

Paleae: A Clarifying Look at the Meaning of Saint Thomas's Final Words

SAMUEL KLUMPENHOWER
Saint Theresa Catholic School
Sugar Land, TX

IN AN ICONIC MOMENT of the medieval Church, the aging Thomas Aquinas looked back upon his life of scholarship after undergoing a mystical experience.¹ It was still the morning of a wintry day in 1273, and Thomas had just attended a Mass for the feast of Saint Nicholas. According to Bartholomew of Capua, Thomas was in the midst of composing the third part of his *Summa theologiae*, on the section dealing with penance. After the Mass, Thomas's secretary, brother Reginald, asked him to continue writing as was their custom. Thomas replied: "Reginald, I cannot—for all that I have written seems to me as straw [*paleae*]."² Readers of Thomas have long puzzled over the statement. Brother Reginald was similarly puzzled, and later urged Thomas to continue writing, demanding an explanation. Thomas replied again to his secretary: "All that I have written seems to me as straw [*paleae*] in comparison to what I saw and what has been revealed to me."³

Generally, *paleae* is translated as "straw" or "chaff," as distinguished from the kernels of grain. Some scholars argue that *paleae* should only be translated as "chaff," which refers to the outer husks of grain that were removed during the wind-winnowing process, and which had no practical use.⁴ Straw, on the other hand, refers to the stalk or stem of the plant, which has many uses. As straw, *paleae* can also refer by extension to several material products in which straw is used, such as fodder, thatching, and bricks.⁵ In Latin sources, one will find *paleae* used in both ways. The

⁵ See especially the detailed entries for *palea* in the following resources: *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, ed. R. E. Latham (London: British Academy,

Vulgate, for example, uses *paleae* to refer to straw and chaff in multiple instances.⁶

Given the significance of the Thomistic corpus, both now and in the medieval period, it seems odd for Thomas to have described his writings as *paleae*, whether translated as straw or chaff. Yet that is precisely what the Angelic Doctor did. In order to better understand why that word was chosen, this essay will first provide an overview of how Thomas's *paleae* have been understood by modern readers. It will then examine other instances of *paleae* in the Thomistic corpus. Finally, it will detail a largely unknown—although well known to Thomas—use of the word among medieval canonists.

Modern readers of Thomas generally fall into two groups in regards to the word *paleae*: those who think it indicates that Thomas repudiated his writings, and those who do not. Those who consider it a repudiation sometimes present Thomas as having come to the realization that his life's work had been pointless. Perhaps he realized the ultimate invalidity of human knowledge or systematic thinking.⁷ As such, he would have seen the intellectual edifice that he previously constructed as truly “chaff”—useless, perhaps even the antithesis of a simple Christ.⁸

The second group are those who do not think that Thomas repudiated his work, but rather came to see it with a higher perspective. They see the *paleae* as “straw” that is of little value in comparison to God, but which still has many good uses. For Étienne Gilson, the straw of Thomas is what made the bricks to build European civilization.⁹ Simon Tugwell points to how straw sometimes represented the literal (which is the lowest) sense of Scripture.¹⁰ In a different regard, others have pointed out that it was

1975–2013); *Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae Latinitatis*, ed. Du Cange (Niort, FR: L. Favre, 1883–1887); *Thesaurus linguae Latinae compendarius*, rev. William Ellis (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1843).

⁶ For instance, in Gen 24:25 and Exod 5:10, *palea* is best translated as “straw.” In Matt 3:12 and Luke 3:17, *palea* is best translated as “chaff.”

⁷ See Philipp Rosemann, “A change of Paradigm in the Study of Medieval Philosophy: from Rationalism to Postmodernism,” *The American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 72 (1998): 73. See also W. J. Richardson, “Like straw: religion and psychoanalysis,” in *Eros and Eris: contributions to a hermeneutical phenomenology*, ed. P. van Tongeren et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1992), 93–104.

⁸ O'Rourke Boyle and O'Rourke Boyle, “Chaff,” 394.

⁹ “Saint Thomas Aquinas,” in *Proceedings of the British academy*, vol. 21 (London: British Academy, 1935), 32.

