

Mary Healy



10 Aquinas's Use of the Old Testament in His Commentary on Romans

Recent decades have witnessed a rediscovery of St. Thomas as biblical exegete. His biblical commentaries are attracting greater attention than ever before, and his theories of biblical interpretation, particularly his view of the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture, have been assiduously analyzed. Yet Aquinas's actual practice of exegesis, and particularly his use of Scripture to comment on Scripture, remains largely unexplored.¹ This state of affairs is partly due to the enormous gap between Thomas's pre-critical interpretive style and the methods and assumptions of modern historical-critical exegesis. In the face of the undeniable progress in determining the original meaning of biblical texts, what does medieval exegesis have to offer? How does one evaluate insights derived from interpretive approaches that are obscure, naïve, or illegitimate by today's standards? Ongoing efforts to bridge this gap are an essential part of reappropriating the Church's treasury of patristic and medieval reflection on Scripture, one of the most important tasks of theology today.

This chapter considers Thomas's use of the Old Testament in his *Commentary on Romans*. But a caution is in order regarding this description of the task: although "use" is the standard expression for the various ways in which an author quotes, refers to, or alludes to an earlier text, it is a potentially misleading term. It could seem to suggest a certain instrumentalization of Scripture, as if one has a prior agenda toward the accomplishment of which one puts biblical texts to work. As Michael Waldstein and others have shown, this way of conceiving the commentator's task would be foreign to St. Thomas.²

1. This point is made and supported in detail by Christopher Baglow, "Modus et Forma": *A New Approach to the Exegesis of Saint Thomas Aquinas with an Application to the Lectura super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, *Analecta Biblica* 149 (Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2002), 1–23.

2. Michael Waldstein, "On Scripture in the Summa Theologiae," *Aquinas Review* 1, no. 1 (1994): 73–94; Wilhelmus Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy*

Rather, in his view, Scripture itself sets the agenda, which it is the theologian's task to serve—just as a musician does not “use” the notes on the score but plays them and makes their melody sound forth. Such a utilitarian misconception illustrates the kinds of missteps that need to be avoided to arrive at a fair and balanced appraisal of Thomas's exegesis.

To this end, and seeking to understand Thomas's exegesis on its own terms, I will first offer some general observations on his Old Testament citations in the Romans commentary. I will then compare his reading of biblical texts with his own theoretical account of the distinctively Christian manner of interpreting the Old Testament as described in the *Summa*. Finally, I will seek to uncover some of the hermeneutical assumptions that are implicit in his method, and inquire as to what relevance or even fruitfulness they might have for biblical exegesis in the Church today.

Observations on Aquinas's Use of the Old Testament

Perhaps the most salient characteristic of Thomas's Old Testament citations is their sheer abundance. Thomas's writing rivals that of Paul himself in its profusion of biblical references woven into the text. The Romans commentary is a virtual tapestry of phrases drawn from nearly every part of the Bible, including some 1,200 explicit Old Testament citations. Of the forty-six books of the Old Testament canon, only five fail to appear (Judges, Ruth, Tobit, Jonah, and Haggai). Thomas's mind is evidently saturated with Scripture, and his mastery of the text is almost mind-boggling to twenty-first-century scholars more accustomed to finding our biblical citations via computerized search engines.

Aquinas shows a marked preference for the Psalms and wisdom literature, quoting from the Psalms far more frequently than from any other Old Testament book (280 times). The next most frequent is Isaiah (161 times), followed by four of the wisdom books: Sirach (85 times), Job (79 times), Proverbs (78 times), and Wisdom (67 times). The historical books, in contrast, appear relatively infrequently; the Deuteronomistic history (Joshua through 2 Kings), for instance, is cited only 28 times in all. Thomas's predilection for the wisdom writings is undoubtedly related to his well-known conviction that the literal sense alone provides a legitimate basis for theological argumenta-

Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas (Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2000); Baglow, 'Modus et Forma.' See also the various essays in Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating, and John P. Yocum, eds., *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries* (London: T&T Clark International, 2005); and in Michael Dauphinais and Matthew Levering, eds., *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas: Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America, 2005).

tion.³ The wisdom literature is, for the most part, discursive rather than narrative, and its statements can be applied directly to the subject matter of Romans without the need to probe for hidden meanings beneath the surface. A few examples serve to illustrate this point. To corroborate Paul's assertion that all earthly power is from God, Thomas quotes Proverbs 8:15: "by me [divine wisdom] kings reign" (1022).⁴ To reinforce the point that the truths of faith may be above reason but cannot contradict reason, he draws on Sirach 3:25, "Many things are shown to thee above the understanding of men," and Psalm 93:5, "Thy decrees are very sure" (828). Job 38:7 serves to refute Origen's error of the preexistence of human souls: "Where were you when the morning stars praised me together and all the sons of God made joyful melody?" (758). Even where the text uses poetic imagery, as in the latter case, its meaning contributes directly to the argument at hand.

