

Whose Red Garments? Which Divine Warrior? Thomas Aquinas on Isaiah 63 and the Literal Interpretation of the Old Testament

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Introduction

In attempting to discern the principles by which St. Thomas Aquinas offers a literal interpretation of the Old Testament, this essay will serve to highlight the tension between various periods and methods of biblical exegesis in the hope that it will allow a more fruitful engagement with the conclusions of both St. Thomas and modern biblical commentators. In order to make this discernment, we begin first by addressing the concept of literal interpretation as a whole, as significant misunderstandings can arise in any discussion of what a “literal” reading of Scripture actually is. This exploration will serve our project well by allowing us to pin down precisely what is meant by this term, as well as why it should be important in any mode of theological exegesis (especially that of the Old Testament). When we are able to parse out the exact nature of literal interpretation and the implications of taking such an approach with regard to St. Thomas, we will then be capable of examining a particular instance of Thomas’s exegesis by offering a test case of his methods in the reading of Isaiah 63, in which Isaiah prophesies the future appearance of a heavenly warrior who will bring both judgment and salvation to Israel.

To sum up, we have two goals: to show that St. Thomas’s understanding of the literal sense is both logically coherent and perennially illuminating, and to highlight a particular instance in which St. Thomas’s exegesis and literal interpretation is employed in an insightful and creative manner. The conclusion of such an investigation will demonstrate that Aquinas is a

valuable resource for the science of biblical exegesis precisely because of his philosophically robust methodology and his commitment to the grounding and foundational importance of the Old Testament's historical, literal sense.

The Nature of Literal Interpretation

At the very outset of the *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas deals with the issue of biblical interpretation and the various senses of Scripture. First, he clarifies what it means to speak of a literal sense of Scripture: "that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal."¹ Having established what he means by the literal sense, he goes on to speak of the various spiritual senses—allegorical, moral, anagogical—and the way in which they are to be parsed out, but he is careful to note that a multiplication of senses does not necessitate equivocation in meaning: "Thus in holy Scripture no confusion results [from the multiplicity of senses] for all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended in allegory."² To sum up: the literal, historical sense of Scripture is that meaning which is intended by the words themselves, and it is upon this understanding alone that any argument (and thus any theology) can be founded.³

Now one should not take this definition of the literal sense as somehow historicizing or demystifying the text of Scripture, as though St. Thomas were concerned merely with what the words of the human authors mean. First, it is not merely the intention of the human author that must be ascertained, for the human author is not the only author: "The author of holy Scripture is God."⁴ In the preface to the *Super Isaiam* he says the same: "the author of Sacred Scripture is the Holy Spirit," and it is "the prophet's tongue" (*lingua prophetae*) which acts as the divine instrument (*organum spiritus sancti*).⁵ So

¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 1, a. 10, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1948).

² ST I, q. 1, a. 10.

³ What is more, Aquinas also points out that the literal sense takes up into itself the use of metaphor: "The metaphorical sense is contained in the literal, for by words things are signified properly and figuratively. Nor is the figure itself, but that which is figured, the literal sense. When Scripture speaks of God's arm, the literal sense is not that God has such a limb, but only what is signified by it, i.e. the power to act" (ST I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 3). This clear understanding of metaphor as a part of the literal sense is one of the key features of St. Thomas's exegesis which will allow him to avoid many of the allegorical pitfalls into which the Christian interpreter may at times be liable to fall.

⁴ ST I, q. 1, a. 10.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Super Isa*, proem., lns. 10–11, 16–17, in Leonine ed. vol. 28 (1974).

here we have a necessary condition for literal interpretation, that it must treat God as the primary author of Scripture. Therefore, a literal exegesis of any particular text must take into account not only the intention of the human author, but the divine author as well.

Let us proceed. It is a particularly modern approach to couch this search for the literal sense of the text as the search to ascertain “what the author meant.” For St. Thomas, this is a question that is not in itself particularly helpful, as the intention of Sacred Scripture does not depend primarily on what the human author means to say at a particular point in time, but what the Holy Spirit intends Scripture to teach. In an essay addressing this very issue, John Boyle points us to one of the disputed questions in the *De potentia*, where St. Thomas is discussing the interpretation of Genesis.⁶ Stepping back to comment on interpretation in general, Aquinas offers two basic principles for consideration. There are two things, Aquinas says, which the interpreter must avoid:

One is to give to the words of Scripture an interpretation manifestly false: since falsehood cannot underlie the divine Scriptures which we have received from the Holy Spirit. . . .

The other is not to force such an interpretation on Scripture as to exclude any other interpretations that are actually or possibly true, since it is part of the dignity of Holy Scripture that under the one literal sense many others are contained.⁷

St. Thomas goes on to state that it is even possible that the sacred authors were aware of all the various ways in which their words might be understood, and wrote them down in such a way that their words would contain a multiplicity of meanings: “They expressed [these truths] under one literary style, so that each truth is the sense intended by the author.”⁸ And not only this, even if the human author did not possess a knowledge of the full range of meanings which their words might convey, this is of little consequence, as the author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit, who certainly understood each

All Latin citations will be taken from this volume, with the corresponding line numbers (note that division by *lectio* is not present after ch. 9); and all translations are my own.

