

**Introduction to the *Nova et Vetera* Symposium
Containing Papers from the International Conference
on “Studying Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas,”
Blackfriars, Oxford, June 1, 2019**

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MOST OF THE PAPERS in this issue of *Nova et Vetera* were delivered at an international conference on biblical Thomism hosted by the Aquinas Institute of Blackfriars Hall, Oxford, on June 1, 2019, and organized by Father Piotr Roszak of the Faculty of Theology of Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń. The Research Center for Biblical Thomism was created there in 2016. One of its aims is to provide Polish readers with translations and explanations of Saint Thomas’s commentaries on the *Corpus Paulinum*, but its remit is much wider: its members seek to offer a fresh perspective on Saint Thomas’s biblical commentaries and to make explicit the biblical theology that is implicit in his major theological works. The Research Center examines the sources of Saint Thomas’s biblical thought, including the Church Fathers and the medieval masters of theology, and brings his approach into conversation with contemporary biblical research and exegesis. The Aquinas Institute was delighted to be able to host this conference and so in a small way support the Research Center’s project. By way of an introduction to this collection, I offer some remarks on how fostering awareness of Saint Thomas’s interest in and use of Scripture may help us know him better, and enrich our own appreciation of Scripture.

Awareness of St Thomas’s engagement with Scripture has grown over the last couple of decades. Already in the 1960s, Magi Books had made English translations of some of his scriptural commentaries available, and Saint Austin Press reissued Newman’s translation of the *Catena aurea* in 1997. Works discussing Saint Thomas’s use of Scripture include: Thomas Ryan’s

2000 *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms*; Wilhelmus Valkenberg's 2000 *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*; and Michael Dauphinais's and Matthew Levering's 2005 edited volume *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas*. The work of the Research Center for Biblical Thomism contributes to the ongoing investigation of this aspect of Saint Thomas's ministry.

Nevertheless, I suspect that many students of theology, and even professional theologians, still know Saint Thomas as a *systematic* theologian who synthesized Aristotle's thought with the Christian doctrinal tradition. Philosophers, very properly, regularly engage with Saint Thomas, and many scholars are aware of his role in the history of ethics and even of legal and political thought. But not many people know that he—as a typical thirteenth-century master of theology—spent a large part of his teaching time lecturing on Sacred Scripture. Indeed, not many people are aware how deeply Scripture pervaded the medieval Christian mind, as witnessed for example by the thirteenth-century *Bible moralisée*, and by the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century editions of the *Biblia pauperum*. Even those who do know this may subconsciously perceive Saint Thomas's biblical commentaries as a side line; it is easy to see his *Summa theologiae* as his *characteristic* work, and as drawing on Fathers like Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, assisted by Aristotle and other philosophers, while Scripture provides “proof texts” as pegs on which to hang arguments, or even decorative quotations.

At the beginning of the *Summa*, Saint Thomas makes clear that his subject is *sacra doctrina*, which I take to be the whole project of exploring, and handing on the saving truth that was *revealed in Sacred Scripture*¹ and is to be pondered and handed on in the Church for as long as human souls animate mortal bodies. While time lasts, we need what can be likened to the straw that provides food and bedding for animals; we press forward in the hope of graduating to the children's meat of the Beatific Vision. Saint Thomas's stated policy leads us to expect the *Summa* to be deeply scriptural. But the Prologue tells us this “first degree course in theology” was intended to replace an existing system in which new students would jump onto the carousel of the program of biblical lectures already running in the studium they joined, and so meet doctrinal topics in the non-systematic order dictated by the exposition of books, presumably the books of Scripture. They might go over some topics more than once, and miss out others altogether. Does this mean that, after all, the *Summa* is meant to provide a thorough overview of doctrine to keep students on the straight-and-nar-

¹ See *ST I*, q. 1, aa. 1, 5, and 8.

row before they touch Scripture, a neat framework into which all Scripture study must be shoe-horned? No: fairly obviously, the “beginners” have already done a course in philosophy; but also, as Mark Jordan has argued, the *Summa* presupposes both a deep familiarity with Scripture based on liturgical contemplation and a commitment to be disciples of the Christ whom we meet in the Gospels and the sacraments.² It is poised between an initial familiarity with Scripture and a return to the study of Scripture at a more informed, alert, and detailed level. We may indeed look to the *Summa theologiae* for what it draws from Scripture and what it helps us see in Scripture.

