

DOCTORES ECCLESIAE

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS AND SACRED SCRIPTURE

John F. Boyle

Some seven hundred years after his death, St. Thomas Aquinas is best known as a systematic theologian. Few have had his capacity to grasp the speculative constructive elements of theology understood as a science, that is, as a unified coherent realm of rational inquiry. His two most cited works are of this kind, the *Summa contra gentiles* and, his most famous work, the *Summa theologiae*. It is a testimony to this quality of his work that the council fathers at Trent placed the *Summa theologiae* on the altar during their deliberations.

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Yet, Thomas himself might be surprised at this legacy. He certainly understood the importance of articulating the intelligibility and coherence of the faith. But much of his time as a university master of theology was dedicated to commenting on Scripture. Indeed, Thomas may well have thought his Scripture commentaries to be his most important works. If we distinguish so sharply systematic from biblical

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theology, Thomas would not. Theology — however one chooses to distinguish its parts — is, for Thomas, a unified science. As the highest science, it is the most unified and unifying. As a theologian, Thomas always returns to the foundation of that science — Scripture. The purpose of this essay is to suggest some of the ways in which he understands and interprets Scripture.

THE UNIVERSITY MASTER

In any analysis of something, Thomas considers its purpose, its goal, its end. Sacred Scripture is no different. "It must be said that sacred Scripture is divinely ordered to this: that through it, the truth necessary for salvation may be made known to us."¹ So Thomas situates Scripture squarely within the divine economy. Man was made to share in the divine trinitarian life of God; this is his end. To achieve this end, he requires divine help, which raises his nature to that which transcends it. And yet, as Thomas insists, grace perfects nature.² God acts in ways most fitting to our nature, to the kind of creature he created. Thus, while God might have elevated man in any number of ways, he does it in ways that recognize the integrity of his creation. Thus, a free and rational creature should, if it is to live according to its created nature, order its actions to its end, to participation in the divine life. This poses a problem: how can this creature order itself to that which ultimately exceeds its grasp? For Thomas, the answer is, in part, revelation. God reveals himself not in order to satisfy idle human curiosity, but to make possible the full ordering in grace of the human person to God.³ In this light, Thomas understands the purpose of Scripture — to make known the truths necessary for salvation.

Given this understanding of Scripture's purpose, one can see why Thomas maintains that the principal author of Scripture is God. If man is to be given this revelation that exceeds his natural capacities, it must ultimately come from God, not another man (unless that man be the Word incarnate). Of course, Thomas is quite aware of the human authorship of Scripture, of its many authors and its many genres.⁴ What unites this collection, however, is its divine authorship, which orders it perfectly to its end of manifesting the saving truth.

This understanding of Scripture governs all of Thomas' thought.

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1. *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, 7.6.1.resp., ed. R. Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1956), p. 146.

2. See, rather in this context, *Summa theologiae* (hereafter ST) I.1.8.ad 2m.

3. ST I.1.1.resp.

4. See *De commendatione et partitione sacrae Scripturae* in *Opuscula theologica*, ed. R. A. Verardo (Turin: Marietti, 1954), vol. 1, pp. 435-39.

Thomas sees his task, and the task of all masters of theology, to teach the divine wisdom and truth in the Scripture. To do this well requires moral uprightness of life, a keen intelligence, and a faithful docility.

