

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS AND HOLY SCRIPTURE*

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Abstract: The article is an study about the Holy Scripture on the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas, pointing out its fundamental importance to 'Thomas' theology, besides the problem of the biblical exegesis and its presuppositions based on Church Tradition.

Keywords: Biblical Hermeneutics, Bible, Thomism.

Resumo: O artigo é um estudo sobre a Sagrada Escritura na obra de Santo Tomás de Aquino, apontando a sua importância fundamental para a teologia tomasiana, além da problemática da exegese bíblica e seus pressupostos baseados na Tradição da Igreja.

Palavras-chave: Hermenêutica bíblica, Bíblia, Tomismo.

In St. Thomas' time the principal task of a master in theology consisted in teaching daily classes on Scripture. Commentaries of Thomas on several books of the Bible as well as on all the letters of St. Paul are extant, some of which are of considerable length. However, they have not yet been studied very extensively. In his article "San Tommaso" for the *Enciclopedia Cattolica Italiana* C. Fabro does not even mention them. M. Arias Reyero who devoted his doctoral dissertation to an analysis of the exegetical works of Thomas, considers these commentaries the least original part of his œuvre¹.

This lack of interest or appreciation is somewhat understandable when one keeps in mind the difficulties one meets in studying these commentaries. Occasionally Thomas' exegesis shocks the modern reader by the *naïveté* of its interpretation of certain words. Biblical philology was still in its infancy in Thomas' time² and literary criticism hardly existed. He himself knew neither Hebrew nor Greek³. But there is a second and greater difficulty: contemporary exegesis is predominantly critical and historical, whereas one finds a different, theological manner of explaining the Bible in Thomas' works. As will appear, it is certainly worth while to consider in greater detail his way of explaining the Sacred Text.

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¹ See REYERO, M. ARIAS. *Thomas von Aquin als Exeget*. Einsiedeln, 1971, p. 26.

² Except perhaps in the work of St. Jerome.

³ At least, he was not sufficiently versed in Greek to be able to use the Greek text of the Bible. He had to be satisfied with the current (but sometimes mistaken) explanations of certain words as found in the different *Glossae*, *Correctoria* and in the writings of Chrysostom, Jerome and medieval authors. See GARDEIL, A. "Les procédés exégétiques de saint Thomas d'Aquin". In *Revue thomiste*, 1903, 428-457.

For the type of theological exegesis as it was carried out at the medieval universities, the philological study of the text was not an absolute prerequisite. All agreed that the text accepted and used by the Church offered certitude⁴. It is only in the second half of the thirteenth and in the fourteenth century that philology began to be practiced more seriously⁵ and some scholars devoted themselves to the study of Greek, Hebrew and Arabian languages.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EXEGESIS OF ST. THOMAS.

We should first mention a general characteristic of Aquinas' exegetical method. Due to his amazing familiarity with the Bible Thomas was able to explain certain texts by referring to a great number of parallel passages. He is also constantly using the hermeneutical principle according to which obscure passages must be explained with the help of what the author writes elsewhere and of his theological ideas in general. One also finds an outline of the theory of different literary genres in the preface to the *Commentary on the Book of Job*⁶ and the prologue to the *Commentary on the Psalms*. In the latter text Thomas makes a distinction between narrations, exhortations, precepts and disputations. He mentions also supplications and praise. One finds a telling example of this distinction in a passage of the *Commentary on the Book of Job*. Job speaks in three different ways: first by giving vent to his lower feelings, next by resorting to deliberations of natural reason and finally according to divine inspiration when he speaks from the point of view of God⁷.

In his inaugural address (*Principium*) of 1252 Thomas observes that with regard to Holy Scripture we must make a distinction between authenticity and canonicity (i.e. the fact that a text belongs to the biblical books acknowledged by the Church). This means that even if it is not sure whether a certain author, for instance Job or Paul, wrote a particular text, this does not impair the text being part of the Sacred Scriptures if it is acknowledged as such by the Church⁸.

According to St. Thomas every passage of the Bible has a literal sense. He dissociates himself from an opinion, fairly widespread in his time, which gave the place of honor to the spiritual sense of Scripture. According to Aquinas we must always determine first the literal sense of a passage. To give an example, the text of *Isaiah* 35,4 ("God...comes to save you") was

⁴ See Thomas' *Lectura super I^{um} ad Timotheum*, c.3, l. 3, n. 128: "*Sed in ecclesia est firma cognitio et veritas*".

⁵ Some important forerunners were Robert Grosseteste, Roger Bacon and William of La Mare.

⁶ "It appears that this book has been written in the manner of a poem. This is the reason why throughout the whole text metaphors and colourful expressions are used as poets do".

⁷ *O.c.*, c. 39 (pp. 212, 368-376): "*Job tripliciter in hoc libro invenitur fuisse locutus...*"

⁸ For this text see MANDONNET. *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis opuscula omnia*, IV. Paris, 1927, pp. 481 ff.

commonly understood as referring to the Messiah, but Thomas says that in its literal sense the sentence applies to the time of the prophet⁹. Likewise he takes *Psalm 2*, often taken to refer to Christ, to mean in the first place king David¹⁰. His meticulous care to determine the literal sense of the *Book of Job* is another example of his resolve to understand what the author wanted to say¹¹. However, this does not mean that he neglects the spiritual sense of biblical texts.

A special difficulty may result from the apparent contradiction between what a biblical text seems to say and the position of the sciences on a particular point. If what scientists hold is absolutely evident, we must conclude that we have not understood this biblical text correctly. When there are minor discrepancies in the different ways in which the evangelists describe an event, these divergences, far from discrediting the truth of the gospels, are rather proof that what is said is true. If the story would have been made up, discrepancies would have been smoothed over.

EXEGESIS AS THEOLOGY AND THEOLOGY AS EXEGESIS.

