspect of the literal sense. So Luther's Old Testament exegesis is profoundly future-oriented and christological: the Old Testament is thus a testimony to Christ; the reader is supposed to read *"was Christum treibt"*. Luther's hermeneutical divide, as Preus has shown, is not any more between the letter of the Old Testament and the spirit of the New, but is already within the Old Testament which contains both laws and promises. (Preus, 1969, 201-11). Against the "carnal intelligence" Luther emphasized the "spiritual" insights. But this attitude is substantially different from the scholastic distinction between literal and spiritual meanings. Luther understood the Old Testament in terms of faith *(analogia fidei)* and thus he could discern christologically the future gaze in "the faithful synagogue". The Old Testament faith becomes "a model and example for the self-understanding of the Christian community, and the Christian believer". (Preus, 1969, 211). For Luther the act of reading just as the act of understanding, was an act of faith. The distinction for Luther is not the spirit *and* the letter but the spirit *in* the letter. The exegete must draw out the spirit from the letter. "The spirit turns into the letter, but the letter must in its turn constantly become its spirit again". (Ebeling, 1972, 99).

There has been one technical term among the Reformers that probably best suited Luther's *sensus litteralis propheticus* and this term was the "scope" of biblical texts. According to William Perkins the "places of Scripture are expounded by the analogy of faith, by the words, scope and circumstances of the place". (Perkins, 1989, 310-1). Gerald T. Sheppard has recently argued that "scope" as a technical term was a part and parcel fo Reformation hermeneutics. One of the hermeneutical rules of Matthias Flacius Illyricus' (1520-1575) monumental *Clavis Scripturae* said that the literal sense was to be disclosed "by the scope, purpose, or intention of the whole

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book". (Sheppard, 1991, 48). The Protestant Reformers spoke not of the scope of the author, but always about the scope of a text, a passage, place, story, chapter, or book. Sheppard has shown that the "scope" comes from the Greek *skopos* meaning "to oversee", "to survey", "to aim at". "By means of the 'scope' one discerns the centre of a target at which one aims a weapon, or, in hermeneutical terms, one can determine the aim, intent, or central purpose of a text". (Sheppard, 1989, LX). Athanasius is said to have accused the Arians of missing the "scope" of some texts. "Scope" was meant to express how the parts of a book interrelated, how they corresponded to the perspective of the total work. The Reformers' use of "scope", says Sheppard, is not an idiosyncrasy inspired by the Greek fathers, but reflects a wide-ranging, text-oriented proposal common to a perception of textuality of Scripture during the post-Reformation period in Europe, England and New England". (Sheppard, 1989, LXIV). This implies that by means of the "scope" the *sensus litteralis* is being expanded as beyond the bare signification of words it embraces also that which is thereby signified: the literal sense implies its own figural exposition. The analogy of faith is necessary to discern the figural dimensions of the literal sense. For William Perkins as for the other Reformers both the proper and figural expositions belong to the literal sense, which he calls "the full sense of the Holy Ghost". (LXI).

However, this text-oriented (and not author-oriented!) literal sense with its notion of the "scope" seems to have vanished by the end of the 17th century. The literal sense has survived but with some major distortions at least from two aspects.

II. *The Distortions of the Literal Sense*

The idea of the literal sense has undergone some major alterations in the 18th century. We can speak about a populist and a scholarly distortion. Both are, perhaps, rooted in the emergence of what Northrop Frye calls the descriprive-demotic phase of language.

a) POPULIST   LITERALISM

According to Frye the descriptive-demotic phase of language begins roughly in the sixteenth century, but "attains cultural ascendency in the eighteenth". (Frye, 1982, 13). Within this phase biblical language is seen as referential and the criterion of "truth" is the accurate matching or correspondence of biblical language with the "outside" world. Frye writes,

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With the general acceptance of demotic and descriptive criteria in language, such literalism becomes a feature of anti-intellectual Christian populism. This attitude says, for example, that the story of Jonah must describe a real sojourn inside a real whale, otherwise we are making God, as the ultimate source of the story, into a liar. (Frye, 1982, 45).

Fundamentalism with its doctrine of inerrancy, as Barr and others (Barr, 1977; Barr, 1984; Marsden, 1980) have shown us, is basically a 20th century phenomenon. But the *Die Bible hat doch recht* mentality that aims to substantiate belief rationally by "proofs" as "historical evidences" that confirm the "letter" of Scripture, is, in my view, rooted in 18th century populist literalism. Brevard Childs argued more than thirty years ago that the idea of exactness of correspondence in the prediction and fulfilment formula is alien from the Hebrew view of fulfilment:

It is non-Hebraic thinking which tries to relate prophecy and fulfillment in terms of exactness of correspondence based on a Greek theory of truth. The Hebrew view of fulfilment does not consider them as two independent entities whose relation is determined by an external criterion. (Childs, 1958, 267).