Psalm 103:13: "Watering the earth from his things above, the earth will be filled from the fruit of your works." The divine wisdom of rain pours down upon the teachers of that wisdom (the mountains) and from there to the fields where it produces much fruit. Thomas then considers four elements: "the exalted nature of spiritual teaching, the high standing of those who teach it, the position of those who hear it and the manner of its communication."⁵ In presenting in capsule form the high standing of the spiritual teacher, Thomas opens to us his own understanding of the task of the theologian. "Because of the exalted nature of this teaching, high standing is also required in those who teach it, and this is why they are symbolized by mountains." Thomas notes three characteristics of mountains that should characterize the teacher: high, radiant, and a defense. "Holy teachers ought to make light of the things of earth and yearn only for the things of heaven." They must be radiant, that is, "enlightened by the rays of divine wisdom." And finally, "They are a defense, because mountains protect the land from its enemies. In the same way the church's teachers ought to protect the faith against error."⁶ The teacher thus stands as a minister who receives his wisdom from above and in turn hands it on. The fruit is not attributed to the teacher, who is but an instrument, but to God who is the source of all wisdom. Of course, instruments can be more or less suitable for the job. "What God requires is ministers who are innocent ('The one who walks a spotless path is the one who has been my minister,' Psalm 100:6), intelligent ('An intelligent minister is pleasing to his king,' Prov. 14:35), fervent ('You make spirits your messengers and your ministers a burning fire,' Psalm 103:4) and obedient ('His ministers who do his will,' Psalm 102:21)."⁷ Thus Thomas sees his task, and the task of all masters of theology, to teach the divine wisdom and truth in the Scripture. To do this well requires moral uprightness of life, a keen intelligence, and a faithful docility.

What Thomas taught in his classroom as a master of theology was Scripture.

But practically speaking, what was a master of theology's job? His duties were twofold: to hold periodic public disputations throughout the course of the academic term and to lecture on sacred Scripture. Although Thomas wrote a dozen commentaries on various works of Aristotle, he never taught Aristotle in the classroom. Likewise, the two great *summas*, the *Summa contra gentiles* and the *Summa theologiae*, were private works of the study; Thomas never taught them. What Thomas taught in his classroom as a master of theology was Scripture.⁸

5. *De commendatione sacrae Scripturae* in *Opuscula theologica*, vol. 1, pp. 441-443, is also available in a fine English translation under the title *Inaugural Lecture* in Simon Tugwell, ed. and trans., *Albert and Thomas* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 355-360. I quote from this translation, pp. 358-59.

6. *Inaugural Lecture*, pp. 358-59.

7. *Inaugural Lecture*, p. 359.

8. For a full biographical account of Thomas' career, see James A. Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work*, second ed. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1983). An exception to the teaching of Scripture is his teaching of the first book of Peter Lombard's *Liber sententiarum* while a master in Rome 1265-66; see L. E. Boyle, *The Setting of the "Summa theologiae" of Saint Thomas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1982), pp. 8-15.

THE PRINCIPLES OF SCRIPTURAL INTERPRETATION

In turning to the principles of Thomas' interpretation of Scripture, we find that Thomas has little to say of a strictly hermeneutical nature.⁹ This may be because Thomas is more interested in actually interpreting Scripture than in thinking about interpreting Scripture. As well, Thomas holds nothing that is significantly novel; he is thoroughly rooted in a tradition extending back to the Fathers, indeed, to Scripture itself. Thomas speaks in a commonly accepted and understood language.¹⁰ This language, so common to the Middle Ages, is no longer so common to us, and so we shall give some attention to it.

Thomas sees in Scripture, as the entire tradition did, various levels of meaning in the text. As the revelation of the infinite God, Scripture offers ever deeper levels of understanding. In presenting the levels of meaning in Scripture, Thomas first distinguishes between the literal sense and the spiritual (or mystical) sense. This is the primary and most important distinction in the levels or senses of Scripture.

The literal sense is the meaning or signification of the words themselves. In this, Scripture is like any other literary work and can be studied accordingly. While Thomas' linguistic and literary skills were modest by modern standards, he would no doubt delight in the deepened modern understanding of the linguistic and literary contexts of Scripture. Likewise with history, Thomas' tools were few, but here again, he would appreciate our deepened understanding of the historical context of Scripture. Nonetheless, these studies are not ends in themselves. What interests Thomas in considering the literal sense of Scripture is What do the words mean? In presenting the literal sense of Scripture, Thomas speaks, by way of a kind of formula, of "words signifying things." His own understanding of human intelligence is that words as sounds are signs of mental words — what we might call concepts and ideas — which themselves have some referent in reality.¹¹ To know the literal sense is to know the reality intended by the author and signified by those words.

