

*The Theological Character
of the Scholastic "Division of the Text"
with Particular Reference to the Commentaries
of Saint Thomas Aquinas*

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The scholastic division of the text is an interpretive technique whose idea is rather simple. Starting with the text as a whole, one articulates a principal theme, in the light of which one divides and subdivides the text into increasingly smaller units, often down to the individual words. A scholastic division of the text has at least three essential characteristics. First, the interpreter articulates a theme that provides a conceptual unity to the text and the commentary as a whole. Second, the division penetrates at least to the level of verse; it does not simply articulate large blocks of the text. And third, because the division begins with the whole and then continues through progressive subdivisions, every verse stands in an articulated relation not only with the whole but ultimately with every other part, division, and verse of the text.

Consider, by way of example, Saint Thomas Aquinas's commentary on the Gospel according to Saint John (see appendix). Thomas begins by stating the principal point—the unifying theme—of the Gospel: to "show the divinity of the incarnate Word."¹ In view of this intention, Saint Thomas divides the Gospel into two parts: in the first, Saint John presents the divinity of Christ (chap. 1), and in the second he manifests that divinity through those things Christ did in the flesh (chaps. 2–21). These two parts are in turn further divided. For example, the second part—the manifestation of Christ's divinity through what he did—is divided into two parts: how Christ manifests His divinity in those things he did while living in the world (chaps. 2–11), and how Christ manifests his divinity in his death (chaps. 12–21). The manifestation of divinity while living in the world is again divided into two parts: manifesting his dominion over nature (chap. 2), and manifesting the effects of grace (chaps. 3–11). This latter is divided into spiritual regeneration (chaps. 3–4) and spiritual benefits conferred on those divinely regenerated (chaps. 5–11). These spiritual benefits are, in turn, threefold: spiritual life (chap. 5), spiritual food (chap. 6), and spiritual teaching (chaps. 7–11). Each of these sections is further divided and subdivided to the point that Saint Thomas can comment sometimes word by word on a given verse. The Marietti edition of Saint Thomas's commentary provides a full schematic outline of the division, which fills some thirty-seven pages.²

I do not know the first instance of a scholastic division of the text, although it appears to be a product of the thirteenth century; it is in full flower by the middle of the thirteenth century as manifest in the skillful use of it by such figures as Saint Bonaventure, Saint Albert the Great, Hugh of Saint Cher, and, of course, Saint Thomas Aquinas.

As a technique for interpreting texts, it is not limited to Sacred Scripture. Saint Bonaventure and Saint Thomas use it, not with such refinement to specific phrases, in their commentaries on Peter Lombard's *Liber sententiarum*. Nor is the division of the text limited to the science of theology. Saint Thomas uses the same technique in his commentaries on the works of Aristotle. Indeed, the division of the text is not limited to the interpretation of another's work: Saint Thomas uses a modified form of it as a guide to the reading of his own *Summa theologiae*. So too do the author/compiler of the *Summa fratris Alexandri*.

As for how the scholastic theologians understand the technique of division, either in practice or in theory, I know of no explicit discussion of it. Here the strictly hermeneutical question as such simply does not engage them. Certainly for the scholastic doctors of the mid-thirteenth century it is not a required form. That they choose to use it suggests they see some particular value to be had in it. As theologians, they presumably see some theological value to its use.

Which brings me, at last, to the two questions I would like to consider. First, what are the theological implications of this technique? And second, what are its theological limitations?

The principal and obvious implication suggested by the use of the scholastic division of the text is the unity of the text—by which I mean here a given book of the Bible. The text holds together. What holds the text together, however, is more than simply the material fact of its human author; what gives the Gospel according to Saint John unity is not simply that Saint John wrote it. For the scholastic division of the text to work, the unity must be an intrinsic conceptual unity; there must be a unifying idea in the light of which the whole can be seen and, still more important, each part can be understood.

