

Creation and Its History: St. Thomas and Robert Sokolowski on Arguments for the Existence of God

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St. Thomas presented many arguments for the existence of God from the commentary on the *Sentences* to the *Summa contra gentiles* to the great *Summa theologiae*. All of these arguments are commonly understood to be philosophical in the sense that they are exercises of natural reason: none of them employ as a premise any revealed truth that can be known only by faith. St. Thomas supposed God could come to be known by natural reason for two reasons: first, because the New Testament teaches it, where St. Paul asserts that God’s “invisible nature, . . . his eternal power and deity” can be known from the things that have been made (Rom 1:20); and second, because St. Thomas believed himself so to have exercised his natural reason so as to come to know God in many arguments scattered throughout his works. The arguments may be contained in what are works of sacred theology, as is perhaps most obviously the case with the “Five Ways,” since they follow so immediately on the question introductory of the *Summa theologiae*, which characterizes the whole as an exercise of *sacra doctrina*. But none of them expressly invoke revealed premises to come to their conclusion, which is perhaps more obviously the case with the long proof in the first book of the *Summa contra gentiles*, and given that St. Thomas intends the first three books to declare what we know of God by reason and not by faith.

The above commonplaces being granted, not all has been said as to the relation of the arguments for God to revelation. For one thing, the

teaching of St. Paul concerns not only the nature of man, the innate ability every man possesses to come to the knowledge of God from the things that have been made. It also contains important observations on the history of the exercise of this natural capacity. Thus, St. Thomas also believed, again following St. Paul, that the natural ability to know God from the things that have been made is often culpably thwarted by the pride and vainglory of man.¹ As St. Paul says, although men did in fact know God, “clearly perceived” in created things, they did not honor him or thank him, and their minds were “darkened” (1:21). Thus did they turn away from the immortal God to idols and images (1:23) and so “worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (1:25). All this is true of the pagans, of course, not of the Jews, who know the will of God and are instructed in the law (2:17–18) and know the oracles of the prophets besides (3:2). On the other hand, St. Paul does not think this knowledge the Jews possess serves to their salvation (3:9–20).

There is, then, a kind of double history as to the knowledge of God, the history of the Jews and the history of the pagans. But now, according to St. Paul, it is time for God by his revelation to re-establish in man a true and a saving knowledge of God, and this he does through Christ: “The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, . . . through faith in Jesus Christ” (3:21). All can come to know his “eternal power and deity” (1:21) once again and in a way that, for both Jew and Greek, saves. The double history is now for the present age reversed, for the Jews have stumbled because of lack of faith in Christ and the gentiles are saved by this faith. But the double history will be resolved into one history of salvation at the end of the age (11:11–36).

The evidence of St. Thomas’s acknowledgement of the history of revelation as bearing on the natural knowledge of God is not always prominent. This is, perhaps, in part, because the evidence of St. Thomas’s having been influenced by revelation in his deployment of reason so as to come to the knowledge of God from the things that have been made is *everywhere* present. It is part of the aim of this essay to show this.

There is certainly an invitation to find out what more is to be said about the relation of revelation and reason with the argument for the existence

¹ St. Thomas, *Super Rom 1*, lecs. 6–8; see *Commentary on the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans*, trans. F. R. Larcher, OP, ed. J. Mortensen and E. Alarcón (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012). See Gilles Emery, O.P., “Knowledge and Ignorance of God in Aquinas’s Commentary on Romans 1,” in *Engaging Catholic Doctrine: Essays in Honor of Matthew Levering*, ed. Robert Barron, Scott W. Hahn, and James R. A. Merrick (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 27–49.

of God in the *De ente et essentia*. That argument is preceded by working out what we may call the idea of God as an absolutely necessary being, one in which essence and existence are not distinct.² Having worked out the idea, Thomas then proceeds to show, as it were, that the idea is “objective,” and that there is a Reality that answers to the idea previously elaborated. Where, historically, does that idea of God come from? St. Thomas works it out as the concluding stage of a metaphysics, certainly of Aristotelian inspiration, that moves from the essence of material substances to that of separate substances to that of God. But if we think the idea itself is not contained in Aristotle, as hardly anyone today holds it to be, then we may well ask where it comes from. If you are Étienne Gilson, the answer is that it comes from Exod 3:14 and the Divine Name, such that it makes sense to speak of a “metaphysics of Exodus.”³ The Divine Name, of course, is something revealed to Moses, and so to Israel, and so to the New Israel.

