

Aquinas on the Divisions of the Ages Salvation History in the *Summa*

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DURING THE COURSE of his important study of Aquinas's soteriology, Romanus Cessario notes that "The scientific method employed in the *Summa theologiae* does not allow Aquinas to consider expressly what German theologians like to call the 'Heilsgeschichte,' namely, salvation history," but suggests that a salvation-historical reading of the *Summa theologiae* can nevertheless be extrapolated from the relevant texts.¹ More recently, Matthew Levering has written that "at the heart of Thomas Aquinas's scientific theology of salvation lies the narrative of Scripture—the fulfillment of Israel's Torah and Temple through the New Covenant of Christ Jesus."² In this article I intend to develop this idea of a narrative and salvation-historical approach to reading Aquinas, focusing in particular on the way in which he divides history into a series of ages through which God guides humanity toward its goal of perfection. Augustine and his followers were accustomed to classifying human history according to the various "legal states." Most especially, Quodvultdeus (d. c. 454), in his *Liber promissionum et praedictorum Dei*, writes in terms of history *ante legem*, *sub lege*, and *post legem* (or *sub gratia*)—a scheme that also envisages periods corresponding with *dimidium temporis* and *gloria sanctorum*—and a reading of the *Summa* suggests that Aquinas viewed history within a similar framework.³ Medieval authors such as

¹ Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Godly Image: Christ and Salvation in Catholic Theology from Anselm to Aquinas* (Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1990), 177.

² Matthew Levering, *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation According to Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 3.

³ See the comments by Vittorino Grossi in *Patrology*, vol. IV, *The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon*, ed. A. Di

Aquinas, Robert Kilwardby, and Robert Grossteste wrestled in their contrasting ways with the implications of the Augustinian theology of the two covenants;⁴ and I wish to argue that Aquinas constructs around the twin pillars of Old and New Covenants a distinctive soteriology according to which God leads humanity from one “age” to the next, and to outline the principal ways in which this covenantal “structure” underpins Aquinas’s treatment of incarnation, law, liturgy, and sacraments.

Salvation History

One context in which Aquinas’s teaching on how God directs human history from epoch to epoch emerges with particular clarity is his discussion on the “timing” of the incarnation. He starts by explaining that “it was not fitting for God to become incarnate at the beginning of the human race before sin” as “medicine is given only to the sick.”⁵ Aquinas goes on to explain that it was not appropriate for him to become incarnate immediately *after* sin, either. Adam’s “original sin” was the sin of pride,⁶ with the consequence that “humans were to be liberated in such a manner that they might be humbled, and see how they stood in need of a deliverer.” *Superbia* is humanity’s striving to be above (*supra*) itself,⁷ and this striving is central not only to individual sinfulness but to that *hubris* of the human race as a whole that needs to be dealt with in and through history. Aquinas writes that “the Lord did not bestow upon the human race the remedy of the incarnation in the beginning, lest they should despise it through pride, if they did not already recognize their disease.”⁸ If pride is the disease, then the unfolding of the successive stages

Berardino, trans. Placid Solari, O.S.B. (Allen, TX: Christian Classics, 1986), 501–2. On Quodvultdeus, see Daniel Van Slyke, *Quodvultdeus of Carthage: The Apocalyptic Theology of a Roman African in Exile* (Sydney: St. Paul’s Publications, 2003).

⁴ Richard Schenk, O.P., “Views of the Two Covenants in Medieval Theology,” *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): 891–916.

⁵ ST III, q. 1, a. 5. I have used, with appropriate adaptations, the translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates & Washbourne, 1920–1925). On the Augustinian idea of Christ as a doctor who brings the medicine that cures the disease of pride, see B. Speekenbrink, “Christ the ‘medicus humilis’ in St. Augustine,” in *Augustinus Magister: Congrès international augustinien*, vol. 2 (Paris: September 21–24, 1954), 623–39.

⁶ ST II–II, q. 163. See Joseph P. Wawrykow, *The SCM Press A–Z of Thomas Aquinas* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 103.

⁷ ST II–II, q. 161, a. 1.

⁸ ST III, q. 1, a. 5, ad 1. On the idea of sin as a disease, see Rik Van Nieuwenhove, “‘Bearing the Marks of Christ’s Passion’: Aquinas’ Soteriology,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 282–84.

of law is an integral part of the healing process, and Aquinas quotes a gloss on Galatians 3:19 to the effect that:

first of all God left human beings under the Natural Law, with the freedom of their will, in order that they might know their natural strength; and when they failed in it, they received the law; whereupon, by the fault, not of the law, but of their nature, the disease gained strength; so that having recognized their infirmity they might cry out for a physician, and beseech the aid of grace.⁹

In the eyes of Aquinas it is not sufficient for God to become incarnate and start pouring out grace on human beings. Humanity's realization of the need for grace is the necessary preliminary to the Incarnation and to the work of atonement; and preparing humanity for grace through the phases of Natural Law and Old Law, God times the Incarnation in such a way as to maximize its healing potential.