Within this understanding of the literal sense, Thomas includes metaphor. Indeed, any literary device used in Scripture, in so far as it

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9. See *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, 7.6.1-3, pp. 145-48; *Super epistolam ad Galatas lectura*, c. 4, lect. 7, in *Super epistolas s. Pauli lectura*, ed. R. Cai (Turin: Marietti, 1953), vol. 1, pp. 620-21; *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, 4.1 in *Quaestiones disputatae*, ed. P. Bazzi et al. (Turin: Marietti, 1949), vol. 2, pp. 102-110, in English as *On the Power of God*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1932), vol. 2, pp. 1-23; ST I.1.10.

10. The standard study in English of medieval interpretations of Scripture is B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970); for a somewhat fuller historical treatment of the tradition see C. Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au Moyen Age* (Paris: Vrin, 1944); for a theological account of this tradition, see H. de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: les quatre sens de l'Écriture* (Paris: Aubier, 1959-1964), 4 vols.

11. See R. G. Kennedy, *Thomas Aquinas and the Literal Sense of Scripture* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 1985), cc. 5-7.

is common to other literary texts, is a matter of the literal sense. So, for example, Thomas notes that Christ's sitting on the right hand of God is to be understood metaphorically, since God has no right hand, but that the metaphorical meaning (the power of God) is the literal meaning as it is the thing, the reality, ultimately signified by the words.¹²

This is not to suggest that Thomas naively thinks the literal sense is obvious or self-evident. Thomas is well aware of the manifold possibilities presented by the letter. We catch a telling glimpse of this in one of the disputed questions when Thomas asks whether the creation of unformed matter precedes in duration the creation of things.¹³ The question is not only a metaphysical one; much of the debate is about interpreting the opening lines of Genesis. In this lengthy question, Thomas considers the interpretations of Augustine, Gregory the Great, Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, and Moses Maimonides, as well as a host of presumably more contemporary "others." We need not rehearse the multiple and complex arguments of this question. Of interest to us are Thomas' general comments at the beginning of his response to the question.

Thomas is particularly concerned that one might tie some personal belief to the truth of faith, which if shown to be false, would hold the faith up to the ridicule of non-believers.

Leaning on Augustine, Thomas says that with questions such as this one there is a twofold debate, namely, concerning the truth of the matter, and concerning the sense of the letter. In disputing the truth of the matter, one should neither assert something false, especially what would contradict the truth of faith, nor assert that what one believes to be true is a truth of faith. Thomas is particularly concerned that one might tie some personal belief to the truth of faith, which if shown to be false, would hold the faith up to the ridicule of non-believers. Those who maintained the Ptolemaic universe to be a truth of faith may provide a good, albeit subsequent, example of what concerns Thomas here.

One ought not maintain something known to be false as scriptural since Scripture is the revelation of God who is truth.

Concerning the sense of the letter, Thomas again notes two extremes to be avoided. One should neither assert that something false is in Scripture, nor should one insist upon a particular meaning to the exclusion of others that contain the truth and that fit the circumstances of the letter. The first seems clear enough: one ought not maintain something known to be false as scriptural since Scripture is the revelation of God who is truth.¹⁴ The second is of particular interest for

12. *Ad Galatos*, c. 4, lect. 7, p. 620. Cf. the following: "Now although spiritual things are proposed under the figures of corporeal things, nevertheless the truths intended about spiritual things through sensible figures belong not to the mystical but to the literal sense, because the literal sense is that which is primarily intended by the words, whether they are used properly or figuratively." *Expositio super Iob ad litteram*, 1:6, in *Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita* (Leonine edition), vol. 26 (Rome: Ad sanctae Sabinae, 1965), p. 7; translation taken from *The Literal Exposition on Job*, trans. A. Damico (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 76.

13. *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, 4.1 in *Quaestiones disputatae*, ed. P. Bazzi et al. (Turin: Marietti, 1949), vol. 2, pp. 102-110, in English as *On the Power of God*, trans. English Dominican Fathers (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1932), vol. 2, pp. 1-23.

14. See *De potentia*, 4.1.ad 5m, p. 106, in which Thomas rejects one interpretation in this way: "But this interpretation seems to fail, because it claims something to be understood through sacred Scripture whose contrary is proven well enough by evident reasons."