This striving for conceptual unity in whole and part is of potential value to the theologian in at least two ways. In a famous article of his disputed questions *De potentia*, Saint Thomas addresses the question of how to read the first chapter of Genesis in the light of certain claims made by reason. He also confronts the reality of multiple literal interpretations of the text. Among the principles he articulates for evaluating an interpretation of a passage of scripture is that the circumstance of the letter be preserved (*salva circumstantia litterae*).³ This would seem to mean, at least minimally, that the interpreter must be attentive to the context of the lemma in question. The thoroughgoing contextualization of the letter provided by a scholastic division of the text could then be a particularly fruitful means of safeguarding the circumstance of the letter.

Second, for a theologian such as Saint Thomas who understands the theological enterprise as the articulation of the ways in which revealed truths—indeed all truths—stand in relation one to another,⁴ the scholastic division provides a way in which such a theological task can be undertaken in the very reading of scripture itself. It is not simply a matter of breaking the text down into component bits, but of seeing how its parts stand in relation one to another. This synthetic task is as much a part of the scholastic enterprise as is division and distinction; indeed, distinction is in service of unity. For the scholastics, the division of the text is precisely a means to arrive at ways of seeing the fundamental unity of revealed truth.

In this light, it is notable that the effort to articulate the intrinsic conceptual unity of the text extended beyond individual biblical books. Saint Thomas subjects the corpus of the epistles of Saint Paul as a whole to a division of the text. The central unifying idea is the mystical body of Christ, divided and subdivided according to each of the epistles.⁵ Or again, Saint Bonaventure will suggest a division of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs taken as a whole.⁶ In theory at least, the whole of scripture could be subject to such a division. I know of no one who actually accomplished such a division; nonetheless, we have general divisions of the Old Testament and the New Testament, which suggest just such a way of thinking about the whole, in principle at least, if not in practice.⁷ In this case, the unity is in no way based upon a unifying human author but solely upon the unifying divine author.

If one takes the technique seriously, it has decisive implications for how one is to read such commentaries. Those who study scholasticism commonly lament how the scriptural commentaries are so disappointing; they seem limp or thin or simply pedestrian. While scholars are initially eager to use the scriptural commentaries of the great scholastic doctors, when they turn to them, they are all too often disappointed and return to the systematic works with sadness in their hearts, suspecting that the doctors did not, after all, take scripture seriously enough. For example, the broad-minded thomist, interested in the sacrament of the Eucharist, but not satisfied simply with reading the *Summa theologiae*, turns to Saint Thomas's commentary on the bread of life discourse in the sixth chapter of the Gospel according to Saint John. The commentary is relatively short, moving quickly from phrase to phrase. Having made a brief foray into Saint Thomas's commentary he returns, disappointed, to his appointed task. He might return to the scriptural commentaries, but only for periodic footnote filler; the commentary itself is not likely to inform his thinking on Saint Thomas.

The problem is in looking simply to the commentary on specific verses. The genius of the scholastic division of the text is that every lemma has a context, or better, a set of nested contexts. It never stands alone. The comments presume all that has come before, and indeed, what comes after. The skilled commentator need not say as much at the particular lemma, because he has already said so much getting there.

Let us return to the example of the bread of life discourse in John 6. An appreciation of Thomas's interpretation requires minimally (see appendix) that one appreciate that this chapter is in the context of spiritual food as a spiritual benefit conferred on those divinely regenerated, which in turn is part of Christ's manifestation of his divinity through those things he did while living in the world.

Thus such commentaries must be read as a whole. The division of the text not only presumes a conceptual unity, but produces a commentary that itself must be understood as a whole. The division of the text is a guide to the biblical commentary as well as to the biblical text. It is a practical point, if not exactly a theological one, for those of us who would undertake the study of these monstrous commentaries.

Thus the most powerful and obvious characteristic of the scholastic division of the text is the articulation of a principle of unity of the text and then the situation of all the parts within that unifying principle. This technique is used principally, however, to elucidate the literal sense of scripture. The scholastics are generally agreed upon what the literal sense of scripture is: the thing signified by the words.⁸ In this, Scripture is like any other literary work: words signify things. They may signify directly or through

metaphor or any number of other literary figures and devices. All of this is a matter of the literal sense. It is not my intention to attend to the complexities and vagaries of scholastic literal interpretation, but rather to note that the scholastic division of the text as an interpretive technique is used principally, I am inclined to say exclusively, in the literal interpretation of scripture.