⁶ See John Boyle, “Authorial Intention and the *Divisio Textus*,” in *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 3–8.

⁷ *De potentia*, q. 4, a. 1, resp., trans. English Dominican Fathers (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1952).

⁸ *De potentia*, q. 4, a. 1, resp.

truth which could be meant, and thus “every truth that can be adapted to the sacred text without prejudice to the literal sense is the sense of Holy Scripture.”⁹

We must take account, then, of the true manner in which St. Thomas goes about his discernment of the literal meaning of Scripture, and the mode in which he goes about crafting an interpretation *ad litteram*. As Boyle points out: “What is missing from Thomas’s criteria, and notably so to moderns, is any consideration of what the author meant. This is not a momentary lapse.”¹⁰ The very nature of speech is that words signify things, and it is quite possible that there are times in which even the human author of Scripture could have intended to signify more than one truth through the vehicle of the spoken word. Though one would look in vain for a treatment of the *meaning* of the author of Scripture in the works of St. Thomas, what is not missing from his thought is an understanding of the importance of the *intention* of the author. However, as Boyle remarks, caution must be taken here as well, for to come to understand the intention of the author, more is to be considered than simply “what they meant”; what an author really means in any particular instance is sometimes very difficult to ascertain, but what an author intends is often more easily discerned. In this regard, intention is, by and large, a macro-level concern, while meaning is a micro-level concern. For the book of Isaiah, Thomas states at the very outset what Isaiah’s intention is: to proclaim the future coming of the Son of God. The commentary itself is concerned to make judgments about what each individual part of the book *means* in light of this primary *intention*.

According to the mind of St. Thomas, the meaning of any particular word or turn of phrase chosen by one of the authors of Scripture is entirely in service of the end to which the author is tending. Taking up the basic categories of goal and intention, when one intends something—when one wills something in particular—one also chooses the means to that end precisely because they will contribute to the attainment of that end. In any sequence of events chosen to bring about a particular good, every choice is ordered toward the attainment of that good, of bringing it about. In

⁹ *De potentia*, q. 4, a. 1, resp. This is a position which many moderns find beyond the pale, and is in fact not even within their horizon as a possibility. For example, in his recent volume on Isaiah, Ben Witherington attempts to give a brief overview of Thomas’s reading of the sacred text and makes an elementary mistake in this regard when attempting to understand the medieval exegetical method: he equates St. Thomas’s understanding of the literal sense with merely that which the human author intends to say (*Isaiah Old and New: Exegesis, Intertextuality, and Hermeneutics* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017], 414).

¹⁰ Boyle, “Authorial Intention,” 4.

the case of the sacred author, their intention—what they intend to teach and proclaim—governs the manner in which they set about bringing that intention into being. Taking up the *Super Isaiam*, we see that Aquinas states clearly what he understands to be Isaiah's intention: "His principal intention revolves around the coming of Christ and the calling of the nations."¹¹ Every interpretive choice Aquinas makes, then, is going to be viewed through this hermeneutic lens—to attain the "literal sense" of any particular passage, it is necessary to keep this intention always in mind.¹²

It is this primacy of authorial intention that provides the unifying structure to the text, especially as laid out in the *divisio textus*, the method by which the Scholastic theologian carried out the medieval equivalent of literary criticism. While it would take us too far afield to raise the issue of the authorship of Isaiah, suffice it to say that St. Thomas asserts single-authorship (no other theory is even broached). Though it is impossible to know what the Angelic Doctor would think about modern hypotheses of multiple authorship, there is a sense in which it would ultimately be a fruitless exercise, as he would still insist upon reading Isaiah as an intrinsically unified whole due to its source in the agency of the Holy Spirit as the principal author. In seeing the canonical form of Isaiah as possessed of an interior unifying principle, Thomas can assert that Isaiah has an explicit intention around which the written work revolves, and which guides the structure of the text.

Anticipating the contemporary division of the book (though with obviously different motives and conclusions), St. Thomas finds Isaiah to be concerned with two main ideas: God's justice, and God's mercy. Chapters 1–39 (what modern scholars have commonly dubbed "Proto-Isaiah") are principally concerned with the proclamation of God's retributive justice: first against the chosen people themselves, and then against any others who would persecute Israel or who would doubt the word of God. Chapters 40–66 ("Deutero-Isaiah," and according to some "Trito-Isaiah") are principally concerned with the proclamation of the consoling mercy of God: first by assuring them of God's love and announcing the divine promises, and then by relating how those promises would be brought about.¹³

¹¹ *Super Isa* 1, lec. 2, lns. 152–54.

¹² There is of course the question of why this reasoning is not circular. It seems to me that the intention of the author, as Aquinas sees it, is relatively obvious and can be gleaned from the text without any particular difficulty. Once the reader has discerned the basic intention of the sacred author, then one can go back into the text and use the primary intention of the author as a key to interpret the more obscure portions of the work in light of the overall structure and authorial intent.

