

THE METAPHOR IS THE MESSAGE:

THOMAS AQUINAS ON BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION AND METAPHOR

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Note: This paper was originally written when I was a graduate student at the University of Texas, for Dr. Barnouw's E393M class, in April of 2000. I've made a few slight revisions in presenting it here. No doubt, it still could be improved and expanded.

Interpreting the Bible properly is a concern of all Christians. But where can one find hermeneutical wisdom in our chaotic, postmodern age? The extreme literalism of some fundamentalists evacuates the Bible of its literary richness and, ironically, borders on rationalism. The special interest approach of the contemporary academy allows any particular reading community to remake the text in its own image and promises to only further splinter the already fragmented body of Christ. If feminists, homosexuals, African-Americans, and other groups are each free to read the Bible in their own way, all hope of reuniting the church around revealed, inscripturated truth is shattered. But sometimes the way forward is backward. In biblical hermeneutics, as in so many other areas, more and more Christians are tapping into the wisdom of their patristic and medieval forerunners. Believe it or not, there was once a broad consensus in the church on how to read the Bible. In the medieval period, a method of biblical interpretation arose that combined the literal and the metaphorical, the theological and the practical, into an integrated whole. Perhaps the best representative of this method was Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas inherited the *Quadrigena*¹ – the fourfold method of biblical interpretation – from his Christian ancestors and left it largely unaltered.² However, his fertile, theologically oriented mind did produce an important defense of this exegetical method, putting it on more “scientific” footing, which, when considered in conjunction with his defense of Scripture’s use of metaphor, yields a approach to biblical interpretation that is full orbbed and free from many of the problems that plague modern and postmodern hermeneutics.

The fourfold method, as it crystallized in the patristic and medieval church, grew out of a more basic distinction between the literal (or historical) meaning of the text, and its spiritual (or theological) meaning. While the literal

¹ *Quadrigena* literally means “four-horse chariot.”

² The nearly universally accepted formula for the fourfold method may be found in verse form in the work of Nicholas of Lyra (c. 1270-1340), among others:

The letter shows us what God and our fathers did;

The allegory shows us where our faith is hid;

The moral meaning gives us rules of daily life;

The anagogy shows us where we end our strife

The precise origins of the fourfold method are still debated. Most would agree the practice finds its roots in the New Testament itself, primarily growing out of Paul’s reading of Old Testament texts (e. g., 2 Corinthians 3:6, Galatians 4:21-31, etc.). Probably the earliest extant passage containing, roughly, the standard fourfold formula is found in John Cassian’s *Conferences* XIV.8, dating from about 420. Earlier, Origen (c. 185-c. 254) had adopted a threefold method, which was very influential on later Christian interpreters, despite Origen’s official condemnation by the church. Other key contributors to the rise of the fourfold method include Clement of Alexandria (fl. c. 200), Jerome (c. 347-419), Augustine (354-430), and Gregory the Great (c. 540-604), whom Aquinas cites as the authority on the matter. Influences from outside the church, such as Greek allegorical readings of Homer and Philo’s allegorical reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, may have had some bearing on the development of the fourfold method. However, on the whole it seems to have been a uniquely Christian approach, tailor made for use on the Christian canon. It arose primarily as a way of harmonizing the Old and New Testaments and showing the things accomplished in the New Testament had been promised in the Old. For standard treatments, see Henri De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis* Vol. 1, translated by Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1998); Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Zondervan, 1992), especially chapter 4; and Karlfried Froehlich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), especially 28-29.

sense is fairly transparent,³ the spiritual sense has three sub-senses: the allegorical (or typological), the moral (or tropological), and the anagogical (or eschatological).⁴ On the whole, the medievals limited the application of the fourfold method to Scripture,⁵ and even then recognized that not all four senses may be found in every text. Aquinas followed a growing trend in his day by focusing on the literal sense as the foundation of the spiritual senses.⁶ Giving the literal sense this definitive role in which the other senses must be grounded did not make the additional senses unimportant but it did provide a hermeneutical control for them. The spiritual senses must be erected on the foundation of the text's historical meaning or they will not be stable.

The major objection Aquinas raises to his fourfold interpretive method flows out of Aristotle's univocal view of language, in which one word has one meaning. The reply of Aquinas needs careful examination, lest his whole method be caricatured:

³ The literal sense should not be confused with a wooden literalism. The literal sense takes account of obviously figurative language. Perhaps the literal sense could be better termed the literary-historical sense. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (ST), I.1.10.

