

REDISCOVERING ST. THOMAS AQUINAS AS BIBLICAL THEOLOGIAN

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It is necessary to begin by asserting a well-established fact: St. Thomas Aquinas sees a unity between sacred Scripture and sacred doctrine.¹

My purpose in this short note is to suggest that Thomas's basic insight—as articulated in his theological writings and modeled in his own exegetical work—has promising implications for modern biblical scholarship and exegesis.

For Thomas, Scripture and doctrine are phases in the broader dynamism of God's revelation of himself to humanity. In the *Summa Theologiae* (I,1,3), he declares that sacred doctrine is a single science because sacred Scripture has a single formal object—namely, divine revelation. That he moves from articles dealing with issues of sacred doctrine to articles regarding sacred Scripture without beginning a new *quaestio* may be the most compelling proof of their unity in his mind. Even God's knowledge and God's will get distinct *quaestiones* in the *Summa*—yet not so sacred Scripture and sacred doctrine.

Perhaps this is because the distinction between the two is much less important for Thomas than the fact that the two derive from the true center and source of all revelation—the divine Son of God.

In his commentary on John 14:6 (“I am the way, and the truth and the life”), Thomas notes that the divine person of the Son, being both man and God, is both the way for humanity and its end, or goal (*terminus*). This insight he finds signified by John's use of the words *via* and *veritas*.² Thus, the incarnational pattern described by John provides a wonderful analogy for understanding scriptural revelation for Thomas. As human words, the words of Scripture are a way by which the human mind can traverse to

¹ This has been observed by innumerable scholars. For a classic explanation of this point, see J. Van der Ploeg, “The Place of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas,” *The Thomist* 10 (1947): 410-413. For Thomas on the relation of Scripture and sacred doctrine, see for example, *I Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, Prol., 1, 1-5; *Quaestiones de quodlibet*, 7, 14-16; *Super Epistolam ad Galatas*, 4:24 [252-54], *Quaestiones disputata de potentia*, 4.1; *Exposito super librum Boethii de trinitate*, Praef., 2.1-4.

² *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 14:5-6 [1865-1872]. For an analysis of revelation as it is treated in this passage and elsewhere, see A. Blanco, “Word and Truth in Divine Revelation: A Study of the Commentary of St. Thomas Aquinas on John 14:6,” in L. Elders, ed., *La Doctrine de la Thomas d'Aquin tenu a Rolduc, les 4 et 5 Novembre 1989* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), 27-48.

understanding. But because they are at the same time divine speech, these human words become also the medium by which divine truth and salvation are communicated to us.

Scripture participates in this pattern of the incarnation, by which God reveals the truth about himself and makes a way to himself. Yet so also does doctrine. Hence, scriptural revelation cannot be broken away or separated from the later articulations of revelation in doctrine. To do so would be tantamount to separating Christ's presence in human history in his life and death from his ongoing presence to the Church in his resurrection.

We come to know and experience Christ's presence in the Church gradually, by progressive stages that always begin with reflection on Christ's saving presence in history. In the same way, we come to know the proper articulation of the truths of faith through a reflection on Scripture—a reflection in which those truths are identified, crystallized, and made foundational.

As Thomas says in the introduction to his *Compendium Theologiae* (in reference to the creed), “that which he handed down clearly and expansively in the various volumes of sacred Scripture for those eager to learn, for those with little leisure he included the teaching concerning the salvation of humanity in a summary form.”³ In other words, the content of that “summary form”—sacred doctrine—is identical to the content of the more “expansive” teaching found in Scripture.

The ‘Science’ of Sacred Scripture

Therefore Scripture is fundamental to the science that is sacred doctrine. In fact, as we noted above, he gives both the name “science” (*scientia*).⁴ But how can Scripture, which is so overwhelmingly narrative and event-oriented, be scientific in the way that theology is scientific—with its generally conceptual and expository nature? Thomas never poses the question. For him, Scripture is given “through the mode of teaching” (*per modum cuiusdam doctrinae*). That is, Scripture itself is *doctrinal*, a matter of teaching and instruction. Scripture is a science because it causes knowledge in those who read it, thereby fulfilling the formal definition of *scientia*.⁵

³ *Compendium Theologiae*, I, 1. See also *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 1,9, ad 1.

⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 8.

⁵ See *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, Prol. 1.1.; *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 171, 6.