Thomas notes in passing the grounds for entertaining competing literal interpretations. They must not claim anything known to be false, and they must fit the text or, to quote more precisely, "the circumstances of the letter must be preserved." Thomas does not explain what he means here. He does provide an example a bit later in the question when he considers how to understand the firmament that divides the waters. He explains that some (including Maimonides) hold that this refers to the air or that part of the atmosphere between the rain clouds and the water on the earth. Thomas argues that this interpretation does not seem to fit the circumstances of the letter since the text also says that God placed the two great lights and the stars in that firmament.¹⁵ Thus minimally, Thomas appeals to context and a contextual coherence.

Let us note the implications of these cautions for the literal interpretation of Scripture as understood by Thomas. Thomas grants that one may be confronted with competing literal interpretations each of which is true with regard to the nature of things and each of which fits the "circumstances of the letter." In these cases one is not to insist on one's own interpretation to the exclusion of the others. Thomas even goes so far as to suggest that these all may have been the author's intention, and if they were not, they nonetheless could be the intention of the divine author and thus all acceptable.¹⁶

The literal sense of Scripture plays two important roles in Aquinas' thought. First, theological argument is only to be made on the basis of the literal sense. For Thomas, theology is a science, that is, it is characterized by reasoned arguments. First and foremost, those arguments are from authority.¹⁷ Scripture holds pride of place among these authorities; however, Thomas is firm that that authority, in so far as it is part of a theological argument, is proper to the literal sense.¹⁸

The second role that the literal sense plays in Thomas' thought is as the foundation for the spiritual or mystical sense. The spiritual sense is carefully distinguished from the literal. If the literal sense is concerned with what things the words signify, the spiritual sense is concerned with what those things, signified by the words, in turn signify. This is the level on which, to use Thomas' shorthand, "things signify other things." Actual persons, events, and things in turn signify something else. Thus, for example, the lamb sacrificed at Passover signifies Christ. This is not to deny the truth and reality of the Passover lamb; indeed, it presupposes it. The word "lamb" does not stand metaphorically for

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15. *De potentia*, 4.1.ad 5m, p. 106.

16. *De potentia*, 4.1.resp., p. 105; cf. ST I.1.10.resp. This is all related to the vexed question in the scholarly literature as to whether Thomas holds the possibility of multiple literal senses of a passage. For a bibliography of the debate, see Mark F. Johnson, "Another Look at the Plurality of the Literal Sense," *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 2 (1992): pp. 117-141.

17. ST I.1.8.resp. and ad 2m.

18. ST I.1.10.ad 1m.

Thomas divides the spiritual sense into three senses: allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Each is related to Christ.

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Christ; the actual lamb itself of the Passover (signified by the word) is the sign of Christ. This spiritual sense is unique to Scripture. Man cannot invest created things or history with intrinsic meaning; at best, he can use attributes metaphorically, as all good poets do. God, however, can so invest persons, events, and things as the creator of everything and the provident Lord of history. Scripture can make known such signification because it has that same creator and Lord as its principal author.

Thomas divides the spiritual sense into three senses: allegorical, moral, and anagogical. Each is related to Christ.¹⁹ The allegorical sense is the signification of Christ himself, especially in the Old Testament (such as the paschal lamb above). This does not necessarily include prophecy of Christ; such passages might well be literal significations of Christ.²⁰ To be truly allegorical in the precise way in which Thomas means it here requires that the words signify some thing and that that thing in turn signifies Christ.

The second sense is the moral in which something signifies how Christians are to act. For Thomas, first and foremost it is the actions of Christ himself and then of the saints (as exemplary members of His body) that signify the actions proper to the Christian life. Again, not all texts pertaining to human action are necessarily instances of the moral sense. The Sermon on the Mount, for example, in its moral directives speaks literally of how those who would follow Christ are to live. Rather, it is the life of Christ himself and the saints that signify. This is not merely a matter of moral examples of good and heroic persons (i.e. edifying moral biography); rather, the lives of Christ and his saints directly signify how the Christian is to live. As an engaging and utterly typical instance of the moral sense, consider Thomas' comments on the passage in Mark in which Jesus' disciples pluck ears of corn on the Sabbath:

