

Discerning the Literal Sense: Bringing together Biblical Scholarship and Dogmatic Theology

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Remarks on the Situation

MUCH OF RECENT BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP involves a severing of the ties between exegesis and dogmatic theology. For many historical critics, exegesis is the domain of technically trained experts in ancient languages, philology, and culture while theology is characterized as, at best, a spiritual reflection only vaguely related to the intentions of the Bible's authors, or at worst, a later overlay that effectively obscures those intentions.¹

Robert Barron's typical complaint about the lack of theological engagement in biblical exegesis is a lacuna that, *mutatis mutandis*, can also be leveled at dogmatic theology. For years the call has gone out—and has been heeded—for study of the Bible to integrate message and meaning into its work.² But has a similar plea been made (or heeded) for theology to integrate in turn the results of exegesis into *its* work?³ While the methodological discus-

¹ Robert Barron, "Biblical Interpretation and Theology: Irenaeus, Modernity and Vatican II," *Letter & Spirit* 5 (2009): 189. Note: all biblical translations in this article are my own.

² Cambridge University Press's Old Testament Theology (ed. B. Strawn and P. D. Miller) and New Testament Theology (ed. J. Dunn) are just two examples of biblical commentary series with the goal of theological interpretation.

³ Robert D. Miller's *Many Roads Lead Eastward: Overtures to Catholic Biblical Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016) is a precious example of an attempt to bridge

sion centers on increased theological interpretation of the Bible, a similar discussion oriented towards dogmatic theology's engagement with exegesis, theological or otherwise, seems under addressed.⁴ Barron's assessment of the regard in which theology is sometimes held by the Bible's "historical critics" may be accurate; but it belongs to theology at least as much as biblical scholarship to rectify this negative perception, in my view, by responsible engagement with each other.

It is a truism to acknowledge that context matters for meaning. But in the case of Scripture, the depth of context demands considerable evaluation to consider the meanings found in such a complex collection of texts. It is my contention that for a rich and robust theology, scholars must draw upon the full range of exegetical resources provided by biblical scholarship, the "domain" of "ancient languages, philology and culture" in Barron's words. This means that the way forward does not call for an altering of perspective on our various disciplines, but, on the contrary, recognition that current critical biblical research is relevant for theology, just as theology should be recognized as the ultimate goal of exegesis. If Scripture is the "soul of theology" (*Dei Verbum* §24), theology as such needs at least awareness of the exegetical conversations.

It seems fitting to be led by Thomas Aquinas in order to conceptualize this necessity. While the precise scope of *sacra doctrina* as presented by Aquinas is arguable, it is clear that its relationship with *Sacra Scriptura* is fundamental, a relationship sufficiently close that Brian Davies notes that, "for [Aquinas] *sacra doctrina* and *sacra scriptura* can be used interchangeably."⁵ And yet at the same time *sacra doctrina* seems to refer to the fruits of the study of Scripture, always in agreement with Church teaching (*Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 5, a. 3, ad 2). In other words, *sacra doctrina* is not something different from or additional to Scripture but is expressive of the truth contained therein (ST I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2; II-II, q. 1, a. 9, ad 1), for which reason it "can borrow from the other sciences, not from any need to beg from them, but for the greater clarification of the things it conveys" (ST I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2).⁶ It is such borrowing, enriched and clarified by

this gap.

⁴ Ten years ago, I suggested that this imbalance was not recognized in two reviews for *New Blackfriars*: Review of *Opening Up the Scriptures*, ed. C. Granados and L. Sanchez-Navarro, *New Blackfriars* 90, no. 1028 (2009); Review of *Theological Interpretation of the New Testament*, ed. K. J. Vanhoozer et al., *New Blackfriars* 91, no. 1033 (2010).

⁵ Brian Davies, "Is 'Sacra Doctrina' Theology?," *New Blackfriars* 71, no. 836 (1990): 144.

⁶ "... accipere potest aliquid a philosophicis disciplinis, non quasi ex necessitate eis

appeal to the full range of human knowledge, that enables the student of *sacra doctrina* to pluck these fruits, something that Thomas Gilby recognizes in Aquinas's own work: "The way is not a narrow cutting, but a high-road; the *Summa* does not keep its eyes down, but looks around, and often at objects not at all ecclesiastical."⁷ Taking the lead from Aquinas's own method, then, it seems that theologians would be well advised to make use of the sciences that Barron lists, namely ancient languages, philology, and culture (not to mention history and archaeology), or at least to refer to the scholarship that *has* made use of them, in the practice of their scripturally ensouled discipline.