Thomas's citations are almost always in the form of single, self-contained statements. He uses Old Testament citations like small spotlights, each shining from a different angle to illuminate another facet of the theological realities that he is expounding.⁵ He rarely discusses an Old Testament passage or narrative episode as a whole, even where Paul is offering a sustained reflection on a biblical text. Moreover, unlike Paul, the other New Testament authors, and most of the Fathers, Thomas does not make use of allusions, echoes, or verbal resonances that can hint at allegorical linkages or create a subtle "meaning effect." Rather, he cites texts in a straightforward manner insofar as they serve to confirm, illustrate, or develop a point he is making in his exposition of Romans. His biblical references are invariably in the foreground rather than the background of the discussion. Likewise, the vast majority of Old Testament citations are read according to their literal sense; relatively few are interpreted spiritually (at least, according to Thomas's definition, as will be explained below).

The Senses of Scripture in Theory and Practice

What hermeneutical principles were operative in Thomas's use of the Old Testament? This question is best answered by comparing his actual practice in the commentary with the systematic treatment of the senses of Scripture

3. *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q.1, a. 10; *Quodlibetum* VII, q. 6, a. 1–2. Cf. Augustine, *Epistle* 48.

4. All translations are taken from St. Thomas Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans by Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Fabian Larcher, ed. Jeremy Holmes (Ave Maria, Fla.: Aquinas Center for Theological Renewal), <http://www.avemaria.edu/uploads/pagesfiles/4283.pdf>. Numbers in parentheses refer to paragraphs in the Marietti edition: *Super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura* (Rome, 1953).

5. I owe this analogy to my colleague Daniel Keating.

found in his theological works. Aquinas's most thorough accounts of the senses of Scripture are in the *Summa* I.1.10 and the *Quodlibetum* VII.6.⁶ His treatment both synthesized and developed insights germinating in the tradition prior to him. According to the medieval formula, Scripture has a fourfold meaning, consisting of the literal sense and the spiritual sense subdivided into the allegorical, the tropological, and the anagogical.⁷

The Literal Sense

The literal sense was traditionally defined as the *gesta*, the events recounted in Scripture. But Aquinas defines it as "that which the author intends" (*quem auctor intendit*). This significant move allows him to include in the literal sense the whole range of devices by which an author can communicate meaning, including figurative modes of speech such as poetic imagery, parable, and metaphor.⁸ In such cases, the literal sense is not the surface meaning of the words but *that which is signified by the literary figure*. As an example, Aquinas notes that the literal sense of "the arm of God" is not a physical limb but "God's operative power."⁹

It is crucial, however, not to confuse Thomas's view with the modern notion of authorial intention. In using the verb *intendere* he was not referring to the psychological intent of the author—the ascertainment of which, as modern literary critics have pointed out, is a dubious and highly speculative enterprise.¹⁰ Rather, he was using *intendere* in its philosophical sense of "point to" or "refer to." The literal sense is not the subjective intention of the author but the *objective realities referred to by the text*, whether historical facts or atemporal truths. Thus Thomas also describes the literal sense as "the meaning whereby the words signify things [*res*]"¹¹ and uses "literal sense" and "histori-

6. See also *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei* 4, a. 1. According to the chronology of Jean-Pierre Torrell, the first series of *Quodlibeta* was written in 1256–59; part I of the *Summa* in 1265–67; and the lectures on Romans were delivered in 1271–72. See Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 1, *The Person and His Work*, rev. ed., trans. R. Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2005), 327–29.

7. The classic formulation is the couplet attributed to Augustine of Dacia: "Littera gesta docet, quid credas allegoria, Moralis quid agas, quo tendas anagogia."