But in a mystical sense these disciples pass through the corn fields, when the holy doctors look with the care of a pious solicitude upon those whom they have initiated in the faith, and who, it is implied, are hungering for the best of all things, the salvation of men. But to pluck the ears of corn means to snatch men away from the eager desire of earthly things. And to rub with the hands is by examples of virtue to

19. See ST I.1.10.resp.

20. "Another error was that of Theodore [of Mopsuestia] who said that nothing in the Old Testament is said literally of Christ, but is adapted.... Against this is the final chapter of Luke: 'It is necessary that all that was written about me in the law of Moses, in the prophets, and in the psalms be fulfilled.' It is to be known that in the Old Testament some passages refer to Christ and are said of him alone, as 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son' (Is 7:14), and the psalm, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me' (21:10). If someone should posit some other literal sense, he would be a heretic, for that heresy has been condemned. But because not only the words of the Old Testament, but also the events signify Christ, sometimes some things are said literally of others but are referred to Christ in so far as they bear some figure of Christ, as is said of Solomon, 'And he shall rule from sea to sea' (Ps 71:8), for this was not fulfilled in Solomon." *Super Evangelium s. Matthaei lectura*, c. 1, lect. 5, ed. R. Cai (Turin: Marietti, 1951), p. 21.

put from the purity of their minds the concupiscence of the flesh, as men do husks. To eat the grains is when a man, cleansed from the filth of vice by the mouths of preachers, is incorporated amongst the members of the Church. Again fitly are the disciples related to have done this, walking before the face of the Lord, for it is necessary that the discourse of the doctor should come first, although the grace of visitation from on high, following it, must enlighten the heart of the hearer.²¹

Finally, in the third sense, the anagogical, what is signified is the beatific life of heaven with Christ. For example, the observation of the sabbath not only keeps the creation of the world always before one's eyes (here Thomas cites Moses Maimonides for the literal sense), but it also signifies the eternal rest that the saints enjoy in glory.²² Or again, circumcision signifies anagogically the casting off of the corruptibility of flesh and blood in the resurrection.²³

Thomas himself gives an example of the senses of Scripture as applied to a particular passage: "When I say 'Let there be light' and speak of corporeal light, it pertains to the literal sense. If 'Let there be light' is understood as 'let Christ be born in the church,' it pertains to the allegorical sense. If it is understood as 'let us be introduced into glory through Christ,' it pertains to the anagogical sense. If it is understood as 'let us be illumined in our intellects and inflamed in our affections,' it pertains to the moral sense."²⁴

Of course not every passage of Scripture admits of all the senses. Nor is it always clear under what sense a particular interpretation fits.²⁵ Nonetheless, the notion of the senses of Scripture informed the very intellectual and spiritual makeup of Thomas and all of his contemporaries.

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THOMAS' COMMENTARIES ON SCRIPTURE

Several of Thomas' commentaries on Scripture have survived. He wrote commentaries on Psalms 1-54, Job, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Matthew, John, and all the letters of Paul.²⁶ As well, he compiled a compendium of patristic comments on the four Gospels.

21. *Catena aurea in quatuor Evangelia*, in Mk 2:23-28, ed. A. Guarienti (Turin: Marietti, 1953), vol. 1, p. 450. The translation is taken from *Catena aurea. Commentary on the Four Gospels, Collected out of the Works of the Fathers* (Oxford: Parker, 1870), vol. 3, p. 52. Thomas himself has taken this interpretation from the Venerable Bede.

22. *Scriptum super Sententiis*, III.37.5.1.solutio, ed. M. Moos (Paris: Lethielleux, 1933), vol. 3, pp. 1251-52. Cf. ST II-II.122.4. ad 1m.

23. *Scriptum super Sententiis*, IV.1.2.1.resp.; vol. 4, p. 47.

24. *In Galatas*, c. 4, lect. 7, p. 621.

25. Is, for example, the use of Ps 103 in the *Inaugural Lecture* quoted above an instance of the literal sense (i.e. a kind of metaphor) or of the moral sense?

26. Some of these Thomas completed for publication; others survive as reports (*reportationes*) of Thomas' classroom lectures. See the "Brief Catalogue of Authentic Works" in Weisheipl, pp. 368-74. Thomas' biographers report a deathbed commentary on the Song of Songs. The commentaries on the Song of Songs in the collected works of Thomas are spurious; the authentic commentary has yet to be found.

