

**THEOLOGICAL SYSTEMATIZATION  
AND THE ORDER BETWEEN  
THE LITERAL AND ALLEGORICAL SENSES  
OF SCRIPTURE**

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The question of how Sacred Scripture should be read is ancient in sacred theology. As a deep understanding of Scripture is part of the foundation of the science of sacred theology, the method by which the Biblical text is understood is, in a sense, its first problem.<sup>1</sup> A failure to comprehend the proper relation between

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<sup>1</sup> On Scripture as the foundation of theology, see Denis Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration & Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 141; Robert J. Woźniak, "An Emerging Theology Between Scripture and Metaphysics: Bonaventure, Aquinas and the Scriptural Foundation of Medieval Theology," in *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas: Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions and New Perspectives*, ed. Piotr Roszak and Jürgen Vijgen (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2015), 417; *ibid.*, 421. On Biblical theology's methodology as a basic problem for sacred theology, see Wilhelmus G.B.M. Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, vol. 6 (Leuven: Peeters, 2000), 220–27. Indeed, biblical theology cannot

the various modes of signifying in Scripture renders the truths of Scripture insusceptible to systematization with other truths. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, the synthesis of what is signified by Scripture (and the whole body of Revelation) with truths known by human reason is the core of the science of sacred theology.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, ignorance of how Scripture signifies precludes the very possibility of this theology, and leads either to an acceptance of Scripture without the ability to defend and explain it—a mere fideism—or, worse, to the rejection of Revelation as mere nonsense.<sup>3</sup> As this problem is ancient, it is appropriate to evaluate it through the examples of the Patristic and Medieval Eras.

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be separated from sacred theology. See Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*, 9: “There is a considerable difference between the modern notions of ‘Scripture’ and ‘theology’ and Aquinas’s notions of *sacra Scriptura* and *sacra doctrina* . . . For Thomas Aquinas, this difference is not so clear. It is remarkable that he seems to use the notions of *sacra Scriptura* and *sacra doctrina* interchangeably in his mature reflections on theological method.” For how this Scholastic interchange included philosophy, see Mark J. Clark, “Peter Lombard, Stephen Langton, and the School of Paris the Making of the Twelfth-Century Scholastic Biblical Tradition,” *Traditio* 72 (2017): 171–274, doi:10.1017/tdo.2017.2, 202–206; 228–31, 251–65; Mark J. Clark, “An Early Version of Peter Lombard’s Lectures on the *Sentences*,” *Traditio* 74 (2019): 223–47, doi:10.1017/tdo.2019.2, 236–38; 247.

2 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, as. 1–3, 5. For more about Scripture’s place in theology, see *Dei Verbum*, §24.

3 For examples of the failures in perceiving the doctrines of the faith based in difficulties surrounding theological exegesis: David A. Michelson, *The Practical Christology of Philoxenos of Mabbug* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), especially 113–43; Jeremy Holmes, “Participation and the Meaning of Scripture,” in *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas*, 91. For the dichotomy of fideism and rejection of Revelation due to such misunderstandings: John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §48. On the failure of fideism: Lluís Clavell, “Philosophy and Sacred Text: A Mutual Hermeneutical Help; The Case of Exodus 3,14,” in *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas*, 464–65. On the rejection of Revelation: Celsus, *On True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffmann (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1987); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, NY: Twelve Books, 2007), especially 109–22; John Paul II, *Fides et Ratio*, §46.

