

THE TWOFOLD DIVISION OF ST. THOMAS'S
CHRISTOLOGY IN THE *TERTIA PARS*

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ST. THOMAS AQUINAS divides the *tertia pars* of his *Summa theologiae* into three parts, the first of which, embracing the first fifty-nine questions, is on the Savior Himself. This section, in turn, is divided into two parts: the first considers the mystery of the incarnation (qq. 1-26); the second, that done and suffered by the Savior (qq. 27-59).

How are we to understand this seemingly straightforward division? As the latter half deals with the life of Christ, M.-D. Chenu saw it as essentially scriptural, in implied contrast to a more scientific consideration in the first section.¹ It is precisely this distinction between the scientific and the scriptural, however, that is problematic and that needs to be evaluated critically in light of Thomas's conception of *sacra doctrina*.

The twofold division of christology that appears in the *tertia pars* is one of many organizational innovations in the *Summa*, representing Thomas's answer to a problem with which his predecessors and contemporaries struggled: the organization of christology. Because Christ is a historical figure, the problems of the historian also beset the theologian. The facts of history occur in a temporal sequence and, for this reason, history is in part a temporal narrative. The historian, however, wants to do more than tell a good story; he wants to explain it. He therefore seeks those categories of intelligibility that will explain why certain events happen in the way they do: the role terrain plays in suc-

¹ M.-D. Chenu, *Toward Understanding Saint Thomas*, trans. A.-M. Landry and D. Hughes (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1964), pp. 315-17.

cessful military strategy, for example, or the motives (economic, psychological, or social) that move men to action. Through an abundant number of such categories, the historian tries to make sense of history. In this lies his problem. The categories that interpret what happens have their own principles and rules of exposition, which may not be wholly compatible with a narrative sequence. For this reason, the historian is torn between two masters in his work: the narrative sequence and the categories of intelligibility.

The theologian, in considering the life and mission of Christ, confronts much the same problem. He has before him both the temporal narrative of that life and the need to understand and explain it, albeit far more profoundly than the historian can. For his information on the life of Christ, the theologian is dependent upon Scripture; the fourfold Gospel narrates the story of Christ's life. For his primary categories of intelligibility, the theologian is also dependent upon Scripture. For example, the Gospel proclaims that Christ is the Word made flesh and thereby understands the import of Christ's life, passion, death, and resurrection. The epistles provide a great number of decisive categories that interpret the mission of Christ: Christ the redeemer of a fallen humanity; Christ the true mediator between God and man; Christ the great high priest; Christ the head of the Church. The theologian must make sense of the life and mission of Christ in such a way as to account for the varied themes and categories already provided by Scripture. Likewise, he must seek to understand and make sense of these categories themselves. In a temporal narrative of Christ's life, there is no obvious place for the treatment of His mediatorship, priesthood, or headship. Each extends throughout, and even beyond, His earthly life, although each is intimately bound to particular aspects of that life. The problem is thus one in which both the narrative and its primary categories of intelligibility are in Scripture. It is not simply making sense of history, it is making sense of Scripture. The task is to formulate a christology that is in some way adequate to the New Testament revelation about Christ. Thomas's predecessors and contemporaries

struggled to organize and explain not only history but also its biblical interpretation.²

A brief consideration of how Peter Lombard,³ the compilers of the *Summa fratris Alexandri*,⁴ and Albert the Great⁵ organize their christological reflections will bring out the novelty and insight of Thomas's account. As might be expected, none of these thinkers adopts a division dominated solely by interpretive categories without regard to temporal sequence. Likewise, none opts for a simple retelling of the Gospel. We find various combinations, which tend in one or the other direction.

The structure of Peter Lombard's christology in book III of his *Sententiae* is not exactly self-evident, as his commentators' varied divisions testify.⁶ In its broadest sweep, it reflects a temporal sequence beginning with the incarnation and concluding with the descent into hell. Within this sequence Lombard clusters more or less cognate ideas. The first twenty-six chapters constitute something of a cluster around the Word made flesh, considering such requisite topics as person and nature, assumption and union, and the twofold character of Christ's nativity. A second cluster around aspects of Christ's humanity follows. Here Lombard considers Christ's grace, wisdom, knowledge, and power. Corporal defects follow, which lead to considerations of

² Every theologian of the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, certainly those we consider here, would affirm the fundamental unity of the scriptural revelation according to which one part may be used to interpret another. The idea that a Pauline notion and a Johannine notion are so distinct as to be only inappropriately applied to each other or to the synoptics is wholly foreign to the medieval mind.

