

Reality and Sign: Thomas Aquinas and the Christological Exegesis of Pope Benedict XVI

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IT IS common knowledge that modern biblical scholarship has arisen largely in opposition to the exegesis practiced by the Fathers and medieval schoolmen. Many modern interpreters find traditional interpretation to be fanciful or arbitrary, due to its supposed lack of grounding in the literal sense and in the historical context of the text. Attempting to bridge this gulf, Pope Benedict XVI¹ called for a renewal of exegesis, in which modern advancements would be employed in a complementary fashion alongside more traditional exegetical sensibilities. In the foreword to the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict argues for the importance of the historical-critical method inasmuch as “it is of the very essence of biblical faith to be about real historical events.”² However, he continues to say that this method is also limited by the fact that the words of Scripture are not simply historical but also should be “something present *today*.”³ Those generally practicing the historical-critical method do not recognize that the words of Scripture are more than simply human words, which are not confined to their original context. Given the divine origin of the words of Scripture, their interpretation must be open to

¹ Though now Pope-Emeritus, and formerly Joseph Ratzinger, I will be drawing primarily on works written during the Pontificate of Benedict XVI. For the sake of simplicity, I will consistently refer to him simply as Benedict.

² Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, *From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, trans. Adrian Walker (New York: Doubleday, 2007), xv. For more on the Pope’s *Jesus of Nazareth*, see the symposia published in *Nova et Vetera*’s English edition, 7, no. 1, pages 1–66 on the first volume and 10, no. 4, pages 985–1027 on the second volume.

³ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, xvi; italics original.

“self-transcendence.”⁴ Ultimately, Benedict calls for a “Christological hermeneutic, which sees Jesus Christ as the key to the whole and learns from him how to understand the whole Bible as a unity”; this Christological hermeneutic is one that “presupposes a prior act of faith.”⁵ Seeing Christ, the Word, as the key to reading the Word of God is the heart of the Church’s traditional methodology, which has been practiced throughout the centuries.

An important and unexpected ally emerges in Benedict’s project of showing this Christological hermeneutic in action. In a statement at the beginning of the second volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict clarifies his intention in writing his works on Jesus as follows: “Closer to my intention is the comparison with the theological treatise on the mysteries of the life of Jesus, presented in its classic form by Saint Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* (ST I–II, qq. 27–59). While my book has many points of contact with this treatise, it is nevertheless situated in a different historical and spiritual context, and in that sense it also has a different inner objective that determines the structure of the text in many ways.”⁶ Despite the differences, Benedict notes that it is still precisely Thomas who stands out as an example of one who approaches the mysteries of Christ’s life in a manner akin to his own work.

Although this may be surprising, upon further reflection it is clear that the two theologians hold much in common, including the importance of the Greek philosophical tradition and realist metaphysics for theology, a strong reliance on the Fathers of the Church, and a great devotion and attention to the Word of God. These connections produce in them similar attention to Scripture, centered on Christ who is the *Logos*, the fullness of truth manifest to reason and contained within the Word of God.⁷ One key reason for the similarity of approach is their common reliance on the exegetical principles of St. Augustine. In particular, Augustine’s *De doctrina christiana* lays out a crucial hermeneutical principle concerning signs (*signa*) and the thing or reality (*res*) they signify:

⁴ Ibid., xvii.

⁵ Ibid., xix.

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, *Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), xvi. See also his references to Aquinas on pages 65 and 192.

⁷ This emphasis on the *Logos* is so strong for Benedict that he made the prologue of John’s Gospel the *leitmotif* of his Apostolic Exhortation “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church,” *Verbum Domini* (Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 2010, §5).

As when I was writing about things, I introduced the subject with a warning against attending to anything but what they are in themselves, even though they are signs of something else, so now, when I come in its turn to discuss the subject of signs, I lay down this direction, not to attend to what they are in themselves, but to the fact that they are signs, that is, to what they signify. For a sign is a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind as a consequence of itself.⁸

The words of Scripture are signs that have historical grounding, but nevertheless should be seen in light of their ultimate purpose, which is to indicate a theological reality. Thus, Benedict declares that in writing *Jesus of Nazareth*, he is not trying to counter modern exegesis but to “go beyond purely historical-critical exegesis . . . to offer a properly theological interpretation of the Bible.”⁹ The theological foundation of exegesis consists in the fact that the particular written words that make up the revealed text mediate an encounter with the Word of God eternally begotten of the Father. It is this transcendent and Christological focus that gives Aquinas and Benedict their common approach, which is meant to enable the mind to participate in the reality expressed by the signs.

In this article, I will examine in more detail how both Aquinas and Benedict appropriate Augustine’s hermeneutical principles on the relation of signs to the reality they signify. After laying out the general Augustinian principles that unite their approaches, I will then look at how Aquinas’s position centers strongly on the theological reality of the text by primarily emphasizing God’s authorship. I will then look at how Benedict affirms this approach, while also complementing it with an insistence on greater attention to the historical details surrounding the

⁸ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (*De doctrina christiana*), trans. James Shaw in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 2. ed. Philip Schaff (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887), 2.1. For background on Augustine’s scriptural interpretation, see *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. and trans. Pamela Bright (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999); Thomas Finan, “St. Augustine on the ‘mira profunditas’ of Scripture: Texts and Contexts,” in *Scriptural Interpretation in the Fathers*, ed. Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey (Portland, OR: Four Courts Press, 1995), 163–99; Pamela Bright, “St. Augustine,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 39–59; Edward D. English, ed., *Reading and Wisdom: The De doctrina christiana of Augustine in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995). For a controversial reinterpretation of Augustine’s concept of signs, which argues that Augustine actually negates the efficacy of these signs, see Phillip Cary, *Outward Signs: The Powerlessness of External Things in Augustine’s Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁹ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, xxiii.

signs of the text. Finally, I will follow Benedict's suggestion that Thomas's treatment of the life of Jesus is a model of what Benedict is trying to accomplish in *Jesus of Nazareth*; I will do this by examining a scene from Christ's life, namely, the Baptism of the Jordan, in both of their works. Reflection on this theologically rich event will confirm the connections in their focus on the reality of the text, which is communicated by the Incarnate Word of God through the medium of signs.¹⁰

The Augustinian Methodological Foundation

In addition to the general affinity to Aquinas highlighted by Benedict in their common theological attention to the mysteries of the life of Christ, they also share key hermeneutical traits. Although a clear distinction emerges in that Benedict focuses much more on the historical context and tools available from the historical-critical method, the two different accounts are united by a common attention to the realities revealed by the sacred text. Despite different contexts and structures that Benedict mentioned—Aquinas's *Summa* is a theological text, whereas Benedict's is a theological-scriptural reflection on the life of Christ—they both overwhelmingly focus on the reality of Christ and the mystery and significance of his life.¹¹ Once again, in this approach they are following

¹⁰ For works on Aquinas's exegesis see *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating, and John P. Yocum (New York: T & T Clark, 2005); Wilhelmus G. B. M. Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Nijmegen: Peeters-Leuven, 2000); Peter M. Chandler, Jr., "St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 60–80; Christopher Baglow, "Rediscovering St. Thomas Aquinas as Biblical Theologian," *Letter and Spirit* 1 (2005): 137–46. On Benedict's exegesis, see *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. José Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sánchez-Navarro (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008); Scott W. Hahn, *Covenant and Community: The Biblical Theology of Pope Benedict XVI* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009); Bruce Marshall, "Reading the Gospels with Pope Benedict XVI: How the Pope Finds Jesus in the Bible," *First Things* 22 (Oct. 2011): 35–40. For an Evangelical account of biblical theology that also seeks to place Christ at the center, see Graeme Goldsworthy, *Christ-Centered Biblical Theology: Hermeneutical Foundations and Principles* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012). Goldsworthy states: "Biblical theology is Christological, for its subject matter is the whole Bible as God's testimony to Christ. It is therefore, from start to finish, a study of Christ. But, since Christ is the mediator who makes the Father known, biblical theology is also *theological* and solely Christological" (40).

¹¹ For a discussion of the centrality of Christ in relation to Augustine's methodology, including the role of sign and thing, see Michael Cameron, "The Christological

Augustine in his distinction between sign (*signum*) and thing (*res*).¹² The words of Scripture are not an end in themselves, but are meant to point beyond themselves to a reality that is sought for its own sake.

Henri de Lubac describes this distinction quite well in light of the sacramental nature of the Church: "Signs are not things to be stopped at, for they are, in themselves, valueless; by definition a sign is something translucent, which dissolves from before the face of what it manifests—like words, which would be nothing if they did not lead straight on to ideas."¹³ In relation to Scripture, this does not make its words irrelevant, but gives them a heightened relevancy in that they actually mediate something greater. De Lubac continues with this more positive understanding of signs: "Under this aspect [the sign] is not something intermediate but something mediatory; it does not isolate one from another, the terms it is meant to link. It does not put a distance between them; on the contrary it unites them by making present that which it evokes."¹⁴ While this Augustinian view of signs places the primary focus on the reality, which they mediate, it also insists on the signs as crucial and indispensable in this process.

