CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL QUARTERLY

CTQ

Volume 45, Number 3

JULY 1981

Hermeneutics in Thomas Aquinas: An Appraisal and Appreciation

John Franklin Johnson

Dr. Stanley Gundry has recently noted that North American evangelical Christians, by and large, are but minimally conscious of their connection with the Christian past in dealing with crucial theological and ecclesiological issues of the day.[1] Although Gundry does not explicitly identify that expanse of the tradition most often dismissed, it would not be far off the mark to suggest the medieval era as the most likely candidate — especially in terms of dealing with questions of Biblical authority and interpretation.

Indeed, when many a Protestant thinks of medieval theotogy the initial images which come to mind are titles of tomes like the *Sententiae* of Peter Lombard or the *Quaestiones Disputatae* of Thomas Aquinas. Moveover, he recalls a "scholastic" manner of thinking and presentation characterized by sophisticated divisions, stereotyped literary forms, definitions, syllogisms, and constant subtle delineations; in short, a dry intellectualism which seems to have neglected the vivid originality of the Holy Scriptures. Certainly in the Lutheran heritage there is evidence of this general predisposition regarding the aridity of medieval theological reflection. There are few who would take issue with Luther's opposition to the use of Aristotle by that "chatter-box" Thomas Aquinas — an opposition that is evident from the fact that, while Aquinas consistently referred to Aristotle as "the philosopher," Luther just as consistently refers to him as "that damned pagan" (in addition to other choice epithets that form a long and impressive catalog).[2] But even beyond the Lutheran denominational pale, it is to be doubted if many Protestants would dissent from Luther's estimate of Peter Lombard or hesitate to apply it even more generally to other medieval theologians. "Peter Lombard," Luther said, "was adequate as a theologian; none has been his equal. He read Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory, and also all the councils. He was a great man. If he had by chance come upon the Bible he would no doubt have been the greatest."[3] In other words, there is the suspicion among contemporary "evangelical" Christians that the Scriptures were so ignored in the Middle Ages that the theology of the period is but bare rationalization.

However, what is less known but decisive for an accurate understanding of medieval theology and its literary expression is that this scholasticism was developed on the basis and in the

framework of what might be termed today an "evangelical movement."

The period of the last third of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century is characterized by the breakthrough of a desire for biblical knowledge which could not be satisfied by means of glosses between the lines or on the margin of the text.[4] Obviously, this thirst for knowledge had a sociological dimension; from a more exact hearing of the biblical word arose an impulse toward a renewal of the church, and soon this movement expressed itself in new institutional forms — as, for instance, the orders of the Franciscans and the Dominicans. Yet, this thirst for scriptural knowledge soon developed as an academic tendency in its own right. New methods were invented to diffuse the text of the Scriptures in greater quantity; corrected copies of the text were attempted, both Latin and vernacular; the text was divided into pericopes; the first concordances appeared; and, above all, the theological educational system was rearranged in harmony with these tendencies. The consistent presentation of systematic theology was the concern of the "baccalaureus," who explained the *Sentences* of Lomard. At one time historians commonly assumed that masters in theology lectured on the *Sentences* as well, but in 1894 Heinrich Denifle demonstrated conclusively that the official textbook of masters in theology in the medieval university was the Bible.[5] Once a young man became a master, he was not allowed to lecture on Lombard; rather his task was to comment on the Holy Scriptures, and his official title was "Master of the Sacred Page."

In addition to this medieval "evangelical movement," a second development helped shape biblical study — the introduction of Aristotelianism into the theology of the Church through the medium of Arabian and Jewish scholars. The significance of this phenomenon for hermeneutics in the Middle Ages is not to be seen in the use of new methods so much as in the close integration of language and thought that it produced. Interpretation, it was realized, cannot be isolated from the rules of thought which govern all areas of knowledge; it must be conducted scientifically, with adequate reasons given for the significance established.[6] The impact of this Aristotelian thought on medieval hermeneutics was basically felt in two connections.