The Literal Sense

Rather than pursuing questions concerning the nature of the theological discipline, I want to illustrate the relevance of biblical criticism for the wider theological project from the biblical critical perspective. First, I will briefly sketch how the tradition has situated biblical criticism in theology before turning to two examples. As a point of departure, we can ask in what way(s) do we expect the biblical text to manifest revelation? What type of witness is the Bible? Put another, more venerable way, how are we to evaluate the senses of Scripture? In the Thomistic schema, what is foundational to understanding Scripture, and hence *sacra doctrina* as a whole, is Scripture's *literal sense* (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 10). But the scope of this literal sense needs careful evaluation. As Robert Miller reminds us, the literal sense is not "taking the text literally," which is not what it has ever meant."⁸ John Barton prefers to speak of the *plain* sense, which is polyvalent and yet finite in scope:

Classic texts such as the Bible lend themselves to reading and rereading precisely because there is always more to be found in them; they answer not one question, but a plethora of questions. But they do so, I would argue, through what they can possibly mean, given the constraints of convention, genre, time, semantics; they cannot mean

indigeat, sed ad maiorem manifestationem eorum quae in hac scientia traduntur (for *ST* I follow the translation in the Blackfriars edition, *Summa Theologiae* [London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1964]).

⁷ Thomas Gilby, "Appendix 6: Theology as Science," Blackfriars ed. of *ST*, vol. 1, no. 29.

⁸ Miller, *Many Roads*, 78. See also Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (1993), II ("Hermeneutical Questions"), B ("Meaning of Sacred Scripture"), 1 ("The Literal Sense"): "The literal sense is not to be confused with the 'literalist' sense to which fundamentalists are attached."

simply anything you like.⁹

For Aquinas we cannot correctly understand the biblical text without the literal sense: "All meanings are based on one, namely the literal sense" (*ST I*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1: "Omnes sensus fundentur super unum, scilicet litteralem"). But again, this prioritization does not counsel fundamentalism, as Davies acknowledges.

It would be wrong to take this as meaning Aquinas was, quite simply, what we would now call a 'biblical fundamentalist,' for his own practice in commenting on Scripture suggests that he would willingly have endorsed the attempt to learn about the origins of biblical texts and to read them in ways they were intended by their authors rather than in ways which ignore the context and beliefs of those from whom they came.¹⁰

In fact, Aquinas describes the various genres that can be found "under the one general heading of the literal sense" (*ST I*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 2), including the metaphorical or "parabolical" sense, which is "not the figure of speech itself, but the object it figures" (*ST I*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 3). In other words, the literal sense of a passage may be metaphorical. Pius XII acknowledged Scripture's range of idioms in his 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, §37.

No one who has a correct idea of biblical inspiration will be surprised to find, even in the Sacred Writers, as in other ancient authors, certain fixed ways of expounding and narrating, certain definite idioms, especially of a kind peculiar to the Semitic tongues, so-called approximations, and certain hyperbolical modes of expression, nay, at times, even paradoxical, which even help to impress the ideas more deeply on the mind. For of the modes of expression which, among ancient peoples and especially those of the East, human language used to express its thought, none is excluded from the Sacred Books, provided the way of speaking adopted in no wise contradicts the holiness and truth of God.

⁹ John Barton, *The Nature of Biblical Criticism* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 113.

¹⁰ Davies, "Is 'Sacra Doctrina' Theology?," 145.

Reviewing the comments of Barton, Davies, and Pius XII, we can see that there is a recurring insistence that appreciation of the context within, through, and for which the scriptural texts were produced is necessary to understand them. Yet, there is equal acknowledgment in the tradition that understanding the context is not straightforward.

The truth of faith is contained in sacred Scripture, but diffusely, in diverse ways and, sometimes, darkly. The result is that to draw out the truth of faith from Scripture requires a prolonged study and a practice not within the capacities of all those who need to know the truths of faith. (*ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 9, ad 1)

The “prolonged study” that Aquinas urges is also encouraged by Pius XII. The Church’s scholars are to employ a range of human sciences to contextualize the Scriptures.