Consider his commentary on the Gospel of John. Thomas begins by stating the principal point of the Gospel: to "show the divinity of the incarnate Word."

The very organization of the commentaries is disconcerting to the modern reader. Thomas usually begins by dividing the text. To this end, Thomas articulates in general what the book is about. In the light of this principal theme, Thomas then divides the text into parts, each of which is related to the overall theme. Each part is in turn divided into smaller and smaller parts.

Consider his commentary on the Gospel of John. Thomas begins by stating the principal point of the Gospel: to "show the divinity of the incarnate Word."²⁷ In view of this intention, Thomas divides the Gospel into two parts: in the first, John suggests the divinity of Christ (c. 1), and in the second he manifests the divinity of Christ through those things he did in the flesh (2-25). These two parts are in turn further divided. For example, the second is divided into two parts: how Christ manifests his divinity while living in the world (2-11), and how Christ manifests his divinity in his death (12-21). The first is again divided into two parts: manifesting his dominion over nature (c. 2), and manifesting the effects of grace (3-11). This latter is divided into spiritual regeneration (3-4) and spiritual goods conferred on those divinely regenerated (5-11). These spiritual goods are threefold: spiritual life (5), spiritual food (6), and spiritual teaching (7-11). Each of these sections is itself further divided and subdivided to the point that Thomas can comment sometimes word by word on a given verse.²⁸

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Although Thomas' comments on a particular verse can be rich in detail and substance, as for example his consideration of "Word" in the prolog to the Gospel of John, more typically his comment on a given lemma or word is sparse. This is, in part, his style; Thomas was not one to speak at length or say the same thing in a variety of ways. Nonetheless, this is not just a matter of style. Indeed, to look simply at the comments on a particular verse is to fail as a reader of Thomas. To ask what Thomas says about John 6, for example, and then go and read the comments on the specific text is to miss much, if not the heart, of the commentary. The genius of the commentaries is often in the division of the text. It is this division that sets every passage in a context, or

27. *Super Evangelium s. Ioannis lectura*, c. 1, lect. 1, ed. R. Cai (Turin: Marietti, 1952), p. 7; the commentary on the first six chapters has been translated into English as *The Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans. J. A. Weisheipl and F. R. Larcher (Albany: Magi Books, 1980), p. 31. This is hardly a novel take on the Gospel; indeed, it is a commonplace for the Fathers and for medieval exegetes alike.

28. In his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Thomas proposes a very different division rooted in a very different intention. For Thomas, the principal focus in Matthew is the humanity of Christ. This leads Thomas to a common sense threefold division of the Gospel: the entrance of the humanity of Christ into the world (1-2), its life in the world (3-20), and its departure from the world (21-28); *Super Evangelium s. Matthaei*, c. 1, lect. 1, p. 3. Thomas applies such a scheme to the entire corpus of Pauline epistles; see *Super epistolas s. Pauli lectura*, prolog, vol. 1, p. 3. This technique of dividing the text is not unique to Thomas; it is common among the scholastics of the period although like any instrument it can be used more or less skillfully. Likewise, the division of the text is not limited to Scripture commentaries; Thomas uses the same technique in his commentaries on Aristotle; and he even uses a modified form of it to structure his own *Summa theologiae*.

perhaps better, in a set of nested contexts. Thus, an appreciation of Thomas' interpretation of John 6 requires minimally that one see that this chapter is in the context of spiritual food as a spiritual gift conferred on those divinely regenerated which in turn is part of Christ's manifestation of his divinity through those things he did in the flesh. In this light one can see all the more clearly the force of the transition from the feeding of the five thousand to the bread of life discourse.