⁴ The traditional example of the fourfold method, going back to Cassian, is Jerusalem. In the Scriptures, Jerusalem is literally a city in Palestine; allegorically, it is the church; morally, it is the individual soul; and anagogically, it is the heavenly city. Aquinas takes marriage as a simple example of the fourfold system at work: "Holy Scripture speaks of four marriages. The first in its historical and literal sense, the bodily union of a man and a woman; the second allegorical, the union of Christ with his Church; the third tropological or moral, the union of God with the soul; the fourth anagogical or eschatological, the union of God with the Church Triumphant" *Sermons*, First Sunday after Epiphany, 20, quoted in David Lyle Jeffery *People of the Book* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1996), 154.

⁵ As we will see, Aquinas assumed the fourfold method applied only to Scripture because only God could use language in this rich, multi-signifying way. Meaning is tied to authorial intent, but because God "by one act comprehends all things by his intellect," (ST I.1.10) he may fill language with several layers of meaning.

⁶ Aquinas says the spiritual sense is "based on the literal, and presupposes it" (ST I.1.10).

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 things signified by the words can be themselves types of other things. Thus in Holy Scripture no confusion results, for all the senses are founded on one – the literal – from which alone any argument can be drawn...⁷

The fourfold method is not a dishonest use of language, nor does it turn Scripture into a blank check for the interpreter to write his own ideas into an authoritative text. The literal sense is *one*, not arbitrarily polyvalent, and whatever other meanings are derived from it or built upon it must be consistent with it.⁸ To borrow (and modify) an illustration of Origen's, a text may contain a symphony of meanings, but it is crucial to remember all the players are reading off the same sheet of music.⁹ Aquinas is not claiming one word has four meanings, all simultaneously operative, or that a text can be neatly divided into four discrete parts, each corresponding to one of the four senses. Rather the text as a whole may be applied to ever widening contexts, and each of these contexts may be linked with one of the three spiritual senses.¹⁰

⁷ ST I.1.10.

⁸ Thus, the fourfold method, as expounded by Aquinas, need not be at odds with the later Reformation concern that "the true and full sense of any Scripture" is "not manifold, but one" (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, I.9). The Reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, opposed allegorical abuses that arose in the medieval period, but were not opposed to the recognition of typology, symbolism, etc. in biblical interpretation. In fact, their Christocentric approach required them to go beyond mere grammatical and historical concerns, even if those dimensions of the text were held to be foundational. Robert M. Grant and David Tracy, *A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible*, Second edition (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) state that the interpretive approach of Aquinas was not all that different from Wyclif and the later Reformers, since they all agreed the literal sense was basic to everything else (92).

⁹ Thiselton, 144, 157.

¹⁰ For example, the allegorical sense applies an Old Testament text to a corresponding New Testament context, usually involving Christ and/or the church; the moral sense applies the text to

Aquinas explains how the biblical text can have multiple senses without being equivocal:

[T]he 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 signification¹¹

This double signification is the key to the fourfold method. According to Aquinas, God can “write” with created objects and historical events as man writes with words. That is to say, God can give to objects and events the power to signify things beyond themselves. God can form a cosmic-historical symbolic system, making things and events into a kind of language.¹² Obviously, then, the fourfold hermeneutic is not a neutral method to be applied indiscriminately; it can be used only with Scripture because only God can use words and things in this way.¹³ The fourfold method presupposes a certain theistic metaphysic, in which God is the Creator and Governor of all things. Because God made all things, they are stamped with his character and may be designed to refer to other things beyond themselves;¹⁴ because God providentially controls all things, he

the context of the Christian’s devotional experience; and the anagogical sense applies the text to an eschatological context.

¹¹ ST I.1.10.

¹² This shows the force behind the standard medieval view that God had authored two “books,” nature and Scripture.

¹³ This is the claim of Aquinas, anyway. It seems, however, humans *can* create things with symbolic significance. Think of flags, allegorical stories like *Pilgrim’s Progress*, and events like initiation ceremonies. Aquinas’s point could still stand even if this is so because of his broad doctrine of analogy; he could simply add humanity’s symbol making ability to the catalogue of ways in which people “image” God (ST I.93).

¹⁴ See, for example, ST I.1.8 and I.2.

may coordinate history in such a way that events can serve as types, or patterns, for later events.¹⁵

Aquinas explicitly roots the three spiritual senses in this double signification (or figuration) doctrine:

Now the 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 [pseudo-]Dionysius says “the New Law itself is a figure of future glory.” 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.¹⁶

A brief illustration of how this works, using one of the three spiritual senses, may be helpful. Consider the allegorical/typological¹⁷ relation of the Old Testament to the New. Aquinas sees in the Old a prefiguring of the New, a foreshadowing. The New is like the Old, but has transposed its melody into a higher key. So, to take one of several standard examples, in Hebrews 10 the author looks back upon the animal sacrifices as types (or enacted prophecies), which find

¹⁵ See, for example, *ST* I.22 and I.103.

¹⁶ *ST* I.1.10. The “so far as” qualifiers show that Aquinas was sensitive to the danger of forcing the fourfold method onto the text.