³ Peter Lombard, *Sententiae in IV libris distinctae*, edd. PP. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 3d ed., 2 vols. (Grottaferrata: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1971-81). Written between 1154 and 1158, Lombard's *Sententiae* became the most influential theological textbook of the later Middle Ages.

⁴ *Summa theologica* [vol. four adds:] *seu sic ab origine dicta "Summa fratris Alexandri"*, edd. PP. Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 4 vols. (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1924-48). Long attributed to the Franciscan master Alexander of Hales, the *Summa fratris* (1236-45) is a Franciscan compilation drawn from a variety of sources.

⁵ Albert the Great, *De incarnatione*, ed. I. Backes, in *Opera omnia* (Cologne edition), vol. 26 (Münster: Aschendorf, 1958), pp. 171-235. This work (ante 1246), lost until this century, was intended as part of a massive *summa*, other parts of which circulated independently.

⁶ Lombard himself only divided his work into books and chapters, which we follow here; his thirteenth-century commentators divide the work into distinctions.

His suffering, will, doubt, and fear. The passion, death, and descent into hell constitute a third cluster (cc. 50-73). In these chapters, Lombard considers Christ's merit, His redemption, His role as mediator, and His just conquest of the devil. A chapter on whether Christ had the theological virtues (c. 74) provides an awkward transition to the remainder of the book on the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Thus there is a general temporal movement from the incarnation to the passion and death. Within this general frame, thematic groupings seem to dominate: a cluster of chapters on the incarnation, a cluster on Christ as man and His human nature, and a cluster on the redemption.

The *Summa fratris Alexandri* presents a clearly temporal structure. The christology is divided into eight tractates which follow the life of Christ: (1) the incarnation and assumption; (2) the conception and nativity; (3) the grace, knowledge, and power of Christ; (4) His merit and will; (5) His passion and death; (6) the descent into hell and resurrection; (7) the ascension and His sitting at the right hand of the Father; and (8) the final coming and last judgment.⁷ With Peter Lombard, the compilers of the *Summa fratris* treat the constitutive elements of union, the twofold nativity, and related issues together at the beginning. Then come various aspects of Christ pertaining primarily to His human nature: grace, knowledge, power, will, and merit. The end of Christ's mission is greatly expanded. The *Summa fratris* not only considers the passion, death, and descent into hell, but also the resurrection, the ascension, the second coming, and the final judgment. Lombard had paid scant attention to them and then as issues for the fourth book on the end times. The *Summa fratris* situates these topics firmly within its christology.

Thematic material usually finds its principal treatment at a point that seems most fitting in the temporal sequence. Christ as mediator, for example, is treated most fully in tractate five on the passion and death. Again, the grace of Christ has its principal treatment in tractate three as part of the middle section that considers Christ's grace, knowledge, power, merit, and will. And yet,

⁷ *Summa fratris*, III.div; vol. 4, p. 3. The division here must be compared to the actual treatment for variations.

the fit is awkward. Because the *Summa fratris*' principal treatment of the grace of Christ occurs here, tractate three contains the fullest treatment of the grace of union; nonetheless, another, albeit briefer, treatment of the grace of union appears necessarily in tractate one on the incarnation and assumption, which is then repeated almost verbatim in tractate three.

The *Summa fratris* is no slave to temporal sequence, however, and its authors will override such sequence in view of thematic needs. For example, the transfiguration is considered as a demonstration of the resurrection and is therefore in tractate six on the descent into hell and the resurrection.