This answer of Gilson as to where the idea of God comes from is by no means in conflict with other of St. Thomas’s presentations of arguments for the existence of God. In the great *Summa*, he is wont to conclude each argument by remarking that the Reality whose existence he has demonstrated is what we call God. But who are the people who call God the First Mover, the First Efficient Cause, the Necessary Being and so on? It is the people for whom Thomas is writing the *Summa*, beginners in *sacra doctrina*, which is to say, Christians. And if one adds “Muslims” and “Jews,” Gilson’s answer need not be modified.

It is in this light that Robert Sokolowski maintains that the idea of God that St. Thomas’s proofs vindicate as an objective idea is in the first place a revealed idea. It is the first four and the ninth chapters of *The God of Faith and Reason* that are especially relevant here. After recalling their argument, we turn next to some objections to Sokolowski. Third, we consider a very pointed vindication of Sokolowski’s position by Gregory Rocca. Last, I bring forward a text of St. Thomas that may cast some light on the issue of the history of the relations of faith and reason as he understands them in coming to know God.

² Following the reading of John F. Wippel, “Essence and Existence in the *De Ente*, Ch. 4,” in *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 107–32.

³ Étienne Gilson, “*Haec sublimis veritatis*,” in *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. K. L. Shook (New York: Random House, 1956), 84–95.

The God of Faith and Reason

Sokolowski begins *The God of Faith and Reason*⁴ with an examination of St. Anselm's argument for God. The argument depends on thinking of God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived. This idea of God implies that God plus the world or God plus anything that is not God is not greater than God. If it were greater, then you were not thinking of God as that than which nothing greater can be conceived, because you just conceived something that was greater (8–9). Even if nothing else existed by his choice and creative power, God would be no less good or mindful or powerful or blessed than he in fact is. Whether the world exists or not, God is undiminished in goodness and glory (10). This distinction, Sokolowski observes, is proper to Christianity. It is not the way the pagans distinguished the divine from what is not divine.⁵ Their god is part of the world, and it is unthinkable that god or the gods could exist alone and apart from the world. They are the best part of the world; but they are not rightly conceived as able to be apart from the world.

The Christian God, however, can be so conceived, and it is that idea that is inscribed in the idea that creation is *ex nihilo* and depends absolutely on God's choice and power to bring it into existence. It is also inscribed especially in the teaching of Christ, and indeed in his very being, and thus Sokolowski thinks it most accurate and entirely proper to name it the *Christian* distinction. The distinction is doubtless prepared for by the prophecy of Isaiah, particularly from chapter 40 onward. It is prepared for by Job, especially in chapters 38–41, and of course by the first chapters of Genesis and such psalms as Ps 104 and 139. But it is expressed perfectly in Christ.

The Christian distinction is first brought forward in life and activity, and ultimately it was first brought forward, it was first rendered, in the life of Christ. (115)

It shows up in his teaching: "What will it profit a man if he gain the whole world but lose his soul?" (Matt 12:26). Is the distinction there? To be sure. First, there is the invitation to think of the world as a whole. Second, there is the invitation to compare that to the loss of one's soul.

⁴ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995). This volume will be cited parenthetically by page numbers in the main text.

⁵ Sokolowski, *God of Faith and Reason*, chap. 2.

But the loss of one's soul is the loss of God and is God's losing the soul. So, third, the question implies thinking of God as apart from and distinct from the world. It invites us to compare the world as a whole with God, who is evidently not part of the world, but could make up for the whole of the world even if the world were lost. If you lose the world, but not God, you have not really lost anything.