Aquinas presents redemption as a process of perfection in which God's perfective work in the Incarnation and atonement precedes and causes the perfection of humanity. Human perfection flows out of the Incarnation, which is the principle of that perfection, and which advances humanity from imperfection toward "ultimate perfection in union with God."¹⁰ Humanity proceeds from imperfection to perfection and from earthy to spiritual (1 Cor 15:46–7);¹¹ and without the interval between imperfection and perfection, between Adam and Christ, humanity would not have come to a sufficient appreciation of its need for grace, and so would not have been open to receiving grace—to becoming spiritual and heavenly and thus to attain "ultimate perfection in union with God."

The relationship of the successive phases of human imperfection and perfection is again to the fore when Aquinas comes to discuss whether or not Christ's incarnation should have been delayed until the *end* of the world. On the one hand, "by the incarnation human nature is raised to its highest perfection; and in this way it was not becoming that the incarnation should take place at the beginning of the human race," while, on the other hand, "the incarnate Word is the efficient cause of the perfection of human nature," and "the perfection of glory to which human nature is to be finally raised by the incarnate Word will be at the end of the world," and hence needed to be preceded in time by the Incarnation.¹² Aquinas, accordingly, does not see the Incarnation as the goal of creation—as the

⁹ ST III, q. 1, a. 5.

¹⁰ ST III, q. 1, a. 5, ad 3.

¹¹ ST III, q. 1, a. 5.

¹² ST III, q. 1, a. 6.

great climax toward which all human history is ordered—but as the driving force behind the movement toward the climax.¹³ That climax itself will come after the general resurrection at the end of the present age; and the Incarnation, far from being the culmination of human history, is what propels human history toward its intended goal. Like the New Testament authors, Aquinas believes in a general resurrection unto judgment that will be followed (for the just) by the beatific vision—with the result that *beatitudo* is an historical “time” (or, more precisely, a posthistorical time) as well as a state of happiness and contemplation.¹⁴

Aquinas concludes that “the work of the incarnation is to be viewed not as merely the terminus of a movement from imperfection to perfection, but also as a principle of perfection to human nature.”¹⁵ Quoting John 1:16—“of his fullness we have all received,”¹⁶ Aquinas shows how human perfection derives from Christ’s own fullness of grace¹⁷—a fullness of grace that overflows into his mystical body,¹⁸ instructs us through every action of his life and ministry,¹⁹ exemplifies the path of perfection,²⁰ and restores the *imago Dei* within us by teaching us and empowering us to live the life of grace inaugurated by the New Law.²¹ Christ’s “fullness” also anticipates the time of beatitude—the *gloria sanctorum*. The eschatological climax of the fullness of grace that is attained in beatitude is anticipated in Christ’s beatific knowledge, for during his lifetime Christ enjoyed the beatific vision that, as a direct result of his gift of grace, will be enjoyed by the blessed in heaven.²²

¹³ See Aquinas’s comments in *ST* III, q. 1, a. 3.

¹⁴ *SCG* IV, 116.1: “There is a twofold retribution for the things that a person has done in life, one for his soul immediately upon its separation from the body, another at the resurrection of the body. The first retribution is to individuals severally, as individuals severally die; the second is to all humans together, as all humans shall rise together.”

¹⁵ *ST* III, q. 1, a. 6, ad 2.

¹⁶ *ST* III, q. 1, a. 6, c.

¹⁷ *ST* III, q. 7, aa. 9, 10.

¹⁸ *ST* III, q. 8, a. 5.

¹⁹ *ST* III, q. 40, a. 1, ad 3: “Actio Christi fuit nostra instructio.” On the significance of this expression and its variants for Aquinas, see Richard Schenck, O.P., “*Omnis Christi actio nostra instructio*: The Deeds and Sayings of Jesus as Revelation in the View of Thomas Aquinas,” in *La Doctrine de la révélation divine de saint Thomas d’Aquin*, ed. Leo Elders (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), 104–31.

²⁰ On the twin themes of the *imitatio Christi* and of Christ as the *summum exemplar perfectionis* in Aquinas, see Paul Gondreau, “The Humanity of Christ, the Incarnate Word,” in Van Nieuwenhove and Wawrykow, *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, 260–62. As exemplar, Christ teaches us what it is to be perfectly human.

²¹ See Wawrykow, *The SCM Press A–Z of Thomas Aquinas*, 100.

²² *ST* III, q. 9, a. 2; III, q. 10.

Matthew Levering rightly discusses Christ's beatific knowledge against the background of Wisdom Christology,²³ but Christ's *scientia beata* is eschatological as well as sapiential inasmuch as it represents an anticipation—even an historical irruption—in the present of the general condition of the redeemed in the age to come.²⁴

Aquinas is outlining something that approximates an “inaugurated eschatology” in the sense that Christ's fullness of grace represents the ultimate perfection of human nature; other human beings will attain perfection only after the general resurrection. This idea is reprised in the response to the third objection, where Aquinas quotes John Chrysostom's comment on John 3:11 (“God sent not his Son into the world to judge the world”): “[T]here are two comings of Christ: the first, for the remission of sins; the second, to judge the world.”²⁵ The first coming of Christ is medicinal—to deal with sin and to pour out grace. The second coming is to judge, and to reward the just with glory. The two comings of Christ inaugurate two distinct ages—the period *sub gratia* and the period of the *gloria sanctorum*. In Christ himself, the second of these ages is anticipated from the outset, but for everyone else it remains a future hope.²⁶

Aquinas offers another perspective on this “inaugurated eschatology” when, commenting on a passage in Augustine's *Retractiones*,²⁷ he alludes to the notion of the “ages” of the human race, and says that “the time of the incarnation may be compared to the youth of the human race ‘on account of the strength and fervor of faith which works by charity,’ and to old age—i.e., the sixth age—on account of the number of centuries, for Christ came in the sixth age.”²⁸ He continues by observing that

²³ *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, 31–33.