Albert the Great's *De incarnatione* is a particularly interesting effort at organizing the revelation about Christ. Within a generally temporal sequence, Albert divides his subject into categories that give direction and structure to his thought. The primary division is fourfold: the necessity of the incarnation; the annunciation, which includes the conception and birth of Christ; the union, that is, those issues that pertain to the immediate condition of union; and finally, the consequences of that union. Albert's efforts to find a conceptual structure for his material are most evident in the fourth part on the consequences of the union which comprises the bulk of the work. He divides it into two parts. The first considers those consequences of the union that arise from the union itself; the second considers those consequences of the union that arise from the end of the union. The first is in turn divided into two parts: consequences in Christ Himself, and consequences in comparison with other men. The first considers the knowledge (with nominal attention to the grace), will, acts, and corporal defects of Christ (tractate four). The second considers the tithing of Christ in the loins of Abraham and His headship (tractate five). Albert concludes his christology with those consequences that arise from the end of the union (the second part of the first division). These are the final deeds of Christ: the passion, death, burial, descent into hell (all tractate six) and resurrection (*De resurrectione*).⁸

⁸ *De resurrectione*, ed. W. Kübel, in *Opera omnia* (Cologne edition), vol. 26 (Münster: Aschendorf, 1958), pp. 237-354.

Albert follows the general temporal sequence that has been seen in others: an initial consideration of Christ's origins, a middle consideration focused on aspects of His human nature and life, and a final consideration on the passion, death, and resurrection. Albert seems to be looking for conceptual categories that will structure the temporal sequence. Thus he uses the idea of consequence to organize the wealth of material that floated in various configurations in the middle and concluding sections of treatises on Christ.

Each of these works tries to make sense of the revelation about Christ. This includes not only His life and mission, but also, and sometimes more importantly, how that life and mission is understood in relation to other revealed truths about Him. Each follows a roughly chronological sequence within which other topics are fit as best they can be.

From this background, the significance of Thomas's simple twofold division emerges. He divides the questions on the Savior into those on the mystery of the incarnation and those on the things done and suffered by God incarnate. Thomas casts the first part broadly as "the mystery of the incarnation according to which God became man for our salvation." These twenty-six questions contain such topics as the union and assumption, Christ's grace, knowledge, will, His priesthood, and mediatorship. The remaining thirty-three questions consider the deeds of that God made man. They begin with the sanctification of the Blessed Virgin and then treat the life of Christ: from His birth, baptism, teaching, and miracles, to His passion, death, resurrection, ascension, and judgment. This second division follows the life of Christ in proper chronological sequence. The second part presents the life and mission of Christ; the first part sets forth the categories and principles according to which that life and mission are to be understood. Thomas considers what it means for God to become man for man's salvation: he considers what it means for Christ to have grace, he explains the great biblical notions of Christ as head of the church, Christ as mediator, and Christ as priest. In doing this, he arms his reader with an understanding of who and what Christ is so as to grasp more profoundly the meaning of what Christ does. Thomas divides what

his predecessors had tried to make fit within a single temporal sequence. The simplicity of this arrangement is striking: the categories according to which Christ is to be understood; followed by the life of Christ, which is explained by those categories.

I do not subscribe to the view that this twofold division is a division between a scientific part and a biblical part. Chenu, who has done so much to draw attention to the scriptural dimension of Thomas's thought, implies just such a contrast. He speaks of "biblical zones" in the *Summa*, such as the life of Christ here in questions 27-59. He says: "The principle of a biblical zone throughout the *Summa* remains, however, and in any case, one cannot delete its place and meaning without throwing the whole edifice out of equilibrium."⁹ He is quite right, but I would argue that fundamentally the entire structure of the *Summa* is biblical, not simply certain blocks inserted into an imposed scientific structure. Perhaps drawing upon Chenu, R. Murphy in the New Blackfriars translation of the *Summa* sees the introduction of such biblical material as the life of Christ as one of Thomas's "great innovations."¹⁰ This brief consideration of Thomas's contemporaries and predecessors suggests that this is hardly the case. For all of them, including Thomas, the issue was to make sense of the wealth of biblical revelation.

At the same time, to say that both parts are biblical in their foundation is not to say that they are without any scientific character. This too would concede the kind of bifurcation so common to contemporary theological self-understanding. Indeed, Thomas's twofold division of christology also conforms to some essential characteristics of his notion of *sacra doctrina* as a science.