It can be helpful to read the treatise on “One God” in questions 2–26 of the *prima pars* not primarily as an exercise in *natural* theology, but as setting out scriptural—chiefly Old Testament—*revelation*.³ To the exasperation of philosophers, the “five ways” of demonstrating God’s existence are given laconically; this makes sense if they are but a reminder of previous studies, and a peg on which to hang the discussion of how He Who Is, who cannot be compared to any creature, may still be known by us. Articles 11–13 of question 12 explain that, while we cannot know God’s essence in this life, revelation and grace do offer a higher cognition of God than reason alone can. Question 13 then explains that, in addition to the metaphors and parables mentioned earlier,⁴ Scripture and doctrine apply certain nouns and adjectives to God *analogically*; when they say things like, “O Lord, you have become our refuge,” this implies no change in God; and the name *Qui Est* revealed in Exodus 3:14 is “the most proper.” Saint Thomas sensitizes us to the subtleties of biblical language and warns contemporary theologians to be more wary than they often are of supposing that, when Scripture speaks of God suffering, or angry, or changing, this must be *literally* true. Likewise he warns us not to suppose that because God *literally is* good, and love, we can comprehend, or “tame,” his goodness and love.

The treatise on “One God” prepares for that on the Holy Trinity,⁵ a truth accessible through revelation alone.⁶ The treatise on creation also employs revelation, though the questions on the hexaëmeron⁷ bring Gene-

² Mark D. Jordan, *Teaching Bodies: Moral Formation in the Summa of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

³ Cf. *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 8, ad 1.

⁴ *ST* I, q. 1, a. 9; a. 10, ad 3.

⁵ Rowan Williams, “What Does Love Know? St. Thomas on the Trinity,” *New Blackfriars* 82 (2001): 260–82.

⁶ *ST* I, q. 32, a. 1.

⁷ *ST* I, qq. 66–74.

sis 1 into conversation with the latest astronomy. After expounding those elements of the “developed Aristotelian” psychology necessary for moral *theology*,⁸ Saint Thomas tells us that the goal of the creation of the human being is that we should come to perfection as God’s image in an active communion with the Holy Trinity; here he draws on Augustine’s reflections on Genesis 1:26–27.⁹

Among much else in the *Summa*, we may note that the treatise on law comprises more than questions 91–97 of the *prima secundae*, which draws on philosophers and jurists, and is still widely studied. Saint Thomas also offers an extremely detailed analysis of the precepts of the Torah, which he sees as God revealing both primary and secondary natural-law precepts, and as providing an exemplar for future societies as they apply perennial natural-law principles to developing social and economic circumstances.¹⁰ In *tertia pars*, Saint Thomas breaks new ground by bringing into the systematic theology of the Incarnation a more detailed exploration of the Christ we meet in the Gospels. By comparison with, for example, the *Summa Fratris Alexandri*, book III, part 1, we find Saint Thomas sharing a common interest in Christ’s human psyche and what knowledge and graces it contained, in his prayer and merit, in his conception, transfiguration, Passion, resurrection and ascension. But Saint Thomas adds questions on Christ’s temptations, miracles, style of ministry, and style of teaching, thus urging us to incorporate into our Christology *everything the Gospels tell us*.

As he was writing the *Summa theologiae*, Saint Thomas disputed various questions to help him clarify certain issues he would have to present more simply in the *Summa*.¹¹ Likewise he commented on Aristotle. He

⁸ *ST* I, q. 75, prol.; q. 78, prol.; q. 84, prol. The treatise on the *passiones animae* is deferred to I-II, qq. 22–48. A careful account of the human psyche helps us see how beautifully God’s grace can “take flesh” in the “fabric” of human nature and life.

⁹ *ST* I, q. 93; see also D. Juvenal Merriell, *To the Image of the Trinity: A Study in the Development of Aquinas’ Teaching* (Toronto, 1990), and John P. O’Callaghan, “*Imago Dei*: A Test Case for St. Thomas Aquinas’s Augustinianism,” in *Aquinas the Augustinian*, ed. Michael Dauphinais, Barry David, and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2007), 100–144.

¹⁰ Richard Conrad, “Aquinas on the Unfolding of Law” and “The Revision of Civil Law: The Torah Exemplifies Aquinas’ Principles,” *Law & Justice: The Christian Law Review* 183 (Trinity/Michaelmas 2019): 117–33 and 155–75 (respectively).

¹¹ The *Disputed Question on the Unity of the Incarnate Word* seems to be contemporary with *tertia pars*. In a. 1, at the end of the corpus, St. Thomas articulates with increased sharpness the uniqueness of the Incarnation, a mystery we cannot reduce to any philosophical categories. Intriguingly, *ST* III, q. 17, a. 2, repeats the

also commented on *Scripture*, partly because this was a teaching duty, and partly, I suspect, because ongoing engagement with Scripture would help him develop his own thought. In fact he had written his literal *Commentary on the Book of Job* while writing book III of the *Summa contra gentiles*, which deals with God's providence. In that commentary, he looked very carefully into the precise details of the text of Job, to see what it tells us about the mysterious wisdom of God's providence and about how demanding is the task of defending it carefully against critics. It is likely that Saint Thomas's unfinished *Commentary on the Psalms* is contemporary with the *Tertia Pars* of the *Summa theologiae*. Father Roszak's article in this collection focuses on the saving power of Christ's obedience, which is one theme of the *tertia pars*, and so helps us see how fitting it was for Christ to quote the incipit of Psalm 22(21)—for, as Saint Thomas brings out, that psalm is one of the clear prophecies of Christ's Passion and the victory it won.