¹⁷ Some might object to this collapsing of allegory and typology into a single category, and certainly in some contexts the two need to be distinguished. If there is a distinction to be made, it is that allegory is rooted in abstract ideas and is relatively atemporal, whereas typology is rooted in concrete history, with the type prophetically foreshadowing its antitype. Sometimes it is said allegory looks for “vertical” connections, while typology looks for “horizontal” connections. In the medieval context, however, the allegorical sense of Scripture was usually thought to be based in history, and hence the difference between allegory and typology was minimal. The term “figural” (or “prefigural”) may seem to bridge the gap between the two.

fulfillment in the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. There is a correspondence between these events, but also an escalation, an intensification, a progression. Aquinas, following the writer of Hebrews, would see in the sacrifices of the Old Law an advance presentation of what was to come under the New Law. Thus, for Aquinas, history has a typological structure, in which earlier events serve as analogies for understanding later events, all according to the divine design. In short, the types of the Old Law and the antitypes of the New Law are horizontally linked to one another because they are both vertically linked to Divine Providence.¹⁸

Everything Aquinas teaches concerning the *Quadrige* must be related to his discussion of biblical metaphors.¹⁹ Aquinas begins his defense of the pervasive use of metaphor within the Scriptures by pointing to our empirical

¹⁸ Erich Auerbach gives an excellent summary of figural interpretation that captures these relations:

Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the *intellectus spiritualis*, of their interdependence is a spiritual act. In practice we almost always find an interpretation of the Old Testament, whose episodes are interpreted as figures or phenomenal prophecies of the events of the New Testament... This type of interpretation obviously introduces an entirely new and alien element into the antique conception of history. For example, if an occurrence like the sacrifice of Isaac is interpreted as prefiguring the sacrifice of Christ, so that in the former the latter is as it were announced and promised, and the latter "fulfills" (the technical term is *figuram implere*) the former, then a connection is established between two events which are linked neither temporally nor causally – a connection which it is impossible to establish by reason in the horizontal dimension (if I may be permitted to use this term for a temporal extension.) It can be established only if both occurrences are vertically linked to Divine Providence, which alone is able to devise such a plan of history and supply the key to its understanding.

Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 73-74.

¹⁹ Any contemporary discussion of metaphor should begin with definition. However, as M. H. Abrams points out in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1999), 155, "after twenty-five centuries of attention to metaphors by rhetoricians, grammarians, and literary critics – in which during the last half century they have been joined by many philosophers – there is no general agreement about the way to identify metaphors..." Thus, we will take the broadest possible definition of metaphor. It is a non-literal use of language in which certain properties of one object are applied to another. Thus, the two objects are compared, even

nature. We learn through sense experience, so God teaches us through sensible objects:

[I]t 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.²⁰

Not only is metaphor peculiarly adapted to our natural way of knowing, it is pleasing to us as well. But these epistemological and aesthetic justifications for metaphor do not exhaust Aquinas's defense. For Aquinas, metaphor is not a mere adornment, but a necessary feature of God's revelation, as his quotation from pseudo-Dionysius shows: "We cannot be enlightened by the divine rays except they be hidden with the covering of many veils."²¹ These veils – these metaphors – are necessary, lest the brightness of a direct revelation from God overwhelm us. These veils conceal, even as they reveal. They permit some light to penetrate through, allowing us to attain a knowledge of the unseen God through the things he has made, without blinding us in our frailty.

Earlier we quoted Aquinas's claim that nature itself is a signifying system, a language of sorts. Perhaps Aquinas would have us think of the world as God's

as they are contrasted; they are similar, yet different; like, yet unlike; and connected in some way, but distinct. Metaphor links two objects, without collapsing them into one another.

²⁰ *ST I.1.9.*

²¹ *ST I.1.9.* Whether the veils are the metaphors in Scripture or the created things that provide the media of the metaphors in Scripture does not much matter. As we will see, the two are intimately related anyway.

poetry.²² Just as poets make “use of metaphors to produce a representation,”²³ so God has written the creation in a kind of metaphorical language representing spiritual (and perhaps other kinds of) truth.²⁴ If so, Scriptural metaphors are simply drawing out the truths God wove into the material world in the beginning. In other words, Scripture shows how the metaphorical knots God tied into the very nature of things may be unraveled in such a way as to uncover spiritual truths. Granting that Aquinas does not make all of this explicit, it is strongly implicit in his thought that all of creation may serve as a kind of metaphorical window onto divine truth. We see this illustrated in his explanation of parabolic (or, more specifically, anthropomorphic) language: “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.”²⁵ In other words, the human arm is a metaphor of God’s power; God made the human arm in such a way that it is an analogue, corresponding to his action in the world without an arm. What is true of the arm – it serves as a revelatory metaphor of the deity – is true of all created reality.

