

Biblical Exegesis and Theology in Thomas Aquinas. Understanding the Background of Biblical Thomism

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Abstract: In the face of the dichotomy of biblical exegesis and theology, one of the main postulates of Biblical Thomism is the integration of both activities. In this sense, it is understandable why there are philosophical threads in exegesis, and why we find many scripture references in *sacra doctrina*. The article, first presenting modern attempts to separate exegesis from theology, analyzes the three aspects of studying Sacred Scripture in practicing theology according to Aquinas. For him, exegesis is the *alphabet of theology*, but the requirement is that the extraction of the meanings of Scripture should be complemented by theological activity.

Keywords: Biblical Thomism, Medieval Exegesis, Theology, hermeneutics, literal sense

Resumen: Frente a la dicotomía entre exégesis bíblica y teología, uno de los postulados principales del tomismo bíblico es la integración de ambas actividades. En este sentido, es comprensible que haya aspectos filosóficos en la exégesis y que encontremos muchas referencias de las escrituras en la *sacra doctrina*. El artículo, que presenta por primera vez los intentos modernos de separar la exégesis de la Teología, analiza los tres aspectos del estudio de la Sagrada Escritura en la práctica de la Teología según santo Tomás de Aquino. Para él, la exégesis es el *alfabeto de la teología*, pero es requisito que la obtención de los significados de la Escritura deba complementarse con la actividad teológica.

Palabras clave: tomismo bíblico, exégesis medieval, Teología, hermenéutica, sentido literal

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There are not many people who see St. Thomas Aquinas as a first-rate biblical scholar, and his exegesis is often not regarded as an interesting proposition worth considering within contemporary biblical studies (Ba-

glow, 2005)¹. At most, it can serve as a frame from the past which –like an exhibit in a museum– only illustrates how people used to think in past centuries, but is already *out of date* and not suitable for contemporary use. Contrary to these tendencies, Biblical Thomism tries to present the advantages of Thomistic exegesis –which has the ambition of going further than just the hermeneutics of the text– by building a theological synthesis that opens up to the mystery of a God who exceeds the expressive ability of the created language (Vijgen, 2018). This has much to do with Thomas' concept of theology as *sacra doctrina* and his reluctance towards the burdened word *theologia* (McGinn, 2014, p. 55). Aquinas does not perceive theology as a science that reduces itself to statements, estimated formulas of the past (derived from *auctoritates*), but as an effort of organizing everything *sub ratione Dei*: not to produce one's own knowledge *alongside* that of specific sciences, as a kind of counter-proposition, but as an integrated attempt to contemplate the created reality in the light of the First Cause. In this way to imitate God is to know the creature through His own knowledge. In this perspective, theology is distinguished by the art of integration from the greatest possible angles (Oleksowicz-Roszak, 2021).

For Aquinas *sacra doctrina* is about a holistic and integrative way of thinking (Ryan, 2007). This order, however, has little to do with a simple arrangement of things in a drawer (i.e., only aesthetic values), but rather resembles a genome order on which the functioning of the organism depends: its health or genetic disease. Therefore, theology in the Thomistic version must *always go together with other sciences*, because it is aware of its pastoral task: transmit the Gospel to each generation, regardless of their intellectual world. It consists in entering the essence of the Christian message into the human world. Sometimes it means expanding this existing world when it is closing in on itself too much, and at times, revealing yet undiscovered places inside it (like the evangelical drachma, lost at home: it is somewhere close, but one cannot pay with it or exploit it –see Lc 15:8-10).

However, St. Thomas Aquinas, with his mode of reading the Scriptures, certainly sets himself another goal, which can be seen from the way he reflects: to prevent the *divorce* between exegesis and theology, at all costs. The cost of this is not only the duration of the relationship itself but its fruit –that is, the transmission of the truth that leads to salvation.

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Three paradigms

The relationship between the biblical narrative and the speculation that arose from the application of philosophical procedures and which led to the discovery of the truth about God under the rigor of rational reflection, was one of the themes that drew the attention of theologians of the last century. It seemed that two alternate theological worlds were to be built. In one of them there was only room for one *language about God*, which consisted of images, formulas or metaphors used in Sacred Scripture, which served as a solid point of support in the times of ideological turmoil, widespread questioning of terms that were still in use, paradigm shifts.