¹³ Thomas gives us his division, as one would expect, at the beginning of the commentary in the second lecture treating the first chapter: "Therefore, this book is divided into two

For Aquinas, the sacred author is a master teacher who lays out his work with the utmost care and orders the text in a manner best suited to his purposes. By emphasizing the two great attributes of God in two major parts—justice and mercy—the prophet Isaiah is able to rebuke Israel for their sins and their failure to live up to the stipulations of the covenant, while also offering the people hope because of the Lord’s mercy. Indeed, for St. Thomas, Isaiah’s principal intention is the message of hope found in the latter half of the book: it is precisely *because* of Isaiah’s intention to announce the great hope of the coming savior and the calling of the Gentiles that he writes anything at all. Far from seeing Isaiah of Jerusalem as the author of the first thirty-nine chapters alone, Aquinas’s understanding is that Isaiah is in fact most properly the author of chapters 40–66 because those contain the message which he principally intends.¹⁴

sections: in the first, the condemnation of divine justice is set down with regard to the eradication of sinners; in the second, beginning at chapter 40, the consolation of divine mercy with regard to the resurrection of the just” (*Super Isa* 1, lec. 2, lns. 162–165). Thomas repeats the structure when beginning the second “section” of Isaiah, when commenting on chapter 40: “This is the second major part of this book, in which he chiefly intends the consolation of the people through the many benefits that had been solemnly promised” (*Super Isa* 40, lns. 1–4). For all of its precision, St. Thomas’s use of the *divisio* is a sword that cuts two ways. On the one hand, perhaps his most significant contribution lies in this distinction between Isa 1–39 and 40–66, which specifically addresses the modern problem of authorship and unity. The distinction between divine justice and mercy is absolutely crucial in discerning Isaiah’s intention. On the other hand, it is clear that there are times where Thomas’s division seems rather to obscure the intention of the author, such as when the unity of the Servant Song which spans Isa 52–53 is glossed over simply because of the (arbitrary) chapter divisions. Perhaps in this particular instance, we can blame the imprecision on his youth and a hectic teaching schedule; the *expositio* was, after all, meant to be a quick gloss over the text.

¹⁴ This line of thinking is remarkably similar to the argument advanced by John Oswalt, who claims that “what is taught in chs. 1–39 requires chs. 40–66” (*The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988], 8). Oswalt goes on to conclude that it is precisely the existence of the book of Isaiah as a whole that gave hope and strength to those who found themselves in exile, wrestling with the difficult circumstances of seeming abandonment by their God: “The fundamental point that chs. 40–55 address is the possibility of restoration. . . . More than anything else, the exile would raise questions about the character of the God whom Isaiah and the pre-exilic prophets had been proclaiming. Had the book of Isaiah in its entirety not existed prior to the exile, it is easy to imagine the exilic community simply abandoning their pre-exilic faith and assimilating to the dominant Babylonian culture, as a number of the Jews did” (8). If the sum total of Isaiah’s prophecy before the exile ended with ch. 39, would it have even been left to posterity? The hope found in the promises of restoration and glorification was the driving force behind the faith of the Jews who would remain faithful—the existence of the book of Isaiah in its entirety would allow the people

If Isaiah's principal intention is to announce the coming of the messiah and the ingathering of the nations, then every choice he makes in conveying that message will be ordered to that end. Since Isaiah has a coherent intention in mind, the text which is produced on account of this intention is coherent as well. Furthermore, if it is true that what is first in intention is last in execution, then it makes perfect sense for Isaiah to only move into the ideas with which he is primarily concerned in the latter half of his work. By setting up his work in chapters 1–39, he sets up chapters 40–66 to shine forth all the greater.

As a preliminary exercise, let us examine a particular instance where St. Thomas's principles are seen in action, where his exegesis explicitly resorts to this concept of a "multiple literal sense." While the immediate application of an appeal to a multiple literal sense may not be immediately apparent, its relevance should be immediately discernible in practice. While the possibility of a multiple literal sense is not widely held, it is a load-bearing concept for Thomas's methodology (and pre-modern exegesis as a whole). In the area of Pauline studies for instance, Scott Hahn and John Kincaid have demonstrated the value of Thomas's appeal to the multiple literal sense as "an important tool that could help bridge some of the exegetical divides that currently plague" the field,¹⁵ and it is clear that the same is quite true regarding interpretation of the Old Testament.¹⁶

Commenting on Isa 35:4–5—"then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,

to hold on to hope as everything they knew fell around them. While many modern scholars remain unconvinced that Isaiah of Jerusalem can be credited with the majority of the content and structure of the book as a whole, the logic with which Aquinas approaches the text of Isaiah—that the prophet composed the whole of the book, and can be credited with the unified vision presented through the *divisio textus*—is in line with that of Oswalt and others who are sympathetic to the single-author theory of composition. This does not preclude the possibility and likelihood that later figures in Israel's history may have added certain passages, clarified certain proclamations, or made editorial contributions, but it does take seriously the integrity of the internal structure and message of the book.