But especially, the Christian distinction is embedded in the ontology of the Incarnation. Christ, as the teaching of the Church has it, is one person subsisting in two natures, the divine and the human. He is perfectly divine and perfectly human. But this requires a non-competitive relation between divinity and humanity. It requires that the God who is distinct from the world not be defined by not being it. He can be as he is whether the world exists or not. He is not constituted by the world in any way. This is quite different, however, from things within the world. In order to be a pig, a pig has not to be a pigeon, and vice versa. They are defined by what they are not, such that, were they not these things from which they are distinct, they could not be themselves. But God can be man without ceasing to be himself and without truncating or transforming the human nature he assumes, as supposed by Apollinaris and Eutyches (35–36). That the divine nature does not “compete” with the human nature implies it is not a worldly nature at all. Zeus may seem to become a swan, but the seeming will be deceptive and the swan but a swan-simulacrum. But if he really becomes one, he is no longer Zeus. But the Son of God really becomes man.⁶

There is in the Incarnation, therefore, a sort of manifestation of the distinction between God and the world than which no greater manifestation can be conceived. Our mind reaches a kind of limit, a final thing, just because the reality of the Incarnation, God becoming a creature, is itself a limit, a final thing. It is not the uncreated manifestation of uncreated reality—that is the person of the Word. It is created manifestation of personal uncreated reality than which no greater can be conceived.⁷

Once the distinction has been introduced into the world, which is to say, into history, then one can argue to the existence of the transcendent God so picked out by the distinction. But the distinction is a prior, more fundamental move than that of argument (108, 113). The arguments are like mopping up exercises after the line of the enemy has been broken.

⁶ Kathryn Tanner notes that this argument can be found in Tertullian (*God and Creation in Christian Theology* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005], 175n22).

⁷ Creation itself immediately manifests the one essence of God and the persons only remotely. But the humanity of Christ is immediately the manifestation of the Word.

The breakthrough is the main thing. Once God has broken through the world and introduced himself as the transcendent Creator he is into the world, then there can be useful, fruitful approaches to God from motion, causality, contingency, and so on. But they all of them depend on the space that has been opened up beyond the world by the Incarnation and the way of life it founds.

Objections

Can there be objections to this pellucid and convincing way of relating revelation to reason as bearing on the existence of God? Professor Joseph Trabbic has three.⁸ Sokolowski holds that, once God has revealed himself as Creator, he can be known by the natural light. But if he can be so known, Trabbic thinks, revelation is therefore irrelevant to the issue: revelation cannot make something that at first was naturally unknowable naturally knowable.⁹ This bespeaks a confusion of orders for Trabbic. Second, Sokolowski has not demonstrated that revelation is needed to make the distinction.¹⁰ Third, St. Thomas's arguments arrive at the knowledge of God the Creator, and without appeal to revelation.¹¹

The first objection seems to envisage human reason as a sort of disembodied and de-temporalized rationalist mind that is ever the same and ever proximate to know always the same things from age to age. It envisages a sort of angelic reason never constrained by historical circumstance, never modified in what it can attain by appetite, ordered or disordered. This does not seem to me to be a very serious objection for a Christian, since St. Paul himself recognizes a certain historicity in our knowledge of God. What else can Rom 1 mean except that what is possible to reason in one condition becomes impossible in another?

The second objection leads us to suppose that the fact that Plato and Aristotle did not distinguish the First Principle from what is not it in the way Anselm and Christians do is a sort of brute fact. Given enough time, they would have hit on the "Christian distinction"; it is just an accident that they did not. To the contrary, if it is not a brute fact, then the explanation of the fact is to be located not in some modification of reason from Plato to Paul, but from some change of circumstance—historical

⁸ Joseph Trabbic, "By Revelation Alone? Some Objections to Robert Sokolowski's 'Christian Distinction,'" *Heythrop Journal* 59 (2018): 456–67.

⁹ Trabbic, "By Revelation Alone?," 458–59.

¹⁰ Trabbic, "By Revelation Alone?," 459–61.

¹¹ Trabbic, "By Revelation Alone?," 461–62.

circumstance, and with some understanding of how distinctions are made. Trabbic repeats Sokolowski's observations that distinctions are lived before they formulated in the crisp way Anselm or Aquinas gives us the distinction.¹² But the embeddedness of thought—of distinctions—in life is itself not always evident to those most interested in evidence, since it requires attention to what is opaque and pre- or extra-linguistic. It is hard to make this point expeditiously. But, to take an instance, contrast the way Christians and pagans in the fourth century thought about and practiced, or did not practice, almsgiving, the performance of Christian (and prior to Christians, Jewish) care for the poor (as is seen for instance the book of Tobit). Pagans did not give alms; it was for them a senseless and unreasonable activity. A human gift is reasonably given only if the giver can expect a counter gift, a return on his investment. That is not the case with the poorest of the poor, and it makes perfect sense never to give such down and outs alms in a universe whose fundamental principle is reciprocity.¹³ But Christians live in a quite different universe. The world they live in is wholly a product of a God who cannot be repaid. He makes the sun rise on the just and the unjust, and gives rain to the wicked and the good (who said that?). And to give alms is simply to get in on this fundamental truth of reality. One's actions are then in tune with the actions of the Creator. So, there is a tight connection between one's way of life and a grasp of the Christian distinction. Those who do not live in a world created out of infinite generosity and as gift that cannot be repaid do not give alms—as increasingly, secularized Americans do not give alms. Almsgiving, relief for disasters, aid for the poor—that is supported by those in the Bible Belt.