²⁴ ST III, q. 10. N. T. Wright argues that the New Testament authors see the resurrection as an anticipation in the present in the person of Jesus of the resurrection that will be enjoyed in the future by all members of God's true covenant people. See N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (London: SPCK, 2003). Aquinas extends this idea that Christ anticipates the future *gloria sanctorum* to encompass his fullness of grace and his beatific knowledge.

²⁵ ST III, q. 1, a. 6, ad 3.

²⁶ Related to this is the idea that Christ has already destroyed death “causally” but that he is yet to destroy it “actually.” SCG IV, 82.1.

²⁷ *Retractiones*, 1.

²⁸ ST III, q. 1, a. 6, ad 1. This is the Augustinian idea, developed by Bede in his *De temporibus* and *De temporum ratione*, according to which the whole of history is divided into six “ages” that correspond both with the six days of creation and with the six “ages of man,” which is a microcosm of the creation. See Benedicta Ward, S.L.G., *The Venerable Bede* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990), 114–16. On the development of this idea in medieval thought, see J. A. Burrow, *The Ages of Man: A Study in Medieval Writing and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

“although youth and old age cannot be together in a body, yet they can be together in a soul, the former on account of quickness, the latter on account of gravity,” and collates apparently contradictory (or complementary) texts from Augustine to show that, on the one hand, “it was not becoming that the Master by whose imitation the human race was to be formed to the highest virtue should come from heaven, save in the time of youth,” and, on the other hand, “Christ came in the sixth age—i.e., in the old age—of the human race.”²⁹ By juxtaposing apparently contradictory Augustinian texts concerning the “ages” of the human race, Aquinas reinforces the point that God became incarnate in the middle of human history in such a way as to allow for a development in humanity’s awareness of the need for grace. The history of salvation is the history of God guiding humanity from imperfection to perfection, and from “earthly” to “spiritual”; and the Incarnation stands at the midpoint of a process that begins with successive phases of preparation (Natural Law, Old Law) and culminates (under the New Law) with the perfection of humanity by grace that will be completed in the final phase of beatitude.

Legal History

At the end of his *quaestio* on the Old Law, Aquinas asks: “[W]as the Old Law suitably given at the time of Moses?”³⁰ He begins by observing that “it was fitting that the Law should be given at such a time as would be appropriate for the overcoming of humanity’s pride.” Human beings were proud of two things—namely, knowledge and power. “They were proud of their knowledge, as though their natural reason could suffice them for salvation; and accordingly, in order that their pride might be overcome in this matter, they were left to the guidance of their reason without the help of a written law.” As a result of this, “people were able to learn from experience that their reason was deficient, since about the time of Abraham they had fallen headlong into idolatry and the most shameful vices,” after which “it was necessary for a written law to be given as a remedy for human ignorance.”³¹ This being the case, Aquinas explains that

²⁹ Aquinas offers a similar interpretation of this idea in *ST* II–II, q. 1, a. 7, ad 4.

³⁰ Aquinas’s treatment of the Old Law in the *Summa* marks a major advance from the position taken in the *Commentary on the Sentences* and is inspired by the *Summa Fratris Alexandri* of Alexander of Hales. See the comments by Matthew Levering, *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, 6–7. On Aquinas’s teaching on the Old Law and its fulfillment by Christ, see Levering, *Christ’s Fulfillment*, 15–30.

³¹ *ST* I–II, q. 98, a. 6.

it was not fitting for the Old Law to be given at once after the sin of the first human beings . . . because humans were so confident in their own reason, that they did not acknowledge their need of the Old Law, since as yet the dictate of the Natural Law was not darkened by habitual sinning.³²

The “age” of the Natural Law precedes that of the Old Law, and Aquinas envisages a clear development from the arrogant postlapsarian humanity that sees no need of law to the humanity represented by Israel that perceives the need for sin (and especially pride) to be effectively dealt with. Aquinas views the Old Law as a necessary bridge between the law of nature and the law of grace—between humanity as governed by Natural Law and humanity as governed by the grace of the Spirit.³³ Here Aquinas takes up three themes that we have already discerned in his treatment of the timing of the Incarnation: the idea of redemption as a historical process in which human beings first arrive at an awareness of and subsequently find a cure for the sin of pride; the idea that the remedy for sin is properly applied in the middle rather than at the beginning of human history; and the idea of a progression from imperfection to perfection.

