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A Note on Scripture in the *Summa theologiae*

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Abstract

Beginning with the question of whether Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* inevitably distorts the meaning of biblical texts by removing them from their narrative context, this essay suggests that one way to think about Aquinas's use of Scripture in the *Summa theologiae* is to read together, as an ensemble, the biblical texts that he cites when treating a particular theme. Focusing on his first four questions on the virtue of faith (*ST* II-II, qq. 1–4), I argue that Aquinas's selection of biblical texts from across the canonical Scriptures enables him to provide a nuanced biblical perspective on a particular theme even without finding it necessary to quote Scripture in every article. I seek to bring to light the way that the various biblical texts in the question—whose functions within the articles are widely diverse, from providing the hinge for a *responsio* to framing a minor objection–complement and echo one another.

Keywords

Faith, Scripture, sapiential, biblical theology, narrative

I. Introduction

In his *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Pim Valkenberg identifies a "theologically primary function" of Scripture in certain articles of the *Summa theologiae*.[1] This "primary function" occurs when the biblical text originates the problem or topic of the article; when the biblical text, located in the *sed contra*, provides the path for the response; and when the biblical text, at the end of the response, confirms the position taken. Valkenberg observes that "the theologically primary function of Scripture will be found everywhere in Aquinas' theology,

[1] Wilhelmus G. B. M. Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 134–40.

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because it is essential to a theology proceeding from the principles of faith known through revelation."[2]

Does such a "primary function" suffice to uphold a truly biblical theology? The biblical exegete Richard B. Hays, in his *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, cautions against privileging intellectual abstraction over the particularity of the biblical texts. As he puts it, "a Christian ethic that seeks to be faithfully responsive to the New Testament texts will not move abstractly away from the form in which the texts present themselves to us. We must respect the particularity of the forms through which the whole witness of the whole canon lays claim upon us."[3] Does the *Summa theologiae* violate Hays's injunction against moving "abstractly away from the form in which the texts present themselves to us"? The *Summa theologiae* aims to set forth the new ordering of our knowledge that God's *sacra doctrina* in Christ makes possible. Does this emphasis on the sapiential re-ordering of our knowledge result in the *Summa theologiae* in an inadequate contextualization of biblical texts, no matter whether biblical texts often play a "primary function"?

Focusing on the first four questions of Aquinas's discussion of the virtue of faith (*Summa theologiae* II-II, questions 1–4), I will explore how the *Summa theologiae* aims to be "faithfully responsive to the New Testament texts." In particular, I will suggest that when the biblical texts found in each question of the *Summa* are read as an ensemble, it becomes clear that Aquinas is engaging "the particularity of the forms through which the whole witness of the whole canon lays claim upon us." He does so with the goal of enabling us to share in the pattern of divine Wisdom that Scripture reveals.

II. *Summa theologiae* II-II, qq. 1–4: Recovering the Biblical Ensemble

We should first note the six biblical texts that Aquinas cites more than once in *Summa theologiae* II-II, questions 1–4. They are as follows: "We see now through a glass in a dark manner: but then face to face. Now I know in part; but then I shall know even as I am known" (1 Cor 13:12); "Faith is the substance of things to be hoped for, the evidence of things that appear not" (Heb 11:1); "He that cometh to God, must believe that He is, and is a rewarder to them that seek Him" (Heb 11:6); "Faith without works is dead" (James 2:20); "faith. . .worketh by charity" (Gal 5:6); "For obedience to the faith in all nations" (Rom 1:5).

[2] Ibid., 141; cf. 2 and elsewhere.

[3] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation: A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 294.

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These biblical texts reveal the scope of Scripture's teaching on faith. In 1 Corinthians 13:12 and Hebrews 11:1, Aquinas finds faith's interpersonal character and eschatological orientation. Hebrews 11:6 reveals faith to be a reality determinative of the whole of human history. James 2:20 and Galatians 5:6 expose the integral connection of faith and love. Romans 1:5 underscores the historical grounding and evangelical dynamism of faith: the full sentence reads,

> "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ; to all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:1–7).

Each of Aquinas's first four questions on faith develops the emphases found in these six biblical texts.

Summa theologiae II-II, question one contains ten articles. These articles especially illumine the historical grounding and evangelical dynamism of faith. Aquinas begins with the teleological "end" of this history, namely eternal life (1 Corinthians 13:12, 1 John 3:2). Within this teleological context, he presents an entire biblical history of faith. Abraham's "seeing" of Christ (John 8:56) is at one end of the spectrum; the Apostle Thomas's at the other (John 20:28–29). Located in relation to the faith of Abraham (who "saw" spiritually) and of the Apostle Thomas (who refused to believe unless he saw) is unbelief, which opposes faith (1 Timothy 1:13). Faith requires going beyond what we can see here in this life (Hebrews 11:1). Therefore, those who believe cannot credit themselves: it is the work of God (Ephesians 2:8 and Deuteronomy 32:7), specifically of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:23).

