

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.<sup>1</sup> 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 senses 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 Baptists: 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 her 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 disappointment 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 particu-

1. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), xv-xvi.

2. Beryl Smalley, *The Gospels in the Schools, c. 1100-c. 1280* (London: Hambledon Press, 1985), 265-66.

larly 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.<sup>3</sup> It is concerned with the *sensus*—let us translate *sensus* here as “meaning”—of the words. The task of the interpreter of the literal sense of Scripture is to articulate that meaning—the *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 *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.<sup>4</sup> I take this latter to mean, minimally, that the interpretation more or less fits 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” (*sensus auctoris*), 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 *Confessions*, known to and cited by St. Thomas.<sup>5</sup> In Book XII, Augustine struggles with the opening chapter of

3. *Summa theologiae* [hereafter *ST*] I, q. 1, a. 10.

4. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* [hereafter *De pot.*] 4.1 in *Quaestiones disputatae*, ed. P. Bazzi et al., vol. 2 (Turin: Marietti, 1949), 102–10; English translation in *On the Power of God*, trans. English Dominican Fathers, vol. 2 (London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, 1932), 1–23.

5. See *De pot.* 4.1. resp.; *ST* I, q. 1, a. 10.

Genesis, a biblical dark continent defying the most ambitious and determined cartographers. Some had criticized Augustine’s interpretation of Genesis 1 on the grounds that it was not what Moses meant. Augustine’s reply was the counter question: How do his critics know what Moses meant? Do not Augustine and his critics share the same letter? Does not Augustine’s interpretation fit the letter? Augustine says nothing contrary to the faith (a sure indicator of a false interpretation). So on what basis do his critics claim his interpretation is not the one meant by Moses? Apart from some secret knowledge, some Gnostic or Straussian decoder ring, they have no basis. The appeal to what the author meant in such contentious cases is simply a dead end. In this concern with the meaning of the author, Thomas seems to be in full accord with Augustine.

If Thomas’s disinterest in the meaning of the author is, from our vantage point, a notable quirk in his reading of the literal sense, it is not the only one. It is just the beginning.

If a given passage of Scripture admits of two different interpretations, two different meanings such that they satisfy Thomas’s modest criteria of legitimate interpretation—not contrary to truth and fitting the circumstance of the letter—what is one then to do? Which interpretation is the right one? The opportunities for this question abound in Thomas’s commentary on the Gospel according to St. John. Time and time again, Thomas provides two or more patristic interpretations for a single scriptural passage. He does not judge one to be correct, the other not; by his own criteria no such judgment can be made.

So in answer to the question, “Which is the true meaning of the letter?” the answer is simply, all of the above. What Thomas does in practice by presenting multiple interpretations of the letter, he affirms in principle: the literal sense admits of many meanings. Recall the principle from *De potentia*: one ought not insist upon one’s own interpretation to the exclusion of other interpretations which in their content are true and in which the circumstance of the letter is preserved. If Thomas is, at least to us, surprisingly uninterested in pursuing what is the meaning of the author as such, he is also uninterested in determining a single meaning of the letter. If the former is a dead end, the latter is simply the wrong question: There is not necessarily one single meaning for each passage of Scripture. Some admit of more.

Thomas does recognize that such is odd. So he asks, might not the human author mean all of these meanings in a given passage? Augustine raised the same question about Moses. And with Augustine, Thomas says yes. In the *De potentia*, Thomas says, “It is not unbelievable that it could be divinely grant-

ed to Moses 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 such that whichever of these meanings is the meaning of the author."<sup>6</sup> This apparently unique instance of the phrase "meaning of the author" (*sensus auctoris*) 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 Scripture 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.<sup>7</sup>

Having avoided for understandable reasons the quagmire of human authorial meaning, Thomas has nonetheless returned to authorial 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 might marvel that he can find in divine Scripture the truth which he conceives in his mind."<sup>8</sup>

For Thomas, the purpose of Scripture is to make known those truths necessary for salvation.<sup>9</sup> 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 given 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 beati-

6. *De pot.*, 4.1. resp.

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

8. *De pot.*, 4.1. resp.

