

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS SUMMA THEOLOGICA (1256-1272)

## "The Nature and Domain of Sacred Doctrine"

Here, Aquinas is concerned specifically with how to interpret the Bible. He is anxious, firstly, to investigate in particular whether figurative language (what he calls "various similitudes and figures" [117]) ought to be present in a work such as the Bible which is "intended to make truth clear" (117), that is, a work ostensibly concerned with revealing the unvarnished truth about the meaning of life. As he points out, many critics claim that "by such similitudes truth is obscured" (117). Figurative language is more properly found in the realm of the "poetic, the least of all the sciences" (117) which by its very nature perforce "makes use of metaphors to produce a representation" (117). Moreover, the argument has been advanced, he points out, that "to put forward divine truths under the likeness of corporeal things does not befit this doctrine" (117) and that the representation of God ought "chiefly to be taken from the higher creatures, and not from the lower" (117).

Aquinas is also concerned, secondly, with the possibility that the Bible is open to more than one interpretation (i.e. whether it may be "expounded in different senses" [117]). Many have argued, he points out, that a word in the Bible should not have "several senses" (118) because "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" (118)

Aquinas contends in opposition to these claims that, firstly, it is entirely "befitting Holy Scripture to put forward divine and spiritual truths by means of comparison with material things" (117) and that it is "natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible things, because all our knowledge originates from sense" (117). Consequently, "spiritual truths are fittingly taught under the likeness of material things" (117), that is, it is necessary that "spiritual truths be expounded by means of figures taken from corporeal things in order that even the simple who are unable by themselves to grasp intellectual things may be able to understand it" (117). He explains:

The ray of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sensible imagery wherewith it is veiled [in 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. (117)

Moreover, he points out, the "very exercise of truth in figures is useful for the exercise of thoughtful minds" (118). Secondly, Aquinas agrees that many words found in the Bible may in fact have more than one meaning. This is not because "one word signifies several things, but because the things signified by the words can be themselves signs of other things" (118). However, he stresses that the "multiplicity of these senses" (118) produced in this way does not "produce equivocation or any other kind of multiplicity" (118).

Aquinas offers a theory of interpretation which, although expressly limited to the interpretation of the Bible, has been enormously influential upon successors like the Italian poet and theorist Dante Alighieri and, later, the Romantics who sought to apply his methodology to the interpretation of secular as well as sacred texts. Aquinas argues that the Bible has two levels of meaning, the "historical or literal" (118) and the "spiritual" (118). At the first level of signification, the literal, "words signify things" (118). This literal level of meaning of the Bible is further divisible into four subcategories:

- "history" (119) which embraces "whenever anything is simply related" (119),
- "etiology" (119) which is concerned with "when its cause is assigned" (119),
- "analogy" (119) which draws comparisons (or which occurs, as Aquinas puts it,

- “whenever the truth of one text of Scripture is shown not to contradict the truth of another” [119]), and
- the “parabological” (119) which is equivalent to the use of what we would normally call figurative language (i.e. metaphor or metonymy) or even circumlocution--“for by words things are signified properly and figuratively” (119), he points out. He gives as an example of the last category the instance when the Bible speaks of God’s arm in order really to denote his power.

The second level of signification found in the Bible, the spiritual as opposed to the historical or literal, is based on the fact, Aquinas argues, that the “author of Holy Scripture is God, in whose power it is to signify his meaning, not by words only (as man can also do) but also by things themselves” (118). As a result, “whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by words have themselves also a signification” (118). That “signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense” (118) of the text. He proceeds to argue that this ‘spiritual sense’ itself has three sub-categories:

- sometimes the spiritual meaning of the passage in question in the Bible can be “allegorical” (118) whereby, for example, the “Old Law is a figure of the New Law” (118);
- sometimes the spiritual meaning can be “moral” whereby, for example, the “things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are signs of what we ought to do” (118); and, last but not least,
- sometimes the meaning can be “anagogical” (118) in so far as the words in question “signify what relates to eternal glory” (118).