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Authorial Intention and the Divisio textus

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Beryl Smalley in her landmark book, The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages, sought to show, among other things, that not all of those who commented on the Bible in the Middle Ages were, in her words, theologians. Some were also scholars. The mark of the scholar was an interest in the literal sense apart from and in contrast to the Middle Ages’ seeming fixation on the spiritual or mystical sense of Scripture. In particular, Smalley was interested in those scholars whose work was a kind of anticipation of modern biblical scholarship, especially of an historical critical flavor. She found, as we know, two such forward-looking John the Baptist: a modest son of the abbey of St. Victor by the name of Andrew and, far more significantly, the intellectual luminary of the Order of Preachers, St. Thomas Aquinas. Smalley would come to have doubts about St. Thomas. Although his instincts in interpreting the literal sense were sound, according to Smalley, St. Thomas was still too drawn to the dark side, or at least the silly side, of the medieval interpretive project. Smalley was correct.

The medieval quirks and oddities in St. Thomas’s interpretation of Scripture, however, extend beyond his fascination with the mystical senses. They extend as well into his understanding and interpretation of the literal sense. Not even here is Thomas particularly modern. Thus a disappointing to Smalley, St. Thomas may nonetheless be of some value to the modern interpreter of Scripture, precisely because he is not one of us.

Thomas’s conception of the literal sense of Scripture is not particul-

ary novel; it is, however, articulated in a particularly clear way. Thomas says that the literal sense of Scripture pertains to those things that the words of Scripture signify. It is concerned with the \textit{sensus}—let us translate \textit{sensus} here as "meaning"—of the words. The task of the interpreter of the literal sense of Scripture is to elucidate that meaning—the \textit{sensus}—of the words.

Getting at the meaning of the words is not always an easy task. As is clear throughout the tradition, and here in Thomas's commentary on the Gospel according to St. John, the interpreter is confronted with different interpretations of the meaning of the words, of the literal sense of Scripture. What is one to do? Fortunately, Thomas does, once, address this question. It is tucked away in an article of his disputed questions \textit{De potentia}, in which he asks whether the creation of unformed matter precedes in duration the creation of things. We need not worry here about unformed matter. As for how one is to read the literal sense of Scripture, Thomas poses two negative principles; first, one ought not 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" is preserved. I take this latter to mean, minimally, that the interpretation must not over-fit the words and their context. Thus for an interpretation to be true it cannot be contrary to the truth, and it must fit the circumstance of the letter.

What is missing from Thomas's criteria, and notably so to moderns, is any consideration of what the author meant. This is not a momentary lapse. Such consideration is not absent only in theoretical discussions, but also in practice. If we look for an expression such as the "meaning of the author" (\textit{sensus autenticus}), we do not find it, with one notable exception to be discussed below. This begs the obvious question: why is it that when Thomas considers an ambiguous passage of Scripture, he shows no interest in determining what the author meant when he wrote it? Might not the question of what the author meant be of some help? I think that Thomas would simply answer no. One need only recall Book XII of Augustine's \textit{Confessiones}, known to and cited by St. Thomas. 3 In Book XII, Augustine struggles with the opening chapter of

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\textit{De potentiis}, however, is not Augustine's only work on the topic. 5 In his work \textit{De potentia}, Augustine devotes a significant amount of space to discussing the nature of power and its relationship to the divine. He argues that power is a manifestation of the divine, and that it is through power that the divine brings about the world.

In his discussion of the literal sense of Scripture, Thomas is careful to distinguish between the literal sense and the "meaning of the author." He notes that while the literal sense pertains to the things that the words of Scripture signify, the meaning of the author pertains to the intentions of the author. Thomas argues that the interpreter should strive to understand what the author meant when he wrote the passage, rather than simply taking the words of the passage at face value.