The most important characteristic of St. Thomas's exegesis is its theological, doctrinal nature. Thomas is concerned with the dogmatic contents of the text. When St. Paul is speaking of sin, redemption or law, or when he writes that "Jesus has been made man" and is "the Head of the mystical body", Aquinas explains these terms always in their formal sense, analyzing their theological meaning, whereas nowadays we are inclined to read a passage in its historical context¹². When one is willing to go into the trouble of acquainting oneself with this theological exegesis, it gives unsuspected insights. For Aquinas theology is analyzing and ordering the contents of the Bible and drawing conclusions from it, while exegesis is theology. Gilson could write that Thomas's theology is a commentary on the Bible and that he does not propose conclusions without justifying them by Holy Scripture¹³. In this connection father Torrell quotes Thomas' words "When dealing with divine realities man should hardly express himself differently from the way Holy Scripture speaks"¹⁴.

Holy Scripture is much more than a source of data: it is the foundation and substance of theology. It provided Aquinas with the main division of his

⁹ *Leonine* 28, 153, 35.

¹⁰ See the Parma Edition of Thomas' works, vol. 14, 153a.

¹¹ See SIEDL, S. H. "Thomas von Aquin und die moderne Exegese". In *Zeitschrift für katholische Theologie*, n. 93 (1971), 29-44.

¹² See Y. Congar in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, vol. 15, 1, 408: "Il interprète le mot *caput* non par une étude exégétique de son emploi, mais par une analyse systématique de l'idée de tête en soi".

¹³ *Les tribulations de Sophie*. Paris 1967, p. 47.

¹⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS. *Contra errores graecorum*, I, 1.

Summa theologiae: God, the procession of creatures from God; man and his free actions which must lead him to his ultimate destination, beatitude in God; Christ the road to God for fallen man. The questions about the Trinity are subsequent to the treatise studying divine nature, an order which follows the history of revelation in the Old and New Testaments. Likewise the pages on law are inspired by the Bible and Thomas' christology follows the order of the events of Jesus' life as described in the *Four Gospels*. The resurrection of Jesus is seen as his glorification, as it is brought forward by the *Gospel according to John*

This doctrinal approach rests on the assumption that God is the primary author of the sacred text which, for this reason, possesses an almost unfathomable depth. Even its individual words must be considered very carefully. A further explanation of the prevalence of this doctrinal exegesis is that in St. Thomas' time the exegesis of the Bible constituted the main course in theology: systematic explanations of the doctrine of the faith and the refutation of heresies were part of it. This is very clear in the exegesis of those passages where the divine Persons and the mystery of Christ are mentioned or in which there is question of God's grace, the infused virtues and the sacraments.

Some examples will illustrate this point: in the *Book of Job* angels are said to assist at the throne of God. This means, Aquinas comments, that they see God and are seen by God¹⁵. In chapters 38 and 39 God intervenes in the debate addressing himself to Job from the heart of the tempest. This highly poetical text covers about three pages, but Thomas's commentary is about twenty times longer and is a remarkable account of God's power and wisdom as manifested in the marvels of creation. When God is said to speak from the center of a tempest this may mean that God's voice is resounding in the storm like thunder or, metaphorically, as an inner inspiration amid the turbulence of Job's feelings and the darkness of his mind.

The commentary on the first chapter of the *Gospel according to John* is an exposé of high dogmatic density, as are the comments on the *Letters to the Romans, the Corinthians, the Galatians*, etc.. Extensive doctrinal explanations will be found in the *Commentary on the gospel according to Matthew*, sc. on the *Sermon on the Mount*, the *Our Father* and the parables of the *Kingdom of heaven*.

THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THOMAS' EXEGESIS.

The inspiration of the sacred text is the first of these presuppositions. The mystery of our salvation has been revealed to the prophets and the apostles. Christ is the principal teacher of the faith¹⁶. He instructed the apostles who in their

¹⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Job*, c. 1, 8, 266.

¹⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* III 7, 7.

turn taught others both by the spoken and the written word¹⁷. Since their message was also destined to future generations, they put it into writing in order to have it preserved in its purity. The purpose of the written text is to impress the message on the mind and the heart of the faithful¹⁸. To guarantee the truth of this message God moved the authors of Sacred Scripture to put it into writing and assisted them in doing so.

Thomas distinguishes between inspiration and revelation. Inspiration is an impulse given to the human author which makes him write precisely what God wants him to write. To this effect God moves the intellect and will of the author¹⁹. In this way God himself becomes the main author of the text, the human author being his instrument²⁰. Since God is the author of the text, whatever is contained in it is necessarily true²¹. However, Thomas' theory of inspiration is not rigid: he allows for the fact that certain details in a story may not belong to the message which an author intended to communicate²². They are of no importance to him. Apparently the material letters and words of a text and divine inspiration do not always totally coincide. What the author wants to communicate constitutes the literal sense²³ and divine inspiration bears on this literal sense, in which there cannot be any error. However, when an author explicitly wants to mention certain details (as frequently happens in the *Gospel according to St. John*), these will belong to the literal sense. In this case it is impossible that there is falsehood in them. So far Thomas' doctrine of the divine inspiration of Holy Scripture.

As regards the role of divine revelation, it gives the human author the knowledge and understanding of the message of salvation which he must announce. When the message directly concerns supernatural salvation it results from a revelation²⁴ given in the manner of the communication of a certain doctrine²⁵. Sometimes the literal sense of a passage of Scripture (although inspired) is not the product of a revelation. This is the case when a text describes things which the author learned by his own observation or from witnesses and which convey historical facts. This occurs also when a text contains insights of human wisdom. In these cases only the spiritual sense will

¹⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* III 42, 4: “*verbo et scripto docuerunt*”.

¹⁸ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* III 12, 4.

¹⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* I-II 68, 1.

²⁰ THOMAS AQUINAS. *Quodl.* VII, a.14 ad 5. The expression was taken over by Leo XIII in his encyclical *Providentissimus*.

²¹ THOMAS AQUINAS. *Quodl.* XII, a.26 (q17, art. unicus). Cf. I 1, 10: “*Sensui litterali sacrae Scripturae numquam potest subesse falsum*”.

²² THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Evangelium Ioannis*, c. 18, *lectio* 4 (n. 2326, on the episode of Peter denying his acquaintance with Jesus): “... *cum non esset eorum principalis intentio ad hoc, sed ad commemorandum verba Petri...*”.

²³ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* I, 1, 5.

²⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* II-II 171, 1 ad 4.

²⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* II-II 171, 6 : “... *per modum cuiusdam doctrinae*”.

be the object of a revelation, but this revelation may have taken place after the redaction of the text, sc. in the community of Israel which reflected on particular texts of the Old Testament or in the Church of the apostolic period which accepted and interpreted the Old Testament²⁶.