When the previous theological syntheses showed their insufficiency, when their approaches –often based on a single philosophical system– turned out to be leaky, incomplete and demanded change when their preferences shifted, there was often an encouragement of returning to the traditional concepts conveyed in the Bible. Thus, the work of a theologian consists in repetition, perpetuation and translation of the biblical language, in trying to express it in a way that is understandable to the reader. In line with this approach, following one of Karl Barth's metaphors, it is necessary to tear down the wall (of time) that separates us from the 1st century when the New Testament was written, and discard everything that has appeared over the centuries, like a growth on a healthy body. Therefore, theological syntheses –which try to reflect the content of the biblical faith in terms of philosophical schools outside the circle of biblical mentality–, are an unnecessary messing of clean water, setting up scaffoldings that obscures the building. Maybe, instead of struggling to express the truth revealed in another philosophical language, just simply show it, remove the scaffolding and let it shine in its richness? Scraping the foreign body out of the exegesis –a postulate of dehellenization so strongly raised by Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930)– is in fact an incentive to abandon the imaginations about synthesis (“the time of the theological Summa has ended”, as some seem to claim) and entrench around oneself.

Still, this paradigm of *isolation* was not the only one that existed in the history of theology –quite the contrary. It seems that from the very beginning, already in the first centuries, St. Paul and the Fathers of the Church were aware of the step of using conceptual categories of Greek philosophy in expressing the truth of faith conveyed by the Scriptures. However, it was not a simple vocabulary acquisition and substitution of new contents,

but a sort of removal from the existing framework in which they were functioning, which undoubtedly made them lose their original meaning and take on a new dimension (Levering, 2010). Another proposition is the paradigm of *collision*: the biblical image and metaphors are contrasted and selected in terms of compliance with the theological considerations, which, already considered to be demythologized –using Rudolf Bultmann’s category– are superior to the biblical text and purify it from the mythological language. Whereas Aquinas proposes a third way –the paradigm of *synergy*. The exegesis of Aquinas remains in feedback with theology: feeds it, but benefits itself the perspective of the whole from its presence, due to which no passage of the Scriptures is disregarded.

The Third way of Aquinas: biblically formatted theology

St. Thomas is convinced that *sacra doctrina* is the kind of discipline which is not a joyful festival of people’s opinions about God. In this sense it is not a *word about God*, but a *word of God* which is received by man and expressed in a language that he understands. Therefore, among the expressions of this teaching there is the *participation* in the knowledge of the saints (those who are already glorified!) or the *impressio* of God’s knowledge, which becomes the partaking of a person who opens up in faith to Him who reveals himself (Roszak, 2014). This knowledge does not come in the form of *one of many* disciplines, but in accordance with the nature of God’s causality, who most often acts through secondary causes, without destroying their freedom at the same time. This knowledge is discovered and communicated through the true word of man who is a hagiographer, an inspired writer. Not *next to* his word, but through this word: it is not a mere packaging for the divine word, but is hidden in its very human being (Bellamah, 2016).

Only such coordinates of Aquinas’ thinking allow his theological proposal to be captured in its entirety. It consists in a twofold line of thinking: the Bible needs theology, for in this way it becomes understandable and alive in every generation. Theology guarantees the fluidity of the Word, does not allow it to ossify. Thomas argues about the need for theology in exegesis with the conviction that in Sacred Scriptures the truth of faith is contained in a “lengthy, various and often vague way; hence a long study and practice is needed to extract the truth of faith from the Holy Scriptures”

(*S. Th.*, II-II, q. 1, a. 9, ad 1)². But there is also a reverse movement: the Bible is a kind of fuse for theology. It is like a centrifugal and centripetal movement, which mutually are in balance. Neither biblicism nor theology are detached from the Scriptures. Instead of choosing one or the other, St. Thomas prefers two *and* both: the Scriptures and theology. We will analyze these two *movements* which provide the full picture of exegesis.

Source of theology

In one way, an attentive reader of Aquinas' texts will notice that his high-level theological speculation is not born in a vacuum, but from a careful, even meticulous reading of biblical texts. In medieval nomenclature, the theologian is a *Magister in Sacra Pagina*, and thus focused on drawing fruits from the study of the Scriptures and conveying its contemplation to others. In this work he resembles a *bee* collecting nectar and delivering honey rather than an *ant* which would juxtapose quotations one after the other or the opinions of subsequent generations of interpreters. Thereby, it is not only about the correctness of the procedures, but about understanding why the Scriptures were given to the Church: after all, the purpose of this knowledge drawn from the Scriptures is love. Theology is understood to be oriented towards human happiness, which consists in *visio Dei beatifica*: theology as *sacra doctrina* is to complement what is missing in philosophy in order to be able to get to know God enough to discern Him as the ultimate goal of human life (*STh* I, q. 1, a. 4c).