Benedict and Aquinas share this sacramental understanding of Scripture, by which its words mediate the truth revealed by God. This is not to say that their interpretations are identical by any means. Benedict is more attentive to the full significance of the words of Scripture in their historical and linguistic import, though he shares with Aquinas a desire to ultimately illuminate the thing or reality that Scripture is revealing. Therefore, following Augustine, Scripture is meant to lead the soul into union with the reality of God, in an approach of love. To focus on the signs of Scripture above the reality it contains, which occurs in much of

Substructure of Augustine's Figurative Exegesis," in *Augustine and the Bible*, ed. and trans. Pamela Bright, 74–103.

¹² As Augustine states: "No one uses words except as signs of something else; and hence may be understood [by] what I call signs: those things, to wit, which are used to indicate something else . . . But we must carefully remember that what we have now to consider about things is what they are in themselves, not what other things they are signs of" (*De doctrina christiana*, 1.2). For a treatment of how Augustine uses his teaching on sign and reality in practice, while engaging in exegesis of the Old Testament, see Matthew Levering, "Scriptural and Sacramental Signs: Augustine's *Answer to Faustus*," *Letter & Spirit* 7 (2011): 91–118. Levering sees Augustine's *Answer to Faustus* as a further development of his teaching in *De doctrina christiana* (ibid., 91).

¹³ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, trans. Michael Mason (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 202.

¹⁴ Ibid.

modern interpretation, is to invert Augustine's priorities of use and enjoyment (*frui*). The fruit of Scripture, found in the Holy Trinity—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is to be enjoyed as the only true end of humanity, from which all other things take their bearing and find their purpose, including divinely revealed signs.¹⁵ Augustine summarizes how this distinction applies to Scripture:

Of all, then, that has been said since we entered upon the discussion about things, this is the sum: that we should clearly understand that the fulfillment and the end of the Law, and of all Holy Scripture, is the love of an object which is to be enjoyed, and the love of an object which can enjoy that other in fellowship with ourselves.¹⁶

The signs employed by Scripture are secondary, though essential, compared to the end for which they exist, which can be found only in communion with the realities indicated by the signs.

Benedict is very attentive to Augustine's distinction of *res* and *signum*, which can also be conceived of in relation to Paul's distinction between letter and spirit. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (*On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*), Benedict actually uses Aquinas, who in turn relies on Augustine, to comment on the importance of this distinction: "Saint Thomas Aquinas, citing Saint Augustine, insists that 'the letter, even that of the Gospel, would kill, were there not

¹⁵ Cf. Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 1.4; 1.5; 1.22.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.35. This distinction is so important for Augustine that he prioritizes love above exact accuracy in interpretation: "Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought. If, on the other hand, a man draws a meaning from them that may be used for the building up of love, even though he does not happen upon the precise meaning which the author whom he reads intended to express in that place, his error is not pernicious, and he is wholly clear from the charge of deception" (*ibid.*, 1.36). This does not mean that the interpretation can be arbitrary, but that when one prioritizes love, the end for which the signs were originally employed is being realized: "Whoever takes another meaning out of Scripture than the writer intended, goes astray, but not through any falsehood in Scripture. Nevertheless, as I was going to say, if his mistaken interpretation tends to build up love, which is the end of the commandment, he goes astray in much the same way as a man who by mistake quits the high road, but yet reaches through the fields the same place to which the road leads. He is to be corrected, however, and to be shown how much better it is not to quit the straight road, lest, if he get into a habit of going astray, he may sometimes take cross roads, or even go in the wrong direction altogether" (*ibid.*).

the inward grace of healing faith.’”¹⁷ The mere letter is not enough to lead to the proper encounter with what is being communicated in the text. An encounter with the reality underlying the sign is needed as well. This must be a spiritual encounter, an encounter with the living *Logos* or Word, who is manifested in the words of the text.

Benedict returns to this connection between the Word and words at several points in *Verbum Domini*. He fundamentally lays out that “Saint John’s proclamation that the Word became flesh reveals the inseparable bond between *God’s word* and the *human words* by which he communicates with us.”¹⁸ Though the words are necessary for the textual manifestation of the Word, they are still subordinate since they are signs. Benedict elucidates this distinction by using the Incarnation itself as a model, recalling

the analogy drawn by the Fathers of the Church between the word of God which became “flesh” and the word which became a “book.” . . . Saint Ambrose says that “the body of the Son is the Scripture which we have received,” and declares that “the words of God, expressed in human language, are in every way like human speech, just as the word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the weak flesh of human beings, became like them.”¹⁹

The words of Scripture reveal the Word sensibly in the world and act like another Incarnation of Christ, though in a more limited sense.²⁰ The reality of Scripture will always exceed the signs since “the word of God precedes and exceeds sacred Scripture.”²¹ Nonetheless, Christ provides the underlying unity and purpose of the Scripture. The whole of Scripture, “in the variety of its many forms and content,” can be seen “as a single reality” or a “‘single word,’” that of the Word.²²

This analogy to the Incarnation is not simply an intellectual distinction. Just as Augustine declared the importance of love as the hermeneutic of

¹⁷ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §29, quoting St. Thomas Aquinas, *ST* I–II, q. 106, a. 2.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §109.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, §18.

²⁰ De Lubac speaks in a very similar way: “The two forms to the Word, abridged and expanded, are inseparable. Thus, the Book remains, what at the same time it passes over in its entirety into Jesus” (*Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O’Neill [New York: The Crossroad Publishing, Co., 2000], 193).

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §17.

²² *Ibid.*, §18. The phrase “single word” is quoted from *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §102. Benedict draws on Augustine to reinforce this point, using a quotation from his *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 103, 4.1.

Scripture, so Benedict uses the incarnational dimension of Scripture to recognize in it a sacramental dimension. Christ not only manifests himself in the world through his body and the words of Scripture, but the two are united in their reception within the Church.²³ The reality of the Scripture, found in Christ, is a living reality, and can be understood only in light of “the living Tradition of the Church which makes us adequately understand sacred Scripture as the word of God.”²⁴ This “ecclesial hermeneutic” is required because, as St. Bernard relates, “Christianity is the ‘religion of the word of God,’ not of ‘a written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word.’”²⁵ The Word becoming flesh is a “lived experience,” not only as Christ enters history, but also as he continually enters the Church through the liturgy.²⁶ The liturgy gives the word its living context for in it “the faithful learn to savor the deep meaning of the word of God which unfolds . . . in the liturgy, revealing the fundamental mysteries of our faith. This is in turn the basis for a correct approach to sacred Scripture.”²⁷ Scriptural interpretation cannot be individual or simply an intellectual study, but must be based in a loving communion with Christ so that the revealed mysteries of Scripture may be properly received.²⁸

This previously mentioned analogy with the Incarnation, coupled with the need for a liturgical reception, culminates in relation to the Eucharist, which manifests “the sacramentality of the Word.”²⁹ Benedict elaborates

²³ Francis Martin points to the center of Benedict’s biblical hermeneutics in the following points: “(1) The subject of biblical interpretation is the Church, the Whole Christ; (2) Scripture is a privileged instrument of Divine Revelation, which means that it mediates supernatural knowledge to those who approach it with faith” (“Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, on Biblical Interpretation: Two Leading Principles,” *Nova et Vetera* 5, no. 2 [2007]: 285).

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, §17. Benedict emphasizes this so strongly that he states: “we can point to a fundamental criterion of biblical hermeneutics: *the primary setting for scriptural interpretation is the life of the Church*” (ibid., §29; italics in original).

²⁵ Ibid., §7, quoting St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Homilia super missus est*, 4.11.

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §11.

²⁷ Ibid., §52. Earlier in the same section, Benedict quoted from *Ordo Lectionum Missae*, §4: “Indeed, ‘the liturgical celebration becomes the continuing, complete and effective presentation of God’s word.’”

²⁸ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §29.

²⁹ Ibid., §56. Jeremy Driscoll speaks further of this reality: “Sacramentality emerges as a necessary dimension because God’s revelation is communication with human, embodied beings. It is *participation* and this cannot be realized except through sacramental economy. This claim can be made because liturgy is actualization of the Word in the very assembly where it is proclaimed” (Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B., “The Word of God in the Liturgy of the New Covenant,” *Letter and Spirit* 1 [2005]: 88; emphasis original).

on this point: “We come to see that at the heart of the sacramentality of the word of God is the mystery of the Incarnation itself: ‘the Word became flesh’ (Jn 1:14), the reality of the revealed mystery is offered to us in the ‘flesh’ of the Son. The Word of God can be perceived by faith through the ‘sign’ of human words and actions.”³⁰ The relation of the ‘signs’ of Scripture to their ultimate ‘reality’ in Christ operates in a pseudo sacramental fashion. These signs need to be accepted in faith so that we can receive their true meaning and respond to them by living in a loving relation with Christ. The words mediate the Word, who should be received in love.³¹

Benedict demonstrates the full import of the Augustinian distinction between the signs and their reality. Benedict himself points to Aquinas to introduce Augustine on this point in *Verbum Domini*. Augustine could have spoken for himself in the text, but the use of Aquinas points to the important role that this distinction plays in Aquinas’s theology as well. In treating sacred doctrine, God’s teaching which comes to us in Scripture, is received in faith, and more fully understood in theology, Aquinas makes clear the priority of God as the one true object, or reality, communicated, to which all the signs and symbols are subordinated:

But in sacred science, all things are treated of under the aspect of God: either because they are God Himself or because they refer to God as their beginning and end. Hence it follows that God is in very truth the object of this science. This is clear also from the principles of this science, namely, the articles of faith, for faith is about God. The object of the principles and of the whole science must be the same, since the whole science is contained virtually in its principles. Some, however, looking to what is treated of in this science, and not to the aspect under which it is treated, have asserted the object of this science to be something other than God—that is, either things and signs; or the works of salvation; or the whole Christ, as the head and members. Of all these things, in truth, we treat in this science, but so far as they have reference to God.³²

³⁰ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §56.

