The Bible and Bread

Context, Themes, and Word Study

Medieval Fourfold Interpretation
2026 Weeks 1, 2, & 3
Matthew 2:13-18 & 2 Samuel 6

Medieval Fourfold Interpretation

from *How to Read the Bible*
by Miranda Threlfall- Holmes

The 4 “layers of meaning” that developed as standard over the medieval period

1. The literal or plain sense –

    What the words actually said, including how they would have been understood in their original context.

Study the words. Words are signs. The Holy Spirit continues to inform and work in the contexts of the human condition. A range of understandings and a multiplicity of meanings with various implications and resonances were understood by medieval interpreters as part of the literal meaning of the text.

2. The allegorical, illustrative or doctrinal sense –

What the text might tell us about the Church and Christian belief.

Assumed the text was always relevant now, it was always cryptic to some extent and in need of skilled interpretation to draw out its meaning and deeper implications.

Assumed that people, places, and things refer to more than just their own reality; they tell us about God, faith, or the spiritual life. Such assumption was essential to reading the Hebrew scriptures (Old Testament). If a passage seemed to be inconsistent with Christian teaching, then it must have an allegorical meaning ~ word signs, symbols, or parallels.

Particular focus was on Christian doctrine, especially for passages that were not immediately edifying.

3. The tropological, moral or soul sense –

    How this applies to our inner moral and spiritual lives.

Uses the allegorical approach and applies it to our inner and spiritual lives, rather than Christian doctrine.

What questions does the passage ask us to consider, what moods, emotions, challenges does it bring forth for our inner life?

4. The anagogical or future vision sense –

How the passage points to the future, to hope in the afterlife or to the ultimate destiny of humanity.

Augustine: Love: The love of God for God's own sake, and the love of our neighbor for God's sake, is the fulfillment and end of all Scripture.

Faith hope and love are graces essentially necessary for anyone wishing to understand and explain Scripture.

The aim of human life was to enjoy God. Enjoyment of all the good things in creation, our own bodies, food, drink, the beauties of nature, science and so on, used rightly, could help us to reach this place of loving God and this included loving other people, because we are all made in God's image. Augustine calls this Charity.

Layers of Meaning

Where the meaning of a passage seems on the face of it to be toxic rather than nourishing, try looking for as many of these layers of meaning as possible.

4 Quandrant method:

Brainstorm: for each quadrant write what you think is meant without judging how good or right your thought may be.

Assess: which thoughts are nourishing or edifying?

Matthew 2:13-18

The Escape to Egypt

13 Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up, take the child
and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you, for Herod is about to search for the child,
to destroy him.” 14 Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt 15 and
remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the
prophet, “Out of Egypt I have called my son.”

The Massacre of the Infants

16 When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the magi, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the
children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had
learned from the magi. 17 Then what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled:

18 “A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.”

Kiss:
What does the passage say?

Quadrilateral:
Scripture is *Primary:*
Read the passage in its book's context

Medieval Fourfold:
The literal or plain sense:
What a study of the words reveals

Kiss:
What does the passage say about humanity?

Quadrilateral:
Tradition:
How has the Church universal treated this passage throughout history

Medieval Fourfold:
The allegorical, illustrative, or doctrinal sense:
What the text might tell us about the Church and Christian belief

Kiss:
What does the passage say about God?

Quadrilateral:
Reason:
Methodists relate scripture to science, culture, and justice, seeking a comprehensive view of reality informed by the Gospel by loving God with their mind.

Medieval Fourfold:
The moral or soul sense of the passage uses the allegorical, illustrative, or doctrinal sense and considers: What the text might tell us about our inner moral and spiritual lives

Kiss:
What does the passage say about the relationship between God and humanity?

Quadrilateral:
Experience:
Personal and communal encounters with God that confirm faith in action, practically transformative, avoiding rigid literalism or ungrounded subjectivism

Medieval Fourfold:
The anagogical or future vision sense:
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2 Samuel 6 *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition*

6 David again gathered all the chosen men of Israel, thirty
thousand. 2 David and all the people with him set out and went from
Baale-judah to bring up from there the ark of God, which is called
by the name of the LORD of hosts who is enthroned on the
cherubim. 3 They carried the ark of God on a new cart and brought it
out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill. Uzzah and
Ahio, the sons of Abinadab, were driving the new cart 4 with the ark
of God, and Ahio went in front of the ark. 5 David and all the house
of Israel were dancing before the LORD with all their might, with
songs and lyres and harps and tambourines and castanets and
cymbals.