For Aquinas, theology is born as the result of the process described by the triad of concepts *littera-sensus-sententia*, which mark the stages of reading the Scriptures: from reading its wording and direct context through capturing the meaning to expressing it in the form of truth. In this sense, within theology, the actualization of the potential of the Word can be seen, whose richness is not confined to one single meaning –for instance, the literal one– but in the basic meaning of the literal sense, from which further spiritual meanings are derived: allegorical, moral, anagogical. Thomas strongly emphasizes the primacy of the literal meaning, which of course

² Veritas fidei in Sacra Scriptura diffuse continetur et variis modis et in quibusdam obscura. Ita quoad ad eliciendum fidei veritatem ex sacra Scriptura requiritur longum studium et exercitium.

does not consist in the literal wording of the text, but in the basic transmission wanted by the Author, and therefore on the *meaning* hidden behind the words (Balaguer, 2004; Ossandon, 2008; Dahan, 2009; Manresa, 2018; Torrijos, 2018).

Hence, in exegesis we are not faced with the dilemma of choosing a path, as if every exegete was to stand at the crossroad and choose: either will he go to the right –the path of literal reading, or perhaps to the left, and decide on spiritual exegesis without worrying about the literal meaning. Unfortunately, in such a simplification, attempts are often made to classify medieval exegesis and divide it into supporters of one or the other option³. The path taken by St. Thomas is different: it is one and the same path, which always begins with the literal sense, in order to develop into a spiritual meaning in subsequent stages. The spiritual interpretation is not given *alone*, in a pure state, but always mediated by a literal meaning (after all, this is how Aquinas thought about every intellectual content that is born in man through contact with the sensual material). In a sense, hylemorphism could be talked about in terms of the relationship of Scripture meanings: the matter would be the literal meaning, whereas the form would be the spiritual meanings. There is a kind of circulation between the meanings and it would be a mistake in reading them apart. Significantly, St. Thomas always tries reading them together, because this multifaceted perspective has the ability of reflecting the richness of the Word of God, which can express many contents, for in the Holy Scriptures even the events described in individual books have their relevance.

Thomas' way of interpreting a sentence from Ps. 33:7 ("He gathered the waters of the sea as in a goatskin") can serve as an example of applying this procedure. In a literal sense, it means the order of the world in which the waters (like in a sack) do not spill but have their limits set; human beings use water to their advantage. Thomas uses the etymology of *abyssus* derived from *a-bassis*, without foundation, in exceeding imposing anthropomorphic associations. Thus, Aquinas reads the spiritual sense from a double perspective. On the one hand, it concerns the good: peoples gather

³ Such a conclusion actually emerges from the dispute between Henri de Lubac and Beryl Smalley on the nature of Thomas' exegesis: the genius of the literal sense does not indicate that he does not value the spiritual meaning. It is like two sides of one coin. You might wonder which one is more interesting, but it is always about one and the same coin.

in the Church like in a sack made from dead animal skin (which is a reference to the death of Christ, from which the Church is born), but it is also a reminder of the mortifications of Christians on an even more perfect path. The abyss is also a reference to people who have been converted from the abyss of sin (Paul, Matthew, Mary Magdalene), whom God does not forget about. Meanwhile, abysses have innumerable biblical meanings, submitted in the treasuries of the Holy Scriptures. Then again, on a spiritual level, it can be referred to evil people: suffering and torment on the outside, and God's grace on the inside; the persecutors of the Church will be an abyss which God watches over (In Ps., 33).

That is why the exegesis of the Sacred Scriptures is a specific alphabet which is fundamental to any theological work. Just as the knowledge of letters alone is not enough, but there is a necessity for building words and whole sentences that convey the content, it is neither enough knowing the loose meanings of individual sentences of the Holy Scriptures. There is a need for knowledge about the history of salvation, reading on a broader plane, and not limiting oneself to such detailed analyses from which the whole can no longer be seen. It would thus resemble a man who knows every cm² of a painting perfectly and is able to indicate the chemical composition of paint, canvases, nuances of brush movement... but does not know what the painting itself is about.

Surely, this is why the exegesis of Aquinas is an art of circulation: as shown in his biblical commentaries where Aquinas is seen *in person* (for these are often texts in the form of *reportatio* which are not corrected by the Master), they are dominated by the movement based on *analysis* and *synthesis*. Both, however, have the intention of leading to contemplation. Moreover, all the techniques he used in interpreting particular books of the Bible –divisions of the text (*divisio textus*), the establishment of different textual variants (*alia littera*), quotations from other biblical books, and finally discrete *quaestiones* introduced to the commentary– remained in the service of a better scriptural contemplation (Roszak, 2016a).