³¹ Benedict makes this clear in speaking of the role of prayer in exegesis: “Therefore a participation in the mind of Jesus—that is, in his prayer, which as we have seen is an act of love, of self-giving and self-appropriation to men—is not some kind of pious supplement to reading the gospels, adding nothing to the knowledge of him or even being an obstacle to the rigorous purity of critical knowing. On the contrary, it is the basic precondition of real understanding, in the sense of modern hermeneutics—that is, the entering-in to the same time and the same meaning—is to take place” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, “Seven Theses on Christology and the Hermeneutic of Faith,” *Letter and Spirit* 3 [2007]: 197).

³² ST I, q. 1, a. 7, c. Though the broadness of sacred doctrine can cause confusion, Aquinas makes the same claim to unity while specifying his reference to Scripture: “Therefore, because Sacred Scripture considers things precisely under the

God reveals himself through sacred doctrine, which includes Scripture, making himself known through sensible things, signs, and events. These secondary things exist in revelation to point toward the one who is primarily known through their mediation. This knowledge or science, including the discipline of theology but not contained by it, ultimately stands upon God's own knowledge of himself, which he is sharing with his creatures: "So it is that sacred doctrine is a science because it proceeds from principles established by the light of a higher science, namely, the science of God and the blessed."³³ Aquinas points toward the most highly exalted "reality" possible: the truth or reality of God's revelation and Scripture is God's own knowledge of himself. All of the manifold signs of the Bible mediate a participation in God's life.

The signs are necessary for two reasons. First, knowledge of God's essence exceeds the capacity of human knowledge, particularly on earth where no one can see God "face to face." Natural knowledge is not enough for supernatural beatitude. Rather, revelation is necessary, "because man is directed to God, as to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason."³⁴ Secondly, the very nature of human knowledge requires the use of sensory signs and images. Aquinas makes this clear when speaking of the existence of metaphors in the Bible:

It is befitting Holy Writ to put forward divine and spiritual truths by means of comparisons with material things. For God provides for everything according to the capacity of its nature. Now it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from sense.³⁵

Although the reality of Scripture exceeds the "capacity" of nature, God reveals his infinite truth through finite limited signs. The infiniteness of this truth requires that they be accepted in faith: "Although those things which are beyond man's knowledge may not be sought for by man through his reason, nevertheless, once they are revealed by God, they must be accepted by faith. Hence the sacred text continues, 'For many things are shown to thee above the understanding of man' (Sirach 3:25)."³⁶ The signs used by God to reveal himself come to us as an

formality of being divinely revealed, whatever has been divinely revealed possesses the one precise formality of the object of this science; and therefore is included under sacred doctrine as under one science" (*ST I*, q. 1, a. 3, c.).

³³ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 2, c.

³⁴ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 1, c.

³⁵ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 9, c.

³⁶ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1.

accommodation of his infinite truth; they point toward, and through faith participate in, the fullness of truth to come in the beatific vision.

Benedict pointed to the centrality of Christ as Word of God in *Verbum Domini*.³⁷ The theme of the “Word” is also, though more indirectly, crucial in scriptural interpretation for Aquinas. Our ability to appropriate the words of Scripture, which are a mediation of the Word of God, is based on the fact that our minds are themselves a participation in the Word. Aquinas makes this clear when speaking of the nature of the intellect, where Augustine is once again influential: “For the intellectual light itself which is in us, is nothing else than a participated likeness of the uncreated light.”³⁸ The created intellect participates in the divine light, which, when commenting on John’s Gospel, Aquinas makes clear is the Word of God:

The *light of men* can also be taken as a light in which we participate. For we would never be able to look upon the Word and light itself except through a participation in it; and this participation is in man and is the superior part of our soul, i.e., the intellectual light, about which the Psalm (4:7) says, “The light of your countenance, O Lord, is marked upon us,” i.e., of your Son, who is your face, by whom you are manifested.³⁹

Though humanity naturally participates in the Word, this participation of the intellect (or humanity’s own interior word) in the Word also reinforces the primacy of the Word in revelation and Scripture. We can express an exterior word because of the interior word formed in the intellect. This is also a participation in the Word, who comes to earth as an exterior expression of himself, which is seen also in the exterior written words of Scripture. Drawing these things together, also commenting on John’s Gospel, Aquinas states:

To understand the name *Word* we should note that according to the Philosopher [*On Interpretation* 16a3] vocal sounds are signs of the affections that exist in our soul. It is customary in Scripture for the things signified to be themselves called by the names of their signs, as in the statement, “And the rock was Christ” (1 Cor 10:4). It is fitting that

³⁷ The International Theological Commission affirms the primacy of the Word in theology: “A criterion of Catholic theology is recognition of the primacy of the Word of God. God speaks ‘in many and various ways’—in creation, through prophets and sages, through the holy Scriptures, and definitively through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh (cf. Heb 1:1–2)” (“Theology Today: Perspectives, Principles, and Criteria” [2012], §9).

³⁸ ST I, q. 84, a. 5, c. Here Aquinas is reflecting on Augustine, *Quaestiones* 83, q. 46.

³⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, trans. James A. Weisheipl, O.P. (Albany, NY: Magi Books Inc., 1980), vol. 1, no. 101.

what is within our soul, and which is signified by our external word, be called a “word.”⁴⁰

In Scripture, we find written words meant to express the Revelation of the Word of God and which are directed to humanity’s own interior word in reason (and which can also in turn be exteriorly expressed to others in preaching and teaching). In this multifaceted use of “word” we see the anthropological basis for a Christocentric exegesis. Christ is not only the center of Scripture’s meaning by his central role, but also permeates the very foundation of the communication and reception of the reality and meaning captured by and understood in the words as signs.

Drawing upon the distinction of Augustine between signs and the reality which the signs transmit, we can see how for Benedict and Aquinas the words of Scripture, when received in faith, are meant to direct toward the reality of God, inviting the soul into a loving relationship begun in this life and completed in the next.

The Primacy of Reality: The Multiple Literal Sense in Aquinas

With this understanding of *signum* and *res*, it will be easier to understand Aquinas’s approach to scriptural interpretation, which focuses on receptivity to the meaning intended by God. This meaning, following Augustine, is the reality which the author, through the medium of words, seeks to convey. The words of Scripture can have both literal and figurative or spiritual meaning, which is a meaning based on and derived from the literal. Aquinas’s rich understanding of the literal sense of Scripture and authorial intention focuses on the infinite power of divine authorship. Aquinas holds the position that the literal sense can have multiple meanings and that these meanings could or could not have been known explicitly by the human author.⁴¹ In this he followed a previously established position

⁴⁰ Ibid., no. 25.

⁴¹ Thomas explains this as follows: “Hence it is not inconceivable that Moses and the other authors of the Holy Books were given to know the various truths that men would discover in the text, and that they expressed them under one literary style, so that each truth is the sense intended by the author. And then even if commentators adapt certain truths to the sacred text that were not understood by the author, without doubt the Holy Spirit understood them, since he is the principal author of Holy Scripture. Consequently every truth that can be adapted to the sacred text without prejudice to the literal sense, is the sense of Holy Scripture” (*Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, q. 4, a. 1, resp., trans. English Dominican Fathers, vol. 2 [London: Burns, Oates, and Washbourne, 1932]). For an overview of the multiple literal sense in Aquinas, see Mark F. Johnson, “Another Look at the Plurality of the Literal Sense,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 2 (1992): 117–41; Stephen E. Fowl, “The Importance of Multivoiced

and one that would be maintained by significant theologians until the rise of the historical critical method.⁴² This approach, while not dismissing the important role of signs, emphasizes the priority of the transcendent reality of the text coming from the divine author. The exposition of Aquinas's position is significant in that it reveals the limitations placed on the literal sense in the modern context.

First, we must examine what Aquinas means by the literal and figurative senses. In his *Quodlibetal Questions*, he states: "In sacred Scripture, the truth is manifested in two ways. In one way inasmuch as things are signified through words: and in this consists the literal sense. In another way inasmuch as things are figures of other things: and in this consists the spiritual sense."⁴³ Hence, Aquinas holds that the literal sense is rooted in the sense communicated by the words of Scripture; the spiritual sense arises insofar as the words give figures that are meant to point to something other than themselves. John Boyle summarizes the two senses in Aquinas as follows: Thomas's "own understanding of human intelligence is that words as sounds are sounds of mental words—what we might call concepts and ideas—which themselves have some referent in reality. To know the literal sense is to know the reality intended by the author and signified by those words"; "the spiritual sense is concerned with what

Literar Sense of Scripture: The Example of Thomas Aquinas," in A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Francis Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 35–50. Johnson points out that many Thomistic commentators have rejected that he actually held the position of the multiple literal sense. Johnson, therefore, walks the reader through all of the major passages where Aquinas clearly lays out the position. Johnson affirms that "the texts state clearly a doctrine of plurality," and that "Thomas's teaching on what the literal sense of Scripture is remains constant throughout his teaching career" (118; 119).