¹⁰ Simon Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 266 n636.

straw that filled the manger of Jesus.¹¹ In one way or another, these interpretations build on the clarification that Brother Reginald extracted from his fellow Dominican. Thomas had said in his second reply that his work *seemed* (*videtur*) as *paleae* in comparison to what had been revealed to him. As such, to people who have not had such revelations, the *paleae* of Thomas remains of much value.¹²

In order to clarify how *paleae* was understood during the medieval period, it will be helpful to examine the rest of the Thomistic corpus, where I have counted sixty-eight usages of the word.¹³ These usages come both from Thomas's own compositions and from passages of earlier authors that he reproduced verbatim. They typically draw from the biblical image found in Matthew 3:12—"Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his floor and gather his wheat into the barn; but the chaff [*paleas*] he will burn with unquenchable fire."¹⁴ The Gospel image is well known, which describes the process of wind-winnowing, by which the wheat was separated from the chaff, and any unneeded chaff then burned. Thomas, like other Scholastics of his age, would have read this passage alongside the *Glossa ordinaria*, which is a collection of glosses collected from authoritative authors and written in the margins of medieval Bibles. The gloss to *paleas* in the Matthean passage reads as such:

Paleae come from the origin, that is the seed, from which wheat comes; tares come from diverse [seeds]. Therefore *paleae* are those who are initiated with the sacraments of faith, but who are not solid; but tares are those who separate from the elect both in deed and profession. Concerning them it is said: "he who does not believe is

¹¹ Peter Kwasniewski, "Golden Straw: St. Thomas and the Ecstatic Practice of Theology," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 2 (2004): 72.

¹² According to Jean-Pierre Torrell: "Straw is a stock expression used to distinguish, by giving it proper weight, the grain of reality within the chaff of the words; the words are not the reality, but they designate it and they lead to it. Having arrived at reality itself, Thomas had a certain right to feel himself detached with respect to the words, but this does not at all signify that he considers his work as without value. Simply put, he had gone beyond it" (*Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1. *The Person and his Work*, trans. Robert Royal [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996], 293).

¹³ To produce this number, I used the *Index Thomisticus* assembled by Roberto Busa and his associates, web ed. by Eduardo Bernot and Enrique Alarcón, available at www.corpusthomisticum.org/it/index.age.

¹⁴ The translation is from the Douay-Rheims. The Vulgate reads as such: "Cuius ventilabrum in manu sua: et permundabit aream suam: et congregabit triticum suum in horreum, paleas autem comburent igni inextinguibili."

now judged" [John 3:18]. And on that account no mention of them is made here.¹⁵

Thomas included this same passage, which is attributed to Rabanus (ca. 780–856), in his *Catena aurea in Matthaeum*.¹⁶ Two thirds of the occurrences of *paleae* in the Thomistic corpus resonate with how the word is negatively used in Matthew 3:12 and the accompanying gloss. They typically discuss how the *paleae* (here, "chaff") is mixed in with the grain, and then blown around and destined for fire. For Thomas, as in the Matthean passage, the winnowing process represents the final judgment. The process of separation by wind represents the judgment itself,¹⁷ and the fire represents the fires of either purgatory or hell.¹⁸

Another theme from the Matthean passage is frequently repeated. Thomas explains how *paleae* come from the same seed as the grain. They are distinguished from the tares, which may be mixed in with the grain but come from diverse seeds. As such, *paleae* represent bad Catholics. This theme is repeated with variation, with *paleae* representing Catholics who are incredulous,¹⁹ evil,²⁰ schismatic,²¹ reprobate,²² vain,²³ and weak.²⁴ As well, Thomas reproduces several times a famous statement from Gregory that, under the same fire, gold (good Catholics) will shine and *paleae* (bad Catholics) will burn.²⁵ However, here *paleae* is still said to be better able to endure fire than the Devil can endure the fervor of charity.²⁶

In the remaining one third of occurrences, *paleae* has an assortment of

¹⁵ *Glossa ordinaria* to Matt 3:12: "Paleae de origine unde et triticum oriuntur id est de semine, zizania vero de diversa. Paleae ergo sunt qui fidei sacramentis imbuuntur, sed solidi non sunt, zizania vero qui et opere et professione secernunt ab electis. De his dicitur: 'Qui non credit, iam iudicatus est.' Et ideo non fit hic mentio de illis" (*Bibliorum sacrorum cum glossa ordinaria* [Venice: 1603]).

¹⁶ *Catena in Matth 3*, lec. 5: "Rabanus. Verum hoc inter paleas et zizania distat, quod paleae non alio quam triticorum semine prodeunt, zizania vero diverso. Paleae ergo sunt qui fidei sacramentis imbuuntur, sed solidi non sunt; zizania vero qui et opere et professione secernuntur a bonorum sorte."

¹⁷ *Catena in Matth 3*, lec. 5.