Yet this is not to say that Thomas neglects the immediacy of scriptural revelation as an encounter with God. Drawing conclusions from God's activity does not mean that the divine activity itself is neglected or ignored. To the contrary, in doctrine, the divine activity narrated in Scripture is appropriated in all its relevance for the Church. Thomas's own epistemology offers us, at least in part, the rationale for this position. Thomas says that when a person understands something, the thing understood itself is present in the one who understands, not simply a conceptual representation of that thing.

Therefore, the scriptural narratives of encounters and events demand a response from the believer since they are now part of the believer's understanding. To formulate doctrines is an extension of the believer's response to the encounter with God in reading Scripture. These doctrinal responses, when correct, bear the authority of Scripture itself, Thomas adds, "since the whole science [of Scripture/sacred doctrine] is contained virtually in its principles" (*cum tota scientia virtute continetur in principiis*).⁶

But what is the process by which Scripture reaches its fruition in doctrine, by which doctrine reveals and realizes its fundamental identity with Scripture? Thomas never systematically answers this question. But it can be easily deduced from his writings that for him, doctrinal formulation and theological argumentation are first and foremost matters of hermeneutics. In accessing Scripture, as in any task of interpretation, there is a definite goal which is involved, namely that of understanding (*intelligere*).

Thomas turns often to the etymology of *intelligere* in his theory of interpretation. It is *intus legere*—"to read within," that is, to discover the essence of a thing (what Thomas often refers to as *quod quid est*) or to apprehend what a speaker or writer has intended.⁷ In the case of Scripture, the interpreter seeks to understand the intention of the divine author. This, Thomas presumes, will require assistance on the part of God and his grace if the interpreter is to pierce through to the divine truth contained in the sacred page.

In addition, the interpreter, in trying to grasp not only individual truths but to make connections and draw insights between the multiple truths and insights found in Scripture, must respect the "aggregate" nature of the Scripture.

⁶ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 7. See L. Elders, "Aquinas on Holy Scripture as the Medium of Divine Revelation," in *La doctrine de la revelation divine de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, p. 135.

⁷ T. F. Torrance, "Scientific Hermeneutics According to St. Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Theological Studies* 13 (1962): 261.

‘Canonicity’ and ‘Soteriological Purpose’

The principle of the “canonicity” of Scripture is fundamental to Thomas’s approach to Scripture. For Thomas, Scripture has one “author,” God, who works through the instrumentality of the many human authors of the individual books of Scripture. Because God is the “author” of all Scripture, any reflection on any single text must be read within “the canon”—the totality of the different sacred writings considered by the Church to be canonical.

After interpretation, the second part of the movement from sacred Scripture to sacred doctrine is *theological argumentation*, or what Thomas sometimes calls “the science of divine realities” (*scientia divina*).⁸ This involves the use of one’s intellectual powers, again with the assistance of grace, to comprehend the truths revealed in Scripture, for the purpose of drawing conclusions from those truths.

This process begins with faith—again, a gift of God. Faith enables us to grasp the primary truth of God revealed in the canon. In grasping this primary truth, we come to accept by faith other truths revealed in Scripture. These truths in turn become the first principles in what Thomas considers to be the science of sacred Scripture/sacred doctrine.

Despite its fundamental dependence on the supernatural origin of its principles, theological argumentation is truly a human science for Thomas. It relies on reason for its elucidation and development, makes use of logical argumentation, and even has recourse to philosophical authorities who do not begin with faith as the theologian does.⁹ This science is essentially concerned with instruction, with the transmission of the truths revealed in Scripture. It is intended to culminate in the reception of these truths, first by the theological interpreter, but ultimately by the believer.

Through this science, which begins in Scripture, a body of sources of theological instruction develops which becomes authoritative, especially magisterial sources.¹⁰ These sources, however, remain always subordinate to Scripture itself and in the service of an ever continuing quest for deeper understanding. Scripture always remains central. As Thomas claims: “Only the canonical scriptures are the standard of faith” (*sola canonica*

⁸ *Exposito super librum Boethii de trinitate*, Praef., 2,2.

⁹ *Exposito super librum Boethii de trinitate*, Praef., 2,3.

¹⁰ *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, 5,3, ad 2. See also E. Persson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*, trans. R. Mackenzie (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), 70, who notes that for Thomas “the teaching of the Church is to be understood essentially as the interpretation of Scripture.”

scriptura est regula fidei).¹¹

It is apparent, then, that Thomas's understanding of the process by which sacred doctrine is drawn from Scripture is based on certain fundamental presuppositions about Scripture itself. We saw above that he presumes Scripture to be of both divine and human authorship and that he presumes the canonical form of Scripture to be fundamental in interpretation.