8. This move was partly anticipated by Alexander of Hales and Albert the Great. See George Montague, *Understanding the Bible: A Basic Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2007), 57–59; Miguel Ángel Tábet, "Il senso letterale e il senso spirituale della Sacra Scrittura: Un tentativo di chiarimento terminologico e concettuale," *Annales theologici* 9, no. 1 (1995): 3–5.

9. *ST I*, q. 1, a. 10, ad 3.

10. See, e.g., Nigel M. Watson, "Authorial Intention: Suspect Concept for Biblical Scholarship," *Australian Biblical Review* 35 (1987): 6–13; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, "Problems of the Literal and Spiritual Senses of Scripture," *Louvain Studies* 20, nos. 2–3 (1995): 134–46.

11. *ST I*, q. 1, a. 10. Here he is closely following Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*.

cal sense” synonymously. Thomas also differs from modern interpreters in that he does not distinguish between the intention of the human author and that of God; because God is the primary author of Scripture, the literal sense is ultimately to be attributed to him. Thus the literal sense apparently can include meanings of which the human author was unaware.¹²

Aquinas emphasized the primacy of the literal sense as the indispensable foundation for every other possible sense. In this he exemplified the new approach to Scripture that had been gaining ground among the schoolmen of the Middle Ages.¹³ For the patristic commentators, following Origen, exegesis had been largely characterized by the search for the spiritual sense, the deeper meaning in which every line of Scripture points in a veiled way to Christ. A quote from Cyril of Alexandria exemplifies the conviction animating this approach: in Scripture “the mystery of Christ [is] signified to us through a myriad of different kinds of things. Someone might liken it to a glittering and magnificent city, having not one image of the king but many, and publicly displayed in every corner of the city.”¹⁴ The patristic exegetical tradition was kept alive in the monasteries, where the spiritual life centered on the practice of *lectio divina*, through which the monks sought to contemplate and spiritually assimilate the inexhaustible mysteries hidden in the text. The scholastic theologians, in contrast, were motivated by more distinctly pastoral concerns: they studied Scripture in order to combat heresy, to develop formal theological arguments, and to meet the needs of the faithful by preaching and teaching in a manner that could be easily understood—aims for which literal interpretation is most suited. This trend, however, represented a shift in emphasis, not a decisive break with the past. While giving greater attention to the literal sense, the scholastics by no means denied that the Old Testament points in a veiled way to Christ.

Some examples from the Romans commentary serve to illustrate Thomas’s use of the literal sense as he broadly construes it. Commenting on Paul’s statement “Those whom he predestined he also called” (Rom 8:30), Thomas ex-

12. Aquinas asserts that “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” (*De potentia* IV.1 resp.). Cf. also *ST* I, q. 1, a. 10: “Since the author of Holy Writ is God, who by one act comprehends all things by his intellect, it is not unfitting . . . if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Writ should have several senses.”

13. For a brief but insightful description of this shift and the historical and cultural factors underlying it, see Nicholas M. Healy, “Introduction,” in *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries*, ed. Thomas G. Weinandy, Daniel A. Keating, and John P. Yocum, 1–20 (London: T&T Clark International, 2005). For a more detailed account see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965).

14. Quoted in Robert L. Wilken, “How to Read the Bible,” *First Things* 181 (2008): 24–27. Ironically, however, Cyril operates mainly within what Aquinas would call the literal sense.

plains that one of the ways God “calls” is through the mouth of preachers; he then quotes Proverbs 9:3 in support: “[Wisdom] has sent out her maids to call from the highest places” (707). The literal sense of this proverb, in Thomas’s view, is that God addresses his people through human emissaries, prophets and teachers whom he sends to speak in his name. This is certainly a plausible explanation of what the sacred author intended to signify by the image of Lady Wisdom sending out her invitations. Thomas goes on to explain that the other way God “calls” is interiorly, by an “impulse of the mind whereby a man’s heart is moved by God to assent to the things of faith or of virtue.” To illustrate this point he draws on Isaiah 41:2: “Who stirred up one from the east and called him to follow?” This text refers to King Cyrus of Persia and asserts that it was God himself who inspired Cyrus to undertake the military conquests that eventually led to the return of the Jews from exile. Without any reference to its historical setting, Thomas draws on the text because of its indirect but literal affirmation of a truth of faith, namely, that to accomplish his purposes God prompts human beings—including even pagans—from within. He regards the text as having a theological as well as a historical referent, and in this case it is the latter that interests him.