The Patristic Era was often divided between the Antiochian and Alexandrian Schools.<sup>4</sup> The Antiochian school practiced a form of primarily literal exegesis of Scripture, where it was read solely as a repository of religious history and narratives, albeit one inspired by the Holy Spirit. As simply such a repository, the text's significance was self-contained, and Scripture did not signify realities that subsisted throughout time. The Alexandrian school, however, practiced a form of exegesis where Scripture was understood to signify primarily eternal spiritual realities through the medium of historical and narrative elements. This emphasis set aside the histories and narratives as relatively unimportant. While there are positives to both ancient schools, neither of them offered a holistic and integrated methodology for understanding what is signified by the Biblical text.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the order between the literal and allegorical senses was often obscured, with the Word of God seemingly divided against itself. This order was later developed by theologians who were able to integrate these two senses of Scripture in a clear way by distinguishing the various modes by which truths are signified.<sup>6</sup> In the Medieval Era, an eminent example of such an

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4 For a similar, though modern, debate on contemporary exegesis as preferring the historical-critical method (which is similar to the literal sense) over spiritual (primarily allegorical) exegesis and their impact on the health of theology as a whole, see Michael Cahill, "The History of Exegesis and Our Theological Future," *Theological Studies* 61.2 (June 2000): 332–47; Marie Anne Mayeski, "Quaestio Disputata: Catholic Theology and the History of Exegesis," *Theological Studies* 62.1 (March 2001): 140–53.

5 For these positives, see Denis Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration & Interpretation* 120–39; Joseph G. Prior, "The Roots of the Historical Critical Method in Patristic and Medieval Literature," in *The Historical Critical Method in Catholic Exegesis*, vol. 50 (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2001), 45–87; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Interpretation of Scripture: In Defense of the Historical-Critical Method* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2008).

6 See Henri de Lubac, "Theology, Scripture, and the Fourfold Sense," in *Medieval Exegesis, Volume 1: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Mark Sebanc (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 15–74.

integration is provided by St. Thomas Aquinas, “the last great representative of patristic-medieval exegesis.”<sup>7</sup> He did this by identifying the direct signifier of each Scriptural sense, and by showing how what is signified allegorically inherently depends on what is signified literally.

This paper traces the general views of the literal and allegorical senses that the early Antiochian and Alexandrian theologians developed. Next, Aquinas’s position on the literal and allegorical senses is discussed, drawing primarily from his *Summa Theologiae*. Then, how his theory reconciles the Antiochian’s view of the literal and the Alexandrian’s view of the allegorical is explained. In conclusion, this historical development of exegetical methodology is summarized within the context of Revelation’s place in Catholic theology.<sup>8</sup>

### *The Antiochian School: Diodore and Theodore*

This section will focus on Diodore of Tarsus (died c. 392 AD) and Theodore of Mopsuestia (c. 350 – c. 428 AD).<sup>9</sup> The historical context in which they wrote is relevant. Diodore’s life overlapped with that of Emperor Julian “the Apostate” (331 – 363 AD) and

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7 Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 25. See Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration & Interpretation*, 147–48.

8 It should be noted that the ancient and medieval authors did not consistently divide the spiritual senses into their different kinds, though the tropological sense was always kept separate. The allegorical and anagogical were often treated as one sense, since both are the spiritual significations of realities not contained in the literal words of the Biblical text. This paper focuses on the allegorical sense, though often in a way that does not exclude the anagogical, since they relate to the literal sense in similar ways.

9 For dates, see John Chapman, “Diodorus of Tarsus,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Robert Appleton Company, 1909), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05008a.htm>; Chrysostom Baur, “Theodore of Mopsuestia,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14571b.htm>.

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Diodore was already a presbyter of the Church of Antioch when Emperor Julian held court in Antioch.<sup>10</sup> At this time Julian publicly mocked the Church, both in word and writing, because of the apparent mythological nature of Scripture's literal narrative and because of its apparent discrepancies.<sup>11</sup> Diodore came to the defense of Scripture against the Emperor, largely by attempting to correct Julian's misunderstanding of the literal sense of the Biblical text and by resolving the apparent difficulties the text presented.<sup>12</sup> In doing so, Diodore restricted the use of allegory to the historical order where strictly historical occurrences of one era can be compared to others of the same or a different era.<sup>13</sup> Diodore does this based on his understanding of St. Paul's own method in Galatians 4:22–31. As John Behr puts it,

Diodore insists that despite using the word “allegory,” Paul does something quite different. . . [W]ith the *historia* laid out, [Paul] theorizes and relates the things lying before him to higher things. This contemplation the apostle calls “allegory.” The prior *historia* remains intact, and the apostle “theorizes” or contemplates other similar realities, that is, compares it to similar things, events or figures, in other *historia*.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, allegory for Diodore, and purportedly St. Paul, is a kind of comparison between essentially literal narratives.