Thomas also insists that the principles found in Scripture are not subject to proof because they are matters of faith and beyond the ability of the human mind to establish them. "This science," he says, "treats *chiefly* [italics mine] of those things which, by their sublimity, transcend human reason" (*ista scientia est principaliter de is quae sua altitudine rationem transcendent*).¹²

Thomas acknowledges that there are other things and facts treated in Scripture—such as narrative, historical or geographical details—that do not transcend reason. These are not unimportant to Thomas. But he repeatedly affirms a *soteriological purpose* for Scripture. His writings clearly suggest that the doctrinal enterprise must give priority to identifying those saving truths, including the speculative and practical truths of morality, to which Scripture itself gives a central place. Details in Scripture that do not refer to God's action, message or designs, do not merit the theologian's attention *except* in reference to the central content of revelation—to those truths which have import for salvation.¹³

Thomas also presumes that there is an inexhaustible depth to the meaning of sacred Scripture—that Scripture has both a literal sense (*sensus literalis*) and a spiritual sense (*sensus spiritualis*). Thomas actually has more to say on this subject than he does on any other aspect of theological method, although in the *Summa* it occupies only a single article. The basic division of the senses of Scripture which he asserts there deserves to be quoted in full:

The author of sacred Scripture is God, in whose power

¹¹ *Super Evangelium S. Ionnis Lectura*, 21:24 [2656]; see also *Summa Theologiae*, 1, 1, 8, ad 2.

¹² *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 5.

¹³ *Quaestiones de quodlibet*, 7, 15; I *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, Prol. 1, 3.; *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 4. See also J. Boyle, "St. Thomas and Sacred Scripture," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1996): 93, who says that this soteriological principle "governs all of Thomas's thought" on sacred Scripture.

it is to signify his meaning not by words only (as man can also do), but also by things themselves. So whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by words have themselves also a signification. Therefore, that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, *which is based on the literal, and presupposes it* [italics mine].¹⁴

The end of the quote is of the greatest importance for the theological process. Thomas holds that only the literal sense of Scripture is available to theological argumentation. That is because he maintains that all the truths necessary for salvation—the only proper “content” of doctrine and theology—are to be found in the literal sense of Scripture.¹⁵

It is not that he denies the possibility or utility of the spiritual senses. Rather, he insists on an essential, foundational status for the literal sense. To be legitimate, all spiritual interpretation must be based on the literal sense. The spiritual sense of a specific text or passage must in no way conflict with its literal sense. This rules out any allegorizing that does not first deal with the literal meaning of the text.

Finally, Thomas urges a certain humility and restraint on the part of the theologian. Because of the dignity and depth of Scripture, but also because of the limitations of the human interpreter, Thomas would advise exegetes not to settle too quickly or firmly on a single interpretation: “The authority of Scripture is in no way derogated if it is explained in various ways, yet without violating the faith. This is because the Holy Spirit has made it fertile with more truth than any man may find in it.”¹⁶

In his own reading of Scripture, Thomas listens to the voices of many extra-biblical auctoritates in his attempt to determine the meaning of the text. At times he offers two interpretations and then chooses one of the two as the better explanation.¹⁷ At other times, he dismisses earlier

¹⁴ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 10. Thomas derives this principle from Hugh of St. Victor—see *De scripturis*, 3; *Didascalicon*, 5-6.

¹⁵ *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 10, ad 1.

¹⁶ *II Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, 12, 1, 2, ad 7. This translation is taken from R. G. Kennedy, “Thomas Aquinas and the Literal Sense of Sacred Scripture” (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1985), 231. See also *Quaestiones disputata de potentia*, 4, 1; *Quaestiones de quodlibet*, 3, 4, ad 10; *Summa Theologiae*, I, 68, 1.

interpretations in favor of his own.¹⁸ Most often, Thomas simply sets out two explanations of the text (sometimes including his own) and refuses to decide between them.¹⁹

Yet his caution should not be misinterpreted as a lack of vigor. Never does Thomas abandon his quest for the best possible interpretation. This always means giving priority to the rule of faith offered by the rest of Scripture—either in itself or as it has been elaborated formally in established Christian doctrine.²⁰

Reading the ‘Bread of Life’ Discourse

In his theological writings and biblical commentaries Thomas achieves the fundamental identification of Scripture and doctrine that he asserts in his teaching. By looking at an example drawn from perhaps his most significant exegetical writing, the *Lectura super Ioannem*, I would like to suggest that Thomas’s method and example have much to offer modern biblical scholars. The *Lectura* is a work far different from the *Summa* and the other systematic theological works of Thomas. But as we will see in this short consideration of Thomas’s six lectures on Jesus’ “Bread of Life” discourse (John 6:26-72), it is no less theological or doctrinal.