⁴² See the *Catholic Encyclopedia* for a list of the many adherents to a multiple literal sense, Anthony Maas, "Biblical Exegesis," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909).

⁴³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, ed. Raymond Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1956), VII, q. 6, a. 1, resp. This is not to say that the words of Scripture do not literally make use of images or what Aquinas calls "imaginary similitudes" (ibid., a. 2, ad 1). It is very important to note that "within his understanding of the literal sense, Thomas includes metaphor. Indeed, any device used in Scripture, in so far as it is common to other literary texts, is a matter of the literal sense. So, for example, Thomas notes that Christ's sitting on the right hand of God is to be understood metaphorically, since God has no right hand, but the metaphorical meaning (the power of God) is the literal meaning as it is the thing, the reality, ultimately signified by the words" (John Boyle, "St. Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Scripture," *Pro Ecclesia* 4 [1995]: 95–96).

those things, signified by the words, in turn signify. . . . [A]ctual persons, events, and things in turn signify something else.”⁴⁴ The meaning from the thing or reality directly conveyed by the words is the literal sense, while another meaning derived from those things beyond the direct statement of the words is the figurative sense.

In examining the meaning of the words, Aquinas gives priority to the reality conveyed by God as the primary author of Scripture. Because God is an omnipotent author, Aquinas stresses the richness and depth of the meaning, which can be understood diversely, even in the literal sense. Thomas explains this in the *De potentia*: “It is part of the dignity of Holy Writ that under the one literal sense many others are contained. It is thus that the sacred text . . . adapts itself to man’s various intelligence, so that each one marvels to find his thoughts expressed in the words of Holy Writ.”⁴⁵ Boyle explains Aquinas’s position as follows: “Thomas has a fine sense of human authorship in the writing of Scripture; but he never loses sight of his theological first principles, one of which is that God is the author of Scripture.”⁴⁶ Though the two authorships are not opposed, Thomas’s exegesis prioritizes the principal authorship of God, which works through the human author as its instrument.

Drawing upon the efficacy of God’s authorship, Aquinas notes that the literal sense itself, based on the words of the text, can have multiple meanings. Sometimes a passage may be interpreted allegorically, which is part of the spiritual or figurative sense, when the words indicate a thing in the Old Testament, which then can be *extended* to include a reference to Christ. An example of this would be the paschal lamb.⁴⁷ This is because the words point to the lamb, as a thing, which then points to a thing beyond itself. If the words of the Old Testament themselves speak of Christ, such as in a direct prophecy, this would be part of the literal sense.⁴⁸ Thomas saw in the denial that the Old Testament speaks literally of

⁴⁴ Boyle, “St. Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Scripture,” 95; 97.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *De potentia*, q. 4, a. 1.

⁴⁶ John Boyle, “Authorial Intention and *Divisio textus*,” in *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, ed. Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 6.

⁴⁷ Boyle explains that “thus, for example, that lamb sacrifice at Passover signifies Christ. This is not to deny the truth and reality of the Passover lamb; indeed, it presupposes it. The word ‘lamb’ does not stand metaphorically for Christ; the actual lamb of the Passover (signified by the word) is the sign of Christ” (Boyle, “St. Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Scripture,” 97–98).

⁴⁸ Once again, see the *Catholic Encyclopedia* for examples, Maas, “Biblical Interpretation.”

Christ, at least in relation to certain passages, the heretical position of Theodore of Mopsuestia.⁴⁹ Theodore's condemnation is evidence that the spiritual sense is not sufficient for an interpretation of Christ in the Old Testament (a position that Benedict affirms as well).⁵⁰

While the allegorical sense, referring to Christ, may be the literal sense in certain passages of the Old Testament, Aquinas also explains further the basis for the related position of a multiple literal sense in the *Quodlibetal Questions*, where he states:

It must be said that the principal author of Sacred Scripture is the Holy Spirit, who in one word of Sacred Scripture knows many more things than are interpreted or discerned by interpreters of Sacred Scripture. Neither also is it unfitting that man, who is the instrumental author of Sacred Scripture, would understand many things in one word: because the prophets, as Jerome comments on Hosea, thus spoke about present deeds, even though they intended to signify future things. From this, it

⁴⁹ In his commentary on Matthew's Gospel, he states: "Another error was that of Theodore [of Mopsuestia] who said that nothing in the Old Testament is said literally of Christ" (*Super Evangelium s. Matthaei lectura*, c. 1, lect. 5, ed. R. Cai [Turin: Marietti, 1951], 21, quoted in Boyle, "St. Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Scripture," 98n20). Aquinas offers Christ's statement in Luke about the Scriptures referring to himself (24:27) as the authority for his position and gives two examples of Old Testament passages, which literally point toward Christ: Isaiah 7:14 and Psalm 21:10. He comments: "If someone should posit some other literal sense, he would be a heretic, for that heresy [of Theodore] has been condemned" (ibid.). The Second Council of Constantinople says of Theodore: "For the prophecies concerning Christ he rejected and hastened to destroy, so far as he had the power, the great mystery of the dispensation for our salvation; attempting in many ways to show the divine words to be nothing but fables" ("Second Council of Constantinople" in NPNF vol. 14, Sentence of the Synod). Although it is true that Theodore largely rejected literal prophecy of Christ in the Old Testament, Harry Pappas points out there are a few exceptions. See Harry S. Pappas, "Theodore of Mopsuestia's Commentary on Psalm 44 (LXX): A Study of Exegesis and Christology," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 47 (2002): 56–57. Despite exceptions, Theodore still stands as an example of a rejection of what Aquinas understands to be the true nature of the literal sense in relation to Christ in the Old Testament.

⁵⁰ Benedict affirms the importance of literal reference to Christ in the Old Testament as follows: "The Old Testament contains some passages that are still 'stray.' Marius Reiser cites Is 53, as an example. . . . The same applies, as we shall see, to Is 7:14. This is another of the passages that, at the time of writing, were still waiting for the figure to whom they refer. One of the characteristics of early Christian narrative is that it provides these 'waiting words' with their 'owner'" (Joseph Ratzinger [Pope Benedict XVI], *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 3, *The Infancy Narratives*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore [New York: Image Books, 2012], 17).

is not impossible to understand many things at once, inasmuch as one thing is the figure of many things.⁵¹

Thomas makes two things clear here. God can intend more than one thing by the words of Scripture. It is also true that human authors can do so, in an ordinary sense, but also in a prophetic one (knowing the multiple meanings that God intends). This is important in demonstrating that the multiple literal sense, though based on God's primary authorship, can also extend to the human author.⁵² Secondly, the divine authorship of Scripture places the text of Scripture beyond the complete grasp of the reader. It will always contain a sense of mystery that places it beyond an exhaustive interpretation, which would subordinate it too much to the human mind.

Boyle further explains the reasoning behind Thomas's articulation of the need for a fuller understanding of the literal sense.

For Thomas, the purpose of Scripture is to make known those truths necessary for salvation. Scripture is ordered to an end. The divine intention is to bring the rational creature into union with Himself, but as always in ways that are accommodated to the reality of that creature. Are not the manifold meanings of that letter in fact fitting given the divine intention of Scripture as communicating the truth requisite for eternal beatitude with God.⁵³

⁵¹ Aquinas, *Quaestiones quodlibetales*, VII, q. 6, a. 1, ad 5.

⁵² The multiple literal sense does not have to extend to the human author, but it may do so. Mark Johnson emphasizes the unity of the two authors, much more than Boyle does. Johnson states: "Granted the possibility of deficiency of the human author's knowledge, it can still happen that the Holy Spirit should so inspire the human author that the human author would know the many true things that are contained virtually in his words, and thus intend to pass on any of those truths by the word or words he employed. And while it may or may not be the case that the human author understands the total virtuality of his words, it is clear that the Holy Spirit first understood the total virtuality that the words contain, and to that extent the Spirit wills all truthful predication by expositions of sacred Scripture that fits the words used" ("Another Look at the Plurality of the Literal Sense," 130). While Johnson concedes that the Spirit alone may know the fullness even of the literal sense, he makes clear that the role of the human author is an important distinction between the literal and spiritual sense: "The medium of words makes the literal sense different from the spiritual senses, since in the spiritual senses the medium of meaning is through the things signified by the words of Scripture and is intended by the Holy Spirit alone, whereas in the literal sense the medium of meaning is the words alone, intended both by the human author and the Holy Spirit" (*ibid.*, 119).

⁵³ Boyle, "Authorial Intention," 6.

Scripture acts in a sacramental fashion; its signs are intended to lead the reader into union with the realities described. Thus, the meaning that God intends to convey is fittingly communicated through the medium of words and images due to the fact that human nature comprises a body-soul unity. Aquinas explains that “God provides for everything according to the capacity of its nature. Now it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from sense. Hence in Holy Writ, spiritual truths are fittingly taught under the likeness of material things.”⁵⁴ Thus, Aquinas reinforces Augustine’s understanding of the purpose of the signs of Scripture; they are to point beyond themselves and initiate union with the reality signified.