St. Paul's own text in Galatians should be quoted here to

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<sup>10</sup> For the dates of Julian's life, see Karl Hoerber, “Julian the Apostate,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08558b.htm>. For Diodore's and Julian's shared history, see John Behr, *The Case Against Diodore and Theodore: Texts and Contexts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 51–52.

<sup>11</sup> See Frederick G. McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 20; Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 51–52; *ibid.*, 66–69.

<sup>12</sup> See Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 69–71.

<sup>13</sup> See Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 70–71.

<sup>14</sup> Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 70–71.

show how his use of the term “allegory” is capable of supporting Diodore’s understanding of the issue.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, the son of the free woman through promise. Now this is an allegory [ἀλληγορούμενα]: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. (Gal. 4:22-27 RSVCE).

St. Paul compares Hagar and Sarah to the worldly Jerusalem and heavenly Jerusalem, respectively, through comparing two historical realities (Sarah and Hagar) with two other historical realities—being born into bondage as known within the history of the worldly travails of Jerusalem and Israel, and being born into freedom in the promised “Jerusalem” to come. Diodore did not see St. Paul as explaining the spiritual sense of the book of Genesis concerning Abraham’s two wives. Rather, Diodore only saw the comparison between people and events that exist on a human timeline—Hagar, Sarah, the historical Jerusalem, and a future state also named “Jerusalem.” As comparisons, the “theorizing” that Diodore ascribes to Paul, and which Diodore himself emulates, does not go beyond the actual texts in question. Narratives are merely set side-by-side.

Diodore, further, downgrades the most confusing literal parts of Scripture to “enigmas” and does not call them allegories.<sup>15</sup> Because he restricted allegory in this way, Diodore was

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<sup>15</sup> Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 71. Comparison between Diodore’s ideas about “theories” and “enigmas” as categories of literal exegesis and St. Thomas Aquinas’s understanding of the etiological, analogical, and parabolic senses within the literal sense of Scripture could be possible. For a brief categorization

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forced to conclude that there is not an inherently essential order between the Testaments that is grounded upon the person of Christ. Behr points out,

As such, the *historia* recounted by the prophets and the apostles, the Old Testament and the New respectively, are essentially about different realities, and any connection between them beyond the contemplation of similarities, such as opening an enigma in the Old Testament, can only be done by the Lord himself.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, for Diodore (and his younger contemporary Theodore of Mopsuestia), only certain individual similarities can be found between the Testaments, specifically where the *historia* of one overlap with the *historia* of the other.<sup>17</sup> This is the only way that a Scriptural text can be seen as “going out from itself”—when reading back into an older text certain truths that were included in a later one. This past event may then be seen as a *typos* of the later event.<sup>18</sup> However, based on the words of Behr above, these similarities are not based in an inherent ordination of the Old Testament event to the New. It is, rather, a *post hoc* realization. This kind of movement beyond an individual text is, also, a rarity

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of these, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 1, a. 10, ad 2.

<sup>16</sup> Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 72.

<sup>17</sup> See Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 78. This should not be interpreted as meaning that Theodore neither allowed for anything Christo-centric in the Old Testament nor for a movement between the Testaments. Indeed, his understanding of Scripture has been well-defended as “christo-teleological,” on account of his excellent knowledge of Salvation History and its prophecies (though he accepted fewer prophecies than would many ancient exegetes). Rather, Theodore denied that the things and events of the past were themselves contemporaneously signs of something yet to come.: Hauna T. Ondrey, *The Minor Prophets as Christian Scripture in the Commentaries of Theodore of Mopsuestia and Cyril of Alexandria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 154.