Thomas begins his lectures on John 6 in the usual manner: he divides the text according to its content. For him, the chapter has two parts: “First he [John] describes a visible miracle, in which Christ exhibited bodily food. Secondly, he considers spiritual food (6:26-72).” Thomas’s reserve is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of this division. His generic characterization of the discourse shows a profound attention to the text and a conscious decision to eschew an immediate “spiritual” interpretation in terms of Catholic sacramental theology.

As the chapter moves into the discourse (John 6:26), Thomas continues to show such reserve, avoiding the many opportunities the chapter presents for reading Catholic doctrine into the text. As he refrains from the easy, sacramental interpretation, he analyzes the meaning of the terms such as “food,” “bread,” and “life”—drawing on other scriptural passages, mainly from Johannine and Wisdom sources.

He comes up with a three-fold distinction: spiritual food as “God himself” (*ipse Deus*), as “obedience to the divine commands” (*obedientia*

¹⁷ See *Super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, 3:10 [161].

¹⁸ See *Super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, 2:15 [116].

¹⁹ See *Quaestio disputata de potentia*, 4,1; *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:27 [898].

²⁰ For an argument which proves that Thomas held there to be only one literal sense of any given verse of Scripture, see Kennedy, “Thomas Aquinas and the Literal Sense of Sacred Scripture,” 212-232.

divinorum mandatorum) and as “Christ himself” (*ipse Christus*), that is, as the flesh of Christ “joined to the Word of God” (*coniuncta verbo dei*).²¹ This distinction allows him to follow the transitions of the text and to unify them, ultimately making a rich identification between the first kind of spiritual food (God himself) and the third kind (Christ himself) based on a sapiential understanding of Christ as the Word. The flesh of Christ, he says, is given its power as spiritual food because of its ineffable closeness to the person of the Word, who is Wisdom itself. His flesh is bread because Wisdom is bread, an identification made possible through the inter-textual citation of the Book of Sirach (15:3).²² This three-fold distinction allows him to discuss spiritual bread from the perspective presented in the Johannine text itself: how it gives life (in v. 33)²³ and how it is imperishable (v. 35).²⁴

Until he reaches verse 50, Thomas refuses to give a solely Eucharistic interpretation to the spiritual bread that Jesus speaks of. If he has preferred any one of its three meanings, it has been the first (that is, God himself), especially as the Son, the life-giving Word of God. He has only given brief, cursory references to the Eucharist, never actually using the term, and has only used the word *sacramentum* twice. This is understandable—Christ’s references to food “which endures to eternal life” (v. 27), “true bread from heaven” (v. 32), and finally to himself as the bread of life have not been significantly different in meaning from the “living water” discourse at the well (John 4:10-15). Indeed, Thomas uses similar language to describe this new discourse as he does that earlier one,²⁵ in which he makes no mention of an obviously tempting interpretation, namely, that the “living waters” refer to baptism. What makes John 6 different, however, is that the text itself takes a decidedly sacramental turn in the final verses, introducing new terms such as “eat,” “flesh,” and “blood.” Only when these appear does Thomas’s exposition turn to the Eucharist.

Prompted by the scriptural text itself, then, in verse 52, Thomas begins identifying a theology of the Eucharist in the text. He makes the distinction directly: “So what he said above, ‘I am the living bread,’ pertained to the power of the Word; but what he is saying here pertains to the sharing of his body, that is, to the sacrament of the Eucharist.”²⁶ Here Thomas pauses to offer a short account of basic eucharistic doctrine in the mode of a *quaestio*.²⁷ This allows him to maintain his strict adherence to

²¹ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:27 [898].

²² *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:35 [914].

²³ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:35 [914].

²⁴ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:37 [921].

²⁵ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 4:10, 13-14 [577, 586-587].

²⁶ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:52 [959].

the text while also availing himself of a pedagogical opportunity.