In the actual interpretation of the literal sense, however, the articulation and application of the division are rather more of an art than a science. This is especially true in articulating the intermediate divisions of the text. Medieval interpreters of scripture are strikingly comfortable with differing literal interpretations of a given passage; so too they seem quite comfortable with differing divisions. Beginning with the same unifying theme, Saint Bonaventure and Saint Thomas divide the Gospel according to Saint John in quite different ways with no attendant need to establish the exclusive truth of one division over the other.⁹ This is so perhaps because such divisions were not understood as definitive but rather as illuminative. The division of the text provides insight into a text presumed to be rich, mysterious, multivalent, and ultimately inexhaustible.

As well, the scholastic division of the text orders and weighs particular passages in relation to one another. For example, in Saint Thomas's division, the second chapter of John manifests Christ's divinity by showing His dominion over nature. This is obvious enough in the miracle of turning water into wine at the beginning of the chapter. But what of the cleansing of the Temple which follows it? Saint Thomas looks to the discourse concluding the cleansing, in which Christ speaks of his resurrection, which resurrection will itself be an instance of his dominion over nature. The cleansing of the Temple provides the occasion for the announcing of the future miracle, and thus it is fittingly understood in relation to Christ's dominion over nature.

The variety of divisions brings to light a foundational understanding of literal authorship for medieval interpreters of Sacred Scripture. The literal sense is concerned in part with authorial intention, but that intention is twofold: divine and human. While both Saint Thomas and Saint Bonaventure in their commentaries on the Gospel according to Saint John begin with the intention of the human author, they have no difficulties with differing literal interpretations or divisions—at least in principle—since such diversity might have been intended by the human author under divine inspiration, and even if not, is embraced within the intention of the divine author. While the conceptual unity of the scholastic division of the text requires authorial intention, it need not require a univocal intention or a solely human author. With regard to the scholastic division, the particulars of the divisions, and perhaps the very possibility of such divisions, presume both human and divine authorship with regard to the literal sense.

That the scholastic division is an essentially literal interpretive method does not mean that commentaries built upon a scholastic division are without consideration of the spiritual or mystical senses of scripture. These commentaries do contain much in the way of mystical interpretation. The mystical, however, does not provide the overarching interpretive framework; it is the literal that provides the overarching framework, which in turn is the context for the mystical interpretation of a particular passage. Thus, the literal sense is necessarily established first in the division of the text, and thereby the basis of the mystical interpretation is also established. Such practice brings to life the important medieval principle, so dear to Saint Thomas, that the mystical should be founded on the literal.¹⁰

Consider Saint Thomas's treatment of the healing of the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda in the fifth chapter of the Gospel according to Saint John. Like all miracles, it is a sign. But of what? Within Saint Thomas's division, chapter 5 treats of the spiritual life as one of the benefits conferred by Christ on those divinely regenerated as part of the larger division of those things which manifest Christ's divinity while he lived in the world. In healing the paralytic, Christ literally conferred on him a new life. As a sign however, it immediately points to a mystical meaning: the conferring of new spiritual life in baptism. Thus, the literal division all the more firmly grounds a mystical interpretation of the passage.