Aquinas advances similar arguments when answering the question “should the New Law have been given from the beginning of the world.”³⁴ To begin with, “the New Law is highly spiritual; therefore it was not fitting for it to be given from the beginning of the world.”³⁵ Moreover, it “consists chiefly in the grace of the Holy Spirit, which was not to be given abundantly until sin, which is an obstacle to grace, had been cast out of human beings through the accomplishment of their redemption by Christ.”³⁶ Next he returns to his favorite motif of the transition from imperfection to perfection, quoting Galatians 3:24–5—“the Law was our pedagogue in Christ that we might be justified by faith, but after the faith is come, we are no longer under a pedagogue”—and presenting the imperfection of the Old Law as preparing us for and leading us toward the perfection of the New Law. Finally, he explains that “the New Law is the law of grace, wherefore it is fitting for human beings first of all to be left to themselves under the state of the Old Law, so that through falling into sin, they might realize their weakness, and

³² *ST* I–II, q. 98, a. 6, ad 1.

³³ *ST* I–II, q. 98, a. 6.

³⁴ On the New Law, see Servais Pinckaers, O.P., “La loi de l’Évangile ou loi nouvelle selon S. Thomas,” in *Loi et évangile*, ed. Jean-Marie Aubert and Servais Pinckaers (Geneva: Labor et Fidés, 1981), 57–79.

³⁵ *ST* I–II, q. 106, a. 3, s.c.

³⁶ *ST* I–II, q. 106, a. 3.

acknowledge their need of grace.” This idea that salvation history is a process in which humanity is schooled to arrive at an appreciation of its need for grace and so open itself up to healing is one with which we are by now very familiar, and it is one that is structured around the succession of legal “states.”

Aquinas is at pains to emphasize that the New Law will last until the end of the world, and that humanity awaits no further legal “state.” He explains that “the state of the New Law succeeded the state of the Old Law, as a more perfect law a less perfect one,” but “no state of the present life can be more perfect than the state of the New Law, since nothing can approach nearer to the last end than that which is the immediate cause of our being brought to the last end.”³⁷ Following Pseudo-Dionysius, he notes that “there is a threefold state of mankind; the first was under the Old Law; the second is that of the New Law; the third will take place not in this life, but in heaven.”³⁸ He explains that “as the first state is figurative and imperfect in comparison with the state of the Gospel; so is the present state figurative and imperfect in comparison with the heavenly state, with the advent of which the present state will be done away.”³⁹

Finally, Aquinas firmly rejects the idea that the Trinitarian structure of salvation history implies that an “age of the Spirit” is yet to come.⁴⁰ He explains that

the Old Law corresponded not only to the Father, but also to the Son, because Christ was foreshadowed in the Old Law. Hence our Lord said (John 5:46) “If you did believe Moses, you would perhaps believe me also; for he wrote of me.” In like manner the New Law corresponds not only to Christ, but also to the Holy Spirit, according to Romans 8:2: “The Law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus,” etc. Hence we are not to look forward to another law corresponding to the Holy Spirit.⁴¹

In this account Christ is not identified exclusively with the New Law (which is also the Law of the Spirit), but also with the Old Law. In a

³⁷ ST I–II, q. 106 a. 4.

³⁸ ST I–II, q. 106, a. 4, ad 1. Aquinas is drawing on Chapter Five of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

³⁹ Aquinas quotes 1 Corinthians 13:12—“we see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face.”

⁴⁰ Aquinas is attacking the view proposed by Joachim of Fiore (d. 1201/1202), who developed a philosophy of history that envisages three ages of increasing holiness and spirituality corresponding with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. On Joachim, see Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

⁴¹ ST I–II, q. 106, a. 4, ad 3.

sense, what is new about the New Law is not first and foremost the coming of Christ, who for Aquinas is very much present (by prefiguration) throughout the Old Testament, but the fact that through his passion he releases the Spirit and pours the grace of the Spirit into the members of his mystical body.⁴² Neither the Father nor the Spirit can be experienced or encountered in isolation from Christ, and this insight is reflected in Aquinas's understanding of the structure of salvation history.

Aquinas discusses the question of the transition from the Old Law to the New during the course of an *articulus* titled "Whether There Is One Divine Law, or Several." He begins by quoting Hebrews 7:12—"the priesthood being translated, it is necessary that a translation also be made of the law"—concerning which he comments that "the priesthood is twofold, as stated in the same passage, viz. the levitical priesthood, and the priesthood of Christ. Therefore the divine law is twofold, namely the Old Law and the New Law,"⁴³ yet remains a single law with a single end.⁴⁴ The New Law, accordingly, is not something radically new or different as compared with the Old Law: Aquinas quotes Romans 3:30 to the effect that there is one Law that justifies by faith.⁴⁵ However, it does denote a new way of being subjected to God,⁴⁶ and thus ushers in a whole new epoch in humanity's subjection. Justification (and hence subjection to God) have always been by faith, but the advent of the New Law means a change in the circumstances in which justification is applied and in which faith is expressed.

⁴² Aquinas may be seen as anticipating the insight of modern historical Jesus scholars such as N. T. Wright that the passion of Christ effectively propels human history into "the age to come." See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996); Mark Armitage, "Broken on the Wheel of History: A Pentecostal Perspective on *Summa Theologiae* 3a, q48," *New Blackfriars* 82 (2001): 561–70.