¹⁵ Scott Hahn and John Kincaid, "The Multiple Literal Sense in Thomas Aquinas's Commentary on Romans and Modern Pauline Hermeneutics," in *Reading Romans with St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering and Michael Dauphinais (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2012), 163.

¹⁶ See Hahn and Kincaid, "Multiple Literal Sense," 164: "It should go without saying that we are not the first to discover Thomas's understanding of Scripture's multiple literal sense. Indeed, he affirms the multiple literal sense in six different texts, which his interpreters have studied and debated for centuries. Nor does Thomas claim to have invented the idea, which, like so many of his other fundamental notions, he inherited from Augustine."

and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped, then the lame man shall leap as a hart, and the tongue of the dumb shall be free”—Aquinas states: “These are figurative expressions if they are to be referred to the time after the Assyrian destruction, and are to be understood of spiritual defects, as above. However, if they are taken to refer to the appearance of Christ in the flesh, as is related in the Gospel, they are to be taken literally.”¹⁷ So, has Aquinas’s interpretation *ad litteram* broken down? Not at all. Aquinas presents the reader with two possible interpretive options, both at the literal level, and neither are mutually exclusive to the point that only one of them is possible.

Of great importance here is St. Thomas’s inclusion of the use of metaphor under the literal sense: if the passage is taken “literally,” then it must be speaking of the miracles worked by Christ during his public ministry, for this is the only time when these kinds of miracles had occurred in the life of Israel. However, if the passage is to be taken as speaking “figuratively”—and here we are still in the provenance of literal interpretation—then it should be understood metaphorically, referring first of all to the spiritual restoration that began to take effect in the wake of the Assyrian crisis. When interpreted in the light of Isaiah’s principal intention to reveal to Israel the impending advent of the messiah and the ingathering of the nations, the possibility of a twofold literal interpretation is made even more likely. Aquinas goes on shortly to propose that the “path” mentioned by Isa 35:8, just a few verses later, is first of all the path which leads to the Temple, and yet also that which leads to the Church.

For Aquinas, this was an illuminating foray into the recognition of Israel’s place in a literal interpretation of Isaiah. Take the exegesis of St. Jerome, for example, who is the author of one of the most extensive and profound commentaries on Isaiah in the history of Christian interpretation. Jerome interprets these verses in chapter 35 to refer to the time of Christ and the Church alone. Commenting on the passage, he makes no mention of Israel’s spiritual renewal whatsoever, and the path of Isa 35:8 is not the path to the Temple (as Aquinas understands), but is the path of Christ, who alone is “the way” (cf. John 14:6).¹⁸ In his own commentary, St. Thomas is adamant about attributing a partial fulfillment to the promise of restoration in the time before the advent of Christ—in fact, this is exactly the tendency Aquinas exhibits in his interpretation of the more obviously eschatological portions of the book, especially beginning with chapter 60.

¹⁷ *Super Isa* 35, lns. 35–40.

¹⁸ Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck (New York: Newman Press, 2015), 502–4.

In his brief study of Aquinas in *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture*, Brevard Childs has correctly identified the characteristic mark of St. Thomas's exegesis as the deft ability to move from sign to reality, minimizing the instantaneous move from literal to allegorical that other interpreters seemed to make often. Summarizing his findings, Childs remarks: "His emphasis on the literal sense has often been correctly stressed, but equally important is Thomas's largely non-allegorical manner of penetrating to the figurative sense by means of an ontological, intertextual move shaped by the substance of the witness itself."¹⁹ This dynamic is important to highlight: the witness of the text to a literal interpretation that is often also figurative, and open to possibilities which transcend the immediate context of the utterance.²⁰ In avoiding an allegorism that strays too far afield from the immediate context of the passage in question, Aquinas is able to penetrate to the realities in question without uprooting the text from its natural habitat. When interpreting a passage, the whole context of any particular passage is always taken into account when moving from the literal to the figurative in order to avoid an understanding that would be arbitrary or disconnected from the surrounding narrative. At the same time, however, St. Thomas is careful never to set an absolute limit to any particular interpretation and remains open to the transcendent nature of Scripture as the word of God (and therefore always capable of being entered into more deeply).

This dynamic openness we see in Aquinas seems at least in part to be speaking to the same reality that Ben Witherington is careful to affirm: "The revelation in the OT while true is always partial and pointing forward. For the Christian, full clarity about the nature and salvific purposes of God does not come to light before Christ."²¹ This fullness of meaning which presents itself only in the fullness of time (cf. Heb 1:1) is precisely what Aquinas is getting at when he is able to interpret a passage from Isaiah as fulfilled partially in historical Israel and more fully in the context of Christ and the Church. For Witherington, it is inherent to the expression of prophecy to be open-ended, capable of a "surplus of meaning" which may not necessarily have been in the mind of the prophet, as though containing some deeper hidden meaning which the prophet intended to conceal, "but rather a trajectory of meaning that can be added to later, so long as it is moving in the same

¹⁹ Brevard Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 162.