A second presupposition of Thomas' exegesis is that the Bible is the book of the Church. The Bible must be read and explained *in medio Ecclesiae* (in communion with the Church). The Bible contains the substance of divine revelation²⁷ and nothing can be added to it or omitted from it²⁸. In this way Holy Scripture is the foundation and the rule of the faith²⁹. In it one may find almost the entire doctrine of theology³⁰. But it is the book of the Church and is read in the Church. On this point Thomas follows the tradition of the Fathers and the early theologians. St. Gregory the Great observes that the bread of the Scriptures must be ground by the teeth of tradition. St. Augustine reminds his readers that the Bible must be read *in fide catholica*³¹. Without the faith of the Church and outside the Church there is no true interpretation of the sacred text³². One example: *Job* 4, 18 says that God found depravity among the angels. Thomas explains that *according to the Catholic Faith* the angels were created in natural goodness, but that certain of them by their own fault forfeited the state of rectitude³³.

In this connection Thomas recalls that certain teachings were transmitted orally by the apostles, in particular with regard to the sacraments³⁴. The apostles brought the essentials of the message of salvation together in the *Apostles' Creed*. This Creed and the other symbols do not add anything to the Scriptures but confirm them and express what is contained in them³⁵. Because of this unity of the Bible and the doctrine of the Church, Thomas says, the latter is also the rule of the faith³⁶. The doctrine of the Church originates from the First Truth, God, as it has been expressed in Sacred Scripture. Therefore we must accept the Scriptures according to the doctrine of the Church which

²⁶ Cf. THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* I-II 104, 2 where Thomas writes that judicial precepts of the Old Testament acquired their spiritual sense *ex consequenti*, since they were not instituted to prefigure something, but to regulate the life of the people.

²⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* I, 1, 2 *ad* 2.

²⁸ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Evang. Ioannis*, ch. 21, lesson 6.

²⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* III 55, 5; II-II 5, 3.

³⁰ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Epistulas beati Pauli, Proemium*.

³¹ AUGUSTINE. *De Genesi ad litt.*, XII, 37, 70.

³² See LUBAC, H. DE. *Exégèse médiévale. Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, I, 1, Paris 1959, pp.56 ff.

³³ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Job*, c. 4.

³⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* III 25, 3 *ad* 4; 64, 2 *ad* 1: "Although not all these things have been transmitted in the Scriptures, the Church has them from a communication by the apostles in their daily conversance".

³⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* II-II 1, 9 *ad* 2.

³⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* II-II 5, 3.

has the correct understanding³⁷. The importance of this is obvious in the doctrine of the Trinity, christology and the theology of the sacraments. The creeds and the doctrine of the Church help us to understand the sacred text correctly and are the criterion with which we must read the sometimes difficult or not too clear biblical texts.

The Church Fathers help to understand Holy Scripture for they have an intrinsic relationship with the sacred text³⁸. The biblical texts and the commentaries of the Fathers have been written under the action of the same Holy Spirit³⁹. There is a community of thought between Holy Scripture and the Fathers who represent the authority of the apostles⁴⁰. In order to benefit from the treasures stored in the Bible we need the explanations proposed by the Fathers, even if not all what they say has the same value and they may be mistaken in things which do not belong to the faith⁴¹. Thomas insists that a theologian must concern himself assiduously with the works of the great doctors of the past and not neglect what they write⁴².

A third presupposition of the exegesis of Aquinas is the principle of the unity of the Scriptures insofar as all the Scriptures speak of Christ⁴³. In his Preface to the *Commentary on the Psalms* Thomas writes that the psalms refer to Christ and the Church, they contain Scripture in its entirety, in accordance with *Deuteronomy* 4, 6: “This is your wisdom and understanding before the nations”. Whatever the patriarchs went through, has to do with Christ⁴⁴. When St. John writes that Jesus went to the Feast of the Tabernacles in secret, he intimates that Christ is hidden under the figures of the Old Testament⁴⁵. The Old Testament is ordered to the New and not *vice versa*. The words “that Scripture might be fulfilled” must not be understood as a final, but as a consecutive clause. The New Testament has not been written in view of the Old, but the latter is ordered to the New⁴⁶. This unity of the Bible applies also to each single individual book. To give an example, Job’s words «I know that my redeemer lives» (*Job* 19, 23) shed light on the entire discussion throughout the text.

³⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* II-II 5, 3 ad 2: “*Omnibus articulis fidei inhaeret fides propter unum medium, scilicet propter veritatem primam propositam nobis in Scripturis secundum doctrinam Ecclesiae intelligentis sane*”. As E. Persson observes, according to St. Thomas the doctrine of the Church must be seen as being essentially the explanation of Holy Scripture. Cf. his *Doctrina sacra. Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*, Oxford, 1970, 70.

³⁸ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* I, 1, 8.

³⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS. *Quodl.* XII, art. 26 (q. 17, art. unic.): “*Dicendum quod ab eodem Spiritu Scripturae sunt expositae et editae*”.

⁴⁰ See GEENEN, J. G. “*Le fonti patristiche come «autorità» nella teologia di S. Tommaso*”. In *Sacra Doctrina* 77, 7-67, p. 18.

⁴¹ THOMAS AQUINAS. *Quodl.* XII, art. 26, ad 1.

⁴² THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* II-II 49, 3 ad 2.

⁴³ See the Proems to the *Commentaries on the letters of St. Paul* and the *Psalms*.

⁴⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS. In *Evang. Ioannis*, n. 560.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, n. 860.

⁴⁶ *Ibidem*, n. 2447.

THE EXEGETICAL METHOD OF ST. THOMAS.

1) We mention in the first place the procedure of the division of the text, as it was in use in the teaching of theology and philosophy at the university of Paris in the time of Aquinas. The method of repeated divisions and subdivision of the text of a book, a chapter or a passage, was used also in the study of Aristotle's writings. To give an example, at the beginning of the *Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* the following division is proposed: Paul's greetings are isolated from the rest of the entire letter. Then this "rest" is divided. First Paul shows his love for his readers in order to get their sympathetic attention, to speak next about the grace of Christ. This part, - the bulk of the letter -, is subdivided into a doctrinal and a more practical section⁴⁷.