Yet his actual interpretation of the final verses of John 6 are by no means tangential; in fact, they are strikingly acute. In the grumbling response of “the Jews” to Jesus, Thomas develops his interpretation on an entirely new level. He discerns the drama in the text—the crisis of belief versus unbelief—and approaches it as a commentary on the way in which spiritual food is received. As he explains how we take the bread of life he does so in a way that is broader than a purely sacramental interpretation. As he explains it, we take the bread of life by believing in Christ with a faith made living by love. Thus, Christ is in us in two ways: “In our intellect through faith, so far as it is faith, and in our affections through love, which informs or gives life to our faith.”²⁸ The grumblers represent for Thomas one way of eating material bread that symbolizes spiritual bread, be it manna or Eucharist. The grumblers eat the bread “as a sign only” (*ad signum tantum*). They are distinguished by Thomas from those who taste the “spiritual food” contained in the material bread.²⁹

Building on this new distinction, Thomas develops an ecclesial element of his interpretation, introducing further distinctions between spiritual, spiritual/sacramental, and insincere sacramental receptions of the Eucharist, particularly in his exegesis of verse 57: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.”³⁰

In this ecclesial interpretation, Thomas asserts that Christ is the cause of the unity of the Church because the spiritual eating makes us a part of him in the mystical body of the Church. To receive Christ in faith, therefore, means to share in the unity of the Church.³¹ Thomas draws together the three themes he discerned in the early discourse—Christ as spiritual bread, the inaccessibility of spiritual bread to those who do not believe, the Eucharist as spiritual bread—to draw a still deeper insight into the text: that the spiritual food received in faith is source of unity among those who believe in Christ.

Respecting the principle of an identity between sacred Scripture and sacred doctrine, Thomas is able to discern a meaning in the Johannine text that is missed by modern exegetes—namely, that the grumblers lack a certain unity that is constituted by spiritual eating, a unity that is a precursor to the unity to be constituted by the Eucharist, which Thomas refers to as the unity of the Mystical Body, or the Church. The unbelieving Jews are divided, grumbling, arguing, disputing, both with Christ and one another. The cause of their grumbling and dissension, as Thomas

²⁷ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:52 [960-964].

²⁸ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:48 [951].

²⁹ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:49 [954].

³⁰ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:57 [976].

³¹ *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:54 [969].

interprets it, is their inability to perceive the spiritual food in the material. They understand the words of Jesus in a carnal way, as if he is speaking of material food.

Thomas contrasts the divisions among the Jews with the unity of the apostles, which allows Peter to speak for the whole group.³² Thomas discovers then in the textual narrative, a drama that captures a primitive ecclesiology—the unity of the Church caused first by the person of Christ and then by his person in the Eucharist. In so doing, Thomas has also drawn together Christology, sacramentology, spirituality, and a theology of grace. Or perhaps, it is better to say that Thomas draws a theological model from the text in which he respects the organic unity of these elements.

Thomas handling of this important text from John is emblematic of his approach to Scripture throughout his exegetical corpus. As a practical consequence of his guiding insight—the fluidity and even identity of Scripture and doctrine—he is able to join the exegetical and the theological, to bring the scriptural text into “conversation” not only with other scriptural texts, but with the whole of the Church’s doctrinal and liturgical tradition.

At all times the literal text of Scripture remains central and determinative of the interpretation. Thomas is never seen “reading into” the text. Rather, with his understanding of the continuity of Scripture and doctrine, we see Thomas bringing to his exegetical work a fresh perspective, one informed and illuminated by the Church’s rich interpretive tradition, as it is reflected in its liturgy and doctrinal teaching. As a result, he is able to draw out from the text extraordinary depths of meaning unavailable to a strictly historical and literary reading.

We see in Thomas’s exegetical practice that important Catholic doctrines are connected to their vital biblical source, and in the process revitalized and deepened. All this he does within a conservative, carefully moderate, exegetical context that has important lessons to teach modern interpreters.

What Thomas’s principally has to teach exegetes today is the importance of recovering the Scriptures as primary theological documents. As M. Barth observed in his commentary on Ephesians: “Since Ephesians is a theological document, it must be explained in theological terms—or else the exposition would not be literal.”³³ What Barth says of Ephesians is true for the other works of the New Testament, which only further underscores the significance for modern exegesis and theology of Thomas’s insights on the unity of Scripture and doctrine.

³² *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*, 6:69 [1001].

³³ M. Barth, *Ephesians*, 2 vols., Anchor Bible Series (Garden City: Doubleday, 1974), 1:60.