We come to Trabbic's third objection.¹⁴ Trabbic thinks Aquinas has sterling rational arguments, untouched by revelation, that conclude to the knowledge of God as Creator, and to the description of God as *ipsum esse*

¹² Trabbic, "By Revelation Alone?," 460.

¹³ See here Gary Anderson, "Creatio ex nihilo and the Bible," in *Creatio ex nihilo: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Gary A. Anderson and Markus Bockmuehl (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2028), 15–35, at 29–32.

¹⁴ Rudi A. te Velde also has a Thomist objection: Sokolowski would have us think about a God independent of the world, from whose reality alone we derive the categories to speak of him, contrary to the practice of St. Thomas ("Dei Filius I: On God, Creation, and Providence," *Nova et Vetera* [English] 20, no. 3 [2022]: 823–38, at 831). This criticism is found also in his *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa theologiae* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 91n24. It is true that the world supplies the categories to speak of God. But the knowledge we have of God is, in the end, a knowledge of one who can be wholly independent of the world. St. Thomas and Sokolowski are not at odds here.

subsistens, and to the real distinction of *esse* and essence in all that is not God. Does he? This is where Gregory Rocca's *Speaking the Incomprehensible God* can help us out.

Gregory Rocca

Chapter 8 of Rocca's book is devoted to the existence of God as creator.¹⁵ In section 1, he first examines St. Thomas's reconstructions of Aristotle's argument for an unmoved mover in the *Physics* VIII and the *Metaphysics* XII. Section 2 takes up the argument for God from motion in Thomas's *Compendium theologiae*, after which section 3 reviews Thomas's view of the history of philosophy, in which it is sometimes recognized that Plato and Aristotle knew God as creator, and then section 4 takes up St. Thomas's arguments for creation. Rocca ends with how the description of God as subsistent being and creatures as always composed of essence and *esse* are philosophically formed interpretations of the doctrine of creation (sections 5 and 7). All of this chapter is relevant to thinking through the relation between revelation and reason in St. Thomas and Sokolowski and Sokolowski's critic, Professor Trabbic. Only the highlights will be touched on here.

For Rocca, St. Thomas substantially modifies the Aristotelian arguments for a first mover. In the commentary on the *Physics*, he makes of Aristotle's cause of motion a cause of existence and undermines the argument's dependence on an eternal motion (206). With many others, Rocca thinks Aristotle has no idea whatsoever of contingent existence such as will lead to a Creator (208). Where Aristotle presents us with an unmoved mover who is but a final cause of motion in the *Metaphysics* (208–10), St. Thomas gives us a mover who moves as both a final and an efficient cause, and expressly installs will and choice in him (214–15). In the argument for God from motion deployed in the *Compendium*, Thomas makes of Aristotle's physically mutable entity of our immediate experience a metaphysically contingent entity. That is, for Rocca, he introduces the Christian idea of God, who is distinct from such contingency, into Aristotle's argument (224). This prepares us well to consider the arguments St. Thomas adduces for creation, which, according to Trabbic, proceed independently of any truth of revelation. This is a key point for

¹⁵ Gregory Rocca, O.P., *Speaking the Incomprehensible God: Thomas Aquinas on the Interplay of Positive and Negative Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2004). Citations to this volume will be made parenthetically in main text, by page numbers.

him. If things are with St. Thomas, as Trabbic says, then in fact St. Thomas's arguments rebut Sokolowski's claim that our knowledge of the Christian distinction depends on revelation.