However, this service to Scripture and the gravity around it does not indicate captivity. It is worth noting the process that took place in medieval theology, which went from strict dependency (9th-11th centuries), through the time of equilibrium (12th-13th centuries), to the independence of vocabulary, although it never gave up contact with the Bible. It was commented by everyone: from the first medieval authors promoting *lectio divina*, through the masters of the *quaestio* or *disputatio* to late scholastics.

The works such as the *Summa Theologiae* are an attempt of organizing the entirety of knowledge, of such a *macro* scale in which *micro* matters are being understood⁴. That way, not only the *Summa Theologiae* is born as a result of reading the Scriptures, but returns to the Bible by discovering the full perspective of the history of salvation. The *Summa Theologiae* becomes a guide for reading the Bible, and therefore it is worth reading biblical commentaries and systematic works together. This is one of the postulates of Biblical Thomism, which, more than restoring the commentary texts, wants to capture the method of Aquinas' work: from the Scriptures, through the Fathers toward synthesis (Roszak, 2016b). There is a deep commitment to Tradition that cannot be ignored which leads to the construction of a coherent message.

The clarification of the wording about the Father that He is "upholding all things by the word of his power" (*portansque omnia verbo virtutis suae*, Heb 1:3), illustrates this practice very well. Thomas derives from the observation that the actions of someone else (like the king through an official), seem to show a lack of one's own strength. To this he primarily explains that the Son of God acts by his power and that of the Father; it is in the Word and through the Word that everything was created. In referring to St. Basil and the Greek tradition, he considers to what extent it is possible to claim, that the Holy Spirit is the image of the Son (if it were to relate, by the power of its word, to the Spirit) –recalling the procession of the Son *ut conceptus ab intellectu* and of the Spirit *ut amor a voluntate*. By rejecting Glossy's interpretation, Thomas evokes St. Augustine and develops a Christological reflection in which he shows the absurdity of arguments made against the unity of the Word with the Father, that would suggest the existence of two eternal words in God. The summary is an act of integrating the biblical text (Letter to the Hebrews), theological reflection, in which he uses the metaphysical terminology and the achievements of the Fathers of the Church, while maintaining an apologetic dimension:

⁴ It is possible to look at the *Summa Theologiae* as an attempt of building a synthesis of revealed knowledge and that which is discovered by scientific activity, as Aristotle expressed in the intellectual climate of the time. Therefore, the presence of peripatetic categories in the commentaries should not come as a surprise: it is to show in what way Aquinas *reads* the Scriptures: it is not a reference for himself, Thomas does not lead to the idolatry of the Scriptures (a term coined by M. Levering in his *Scripture and Metaphysics*) but to accept it as a treasury of wisdom leading to *via salutis*, the way of salvation. For Aquinas, the saving purpose of the exegesis of the Scriptures is fundamental.

Consequently, by those three characteristics he shows three things of Christ: for by the fact that he is the splendor, he shows his co-eternity with the Father; for in creatures splendor is of the same age, and the Word is coeternal. This is against Arius. But when he says, the image of his substance, he shows the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. For since splendor is not of the same nature as the resplendent thing, then lest anyone suppose that it is not similar in nature, he says that it is the image or figure of his substance. But because the Son, even though he is of the same nature with the Father, would be lacking power, if he were weak, he adds, upholding all things by the word of his power. Therefore, the Apostle commends Christ on three points, namely, co-eternity, consubstantiality, and equality of power. (*In Hbr*, cap. I, lect.2 –transl. by F.R. Larcher OP)

Another way to integrate exegesis and theology in Aquinas, as highlighted by Biblical Thomism, is to depict the unity of the truth about God as an exemplar for Christian conduct. It is about overcoming the temptation of reading in isolation, that is, extracting dogmatic truths without any relation to morality, and instead switching to a holistic approach. A reflection on the simplicity of God can set a good example, which leads to reflections on the simplicity of Christian life and the unity of the Church (Wittman, 2016).