What is the literal sense of a passage is not always as obvious in the speeches and writings of the ancient authors of the East, as it is in the works of our own time. For what they wished to express is not to be determined by the rules of grammar and philology alone, nor solely by the context; the interpreter must, as it were, go back wholly in spirit to those remote centuries of the East and with the aid of history, archaeology, ethnology, and other sciences, accurately determine what modes of writing, so to speak, the authors of that ancient period would be likely to use, and in fact did use. (*Divino Afflante Spiritu* §35)

Finally, we should also acknowledge that it is in the nature of science to advance human knowledge as more data is recovered, which can alter the parameters of a discipline. While we might begin with the Thomistic schema, current research leads the scholar beyond what Aquinas imagined.

Biblical science has advanced in detail and in depth since the Middle Ages. Historical imagination now commands improved techniques to reconstruct the circumstances of Scriptural composition and to appreciate the practical preoccupations of the writer, not merely his timeless theological message. Criticism is now more versatile about literary “genres”; less committed to Graeco-Latin usage and less content than the medieval were with the pure signification of words, symbols, and events, it sees them in the stream of history

moving to their prophetic fulfilment. The trend is towards giving the literal sense a fuller content, *sensus litteralis plenior*, reinforced with elements from the spiritual senses described by St Thomas.¹¹

All this means that new information brought by the study of culture, archaeology, history, and epigraphy influences how biblical texts are evaluated and thus should influence theology if it is to base its work on Scripture. Let me put it another way. A theologian's primary appeal to the Bible as source of revelation is as a canonical (hence completed) collection of texts. This is entirely appropriate. Yet, while it does not lie ordinarily within the field of theological study, the process by which the text reached its canonical form cannot be irrelevant to theological application. Questions of a literary and theological nature are informed by diachronic issues, for example, the choice to present source material in a particular way, just as acknowledging the Bible as canonical and hence socially authoritative contextualizes the text-critical and source-critical questions. For understanding the Bible, *it matters how the text came to be* and dismissing this ostensibly non-theological research as irrelevant risks diminishing the persuasiveness of any theological argument.

Returning to the language of Scripture's senses, while it would seem that the literal sense is fundamental for theology, is not always straightforward to evaluate the literal sense of a particular biblical passage. If I can put it like this, theology needs the sciences of biblical scholarship because they are engaged in discerning the literal sense.

Discerning the Literal Sense: Two Examples

To illustrate the contribution of these sciences to theology, I am going to give just two examples where biblical criticism reveals and negotiates the complexity in discerning the literal sense. I have deliberately chosen passages where nothing of major doctrinal importance is at stake. This is to enable analytical clarity. My claim that discerning the literal sense is essential for theology indicates a procedural hierarchy. The sciences of biblical criticism are employed as the first step in biblical engagement and then (it is my hope that) the discovered data is taken into consideration when scriptural passages are reflected upon in theological work.¹² Since I am going to concentrate on the first analytical step, this is best exemplified if doctrinal

¹¹ Gilby, "Appendix 12: The Senses of Scripture," in Blackfriars ed. of *ST*, vol. 1, no. 4.

¹² See Miller, *Many Roads*, 76–88, for his comparable methodological proposal.

commitments are allowed to emerge later in the approach.¹³ The examples have also been chosen because they involve passages that are taken from different literary genres. There is no “one approach fits all” to biblical texts and part of discerning the literal sense is to establish which approaches are relevant and which questions are most productive in each case. In the first case, Judges 9:7–21, topographical data make a relevant contribution; in the second, Sirach 3:21–25, the complexity of textual transmission is of significance.

Topography

Chapter 9 in the book of Judges relates the tale of Abimelech’s rise to be leader of Shechem and his fall from power. It is a story thought to come from the region of Shechem with likely antiquity, at least in oral transmission, to the tenth century BCE, albeit bearing some marks of later editing.¹⁴ Part of this story is a cautionary fable told by Abimelech’s surviving brother Jotham as he flees after Abimelech has killed all their other siblings. We find Jotham’s fable in 9:8–15: “The trees went out to anoint for themselves a king” (v. 8).¹⁵ The protagonists in the fable are a variety of representative flora who are seeking to constitute a monarchical political system (likely incorporating the whole of the plant kingdom although this is not clarified) under a sovereign who is chosen from among them.