The first argument Trabbic brings forward is from *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 44, a. 1, whose point of departure is the fact of the participation in being by the things of our experience, and the conclusion of which is that all things but God are caused by the God, who does not participate being but possesses being perfectly. In treating this text, along with the many passages parallel to it, Rocca asks, "But how do we know the fact of participation?" (234). The general statement that "what exists by participation is reduced to what exists essentially" is brought forward as if it is "a universal truth that we *first* come to know independently and then *later* apply to the case of God" (234–35).

In reality, however, we have no knowledge, except in the case of God, of any quality, perfection, or reality existing in a pristine, perfect, or "essential" state. In Thomas's hands, then, the seemingly general and independent principle of participation is actually a more abstract, philosophical way of explicating the relationship between God and creation, and indeed depends for its own meaning upon the prior knowledge of God as pure subsistent being. (235)

Participation language "expresses in a more philosophic fashion the *religious* truth about the God who creates" (235; emphasis added).¹⁶ Nor, of course, does the idea of existence as a contingent reality distinct from essence here come from Aristotle.

Trabbic's second argument, for creation *ex nihilo*, taken from ST I, q. 45, a. 1, fares no better. The argument is a recapitulation of the last, meta-physical stage of the history of philosophy in Thomas's telling of it, where a cause for the universality of being is sought. "It is impossible," Thomas says, "that any being should be presupposed before this emanation" of universal being. Therefore, universal being is produced *ex nihilo*. Rocca replies:

The problem with this proof is that anyone who does not comprehend the radically contingent and accidental nature of universal being will not be able to assert its basic premises in such a way that they conclude to what Aquinas wants. (237)

¹⁶ Rocca notes that Rudi te Velde has also noted that the proof of creation based on participation is circular (*Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 234n59).

For Aristotle, in contrast to Thomas, “being simply *is*.”

It is beginning to look as if it is because Aquinas first knows a *creatio ex nihilo* that he is able to discern a more profound contingency at the heart of things, and not the other way around. (237)

God as subsistent being, and what is not God as always a compound of essence and *esse*—these are but ways to shape up the doctrine of creation philosophically. They both express faith in God the Creator (246).¹⁷ For Rocca, Exod 3:14 all by itself is not enough to understand these formulas, as Gilson can be taken to suggest. It is the whole doctrine of creation that comes to expression in them (244): the fact that the world of contingent existence depends on the free choice of subsistent being, who could be in undiminished splendor and excellence whether the world existed or not, who is that than which nothing greater can be thought.

Consider a few quite emphatic lines from Rocca.

The ancient philosophers did not know the essentials of the doctrine of creation, despite Aquinas’ opinion, for reason bereft of revelation naturally and instinctively limits its endeavors to the world’s relational necessities and thus experiences no need to explain radical contingency. Ultimately, we must be *told* that our existence is the decision of a God who loves without need and that all creation is suspended from the free and gracious will of God. (243; emphasis original).

This, I think, is as fine a paraphrase of Sokolowski’s point about the natural home of reason as one could want.¹⁸ What makes us look beyond our home is a Voice calling from outside of it.

Trabbic’s last argument, invoking John Wippel, notes that the freedom with which God creates is also established with no formal reliance on revelation.¹⁹ It turns out, however, that Thomas’s argument for God’s freedom depends on the Christian distinction just as his argument for creation

¹⁷ Rocca deals with Pierre Hadot’s conjecture that a first principle in which being and essence are not distinct is the invention of Porphyry and finds it wanting, both philosophically and historically (*Speaking the Incomprehensible God*, 244–45).

¹⁸ Sokolowski’s *God of Faith and Reason* is in Rocca’s bibliography, but he never expressly refers to him. Doubtless, many things get rubbed away in preparing a dissertation for publication.

¹⁹ John Wippel, “Thomas Aquinas on God’s Freedom to Create or Not,” in *Metaphysical*

itself did. Wippel himself shows this, for an important conclusion of his in examining Thomas's vindication of the divine freedom is "the lack of proportion, the lack of any kind of equality, between the goodness and perfection of any creature or any number of creatures . . . and God's infinite goodness and perfection." And Wippel explains that this is because "the divine goodness is so perfect in itself that, even if no creature whatsoever existed, the divine goodness would still be completely perfect in itself."²⁰ Just so. God plus the world is not greater than God; God is that than which nothing greater can be conceived.