Modern historiography of medieval exegesis, at least in the English-speaking world, has been especially interested in claiming a relevance for medieval exegesis precisely because it had not always and everywhere abandoned the literal sense. By literal sense, what was meant tended to be the modern critical project (hence Beryl Smalley's telling distinction between theologians and biblical scholars¹¹). In the effort to find moderns in medieval garb, modern students of medieval interpretation have latched onto a few select figures, such as Saint Thomas, with their emphasis on the literal sense, as exceptional scholars in the Middle Ages and as notable precursors of our modern exegetical masters. Miss Smalley subsequently retracted, or at least significantly modified, her own praise for Saint Thomas, noting that he never fully appreciated the literal wholly apart from the mystical.¹² Without speaking to their status as precursors, I would suggest that such study has rather misconstrued the scholastics and their work. Indeed, when one considers what these figures understood by the literal sense, one can see that not simply Saint Thomas but many of his contemporaries are engaged in precisely literal interpretation; indeed, such is demanded by the use of the scholastic division of the text. The appearance of mystical interpretation within such commentaries is not a lapse, but an instance of building the mystical upon the literal.

Let us now turn to the second question, what are the theological limitations of the technique? Not all commentaries on scripture from this period are built upon a division of the text. Such a technique cannot do everything, and interpreters did not always use it. What are its limitations?

First, as is implied above, it is not a fruitful tool for sustained mystical interpretation. Scholastic interpreters agree on a fundamentally twofold division of the senses of scripture: literal and mystical (or spiritual—the name varies, but the reality does not). If the literal sense of scripture pertains to the things signified by the words, the mystical sense pertains to things that are signified, in turn, by the things signified by the words.¹³ Thus, for example, the word "Jacob" signifies the patriarch; the patriarch himself signifies the rational soul. The former pertains to the literal sense, the latter to the mystical. For these theologians, God, as creator and provident Lord of creation, has invested things, persons, and events with intrinsic multivalent signification. In the investigation of those things signified by the words of scripture, the theologian discovers their still deeper realities in the economy of salvation. This mystical sense is usually divided into three specific senses which need not concern us here; indeed, while particular theologians may disagree on precisely how to carve up the number and character of mystical senses, they all agree on the existence of the mystical sense and how it stands in distinction from the literal sense.

The scholastic division of the text is not a fruitful tool for sustained mystical interpretation. The critical term here is "sustained." By this, I mean a commentary in which

the whole—the conceptual unity that is the subject of the division—is mystical, not simply some part. I know of no such commentary. The reason for such a general absence appears obvious enough: few books would sustain such an interpretation as a whole. The most likely candidate is the Song of Songs. In its case, however, the difficulty is in establishing the literal sense in the first place. Much of what moderns critically dismiss as fanciful, or sympathetically classify as mystical, was treated by many medieval theologians as literal. Thus a christological reading of the Song of Songs within a scholastic division of the text would not necessarily signal a sustained mystical interpretation.

Nonetheless, widespread use of the scholastic division on the mystical level would be surprising from the very character of the mystical sense as so clearly enunciated in the scholastic period: things signify things. In order to get at the mystical thing, one must first get at the foundational literal thing. A sustained division of the text would require a division to cover both. It would seem more practical, one might even say more fitting, that the unifying division be on the literal level and that the mystical be drawn from that. Indeed, grounded in the literal sense, it could be drawn frequently and consistently, without being tied to an overarching mystical division. Such is precisely the technique of Saint Thomas in his Gospel commentaries.

Let me note one further area of possible limitation. In his Commentary on the Book of Job, Saint Thomas does not use the scholastic division of the text. The commentary is explicitly a literal one—concerned with Job and his circumstance. At the outset, Saint Thomas concedes the mystical ground to Saint Gregory the Great. His decision not to use the division of the text is thus not related to the particular sense of scripture he is investigating. Saint Thomas sees a theme to the book—divine providence—and that theme governs his commentary. Thus his decision not to use the division of the text does not arise from a lack of conceptual unity to the book. Saint Thomas's reading of Job is as a long extended dialectical argument. He carefully articulates the various steps and missteps in the argument. In Saint Thomas's hands it rather takes on the character of a narrative dialogue. Why not use the scholastic division here? Perhaps the scholastic division is not particularly useful in articulating the give and take of a narrative argument; the literal interpretation of the text is not served by a scholastic division of it.