I think it is safe to assume that discerning the literal sense of these verses is straightforward. Any reader should be happy to agree that trees do not talk, engage in administrative procedures, or make kings of each other. In other words, it is clear that the literal sense of Judges 9:8–15 is metaphorical, or in Aquinas’s nomenclature, “paraboli- cal” (*ST* I, q. 1, a.

¹³ Of course, approaching the Bible confessionally means we can never free ourselves from the doctrinal issues revealed in the Scriptures. My point here is merely that scholars should be open to all data and accept or reject exegetical proposals for theological reflection based upon reasoned knowledge of the questions raised.

¹⁴ See, e.g.: Hanoch Reviv, “The Government of Shechem in the El-Amarna Period and in the Days of Abimelech,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 16, no. 4 (1966): 252–57; Robert D. Miller, *Chieftains of the Highland Clans: A History of Israel in the 12th and 11th Centuries Bc* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2012), 120; Israel Finkelstein, *The Forgotten Kingdom: The Archaeology and History of Northern Israel* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2013), 160; Finkelstein, “Comments on the Abimelech Story in Judges 9,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 47 (2016): 74; Finkelstein, “Major Saviors, Minor Judges: The Historical Background of the Northern Accounts in the Book of Judges,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 4 (2017): 435.

¹⁵ For this discussion of Judges, I use my own translation from the Hebrew.

10, ad 3).¹⁶ Indeed, it is this generic clarity that identifies Jotham's speech as fabulous.¹⁷

Let us now look at the fable's setting in the wider story of Abimelech. The opening scenes in Judges 9 are at Shechem, a settlement in the north of Israel that features significantly in the biblical literature. Shechem (near modern day Nablus) was located at the eastern mouth of a valley between two hills and to the west of a plain.¹⁸ The hills are Mount Ebal to the north and Mount Gerizim to the south, two sites that are linked in Deuteronomy 11:29 and 27:11–13 and Joshua 8:33. Mount Ebal rises to 3,084 feet, while Mount Gerizim is 2,890 feet tall. The valley of Shechem between this high ground is at approximately 1,950 feet above sea level, roughly one thousand feet below the summits.

In the story, after the news that Abimelech has eliminated his fraternal rivals has circulated, Jotham takes action. "They told Jotham and he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim and he lifted up his voice and called and said to them, 'hear me lords of Shechem and God will hear you'" (Judg 9:7). This verse relates that Jotham is on top of Mount Gerizim when he addresses his parable to the Shechemites, which begins in verse 8. That is, Jotham is standing about a thousand feet above the settlement and between two-thirds and one mile from the settlement as the crow flies. Are we to wonder how the lords of Shechem hear Jotham's parable when he is stood so far away from them? Judges 9:7 is specific that Jotham stands "on the top of Mount Gerizim" and it is not clearly meant metaphorically. Are

¹⁶ It may be that greater distinctions between metaphor and parable (which signifies through a story) are needed in theological language than Aquinas allows, perhaps in the same way as he himself carefully distinguishes between metaphor and analogy (*ST* I, q. 13).

¹⁷ Continuing to follow Aquinas, I should note that the *object* that is *signified* by the *figure* (see *ST* I, q. 1, a. 10, ad. 3) of Judg 9:8–15 is not self-evident, and thus the *content* of the passage's literal sense—the fable's meaning—still requires interpretation. As I have explained, there is a procedural priority beginning with establishing the type of literality the passage has before moving to analysis of its signification. See Miller, *Many Roads*, 76–88.

¹⁸ "Jerome's statement, 'Shechem, which is now called Neapolis,' apparently equated the two sites, but Eusebius stated that Shechem was 'in the suburbs of Neapolis,' and the Madaba mosaic map, which depends on Eusebius' Onomasticon, shows Shechem a short distance SE of Neapolis. Thiersh's discovery of a major ancient fortification system at Tell Balâtah seemed to establish Tell Balâtah, rather than Nablus, as the site of ancient Shechem, and the identification has not since been seriously questioned" (Lawrence E. Toombs, "Shechem (Place)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1992], 1:174–75).

we to understand the literal sense of verse 7 to be the recounting of actual events?