The main divisions are accompanied by numerous subdivisions which by their sheer number easily irritate a modern reader⁴⁸. Nevertheless, they are not without considerable advantages. They oblige the reader to discover the coherence of a text and the train of thought of the author. There is always more order to a text than one may have thought initially! Moreover, these divisions force us to concentrate on the doctrinal contents of a text in its entirety and are a support for our memory. One may add that looking for order in a text is also a challenge to the intellect.

2) After a text has been divided and subdivided its meaning is explained with the help of parallel passages. Here the principle applies that "Scripture is the interpreter of Scripture"⁴⁹. This recourse to other biblical texts "is the method of medieval exegetes who knew many long passages by heart. Their vocabulary, their style and the images they use are borrowed quite naturally from the Bible; the vocabulary and the imagery of the Bible form part of their thought"⁵⁰. In his commentaries Thomas uses the main interpretations advanced by the Christian authors before his time. Usually he indicates which of these deserve our preference. He does so by means of such expressions as "the second interpretation is better". He first points out the literal sense of a passage to mention next its spiritual sense(s)⁵¹. Sometimes Thomas adds long, dogmatic explanations to his commentary of particular texts.

3) Besides dividing the text of a book of Holy Scripture Thomas also approaches its contents from one central thought and attempts to indicate a

⁴⁷ N. 97: "Primo ostendit virtutem evangelicae gratiae"; n. 953: "Exhortatur ad executionem operum huius gratiae".

⁴⁸ Cf. SPICQ, C. "Thomas d'Aquin". In *Dict. de théol. cath.* XI, 716.

⁴⁹ On the frequency of scriptural quotations in Thomas' biblical commentaries one may consult VALKENBERG, W. G. M. B. *Did not our Heart Burn! Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of Aquinas.* Utrecht, 1990, 259f.

⁵⁰ SPICQ, C. *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse médiévale*, Paris, 1944, 223.

⁵¹ "Exponitur autem et mystice"; SPICQ, C. *O. c.*, 224.

general characteristic. Thus he writes that Matthew is concerned mainly with the humanity of Christ, Luke with his priestly dignity⁵². The book of Job in its entirety purports to show that human life is directed by divine providence. At the beginning of his scriptural commentaries, written after 1258, Thomas always gives a quotation from the Bible which indicates the main argument of this particular book. Some examples: the *Psalms* are characterized by a text from *Sirach* 47, 8: “With his every deed he offered thanks to God Most High in words of praise”. Thomas notes that David sings the praise of Christ and expresses himself in songs of praise and supplication. The contents and purpose of the *Letter to the Romans* are very well indicated by a quotation from *Acts* 9, 15: “Go, for this man is a chosen vessel of mine to carry my name before gentiles, kings and Israelites”. Indeed, Aquinas adds, Paul is a vessel full of knowledge about Christ; everything he writes refers to Christ. The *First Letter to the Corinthians* is characterized by a sentence from *Wisdom* 6, 22: “I shall hide no secrets from you” (in Latin *sacramenta Dei*), an obvious reference to Paul’s teaching about the Eucharist in *1 Cor.* 11. The *Letter to the Galatians* is introduced by a very appropriate headline from *Leviticus* 26,10: “Discard the old crop to make room for the new”. A text from *Sirach* 33,31 “If you have but one slave treat him like yourself” characterizes the contents of the *Letter to Philemon*. As to the *Gospel according to John* Thomas quotes *Jesaja* 6,1: “I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne with the train of his garment filling the temple”. From the height of his contemplation of the divine mysteries John describes how the divinity of Christ fills his human nature from which grace flows to man.

According to the way in which Holy Scripture expresses itself, something is said to happen when people come to know it⁵³. Thomas uses such expressions as *secundum morem Scripturæ*, *Scriptura communiter appellat*, *secundum consuetudinem Scripturæ*⁵⁴. Sacred Scripture usually describes spiritual realities with images of corporeal things⁵⁵. Similarly biblical texts say that days are good or bad according to the good people do or experience and the evil they commit or suffer on these days⁵⁶.

5) Another aspect of Aquinas’ exegetical method is that particular forms of behavior or events are explained by means of a general principle. When Job, despite the catastrophes bearing down on him, continues to put his trust in divine providence, Satan suggests that he does so out of self interest. Thomas notes that when evil people do not find any faults in the

⁵² THOMAS AQUINAS. *In evang. Matth.*, c. 1, n. 27.

⁵³ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Rom.*, c. 1, *lectio* 3.

⁵⁴ For examples see THOMAS AQUINAS. *Comp. theol.* I, 236, THOMAS AQUINAS. *Contra gentiles* IV, 4, THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Job*, c. 3, p. 20, 72, THOMAS AQUINAS. *In evang. Ioan.*, c. 2, l. 2, *In Hebr.*, c. 11, l. 8, THOMAS AQUINAS. *Q. d. de malo* 4, 8 *ad* 1, *In Job*, c. 1, p. 8, 290.

⁵⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Job*, c. 1, p. 7, 233.

⁵⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Job*, c. 3, p. 20, 72.

behavior of Christians for which to blame them, they usually throw suspicion on their intentions⁵⁷.

6) A further particularity of Thomas's exegetical method is the use of certain sentences of the text as a basis and starting point for considerable doctrinal developments. One comes across this practice in the commentary on the *Gospel according to John*, but also elsewhere, as in *Galatians*, c. 4, lesson 2, where he develops the theology contained in Paul's words *factus ex muliere*. Quite striking is the doctrinal development of a sentence in *Isaiah* 38, 28 : "Is not God the father of the rain?"

THE SENSE OF THE TEXT.

For St. Thomas as well as for all medieval theologians Holy Scripture is the criterium of the faith and the nourishment of our spiritual life. As St. Gregory the Great writes, it is the food which people will eat at the end of time in the house of Job⁵⁸. Its depth is such that it provides material for a never ending meditation because it is filled with divine wisdom. In this connection St. Jerome speaks of an immense forest of meanings⁵⁹. According to St. Gregory strenuous efforts are needed to discover its treasures, a task comparable to the toiling of fishermen on the high seas⁶⁰.