Two commentaries are a bit different from the rest: the commentary on Job and the *Catena aurea*. Thomas' commentary on Job is explicitly a literal one.²⁹ The Middle Ages was heir to the rich and influential *Moralia in Iob* of Gregory the Great, which was concerned principally with the spiritual senses of the text. With typical modesty, Thomas says that he has nothing to add to Gregory, but instead offers a literal commentary. In so commenting, Thomas understands the Book of Job to be about divine providence, especially the question of reward and punishment. In this he is hardly novel. What is striking about Thomas' commentary is his careful reading of the book as an extended argument. He sees the work's intrinsic unity in the question of whether faithfulness to God is necessarily or properly rewarded by temporal blessings. He charts subtle developments and movements of the arguments. Thomas is even attentive to the ways in which emotion and dimwittedness can cloud and affect arguments and disputes. In following the narrative give and take (treating the book much like a dialog), Thomas does not provide a formal division of the text. Instead, he considers arguments as the essential units. Again, the comment on a particular lemma or word can only be appreciated in the light of its place within a larger picture, in this case, within an argument. In his presentation and analysis of the arguments of Job, Thomas considers with astute subtlety the nature of divine providence and its relation to the human end. It is a valuable, or better, necessary, complement to his treatments of providence in the *Summas*.

The *Catena aurea*³⁰ proved to be one of Thomas' most popular works although technically he wrote none of it. It is an instance — one of the best instances — of a common medieval genre, the *florilegium* or gathering of quotations (*flores*, flowers) into a whole. In this case, Thomas raids the Fathers to produce a verse by verse running commentary on each of the four Gospels. The selections are carefully chosen and edited with an eye, one suspects, to prayer and preaching. Several Fathers may be quoted for a single passage, offering a variety

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29. *Expositio super Iob ad litteram*, in *Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita* (Leonine edition), vol. 26 (Rome: Ad sanctae Sabinae, 1965); in English, *The Literal Exposition on Job*, trans. A. Damico (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

30. *Catena aurea in quatuor Evangelia*, ed. A. Guarienti (Turin: Marietti, 1953), 2 vols. English translation: *Catena Aurea. Commentary on the Four Gospels collected out of the Works of the Fathers* (Oxford: Parker, 1870), 6 vols.

Throughout his commentaries, Thomas is thoroughly theological; that is, he is first and always concerned with deepening his understanding of the revealed truths of the faith.

Scripture is not a proof text for the conclusion of his argument; rather, the argument is a defense and elucidation of Scripture itself.

of readings. Inevitably, the readings are classical within the tradition. The result is a compendium of the patristic tradition's readings of the Fathers, especially as received in the Latin West.

Throughout his commentaries, Thomas is thoroughly theological; that is, he is first and always concerned with deepening his understanding of the revealed truths of the faith. Scripture always speaks to that faith. Furthermore, that theological reading is itself thoroughly ecclesial; that is, Thomas reads Scripture as a faithful son of the church. Scripture itself has its origin and confirmation in the church;³¹ it nourishes the truths learned from the church and lived in the church. While Thomas would no doubt grant the possibility of an extra-ecclesial reading of Scripture; he would surely doubt its ultimate worth to the theologian.

THE SUMMA THEOLOGIAE

To consider the *Summa theologiae* in the context of St. Thomas and Scripture may seem odd. Such apparent oddity may well, however, say more of the contemporary theological divides than of Thomas and his own understanding of his work.

When Thomas considers the nature of sacred doctrine in the opening question of the *Summa*, he notes among its many characteristics that it proceeds by way of argument; that is, it is a fitting object of human intelligence. Nonetheless, because it deals with what has been revealed, its arguments are rightly often from authority. The highest authority, which is intrinsic and proper to the science of sacred doctrine, is sacred Scripture.³² Of course, there are other authorities, especially the Fathers, but Thomas is careful to distinguish them from Scripture, which holds the highest authority.

The importance Thomas places on Scripture in theological argument suggests one needs to be careful in reading the *Summa*, especially the *sed contra* ("on the other hand") where the authority for the answer to the question is often to be found. The modern reader has a tendency to glide past the scriptural quotations (as instances, perhaps, of primitive "proof-texting") in order to get to the real meat of Thomas' arguments. This may, however, entail a subtle shifting of the weight of the text from Thomas' own intentions. For Thomas, the careful arguments and distinctions of his responses are in the service of the revealed truth made known in Scripture as the church reads it. Indeed, Scripture is not a proof text for the conclusion of his argument; rather, the argument is a defense and elucidation of Scripture itself.