As we have seen, Aquinas approves of Scripture's metaphorical language (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 9). When classifying Scripture's senses, he places the parabolic within the literal sense (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 3). The case of Judges 9:7, however, seems to resist Aquinas's classificatory summary. Unlike the parabolic sense perceptible in 9:8–15, verse 7 seems to be “straightforwardly recorded,” which Aquinas categorizes as “history” (*ST* I q. 1, a. 10, ad 2: “. . . nam historia est . . . cum simpliciter aliquid proponitur”), raising the practical question of how anyone heard Jotham's parable. The Pontifical Biblical Commission offers a solution.

When it is a question of a story, the literal sense does not necessarily imply belief that the facts recounted actually took place, for a story need not belong to the genre of history but be instead a work of imaginative fiction.¹⁹

But discerning “when it is a question of a story” is precisely the issue at hand and while this reading might be acceptable for books like Ruth, Esther, or Job, it is not clear whether we would want to assign most of Judges to “imaginative fiction.” If we are to receive the account with narrative license, dismissing Jotham's audibility as a non-issue, then we also cannot accept the Thomistic schema that what is related is straightforwardly history (“simpliciter historia est”) without modification.²⁰ Aquinas does not discuss Judges 9:7 specifically and I am sure that he never visited Shechem and Mount Gerizim, so it is likely that the practicality of Jotham's proclamation did not occur to him. But considering the convergence of data (textual, narrative, topographical) it does not seem as if we can simply assign verses 8–15 to parable and verse 7 to history and leave it at that. It seems as if a text related *cum simpliciter* is not a principle sufficient to characterize a biblical verse as history. The literal sense requires a more nuanced evaluation.

While the practicality of Judges 9:7 may seem a trivial problem to raise, my purpose is to show that there are some better and some worse

¹⁹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, II.B.1.

²⁰ Aquinas also thinks that “historical” and “literal” are interchangeable labels for the foundational sense of Scripture: “qui est historicus vel litteralis” (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 10). These exegetical points further demonstrate the need for refinement of theological concepts beyond Aquinas, between history and literality; between metaphor and parable.

questions to put to biblical passages and, what is more, which *are* the better questions is not always self-evident. The data from philology, literary criticism, history, and so on should guide us to ask the most relevant questions of the text. For Judges 9:7–21, the topography draws attention to locations that carry their own symbolism and meaning. So, rather than spending energy postulating an ancient pulpit on the slopes of Mount Gerizim,²¹ we are led to concentrate upon the literary pragmatics of proclamation and the symbolism evoked by the site, for instance drawing on other references to the two mountains in Deuteronomy 11:29; 27:11–13 and Joshua 8:33.²² Briefly, Gerizim is the mountain of blessing, with Ebal the mountain of curses. We immediately see an irony in the apparent curse of Jotham's parable being pronounced from Gerizim and this knowledge should suggest many avenues of biblical and theological reflection. It is not my intention to develop this analysis here, but I present this example from topography simply to show how apparently non-theological data helps to establish which questions are most productive for drawing out the theological teaching of sacred Scripture.

Textual criticism

Pius XII endorsed the science of textual criticism because the original text, “has more authority and greater weight than any even the very best translation, whether ancient or modern” (*Divino Afflante Spiritu* §16; see also §§17–18). The challenge that this science faces, however, is the near impossibility of retrieving the “original text” with certainty. There are no *autographs*, which means that all extant textual witnesses to the Bible are copies. In the case of the Old Testament in particular, these copies come from many centuries after any proposed date of production and frequently betray signs of editing.²³ Further, the Bible's different books have been received into the canon from different language versions and one of them, the Septuagint in Greek (LXX), is itself a translation for which we do not have the underlying Hebrew. What is more, there are plural witnesses to each version and an original priority cannot be

²¹ See Barry G. Webb, *The Book of Judges*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 275.

²² A comparison of Judg 9:7 with these texts reinforces this approach to the literal sense, since all speak of pronouncements made from the summits of the mountains without concern for practicality.