In a *Sermon for the Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time* Thomas writes that Sacred Scripture enjoys the privilege of gratifying all people. Although it is only one book, it adapts itself to all and teaches them whatever they need according to their particular state of life. The explanation is that God is the subject matter of Scripture, while He is at the same time its efficient, exemplary, formal and final cause⁶¹.

While studying the Bible one must attempt to discover the sense the author of a text intended to express, that is, its literal meaning⁶². Thomas calls this the *intentio auctoris* or the *intentio libri*. At the beginning of his commentary on the *Book of Job* he writes that it makes little difference for the "intention" of the book whether Job is a historical person or not. Before Thomas, Hugh of Saint-Victor had pointed out that the literal sense of a passage does not

⁵⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Job*, c. 1, p. 10, 480.

⁵⁸ GREGORY THE GREAT. *Moralia* 36, ch. 26.

⁵⁹ JEROME. *Epist.* 64, ch. 21: "...infinita sensuum silva".

⁶⁰ GREGORY THE GREAT. *Comment. on 1 Kings*: PL 79, 19AC.

⁶¹ *Opera omnia* (edit. P. Ficcadori). New York, 1950, 24, 225. See also THOMAS AQUINAS. *Q.d. de potentia*, q. 4, a. 1: "Hoc enim ad dignitatem divinae Scripturae pertinet, ut sub una littera multos sensus contineat, ut sic et diversis intellectibus hominum conveniat, ut unusquisque miretur se in divina Scriptura posse invenire veritatem quam mente conceperit".

⁶² See THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Job*, c. 1, p. 7, 232: "... quia sensus litteralis est qui primo per verba intenditur sive proprie dicta sive figurate".

consist in the words as such, but in the sense they have. The literal sense can be expressed also by metaphors⁶³.

This does not imply that the individual words of a passage may be neglected. The following examples illustrate Thomas' position. With regard to the question whether Job is a historical person, Thomas attaches much importance to *Ezekiel 14,14*: "Even if these three men were in it, Noah, Daniel and Job, they could only save themselves by their virtue". For Thomas Noah and Daniel are historic persons, and so Job must also be one. Another example of the attention Thomas pays to individual words are his comments on *Matthew 22, 32* where Jesus quotes *Exodus 3, 6*: "The Lord the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...", and says that God is the God of the living. In this text Thomas sees an argument in favor of the resurrection because the souls of the patriarchs, as long as they are not reunited to their bodies, are not living persons⁶⁴. Spicq observes that of all medieval exegetes Thomas is most intent on determining the meaning of the words of a passage and his explanations are remarkable because of their accuracy⁶⁵.

As has been said before, the sense an author wanted to communicate does not always coincide with the material terms of a passage. Thus the precise meaning of the saying of Jesus "when someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other to him as well" must be understood by looking at Jesus' own behavior. When a soldier struck him during the interrogation by the high priest, he did not turn his other cheek to the man. Therefore, the meaning of the text apparently is that "we must be willing to support these things or even worse"⁶⁶. A second example is the interpretation of the "days" during which God created the world. Thomas writes that here we do not have to do with days of 24 hours. The text just indicates the various species of things created by God⁶⁷.

Some medieval exegetes felt somewhat embarrassed with regard to the literal sense of seemingly trivial texts such as *Exodus 23, 19* ("You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk"). Aquinas notes that the text must have a literal sense which has its justification. The reason for the ceremonial precepts of the Old Testament is, on the one hand, the religious cult of that time and, on the other, the prefiguration of Christ⁶⁸. However, Thomas does allow that in order to explain or justify many of these regulations they must not be

⁶³ See SMALLEY, B. *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*. Oxford, 1952, 101: "Living a century before Thomas Hugh seems to have grasped the Thomist principle that the clue to prophecy and metaphor is the writer's intention: the literal sense includes everything which the sacred author meant to say".

⁶⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In IV Sent.*, d. 43, a.1, ql. 1 ad 2.

⁶⁵ *O. c.*, p. 253.

⁶⁶ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Evang. Ioannis*, ch.18, lesson 4, n. 2321.

⁶⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS. *Comment. in librum Job*, ch. 2 (Leonine, p. 26).

⁶⁸ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S. Th.* II-II 102, 2.

regarded individually but taken together, because instead of those actually issued other rules would have been possible. Individually considered they have a spiritual sense⁶⁹

The fact that St. Thomas so strongly emphasizes the literal sense of the text has helped make the ceremonial precepts of the Old Testament the object of scientific study. He took up a thought expressed by the Church Fathers, sc. that the Old Testament gives the history of the gradual religious education of mankind⁷⁰. At the beginning of his *Commentary on the Book of Job* St. Thomas indicates the reasons why he intends to comment on the literal sense of this text, which many of his contemporaries neglected because they considered the arguments of the Book as rather imperfect. Thomas observes that this is no reason to disdain the text. As human beings we discover the truth only gradually.

THE DEPTH OF THE LITERAL SENSE.

In his *Commentary on the Gospel according to John* St. Thomas writes that the words of Christ are so profound and surpass so far the human intellect that we can understand them only to the extent God reveals their meaning to us⁷¹. Each word of the text originates with the Eternal Word and, therefore, is full of wisdom. Because of the limitations of the human mind not even the prophets understood everything which the Holy Spirit put into their visions, their own words and deeds⁷². As St. Augustine observes, even John did not tell us what the Divine Word is, but just spoke about the Son of God as well as he could⁷³.

It is sometimes difficult to determine the literal sense of a passage. Let us take, for instance, *Matthew* 12, 31. What is the precise meaning of the saying that “sins against the Holy Spirit cannot be forgiven”? St. Thomas quotes the explanations of the Fathers prior to Augustine, next the solution of Augustine and finally he formulates this in a modified form. In this connection he states the following rule: what is said in the Bible in an indefinite way (in this case, sins against the Holy Spirit) need not always be understood in such an indefinite way. In the passage under discussion, sins committed out of malice must be meant. To find the literal sense of a text one must take into account the intention of the author, sc. the message he wanted to convey⁷⁴.

⁶⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S. Th.* I-II 102, 2 ad 3 : “... in communi vero habent etiam causam litteralem”.

⁷⁰ SMALLEY. *O. c.*, p. 306.

⁷¹ Chapter 13, lesson 5, n. 1816.