In this history of faith, there is room for implicit faith whose constituent elements are belief in God's existence and providence (Hebrews 11:6). Before Christ's coming, God's revelation of himself becomes more and more explicit (Exodus 6:2,3 and Psalm 119:100). Only after Christ's coming is the full scope of faith known explicitly by many people (Ephesians 3:5, Hebrews 11:13, Galatians 4:4). In Christ, believers "see" the Father and become the Father's "sons," thereby receiving eternal life (John 14:9, Romans 5:2, John 17:3). Faith enables human beings to receive adoptive sonship and eternal life. This is "the mystery of godliness" (1 Timothy 3:16) and its good news must be transmitted without changing it to suit changing times (Deuteronomy 4:2). Believers are called to be one community

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united in Christ and to be drawn more and more deeply into Christ by the teaching of the Holy Spirit (John 14:1 and John 16:13). This community will be led by Peter as an instrument of unity, so that all believers might possess and proclaim the same faith (Luke 22:32 and 1 Corinthians 1:10).

This ensemble of biblical texts in the ten articles of question one exerts a remarkably coherent influence, especially when compared to the quite diverse functions that the individual biblical texts possess within the articles. The ensemble directs the reader toward the beatific vision of the Trinity as adopted sons of the Father taught by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, the ensemble propels the reader toward the visible ecclesial communion of the Church, while granting the possibility of implicit faith on the part of those who do not explicitly know Christ. In other words, the ensemble itself, and not merely individual texts, displays what might be called a "primary function."

This function of the ensemble is particularly important because the ten articles of the first question might otherwise suggest that the biblical portrait of faith is not a primary concern of the *Summa*'s. The first article asks whether the object of faith is "First Truth," and differentiates between the formal and material objects of faith, drawing upon Pseudo-Dionysius. This article has no biblical quotations. The second article inquires into the status of propositions as regards the object of faith; biblical quotations appear only in objection three and in the reply to objection three. The third and fourth articles discuss whether faith's object can include anything false or be visible to the eye, and the fifth through tenth articles all treat the object of faith under the rubric of the Church's creedal statements. Articles four and nine contain key biblical quotations in the *sed contra*; articles five, seven, eight, nine, and ten contain biblical quotations whose purpose is to develop and confirm Aquinas's *respondeo*. Articles three, eight, and nine have biblical quotations in the objections, but not in the responses to the objections; articles four and seven contain one or more biblical quotations in the objections and the responses to the objections. Article six possesses biblical quotations only in the responses to the first and third objections.

It will be clear, then, that question one certainly does not aim to include as many biblical texts as possible. Nor does Aquinas follow the narrative of Scripture or require every argument to hinge upon a biblical text. However, by providing an ensemble of biblical texts whose theme is the history of faith on its way to eschatological fulfillment in the adoptive sonship, he illumines "faith's object," the topic of the first question, in a profoundly biblical manner.

In *Summa theologiae*, II-II, question two (on the "act of faith"), Aquinas presents an ensemble of biblical texts that focuses on faith's interpersonal character and eschatological orientation. The human ear and mind are made for receiving truth (Job 12:11 and Romans 1:20),

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which God himself gives for human salvation (Psalm 36:39). When we believe God's word, we are led to Christ, and we please God, thereby avoiding condemnation for our sins (Hebrews 11:6, John 6:45, Romans 8:1). We cannot teach ourselves the truths of faith, because they are above mere human reason (Sirach 3:23); they must be received from teachers sent by God (Romans 10:14,15). To be able to receive the truths of faith requires an attitude of profound humility (Matthew 5:39), since we cannot prove the truths of faith for ourselves, but rather must receive them out of obedience to God (Romans 1:5 and Psalm 119:60). Some persons will possess deeper understanding of the content of faith (Hebrews 11:6 and Job 1:14), but such differences properly serve to increase our ecclesial dependence upon each other—and ultimately upon Christ—rather to inflate human pride (1 Corinthians 4:16 and Luke 22:32). The true Teacher of salvation is Christ alone, whose herald is John the Baptist (Psalm 24:8, Isaiah 63:1, Matthew 11:11, Matthew 11:3, and Acts 4:12). What he teaches is the marriage of God and man through the forgiveness of sins (Genesis 2:24, Ephesians 5:32, John 1:29 and 34, Zechariah 9:11, Job 19:25). Because of human rationality, human beings can receive this teaching and come to share in the Trinitarian name of God (Job 35:11, John 17:5–6, Genesis 1:26, Matthew 28:19). Believers are called to proclaim this saving faith as the fulfillment of the promises of God (Matthew 28:19 and Hebrews 11:33); such proclamation should proceed not by appealing to human credulity (Sirach 19:4) but by testifying to the reasons for faith (1 Peter 3:15 and John 4:42).