A literary critical perspective can help us to overcome this populist literal-mindedness. With Northrop Frye we can say that it is a fallacy to regard the literal meaning as simply the descriptive meaning. Populist or centrifugal literalism is an "externalized literalism" because it subordinates "words" to "real things". (Frye, 1982, 61). On the contrary,

the primary and literal meaning of the Bible . . . is its centripetal or poetic meaning . . . This primary meaning, which arises simply from the interconnection of words, is the metaphorical meaning . . . In the Bible the literal meaning, first by tautology, in the context in which all literal meaning is centripetal or poetic; secondly, in a quite specific sense of confronting us with explicitely metaphorical and other forms of distinctively poetic utterance. . . . (Frye, 1982, 61-2).

Frye had shown already in the *Anatomy* that the literal meaning of a poem (e.g. of Dante's *Comdey*) is not its historical reference, a simple description of what really happened, but the whole poem: "the literal basis of meaning in poetry can only be its letters, its inner structure of interlocking motifs." (Frye, 1957, 77).

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b) HISTORICIST RECONSTRUCTION

The all-inclusive aspect of the literal sense preceived by the Reformers has been distorted not only from below, but also from above, by high criticism. Sheppard has recently argued that both literalism and liberalism are products of modernism: "fundamentalism is a position advocating the right wing of modernism, old liberalism being on the left." (Sheppard, 1990, 56).

It was Bervard S. Childs who, in his excellent article "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem" (1976) has convincingly demonstrated that the historical-critical method, emerging in the 18th century was characterized by a total commitment to the literal sense. The general assumption has been that there is an unbroken line of continuity between the Reformation and the 18th century with regard to the literal sense. However, Hans Frei in his brilliant *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative* (1974) has demonstrated the discontinuity between the Reformers and the eighteenth and nineteenth century critics (Frei, 1974). Childs comments:

Basic to the new approach was the attack on the identity of the explicative sense and the historical reference of the text. When the coherence between the verbal sense of the text, that is the literal sense, and its real reference was shattered, a whole set of new hermeneutical options opened up for the interpreter. Thus Spinoza was at pains to demonstrate that the literal meaning of the text was to be sharply distinguished from the question of truth, and that the subject matter of the Old Testament was not events but the lessons which they convey. Increasingly both conservative and liberal scholars grew to assume that the meaning of the biblical text lay in its historical reference and the issue of historical factuality, usually couched apologetically in terms of "evidendes", came to dominate English 18th century study of the Bible. The task of exegesis lay in working out the true historical reference since revelation no longer consisted in the words, but exclusively in the subject-matter to which the words referred. (Childs, 1976, 88-9).

This new attitude had an enormous impact on the *sensus literalis*. True, the Reformers often interchanged the *sensus literalis* and the *sensus historicus* but they did not claim that the *sensus historicus* is the original and "true" literal meaning. With the 18th century, however,

The historical sense of the text was construed as being the *original* meaning of the text . . . Therefore, the aim of the interpreter was to reconstruct the original occasion of the historical reference on the basis of which the truth

of the biblical text could be determined. In sum, the *sensus literalis* had become *sensus originalis*. (Childs, 1976, 89).

The consequence of this recognition was the desperate attempt to remove all the interpretative layers of Scripture, to free it from tradition and dogma in order to arrive at the original, authentic meaning. By this attitude, argues Childs, the integrity of the literal sense was shattered and undermined just the same way as it was undermined by the four senses in the Middle Ages.

by identifying the literal sense with the historical sense, which is then interpreted within the model of meaning as ostensive reference, any claim for the integrity of the literal sense of the text is virtually destroyed. The explanation of the biblical text is now governed by historical research. The role of the literal sense of the text functions to provide a way behind the text to some historical reality. The literal sense of the text in itself has lost all significance. (Childs, 1976, 90).

The further consequences of this unhappy distortion were that interpretation became speculative and the Bible, by losing its "scope", also lost its concept as Scriptures of a community of faith. And last, the gap between the historical "then" and the relevant "now" became insurmountable. Hence there have been so many desperate attempts at *Vergegenvertigung* in recent theology. Childs' frightening recognition is, that each consequence had its antecedent in the Middle Ages.

What was intended as an attempt to free the text from the allegedly heavy hand of tradition and dogma proved to be a weapon which cut both ways . . . Whereas during the medieval period the crucial issue lay in the usage made of the multiple layers of meaning *above* the text, the issue now turns on the multiple layers *below* the text. The parallel consists in the threat from both directions to undermine the literal sense of the biblical text. (Childs, 1976, 92).