⁷² THOMAS AQUINAS. *S. Th.* II-II 173, 4.

⁷³ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Ioan. evang.*, tr.1, 2: PL 35, 1379. Cf. I 1, 10.

⁷⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS. *Quaestiones disputatae de malo*, 3, art.14. THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Expos. in I Tim.*, ch. 2, lesson 1, Aquinas speaks of the *intentio apostoli*.

Scientific and critical exegesis can be a help to reach a better understanding of the literal sense of the text. They may also help us to avoid errors in interpreting it. However, the true meaning of the Bible can only be known in the light of the faith⁷⁵. The authentic meaning of a biblical text bears on supernatural salvation and can only be understood by those who belong to the Church⁷⁶. One may illustrate this with the exegesis Thomas gives of *Proverbs* 8, 24: “The deep was not when I was born”. This text and *Sirach* 24, 3 ff. show effectively that the Word is engendered by the Father before all created things⁷⁷. Now this sense will escape the reader who resorts only to the historico-critical method.

In this connection the question has been raised whether, according to Aquinas, passages of Holy Scripture can have more than one literal sense. In the *Summa theologiae* I 1,10 and *De potentia* 4,1 he seems to answer affirmatively: “Since God understands everything, there is no objection against a certain text having more than one literal sense”.- To see what Thomas means, one has to consider the context of these passages where the question is discussed whether God first created general matter and after that particular substances as St. Basil holds or whether in the beginning God made only the main classes of beings out of which other species developed (St. Augustine). It is obvious that the two opinions are mutually exclusive and cannot be true at the same time. Therefore, the text of the first chapter of *Genesis* cannot affirm both meanings at the same time.

Apparently St. Thomas wants to say that with regard to this particular point the literal sense is indefinite and that different explanations are compatible with it⁷⁸. We are dealing here with details the knowledge of which is not necessary in order to understand the core of the message of salvation (sc. that God created the world). God left it up to us to determine certain texts somewhat further so that everyone may find his own explanation in the text and thus feel closer to Sacred Scripture. Obviously this applies only to interpretations which are not opposed to the teachings of Holy Scripture and sound reasoning.

Besides this interpretation of a not yet fully determined sense of certain biblical texts St. Thomas also speaks of the use of Scripture by the Church which understands texts in a special way and thus renders explicit what is

⁷⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS. *S.Th.* II-II 1, 4 ad 3: “The light of the faith lets us see the things in which we believe”.

⁷⁶ See GARDEIL, A. *Le donné révélé et la théologie*. Paris, 1910, 218.

⁷⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS. *SCG* IV 4 and 12. Cf. FIDALGO, J. A. “*Hermenéutica bíblica de santo Tomás de Aquino*”. In *Biblia y hermenéutica. VII Simposio internacional de teología*, Pamplona 1986, 477-486.

⁷⁸ See THOMAS AQUINAS. *De potentia* 4, 1: “Every truth which leaving intact whatever belongs to the literal sense (*salva litterae circumstantia*) is compatible with it, is its meaning”.

implicitly contained in them. According to Aquinas this understanding of Scripture under the guidance of the Holy Spirit leads us to the full truth.

THE SPIRITUAL OR MYSTICAL SENSE.

St. Paul formulated the principle of the distinction between the literal and the spiritual sense. The allegorical meaning of the Old Testament is Christ, for the Old Testament in its entirety is ordered to Christ. Following in the footsteps of Paul the Fathers of the Church and later theologians have tried to discover the spiritual meaning of all the books of the Old Testament. St. Jerome writes that “we must understand them in a spiritual way”.- “After the truth of the historical events (has been grasped), everything must be understood spiritually”⁷⁹. According to St. Augustine we “see the Old Testament revealed in the New, while the New Testament, on the other hand, is present in the Old covered with a veil”⁸⁰. Holy Scripture, indeed, is “the Book of Mysteries”⁸¹. Augustine even writes that the spiritual understanding of the Bible is Christian freedom.

According to St. Gregory the Great whatever is in Holy Scripture must be understood allegorically and applied to our moral life (the so-called moral sense of the text)⁸². The Church has always acknowledged this in principle, but while the exegetes of the School of Alexandria (influenced by Platonism) showed a strong tendency to an allegorizing exegesis, the theologians of Antioch kept mostly to the literal sense. In the Preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms* St. Thomas writes that we must avoid the error of Theodore of Mopsuesta, condemned by the Fifth General Council. This author asserted that in the Old Testament and in the Prophets nothing explicit is said about Christ whereas the opposite is true⁸³. Yet this reference to Christ is not always apparent at first sight. Commenting on Jesus’ words «*Scrutamini Scripturas*», Aquinas writes that the faith in Christ was contained in the Old Testament, but was not clearly visible on the surface of it, hidden as it was underneath the shadows of images⁸⁴.

All medieval theologians accepted the principle that the Old Testament has a spiritual sense. As C.H. Dodd writes, “for a Christian the plenitude of

⁷⁹ AUGUSTINE. *In Isaiam prophetam, prol.*: PL 24, 20B.

⁸⁰ AUGUSTINE. *Enarr. in Ps. 105*, n. 36.

⁸¹ GREGORY THE GREAT. *Contra Julianum* 6, 7 n. 20.

⁸² GREGORY THE GREAT. *In Ezech. 2, 2*, 15.

⁸³ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Psalmos*, Prol. : “*Sic sunt exponenda de rebus gestis ut figurantibus aliquid de Christo et Ecclesia*”; *S.Th. I-II* 102, 2: “*Verba prophetarum sic respiciebant præsens tempus quod etiam in figuram futuri dicebantur*”.

⁸⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Evang. Ioan.*, c. 5, lectio 6, n. 10: “*Fides Christi in Veteri Testamento continebatur sed non in superficie, quia in profundo obumbrata figura latebat*”. Thomas refers to 2 Cor 3, 15 (“*usque in hodiernum diem velamen positum est super cor eorum*”). See also *S.Th. I-II* 104, 2; 102, 6 ad 1.

revelation includes also the revelation of God's intentions with him"⁸⁵. Medieval theologians were convinced that the literal sense of the Bible is not the only reason why it has been given to us⁸⁶. In this way they acted in accordance with Augustine's invitation: "We have heard the facts, let us now look for the mystery"⁸⁷. On this point there is a considerable difference with modern exegesis which tends to accept the spiritual sense in exceptional cases only.