31. St. John the Evangelist says of his own witness in his Gospel, "and we know that his testimony is true" (Jn 21:24). Thomas comments on this verse: "He [John] speaks in the person of the whole church, from which this Gospel has been received." (c. 21, lect. 6, p. 488).

32. ST I.1.8.ad 2m.

Throughout the *Summa* one finds articles dedicated to specific biblical texts. So, for example, in a question dedicated to the different kinds of law, Thomas asks whether there is a law that inclines to sin.³³ The question arises because of Romans 7:23: "I see another law in my members." Thomas explicitly situates this Pauline passage within his consideration of the nature of law. Yet his very notion of law has been shaped in such a way as to account for, and not simply dismiss, the language of the Apostle. Or again, in considering the priesthood of Christ, Thomas asks whether the priesthood of Christ was according to the order of Melchisedech.³⁴

Beyond particular articles within the *Summa*, whole sections are strikingly scriptural, for example the treatment of the six days of creation, of the elements of the old law, and of the life of Christ.³⁵ But even acknowledging biblical sections may not get to the truly scriptural orientation of the *Summa*. For example, the treatment of Christ is divided into two parts; the first is sometimes characterized as more "scientific" and the second, covering the events of his life, more "scriptural." But is this truly an adequate description? The first section analyzes "the Word made flesh," the grace of Christ as he is head of the church, Christ as high priest, Christ as mediator. Are not all these scriptural? Thomas works to understand these scriptural ideas which he then uses in turn to illumine the life of Christ in the second part of the Christology.

All of this is to suggest that perhaps Thomas never intended for the *Summa* to stand as an independent work. Might it not be seen as a guide to understanding Scripture bringing to bear all that revelation and human science have to offer? Thomas characterizes the *Summa* as a work for beginners. And who are these beginners? They are beginners in theology, that science that stands grounded in and ordered to the study of sacred Scripture. In addition to its many other purposes, might not the *Summa* also stand as a guide, for the beginner, to the faithful and theological reading of Scripture?³⁶ After all, the *Summa* was not alone on the altar at Trent; it accompanied sacred Scripture.

CONCLUSION

Patristic and medieval exegesis, of which St. Thomas is but one more or less typical example, has been out of favor for some time, especially among Scripture scholars. One does hear a few rumblings from time

33. ST I-II.91.6.

34. ST III.22.6.

35. ST I.65-74 for the six days; I-II.98-105 for the old law; III.27-59 for the life of Christ.

36. St. Bonaventure's own little *summa*, the *Breviloquium*, written just a few years prior to Thomas' *Summa theologiae*, is explicitly intended as a guide to reading Scripture.

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to time that scholars have been premature and overly zealous in their rejection of such a rich and varied tradition.³⁷

The traditional exegesis and the modern critical methods need not be necessarily contradictory. But when one considers Thomas one sees how much more there is to the interpretation of Scripture, beyond that which is the focus of the critical methods.³⁸ One also sees that the issue is not so much the understanding of methods, but the understanding of theology. For Thomas, indeed for much if not all of the tradition, the theologian's vocation is ecclesial. He lives and works within the church, not apart from it.

This ecclesial understanding of the theologian's work is what makes possible the great variety of interpretations according to the various senses of Scripture. The fullness of truth, which Thomas was so convinced was united in revelation and reason within the church, provides the necessary safeguards and checks for the work of the exegete. Every passage could be found to speak, here and now, in any number of ways of the saving truth that brings man to his proper end. What Thomas offers is not simply specific readings of Scripture, but rather a vision of the theologian as interpreter of Scripture. He may yet have much to say to our own time. □

37. Among Roman Catholics see de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*, especially the Preface, vol. 1, pp. 11-21. Among Protestants, see D. C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Precritical Exegesis," *Theology Today* 37 (1980): 27-38. Among the Orthodox, see M. Ford, "Towards the Restoration of Allegory: Christology, Epistemology and Narrative Structure," *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 34 (1990): 161-95.

38. A point made in a slightly different context by K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), preface to the second edition, pp. 2-15.