²³ Of course, the issue of dating books of the Bible at their point of origin is itself fraught with complexity.

securely granted to one of them. Sifting these witnesses has become ever more complex with the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other scriptural fragments from the Judean desert, whose texts boast an antiquity that aligns them with (or sometimes trumps) other claimants to originality despite the evident fluidity in textual transmission that these ancient witnesses display.²⁴

I have argued that it matters how the biblical text came to be and textual criticism makes a significant contribution to understanding this development. A related contribution is to deepen the literary perspective on a scriptural passage by comparison of variant readings. Variants also reveal how different communities have understood the biblical text in its translation and reception. All of this research provides material for theological reflection, beginning with ascertaining the most productive questions on which to reflect.

As a brief example of this science, I have chosen to look at the first scriptural quotations appealed to by Aquinas in the *Summa*: Sirach 3:22, quoted in *ST* I, q. 1, a. 1, obj. 1, followed up by Sirach 3:25 in response in ad 1. In the first instance, Aquinas only gives the first four words of verse 22; in his Latin Bible the full verse reads:

Things too high for you, do not examine/ and things too strong for
you, do not seek out/
but those things which God commands you forever understand/
and do not be curious about his many works.²⁵

Aquinas cites the first half of the first bicolon, giving a flavor of Ben Sira's advice as an objection to the study of theology: the "things too high for you." In his response to this objection Aquinas continues his reference to Sirach 3 with an appeal to verse 25, a brief verse he cites in its entirety:

For many things beyond the sense of man have been shown to you.²⁶

First, I would like to draw attention to how, in the very first article of

²⁴ For an introduction to all these issues, see Paul D. Wegner, *A Student's Guide to Textual Criticism of the Bible: Its History, Methods and Results* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

²⁵ "Altiora te ne scrutaveris/ et fortiora te ne exquisieris/ sed quae praecepit tibi Deus illa cogita semper/ et in pluribus operibus eius ne fueris curiosus" (for the biblical texts, the translations are my own).

²⁶ "Plurima enim super sensum hominis ostensa sunt tibi."

the *Summa*, Aquinas's citation of Scripture encourages the student to bring the whole context of Sirach 3 to bear on the debate he initiates. In this first article the debate is about the appropriateness of the theological project. This procedure exemplifies what Aquinas goes on to argue through the ten articles of the first question; the foundational place of *Sacra Scriptura* as *sacra doctrina*. Although it falls outside of Aquinas's frame of reference, we shall see how acknowledgment of the complexity of our textual witnesses to *sacra doctrina* enriches this debate.

It is not surprising that, in his scriptural references Aquinas seems to follow his Vulgate, the late fourth-century Latin revision by St Jerome.²⁷ Jerome's work, however, extended only to the books of the Hebrew Bible (and not the Deuterocanonical books of the Greek Septuagint) and the Gospels. The rest of the Vulgate Old and New Testaments come from the *Vetus Latina* ["OL" for "Old Latin"] translation tradition, though the Vulgate edition shows its own variants from the OL.²⁸

Sirach is an enigmatic piece of literature with a complex textual history. It was accepted into the Old Testament in Greek as a translation from Hebrew by Jesus ben Sira's grandson, explained in the book's prologue as found in our Bibles. A medieval Hebrew witness to the book was only discovered in 1896 as part of the Cairo Genizah collection.²⁹ Jordan Schmidt summarizes the textual development:

The grandson translated Jesus ben Sira's work from Hebrew into Greek in ca. 117 BCE. After this the Hebrew underwent some expansion, which was most likely an accretion of various sayings and glosses, and then someone else made a revised translation that was based on the first translation of the Greek as well as the expanded form of the Hebrew. This second text form of the Greek is what we have in the Lucianic and Origenic recensions of the LXX. By and large, the Old Latin [OL] corresponds to the first translation of the Greek, but it does have some of the expanded readings too, sometimes coming closer to the Hebrew than the Greek. Perhaps as early as the 3rd century CE, the expanded

²⁷ See Wegner, *Student's Guide to Textual Criticism*, 289–92.

²⁸ *Vetus Latina* or "Old Latin" is the collective title for the large and diverse body of Latin biblical translations used by Christians from the second century until about the eighth century, by which time the Vulgate had established itself as the standard Latin translation.

²⁹ See Janet Soskice, *Sisters of Sinai: How Two Lady Adventurers Found the Hidden Gospels* (New York: Random House, 2009), 239–42.