²⁰ Of course, St. Thomas also engages the spiritual senses of the biblical text as well, most notably in the *collations* found throughout the work.

²¹ Witherington, *Isaiah Old and New*, 444.

direction.”²² This additional meaning is not additional in the sense of being extrinsically imposed as a foreign object, but additional in the sense that it is only in light of certain events brought about by God that the full meaning of some particular utterance is understood.²³ If we think of the various words and deeds of Jesus which the apostles were only able to understand in all their depth after the event of the resurrection (cf. Luke 24:13–35; John 2:13–22), we realize that the witness of the New Testament itself teaches us to look back to the events recorded in Scripture with renewed vision made possible by the Christ event.

This openness to a “surplus of meaning” so crucial to Witherington’s understanding of prophecy cuts very close to the hermeneutical principle of Aquinas (following Augustine) that a text can contain a multiplicity of meaning as long as it is in keeping with the deposit of faith.²⁴ Recall his

²² Witherington, *Isaiah Old and New*, 343.

²³ Gilbert Dahan brings out this point marvelously in his article. Speaking of the relationship between the exegete and the prophetic oracle, he states: “This speaking or doing [i.e., of the prophetic oracle] exceed [*sic*] the prophet’s understanding: it is the work of the exegete to make explicit the inspired word or action. This is not to make the exegete superhuman or superior to the prophet: exegesis is a humble science which falls within a tradition—but the exegete benefits from the perspective of history and this placement within a history enables the progressive clarification of the word of God. This word is presented for understanding and is understood little by little as history progresses.” In “Thomas Aquinas: Exegesis and Hermeneutics,” in *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas: Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions, and New Perspectives*, ed. Piotr Roszak and Jörgen Vijgen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 49.

²⁴ In *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine offers the following reflection in 3.27–28 which is worth quoting at length:

Sometimes not just one meaning but two or more meanings are perceived in the same words of Scripture. Even if the writer’s meaning is obscure, there is no danger here, provided that it can be shown from other passages of the holy scriptures that each of these interpretations is consistent with the truth. The person examining the divine utterances must of course do his best to arrive at the intention of the writer through whom the Holy Spirit produced that part of scripture; he may reach that meaning or carve out from the words another meaning which does not run counter to the faith, using the evidence of any other passage of the divine utterances. Perhaps the author too saw that very meaning in the words which we are trying to understand. Certainly the spirit of God who worked through the author foresaw without any doubt that it would present itself to a reader or listener, or rather planned that it should present itself, because it too is based on the truth.

Could God have built into the divine eloquence a more generous or bountiful gift than the possibility of understanding the same words in several ways, all of them deriving confirmation from other no less divinely inspired

statement in the *De potentia* that an interpreter of Scripture is bound “not to force such an interpretation on Scripture as to exclude any other interpretations that are actually or possibly true.”²⁵ This principle seems to be of special significance in the interpretation of prophecy, which is by nature open to the future; the task of the prophet in announcing future judgment or vindication forces future generations into discerning their place within the narrative of salvation history. In the first place, the reader (or hearer) of Isaiah in the period after the exile surely encountered the text in a deeply personal manner. To an even greater extent, as the New Testament bears witness, the apostles and early Christians were able to encounter an even greater mystery proclaimed by Isaiah, receiving a depth of understanding that had been previously inaccessible before the Incarnation and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Divine Warrior of Isaiah 63—A Test Case

As the final stage in our exploration of Aquinas’s exegetical methodology, we will examine Isa 63:1–6 with St. Thomas as our guide, and compare it with the interpretations offered by various modern treatments of the passage. In the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate, the passage reads as follows:

Who is this that comes from Edom, with dyed garments from Bosra, this beautiful one in his robe, walking in the greatness of his strength? “I that speak justice, and am a defender to save.” Why then is your apparel red, and your garments as those who tread in the winepress? “I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the Gentiles there is not a man with me; I have trampled upon them in my wrath, and their blood is strewn about, and I have stained all my apparel. For the day of vengeance is in my heart, the year of my redemption has come. I looked about, and there was none to help: I sought, and there was none to give aid, and my own arm has saved me, and my wrath itself has helped me. And I have trodden down the people in my wrath, and

passages? When one unearths an equivocal meaning which cannot be verified by unequivocal support from the holy scriptures it remains for the meaning to be brought into the open by a process of reasoning, even if the writer whose words we are seeking to understand perhaps did not perceive it.

(*On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 86–87).

²⁵ *De potentia*, q. 4, a. 1, ad 8.

have made them drunk in my indignation, and have brought down their strength to the earth.”²⁶

St. Thomas begins his commentary by laying out the traditional interpretation as found in the writings of the holy men and women down through the ages: “Now it is known that all the saints commonly interpret this with reference to Christ.”²⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, for example, writing in the early fourth century, interprets the passage with reference to the end of the world and Christ’s return in judgment of the earth.²⁸ Jerome on the other hand, while aware that he is in the exegetical minority, argues instead that this refers to the first coming of Christ and his work of redemption accomplished in the Passion.²⁹ Regardless of the nuance the interpretation takes on, the trajectory is clear: from very early on, the warrior in blood-spattered clothes is seen to be the incarnate Christ.

