

Saint Thomas Aquinas

1225-1274

Attitudes toward the interpretation of Holy Scripture that developed early in the Christian era are represented in the selection below from the *Summa Theologica*. Allegorical interpretation of Homer can be found as early as the sixth century B.C. and was still being practiced in the third century A.D. by Porphyry. Neo-Platonic allegorizing can be found throughout the history of literary criticism up to our own day. Christian hermeneutics probably began with the adoption of the methods of Philo Judaeus, a philosopher of the first century A.D., by the churchmen Origen, Clement, Jerome, Augustine, and Gregory. The fourfold interpretive system Aquinas uses was probably first worked out in the fifth century A.D. It is a reflection of the fundamental idea that the world itself is a symbol subject to interpretation as the work of God. This principle was adopted without its theological overtones by the nineteenth-century French symbolists, such as Baudelaire, whose sonnet *Correspondences* no doubt owes more to the pagan saying that things below copy things above.

Aquinas believes the system is applicable only to Scripture. However, Dante extends the principles of interpretation to secular writing in his letter to Can Grande della Scala. Aquinas argues that spiritual truths are properly and naturally taught by figures taken from corporeal things and, contrary to Boethius, that for these truths to be veiled is not harmful dissimulation but the cause of beneficial exercise for the mind. His twofold system of interpretation, involving the historical, or literal, level of meaning and the spiritual level, is really fourfold, like Dante's, for the spiritual is divided into three parts—allegorical, moral, and anagogical. There is plenty of evidence that the Thomistic system has been imposed arbitrarily on literary works, but it did open up the possibility of discovering multiple meanings in poems. This interest in the relationship between signs or symbols and what they signify or denote arose again in the Romantic period in discussions of symbolism, particularly in the work of Coleridge and Carlyle, and in the twentieth century. In Frye's theory of symbols, the terms *literal*, *allegorical*, and *anagogic* reappear with new, though related, meanings.

The standard translation of *Summa Theologica* is by the Dominican Fathers (1927). See also *The Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, edited by A. C. Pegis (2 vols., 1945). For commentary consult Leonard Callahan, *A Theory of Esthetic According to the Principles of St. Thomas Aquinas* (1927); Thomas Gilby, *Poetic Experience* (1934, 1967); John Duffy, *A Philosophy of Poetry Based on Thomistic Principles* (1945); and T. F. Torrance, "Scientific Hermeneutics According to St. Thomas Aquinas," *Journal of Biblical Studies*, new series XIII (1962), 259-89. The 1929 work of Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* has now been translated, as has Umberto Eco's *The Aesthetics of Thomas Aquinas* (1970).

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From
The Nature and Domain of
Sacred Doctrine

In Ten Articles

To place our purpose within definite limits, we must first investigate the nature and domain of sacred doctrine. Concerning this there are ten points of inquiry:

- (1) Whether sacred doctrine is necessary?
- (2) Whether it is a science?¹
- (3) Whether it is one or many?
- (4) Whether it is speculative or practical?
- (5) How it is compared with other sciences?
- (6) Whether it is a wisdom?
- (7) Whether God is its subject matter?
- (8) Whether it is argumentative?
- (9) Whether it rightly employs metaphors and similes?
- (10) Whether the sacred Scripture of this doctrine may be expounded in different senses?

Ninth Article
Whether
Holy Scripture
Should Use
Metaphors?

We proceed thus to the ninth article:

Objection 1. It seems that Holy Scripture should not use metaphors. For that which is proper to the lowest science seems not to befit this science, which holds the highest place of all. But to proceed by the aid of various similitudes and figures is proper to poetic, the least of all the sciences. Therefore it is not fitting that this science should make use of such similitudes.

Objection 2. Further, this doctrine seems to be intended to make truth clear. Hence a reward is held out to those who manifest it. "They that explain me shall have life everlasting" (Ecclesiasticus 24:31). But by such similitudes truth is obscured. Therefore to put forward divine truths

under the likeness of corporeal things does not befit this doctrine.

Objection 3. Further, the higher creatures are, the nearer they approach to the divine likeness. If therefore any creature be taken to represent God, this representation ought chiefly to be taken from the higher creatures, and not from the lower; yet this is often found in the Scriptures.

On the contrary, it is written (Osee 11:10): "I have multiplied visions, and I have used similitudes by the ministry of the prophets." But to put forward anything by means of similitudes is to use metaphors. Therefore sacred doctrine may use metaphors.

I answer that, it is befitting Holy Scripture to put forward divine and spiritual truths by means of comparisons with material things. For God provides for everything according to the capacity of its nature. Now it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible things, because all our knowledge originates from sense. Hence in Holy Scripture spiritual truths are fittingly taught under the likeness of material things. That is what Dionysius says: "We cannot be enlightened by the divine rays except they be hidden within the covering of many sacred veils."² It is also befitting Holy Scripture, which is proposed to all without distinction of persons—"To the wise and to the unwise I am a debtor" (Romans 1:14)—that spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from corporeal things, in order that thereby even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it.

Reply to Objection 1. Poetry makes use of metaphors to produce a representation, for it is natural to man to be pleased with representations. But sacred doctrine makes use of metaphors as both necessary and useful.