Hebrew text was also translated into Syriac. In the course of transmission, other additions made it into the Hebrew—some of them were retrojected from the Syriac, while others were glosses. This form of the Hebrew is what we have in the Cairo Genizah manuscripts.³⁰

Sirach's history of transmission shows that biblical texts were not always regarded as monolithic and unchangeable witnesses and that rather there was a fluidity in copying and editing by scribes, which is significant considering that these copies are the only witnesses to the biblical text we have. This fact in itself provides an important datum for considering theological issues such as inspiration, divine authorship, and the type of witness to revelation the Bible is.

Returning to the particular verses under consideration, in the LXX text, Sirach 3:22 seems to reflect only the first bicolon as it appears in the Vulgate—"What is commanded you, these things understand / for you have no need of hidden things"—while verse 25 is not in the earliest texts of the LXX. The Hebrew of verse 22 is comparable to the other witnesses—"On what is authorized concentrate / for you have no concern with hidden things"—but verse 25 does not correspond to the Latin: "Without a pupil, light is lacking/ and without knowledge, wisdom is lacking." Finally, the Syriac version is nearest to the Hebrew—"What is authorized for you understand / for you have no concern with hidden things"—but has its own take on verse 25: "He who does not have the eye's pupil lacks light / in what you are devoid of knowledge you should not be promising instruction."

Overall, it appears as if verse 22 in the Latin witness is twice as long as in the other versions, while verse 25 does not correspond at all. Schmidt gives his assessment:

The OL reflects the Hebrew pretty well, though it makes explicit the references to God: i.e., the divine passive is translated as an active with God explicitly named as the subject. Also, there are a few interpretive glosses mixed in. The Vulgate then adds more material to smooth out the translation (I don't know the source of the additions).

Regarding the Latin, it seems to me that 3:22 = LXX 3:21–22a,

³⁰ Jordan Schmidt, private communication of 2019. I am grateful to my colleague Jordan for his help with Sirach's textual development.

and then 3:23 = LXX 3:22b. After that it gets more complicated because the Vulgate and the OL are different. It seems that Vulgate 3:24 = LXX 3:23a and then Vulgate 3:25 = LXX 3:23b. However, the Vulgate of v24 is a plus compared to the OL. So v23 of the OL was likely the original translation of v23a of the LXX, and then v25 of the OL (which is identical to the Vulgate version) is the translation of v23b of the LXX. It seems that v24 of the Vulgate was added to smooth out the translation.

Regarding the Greek of v25, it is found only in the Origenic recension whereas the Lucianic has only v25a. Given the fact that Hebrew v25 doesn't go with either the preceding or the following, it could be a later addition in the Hebrew that was then picked up in the later revised translations of the Greek. The fact that it is not found in the OL would support this.

However, v25 is found also in the Syriac (though slightly different in formulation), which would suggest that if v25 is an addition, it was made rather early.

The Greek corresponds to the Hebrew fairly closely in all of these verses. The differences that do exist between the Hebrew and Greek could be a function of the content. In 3:21–22 Ben Sira instructs his students to accept human limitation of knowledge as well as his authority to determine the limits of their inquiry. Likely he has in view astrologically inclined groups who espoused and sought esoteric knowledge. Perhaps the grandson is trying to deemphasize the stress laid on humility and acceptance of authority for his Greek audience.³¹

Where does this analysis leave the theologian? I have pointed out that the very complexity of Sirach's different versions must stimulate reflection on theological issues, such as the nature of divine inspiration, the place of the author, translator or reviser in this process, and the manner in which biblical texts are the font of revelation. The data from textual criticism ensures that these vital questions are raised. Secondly, Schmidt suggests ideological and social motives as a reason for the particular variants for Sirach 3:21–25. Revision in response to audience expectation across the translations surely has something to say about how any "final form" of the text is received for theological analysis. As I have argued above, it matters how the biblical text came to be. Finally, returning to my initial comment

³¹ Schmidt, 2019 private communication.

that Aquinas's references encourage taking in the whole context, comparison of all four versions of Sirach 3:21–25 allows a multi-dimensional reading of Ben Sira's advice on the nature of teaching.

In Sirach 3 we find an exhortation to humility and docility when being instructed. This counsel is prefaced by verses 17–20 [v. 20 = Vulgate v. 21].