Childs agrees that the identity of the figure is quite clear, but does not agree that the figure is that of Christ: “God’s identity is obvious to all. . . . Yahweh is portrayed returning from the slaughter having requited his great anger.”³⁰ However, his interpretation may not be as far from the traditional reading as it might seem at first glance. Bringing his reflection on this divine warrior figure to a close, he states that “the crucial function of chapter 63, which is set forth in a retrospective sequence, is to emphasize in the strongest manner possible that the divine judgment against the evil and injustice of those in rebellion against God’s rule must precede the entrance of God’s promised kingship in the transformation of Zion.”³¹ Penetrating through the sign to the *res*, to the reality at the heart of the matter, Childs is convinced that the primary locus of meaning is centered in the sacred

²⁶ The Douay-Rheims translation, taken from the Clementine Vulgate, emended slightly to fit better with the text as reflected by the reading of St. Thomas.

²⁷ *Super Isa* 63, lns. 11–13.

²⁸ See Eusebius, *Commentary on Isaiah*, trans. by Jonathan J. Armstrong (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 304.

²⁹ Jerome comments: “By necessity, therefore, we are compelled to interpret everything that is said with reference to the first coming of the Savior. . . . Let us show that [these things] have already been fulfilled in Christ, both according to the flesh and according to the spirit” (*Commentary on Isaiah*, 799).

³⁰ Childs, *Struggle to Understand Isaiah*, 517. Oswalt summarizes the last five hundred years of reflection on this passage in a single sentence: “Reacting against anything that might smack of allegorization, Calvin spoke out strongly against this interpretation [i.e., that the figure is Christ], and virtually all commentators since have followed him” (*Isaiah: Chapters 40—66*, 595).

³¹ Childs, *Struggle to Understand Isaiah*, 519.

author's conviction that God's justice and purgation of evil must precede his enacting of mercy in the transformation of the people and restoration of the holy city. In his own words: "What is at stake is that Israel's ultimate vindication must be preceded by God's judgment, which he alone is able to execute."³² The path he takes to that conclusion is different from those of Eusebius and Jerome, but the conclusion is remarkably the same. Let us now bring Aquinas back into the discussion.

It must be acknowledged at the outset that Aquinas is very conscious of the history of interpretation involved here, and his interpretation on the first run-through takes the traditional stance: the figure is Christ, and the passage is to be interpreted in light of this reality. The astonished questioners are here the angels, who cry out with amazement at the mystery of the Incarnation as Christ strides into heaven by his own power, whose robe is the flesh of humanity in which he had clothed himself, and whose limbs are stained with the blood of the Passion. He speaks justice because he himself is the judge, who will pronounce the sentence upon the wayward nations and defend all mankind from the demons. The work of redemption which he had to undertake was a solitary affair, the suffering and victory was achieved alone. Though, taking Isaiah's choice of words quite literally that there was "not a man" with him, he states: "He very clearly says 'a man' on account of the Blessed Virgin, in whom faith was never lacking."³³

After this lengthy exposition on Christ, the heavenly warrior who works justice and redemption for the salvation of the human race, St. Thomas makes an unexpected interpretive choice (historically speaking):

Now all of this can be interpreted literally so as to represent the Lord under a metaphor, as one who comes to destroy the various peoples who are enemies of the Jews (particularly the Idumeans), in accordance with the metaphorical mode in which it is clothed, for as it is said above, "he put on justice as a breastplate" (Isa 59:17).³⁴

True to form, Aquinas offers two different interpretations according to the letter, both of which involve the acknowledgment of the heavy use of metaphor involved, and does not feel compelled to choose between the

³² Childs, *Struggle to Understand Isaiah*, 517. A short while later he concludes his comments by stating: "According to the witness of these chapters, the eschatological economy of God unfolds sequentially according to his purpose of judgment that precedes the final redemption of God's elect" (519).

³³ *Super Isa* 63, lns. 101–2.

³⁴ *Super Isa* 63, lns. 136–41.

two. If interpreted of God simply, the metaphor is obvious, as everything corporeal is meant to be understood as signifying a spiritual reality (e.g., the image of the winepress as the place of divine judgment). If interpreted of the incarnate Christ, however, this image also must be understood to portray spiritual realities under metaphor, for as Aquinas notes: “This is said according to the likeness of a conqueror, whose ripped garments have been stained, as above: ‘with garment mingled with blood’ (Isa 9:4).”³⁵ In many ways, the latter interpretation stands out as more vivid in the mind of the Christian reader, for when it is interpreted as referring directly to Christ, we can actually picture the beaten and bloodied figure of Christ on the road to Calvary and hung upon the Cross—the metaphor is all the more striking because of the reality that Christ’s act of redemption literally involved the shedding of blood.