One could respond to Aquinas’s position on literal sense with Augustine’s warning against the person who “takes up rashly a meaning which the author whom he is reading did not intend, [who] often falls in with other statements which he cannot harmonize with this meaning.”⁵⁵ How does Aquinas differentiate what is and is not in accord with the meaning as intended by the divine author? Boyle lays out two “negative principles” that Aquinas employs in the *De potentia* to govern interpretation: “First, one ought not to assert something false to be found in Scripture, especially what would contradict the faith; and second, one ought not to insist upon one’s own interpretation to the exclusion of other interpretations which in their content are true and in which what Thomas calls ‘the circumstance of the letter’ are preserved.”⁵⁶ In his principles for interpretation, Aquinas prioritizes Scripture’s purpose in conveying the truth necessary for salvation and the humility with which Scripture must be approached. One must have a position of receptivity to what the Scriptures are communicating about the reality of God, rather than trying to insist on one’s own interpretation of

⁵⁴ *ST I*, q. 1, a. 9, c.

⁵⁵ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.37. In a statement very apropos for today, Augustine even warns of the danger that can threaten one’s faith when the authority of Scripture is called into question by seeming contradictions and ambiguities: “Now faith will totter if the authority of Scripture begins to shake. And then, if faith totters, love itself will grow cold. For if a man has fallen from faith, he must necessarily also fall from love; for he cannot love what he does not believe to exist. But if he both believes and loves, then through good works, and through diligent attention to the precepts of morality, he comes to hope also that he shall attain the object of his love. And so these are the three things to which all knowledge and all prophecy are subservient: faith, hope, love” (ibid.).

⁵⁶ Boyle, “Authorial Intention,” 4, quoting *De potentia*, q. 4, a. 1. It is important to note Aquinas’s articulation of the literal sense as the foundation for all interpretation. Cf. *ST I*, q. 1, a. 10.

particulars, which can never fully be ascertained.⁵⁷ Signs are important, but they must be subordinated to the reality (or thing in itself), and this reality transcends the confines of any sign.⁵⁸

The continuing relevance of Aquinas's position ultimately comes down to his focus on the power of God's divine authorship, the source and object of the reality that the words convey.⁵⁹ A strong affirmation of God's authorship is necessary to ensure that the primacy of Scripture's meaning is ultimately rooted in the transcendent Word of God. Aquinas's position further indicates that the literal sense should not be confined simply to the human author's intention, which would need to be ascertained historically. Rather, he affirms the primacy of God's authorship, which includes the human author's intentions but can also exceed them. From this perspective, sometimes what today would be called the spiritual sense may actually be part of the literal sense. The spiritual sense that is derived from the literal would rely more on the ability of the reader to draw out connections and applications from the literal sense, but this spiritual interpretation, though significant, would not have the same theological weight for Aquinas.⁶⁰ Indeed, he makes clear that theological argument must be based on the literal sense: "Thus in Holy Writ no

⁵⁷ Cf. Boyle, "Authorial Intention," 4–5, especially his note on the difficulty of ascertaining the human author's intention.

⁵⁸ Cf. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.6.

⁵⁹ It is important to note that the Pontifical Biblical Commission, under the presidency of Joseph Ratzinger, affirmed the importance of the multiple literal sense: Does a text have only one literal sense? In general, yes; but there is no question here of a hard and fast rule, and this for two reasons. First, a human author can intend to refer at one and the same time to more than one level of reality. This is in fact normally the case with regard to poetry. Biblical inspiration does not reject this capacity of human psychology and language; the fourth Gospel offers numerous examples of it. Second, even when a human utterance appears to have only one meaning, divine inspiration can guide the expression in such way as to create more than one meaning. This is the case with the saying of Caiaphas in John 11:50: "At one and the same time it expresses both an immoral political ploy and a divine revelation. The two aspects belong, both of them, to the literal sense, for they are both made clear by the context. Although this example may be extreme, it remains significant, providing a warning against adopting too narrow a conception of the inspired text's literal sense" ("The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church" [March 18, 1984], II, 2, B). For commentary on the document, see Paul M. Blowers, Jon D. Levenson, and Robert L. Wilken, "Interpreting the Bible: Three Views," *First Things: A Monthly Journal of Religion & Public Life* 45 (Aug/Sep 1994): 40–46.

⁶⁰ Pope Pius XII asserts, in reference to the spiritual sense, that "it should, however, never be forgotten that this use of the Sacred Scripture is, as it were, extrinsic to it and accidental" (*Divino Afflante Spiritu* [1943], §27).

confusion results, for all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended in allegory, as Augustine says (Epis. 48). Nevertheless, nothing of Holy Scripture perishes on account of this, since nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward by the Scripture in its literal sense.”⁶¹ It is precisely this focus on the primacy of the literal sense that makes Aquinas important for contemporary scholarship, which focuses almost exclusively upon it. Aquinas can also serve as a corrective to modern exegesis through his insistence that the literal sense is the means by which God communicates his theological teaching. These points enable Benedict to appropriate Aquinas’s teaching on Scripture within his own thought.

The Necessity of Signs: The Unity of Old and New Approaches in Benedict

Benedict strongly validates traditional interpretation as important in reaching the meaning of the text. This theological approach is not enough, however, unless it also recognizes the complexity of the signs and their historical rootedness. This drawing together of the old and the new gives more assurance to the modern exegete of not venturing too far astray from the “circumstances of the text,” which even Aquinas held to be important. This drawing together of old and new, which is a hallmark of Benedict’s methodology, is also profoundly Christological. The Word of God is not simply a transcendent reality, but one that has become flesh, or, in terms of Scripture, is expressed in historical, human words. This emphasis leads Benedict to a twofold approach that is at once old and new, and that uses both methods to understand the meaning of the Word. In his third volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, which he describes as a “small ‘antechamber’ to the two earlier volumes,” he clearly lays out this vision:

⁶¹ *STI*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1. Johnson, “Another Look at the Plurality of the Literal Sense,” raises the question that “a doctrine of plurality [in the literal sense] would seem to call into question the dependability of theology’s argumentative basis in the literal sense of Scripture” (120). Rather than doing so, however, the reflections on the multiple literal sense in his Parisian *Commentary on the Sentences* and in the *De potentia* are actually occasioned by a discussion of how both Augustine’s and the Greek Fathers’ accounts of Creation, though they are seemingly contradictory, can validly interpret the literal sense of Scripture since they legitimately and diversely hit on various aspects of the meaning of the text. Therefore, the multiple literal sense “becomes an instrument used to explain that a legitimate diversity in theological understanding could well be the intention of the Holy Spirit and even of the Spirit’s instrument, the human author of Scripture” (ibid., 141).

I am convinced that good exegesis involves two stages. Firstly one has to ask what the respective authors intended to convey through their text in their own day—the historical component of exegesis. But is not sufficient to leave the text in the past and thus relegate it to history. The second question posed by good exegesis must be: is what I read here true? . . . With a text like the Bible, whose ultimate and fundamental author, according to our faith, is God himself, the question regarding the here and now of things past is undeniably included in the task of exegesis. The seriousness of the historical quest is in no way diminished by this: on the contrary, it is enhanced.⁶²

This twofold vision seeks to create a “conversation, drawing in the past, the present and the future” regarding the meaning of the text.⁶³

In bringing together of old and new, Benedict clarifies the importance of traditional methodology in this conversation. He does so in *Verbum Domini* by quoting Aquinas’s own position on the foundational role of the literal sense: “Saint Thomas Aquinas . . . states that ‘all the senses of sacred Scripture are based on the literal sense.’”⁶⁴ Benedict wants to ensure that patristic and medieval interpretations are not seen as undercutting the literal sense, but also that the literal sense is not locked into modern conceptions of the term. The literal sense itself needs to be focused on the meaning of the text. Quoting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Benedict outlines this focus on meaning in the tradition: “While obviously lacking the philological and historical resources at the disposal of modern exegesis, the patristic and mediaeval tradition could recognize the different senses of Scripture, beginning with the literal sense, namely, ‘the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation.’”⁶⁵ Benedict clarifies the traditional exegetical position further, first of all, by affirming that the traditional method sought the proper intention of the text: “In a word, while acknowledging the validity and necessity, as well as the limits, of the historical-critical method, we learn from the Fathers that exegesis ‘is truly faithful to the proper intention of biblical texts when it goes not only to the heart of their formulation to find the reality of faith there expressed, but also seeks to link this reality to the experience of faith in our present world.’”⁶⁶ Tradi-

⁶² Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 3, xi.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, xii.

⁶⁴ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §37, quoting ST I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, quoting CCC §116.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, quoting Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (15 April 1993), II, A, 2. For more on Benedict in relation to the Fathers, see William M. Wright IV, “Patristic Biblical Hermeneutics in Joseph Ratzinger’s *Jesus of Nazareth*,” *Letter & Spirit* 7 (2011): 191–207.

tional methodology approaches the text in faith to gain access to the revelatory meaning intended by God.