Thomas's approach to understanding the literal sense of Scripture is rooted in his understanding of Scripture as a divine revelation. He believes that the literal sense of Scripture pertains to the things that the words of Scripture signify, and that this sense can be understood through careful attention to the text. However, Thomas also recognizes the importance of the meaning of the author, and he argues that the interpreter should strive to understand what the author meant when he wrote the passage.

In conclusion, Thomas's approach to understanding the literal sense of Scripture is characterized by a commitment to both the literal sense and the meaning of the author. He argues that while the literal sense pertains to the things that the words of Scripture signify, the meaning of the author pertains to the intentions of the author. Thomas's approach to understanding the literal sense of Scripture is rooted in his understanding of Scripture as a divine revelation, and he believes that the interpreter should strive to understand both the literal sense and the meaning of the author when studying Scripture.

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ed to Mosæ and the other authors of Sacred Scripture to know the diverse truths which men would be able to understand, and that they might signify those truths under one letter so that whenever of these meanings is the meaning of the author. This apparently unique instance of the phrase "meaning of the author" (sensus auctorii) in the works of Thomas is notably found here in a context in which Thomas affirms the very possibility of the multiplicity of such meanings under one letter.

But if the author did not so mean all of those meanings, it does not matter. And it does not matter for one simple reason: the primary author of Scripturie is God. 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. God could mean all of the literal meanings, and thus one would have multiple literal meanings, but without any such meanings on the part of the human author.

Having avoided understandable reasons the quasimi? of human au-

thorial meaning, Thomas has nonetheless returned to scholastic meaning with his final appeal to divine authorship. Why? If we were to consider Thomas as a commentator on Aristotle, we would find something rather different. Certainly passages of Aristotle are difficult, and multiple interpretations might fit the text both narrowly and more broadly; this would, I think, be taken as a defect in the case of Aristotle. It is clearly not a defect in the case of Sacred Scripture. In the De potentia, Thomas says: "This pertains to the dignity of divine Scripture that it contains many meanings (sensus) under one letter, so that it thus would be fitting to the diverse intellects of men, such that each man marvel that he can find in divine Scripture the truth which he conceives in his mind."

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 the letter in fact fitting the divine intention of Scripture as communicating the truth requisite for eternal beatitude with God? Do not the manifold possibilities of scriptural reading—and this just on the literal level—suggest in a dim but analogical way the manifold actualities of bea-

6. De pot. 4.1. resp.

7. ST 1, q. 1, a. 10.

8. De pot. 4.1. resp.

No verse stands in isolation, but rather each stands in a rich and organic set of relations to the rest of the Gospel. The division maintains the integrity of the Gospel in the midst of careful, detailed, and often word for word interpretation. In the De potentia, Thomas stated that one of the criteria for considering the legitimacy of a given interpretation of Scripture is that "the circumstance of the letter" is preserved. By providing a context that reaches not only to the surrounding verses or even chapters, but to the Gospel as a whole, the division of the text articulates in a highly formal way the circumstance of the letter."

In his Commentary on John, Thomas yokes the division of the text to the intention of the author. I quoted above the opening sentence of the commentary: "John the Evangelist principally intends to show the divinity of the Word incarnate"; but this is only the first part of the sentence, which significantly concludes, "and thus the Gospel is divided into two parts: for first, he presents the divinity of Christ; second, he makes it known through those things which Christ accomplished in the flesh." In the Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John, the intention becomes the defining note of the division. Thus the whole and its parts are ultimately seen in relation to John's end of making known the divinity of the Word Incarnate. Since, intention embraces not only the end but also the means to the end, the manifold subdivisions of the text ultimately relate to the first division and its signal theme. Each part of the Gospel is now structurally related as a means to the end of making known the divinity of the incarnate Word, that is, to the intention of the author.

Authorial intention thus has a place in Thomas's interpretation of the Gospel according to St. John. While it does not directly answer the question, what did St. John mean when he wrote a particular passage, it does answer this question: to what ultimate end did St. John write this particular passage. In this, authorial intention is invaluable to the interpreter of the Gospel.