A History of Creation

According to Rocca, Thomas's reading of Aristotle imports revelation—the idea of creation, the idea of the radical contingency of the things of the world—into what he thinks Aristotle means. Does this imply Thomas thinks reason is always already in proximate potency to come to a natural knowledge of God simply on the basis of its innate capacity, power, scope?

That Thomas thinks reason is always already in proximate potency to come to a natural knowledge of God as creator seems to be what Trabbic thinks St. Thomas's arguments for creation mean. The knowledge of God as creator is either natural or not. If it is natural, then it is always everywhere possible to attain to it, and revelation can make no difference to its success or failure whatsoever.

Perhaps, however, Thomas thinks he reads Aristotle aright, not simply in virtue of an assessment of the native power of the human intellect, and not at all because he supposes he is reading anything into Aristotle that is not there, but because he thinks the knowledge of creation—the idea of it—has always been historically available to human beings from the foundation of the world.

In the question devoted to idolatry in the *secunda secundae*, St. Thomas asks what the cause of idolatry was on the part of man, and delivers himself of the opinion that, while demons are its perfective cause, inducing men to worship them, man is the dispositive cause of ancient idolatry, and on three grounds: first, on account of an excessive affection for some man whose image men had made (see Wis 14:15); second, on account of human delight in images, as Aristotle points out in the *Poetics*, and which the Book

Themes in Thomas Aquinas, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 218–39.

²⁰ Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas on God's Freedom," 232–33.

of Wisdom confirms in chapter 11; and third, because of the erstwhile human “ignorance of the true God, whose excellence they did not consider.”²¹ The issue of ignorance is taken up in the reply to the second objection, which had denied that man is the cause of it, since idolatry is not to found in every age of man. Rather, “we read that it was invented in the second age” of man, and the objection then notes that it has largely ceased in the sixth age. Recall the Augustinian division of the ages: first, from Adam to Noah; second, from Noah to Abraham; third, from Abraham to David; fourth from David to the exile; and fifth, from the exile to Christ. Christ inaugurates the sixth age. The reply is as follows:

It must be said that there was no idolatry in the first age on account of the recent memory of the creation of the world, from which there still flourished a knowledge of the one God in the mind of man. In the sixth age, on the other hand, idolatry has been excluded by the teaching and power of Christ, who triumphed over the devil.

According to this remarkable text, the history of idolatry supposed by the objection implies a converse history of the knowledge of God and his creation, which the reply reports. For our purposes, it is noteworthy that Christ dispels the conditions for idolatry by his teaching and power—by his word and deed. St. Thomas does not closely delimit the content of the teaching of Christ here. But from the context, the supposition is that this teaching bears on the knowledge of creation itself and on the existence of but the one true God. At either end of the ages of man, the knowledge of creation would then depend not on the exercise of reason, but rather on the deed of God: the memory of his creative act in the first age and the teaching as to this creative act by Christ in the last. Whatever we want to say about the native power of the mind, following the Book of Wisdom and St. Paul, there is also this history of the revelation of it.

Did St. Thomas think the history of the revelation of creation conditioned the exercise of the native power of the mind in coming to know God? It is not easy for us who have a quite different view of ancient history to remember the thirteenth-century sense of it, even after we have dutifully read *The City of God*.

Quoting St. Jerome, the *Glossa Ordinaria* identifies Shem, Noah’s oldest son, with Melchizedek, who blesses Abraham.²² So also St. Augustine

²¹ St. Thomas, *Summa theologiae* II-II, q. 94, a. 4, corp.

²² *Biblia cum Glossa Ordinaria. The Great Medieval Commentary on Sacred Scripture.*

reports that the City of God is preserved in the descendants of Shem until the time of Abraham, who thus certainly knows who the God is who sends him to Canaan.²³ Do the histories of the descendants of Shem and the descendants of Japheth, “the circumcision and the uncircumcision,” the Jews and Greeks, intersect? It is only after Christ that Japheth is let to dwell “in the tents of Shem” (Gen 9:27).²⁴ St. Augustine entertained the idea that Plato knew the writings of Moses, and read there the name of God, “I am who am,” and that this mightily influenced his philosophical construction of the world. The revelation of the divine name to Moses “most of all inclines me almost to assent to the opinion that Plato was not ignorant of those writings.”²⁵ Peter Comestor, however, from whom Thomas learns that the invention of idolatry occurred in the second age as reported in question 94 above, asserts it as fact that Plato read the books of Moses.²⁶ That Plato learned from Moses and copied him was in fact a general patristic opinion.²⁷