The meaning of Scripture is approached properly with the disposition of faith, because it is only in faith that one comes into contact with the reality of the text in communion with God. Benedict defines more precisely the meaning of the spiritual sense in light of this approach:

The Pontifical Biblical Commission's definition of the spiritual sense, as understood by Christian faith, remains fully valid: it is "the meaning expressed by biblical texts when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it. This context truly exists. In it the New Testament recognizes the fulfillment of the Scriptures. It is therefore quite acceptable to re-read the Scriptures in light of this new context, which is that of life in the Spirit."⁶⁷

The meaning of the text cannot be confined solely to the literal, though it must presuppose it. The Christian is able to read more deeply with divine assistance. Ultimately, the two meanings, literal and spiritual, cannot be separated, because of "the unity and interrelation between the *literal sense* and the *spiritual sense*."⁶⁸ This unity was so strong that "in patristic and medieval times every form of exegesis, including the literal form, was carried out on the basis of faith, without there necessarily being any distinction between the *literal sense* and the *spiritual sense*."⁶⁹ Scripture is the Word of God and its dynamism cannot be reduced to or contained in exegesis. Benedict, therefore, strongly asserts the need for the unity of this multifaceted approach. If one simply stops at the literal, the letter, than one will not truly grasp the meaning of the text:

In rediscovering the interplay between the different senses of Scripture it thus becomes essential to grasp the *passage from letter to spirit*. This is not an automatic, spontaneous passage; rather, the letter needs to be transcended: "the word of God can never simply be equated with the letter of the text. To attain to it involves a progression and a process of understanding guided by the inner movement of the whole corpus, and hence it also has to become a vital process."⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §37, quoting Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (15 April 1993), II, B, 2.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*; emphasis original.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, §38, quoting Benedict XVI, *Address to Representatives of the World of Culture at the "Collège des Bernardins" in Paris* (12 September 2008).

In transcending the letter, Benedict states that “the goal to which we are necessarily progressing is the one Word,” whose Spirit gives life to one’s reading and interpretation.⁷¹ As an example of this liberation, Benedict points toward Augustine. For him, “transcending the literal sense made the letter itself credible, and enabled him to find at last the answer to his deep inner restlessness and his thirst for truth.”⁷² Augustine not only points to the need to transcend the signs and come to the reality, but his life provides an example of the power of this progression toward the Word.

The unity of Scripture in Christ can be seen especially in typology. Benedict notes that for the Christian, the Bible is the “one book of Christ,” because “the person of Christ gives unity to all the ‘Scriptures’ in relation to the one ‘Word.’”⁷³ While this “*Christological interpretation*” is absolutely essential to a proper reading of Scripture, Benedict also wants to make sure that this does not destroy the historical context of the Old Testament. Both the original context and the typological can be held in balance as the proper meaning. Benedict states that “while the typological interpretation manifests the inexhaustible content of the Old Testament from the standpoint of the New, we must not forget that the Old Testament retains its own inherent value as revelation.”⁷⁴ Typology can be seen as central to the meaning of the text without having to excuse the historical foundation. Diverse meaning can be held together in the unity of the Word, who unites all the words into a coherent whole that teaches the truth of God.

Drawing together diversity into a unity is important also for engaging and incorporating the modern approach. Benedict wants this more traditional method to be used in conjunction with the fruits of modern exegetical methods. The basis for this unity is Christ, the foundation of the hermeneutic of faith, “which does not violate the historical record but reveals its truth and is open to every genuine truth. The unity of the person of Jesus, embracing man and God, prefigures that synthesis of man and world to which theology is meant to minister.”⁷⁵ The theological unity of exegesis, drawing the new and the old, follows from the same Augustinian foundation seen above. Christ as the Word draws all truth together in himself.

The focus on the Word is not simply timeless, but must entail attention to history, because the Word has become Incarnate. This reveals a limit to

⁷¹ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §38.

⁷² *Ibid.*, §38.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, §39.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, §41.

⁷⁵ Ratzinger, “Seven Theses on Christology and the Hermeneutic of Faith,” 209.

the traditional method of Scripture, which may emphasize the theological reality at the expense of the historical instantiation in which it is revealed. The historical dimension of Scripture is essential and impacts the faith itself. Benedict makes this clear by stating that “the idea that faith, as such, knows nothing about historical facts and must be given over to historians is gnostic because it eviscerates the faith and turns it into a mere idea. For biblical faith, however, the realism of biblical events is essential and constitutive. A God who cannot intervene and show himself in history is not the God of the Bible.”⁷⁶ Along with completely affirming the enduring importance of traditional exegesis, this emphasis on the historical rounds out exegetical method, enabling theology to be more incarnate in history.

Benedict’s articulation of the need for this unity of the old and new is seen most clearly in his Erasmus Lecture, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: On the Foundations and the Itinerary for Exegesis Today.”⁷⁷ When it comes time to offer his “Basic Elements of a New Synthesis,” Aquinas is referenced in three places and receives significant attention. Benedict indicates that his philosophical realism, teleological understanding, and his focus on the sense of Scripture provide a “counter model,” to the worldview behind methodologies focused primarily on signs that cannot point to anything beyond themselves (especially on the metaphysical level).⁷⁸ Benedict does not simply advocate returning to more traditional methods of biblical interpretation, but that the traditional attention to the unity of Scripture in the “central event of Christ,” must be paired with a restoration of texts “to their historical locus and interpreted in their historical context.”⁷⁹ Though he notes that the absence of this historical grounding can lead to “caprice,” he also notes that a “methodological arbitrariness” enters in if the meaning of the text is left behind.⁸⁰ The meaning of the biblical text is being lost today in the overemphasis on the historical, which is why he notes that turning back to Aquinas can be helpful. He states:

To discover how each given historical word intrinsically transcends itself, and thus to recognize the intrinsic rightness of the rereading by

⁷⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, “100 Years: The Magisterium and Exegesis,” *Theology Digest* 51, no. 1 (2004): 3–8.

⁷⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, “Biblical Interpretation in Conflict: On the Foundations and the Itinerary for Exegesis Today,” in *Opening Up the Scriptures: Joseph Ratzinger and the Foundations of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. José Granados, Carlos Granados, and Luis Sánchez-Navarro (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008).

⁷⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 24.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 26.

which the Bible progressively interweaves event and sense, is one of the tasks of objective interpretation. It is a task for which suitable methods can and must be found. In this sense, the exegetical maxim of Thomas Aquinas is very much to the point: "The task of the good interpreter is not to consider words, but sense."⁸¹

While noting, of course, the need to take into account modern methods as a complement, Benedict clearly aligns himself with the goal of Thomas's exegesis, which is centered on understanding the things conveyed by God in Scripture by the use of signs.

The use of St. Thomas by Benedict can be seen within *Verbum Domini*. Benedict explicitly refers to and quotes the Fathers roughly thirty times and the scholastics ten times, three of which are to Aquinas. In pursuing what Pope John Paul II calls a "more comprehensive exegesis,"⁸² Benedict in particular points toward the need for an appreciation for the harmony of faith and reason and nature and grace.⁸³ Christ as the Word is the basis for this unity, because "we can contemplate the profound unity in Christ between creation, the new creation and salvation history."⁸⁴ The knowledge of creation, as could be seen as emphasized in modern methodologies, should not be seen in opposition of the realities at the heart of the Word of God. Both should be seen within the context of realism, which for Benedict is found "recogniz[ing] in the word of God the foundation of all things."⁸⁵ Aquinas is helpful in this regard and is referred to in relation to the natural law, which Benedict sees are reinforced by Scripture and also fulfilled most profoundly in the new law of Christ.⁸⁶ The realism

⁸¹ Ibid., quoting Aquinas, *In Matthaeum* XXVII, n. 2321, ed. R. Cai, 358.

⁸² Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* §36, quoting Pope John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (14 September 1998), §55.

⁸³ Benedict states on this point: "In applying methods of historical analysis, no criteria should be adopted which would rule out in advance God's self-disclosure in human history. The unity of the two levels at work in the interpretation of sacred Scripture presupposes, in a word, *the harmony of faith and reason*. . . . In any case, the religion of the incarnate Logos can hardly fail to appear profoundly reasonable to anyone who sincerely seeks the truth and the ultimate meaning of his or her own life and history" (*Verbum Domini* §36; italics original).

⁸⁴ Ibid., §13.

⁸⁵ Ibid., §10. The foundation of understanding creation through the Word is reinforced by a reference to St. Bonaventure: "The tradition of Christian thought has developed this key element of symphony with the word, as when, for example, Saint Bonaventure, who in the great tradition of the Greek Fathers sees all the possibilities of creation present in the Logos, states that 'every creature is a word of God, since it proclaims God'" (ibid., §8, quoting St. Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, II, 12).

⁸⁶ Ibid., §9.

of Aquinas and the relation of nature and grace found in his thought reinforce Benedict's comprehensive exegesis.

In drawing together the old and the new approaches of exegesis in the comprehensive and ecclesial approach it is important to avoid "the serious risk nowadays of a dualistic approach to sacred Scripture."⁸⁷ Such dualism would completely undermine the unity of the natural and supernatural in the Word that comes together in Scripture. Rather than accepting a dichotomy between modern exegesis and the theological dimensions of the text, Benedict thinks they can "exist only in reciprocity."⁸⁸ While Benedict criticizes those who assert that the Bible is "a text belonging only to the past" and who impose on it "a positivistic and secularized hermeneutic," he also criticizes a theology that overspiritualizes the text and thus "would fail to respect the historical character of revelation."⁸⁹ Benedict, thus, coherently defends an exegesis which is not simply based on the eternal and transcendent Word of God but which understands that the Word has taken flesh and is the truth of the world. This holds together the spiritual and the historical in a bond of unity.