¹⁸ *Super Matth* [rep. Petri de Andria] 3, lec. 1.

¹⁹ *Catena in Luke 3*, lec. 5.

²⁰ *Super Matthaeum* [rep. Leodegarii Bissuntini] 13, lec. 2.

²¹ *Catena in Matth 13*, lec. 4.

²² *In IV sent.*, d. 47, q. 2, a. 3, qc. 3.

²³ *Catena in Matth 3*, lec. 5.

²⁴ *In IV sent.*, d. 47, q. 2, a. 3, qc. 3.

²⁵ *In IV sent.*, d. 15, q. 1, a. 4, qc. 2.

²⁶ *Catena in Luke 10*, lec. 8.

meanings. In a straightforward sense, *paleae* is used by birds for making nests,²⁷ as fodder for bulls,²⁸ and by some people for making sandals.²⁹ It can also refer to the literal sense of Scripture which covers the hidden meanings.³⁰ By extension, as *paleae* cling closely around the grain, it can signify how people cling to the law,³¹ or how the kingdom of heaven or some other thing of value is hidden as a kernel of grain.³²

In this overview of *paleae* in the Thomistic corpus, there is no consistent way in which it is used, whether negative, positive, or neutral. While some insight into the meaning of *paleae* can be gained by examining the Thomistic corpus, the interpretation of *paleae* should not be limited to how the word is there used. This is especially true since Thomas's final words were made in a spoken, non-academic setting, and were not reported by Thomas himself. Given this situation, it will be helpful now to broaden the examination to sources outside the Thomistic corpus.

There is a generally unknown usage of *paleae* in the books of medieval canon law, specifically Gratian's *Decretum*. The *Decretum* was written in the mid-twelfth century and became the foundational book of the *Corpus iuris canonici*, which was the law of the Church until the first *Codex iuris canonici* was promulgated in 1917. Every Dominican house was responsible to have a copy of it in their library for ready reference.³³ Thomas knew the *Decretum* well, and frequently cited it in his works, from his early commentaries on the *Sententiae* of Peter Lombard to his final work on the *Summa theologiae*.

The *Decretum* is a collection of canons from Church councils, papal letters, and patristic writings. It is also known by an alternate title, *Concordantia discordantium canonum*—"the harmony of discordant canons." While there were collections of canon law before Gratian, the genius of the *Decretum* is that it gathered together canons that were seemingly at conflict and then used a dialectical method to harmonize them. As such, Gratian added his own *dicta*, interspersed between the canons, which explain how he thought certain tensions should be resolved. The *Decretum* was an immediate success and captured the imagination of medieval

²⁷ *Summa theologiae* I, q. 78, a. 4.

²⁸ *Super Isa* 11.

²⁹ *Super Matt* [rep. Leodegarii Bissuntini] 10, lec. 1.

³⁰ *Super Psalmos* 8, no. 1.

³¹ *Catena in Matth* 15, lec. 7.

³² *Catena in Luke* 3, lec. 5; *Catena in Ioan* 6, lec. 1; *Super Ioan* 6, lec. 1.

³³ Leonard Boyle, "The setting of the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas—revisited," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 7.

jurists. It is for this reason that Gratian is known as the father of the science of canon law.³⁴

Throughout the *Decretum*, one often finds some canons under a rather odd heading: *palea*. There are around 169 of these *paleae*, with the exact number varying among the manuscript witnesses. Historians of canon law have long known about these passages, but remain puzzled by the use of *paleae* to describe them. What the legal historians have determined is that this rubric is typically used for two reasons. This first is to designate when Gratian included the same canon in two different sections, with the repetitious canon placed under the rubric *palea*. The second is to designate supplemental canons later added by the masters of Bologna. These were inserted in the *Decretum* shortly after it was completed in the mid-twelfth century. These *paleae* provide additional canons that were not given by Gratian, but which medieval jurists considered relevant. The Gelasian Decree and Donation of Constantine, for instance, were not included by Gratian, but later added as *paleae*. However, these canons did not merit the same authority or attention among medieval jurists as those in the original composition.³⁵

As with modern legal historians, medieval canonists were puzzled over why *palea* was used to describe these supplemental or superfluous passages. Several explanations were offered. The first came from Huguccio, the most renowned of the twelfth-century canonists. Huguccio thought that *palea* meant chaff that had been added to the good grain. That is, it referred to canons later added the original *Decretum*.³⁶ This explanation still has some support among modern scholars.³⁷ Johannes Andreae, a contemporary of Thomas, thought that *palea* came from the name of one of Gratian's students who first added material to the original *Decretum*. This theory

³⁴ Stephan Kuttner, "The Father of the Science of Canon Law," *The Jurist* 1 (1941): 2–19.