First, it challenged the sharp distinction between sense and thought. According to the Platonic philosophical orientation, there was a world of ordered forms above and apart from the world of sense-experience; they are reflected in it to be sure, but knowledge of them is reached only through transcending sense-

experience. That made it possible for the late patristic and early medieval ages to develop an entire world of allegory and spiritual meaning in detachment from history and event. According to the Aristotelian view, however, the universal ideas exist only as expressed in the individual objects of the sensible world, and we know them apart from, but only through, sense-experience. All of this had a very sobering effect on exegesis. It disparaged the cultivation of a world of meaning which could be correlated on its own without scientific reference to the historical sense of Scripture and careful examination of its words and concepts. The Aristotelian philosophy, that is to say, refused to separate matter and form because they are two aspects of one thing. In terms of hermeneutics, one cannot understand the Bible by naively distinguishing letter from spirit and making a separate study of each.

In the second place, the Aristotelian notion of science as that which establishes rational connections and gathers them around a center had an impact on hermeneutics.[7] Scientific knowledge, according to the Aristotelian model, is the orderly arranging and demonstration of sequences of truths in a particular science according to the particular principles relevant to it (e.g., biological sequences within biology and geometrical sequences within geometry). Knowledge arises through a development from sense-experience by drawing out what is implicit in it and so proceeds by abstraction to the formulation of general notions, and to explanation by testing the relation of their causes to particular effects. The application of this concept to biblical interpretation in the medieval theologians does not mean that the truths of divine revelation have to be demonstrated, but that the interpretation of the Scriptures cannot be separated from careful analysis of propositions. The interpretation of language is, after all, the interpretation of thought. This, in turn, had twin ramifications for exegesis. On the one hand, it detached the interpretation of the Bible from a realm of mystical meanings that could not be rationally related to the text and thus brought theology and exegesis into closer relation to one another. On the other hand, it introduced a powerful element of inferential reasoning into interpretation, whether of the linguistic signs used in Scripture (its words and sentences) or of the things they signified. Consequently, there arose a natural theology side by side with revealed theology, and because the former could only be regarded as *praeparatio fidei*, it tended to provide the general framework within which biblical interpretation was carried on.[8]

To perceive in a concrete way how these two developments coalesced — the renewed movement toward the centrality of

Scripture and the implications of Aristotle's philosophy for hermeneutics — one must look preeminently to Thomas Aquinas. Thomas was, of course, a Dominican friar and very much committed to the medieval "evangelical movement", a commitment sharpened in the midst of the anti-mendicant controversy which was at its zenith when Thomas incepted at the University of Paris in 1256. In the following year he began lecturing on the Bible as a master of sacred theology. From that time until his death some seventeen years later, Thomas lectured and wrote commentaries on a number of biblical books including Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, the Psalms, Matthew, John, and the Pauline epistles. Indeed, according to Pope Leo XIII, Thomas was the leading exegete of Holy Scripture among the scholastic theologians.[9]

In terms of Aristotelian influence, Thomas is well known as an interpreter of that philosophical position. His massive *Summa Theologiae* stands as a monumental synthesis of Aristotelian philosophy and Christian theology. As Paul Vignaux notes, Aquinas placed Christianity "in the midst of Aristotelian natural philosophy, in the very center of the science of nature."[10]

The present question, then, is what brand of biblical hermeneutic emerges from a theologian whose understanding of the Word of God develops in the matrix of these two currents. Is it a hermeneutic hopelessly mired in the intricacies of scholastic subtleties and of little value today? Or is it a hermeneutic — deficient, to be sure — but suggestive of some important motifs to which all who appreciate the authority of Scripture can resonate? And, perhaps just as importantly, what does it say about a scientific hermeneutic forged from the fires of both an "evangelical" renaissance and an Aristotelian philosophical orientation in a time when many Protestants seem to think of Platonism as a theological virtue? While exhaustive answers to these questions cannot be offered in this brief essay, perhaps the most appropriate way to begin the task is to identify those concepts at the basis of the hermeneutic of Thomas Aquinas and their implications for the role of Scripture in his theology.