⁴³ *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 5, s.c. According to Aquinas, "the priesthood of the Old Law was a figure of the priesthood of Christ" (*ST* III, q. 22, a. 1, ad 2). Matthew Levering argues convincingly that as prophet, priest, and king Christ fulfills the moral, ceremonial, and judicial precepts of the Old Law (*Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, 51–79). In each of these areas by fulfilling the Old Law, Christ ushers in the new era of the grace of the Spirit.

⁴⁴ *ST* I–II, q. 107, a. 1.

⁴⁵ On justification, see the excellent discussion in Daniel A. Keating, "Justification, Sanctification and Divinization in Thomas Aquinas," in *Aquinas on Doctrine: A Critical Introduction*, ed. Thomas Weinandy, Daniel Keating, and John Yocum (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 139–58.

⁴⁶ *ST* I–II, q. 113, a. 1. Aquinas defines justification as "a certain rectitude of order in the interior disposition, in so far as what is highest in humans is subject to God, and the inferior powers of the soul are subject to the superior, i.e., to the reason."

Next, he returns to the theme of the development from imperfection to perfection, remarking that two things may be distinguished from each other “as perfect and imperfect in the same species, e.g., a boy and a man.”⁴⁷ He then refers to one of his favorite texts, Galatians 3:24–25, which, he says, “compares the state of man under the Old Law to that of a child ‘under a pedagogue,’ but the state under the New Law to that of a full grown man who is ‘no longer under a pedagogue.’” He makes a similar point during his discussion on the comparison between the Old Law and New Law, where he writes that

the New Law is distinct from the Old Law, because the Old Law is like a pedagogue of children, as the Apostle says (Gal 3:24), whereas the New Law is the law of perfection, since it is the law of charity, of which the Apostle says (Col 3:14) that it is “the bond of perfection.”⁴⁸

In all this Aquinas’s view of the Old Law is entirely positive.⁴⁹ The function of the Old Law is to provide a bridge between the chaotic state of fallen humanity under Natural Law and the justified state of redeemed humanity under the New Law—that is, under the grace of the Spirit—and the only problem with the Old Law is that it belongs to a former era of “legal history,” and hence is something that in the present day one cannot meaningfully live under.⁵⁰

In *Summa theologiae* I–II, question 91, article 5, Aquinas outlines the advance from imperfection to perfection in terms of a transition from a law ordered toward sensible and earthly good to one ordered toward intelligible and heavenly good, from a law that directs external acts to one that directs internal acts, and from a law that works by inducing fear to a law that works by inducing charity. Salvation for Aquinas encompasses not just Christ’s saving work on Calvary but the whole process of maturation, education, and perfection in virtue of which the human race arrives at an appreciation of its true condition and is duly prepared for

⁴⁷ *ST* I–II, q. 91, a. 5.

⁴⁸ *ST* I–II, q. 107, a. 1.

⁴⁹ The Old Law was good but imperfect, because it does not confer the Holy Spirit by whom that charity that fulfills the Law is spread abroad in hearts (*ST* I–II, q. 98, a. 1).

⁵⁰ Does Aquinas advocate supersessionism—the idea that in the light of the New Law the Old Law has been completely superseded (for Christians and Jews alike)? See the nuanced discussion by Matthew Levering, *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, 88. For an excellent account of this debate in the light of *Nostra Aetate*, see Francis Martin, “Election, Covenant, Law,” *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): 857–90.

the outpouring of divine grace.⁵¹ Echoing the theme of Galatians 3:24–25, he explains that “the one king, God, in his one kingdom, gave one law to human beings, while they were yet imperfect, and another more perfect law, when, by the preceding law, they had been led to a greater capacity for divine things.”⁵² Once again, the underlying motif is that of the distinction between two types of kingdom—earthly and heavenly, sensible and intelligible—and the transition from Old Law to New Law is the story of the transition by way of education, and in God’s one kingdom, from one way of living in the kingdom to another.⁵³ Indeed, in an important sense the transition in question is not first and foremost a transition from Old Law to New Law but a transition of fallen humanity under Natural Law to justified humanity under the grace of the Spirit (the New Law) by way of the Old Law that acts as a bridge or conduit—in the language of Aquinas’s favorite text from Galatians, as a pedagogue—connecting two very different states.

Liturgical History

In guiding humanity through successive legal states—corresponding to the Natural Law, the Old Law, and the New Law—God also leads us through a series of four liturgical states “corresponding to four different stages of divine revelation and union with God.”⁵⁴ Aquinas explains that the ceremonial precepts directed human beings to God, just as the judicial precepts directed them to their neighbor, and that they accomplish this by prescribing the worship due to him.⁵⁵ The worship due to God has two aspects—internal and external, for “since humans are composed of soul and body, each of these should be applied to the worship of God—the soul by an interior worship; the body by an outward worship”

⁵¹ *ST I–II*, q. 107, a. 1, ad 2. John P. Yocum, “Sacraments in Aquinas,” in Weinandy, Keating, and Yocum, *Aquinas on Doctrine*, 164: “The way of salvation is prepared by the education of a people, from whom Christ is to come.” See *ST I–II*, q. 104, a. 2, ad 2.

⁵² *ST I–II*, q. 107, a. 1, ad 1.

⁵³ On the idea of the kingdom of God in Aquinas, see Benedict T. Viviano, O.P., “The Kingdom of God in Albert the Great and Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 44 (1980): 502–22. Viviano makes the point that Aquinas’s teaching on the kingdom represents a rebuttal of Joachim.