In conclusion we can say that there are at least two characteristic features or concommitants of the modern distortion of the integrity of the literal sense. The first one is the endless attempt at the *reconstruction* of the original meaning and the second one is the effort to locate the literal meaning within the *intention of the author*. So far I have dealt only with the first feature. With regard to the intention of the author we can appeal to Ricoeur's theory of the text. The essence of Ricouer's new theory of interpretation is that the text itself has intention: the text speaks, the text orients our thought.

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Interpretation is not an act on the text but the act of the text. (Ricoeur, 1986, 241). Therefore it is more proper to speak about "textual intention" rather than "authorial intention".

3. *The Recovery of the Integrity of the Literal Sense*

How to recover the loss of the integrity of the literal sense? In the following I wish to refer to some models of solutions. Some models are closely related to each other but some others do not seem to be aware of each other.

The first model is that of Childs' himself. He offers the *canon-critical* recovery of the literal sense. Arguing that biblical exegesis has been the strongest when it rested on the literal sense "in such a way as not to divorce text from reality, and history from theology" (Childs, 1977, 92). This implies that, a) the doctrine of revelation cannot be studied independent from the doctrine of inspiration; b) the genuine *sensus literalis* means always a commitment to the canon; c) the literal sense and the figurative sense should not be in tension with one another, since the basis of the actualization and future accommodation is the literal sense. Thus the church's *regula fidei* should encompass both text and tradition in an integral unity as the living Word of God; d) the proper understanding should be of the *testimonium Spiritus sancti.* (Childs, 1976, 92-3).

The second model is that of Gerald T. Sheppard who, following Childs, condemns the "misplaced literalism" of both the conservatives and the moderns and identifies the literal sense "by its canonical context, its intertext, and its subject matter which corresponds to the scope and analogy of faith . . ." (Sheppard, 1991, 50). Sheppard says that beside the inaccurate assumption that a historical reconstruction of a biblical author's intent is the same as the literal sense, the use of "scope" was neglected because of an "inadequate historical-critical appreciation for the semantic transformation that takes place when precritical traditions conjoin to form parts of a scripture in Judaism and Christianity". (Sheppard, 1989, LXVIII). Moreover, "the modern pursuit of a historically reconstructed author and his or her intent inevitably atomizes the biblical books by shifting focus away from what was traditionally considered the literal sense of Scripture . . . (Sheppard, 1989, LXIX). The solution for Sheppard is a reaffirming of the "scope" and a conscious awareness of the intertextuality of Scripture: "The nature of Scripture presupposes a textual unity or an intertextuality not anticipated by the original authors of traditions caught up in it." (Sheppard, 1989, LXX). The idea of the "scope" as

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a text-oriented concept strongly resembles what canonical criticism describes as "the shape or the composition of biblical books in their canonical context or canon-conscious redactions within the formation of Scripture." (Sheppard, 1989, LXXII). Using Frei's and Auerbach's insights, Sheppard offers Perkins' idea of the scope of Scripture, which, as an intertext is a far more powerful and better way of rendering reality for religious believers than any other modern concept of history.

The third solution comes from the early Raymond Brown and his idea of the *sensus plenior* of Scripture. I am suggesting the "early" Raymond Brown, because with his gradual abandoning of a somewhat rigid scholastic tradition, he seems to have moved, in my view too rapidly, towards the historical idea of the literal sense. Thus in Childs' words he "has not . . . fully avoided the pitfalls of modern Protestantism". (Childs, 1977, 90). However, I find that some of his ideas, perhaps with some modifications, closely resemble the idea of the "scope" of Scripture.

The *sensus plenior* (hereafter: SP) is a modern term. It was invented by Ferdinandez in 1925 but gained wider currency after the papal encyclical of 1943 encouraged Catholic theologians to adopt methods of critical and historical exegesis in the study of the Bible. Raymond E. Brown proposed the following definition in 1955:

> the *sensus plenior* is that additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of the biblical texts (or a group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation. (Brown, 1955, 92).

In 1968 Brown emphasized that the SP is not a new sense but belongs to the literal sense; it is the *approfondissement* of the literal sense. (Brown, 1968, 72). It is a necessary consequence of the traditional doctrine of inspiration and the so-called "double-authorship" (human and divine) of Scripture. Thus Isaiah as the human author was not necessarily aware that he was uttering prophecy about the birth of Christ: the fuller or deeper meaning of the passage is uncovered in a later stage of revelation and Matthew has recorded this discovery. The fuller sense of Scripture is the literal sense that is pregnant with a future. The prophet does not simply "foresee" the future; for him all futurity is within the "thing", but this is understood only later on the basis of the progressive revelation of God. SP is usually recognized in retrospect: just as in Jesus' lifetime

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the disciples were unable to understand some of their master's sayings (for example about the temple) or his actions (for example the footwashing) Jesus promised to send them the Paraclete who would enable them to understand these sayings and events.