Joel Thomas Chopp's article on Saint Thomas's use of Psalm 16:2 (Vulgate 15:2) locates Saint Thomas within the reception history of that text, and helps us reflect on what medieval exegesis may offer today. Perhaps it is easier now than it was some decades ago to perceive the value of medieval exegesis, for the historical-critical method, which remains immensely valuable, has been joined by canon criticism, and is nowadays complemented by literary criticism, by research into reception history, and by other approaches. We might take St Thomas's Mass and Office for the Feast of Corpus Christi as a reminder of the importance of the *liturgy's* use of Scripture, which, besides the long readings of the Office of Readings and at Mass, almost playfully combines short passages into a tapestry in which they can spark off each other. In each of the responsories for Corpus Christi, for example, Saint Thomas deftly juxtaposes an Old Testament text to a New-Testament one.¹²

The liturgical, contemplative repetition of scriptural texts allows words and phrases suddenly to hit us afresh. Maybe this is what helped Saint Thomas break new ground in his mature theology of the "Seven Gifts" of the Holy Spirit, both in comparison with his earlier thought and in comparison with his contemporaries. In question 68 of the *prima secun-*

"metaphysical analogy" used before, perhaps because St. Thomas thought it might help "beginners"; but the way qq. 1–59 of *ST* III are arranged suggests to me that St. Thomas wanted to enlarge the scope of their study to embrace not only metaphysics, but also detailed reflection on Christ's humanity and the whole sweep of his saving ministry.

¹² For a detailed analysis of St. Thomas's Corpus Christi Office, see *The Feast of Corpus Christi*, ed. Barbara Walters, Vincent Corrigan, and Peter Ricketts (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

dae, he notices that Scripture does not in fact call them “gifts”: Isaiah 11 calls them *spiritus*. Thus he is able to present them as ways in which the Holy Spirit attunes us to his personal guidance, to his “inspirations” or, better, his “instincts.”

Saint Thomas recognizes that, in the events and people Scripture tells us of, God provides us with a generous set of lessons which work in various ways—these are the “spiritual meanings.”¹³ But he also urges us to pay careful attention to the text itself. Besides working out whether some word is meant metaphorically or analogically, besides working out whether some passage is history or parable, and so on, we must pay attention to the purpose and argument of each Book. Doctor Jörgen Vijgen’s article in this collection shows how Saint Thomas saw Saint Paul’s letters (including Hebrews, which we now know is not by Saint Paul) as chiefly about Christ’s grace in its various dimensions, and how he applied the medieval method of *divisio textus* to Hebrews. This careful reverence for the text remains exemplary, even if, helped by reconstructions of Saint Paul’s historical context, modern scholars offer different analyses of the detailed structure of the epistles and of the trains of his thought. Arguably, Saint Thomas’s conviction that Saint Paul’s core focus is Christ’s grace remains a strong contender as the best interpretative key. It helps us distinguish the arguments that sometimes drove the writing of the epistles from the perennially important truths that they drove Saint Paul and the author of Hebrews to articulate.

Saint Thomas worked before the danger arose of rigidly compartmentalizing scriptural study, natural theology, dogmatic theology, moral theology, and mystical theology. I have mentioned but a few of the ways in which, in his mind, Scripture interacted fruitfully with other disciplines. There is much that further research can bring out. But we can certainly see Saint Thomas as something of an exemplar for what Father Bruno Clifton calls for in his article: a reconnection between doctrinal theology and Scripture scholarship.¹⁴ We know more than Saint Thomas did about the historical circumstances in which Scripture developed, just as we know more about cosmology, biology, neurophysiology, and so on—the work of synthesis is more daunting. We might see as “parable” some passages Saint Thomas saw as straightforward history.¹⁵ But we live and work at an

¹³ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 10.

¹⁴ This reconnection is argued for and exemplified in, for example, Matthew Levering’s *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004).

¹⁵ The Book of Jonah, in particular, comes to mind.

opportune time for doing in our small ways what he was granted to do so outstandingly, and to present to the world something of the vision that the blessed possess, which is refracted to us through Scripture, that spring we can never exhaust.¹⁶ N.V

¹⁶ See: *ST*, I, q. 1, a. 2; St Ephraem, *Commentary on the Diatesseron*, 1.18–19.