In interpretation, Thomas held, one has to determine the intention of the author and discern the significant form of what he has to say through turning one's attention to the things signified and through noting the use of his words by examining their relation to the whole of his discourse.[11] In all of this, interpretation is fundamentally an act of the intellect or understanding (*intellectus*) in which the mind pierces through to see the *quid* of a thing, that is to say, to read the truth in the very essence

of it (*interius in ipsa rei essentia rei veritatem quodammodo legere*).[12]

The etymology of *intelligere* accepted by Thomas was from *intus legere*, to read within, to penetrate beneath the sensible surface and discern the relational meaning. This provides an important clue to the Thomistic conception of interpretation as an act of understanding or intimate knowledge (*intellectus*). In the *Summa* he writes:

> Sensitive cognition is concerned with external sensible qualities but intellective cognition penetrates into the very essence of a thing, because the object of the understanding is that which is (*quod quid est*). But there are many kinds of things which lie hidden within, to which man's cognition ought to penetrate from the inside, as it were. For under the accidents lies hidden the substantial nature of the thing; under words lie hidden the things signified by the words; under similitudes and figures lies hidden effects, and conversely. But since man's cognition begins with sense as from without, it is manifest that the stronger the light of the intellect is, the farther it can penetrate into the inmost depths. However, the natural light of our intellect is of finite strength and hence can but reach to what is limited. Therefore man needs supernatural light, that he may penetrate farther in order to learn what he cannot learn through his natural light, and that supernatural light given to man is called the gift of understanding (*donum intellectus*).[13]

By this supernatural light Thomas was not referring to some special grace but to the gift of simple intuitive apprehension which Aristotle had spoken of as the divine in man and which St. Augustine had taken over from his Platonic sources. Although he was critical of Augustinian Platonism, Aquinas still held that the power of the intellect in penetrating into the essence of a thing, into its ultimate structure or spiritual content, would not be possible were it not that man has been given a share in the divine light. To be sure, in the above cited passage Thomas is not discussing hermeneutics *per se*, but, as he indicated, the same procedure applies to the interpretation of words, for we have to discern not only their sense but break through to the real meaning. To understand is to read the hidden meaning. This does not refer to some esoteric art, but to the same sort of activity one employs when one seeks to know the quiddity of anything.

But how is one to think of this intuitive apprehension of essences when it is applied to the interpretation of the divinely

inspired writings of Scripture, which can be approached "scientifically" only if they are interpreted in a mode appropriate to their nature? The Bible has two authors; the principal author is God, Thomas affirms, but man is the instrumental author.[14] Thus, in interpreting Scripture, the intellect must penetrate through the sense of the words to the meaning of the human author and to the meaning of the divine author. This does not mean that the Scripture is equivocal, for God reveals Himself through the literal sense intended by the human author; but it does mean that the interpreter has to penetrate to the divine intention through the literal sense, the grammatical sense.

On the one hand, then, the Scriptures must be interpreted as divinely inspired. In them, Aquinas writes, "the Word of the eternal Father, comprehending everything by His own immensity, has willed to become little through the assumption of our littleness, yet without resigning His majesty . . . ."[15] Because it is our nature to learn intelligible truths through sensible objects, God has provided revelation of Himself according to the capacity of our nature and has put forward in the Holy Scriptures divine and spiritual truths through comparisons with material things. That is why the Lord spoke in parables. Thus it is apparent that, as Thomas states in the introduction to his *Summa*:

> The divinely inspired Scripture does not come within the philosophical disciplines that have been discovered according to human reason. Accordingly, there is needed another science divinely inspired beyond philosophical disciplines . . . because man is ordained to God, to an end that surpasses the grasp of his reason.[16]

The science of interpreting these Scriptures needs supernatural grace and special illumination that the intellect may penetrate into the inner depth of the divine revelation, into the very heart of the truth.[17] It will not, however, leave the grammatical-historical sense behind nor deprecate it; for it is only in and through the literal sense that the illuminated intellect can reach the spiritual content and reality that lie behind them.