In conclusion, the scholastic division of the text as a method employed by the doctors of the high Middle Ages is not without its theological character. Certainly for those who were masters of theology, the commenting on scripture was their primary task. In their choice to use or not use the scholastic division, they help us who would study them better understand their tasks as theologians entering into that deep and shrouded mystery that is sacred scripture.

Appendix: Saint Thomas Aquinas's Division of the Gospel according to Saint John

The Gospel according to Saint John principally intends to show the divinity of the incarnate Word

- I. Presents the divinity of Christ, chap. 1
 - A. Shows the divinity of Christ, 1.1-1.13
 1. Considers the divinity of Christ 1.1-1.5
 - a. With regard to divine nature 1.1-1.2
 - b. With regard to divine power or operation 1.3-1.5
 - i. With regard to all things 1.3-1.4a
 - ii. With regard to all men 1.4b-1.5

2. Considers the incarnation of the Word 1.6-1.13
 - a. The witness: John the Baptist 1.6-1.8
 - b. The coming of the Word 1.9-1.14
- B. Sets forth the manner in which Christ's divinity is made known, 1.14-1.51
- II. Manifests the divinity of Christ by what he did in the flesh, 2.1-21.25
 - A. How Christ manifests his divinity in those things he did while living in the world, 2.1-11.57
 1. In his dominion over nature, chap. 2
 2. In the effects of grace, 3.1-11.57
 - a. Spiritual regeneration, 3.1-4.54
 - i. In relation to the Jews, chap. 3
 - ii. In relation to the gentiles, chap. 4
 - b. Benefits conferred on those regenerated 5.1-11.57
 - i. Spiritual life, chap. 5
 - ii. Spiritual food, chap. 6
 - iii. Spiritual teaching, 7.1-11.57
 - aa. Its origin, chap. 7
 - bb. Its power, 8.1-11.57
 3. Illuminative, 8.1-9.41
 - a. By word, chap. 8
 - b. By miracle, chap. 9
 4. Life giving, 10.1-11.57
 - a. By word, chap. 10
 - b. By miracle, chap. 11
 - B. How Christ showed his divinity in his death, 12.1-21.25
 1. Christ's passion and death, 12.1-19.42
 - a. Causes and occasion of Christ's death, chap. 12
 - b. Preparation of the disciples, 13.1-17.26
 - i. How he informed them by example, chap. 13
 - ii. How he comforted them in word, 14.1-16.33
 - iii. How he strengthened them by prayer, chap. 17
 - c. passion and death, 18.1-19.42
 - i. Passion at the hands of the Jews, chap. 18
 - ii. Passion at the hands of the gentiles, chap. 19
 2. The resurrection, 20.1-21.25
 - a. Manifest to the women, 20.1-20.18
 - b. Manifest to the disciples, 20.19-21.25

Notes

1. Thomas Aquinas, *Super Evangelium s. Ioannis lectura* 1.1, 7. This is hardly a novel understanding of this Gospel; it is a commonplace for the Fathers and for medieval interpreters alike.
2. *Ibid.*, 505-42.
3. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia* 4.1, 2:105.
4. Cf. Weisheipl, "The Meaning of *Sacra Doctrina*," 49-80.
5. Thomas Aquinas, *Super epistolas s. Pauli lectura*, prologus, 1:3.
6. Bonaventure, *Commentarius in Ecclesiasten*, in *Opera omnia*, 6:5.
7. See Thomas Aquinas, *De commendatione et partitione sacrae Scripturae*, in *Opuscula theologica* 1:435-39. Another example, from the Franciscan John of La Rochelle, can be found in Delorme, "Deux leçons d'ouverture de Cours Biblique," 345-60.

8. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.1.10. The fullest study of the senses of scripture as understood in the Middle Ages is Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale*.
9. Bonaventure, *Commentarius in Evangelium Ioannis*, in *Opera omnia*, 6:246. This is but one instance of many in which the great scholastic doctors overlap in their work.
10. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1.1.10.
11. Smalley, *Study of the Bible*, xv-xvi.
12. Smalley, *The Gospels in the Schools*, 265-66.
13. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.1.10.

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