The Spiritual Sense

If the literal sense encompasses all that is signified by the text by means of whatever literary forms and genres it employs, the spiritual sense, in contrast, is what is in turn signified by the *things or events* conveyed by the text. Underlying this principle is Thomas’s crucial insight regarding the spiritual sense: whereas human beings write with words, God writes with history. That is to say, God acts in history according to a pattern such that the persons, objects, institutions, and events of the old covenant, interpreted properly, point forward to and illuminate the culmination of his plan in Christ. They may do so by signifying either the mystery of Christ himself (the allegorical or Christological sense), or how we ought to live life in Christ (the tropological or moral sense), or what lies ahead in eternal glory (the anagogical or eschatological sense). It follows that having a spiritual sense is a property unique to sacred Scripture as having a divine Author; no other text has this inner dynamic.¹⁵ Only God could so order everything in salvation history that it would prefigure, foreshadow, and prepare for the greater things that lie ahead. It also follows that to grasp the mystery hidden in history requires a supernatural grace, which Thomas identifies as the gift of prophecy (978). But Thomas also seeks to correct the excesses of figural interpretation by insisting that the spiritual

15. See *Quodlibetum* VII, q. 6, a. 3.

sense is not open-ended. Because the realities that signify Christ are themselves communicated by means of the word, the spiritual sense "is based on and presupposes the literal."¹⁶

In the Romans commentary, on those few occasions where Aquinas makes use of a clearly allegorical (Christological) reading, his interpretation tends to be closely dependent on that of Paul, as for instance in his extended treatment of circumcision in commenting on Romans 4:11–15. In this case, as elsewhere, the focus of his interpretation is not the text (the narrative recounting the institution of the rite of circumcision in Gn 17) but its referent, the actual practice of circumcision as the outward sign of the old covenant.¹⁷ For Thomas, the spiritual sense is a matter not of literary correspondences, or what is today called intertextuality, but of ontological participation.¹⁸ It is the rites and institutions of the old covenant themselves that bear a "relation to Christ, to whom they are compared as the figure to the reality and as the members to the body" (348). Aquinas's attention to the referent allows a richer and more profound exploration of theological themes than is typical in exegesis that looks only for intertextual linkages. For instance, he notes an inner connection between circumcision and Abraham's act of faith: "Abraham believed that his seed would be multiplied; hence, it was fitting to receive its sign in the organ of reproduction" (343). Thomas also observes how circumcision expresses "something that was to occur spiritually, namely, just as superfluous skin was removed from the organ of reproduction, which is the chief servant of concupiscence, so every superfluous desire should be removed from man's heart, as Jer (4:4) says: 'Circumcise yourself to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts.'" Finally he makes the interesting remark that "the secret of the incarnation of Christ from the seed of Abraham was enclosed under the seal of circumcision" (343).

There are cases where it is unclear whether Aquinas would consider his own reading of a particular text as literal or spiritual. For example, he draws on the Song of Songs (5:3) to support Paul's exhortation not to continue in sin because we have died to it: "I had bathed my feet; how could I soil them?" (471). It is clear that Thomas does not have the surface meaning of the text in mind. But it is hard to know whether he viewed this verse (with its baptismal overtones) as alluding to purification from sin in a general sense or to the old covenant rituals as prefigurations of baptism. In another place, to expound

16. *ST I*, q. 1, a. 10.

17. Cf. *ST II-II*, q. 1, a. 2, ad 2: "The believer's act [of faith] does not terminate in the propositions, but in the realities [which they express]."

18. See Francis Martin, *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word* (Naples, Fla.: Sapientia Press, 2006), 262–75.

on Paul's description of disordered sexual lust in Romans 1, Thomas turns to Psalm 118:12: "They blazed like a fire of thorns" (150). In context the psalmist is clearly referring to enemy nations, thanking God for deliverance from their grasp: "All nations surrounded me. . . They surrounded me like bees, they blazed like a fire of thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them off!" Thus Thomas would probably say that the literal sense of the blazing thorns (the *res* signified by the words) is enemy nations; the spiritual sense (that which is in turn signified by the *res*) is uncontrolled passions of the soul. On what grounds does Aquinas read hostile nations as a figure for carnal desires gone out of control?¹⁹ Probably on the grounds that "burning" was a common figure for sexual desire in the Bible (Sir 9:8; Prv 6:27–29; 1 Cor 7:9) as in Greek literature, and that wicked behavior is associated with both fire and thorns.²⁰