On the other hand, the Scriptures must be considered from the viewpoint of their human authorship, according to Thomas. The fact that he distinguished the human author from the divine, as the instrumental author, means that he thinks of the human authorship in terms of second causes. Thus, while God is the Principal Author or Cause, the human author is given a relative place under Him as secondary cause so that what he produces must be investigated in its *relative* independence as a human composition. When the act of *intelligere* is directed to the human

words of Scripture it penetrates beneath them to read them from their inner aspect and so through the *sensus* it reaches what the author intended the words to signify, the *intellectus litteralis*. In determining this, one has to consider the end to which they conduce and therefore the reason for them. Therefore, interpretation is concerned not only with the literal sense of the words but with the literal causes and reasons that lie behind them. If language and thought, words and reasons, belong so closely together, then a faithful interpretation of the text will be inseparable from an interpretation of the thought.

In the Scriptures, then, the interpreter is concerned with rational communication; the rational disciplines, accordingly, have to be used in their interpretation. The influence of Aristotle's *Perihermenias* on Thomas is manifest at this juncture; if men only made natural sounds without any intention or mental image lying behind them they could no more be interpreted than the noises of animals.[18] If it is this rational communication in and through words that one has to interpret in the Bible, then the exegetical and argumentative modes of interpretation are not to be divorced from one another. That is to say, unless one probes right into the sequence of thought a passage involves, one is unable to deal adequately and lucidly with the text. Exegesis requries problematic thinking.

It is to be observed that when one does penetrate into the literal reasons that lie behind the literal sense of Scripture one is interpreting what is intended by the divine author as well as the human author who was moved by God to write. For instance, when one considers the reasons for the ceremonial precepts in the Old Testament, one discovers that there was a twofold end which must guide the interpretation; they were ordained for divine worship to commemorate certain divine benefits, but they were also ordained to foreshadow Jesus Christ. They may, therefore, be taken in two ways but never in such a way that they go beyond the order of literal causes.[19] Thus, even though one gives some of these ceremonies a Christological interpretation, one can only do that if it is congruent with the literal signification and rooted in it.

When handling the question of biblical interpretation, Aquinas speaks prominently of the *sensus litteralis*; indeed, it is interesting to note that in his biblical commentaries the early church fathers are not cited as often as in the works of other medieval exegetes. The so-called spiritual sense is handled much more soberly by Thomas than his contemporaries. The literal sense is primary and essential, while the spiritual is derived and based on the former.

Recalling the Augustinian fourfold distinction in determining the sense of the Old Testament: the historical, the aetiological, the analogical, and the allegorical, Thomas argues that all but the allegorical are to be included in the literal sense. History is the straightforward account, aetiology is the causative account, and analogy is the comparative account in which the truth of one is shown not to contradict the truth of another. The rule to be observed is that all the senses are built upon the literal sense — the sense of words — and that argument and doctrine are to be taken from the literal sense alone, never from the allegorical or spiritual sense.[20] Aquinas is very emphatic about this. Historical truth must be kept as the foundation, while spiritual expositions are to be built on top of it. As he writes in his commentary on 2 Corinthians, to wrest the Scripture to an alien end is a form of spiritual adultery.[21]

By the spiritual sense, Aquinas refers in traditional terms to the allegorical, tropological or moral, and the anagogical senses. But he insists that Scripture does not teach under the spiritual sense anything necessary for faith which it does not teach with clarity under the literal sense.[22] In so far as it is not explicitly revealed, the spiritual sense is always uncertain and therefore cannot be employed in sacred doctrine. However, by this nothing is lost from the revealed truth since "nothing is taught mysteriously in any place of Scripture which is not explained clearly elsewhere; therefore, the spiritual explanation must always be based on the literal."[23] This sentiment is in part, of course, reminiscent of the Lutheran insistence on the perspicuity of Scripture and the truth that Scripture interprets Scripture.

The primary necessity for Thomas, then, is to study the text. The interpreter of the Word of God has to see the parts in relation to the whole and the whole in relation to the parts that comprise it. No part separated from the rest has the form of the whole any more than a hand separated from man has human form.