⁵⁴ Yocum, “Sacraments in Aquinas,” 164. The idea of the “four liturgies” was first raised by Colman O’Neill, O.P., “St Thomas on the Membership of the Church,” *The Thomist* 27 (1963): 88–140. See also Matthew Levering, *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, 54–58; Liam Walsh, O.P., “Liturgy in the Theology of St. Thomas,” *The Thomist* 38 (1974): 557–83.

⁵⁵ *ST I–II*, q. 101, a. 1.

(Aquinas quotes Psalm 83:3: “my heart and my flesh have rejoiced in the living God”).⁵⁶ Just as “the body is ordained to God through the soul, so the outward worship is ordained to the internal worship,” which consists in “the soul being united to God by the intellect and affections.” In the state of beatitude (Aquinas is following Pseudo-Dionysius here), “the human intellect will gaze on the divine truth in itself, wherefore the external worship will not consist in anything figurative, but solely in the praise of God, proceeding from the inward knowledge and affection.”⁵⁷ However, in our “present state of life, we are unable to gaze on the divine truth in itself, and we need the ray of divine light to shine upon us under the form of certain sensible figures.”⁵⁸

This happens in various ways “according to the various states of human knowledge” (*secundum diversum statum cognitionis humanae*).⁵⁹ Accordingly,

under the Old Law, neither was the divine truth manifest in itself, nor was the way leading to that manifestation as yet opened out . . . hence the external worship of the Old Law needed to be figurative not only of the future truth to be manifested in our heavenly country, but also of Christ, who is the way leading to that heavenly manifestation. But under the New Law, this way is already revealed, and therefore it needs no longer to be foreshadowed as something future, but to be brought to our minds as something past or present, and the truth of the glory to come, which is not yet revealed, alone needs to be foreshadowed.⁶⁰

Aquinas proceeds to quote Hebrews 11:1 (“the Law has a shadow of the good things to come, not the very image of the things”), and comments that “a shadow is less than an image, so that the image belongs to the New Law, but the shadow to the Old.”⁶¹ *Imago* in this context refers principally to the way in which the grace of the New Law reflects and anticipates future beatitude, but it also recalls what Aquinas says in the *prima pars* about the creation of human beings in the *imago Dei*:

⁵⁶ ST I–II, q. 101, a. 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid. Matthew Levering speaks of “the liturgical consummation of history” (*Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, 129).

⁵⁸ ST I–II, q. 101, a. 2. Aquinas is drawing on Chapter One of Denys’s *Celestial Hierarchy*. On the relationship of the thought of Aquinas to that of Denys, see Fran O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ ST I–II, q. 101, a. 2. The various states of human knowledge correspond to distinct periods of salvation history.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

the image of God is in humans in three ways. First, inasmuch as humans possess a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God, and this aptitude consists in the very nature of the mind, which is common to all. Secondly, inasmuch as they actually and habitually know and love God, though imperfectly; and this image consists in the conformity of grace. Thirdly, inasmuch as they know and love God perfectly; and this image consists in the likeness of glory.⁶²

Aquinas goes on to speak of a threefold image of “creation,” “re-creation,” and “likeness”; the first of which is found in all people, the second only in the just, the third only in the blessed. This threefold image corresponds to the states of Natural Law, the New Law, and beatitude—with the Old Law acting as a bridge between creation and re-creation, and between the conformity of nature and the conformity of grace. Accordingly, law, liturgy, and the *imago Dei* in humans can be viewed as “historical” inasmuch as all are divisible into states or epochs each of which reflects a different phase in humanity’s progression toward beatific knowledge.

Addressing the question of whether or not the ceremonial observances of the Old Law ceased at the coming of Christ, Aquinas explains that “external worship should be in proportion to the internal worship, which consists in faith, hope, and charity,” which in turn means that “exterior worship had to be subject to variations according to the variations in the internal worship, in which a threefold state may be distinguished.”⁶³ Aquinas identifies a “threefold state” in internal worship:

one state [*status*] was in respect of faith and hope, both in heavenly goods, and in the means of obtaining them—in both of these considered as things to come. Such was the state of faith and hope in the Old Law. Another state of interior worship is that in which we have faith and hope in heavenly goods as things to come; but we have in the means of obtaining heavenly goods, as in things present or past. Such is the state of the New Law. The third state is that in which both are possessed as present; wherein nothing is believed in as lacking, nothing hoped for as being yet to come. Such is the state of the blessed.⁶⁴

⁶² ST I, q. 93, a. 4. On the image of God according to Aquinas, see Michael Dauphinais, “Loving the Lord Your God: The *imago Dei* in Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 63 (1999): 241–67; D. Juvenal Merriell, C.O., *To the Image of the Trinity: A Study of the Development of Aquinas’ Teaching* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990). Aquinas sees atonement above all in terms of restoration of the *imago Dei*. See Romanus Cessario, O.P., “Aquinas on Christian Salvation,” in Weinandy, Keating, and Yocum, *Aquinas on Doctrine*, 117–37.

⁶³ ST I–II, q. 103, a. 3.