Witherington, along with Childs, rejects a Christological interpretation, but curiously invokes the imagery of Revelation 19 as part of the basis for his argument.³⁶ Admittedly, Witherington is more concerned to clarify that the blood with which the warrior’s garments are stained is that of his enemies—and not his own blood, as a Christological reading would have—but Witherington’s denial is particularly strange because the rider in Revelation 19 is specifically identified as “the Word of God,” the Johannine title for the divine Son. His primary focus is important, stressing the point that the blood with which the warrior is stained is first a symbol of judgment, yet he seems to gloss over the rather obvious identification of the apocalyptic figure of Revelation:

Then I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse! He who sat upon it is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. . . . He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is the Word of God. . . . From his mouth issues a sharp sword with which to strike the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed: King of kings, and Lord of lords. (Rev 19:11, 13, 15–16)

On the one hand, if he wishes to deny a Christological interpretation to the passage from Isaiah, it does not seem that Revelation 19 helps his cause.

³⁵ *Super Isa* 63, no. 111–13.

³⁶ See Witherington, *Isaiah Old and New*, 315. Even more curiously, Witherington denies that the rider in Revelation—specifically identified as “the word of God”—is in fact Christ, saying that the rider is merely “like Christ” (319).

On the other hand, it is indeed important, as Witherington notes, not to ignore the aspect of judgment and wrath here in our passage from Isaiah. The two ideas, however, are by no means mutually exclusive—we need not deny an identification with Christ so as to emphasize the primacy of judgment. Significantly, Aquinas cannot be accused of this oversight, as he too emphasizes the aspect of wrath and judgment even in his Christological reading of the text, as we saw above.

The reading of the passage by John Oswalt on the other hand, as well as that of J. Alec Motyer, is similar to that found in Aquinas, and allows for a “surplus of meaning” in the text (to quote Witherington).³⁷ Thus Oswalt writes:

First, the blood that spatters the robes of the Warrior is unquestionably that of his enemies. Sin and evil will be converted or destroyed. Second, this is not an allegorical presentation of the crucifixion. What the Warrior has done here may include the crucifixion, but it is not limited to, or primarily about, that event. But neither is the passage limited to the destruction of external enemies alone. It is about the destruction of all that prevents the “Holy People” from realizing all that God has promised them. In this sense, the passage is about the work of the Messiah that makes it possible for the people of God to be and to do what God commands them to do.³⁸

Here Oswalt, like Witherington, is careful to emphasize the role of the Warrior as a judge, stained with the blood of his enemies. He is comfortable going beyond this, however, because he is convinced that the Warrior is undoubtedly related to the anointed one mentioned in Isaiah 59,³⁹ and even with the servant of chapters 49–53.⁴⁰

³⁷ See Witherington, *Isaiah Old and New*, 343.

³⁸ Oswalt, *Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, 596.

³⁹ Thus Oswalt comments on Isa 59:20: “God assumes the warrior stance so that he may fill the role of *redeemer*. His ultimate purpose in attacking the sin of the world is to redeem the world as typified in Zion. No matter how fearsome his wrath against sin, no matter how terrified those who choose to remain in sin should be, still it is the patient compassion of a God who longs to forgive that should capture our attention as it did that of the ancient Israelites. . . . It is not remarkable that God should be incensed at the corruption of his purposes for creation. What is remarkable is that he should persevere in compassion toward those who have become corrupt” (*Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, 530).

⁴⁰ See Oswalt, *Isaiah: Chapters 40–66*, 595. Commenting on Isaiah 52:10 he writes: “God’s power is expressed in the image of the outstretched hand or *arm*. Here, like the

Motyer likewise identifies the Warrior with God's anointed one, arguing that this is merely the final act of a sequence of narratives focused on God's desire to render justice among the nations:

The Lord too was appalled that earth's sinners were without any to come to their aid (59:16ab; 63:5ab). But between these two passages, the beginning and end of the whole sequence, we have learned that the Anointed One comes with a ministry of comfort, vengeance and salvation (61:2), and that it is on him that the Lord puts the garments of salvation and righteousness (61:10). The third Song of the Anointed One and its tailpiece focused on salvation (61:10; 62:1, 11), and now it falls to the final Song to unfold the last act of the drama, the day of vengeance.⁴¹

If Oswalt and Motyer are correct in identifying the Warrior with the Anointed Messiah who will come to enact God's judgment and bring about ultimate redemption and restoration, which seems beyond doubt, then a literal interpretation which includes the work of Jesus Christ is perfectly fitting. One need not imagine that Isaiah was granted an explicit image of the crucified Christ in a vision, but this does not exclude a Christological dimension from our understanding of the passage. If Jesus truly was the expected Messiah, and if Isaiah's Warrior is a metaphorical image of the divine work which the Lord had prepared for his Anointed One to perform, then a soberly Christological interpretation naturally follows.⁴²

Wrapping up his treatment of the Warrior, and adding the final layer to his

warrior preparing for battle, the Lord has shrugged off his cloak and his powerful arm is *bared* for battle. For the nations determined to oppose him (66:14), that is cause for a shiver of apprehension; but for those who submit to him, it is cause for hope (51:5)" (371).