Early in the history of the Church the spiritual sense was subdivided. As St. Thomas did with regard to many other questions, he gave a systematic survey of the subdivisions of the spiritual sense of the Sacred Text. His explanation has become the generally accepted theory: the allegorical sense is the meaning which refers to Christ and the central mysteries of the faith. The moral sense is the meaning a text has for our moral life. With regard to this moral sense one must keep in mind that, as Thomas points out, in biblical texts which as such contain precepts or admonishments concerning moral life, these precepts and exhortations are the literal sense of these passages. Finally there are texts which describe something which is a prefiguration of eternal life. In this case we have to do with the anagogical sense⁸⁸.

Being the Creator of the world God can arrange things and historical events in such a way that they refer to the realities of the faith and the order of grace. This means that the history of the world and of Israel, as it is described in the Old Testament, now appears in a new light. They refer to Christ, contain indications for our Christian life and describe a prefiguration of heavenly bliss. In this way, St. Thomas, writes, we understand better the marvelous connection of all things in the wisdom of God's plan and we bend our heads with reverence before the Scriptures, of which the treasures surpass our understanding⁸⁹.

THE BIBLICAL COMMENTARIES OF ST. THOMAS.

As we have seen, in Aquinas' time, to practice theology meant to study the Bible⁹⁰. Holy Scripture is the source of each theological question and it is the point of reference for the explanation one gives. In a single work of Aquinas, the *Summa theologiae*, there are more than 25,000 quotations from the

⁸⁵ DODD, C. H. *The Bible Today*, p. 161.

⁸⁶ LUBAC, H DE. *Exégèse médiévale*, I, 484.

⁸⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS. In *Ioan. Evang.*, tr. 50, n. 6: "Factum audivimus, mysterium requiramus".

⁸⁸ This is explained in detail in THOMAS AQUINAS. *Quodl.* VII, q. 6, a. 1, 2 and 3 and in the last articles of the first question of the *Summa theologiae*, Part I.

⁸⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS. *Q. d. de potentia*, q. 4, a. 1.

⁹⁰ See THOMAS AQUINAS. *Quodl.* VII, art. 2: there are four types of spiritual work, sc. that of a judge, preaching, reciting the divine office and the study of the Bible. With regard to the use of the Bible in the teaching of theology see DENIFLE, H. "Quel livre servait de base à l'enseignement des maîtres en théologie à l'Université de Paris?". In *Revue thomiste* 2 (1894) 129-161.

Bible⁹¹. In Paris students were requested to attend every morning a course in the reading of the Bible taught by a bachelor and, secondly, a lesson by a master. In 1257 as master of theology St. Thomas began to teach on the *Gospel according to Matthew* and most likely in the next year on one of the books of the Old Testament (perhaps *Isaiah*)⁹². For his classes he used the commentaries of Chrysostom, Jerome and Augustine. The *Commentary on the Gospel according to Matthew* is a so-called *reportatio*, a lecture written down by an assistant or student.

In Italy St. Thomas wrote his *Commentary on the Book of Job*, and the *Catena aurea* (which was not used for teaching). He did perhaps also start with his commentaries on the *Letters of St. Paul* to continue in Paris, where he also composed his *Commentary on the Gospel according to St. John* (from ch.5 onwards this is a *reportatio* revised by Thomas himself). Finally, in Naples he commented on the first 54 *Psalms*. The chronology of the exegetical works of Aquinas is somewhat uncertain⁹³. The research required for the Leonine edition of these texts will most likely help to make possible a more precise dating of the commentaries.

Among the biblical commentaries of St. Thomas the *Catena aurea* is a turning point. In this work, which he undertook at the request of pope Urbanus IV, he brings together in short quotations or summaries the explanations the Fathers had given of the text of the Four Gospels. The work distinguishes itself by its clarity and the meaningful order of its contents. It collects the most valuable passages. Even when these are shortened, their vocabulary and style are left intact in so far as possible. Thomas quotes 57 Greek and 22 Latin Fathers. His intention was to determine the literal meaning of the text, explain its spiritual sense, refute errors and confirm the truth of the catholic faith. All this is necessary, he writes, because it is from the Gospels that we receive the norm of the catholic faith and the rule for our Christian life⁹⁴.

One of Thomas' finest writings is his commentary on the *Book of Job*, composed in Italy (probably in Orvieto) between 1262-1264. In an astonishing display of insight and learning he analyzes the various arguments concerning the meaning of suffering, guilt and divine providence, and provides explanations of the often difficult and poetical text. Since Gregory the Great had written extensively on the spiritual sense of the *Book of Job*, Thomas limits himself to the explanation of the literal sense of each passage and sentence, a difficult undertaking, for which he could not avail of the work of predecessors. The commentary is packed with arguments about suffering,

⁹¹ See VALKENBERG, W. O. c., p. 193 f.

⁹² The *Commentary on Isaiah* might even date to his years in Cologne.

⁹³ See Glorieux, P. "Essai sur les Commentaires scripturaires de saint Thomas et leur chronologie". In *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale*, 16 (1949), 237-266.

⁹⁴ THOMAS AQUINAS. *Catena aurea*, I, n. 468.

guilt and providence, but it is pleasant to read. A main conclusion is that in order to give an ultimate explanation or justification of suffering, we must assume that there is an after-life for man⁹⁵. We have already drawn attention to the distinction between the three levels on which Job may be speaking⁹⁶. It is remarkable that Thomas understands the passages about the voice of God intervening in the debate as words spoken by Job himself, inspired or guided by God.

As regards Thomas' other exegetical writings his *Commentaries on the Gospel according to John* and the *Letters of Paul* have been called "the ripest fruit and the most perfect example of medieval scholastic exegesis"⁹⁷. The commentary on the first five chapters of the gospel, written by Thomas himself, is called an *ordinatio* or *expositio*, the remaining part, written down by an assistant during the classes, is called a *reportatio* or *lectura*. In this commentary the doctrine of the Trinity, the mystery of intradivine life, God's love of man and Christ's love of his disciples are placed in the center by Aquinas.