As in the first question, therefore, the ensemble of biblical texts provides the content and goal of pondering on the question of "the act of faith." Yet the second question, too, would not immediately be recognized as biblical theology. Article one asks whether Augustine's definition of faith as "to think with assent" is adequate. At stake is the status of the act of faith in relation to demonstration, on the one hand, and mere opinion, on the other. Article two probes another saying of Augustine, namely that the act of faith with regard to its "object" can be considered in three ways: believing God (the intellect's formal object), believing in a God (the intellect's material object), and believing in God (the intellect as moved by the will). Article three asks whether the act of faith, insofar as it exceeds what can be known by natural reason, is necessary for salvation. Article four inquires into whether things knowable by natural reason can belong to the act of faith. Articles five through eight have to do with "explicit" versus "implicit" faith. The ninth and tenth articles, lastly, treat the meritorious character of the act of faith. No biblical quotations appear in articles one, two, and four, which treat questions in Augustinian and Aristotelian cognitional theory as a backdrop for the kind of knowing that "faith" is. The third article contains biblical

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quotations (in particular from the Old Testament) throughout—the objections, the *sed contra*, the *respondeo*, and the responses to the objections—and hinges upon Hebrews 11:6. Article five, too, hinges upon Hebrews 11:6. Articles six through ten all contain numerous biblical quotations of widely varying degrees of importance for the arguments.

Question two thus exhibits the same pattern that we found in question one. Within the broad range of arguments pertinent to expositing the act of faith, Aquinas sets forth an ensemble of biblical texts. These biblical texts are not arranged as an ensemble, but the reader of the *quaestio* nonetheless receives a biblical instruction in faith.

Questions three and four can be summarized more briefly. Question three takes up the outward act of faith, and thus treats the words and deeds appropriate to the public confession of faith; ultimately at issue is how faith shapes history. Faith involves confidently making known the gospel (Ephesians 6:19), trusting in Christ's power to make fruitful our witness (2 Thessalonians 1:11). One shows that one truly has faith by works of charity (Galatians 5:6) and by confessing one's faith publicly (2 Corinthians 4:13 and Romans 10:10). In the proclamation of faith by one's words and deeds, one must take care not to offend others needlessly (1 Corinthians 10:32) and not to confess one's faith inopportunely (Matthew 7:6). At times, however, giving offense to unbelievers cannot be avoided (Matthew 15:12).

Question four explores the virtue of faith in itself, with particular attention to the relationship of intellect and will in the act of faith and to the relationship of faith and charity. The main themes include the nature of the virtue of faith (Hebrews 11:1), the fulfillment of faith in the vision of God (1 Corinthians 13:12), faith's relationship to charity (Galations 5:6, James 2:20, Colossians 3:14), faith and justification (Romans 5:1), faith as flowing from the grace of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4 and Ephesians 2:8), faith as obedience to God's Word (Romans 1:5, Luke 12:4, 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Romans 10:17), faith in Christ (Isaiah 7:14 and 1 Corinthians 3:11), faith and the unity of the Church (Ephesians 4:5), and the relationship of faith and reason (Isaiah 7:9 [Septuagint]).

In questions three and four (a total of ten articles), Aquinas consistently hinges his arguments upon biblical texts, as shown by the fact that in every article (with one exception) a biblical text appears in the *sed contra*. In only two of the ten articles, however, does a biblical text appear in the *respondeo*. Aquinas instead employs the *respondeo* to reflect upon the intelligibility of the content of the biblical text found in the *sed contra*. As for the topics addressed questions three and four, the two articles of question three ask whether outward confession belongs to the act of faith and whether it is necessary for salvation. Question four then addresses in article one whether Hebrews 11:1 offers an appropriate "definition" of faith. Article two

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asks whether faith is in the intellect or in the will; articles three and four whether charity is the form of faith and if so whether faith can be present without its form. Articles five, six, seven, and eight inquire into what it means to call faith a "virtue" of the intellect rather than of the will.

Questions three and four display the same pattern that we have seen in the first two questions as regards the role of Scripture in the *Summa theologiae*. An ensemble of biblical texts enables the reader to enter into the central themes of the biblical portrait of faith, but this ensemble appears within the framework of a sapiential reflection upon biblical revelation. The goal is to re-order, instructed by Revelation, our understanding of true wisdom, now that Wisdom has come in person.

III. Conclusion

The *Summa theologiae* does not offer a biblical theology if by this is meant, in Richard Hays's phrase, refusing to move "abstractly away from the form in which the texts present themselves to us."[4] Aquinas sets forth numerous texts from the Old and New Testaments within the "form" of sapiential pondering, rather than in a narrative or salvation-historical form. Nor does he include biblical texts in every article; they are lacking even in important articles, and even when they are present in the *sed contra* as the argument's hinge, they are often not present in the *respondeo*. In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas is not a narrative theologian or a biblical theologian in the standard sense.

Yet by attending to the ensemble of biblical texts, we discover something more. One finds within *quaestiones* on faith a rich ensemble of biblical texts that can rightly be described as a "biblical theology" regarding the topic. In light of this ensemble, one sees more clearly how the *Summa*'s reflection on Scripture involves a twofold participation in the biblical Word. First, the *Summa* teaches the content of Scripture's teaching on a theme. Second, the *Summa* employs Scripture in order to promote the accomplishment of Scripture's promise, namely, participation in divine Wisdom through charitable knowing.

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[4] Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, 294.

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