My child, perform your tasks with humility / then you will be loved
by those whom God accepts.

The greater you are, the more you must humble yourself / so you will
find favor in the sight of the Lord.

For great is the might of the Lord / but by the humble he is glorified.

This pericope establishes the context for the passage under consideration. For ease of comparison, the following table presents the text of Sirach 3:21–25 with the four language versions in parallel with my translation. The textual variation of this text does not substantially change the point that is being made, but rather lends a multi-dimensionality to the advice, enriching the point that Aquinas is making in *ST I*, q. 1, a. 1, about *sacra doctrina* and its basis in revelation.

Drawing the versions together, my own reflection is as follows. Both humility (v. 21 [Vulgate v. 22a]) and docility are necessary (v. 22a [Vulgate v. 22b]) in the face of remarkable and hidden things. This receptive attitude enables the apprehension of things beyond human understanding (v. 23b [Vulgate v. 25]), but only those things that God has chosen to reveal (v. 23a [Vulgate v. 24]). This is because the pursuit of the hidden with a purely human curiosity can lead to evil (v. 24 [Vulgate v. 26]). The passage seems to be about grace and the God-given capacity to raise the mind to the supernatural, while warning against seeking things outside of God's revelation for mystical answers that cannot lead to the divine. In the words of a New Testament author, "Do not be led astray by all kinds of strange teachings" (Heb 13:8–9; cf. Sir 3:26–28).

LXX Sirach 3:21–25	Vulgate Sirach 3:21–26
21 Things too troublesome for you do not seek / and things too strong for you do not examine 22 What is commanded you, these things understand / for you have no need of hidden things 23 With the remarkable things among your works do not be concerned / for more than the understanding of men has been shown to you 24 For their speculation misleads many / and wicked suspicion falls on their minds 25 -----	21 Because great is the power of God alone and he is honored by the humble 22 Things too high for you, do not examine / and things too strong for you, do not seek out / but those things which God commands you forever understand/ and do not be curious about his many works. 23 For it is not necessary for you to see with your eyes those things which are hidden 24 Unnecessary things, do not examine / and do not be curious about his many works 25 For many things beyond the sense of man have been shown to you 26 For their suspicion deceives many / and has detained their senses in emptiness
Syriac Sirach 3:21–25	Hebrew Sirach 3:21–25
21 Things too hard for you do not seek / and things too strong for you do not investigate 22 What is authorized for you understand / for you have no concern with hidden things 23 But with the rest of his deeds do not be vexed / because things greater than you have been shown to you 24 Because many are their human opinions / and evil forms which lead astray 25 He who does not have the eye's pupil lacks light / in what you are devoid of knowledge, you should not be promising instruction.	21 Things too wonderful for you do not seek / and that which is hidden from you do not search out 22 On what is authorized concentrate / for you have no concern with hidden things 23 About what is kept from you do not be bitter/ because things greater than you have been shown 24 Because many are the machinations of the sons of Adam / and evil imaginations which lead astray 25 Without a pupil, light is lacking / and without knowledge, wisdom is lacking

Summary

I have argued that the sciences of biblical criticism—ancient languages, philology, cultural studies, history, and archaeology—are relevant to and indeed necessary for theology as they stand. It is not primarily an altered methodology in these sciences that is needed as much as awareness in theology of the relevance of these methods' exegetical results. For the avoidance of prejudice, I deliberately chose examples in which not much is at stake doctrinally, but it should be clear from this discussion that taking on board the implications of scholarship's robust evaluation of biblical texts is even more important where the authenticity of Church teaching is in question.

The point I have tried to make is twofold: first, it matters for its interpretation how the biblical text came to be; secondly, the literal sense of a passage, and hence which are the best questions to address to it, is frequently not self-evident. If theology is to find its basis in God's revelation and its literal sense (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1), then to discern the literal sense we need the "technically trained experts" of biblical scholarship.³² Without this data to inform our reflection, theological arguments risk losing their persuasiveness and become detached from the reality in which the Bible is rooted. To conclude with the warning found only in the Syriac translation of the book of Sirach: "In what you are devoid of knowledge you should not be promising instruction" (3:25). N V

³² See Barron, "Biblical Interpretation and Theology," 189.