²² For Aquinas, this would have been a natural connection since, according to Genesis 1, God created the world through a series of speech acts. Interestingly, the Septuagint uses the Greek term *poieo* (from which we get our English words “poet,” “poem,” and “poetry”) to describe God’s work of creation in Genesis 1:1.

²³ ST I.1.9.

²⁴ Metaphors are not used in Scripture simply to teach narrowly theological truths, as even a cursory reading of the Bible will show. Metaphors are used to describe not only God, but various types of human beings, political orders, actions, etc. Aquinas seems to have committed himself to a defense of all of these kinds of metaphors, which seems to mean he is committed to seeing the very structure of the creation as metaphorical, i. e., everything is related to everything else in some way and therefore anything can serve (in some way) as a metaphor for anything else. Of

Thus, for Aquinas, metaphors are not arbitrary human inventions. We do not *construct* metaphors on our own; rather we *discover* the divinely fabricated connections between things. Metaphor is a natural, not a superficial, use of language, because the world itself is designed to reveal truth metaphorically. The creation may be viewed as a network of interconnected metaphors, and so when we use metaphorical speech, we are going with the grain of creation, not against it.

What is true of created objects like human arms may also be transferred to historical realities. Now, instead of speaking of the sacrifices of the Old Law as types or figures of the sacrifice of the New Law, we may speak of them as metaphors. Typology is really just metaphor applied to history. Events under the Old Law that prefigured events of the New Law are metaphorically related. Indeed, the Old Law as a whole may be seen as a metaphor for the New Law in its totality.

So how does the Thomistic *Quadriga* help biblical interpreters in a postmodern age? The implications of this Thomistic approach to the Scripture and metaphor are numerous. First, this approach seems to fit well with the way New Testament writers themselves used Old Testament texts. There is no doubt Jesus and the apostles viewed the Old Testament narratives as literal history (e.g., Mt. 24:38, Rom. 5:12), but their use of Scripture did not terminate on the

course, only God knows all the relations between all the things in the world and so only he knows all the possible metaphorical combinations.

²⁵ ST I.1.10.

literal reading. They used Old Testament texts in spiritual ways as well. Thus, Jesus could read the Old Testament typologically (e.g., Lk. 24:27) and Paul could make moral (e.g., 1 Tim. 5:18) and eschatological (e.g., 1 Cor. 2:9) applications. The fourfold method allows us to follow Jesus and the New Testament writers themselves in hermeneutical methodology, something of great concern to all Christians who want to be loyal to Scripture.

We can also see how the philosophy undergirding the fourfold approach has a way of keeping language trustworthy, tying words firmly to the world, over against deconstructionism, in which words keep slipping off of reality, leading to skepticism. For Aquinas, words are naturally attached to reality because reality itself is a God-written book. Our language is simply doing with words what God does with everything. Signification – generating meaning through signs – is not a problem because God has created a world with *significance*. Metaphorical language, so far from getting in the way of communication (as men like Hobbes and Locke²⁶ and many contemporary philosophers have claimed) is especially well suited to communicate since it mimics God’s way of communicating with us. We like metaphor because we *are* metaphorical beings, living in a metaphorical world. Indeed, this is why we find

²⁶ Even if Hobbes and Locke were only objecting to the use of metaphor in the context of scientific discourse, their attack on metaphor is misplaced. Scientific theories are actually loaded with metaphorical language. For example, scientists speak of objects “obeying” certain “laws.” See C. S. Lewis, *The Discarded Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 93f. George A. Kennedy makes the striking observation that Locke’s critique of metaphor uses a “dozen or more tropes and figures;” the same is true of the anti-metaphorical discussion of Hobbes. See *Classical Rhetoric and Its Christian and Secular Tradition From Ancient to Modern Times* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press) 270ff.

metaphor virtually inescapable. Moderns, who denigrate metaphorical communication as artificial, as well as postmoderns, who embrace metaphor, but deny it can serve as vehicle of truth, are effectively countered.

Finally, Aquinas has shown biblical interpreters how to keep happily together what modern and postmodern hermeneutical theories so often seek to separate, namely, theology and history.²⁷ For Aquinas, created objects and providentially governed events have metaphorical, symbolic significance. God uses them as signifiers of divine truth. But if this is so, pitting the literal-historical meaning of a biblical text against the theological-metaphorical is not only a misreading of Scripture, but also a misreading of reality. While adopting a medieval approach to biblical interpretation should not cut us off from new insights that have emerged in biblical scholarship over the past several centuries, it should be recognized as giving those who wish to be faithful readers of God's Word a firm place to stand amidst the quicksand of postmodernity.

²⁷ For a thorough study of how post-Enlightenment theology and hermeneutics have often opposed theology to history, see N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992).