From start to finish Thomas Aquinas is a rational, scientific thinker. It is not surprising therefore that he should act in the same way with regard to Sacred Scripture. A science, according to him, is the way of knowledge in which from things already known one derives a knowledge of things previously unknown. This embraces a ratiocinative process from first principles to conclusions through which knowledge is sifted out and arranged in an order which the intellect seeks to see as a whole. No science can prove its first principles, but it is in the light of them that it knows what is less knowable; and in ordering its matter in the light of the first principles it does succeed in connecting the contents

rationally together and so directs attention back again to first principles. When this scientific method is applied to theology, Thomas claims, the Bible occupies the place of first principles, and it is in the light of the truths they reveal that the whole process of theological activity is undertaken.[24]

However, Aquinas also suggests that there are two kinds of science. Some sciences are grounded on first principles that are *per se nota* evident to the natural intelligence, such as geometry; but there are others that operate under the light of God's own knowledge and which He manifests to us through the words of Scripture. In this way, it could be said, Thomas unequivocally bases the doctrines of theology upon the Word of God. The authoritative pronouncements of Scripture ought to have supreme place; theology can only make use of other authorities or teachers as extrinsic and probable corroboration.[25] Theological science receives its principles immediately from God through the divine revelation given to the prophets and apostles. "We must keep to that which has been written in Scripture," says Aquinas, "as to an excellent rule of faith so that we must add nothing to it, detract nothing, and change nothing by interpreting it badly."[26]

Certainly, there are many deficiencies in other aspects of Thomistic hermeneutic. In refusing to allow the propositions of the Roman Church to come under the criticism of scriptural truth, for example, Aquinas virtually made the authority of the Church dominant over the *prima veritas.* Certainly, too, after Aquinas there emerged medieval theologians for whom the scholastic system was the principal matter and the interpretation of the Bible a secondary matter. Yet, the thrust of the present discussion is to demonstrate that such a mentality is far from that of Aquinas. There are, indeed, some motifs in his theology that distinguish his handling of Scripture from others in his own time, motifs which remain instructive in our time also. This is a significant point to make if modern Lutheranism is to capitalize on its wider connection with past Christian tradition and to mine that connection, where valid, for all of its gold in defending the primacy and infallibility of the Word of God in our own day.

FOOTNOTES

1. Stanley Gundry, "Evangelical Theology: Where Should We Be Going?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society,* XXII (March, 1979), p. 8.
2. Quoted in Friedrich Nitzsch, *Luther und Aristoteles* (Kiel, 1883), p. 3.
3. Martin Luther, *Table Talk* (Philadelphia, 1967), p. 26.

4. See Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford, 1952).
5. Heinrich Denifle, "Quel livre servait de base a l'enseignement des Maitres en Theologie dans d'Universite de Paris," *Revue Thomiste*, II (1894), pp. 129-161.
6. It would be well, incidentally, for evangelical Lutherans to explore this Aristotelian motif in view of the threat to modern biblical theology by a new nominalism that appears to question very radically the relation of language to thought. See, for example, James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford, 1961).
7. For a concise summary of the Thomistic stance on the subjects of a science see Armand Maurer's "Introduction" to Thomas Aquinas, *The Division and Methods of the Sciences* (Toronto, 1963).
8. *Expositio super librum Boethii de Trinitate*, q. 2, 22.
9. Pope Leo XIII, "Thomas Aquinas inter eos habuit palmam," in the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus*.
10. Paul Vignaux, *Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1959), p. 119.
11. See *Perihermenias*, Bk. I, 1-7.
12. See Hans Meyer, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (St. Louis, 1944), p. 190ff.
13. *ST*, II-II, q. 8, a. 1.
14. *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, q. 6, a. 3.
15. *Compendium Theologiae*, I. 1.
16. *ST*, I-I, q. 1, a. 1.
17. *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, q. 6, a. 1.
18. *Perihermenias*, Bk. 1, 1.
19. *ST*, I-II, q. 102, a. 2, ad I.
20. *ST*, I-I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1.
21. *Comm. in 2 Cor.*, 2, lect. 3, fin.
22. *ST*, I-I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 1.
23. *Quaestiones Quodlibetales*, q. 7.
24. *ST*, I-I, q. 1, a. 2; a. 3.
25. Consistently in Thomas's systematic works *sacra scriptura* and *sacra doctrina* are taken as equivalents. See, for example, *ST*, I-I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2; a. 8, ad 2; II-II, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2; *Summa contra Gentiles*, bk. 1, ch. 9.
26. *In De Divinis Nominibus*, II, lect. 1.

John F. Johnson is associate professor for systematic and historical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.