⁶⁴ Ibid. Once again, *status* in this context denotes a period of salvation history as well as a human condition.

In the state of the Old Law, all external worship was figurative, whereas in beatitude “nothing in regard to worship of God will be figurative.”⁶⁵ Aquinas observes that “the mystery of the redemption of the human race was fulfilled in Christ’s Passion,”⁶⁶ and, drawing on John 19:30 (“it is consummated”) and Matthew 27:51 (“the veil of the temple was rent”), presents this redemption in terms of the fulfillment and final cessation of the ceremonial precepts of Law: “[T]he prescriptions of the Law must have ceased then altogether through their reality being fulfilled.”⁶⁷ Accordingly, “before Christ’s Passion, while Christ was preaching and working miracles, the Law and the Gospel were concurrent, since the mystery of Christ had already begun, but was not as yet consummated.”⁶⁸ Although, in one sense, the incarnation inaugurates a new era or “state,” in another sense the former state and the newer state run alongside each other until the passion, when a new historical and liturgical era is inaugurated.

Sacramental History

The fact that liturgy encompasses the sacraments means that we are also living in a new sacramental era. The sacramental dispensation inhabits a dynamic—a narrative—similar to that of the soteriological, legal, and liturgical dispensations; and Aquinas accordingly situates his discussion of the sacraments within “a historical framework that takes account of how they might operate in the successive phases of an economy of grace that reaches its fullness in the coming of Christ.”⁶⁹ God’s pedagogical government of human beings consists in his leading them from sin to beatitude by way of Old Law and New Law; and “The sacramental system is wholly adapted to the need of human beings in this age, according to the progressive states of knowledge possible through divine revelation.”⁷⁰

Aquinas begins by asking why sacraments are necessary for salvation, and suggests three reasons. First, human nature “is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible,” and “divine wisdom . . . fittingly provides humans with means of salvation, in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments.”⁷¹

⁶⁵ Ibid. Matthew Levering writes that “the beatific vision fulfills in the most immediate and intimate way possible the history of Israel’s Torah and Temple,” *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple*, 129.

⁶⁶ *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 3.

⁶⁷ *ST* I–II, q. 103, a. 3, ad 2.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Liam G. Walsh, O.P., “Sacraments,” in Van Nieuwenhove and Wawrykow, *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, 343.

⁷⁰ Yocum, “Sacraments in Aquinas,” 164.

⁷¹ *ST* III, q. 61, a. 1.

Second, in sinning, human beings subjected themselves by their affections to corporeal things; and Aquinas sees sacraments as drawing them away from a disordered attachment to materiality. However, in good Dominican fashion, he regards the materiality of the sacraments themselves as entirely positive, and views it as a corrective to pride:

through the institution of the sacraments, humans, consistently with their nature, are instructed through sensible things; they are humbled, through confessing that they are subject to corporeal things, seeing that they receive assistance through them; and they are even preserved from bodily hurt, by the healthy exercise of the sacraments.⁷²

The purpose of sacraments, then, is to “instruct” and to “humble”—to deal with the sin of *superbia* by teaching us about God and by humbling us in his presence. During the periods *sub lege* and *sub gratia*, the divine wisdom makes use of sacraments to enlighten us about intelligible truths, and to remind us of the proper attitude of humanity before God.

Sacraments were not necessary in humanity’s condition of innocence, as the *rectitudo* of that state meant that “just as the mind was subject to God, so were the lower powers of the soul subject to the mind, and the body to the soul.”⁷³ Humanity stood in need of grace in the state of innocence, but obtained grace in a spiritual and invisible manner rather than by sensible signs.⁷⁴ The sin of Adam brought about a change of state, one consequence of which is that grace now needs to be mediated by way of sensible objects. History has advanced from one liturgical age to another, and from a presacramental phase to a sacramental phase. As we might expect, Aquinas’s treatment of the sacraments of the Old Law takes account of the Torah’s educative function. Aquinas describes the way in which, as sin gained more of a hold on humans and clouded their reason, fixed laws and sacraments of faith became a necessity.⁷⁵ Drawing on a statement of Gregory the Great to the effect that “since the advance of time there was an advance in the knowledge of divine things,”⁷⁶ Aquinas observes that “it was necessary, as time went on, that the knowledge of

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *ST* III, q. 61, a. 2. On original justice (*ST* I, q. 95, a. 1), see Rudi A. te Velde, “Evil, Sin, and Death: Thomas Aquinas on Original Sin,” in Van Nieuwenhove and Wawrykow, *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, 157–59.

⁷⁴ *ST* III, q. 61, a. 2, ad 1.

⁷⁵ *ST* III, q. 61, a. 3, ad 2.