Aquinas's spiritual reading of the Old Testament is more restrained and disciplined than that of many earlier commentators. But there are occasions where the modern reader may wonder: is Thomas adhering to his own principle, that the spiritual sense is based on the literal, or is he not rather imposing an interpretation alien to the original meaning of the text?²¹ In these cases it can be illuminating to consider the broader context of the passage cited as well as use of motifs appearing elsewhere in the Old Testament. What at first glance appears to be strong-arming a text to express something wholly unrelated to its original meaning may on closer inspection turn out to have a logical basis. For example, commenting on Paul's remark that he had wished to visit Rome but had been prevented, Thomas notes that it is God who arranges the travels of preachers. In support he quotes a text of Job: "The clouds scatter his lightning. They turn round and round by his guidance to accomplish all that he commands them" (Job 37:11–12), adding that "clouds" signify preachers (91). In the same context he cites Proverbs to describe the way Satan seeks to prevent the preaching that leads to salvation: "the north wind drives away rain" (Prv 25:23), i.e., the doctrines of the preachers" (91).²² The reader might object that there is nothing in the text of either Job or Proverbs to remotely suggest a reference to preaching, much less to the proclamation of the Gospel. The Job text is part of an encomium to the inscrutable wisdom and power of God manifested in creation; the proverb compares the rain that predictably

19. Note that it is not the *res* in itself but the *res* as conveyed by the words of Scripture that is significant; not enemy nations per se but enemy nations understood figuratively as bees and a fire attacking God's faithful servant signify the passions of the soul.

20. Cf. 2 Sam 23:6; Mt 7:16; Heb 6:8.

21. A complaint not unlike that often made against St. Paul!

22. The Vulgate translation, *ventus aquilo dissipat pluvias*, apparently misinterprets the Hebrew *TüHô'lel| Gä'osem* as "drives away rain" rather than "brings forth rain." The LXX has *exegeirei nephē* ("raises clouds").

follows the north wind to the anger aroused by a backbiting tongue. However, Thomas is undoubtedly aware that clouds, and rainclouds in particular, frequently function as a biblical image for the life-giving effect of sacred teaching, as in the Song of Moses: "May my teaching drop as the rain, my speech distil as the dew, as the gentle rain upon the tender grass, and as the showers upon the herb" (Dt 32:2; cf. Isa 55:10–11; Hos 10:12). Moreover, wind often appears in the prophetic tradition as an image for forces hostile to God's people.²³ Aquinas's use of these texts, then, is not arbitrary but is rooted in an interlocking network of associations found in Scripture itself. Moreover, in holding that the spiritual sense must be based on the literal (*quem auctor intendit*), he apparently does not mean that it must be tied to that meaning with which the author endowed a text in its immediate context. Rather, it must be grounded in a proper interpretation of the Old Testament as a whole in its communication of revelation through both earthly realities and the events of salvation history. Aquinas's claim that the spiritual sense is based on the literal must be evaluated on the basis of his own understanding of what the literal sense is and how it functions.

In another passage, to explain how God can be said to search hearts (Rom 8:27) Thomas quotes the prophet Zephaniah: "I will search Jerusalem with lamps" (Zep 1:12), explaining that it is "not as though [God] investigates the secrets of the heart, but that he knows clearly the hidden things of the heart" (694). On what basis does Thomas identify Jerusalem with the heart? The quotation is from an oracle in which Zephaniah warns in figurative language that although God will punish Israel's enemies, he also will not spare those of his own people whom he finds guilty of idolatry. Thomas's interpretation, taking Jerusalem as a figure for the human heart, simply applies the same idea at a more interior level. Indeed, in the very same verse, as Thomas was doubtless aware, Zephaniah goes on to say, "I will punish the men . . . who say *in their hearts*, 'The LORD will not do good, nor will he do ill.'"