⁴¹ J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL; IVP Academic, 1993), 509.

⁴² In point of fact, the Old Testament often presents the reader with an unresolved paradox in the relationship which exists between the action which the God of Israel claims for himself and the action which he calls another to perform. Take another of the major prophets, Ezekiel for example, and the image of the divine shepherd. In Ezekiel 34:15, YHWH declares: "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep." And yet only a few verses later, he gives this exact same task to another: "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd" (34:23). What are we to make of this? Is it YHWH who is to be the shepherd, or is David to assume the task of the "one shepherd"? The prophet leaves the paradox unsolved. It is only in the New Testament that an answer is offered: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11).

argument in favor of viewing the Warrior's mission as intrinsically related to that of the Anointed One, Oswalt clarifies all that is meant by the declaration of judgment and vengeance:

What is the vengeance about? God's hurt pride? No, it is about *redemption*, about breaking the power of sin and evil so that those who are held in its grasp may go free. This is precisely the point that the Servant/Messiah made in 61:2 in similar words (and one more reason to recognize that all of the work of that person, both salvific and judgmental, is included here).⁴³

The work of the Warrior is not only one of judgment and recompense; he is not fixated on the outpouring of his wrath alone (as Childs seems to intimate), but his work is ultimately one of salvation which must include judgment on account of human sin.

St. Thomas recognizes this joint mission of judgment and redemption, refusing to sever either from the other as if their coexistence were untenable. Commenting on the Warrior's answer—"I that speak justice, and am a defender to save"—Aquinas explains that this response indicates the threefold nature of his role:

"I [that speak justice]." Here he sets down the response, and reveals the judge himself, "[I] who speak justice," i.e., who have authority to carry out the judgment of the nations (cf. Isa 42); the teacher: "I am the Lord, speaking justice [and declaring right things]" (Isa 45:19); and the savior, "a defender" against the demons, "to save" the race of mankind: "the Lord is my strength and my praise, he has become salvation to me" (Exod 15:2); "the Lord is a man of war, Almighty is his name" (Exod 15:3).⁴⁴

Not only does Aquinas's interpretation show a depth of understanding that belies the dense form in which it is composed, but his quotations from the book of Exodus demonstrate that he is quite familiar with the Old Testament's "divine warrior" motif. Steeped in a profound knowledge of the Scriptures, St. Thomas is no artless interpreter, approaching the text as if the only possible explanation for Isaiah's use of this image is his explicit foreknowledge of the victory wrought by Christ. Aquinas shows that the

⁴³ Oswalt, *Isaiah: Chapters 40—66*, 598–99.

⁴⁴ *Super Isa* 63, lns. 65–74.

biblical image of the Lord as a mighty warrior is quite familiar to him, and is in fact the reason that he is quite confident in his assertion that the depiction of the Lord under the image of a warrior—and the twofold metaphorical interpretation he offers—is not only possible, but appropriate.

Conclusion

The unifying aspect to any discussion of biblical interpretation, especially for St. Thomas, is crystallized in one main concept: authorial intention. We saw how authorial intention is crucial for Aquinas's interpretation of Isaiah as a whole, since the prophet's intention is the catalyst for everything contained within the book—not only does intention provide the overall structure of the text (macro-level interpretation), but also informs the exegete as to how the individual sections of the text are to be interpreted (micro-level interpretation)—Aquinas's use of the *divisio textus* demonstrates this masterfully. Isaiah's intention in composing the book—proclaiming the future coming of the Son of God—is the primary lens through which St. Thomas reads and explains the text. For the modern exegete, even if they deny the premise that Isaiah's primary intention includes Jesus Christ, the basic approach remains the same: the intention of the author is the main factor in the interpretation of the text.

Inquiring further into St. Thomas's exegetical method, it is clear that his concept of the literal sense reaches much further than a superficial reading would suggest. It is also clear that an *ad litteram* interpretation according to St. Thomas is markedly different from the kind of literal interpretation to which most modern practitioners of the art would subscribe. Aquinas shares the most common ground with exegetes who identify as historical critics in his reliance on the literal sense of Scripture as the foundation for argumentation and demonstrative proofs. Further, his reliance on a purified realism allows him to engage with the text of Scripture in a manner that is very grounded in the historical, preventing him from straying too far afield into tangential allegorism—this includes and emphasizes his insistence on the inclusion of literary metaphor under the umbrella of literal interpretation. Thomas's insistence on the dual authorship of Scripture, as well as his macro-level focus on authorial intention—as demonstrated in his precise use of the *divisio textus*—can help to pave the way for a purification of modern exegesis which allows the exegete to operate with a fundamental metaphysical base upon which to build a truly theological, and (frankly) realistic, interpretation of Scripture. N·V