Although the SP had only a short-lived career in Catholic exegesis, among some Protestants it soon gained currency. As early as 1965 J. M. Robinson suggested that the SP should take the direction of the New Hermeneutics (Gadamer, Ebeling etc.) which rejects the idea of "authorial intention" and conceives the text and its life from its original composition up till now as a "world-event". It would imply that it is not the "author" but the "language" that speaks in texts. (Robinson, 1965, 6-27). The term was creatively adopted by an American Protestant biblical scholar, William Sanford LaSor. He suggested the following definition:

the fuller meaning of a passage, the 'something more' that was given by God in the divine inspiration, that makes the message equally valid as the word of God to succeeding generations. (LaSor, 1978a, 50)

LaSor related the SP to the "prophecy and fulfilment pattern". He rejected the idea that prophecy is a mere prediction of future events, claiming instead, that it is the "revelation of God's purpose in the present situation and its on-going character . . . It is an age-long outworking of his own will." (LaSor, 1978a, 55). The idea of prophecy is that God is fulfilling his purpose which is not yet complete. Prophecy that "reveals some part of God's redemptive purpose is capable of being filled, or achieving a fullness, so that when it is *filled full* it is *fulfilled.*" (LaSor, 1978a, 51). The SP or the fullness of meaning can be discovered when we "relate the situation and the prophecy to the on-going redemptive purpose of God." (LaSor, 1978a, 51). I wish to demonstrate that Brown's and LaSor's idea of the SP can be integrated into the "canonical approach" of Childs or Sheppard. A recent attempt at this integration was made by Douglas A. Oss. In 1988 he wrote as follows:

the *SP* of a given text is simply that which emerges when the text is subjected to the light of all biblical revelation. Thus the use of *SP* as a hermeneutical method does not involve allegorization or eisegesis, but involves discerning in a text all the strata of meaning that the canonical context warrants. The progress of revelation dictates that the meaning of scriptural texts became deeper and clearer as the canon unfolded. The exegete, by considering the Bible as an integrated whole, reaches a fuller understanding of individual texts of Scripture. That fuller understanding

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involves strata of meaning, all of which the author expressed, whether or not he *intended* to express them. (OSS, 1988, 105).

The fourth solution is offered by the *literary criticism* of Northrop Frye. We have already alluded to Frye's notion of the literal sense when we criticized the anti-intellectual "populist" literalism in Christianity. But Frye writes in *The Great Code* that "one of the central issues of the present book [is] the nature of 'literal' meaning." (Frye, 1982, 45). This literal meaning is warranted by the "shape" of the Bible when read it as a unity of narrative and imagery. However, this unity is realized only in reading. Only in reading do we experience meaning. To describe the effect of reading on meaning Frye has adopted Dante's term "polysemous". This expression does not imply many different meanings nor does it contradict the primacy of the literal meaning. The Reformers' and Milton's formula that "no passage is to be interpreted in more than one sense" remains unchallenged. Frye describes what he means by this term as follows:

> One of the commonest experiences in reading is the sense of further discoveries to be made within the same structure of words. The feeling is approximately 'there is more to be got out of this', or we may say . . . that every time we read it we get something new out of it. This 'something new' is not necessarily something we have overlooked before, but may come rather from a new context in our experience. . . . (Frye, 1982, 220)

Commenting on Dante's four senses Frye writes:

> What is implied here is a single process growing in subtlety and comprehensiveness, not different senses, but different intensities or wider contexts of a continuous sense, unfolding like a plant out of a seed. (Frye, 1982, 221).

With this idea of polysemous meaning Frye, like Childs, is able to preserve the integrity of the literal sense ("not different senses") and he is also able to avoid the trap of historicists or intentionalists who want to fix the meaning in an external, historical or biographical reality. There have been some other technical terms that, like Frye's "polysemous meaning", that have tried to provide room for his "continuous sense". The Antiochian's *theoria* or Brown's *sensus plenior* strike me as similar to Frye's notion. What is common to all these theories is that meaning is not conceived as something static or fixed but rather as a continuous, unfolding process, "unfolding like a plant out of a seed". If we conceive of the language of the

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Bible in terms of a "seed", then meaning should also be understood as an organic growth.

Therefore, our conclusion is that the literal meaning is a dynamic process rather than a static entity; it is in constant motion, it is a progress, a growth, always in the making. The *sensus plenior* should be seen as part of the literal sense, a future, figurative dimension of the literal meaning. Thus we have come back to where we began, since the meaning of *peshat* was "to spread out", "to stretch out", "to make plain", "to extend", "to unfold", "straighting and smoothing out the uneven parts". (Weingreen, 1976, 57; Gertner, 1962, 180). Contrary to traditional view of authorial intention the literal sense is not the property of the author but the quality of the text, and belongs to the reader.*

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