9. *Quaestiones de quolibet* 7.6.1. resp., in *Opera omnia iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita* fs24, vol. 25.1 (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1996), 28.

tude which Scripture signifies and to which it is ordered? Such multiplicity is no defect, but the unique dignity of Sacred Scripture.

If the *sensus auctoris* is missing from St. Thomas's commentaries, *intentio auctoris*—the intention of the author—is not. It is precisely here that the modern reader of St. Thomas must be particularly careful. Insofar as the modern reader is inclined to think that authorial intention is simply "what the author meant," he is not of one mind with St. Thomas. So how are we to understand "intention of the author" according to Thomas?

In the *Summa theologiae*, St. Thomas tells us that intention, to intend, is an act of the will insofar as the will moves to some end or goal, embracing not only the willing of that end, but also the willing of those things that are ordered to that end.<sup>10</sup> When Thomas speaks of the "intention of the author," it is precisely in this way.

Consider the opening sentence of the first lecture on the first chapter of the Gospel according to St. John: "John the Evangelist principally intends to show the divinity of the incarnate Word." Thomas here states a reason why St. John wrote his Gospel, the end St. John was pursuing. Such a consideration is not unimportant; in providing the end intended by St. John, Thomas gives the frame for his interpretation of the Gospel as a whole. Because to intend is not only to will an end, but also to will those things that are ordered to that end; a knowledge of the intention of St. John provides the context for understanding a given passage of his Gospel, since the whole Gospel will be read as ordered to the end intended.

The articulation of the author's intention is particularly powerful when yoked as it is in Thomas's commentary on St. John to that splendid scholastic device, the division of the text. In a division of the text, a commentator states some theme that serves as an interpretive key for his commentary. St. Albert the Great uses the lion and its attributes as the starting point for his commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark. The Franciscan John of La Rochelle uses a passage from Isaiah as the starting point for his commentary on the Gospel according to St. Matthew. With the theme stated, the commentator begins to divide the text, dividing each division in turn into smaller and smaller parts down to the verse or even smaller. Thus, St. Albert divides the Gospel according to St. Mark into seven initial parts according to seven properties of the lion.

The division of the text provides a sustained structural analysis by which the parts of the Gospel stand in relation both to the whole and to each other.

10. *ST I-II*, q. 12, a. 1, ad 4.

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.<sup>11</sup>

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 this 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.

11. I have developed this point at more length in "The Theological Character of the Scholastic 'Division of the Text' with Particular Reference to the Commentaries of Saint Thomas Aquinas," in *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Christian Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 276–83.

## TWO

The Theological Role of the Fathers in Aquinas's *Super Evangelium S. Ioannis Lectura*

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Many modern studies on the nature of theology according to St. Thomas Aquinas have been centered on his claim for a scientific study of divine revelation. This stress perhaps to a great extent is due to our modern concentration on the opening question of the *Summa theologiae*, where the second article asks: "Whether sacred doctrine is a science?" The immediate context is the preceding article: "Whether besides the philosophical disciplines any further doctrine is required?" By placing sacred doctrine in contrast to the teachings of the philosophical disciplines, Aquinas invites us to compare the kind of science that each provides: in short, which science, philosophy or theology, is more scientific. Theology is more certain, based as it is on divine revelation. Yet, philosophy has, in a sense, a certain advantage: it starts with sources that are evident, not on authority.

Still, the focus on theology as a scientific discipline is due not only to our present-day perspective. Even in Aquinas's own time, one can find that his answer to the question "Whether sacred doctrine is a science?"—namely, that sacred doctrine is a subaltern science whose principles or premises are based most essentially on the authority of divine revelation—was challenged. The discussion, carried on in especially strong terms in the works of Henry of Ghent and Godfrey of Fontaines,<sup>1</sup> shortly after Aquinas's time, led to a certain division con-

1. Henricus de Gandavo, *Summa quaestionum ordinariarum*, a. 7, qq. 4–5 (Paris: 1520), f. 52rB–54rH. Cf. S. F. Brown, "Henry of Ghent's Critique of Aquinas's Subalternation Theory and the Early Thomistic Response," in *Knowledge and the Sciences in Medieval Philosophy*, Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Medieval Philosophy: Annals of the Finnish Society for Missiology and Ecumenics 55, vol. 3