Benedict and Aquinas on Christ's Baptism

In this last section, I will now explore more concretely the connections between Benedict's *Jesus of Nazareth* and Aquinas's treatment of the life of Christ in the *Summa*, using one particular example: Christ's Baptism in the Jordan. Benedict treats the Baptism of Jesus in the first chapter of the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, and Aquinas treats the Baptism in questions 38 and 39 of the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*. The structures of the treatises are very distinct, as would be expected, but the treatises hit on many of the same themes. Aquinas's structure is very easy to determine using the fourteen articles into which the two questions are divided: The first six articles focus on the baptism of John (the Baptist), which, as a necessary precursor to Christ's Baptism, was meant to prepare for it by teaching, introducing the rite, and initiating penance. This baptism did not convey grace, but served as a temporary sign pointing toward the reality to come. The next eight articles of the *Summa theologiae* address Christ's Baptism at the hands of John, focusing on the fittingness of Christ's baptism and the particulars through which it occurred. Benedict, on the other hand, begins by linking the baptism of Christ to the genealogies presented by Matthew and Luke. Luke in particular, he says, sees the genealogy and other historical indicators in connection with

⁸⁷ Ibid., §35.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

the Baptism and uses it to provide backdrop to Jesus's mission.⁹⁰ This immediately gives the treatment more historical grounding. Benedict also treats the baptism of John and its significance, and then turns to the soteriological importance of Jesus' Baptism; like Aquinas, he treats the surrounding particulars of the event, such as the Father's voice and the dove descending.

It is important to emphasize that neither Aquinas nor Benedict intends, in these two works, to write a strict biblical commentary. The *Summa* is a work of systematic theology, whereas Benedict's work is a theological reflection on the life of Christ using the Gospels as his framework. The section on the life of Christ in the *Summa* is similar to *Jesus of Nazareth* inasmuch as they both seek to elucidate the theological significance of Christ's life by reflecting on central mysteries that point to the *res* of his identity. For both Benedict and Aquinas, the key realities revealed in the Baptism of Christ are the introduction of baptism itself, the manifestation of salvation, and the revelation of the Holy Trinity.

The first reality revealed in the baptism of Christ is the nature of baptism itself. To illustrate this truth, let us turn to the baptism of John, which is linked to the introduction of baptism. Both Benedict and Aquinas see that John's baptism serves as an essential forerunner to Christian baptism inasmuch as it introduces the sacramental sign, that is, the matter of baptism, and also introduces the interior disposition needed for its reception. In the same passage in which Aquinas identifies the purpose of John's baptism, he also clearly distinguishes it from Christian baptism: "The baptism of John did not confer grace, but only prepared the way for grace; and this in three ways: first, by John's teaching, which led men to faith in Christ; secondly, by accustoming men to the rite of Christ's baptism; thirdly, by penance, preparing men to receive the effect of Christ's baptism."⁹¹ According to Aquinas, John's mission consisted of pointing the way to Christ, introducing the method of baptism, and bringing about the proper penitential disposition in the recipient. Benedict too affirms these three points. In regard to teaching, Benedict states that John's baptism "is connected with an ardent call to a new way of thinking and acting, but above all with the proclamation of God's judgment and with the announcement that one greater than John is to come."⁹² Hence, as Aquinas also asserted, John's teaching is ordered toward belief in Christ. Secondly, Benedict affirms that John introduced

⁹⁰ Cf. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 10.

⁹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 38, a. 3, c.

⁹² Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 14.

a new kind of rite, which Benedict even describes as “something completely new,” insofar as “the Baptism that he [John] enjoined is different from the usual religious ablutions. . . . [I]t is meant to be the concrete enactment of a conversion that gives the whole of life a new direction forever.”⁹³ Thus, as Benedict explains, John’s baptism was not a simple ceremonial washing but a forerunner to true baptism inasmuch as it was meant to mark an abiding conversion. Finally, John’s baptism is focused on penance, which fact reinforces the second point relating to conversion: “John’s baptism includes the confession of sins. . . . The goal is truly to leave behind the sinful life one has led until now and to start out on the path to a new, changed life.”⁹⁴ Both Benedict and Aquinas agree that the baptism of John was intended essentially to prepare for Christ by word, action, and interior effect. Although Thomas focuses more on the transitory nature of the action and Benedict on the fittingness of water (which Aquinas saves for his treatment of baptism as a sacrament), together they see the theological significance of John and his baptism in relation to Christ.

The second reality revealed in the Baptism of Christ to which Benedict and Aquinas point is the manifestation of salvation. Aquinas and Benedict both begin the discussion of Christ’s Baptism by asking whether it is fitting for Christ to be baptized, or, as Benedict puts it, “Is that something he could do?”⁹⁵ This question highlights the drama of the moment—Christ undertook something that was not necessary for him but that symbolized his mission to take on the burden of sin by plunging the old man into the waters of death to raise him up in a new life. Both Benedict and Aquinas call upon the Fathers to attest to this reality. For example, the responses to Aquinas’s first two articles of the question on Christ’s Baptism consist almost completely of quotations from the Fathers. One pertinent example is from Gregory Nazianzen: “‘Christ was baptized that he might plunge the old Adam entirely in the water.’”⁹⁶ Benedict likewise quotes John Chrysostom: “‘Going down into the water and emerging again are the image of descent into hell and the Resurrection.’”⁹⁷ After considering the Fathers, Benedict specifically asks: has “this ecclesiastical interpretation of Jesus’ Baptism taken us too far away from the Bible?”⁹⁸ Rather than backing down from this ecclesiastical interpretation, Benedict reinforces it with a liturgical and

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 15.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 16.

⁹⁶ ST I–II, q. 39, a. 1, c, quoting Gregory Nazianzen, *Orations*, 39.

⁹⁷ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 19, quoting John Chrysostom; citation not given.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 20.

scriptural reflection on the significance of Christ as the Lamb of God; Benedict's interpretation is supported in turn by Aquinas in his commentary on John's Gospel.⁹⁹ Although Aquinas gives more reasons than does Benedict for Christ's baptism and Benedict dwells longer upon the soteriological import than does Aquinas, nevertheless they share a common vision of Christ's Baptism, as elucidated by the Fathers, represents the destruction of sin and the restoration of life, symbolized by water in both cases.

The third reality revealed in the Baptism of Christ to which Benedict and Aquinas point is the emergence of the Trinity within the biblical scene. Both Benedict and Aquinas turn to the events surrounding the Baptism to establish its Trinitarian context: the heavens are torn open, a voice speaks, and a dove descends. Benedict expounds on these events:

I would like to point out that in this scene, together with the Son, we encounter the Father and the Holy Spirit. The mystery of the Trinitarian God is beginning to emerge, even though its depths can be fully revealed only when Jesus' journey is complete. For this very reason, though, there is an arc joining this beginning of Jesus' journey and the words with which he sends his disciples into the world after his Resurrection: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19).¹⁰⁰

Though we do not have a clear explanation in the scriptural text, the reality of the Trinity is manifested in the passage and further elucidated as the scriptural narrative unfolds. Benedict introduces this point on the Trinity by first speaking of the Father's voice, which is also the occasion Aquinas uses for discussing the Trinity in relation to the baptism. Turning again to the Fathers, Aquinas quotes St. Jerome's commentary on Matthew 3:16–17: "The mystery of the Trinity is shown forth in Christ's baptism. Our Lord Himself is baptized in His human nature; the Holy Ghost descended in the shape of a dove: the Father's voice is heard bearing witness to the Son."¹⁰¹ Aquinas also elaborates specifically upon the Trinitarian significance of the Father's voice, explaining: "Since it is proper to the Father to produce the Word—that is, to utter or to speak—therefore it was most becoming that the Father should be manifested by a voice, because the voice designates the word. Wherefore the very voice to which the Father gave utterance bore witness to the Sonship of the Word."¹⁰² In reference to the Holy Spirit, Aquinas gives four reasons for the Spirit's appearance as a dove—

⁹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, vol. 1, nos. 255–59.

¹⁰⁰ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 23.

¹⁰¹ *ST I-II*, q. 39, a. 8, c.

¹⁰² *ST I-II*, q. 39, a. 8, ad 2.

simplicity, reconciliation, remission of sin, and unity—though none of these manifest the Trinity as clearly as does the Father's voice.¹⁰³ Thus, the scene of the Baptism of Christ conveys theological truth about the Trinity, and also, as we have seen, about the importance of baptism and salvation.

Differences in the two treatments are clear. Benedict is much more attentive to the historical setting of the Baptism, referencing details of the Roman Empire and contemporary sects, such as the Essenes. Benedict also places more emphasis on the fact that the Baptism signals the beginning of Jesus' ministry, though Aquinas does speak of the significance of the Baptism occurring at that particular time in Christ's life.¹⁰⁴ There is also a disagreement over whether the dove signifying the Holy Spirit was a real dove or, as Benedict argues, an image of something inexpressible.¹⁰⁵ Finally, we see that Benedict uses the events of Christ's life, in this case the Baptism, to develop his Christological conclusions about the identity of Jesus; Aquinas, by contrast, since he is writing in the middle of a complete theological treatise, has already developed his general Christology at the beginning of the *tertia pars* of the *Summa*. This means that Benedict will make more overarching theological claims, whereas Thomas, having already done so, examines the meaning of particular details with more attention.