Similarly, Aquinas comments on Paul's description of the progressive moral degeneration of those who reject the truth (Rom 1:18–32), noting that God "releases men to the desires of the heart as to cruel masters" (137). In support he cites a text from Isaiah: "I will give over the Egyptians into the hand of a hard master" (Is 19:4). He thereby makes the Egyptians a figure for the morally depraved, and the hard taskmaster a figure for their own corrupt and insatiable passions. In its original context, the text occurs in an oracle against Egypt, in which the prophet threatens that because of Egypt's hostilities against God's people, it will be subject to internal strife and subjugated to a foreign king,

23. Cf. Isa 49:10; 64:6; Jer 4:11; Ezek 13:13; Mt 7:25.

probably referring to the ruler of Assyria. Is there any discernable continuity between this literal sense and Thomas's tropological reinterpretation? Yes, if one considers the pervasive Old Testament motif—stemming from the golden calf incident with its overtones of sexual revelry (Ex 32:6, 25)—in which Egypt represents the perennial temptation of Israel to return to idolatry for the sake of pleasure, wealth, and power.²⁴ From there it requires only a small step to associate God's punishment of the Egyptians with his allowing the tyranny of sinful desires to become sin's own punishment, the dynamic described by Paul in Romans.

It must be admitted that there are also instances where, even granting Thomas's own definition of the literal sense, his reasoning for bringing a particular Old Testament text to bear on the subject matter of Romans is obscure or even forced. To explain that the saints on earth do not yet have the liberty of glory, which is release from the trials we endure on earth, he quotes Job: "who has let the wild ass go free?" (Job 39:5) (666). Where he expounds on how the Holy Spirit "intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words," he cites a simile from Nahum, "moaning like doves" (Na 2:7) (693). The phrase occurs in an oracle against Nineveh and describes the moaning of the palace maidens as the city is ravaged by plunderers. Thomas's justification for citing it at Romans 8:26 is the biblical association of the Spirit with a dove,²⁵ but here it results in an interpretation at odds with the original meaning.²⁶

The examples given above demonstrate the futility of trying to draw a bright line between literal and spiritual interpretation of Scripture as practiced by Aquinas. The boundary between the two is fluid. As Hans Frei once pointed out, for pre-critical scholars "figuration or typology was a natural extension of literal interpretation. It was literalism at the level of the whole biblical story and thus of the depiction of the whole of historical reality."²⁷

Thomas's Hermeneutical Premises

What are the hermeneutical premises that undergird Thomas's Old Testament interpretation, and is there anything they might contribute to biblical exegesis today? It has been observed with increasing frequency that what we

24. Cf. Dt 17:16; Neh 9:17; Jer 44:12–14; Hos 8:13, 11:5.

25. In such cases Thomas's approach is similar to, and may be influenced by, that of the ancient rabbis, who delighted in linking texts through word association.

26. In this case Thomas relies on a verbal parallel in the Vulgate, *gementibus/gementes*, which does not exist in the Greek: Rom 8:26 has *stenagmois*; Na 2:7 LXX has *phthengomenai*.

27. *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 2.

call pre-critical exegesis is often more satisfying, more theologically suggestive, and more spiritually nourishing than modern critical interpretation. But the question remains as to whether it is legitimate *as exegesis*—as “drawing out” the meaning of the text—as opposed to eisegesis, reading into the text. Is Thomas’s use of the Old Testament as exemplified in his Romans commentary merely a quaint, imaginative, and perhaps edifying exploitation of verbal associations, or does it have any objective exegetical basis? Perhaps the fact that it *is* so spiritually enriching should be taken as at least a partial clue to the answer. I would like to suggest several hermeneutical principles implicit in Thomas’s work that could contribute to a renewal of both biblical exegesis and theology today.

One of the most striking premises of Thomas’s use of the Old Testament is his assumption that Scripture is theologically robust. That is, it makes theological truth claims that are internally consistent and rationally defensible, and that can be incorporated into a formal theological argument without fear that they will dissolve into a mass of inconsistencies or ambiguities. It might be objected that this assumption leads Thomas to proof-text—to mine the Old Testament for statements that support his argument, regardless of their original context and meaning. But even if he is not sensitive to critical questions of philology, genre, literary context, sociocultural background, and so on, which today are recognized as essential to determining the literal sense, it does not follow that Thomas arbitrarily imposes a meaning. He conceived his task as that of faithfully interpreting Scripture by organizing its teaching into a coherent synthesis, not that of hunting for and bending texts to support a predetermined theological scheme. The texts determine the synthesis, not the other way around.²⁸ A retrieval of this confidence in Scripture (interpreted within the Church) as the genuine source of theology—not merely a quarry for theological vocabulary, themes, and images—could lead to a more conscientious effort to *begin* from the word of God in addressing contemporary doctrinal and disciplinary questions, and a confidence that therein we will most surely discover the truth and the will of God.²⁹

Second, Thomas assumes the fundamental unity of the canon. For him, as for the ancient and medieval tradition as a whole, the sacred books are not merely the record of a multiplicity of ancient theologies attributable to various authors addressing various concerns in various historical contexts, but a single source of revelation bearing witness to a single economy of salvation.