6 When they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah reached
out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen
lurched. 7 The anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and
God struck him there, and he died there beside the ark of
God. 8 David was angry because the LORD had burst forth with an
outburst upon Uzzah, so that place is called Perez-uzzah to this
day. 9 David was afraid of the LORD that day; he said, "How can the
ark of the LORD come into my care?" 10 So David was unwilling to
take the ark of the LORD into his care in the city of David; instead,
David took it to the house of Obed-edom the Gittite. 11 The ark of
the LORD remained in the house of Obed-edom the Gittite three
months, and the LORD blessed Obed-edom and all his household.

12 It was told King David, "The LORD has blessed the household of
Obed-edom and all that belongs to him because of the ark of God."
So David went and brought up the ark of God from the house of
Obed-edom to the city of David with rejoicing,
13 and when those who bore the ark of the LORD had gone six paces, he
sacrificed an ox and a fatted calf. 14 David danced before the LORD with all his
might; David was girded with a linen ephod. 15 So David and all the house of
Israel brought up the ark of the LORD with shouting and with the sound of
the trumpet.

16 As the ark of the LORD came into the city of David, Michal daughter of Saul
looked out of the window and saw King David leaping and dancing before
the LORD, and she despised him in her heart.

17 They brought in the ark of the LORD and set it in its place, inside the tent
that David had pitched for it, and David offered burnt offerings and offerings
of well-being before the LORD. 18 When David had finished offering the burnt
offerings and the offerings of well-being, he blessed the people in the name
of the LORD of hosts 19 and distributed food among all the people, the whole
multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion
of meat, and a cake of raisins. Then all the people went back to their
homes.20 David returned to bless his household. But Michal the daughter of
Saul came out to meet David and said, "How the king of Israel honored
himself today, uncovering himself today before the eyes of his servants'
maids, as any vulgar fellow might shamelessly uncover himself!" 21 David said
to Michal, "It was before the LORD, who chose me in place of your father and
all his household, to appoint me as prince over Israel, the people of
the LORD—I will dance before the LORD. 22 I will make myself yet more
contemptible than this, and I will be humbled in my own eyes, but by the
maids of whom you have spoken, by them I shall be held in honor." 23 And
Michal the daughter of Saul had no child to the day of her death.

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Does the literal meaning of the scriptural text tend to produce love for God and one's neighbor?

If so, the literal meaning suffices and there is no benefit to searching for an allegorical meaning.

If the literal meaning does not suffice, then a figurative reading must be required.

Helpful guidelines are found in the study of philosophy, science, history, languages, rhetoric, and grammar.

Love as a destination is more important than the road taken to get there.

~ Augustine of Hippo

2 Samuel 6:7 *NRSV*

"*The anger of the Lord was kindled against Uzzah; and God struck him there because he reached out his hand to the ark; and he died there beside the ark of God*."

John Wesley on verse 7:
"This may seem very severe, considering his intention was pious, and his transgression not great. But, besides that, men are improper judges of the actions of God; and that God's judgments are always just, though sometimes obscure: it is reasonable, God should make some present examples of his high displeasure against sins, seemingly small; partly, for the demonstration of his own exact and impartial holiness; partly, for the establishment of discipline, and for the greater terror and caution of mankind, who are very prone to have slight thoughts of sin, and to give way to small sins, and thereby to be led on to greater; all which is, or may be prevented by such instances of severity: and consequently there is more of God's mercy, than of his justice, in such actions, because the justice is confined to one particular person, but the benefit of it common to mankind in that, and all future ages" (*Notes*, 6: 7).

Augustine on violence by God: If the passage contains violent imagery, and especially violence ascribed to God; what might, figuratively speaking, be being violently rejected here? Could the passage be meant to be read, for example, in an ironic or sarcastic tone of voice? If a story about a person is offensive or distasteful, might that encourage us to be humble about our own capacity for sin or self-deception?