Fuse of theology

In the theology of Aquinas, the Scriptures fulfill yet another role which is not exhausting itself in the image of the *source*. For him, the Sacred Scripture are not simply –contrary to popular opinions– a reservoir of biblical arguments useful in theological reflection. It is not only about the source of the argument, but the instruction in faith on what is concealed behind the Latin term *eruditio*⁵. The purpose is to gain wisdom and understand that the world is richer than our concepts, and that is why theological reflection aspires to universality (Mongeau, 2015). Theology is thus on a journey

⁵ *Quodlibet* XII, q. 17 s.c.: “sed finis Scripturae, quae est a Spiritu Sancto, est eruditio hominum. Haec autem eruditio hominum ex Scripturis non potest esse nisi per expositiones sanctorum”.

from *words* through *things* to *divine matters*, that is, to the *res* itself, which various formulas, for example expressed in the *Creed*, are devoted to.

On this path, Thomas soars in the world of philosophical terms of his time rather than *bounces* from the Bible: it is clearly seen from the text of the commentaries that the Bible is constantly returning to the already created result of his theological reflection. It contrasts the developed concepts with the biblical message, thus making the Scriptures a kind of *fuse for theology*: as with the flow of too strong a dose of electricity which could destroy the installations and lead to house fire, in many situations the Bible appears as such a fuse. It is not a question of keeping theologians on a belt, but interrupting such a circuit, which threatens –often due to the rejection of external points for its theory, infatuation with words, loss of perspective– with innovation for itself, rather than searching new forms for a more accurate capturing of the truth and its proclamation (*praedicatio* always served as the last link in the formation and work of the medieval theologian). That is why, St. Thomas does not like to reflect too far in terms of *what if*, and although he sometimes (what very rarely can be seen perfectly, for example, in his reflections on the Incarnation and its necessity) allows himself to do so, it is clear that he returns quickly to the biblical perspective. In this way, Scripture is a limiting principle for the theological speculation, because it is not a word about God, but of God.

Conclusions

From this recognition of the role of the Scriptures in theology –three essential functions are born.

First, Aquinas often refers to biblical exegesis when formulating arguments against theological errors. It is a kind of *defensive* function ahead of falling into harmful recognitions and bringing about a correction based on the biblical text, which has a regulatory role (Vijgen, 2020). When losing the direction, such –biblical– reference point immediately restores the orientation, just as the knowledge about the north direction allows to derive the others. *The second function* is rather ostensive than apologetic, thus to show the truth. This positive view of the Bible's contribution to the development of reflection –delivers intuitions which perhaps the reflection itself would not be able to reach. *The third function* is the solving of dilemmas that arise while reading the Scriptures. Some passages seem to be contradictory to others, unclear and questionable. Their solution is, above all, to

reach for other biblical texts that illuminate this darker fragment (for our understanding) and in this way the Scriptures are being explained by the Scriptures –although reason constantly remains the tool, for it is it, that is working on adopting the Scriptures.

The juxtaposition of these difficult biblical passages, which can be found in the commentaries, testifies to a careful reading of the Word of God, as well as Aquinas' unavoidable difficulties. He is not interested in presenting a one-dimensional reflection, as long as everything fits into the coherence of his narrative. His exegesis has the ambition of universality: he does not want to satisfy one theological school, but is seeking a very deeply hidden *consensus*. At the same time, as Ignacio Manresa underlines, St. Thomas is aware of various possible forms of exegesis: the exegesis of the theologian is different (emerging from faith and seeking certainty and justification for understanding the meaning of the Scriptures) from the saint (characterized by connaturality with the mysteries of faith based on grace and love), and yet another of the charismatic person enjoying the gift of *interpretatio sermonum*⁶, a charism given because of others and acting in a similar way to prophecy (Manresa, 2015).

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in his book *Last Conversations* emphasizes the necessity for contemporary theology of developing a new *imaginarium*, resource of images, metaphors and concepts that will be able to express the mysteries of faith in the present state of knowledge. He warns against self-referential theology, closed to the circle of its own concepts, without the ambition of conveying the truth (in using the term of Aquinas) derived from the Sacred Scripture.

For St. Thomas, theology is a *granary* for the Word of God: there is no point in a granary without grains, wherein that grain is the Word of God. It is therefore easy to understand that, for Aquinas, theology and the images developed by it are at the service of mystagogy –if philosophy is the *ancilla* of theology, then theology– as Giulio Maspero noticed –is the *ancilla Mysteriorum* (Maspero, 2018). It is a theology which, on the one hand, leads exegesis to perceiving the whole picture, and on the other, is itself protected by a biblical text, due to which it does not remain in the shallows, but explores the depths. It constantly endures at the source.

⁶ In Hebr., cap. V, lect. 2: "Interpretatio enim Scripturae numeratur inter dona Spiritus Sancti, I Cor XII, 10".

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