⁷⁶ Aquinas quotes Gregory elsewhere (*Homilies on Ezekiel* 17) to the effect that “the knowledge of the holy fathers increased as time went on . . . and, the nearer they were to Our Savior’s coming, the more fully did they received the mysteries of salvation” (*ST* II–II, q. 1, a. 7, s.c.).

faith should be more and more unfolded”; and this unfolding of knowledge was provided for by “certain fixed sacraments significative of humanity’s faith in the future coming of Christ.”⁷⁷

Aquinas’s answer to the question “Was there need for any sacraments after Christ came?” enables him to stand back and contemplate the entire sweep of salvation history (and, we might say, liturgical history). The difference between “then” and “now” is that “as the ancient fathers were saved through faith in Christ’s *future* coming, so are we saved through faith in Christ’s *past* birth and passion” (emphasis added); and Aquinas reminds us that “the sacraments are signs in protestation of the faith whereby humans are justified, and signs should vary according as they signify the future, the past, or the present.”⁷⁸ Following Pseudo-Dionysius, he further explains that

the state [*status*] of the New Law is between the state of the Old Law, whose figures are fulfilled in the New, and the state of glory, in which all truth will be openly and perfectly revealed. Wherefore then there will be no sacraments. But now, so long as we know “through a glass in a dark manner” (1 Cor 13:12), we need sensible signs in order to reach spiritual things, and this is the province of the sacraments.⁷⁹

Aquinas accordingly envisages four sacramental “states”—the presacramental state that preceded the Old Law, the sacraments of the Old Law, the sacraments of the New Law, and the postsacramental state of beatitude. These sacramental “states” correspond with distinct phases in the history of salvation, and, more especially, of human knowledge and humility before God. Human history is nothing other than the story of God guiding the human race through successive stages—characterized by the Augustinian scheme *ante legem*, *sub lege*, and *post legem* (*sub gratia*)—away from pride and toward the possibility of beatific knowledge, and this process is mirrored in the four sacramental “states” that Aquinas derives from Denys.

Finally, one further difference between the sacraments of the Old Law and those of the New is that the latter are causes of grace as well as signs pointing toward the grace-causing passion.⁸⁰ Aquinas quotes Galatians

⁷⁷ ST III, q. 61, a. 3, ad 2.

⁷⁸ ST III, q. 61 a. 4.

⁷⁹ ST III, q. 61, a. 4, ad 1, drawing on Chapter Five of Pseudo-Dionysius, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.

⁸⁰ For a defense of Aquinas’s teaching on sacramental causality against modern objections, see Bernhard Blankenhorn, O.P., “The Instrumental Causality of the Sacraments: Thomas Aquinas and Louis-Marie Chauvet,” *Nova et Vetera* 4 (2006): 255–94.

4:9, which describes the sacraments of the Old Law as “weak and needy elements” on the grounds that “they neither contained nor caused grace” and those who used them were “under the elements of this world” with the results that the sacraments themselves were “elements of this world.”⁸¹ Grace derives exclusively from Christ’s passion.⁸² We have seen that Christ’s passion is the final cause of the Old Law sacraments inasmuch as these are protestations of faith in the passion, but Aquinas explains that, while effects can precede their final cause temporally, they cannot precede their efficient cause, with the result that, unlike the New Law sacraments, they cannot be said to contain grace,⁸³ or to possess the power to cause grace.⁸⁴ The fact that the sacraments of the New Law contain and cause grace whereas those of the Old Law merely signify grace is a further indicator that they belong to a different era of salvation history. History has moved on from an era in which sacraments are protestations of a future redemption to one in which they signify past events (most especially Christ’s passion) as well as future ones (beatitude), and in which, as well as signifying grace, they are instrumental causes of grace. Christ has delivered us from the “weak and needy elements,” and inaugurated a new age characterized by the freedom of the Spirit, with the result that the period *sub gratia* is a period in which humanity enjoys access to the grace of Christ in virtue of the causality of the sacraments.

Conclusion

Following in the tradition of Augustine, Aquinas divides salvation history into three main periods—*ante legem*, *sub lege*, and *sub gratia* (or *post legem*)—which lead to a fourth “age” characterized by *beatitudo*. This Augustinian reading of history is integrated with a Dionysian reading, which relates the legal divisions of history to different stages in the development of human understanding and worship. God exercises his government of history by guiding humanity through this succession of ages, dealing with the consequences of original sin (conceived primarily as pride) by means of a divine pedagogy built into the structure of the divisions of time, each of which prepares for the one that follows. In slightly differing ways, incarnation, law, liturgy, and the sacraments (here the Dionysian viewpoint is in evidence)

⁸¹ *ST* III, q. 61, a. 4, ad 2.

⁸² *ST* III, q. 62, a. 6.

⁸³ *ST* III, q. 62, a. 3.

⁸⁴ *ST* III, q. 62, a. 4. Liam G. Walsh writes that “sacraments give grace because they are acts of worship that join those who make them to the passion of Christ” (“Sacraments,” 348). The Old Law sacraments are acts of worship, but as such they are figurative of Christ’s passion rather than derived from it.

all reflect the fourfold pattern of salvation history, which moves from Natural Law through the Old Law to the New Law (that is, the grace of the Spirit), and finally to the state of beatitude—the *gloria sanctorum*. While it remains true that “[t]he scientific method employed in the *Summa theologiae* does not allow Aquinas to consider expressly what German theologians like to call the ‘Heilsgeschichte,’” nevertheless *Heilsgeschichte* is everywhere presupposed in the *Summa*, and, in the Augustinian–Dionysian form which we have described, provides its “narrative substructure.”⁸⁵ N·V

⁸⁵ For a demonstration of the way in which, in the New Testament, theological statements presuppose what he terms a “narrative substructure,” see Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: The Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002).