28. It should also be pointed out, however, that the scholastic fondness for system degenerated in time to the distortion of proof-texting, where the system begins to take priority over the text.

29. See Raniero Cantalamessa, Lenten Sermon to the Pontifical Household, February 29, 2008.

For Thomas it is self-evident, for instance, that the words of Isaiah, “What I have heard from the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, I announce to you” (Is 21:10), apply to Paul announcing the Gospel (24). Amos too speaks of Christ, as Thomas shows by adding a gloss to Amos 3:7: “‘The Lord will not make a word,’ *namely, make it be incarnate*, ‘without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets’” (26).³⁰ So luminous is the Christological significance of the Old Testament that in response to the question, “Did the Jewish people not know the things which pertain to the mystery of Christ and to the calling of the Gentiles and the fall of the Jews?” Thomas can answer, “They knew fully” because they were “instructed by the law” (Rom 2:18) (850). For Thomas, the unity of the canon is ultimately grounded in a theology of history that recognizes all history as a divine plan at the center of which is the Lord Christ. As Paul put it, all things are “summed up” in Christ (*anakephalaiōsasthai*, Eph 1:10); that is, all history finds its intelligibility and ultimate meaning in him. The Old Testament truly announces the good news of Christ, not only via our “retrospective re-readings,”³¹ but by a Spirit-conferred participation in the wisdom of God on the part of the sacred authors. If all Scripture is a unified witness to a single providential plan, the continuity between old and new is far greater than is usually regarded by exegetes today.

It follows that if a passage in one part of the canon appears to contradict another, part of the commentator’s task is to show how they can be reconciled. Aquinas sees a need, for instance, to address the apparent inconsistency between Paul’s sorrow over the unbelief of his fellow Jews in Romans 9:2 and the admonition in Sirach: “Give not up your soul to sadness” (Sir 30:22). He does so by arguing that since “charity requires that a person love his neighbor as himself, it is laudable for a wise man to grieve over a son of his neighbor as over his own” (738). Such an approach is markedly different from that of modern exegetes, who are generally content to let discrepancies and even contradictions stand as simply indicating different theologies among the various biblical authors, or even among layers of redaction within a single work. Reclaiming a faith that all Scripture is inspired by God and thus theologically reliable—on its own terms, not ours—could lead to a renewed effort to show how the different perspectives among the biblical authors are complementary rather than contradictory.

Finally, the above exegetical premises are ultimately dependent on a *hermeneutic of faith*—a profound awareness on Thomas’s part that he is dealing

30. Italics added. Aquinas here relies on a parallel in the Vulgate between Amos 3:7, “non **faciet** Dominus Deus **verbum** nisi revelaverit” and John 1:14, “(Joh 1:14) **Verbum** caro **factum** est.”

31. The phrase is from the Pontifical Biblical Commission document, *The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible* (2002), 21.

with not merely a human document from the ancient past but a living, breathing Word in which God continues to speak. The recovery of such a faith perspective is crucial to overcoming the crisis of a truncated, reductive exegesis that attends only to the human dimension of the word and that has no power to edify, challenge, convict, or guide the faithful. Already a renewed attention to faith as the properly Christian hermeneutic is bringing streams of fresh water into what sometimes looks like the dry desert of contemporary academic biblical scholarship.

At the international Synod of Bishops on “The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church” in 2008, Benedict XVI made an intervention in which he stated:

Where exegesis is not theology, Scripture cannot be the soul of theology and, vice versa, when theology is not essentially the interpretation of the Scripture in the Church, this theology has no foundation anymore. Therefore for the life and the mission of the Church, for the future of faith, this dualism between exegesis and theology must be overcome. Biblical theology and systematic theology are two dimensions of the one reality that we call Theology.³²

A closer attention to Aquinas’s use of the Old Testament in interpreting the New helps point the way toward a reintegration of Scripture and theology.

32. See Benedict XVI’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, 35.