One should not look for historical or philological details in this commentary. It is a theological *exposé* which sets forth the doctrinal contents of the gospel explaining them with the help of the Tradition of the Church. The commentary has 373 quotations from Augustine, 217 from Chrysostom and 95 from Origen⁹⁸. Thomas indicates the literal and the spiritual sense of the various passages and refutes the heretical views of Apollinaris, Arius, Pelagius, the Manichees, Nestorius and others. The commentary aims at making its readers meditate on God's greatness and love. "Our knowledge of the Divine Word will be perfect when we arrive in the house of the Father to be embraced by the love of the Father for his Son" (nn. 218-220).

St. Thomas divides the *Gospel according to John* into two parts, which roughly speaking coincide with the division proposed by modern authors, sc. the Book of the Signs (chapters 1-12) and the Book of Glory (chapters 13-20). Chapter 21 is considered an appendix. Since he possessed an extraordinary knowledge of the entire Bible and the writings of the Fathers, while having at the same time an arsenal of profound theological insights at his disposal, his commentary has become very valuable. One should add that Thomas was a saint, whose spiritual nourishment consisted in meditating on the Bible. He knew that Jesus' love of his disciples, pointed out by John, extended to his own person. In his commentary on *John* 6, 56 ("Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him") he writes : if we receive the Body of Christ with feigned piety, without the desire to be united with Him

⁹⁵ THOMAS AQUINAS. *In Job*, c. 2, p. 18, 215.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, c. 10, p. 68, 10; c. 39. 212, 370-379.

⁹⁷ SPICQ, C. *DTC*, XV 1, p. 695.

⁹⁸ After WEISHEIPL, J. "The Johannine Commentary of Friar Thomas". *In Church History*, 45 (1976), 185-195.

and the resolve to take away the obstacles, we do not remain in Christ nor He in us (n. 976). Jesus says that He is the way, the truth and life (*John* 14, 6): “You want to know which road to take? Accept Christ... Are you looking where to go and where to stay? Hold on to Christ, for He is the Life. Hold on to Christ if you want to be secure” (n.1870).

As M.-D. Philippe notes, Thomas discloses the profound meaning of the testimony of John the Baptist, of the passages on the Eucharist and the Farewell Discourses. The secrets of God are revealed above all to those who unite themselves in love with Christ. Thomas sees a narrow relationship between the passion of Jesus and his resurrection. In his commentary he uses the concept “glory” as a principle to explain the meaning of “the glory the Father gives to Christ” and “the glorification of the Father by the Son”. He also assigns a central place to the Holy Spirit: the Son teaches us the truth and the Holy Spirit brings us to accept it. He lets us know everything, leads us and directs our desires towards spiritual things (n. 1959).

Although the *Commentary* emphasizes the theological explanation of the Gospel and its significance for our spiritual life, Thomas did notice that the Gospel was written by an eye witness and possesses great historical accuracy⁹⁹. After explaining the literal sense of the text Thomas examines its spiritual meaning. According to John the words and deeds of Christ have also a spiritual meaning and refer to a more profound reality, that is to the life of God himself, grace, the sacraments and the spiritual life of Christians. To see how well Thomas developed this spiritual sense one should read the commentary on the passages about the Wedding at Cana or the apparitions of the risen Lord. On the shore of the Sea of Tiberias Jesus roasted some fishes over a charcoal fire; the spiritual meaning of this passage is that in his suffering on the cross Jesus was consumed by the fire of love. In his explanations Thomas attains the deepest levels of that mystical understanding of the text St. John of the Cross speaks about¹⁰⁰.

We must finally mention the *Commentaries on the Letters of Paul*. In his *Saint Paul. Épître aux Romains* M.-J. Lagrange writes: “It is superfluous to praise the intellectual depth and theological accuracy of this commentary. No one has seen better the connection between the various arguments and their range than Thomas. But one has not always paid attention to his astonishing broadness of vision which leaves the exegetes much leeway. Thomas often mentions views without pronouncing himself”¹⁰¹.

⁹⁹ See CIPRIANI, S. “*Riflessioni esegetiche su Super S. Ioannis Evangelium lectura di san Tommaso*”. In *San Tommaso nel suo settimo centenario. Atti del congresso*, IV, Roma-Napoli 1974, 41-59.

¹⁰⁰ PHILIPPE, M.-D. *Saint Thomas d'Aquin. Commentaire sur l'Évangile de saint Jean, Preface*. Nice: 1978, 42.

¹⁰¹ O. c. Paris, 1916, p. XI.

To make this plain we want to draw attention to some of the central thoughts of the *Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*. Paul's argument is dominated by the opposition between "letter" and "spirit" (2, 29 ff.). Quite a number of modern exegetes understand "spirit" as the spirit of the Christians, but Thomas saw that Paul means the contrast between a life according to the Law and one according to the Holy Spirit. This is, moreover, the opposition between the external law, carved in stone, and the interior law written on the hearts of the faithful, sc. the presence of the Holy Spirit. "St. Thomas sees a similar contrast in other passages of the *Letter* where there is question of the opposition between letter and spirit"¹⁰².

Inspired by St. Paul Thomas elaborated his splendid doctrine of the New Law as the grace of the Holy Spirit (n. 602). The Holy Spirit gives us faith which is active through love. In this way Thomas could incorporate the prophecies of *Jeremiah* 31, 33 and *Ezekiel* 36, 26f. in his explanation. Both prophets predict that God will place his Law in the heart of man. In this connection Thomas' explanation of the sentence "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 *Cor.*3, 17) deserves to be mentioned. As S. Lyonnet writes, it is the best description of Christian freedom one can give. The Holy Spirit is the dynamic force of Christian life. He who avoids evil because it is evil, is free. Now this is precisely what the Holy Spirit brings about in the elect. Finally, Thomas attaches great importance to the soteriological power of the resurrection of Christ. In his explanations he can base himself on Paul.

We must restrict ourselves to these examples but trust that they give at least some idea of the value of Thomas' biblical commentaries. Hopefully our reflections are of some help to go beyond the historical critical exegesis in discovering the riches of the Word of God.

¹⁰² See LYONNET, S. "L'actualité de saint Thomas exegete". In *San Tommaso nel suo settimo centenario. Atto del congresso*, IV, 9-28.