A more adequate consideration of the twofold division is possible. Let us consider briefly a particular aspect of Thomas's understanding of *sacra doctrina* as developed in the opening question of the *Summa* itself. James Weisheipl has argued that for Thomas the task of *sacra doctrina* is not primarily the creation of new theological knowledge but rather the fuller understanding

⁹ Chenu, *Toward Understanding St. Thomas*, p. 316.

¹⁰ *Summa theologiae*, New Blackfriars ed., vol. 54 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. xix.

of the revealed truths of faith.¹¹ That is, both the premises and conclusions of the science are often articles of faith. In arguing for the scientific nature of *sacra doctrina*, Thomas gives St. Paul as an example: Because Christ has risen from the dead, so we too shall rise. As Weisheipl notes, both the premise and the conclusion are revealed articles of faith. What St. Paul does is to connect them and to connect them causally; and in so doing, Paul renders the conclusion, that we too shall rise, better known for it is now known in one of its causes, the resurrection of Christ.

In part then, Thomas sees the task of *sacra doctrina* as the intelligible connecting of revealed truths. In this, it is analogous to the philosopher's finding of the middle term. Introducing students to theology, Thomas wants to show how the truths of the faith are ordered one to another. It is, of course, another instance of faith seeking understanding. Just as St. Paul had done in his consideration of the final resurrection, Thomas seeks to bring out, as is proper to any science, the connections between things, in this case, the articles of faith about Christ. Who and what Christ is grounds the understanding of what He does. Christ's actions that are of interest to the theologian are those that serve to bring man to God. They are important as they have supernatural effects. This is the perspective from which Thomas considers Christ. If Christ's actions are understood as having supernatural effects, who He is is all the more important and fittingly comes first in study. Because the reader already knows that Christ is the incarnate Word, is head of the Church and mediator, he better understands the life and its effects. Because Christ is God and man, for example, His passion and death are redemptive. What matters in the passion and death is not simply that Christ suffered and died, but that in so suffering and dying He satisfied for a fallen humanity. When that revealed union of God and man is understood, the satisfaction accomplished through His passion and death is understood. Examples could be multiplied; the innumerable allusions and references from the second part back to the first testify to this relation. The complexity of Thomas's

¹¹ James A. Weisheipl, "The Meaning of *Sacra Doctrina* in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1," *The Thomist* 38 (1974): 49-80.

analysis of Christ's life is only possible given the fullness of his examination of who and what Christ is in the first part.¹²

No doubt reacting to an enduring but distorted view of Thomas's theology that all but ignored its scriptural dimension, students of Thomas in this century are struck by the mere existence of questions 27-59.¹³ Such wonder, however, tells us much more about ourselves than about Thomas.

To the extent that *sacra doctrina* is scientific, the whole of Thomas's treatment of the Savior is scientific. Likewise, the extent to which *sacra doctrina* is scriptural, the whole of Thomas's treatment of the Savior is scriptural.¹⁴ The twofold organization of the questions on the Savior of the *tertia pars* is a significant innovation in the organization of christology precisely because it is a structuring of scriptural revelation according to Thomas's understanding of the scientific character of *sacra doctrina*.

¹² G. Lafont, *Structures et méthodes dans la Somme Théologique de s. Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Desclée, 1961), p. 320, appreciates the first half of Thomas's christology as revealed matter that makes sense of the second half; however, he makes no use of it in his structural analysis.

¹³ In addition to Chenu cited above, see also Y. Congar, "Le sens de l' 'économie' salutaire," in *Thomas d'Aquin: sa vision de théologie et de l'Eglise* (London: Variorum, 1984), III, p. 83 (this article originally appeared in *Festgabe Joseph Lortz, II: Glaube und Geschichte*, ed. E. Iserloh and P. Mann [Baden-Baden: Bruno Grimm, 1957], pp. 72-122); and Y. Congar, "Le moment 'économique' et le moment 'ontologique' dans la *Sacra Doctrina* (Révélation, théologie, *Somme Théologique*)," in *Thomas d'Aquin: sa vision de théologie et de l'Eglise*, XIII, pp. 178-79 (this article appeared originally in *Mélanges offerts à M.-D. Chenu* [Paris: Vrin, 1967], pp. 135-87).

¹⁴ The scriptural character of Thomas's christology is brought out in F. Ruello, *La christologie de Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1987), pp. 285-337.