³⁵ Peter Landau, "Gratian and the *Decretum Gratiani*," in *The History of Medieval Canon Law in the Classical Period: 1140–1234*, ed. Wilfried Hartmann and Kenneth Pennington (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 47. For details about the composition process, see Anders Winroth, *The Making of Gratian's Decretum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

³⁶ See Jacqueline Rambaud-Buhot, "Les additions," in *L'Age classique 1140–1378*, ed. Gabriel Le Bras, Charles Lefebvre, and Jacqueline Rambaud (Paris: Sirey, 1965), 100–101; Walter Ullmann, "The *Paleae* in Cambridge Manuscripts of the *Decretum*," *Studia Gratiana* 1 (1953): 161–216; Franz Gillmann, "Paucapalea et paleae bei Huguccio," *Archiv für katholisches Kirchenrecht* 88 (1908): 466–79.

³⁷ See Jacqueline Rambaud-Buhot, "L'étude des manuscrits du décret de Gratien," in *Congres de droit canonique médiéval: Louvain et Bruxelles 1958* (Louvain: Bibliothèque de l'Université, 1959), 38.

is also widely held today, that the word comes from *Paucapalea* (literally—"little straw"), a Bolognese canonist and student of Gratian.³⁸

In the sixteenth century, when the Roman Correctors were preparing an edition of the *Corpus iuris canonici* to serve the Church's legal needs, they offered another explanation of the *paleae* in the *Decretum*. They speculated that *palea* was connected with the Greek *παλαιά* ("old"), or *πάλιν* ("again"), signaling the ancient or repetitious nature of those canons.³⁹ Conversely, modern etymologists typically connect *palea* with *πάλλω* ("to swing, sway"), perhaps from the movement of the chaff during the winnowing process.⁴⁰

This usage of *paleae* in the rubrics of the *Decretum* is unique among medieval texts. While in the Thomistic corpus it typically has the meaning of "chaff" or "straw," in the *Decretum* it has the additional meanings of "not original" or "duplicate." However, the same qualification should be made as above—that this only shows the rich and varied meaning of the word. It does not lead to the conclusion that Thomas's final remarks should be interpreted a particular way.

The one conclusion that does emerge from this investigation is that medieval readers were more comfortable with polysemy than modern readers. This is true even when the different meanings were at tension, as is the case with "chaff," which is useless, and "straw," which has many practical uses. It is also true when new meanings, as in the case of the *Decretum*, were developed. Medieval readers would be puzzled, for instance, at the insistence of some modern scholars that *paleae* be translated as "chaff" and not "straw."⁴¹ They would be similarly puzzled at people who insist the reverse.

In fact, the narrative about Thomas's mystical experience invites the reader to understand *paleae* in multiple senses simultaneously. When one reads Thomas's words earlier quoted, the sense is that *paleae* is useless chaff

³⁸ Landau, "Gratian and the *Decretum Gratiani*," 47; Stephan Kuttner, *Repertorium der Kanonistik: 1140–1234* (Rome: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana, 1937), 125–27; Friedrich von Schulte, *Die Paleae im Decret Gratians* (Vienna: Karl Gerold's Sohn, 1874), 11–12; see also the first entry for *palea* in *Glossarium ad scriptores mediae et infimae Latinitatis*, ed. Du Cange.

³⁹ *Corpus iuris canonici* (Rome: 1582), prol.

⁴⁰ See the entries in Michiel de Vaan, *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages* (Boston: Brill, 2008), and Thomas Tucker, *A Concise Etymological Dictionary of Latin* (Halle: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1931). Some of the derivatives of *palea* have mystified linguists, who are unsure how it gained an additional meaning as a rooster's wattles or the dewlap of other animals.

⁴¹ O'Rourke Boyle and O'Rourke Boyle, "Chaff," 395n11.

in comparison to what had been revealed to Thomas. At the same time, however, the reader is invited to reject Thomas's own evaluation of his written corpus. The narrator does this not only by emphasizing that it *seemed* as chaff, but by recording elsewhere that God himself declared his approval of Thomas's writings.⁴² From the enlightened perspective of Thomas, his writings were superfluous, useless chaff. From the perfect perspective of God, they were straw which could be put to great use. N.V.

⁴² *Fontes vitae S. Thomae Aquinatis*, 108.