St. Augustine wanted to believe that the fusion of the two horizons of Greek thought and of the Bible happened in Plato, while in fact it was happening in him, Augustine. St. Thomas knew St. Augustine’s hypotheses regarding Plato and Moses in both *De doctrina Christiana* 2.43, where he says that St. Ambrose said that Plato visited Egypt during the prophet Jeremiah’s lifetime, and the discussion of *The City of God*, where Augustine recognizes the impossibility of that, but still thinks Plato must somehow have been acquainted with Mosaic teaching.²⁸ St. Thomas could well

Genesis, trans. and annotated Samuel J. Klumpenhouwer (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2023), 109 (gloss to Gen 14:18).

²³ St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 16.10.

²⁴ See Augustine, *De civ.* 16.2.

²⁵ Augustine, *De civ.* 8.11. What makes him reluctant to assent is that Plato could not, when he went down to Egypt, have read a Septuagint that was not yet composed; he would have had to learn what was in Moses orally.

²⁶ Peter Comestor, *Historia Scholastica*, Gen 7: “descendens in Aegyptum libros Moysi legit” (*Patrologia Latina* [PL] 198:1061). For the invention of idolatry, see the *Historia scholastica*, Gen 37 and 40 (PL 198:1088, 1090). Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., reports that the Dominican constitutions in 1234 required Dominican provinces to provide the Bible, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard, and the *Historia Scholastica* of Peter Comestor to friars slated for study (*Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1996], 40).

²⁷ For notes on the controversy over who copied from whom, see R. Arnou, “Platonisme des Pères,” *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, 12/2:2294–300.

²⁸ See note 24, above. In the *Retractationes*, Augustine notes that Jeremiah and Plato were not contemporaries. Edmund Hill sorts things out as follows: “Perhaps what Ambrose said, and Augustine now verified, was that when Plato went down to Egypt he found

believe that the fusion of horizons was furthered also in Aristotle, Plato's student, while, once again, it was happening in him, Thomas. The point, however, is that St. Thomas could easily believe himself to see an Aristotle much closer to Catholic truth than in fact he is.

The recognition that creation has a history, then, is not a new thing, but a very old thing. Doubtless, the ancient and modern versions of the history are very different.²⁹ But it is nonetheless important to recognize St. Thomas's history, lest we denature his thought and start construing him as some forerunner of the Enlightenment and the Enlightenment version of reason. St. Thomas's history of revelation touches the very things many think to wrest from his theological hands and commit to his philosophical hands, presumably washed clean of anything from revelation by the disinfectant of Aristotle. In fact, he never had any purely philosophical hands. Many years ago, Jean Daniélou maintained provocatively that "Thomism" has no idea of history at all.³⁰ The preposterousness of this claim as touching St. Thomas himself is evidenced by, among others, Max Seckler and Jean-Pierre Torrell.³¹ Had he no idea of history, he would have been A.W.O.L. from the great Catholic and theological enterprise delimited by Joseph Ratzinger, working out the relation of ontology and history.³² In fact, he was not.

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the book of Jeremiah, and borrowed much of his philosophy from it" (St. Augustine, *Teaching Christianity*, trans. Edmund Hill [Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1996], 98n6). Hill notes here that Ambrose taught (Sermon 14, no. 4) that Plato went to Egypt "in order to study the wisdom of the Israelites among others." There are, then, several paths by which the idea of Plato studying Moses could come to St. Thomas—Augustine, Ambrose, Peter Comestor.

²⁹ For modern accounts of this history, one can consult Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), and André Lemaire, *The Birth of Monotheism: The Rise and Disappearance of Yahwism* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archeological Society, 2007).

³⁰ Jean Daniélou, S.J., "Les orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse," *Études* 249 (1946): 5–21, at 10.

³¹ Max Seckler, *Le Salut et l'histoire. La pensée de saint Thomas d'Aquin sur la théologie de l'histoire* (Paris: Cerf, 1967); Jean-Pierre Torrell, OP, "Saint Thomas et l'histoire: état de la question et pistes de recherches," *Revue thomiste* 105 (2005): 355–409.

³² Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology. Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy, SND (San Francisco: Ignatius, Press, 1987), 153–71.