In spite of these differences, clear and important connections emerge in the two treatments of the Baptism. Benedict and Aquinas both focus on common theological points, reference the Fathers, and illuminate the passage with other scriptural references. One of the most significant similarities can be seen in the fact that the event of the Baptism recorded by the Gospels is meant to be experienced and participated in by the believer. Benedict expounds on this: "The Baptism that Jesus' disciples have been administering since he spoke those words [Mt 28:19, quoted above] is an entrance into the Master's own Baptism—into the reality that he anticipated by means of it."¹⁰⁶ The reality of the event conveyed by the words is meant to be appropriated by the believer, not just by faith but also by sacramental action, which unites the believer to Christ, the Word. This can also be seen in Aquinas's exposition of the Baptism as an exemplar.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Cf. *ST* I–II, q. 39, a. 6, ad 4.

¹⁰⁴ For Aquinas's further treatment of Christ's mission, see also *ST* I–II, q. 39, a. 8, ad 3.

¹⁰⁵ He quotes Joachim Gnllka, *Das Matthäusevangelium: Erster Teil* (Freiburg: Herder, 1986), I, 78. Cf. Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 22. For Aquinas's position see *ST* I–II, q. 39, a. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 23.

¹⁰⁷ For more on the importance of Christ's baptism as exemplar, see Thomas F. Ryan, *Thomas Aquinas as Reader of the Psalms* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 90–91.

Like Benedict, he links Matthew 28:19 to the manifestation of the Trinity at Christ's baptism and our participation in it. He states: "that which is accomplished in our baptism should be manifested in Christ's baptism, which was the exemplar of ours. Now the baptism which the faithful receive is hallowed by the invocation and the power of the Trinity; according to Matthew 28:19"¹⁰⁸ Christ's baptism is a reality manifested by Scripture and participated in sacramentally by the believer.¹⁰⁹ The words of Scripture become alive today (in Benedict's words) as the believer encounters the Word and shares in his life. Through all of these similarities we see the fundamental exegetical principles Benedict and Aquinas share instantiated in their exposition of Christ's baptism.

Conclusion

Benedict and Aquinas share many key traits in their biblical interpretation. Could we, however, speak of Aquinas as an influence on the interpretation of Benedict? William Wright answers negatively, pointing to a distinction between the authors precisely where I have been arguing their common approach: "The models of Ratzinger and Aquinas are not irreconcilable, but they do diverge in their locating of the more-than-literal sense of Scripture, whether entirely in the text's surplus of meaning or in the concrete historical realities of the divine economy as given in Scripture."¹¹⁰ Although I agree that Benedict much more strongly makes use of concrete historical realities and does not completely accept Aquinas's position, I think that Benedict does see Aquinas as an ally in the proper understanding of the literal sense. Wright uses Aquinas's definition of the four senses to highlight his distinction from Benedict, noting that traditional interpretation "associates the spiritual sense with the *things* or *realities* presented by the text rather than the language of the text itself."¹¹¹ On the contrary, Aquinas should not be identified completely with the prior tradition of the four senses, for, as we have seen, he roots the spiritual so strongly in the literal, the meaning of the words. Beryl Smalley, though not without controversy, affirms this point: "St. Thomas, perfecting the tentative efforts of his predecessors, has supplied a theory

¹⁰⁸ ST I-II, q. 39, a. 8, c.

¹⁰⁹ Scott Hahn, speaking of Benedict's biblical theology, states that "the Word proclaimed is always a Word that seeks conversion. As such, the Word always leads to the sacraments, to the enactment or 'actualization' of the Word, by which the believer enters into communion with the Word" (*Covenant and Community*, 55).

¹¹⁰ Wright, "Patristic Biblical Hermeneutics in Joseph Ratzinger's *Jesus of Nazareth*," 205.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 204.

of the relations between the senses which lays the stress on the literal interpretation, now defined as the full meaning of the author.”¹¹² Along these lines, I have been arguing that Aquinas actually locates the key reference to the reality of text in the words, in their literal sense, and sees the spiritual sense as something secondary and derived, and therefore not the basis of theology.

What characterizes Aquinas’s position is not simply the focus on the *reality* of the text but rather the ability of the words of the text to literally point beyond themselves to that reality. It is precisely because words are signs that they are able to refer to a transcendent reality without having to point to a further referent, as is done in the spiritual sense (a sign pointing to a sign). It is precisely Aquinas’s rich description of the literal sense that points to the text’s theological significance without having to locate this significance in a derived spiritual sense. Benedict explicitly affirms Aquinas’s position on the primacy of the literal sense, and also his position on transcending the literal sense, though he is able to draw out further the historical rootedness of the literal sense. The continuity of Benedict’s exegesis with the Augustinian method can be seen in a passage of the third volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*, a passage that also demonstrates how he uses history to advance exegesis: “There is a reciprocal relationship between the interpreting word of God and the interpreting history: the word of God teaches that ‘salvation history,’ universal in scope, is present within the events. For their part, the events themselves unlock the word of God and manifest the true reality hidden within the individual texts.”¹¹³ Scripture manifests a reality hidden within the text, but it is not simply the words that point toward this reality, but also the history embodied in the text, which is crucial for its proper understanding. Benedict’s approach is at once in harmony with the approaches of Augustine and Aquinas, but also provides the opportunity to advance their thought with a more thorough historical understanding of the text.

To respond to the question I posed at the head of this concluding section, I would answer that Aquinas is indeed a theological influence on

¹¹² Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), 368. It should be noted that de Lubac cautions against an overly simplistic understanding of the emergence of a more literal tendency in scriptural interpretation, explicitly mentioning Smalley’s view of Aquinas. Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Sense of Scripture*, vol. 3, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2009), 4; and the section “La ‘nouveau’ de saint Thomas,” in *Exégèse Médiévale: Les quatre sens de l’Écriture, Seconde partie*, II, 285–302. De Lubac rightly argues that Aquinas does not represent a complete break with his predecessors.

¹¹³ Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 3, 17.

Benedict's Christological hermeneutic. Benedict explicitly looks to Aquinas as a model for reflecting on the life of Christ. He also turns to him as an authority on the literal sense itself and on the role of metaphysics in interpretation. This influence is enhanced by a common turning toward the Fathers and specifically to Augustine. Augustine provides the crucial foundation of the distinction between thing/reality and sign, but he also roots them both in the order and purpose of Scripture, which is union with God. What may unite Aquinas and Benedict most fully is what Augustine describes as the necessary disposition for scriptural interpretation:

And, therefore, if a man fully understands that the end of the commandment is charity, out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned, 1 Timothy 1:5, and is bent upon making all his understanding of Scripture to bear upon these three graces, he may come to the interpretation of these books with an easy mind.¹¹⁴

Both theologians approach the realities of faith, as found in Scripture, with a disposition of reverence and contemplation that is ordered to making the truth known in love.¹¹⁵

Seeing Christ as the subject of Scripture and particularly as exemplum in his Baptism provides a concrete example of how to enter into this proper disposition. In order to understand the Word, one must unite one's life to the Word made flesh. The reality communicated by Scripture is one that is meant to be experienced and appropriated in the soul, which occurs when one is united to Christ as a member of his body. Indeed Benedict insists on "Christ as the center of the Bible."¹¹⁶ He points to the unity of all Scripture in Christ, read with an *analogia fidei*, and the need to "open oneself to the dynamism of the Word."¹¹⁷ The reality of Scripture, and one's participation in it, come from union with Christ. Likewise, Nicholas Healy, summarizing Aquinas's hermeneutics, states that "the point of reading Scripture is to open us up to God's reality revealed in Christ, not to enclose and control that reality."¹¹⁸ Just as the Word of God as Son is made manifest by the written words, so the union with the Word Incarnate is made visible by the reception of the Eucharist. Scripture is part of God's sacramental economy, by which invisible realities are made manifest by sensible signs. The Christian's reception of Scripture is meant

¹¹⁴ Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 1.40.

¹¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 2.9.

¹¹⁶ Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Conflict," 26.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹¹⁸ Nicholas M. Healy, *Thomas Aquinas: Theologian of the Christian Life* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 46.

to be sacramental and participatory, enabling the believer to share in the realities portrayed by the sacred text.

I began by noting with some surprise that Benedict turned to St. Thomas Aquinas as the preeminent model to demonstrate his intent in writing *Jesus of Nazareth*. However, looking at the connections in their exegesis and the similarities in their interpretation of at least one event in the life of Christ, it is clear that the two theologians approach Scripture in a similar vein. They both attend primarily to the meaning of the text, letting Christ communicate the truth and reality of his life through the medium of words as signs. And furthermore, they both turn to the Bible to be theologically instructed—theology being understood as thinking with God, by rationally receiving his word.¹¹⁹ We should not be surprised, therefore, that Benedict is at once in continuity with the tradition that includes Aquinas's thought and that he is also an advancement of this same tradition. Benedict provides a model for scriptural interpretation today, affirming the importance of modern methods of scriptural analysis and at the same time redirecting our attention to the deepest truth of Scripture, Christ, and how this Word should be received. **N V**

¹¹⁹ In his *Principles of Catholic Theology*, Benedict explicitly engages Aquinas on the nature of theology. See Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 315–22.