Reply to Objection 2. The ray of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sensible imagery wherewith it is veiled, as Dionysius says;³ and its truth so far remains that it does not allow the minds of those to whom the revelation has been made, to rest in the likenesses, but raises them to the knowledge of intelligible truths; and through those to whom the revelation has been made others also may receive instruction in these matters. Hence those things that are taught metaphorically in one part of Scripture, in other parts

THE NATURE AND DOMAIN OF SACRED DOCTRINE. The *Summa Theologica*, of which this selection is a part, was written from 1256 to 1272. The text is from *Introduction to Saint Thomas Aquinas*, edited by Anton Pegis. Reprinted by permission of Modern Library, a division of Random House, Inc. According to Pegis the correct title of the work is *Summa* or *Summa Theologiae*. It may be interpreted to mean the highest or ultimate theology. "Science" here means a true branch of learning proceeding by rational principles.

²Of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, I. 2. Of the *Celestial Hierarchy* is one of a number of theological writings of unknown origin that had great influence on medieval thought. Scholars are now certain that these works, long attributed to Dionysius Areopagiticus, an Athenian convert to Christianity in the first century A.D., were written in the fourth or fifth century A.D. The author is traditionally called pseudo-Dionysius or the pseudo-Areopagite.
³Of the *Celestial Hierarchy*, I. 2.

are taught more openly. The very hiding of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds, and as a defense against the ridicule of the unbelievers, according to the words, "Give not that which is holy to dogs" (Matthew 7:6).

Reply to Objection 3. As Dionysius says,⁴ it is more fitting that divine truths should be expounded under the figure of less noble than of nobler bodies; and this for three reasons. First, because thereby men's minds are the better freed from error. For then it is clear that these things are not literal descriptions of divine truths, which might have been open to doubt had they been expressed under the figure of nobler bodies, especially in the case of those who could think of nothing nobler than bodies. Second, because this is more befitting the knowledge of God that we have in this life. For what he is not is clearer to us than what he is. Therefore similitudes drawn from things farthest away from God form within us a truer estimate that God is above whatsoever we may say or think of him. Third, because thereby divine truths are the better hidden from the unworthy.

Tenth Article Whether In Holy Scripture A Word May Have Several Senses?

We proceed thus to the tenth article:

Objection 1. It seems that in Holy Scripture a word cannot have several senses, historical or literal, allegorical, tropological or moral, and anagogical.⁵ For many different senses in one text produce confusion and deception and destroy all force of argument. Hence no argument, but only fallacies, can be deduced from a multiplicity of propositions. But Holy Scripture ought to be able to state the truth without any fallacy. Therefore in it there cannot be several senses to a word.

Objection 2. Further, Augustine says that "the Old Testament has a fourfold division: according to history, etymology, analogy, and allegory."⁶ Now these four seem altogether different from the four divisions mentioned in the first objection. Therefore it does not seem fitting to explain the same word of Holy Scripture according to the four different senses mentioned above.

⁴*Of the Celestial Hierarchy*, II. 2.

⁵These are the four levels upon which interpretation is made. See also Dante, *The Banquet* and his letter to Can Grande della Scala, pp. 121-22.

⁶*Of the Value of Belief*, III.

Objection 3. Further, besides these senses, there is the parabolical, which is not one of these four.

On the contrary, Gregory says: "Holy Spirit by the manner of its speech transcends every science, because in one and the same sentence, while it describes a fact, it reveals a mystery."⁷

I answer that, the author of Holy Scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify his meaning, not by words only (as man also can do) but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it. Now this spiritual sense has a threefold division. For as the Apostle says (Hebrews 10:1) the Old Law is a figure of the New Law, and Dionysius says "the New Law itself is a figure of future glory."⁸ Again, in the New Law, whatever our Head has done is a type of what we ought to do. Therefore, so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are signs of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. But so far as they signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the anagogical sense. Since the literal sense is that which the author intends, and since the author of Holy Scripture is God, who by one act comprehends all things by his intellect, it is not unfitting, as Augustine says,⁹ if, even according to the literal sense, one word in Holy Scripture should have several senses.

Reply to Objection 1. The multiplicity of these senses does not produce equivocation or any other kind of multiplicity, seeing that these senses are not multiplied because one word signifies several things, but because the things signified by the words can be themselves signs of other things. Thus in Holy Scripture no confusion results, for all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended allegorically, as Augustine says.¹⁰ Nevertheless, nothing of Holy Scripture perishes because of this, since nothing necessary to faith is contained under the spiritual sense which is not elsewhere put forward clearly by the Scripture in its literal sense.

⁷*Precepts (Moralia)*, XX. 1.

⁸*Of Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, V. 2. This idea is the basis of a typological reading of the Bible.

⁹*Confessions*, XII. 31.

¹⁰*Letters*, XCIII. 8.

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Reply to Objection 2. These three—history, etiology, analogy—are grouped under the literal sense. For it is called history, as Augustine expounds,¹¹ whenever anything is simply related; it is called etiology when its cause is assigned, as when our Lord gave the reason why Moses allowed the putting away of wives—namely, because of the hardness of men's hearts (Matthew 19:8); it is called analogy whenever the truth of one text of Scripture is shown not to contradict the truth of another. Of these four, allegory alone stands for the three spiritual senses. Thus Hugh of St. Victor includes the anagogical under the allegorical sense, laying

¹¹*Of the Value of Belief*, 3.

down three senses only—the historical, the allegorical, and the tropological.¹²

Reply to Objection 3. The parabolical sense is contained in the literal, for by words things are signified properly and figuratively. Nor is the figure itself, but that which is figured, the literal sense. When Scripture speaks of God's arm, the literal sense is not that God has such a member, but only what is signified by this member, namely, operative power. Hence it is plain that nothing false can ever underlie the literal sense of Holy Scripture.

¹²See *Of the Sacraments*, 1. 4, and *Of Scriptures and Sacred Writers*, 3.