<sup>18</sup> See Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 74–75; Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, vol. 1, 2 vols. of *The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2004), 220.

and only for explicit prophecies—it is not characteristic of the two Testaments as a whole.<sup>19</sup> By restricting the spiritual connections inherent in Scripture in this way, Diodore, and Theodore following him, actively narrowed Biblical exegesis to the explicit words of each passage, even when an enigma.

Their reaction to the environment created by Julian, alongside other causes, culminated in an undue rejection of real allegory and in the creation of their own method of exegesis.<sup>20</sup> This method both gave pride of place to the literal sense and understood only the literal sense as the product of the Divine Mind, which had to be defended as such.<sup>21</sup> Exegesis that is not explaining what this Divine writing literally says is a human invention. As such, Theodore claimed that it is presumptuous to apply any allegory to the text. As he himself puts it,

But then to twist the entire narrative or to change the written text, how is this not completely insane and evident wickedness? For, if one can rightly assert without shame, this wanton frenzy [for allegory] is like that

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<sup>19</sup> See Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 72; 78–79.

<sup>20</sup> See Behr, *Diodore and Theodore*, 59; 81; for a moderating literalism that still rejects most allegory, see Paul B. Clayton, “The Mature Theodoret, 433–45,” in *The Christology of Theodoret of Cyrus: Antiochene Christology from the Council of Ephesus (431) to the Council of Chalcedon (451)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), especially 170.

<sup>21</sup> See McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 18: “If one grants that the Spirit is revealing God’s will in the Bible, then Theodore reasoned that one ought to seek the Spirit’s intent within the actual words He has inspired. He concludes from this that there is no instance where an allegorical interpretation is justified, unless it is inherently connected to the text.” For the proper importance of the literal sense as intended by God, see *Dei Verbum*, §12; the Second Vatican Council stressed the importance of the literal sense and its inherent clarity. This very clarity is why dogmatic arguments from Scripture generally follow the literal sense: “The Jewish People and Their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible,” in *The Church and the Bible: Official Documents of the Catholic Church*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Dennis J. Murphy (Bangalore: St. Paul’s Press, 2007), 858; Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 91–92.

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[shown] to [the pagan] idols. [*lacuna*] They introduce [interpretations] that do not agree at all—not even in a single instance—with what is written.<sup>22</sup>

Here, Theodore asserts that there can be no connection to a spiritual meaning that is not literally and openly contained in the words of the text itself.<sup>23</sup>

This rejection of allegorical exegesis, insofar as such exegesis does not relay what is directly written<sup>24</sup> and because only the text itself is intended by the Holy Spirit,<sup>25</sup> assumes that Scripture is self-contained. There is no other signification beyond the explicit words. This is Theodore's precise accusation:

As we have abundantly shown in our interpretation, [Paul] did not employ an allegorical interpretation in order to rise above its historical narrative. . . For, [in] an allegory, someone draws out of the text another meaning that transcends the meaning of the text, in order to demonstrate thereby [a meaning] that someone maintains has been implanted there.<sup>26</sup>

What Theodore meant by “historical narrative” is not clear. The text of Scripture on which Theodore (and Diodore) focused could be historiography, quasi-historical narrative designed to

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22 Theodore of Mopsuestia, “In Opposition to the Allegorists,” in McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 75; see also McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 19.

23 When taken to further extremes, this would even produce literalists so strict that nothing more than what Scripture already stated could be claimed, at least on doctrinal matters, to the point of denying the liceity of commentaries. See Michelson, *Philoxenos of Mabbug*, 129: “Similar to Antiochene exegesis, Philoxenos advocated a strict literal reading. With regard to the Incarnation, he allowed no wavering from what he considered to be the immediate reading of the text: ‘. . . the expressions which are said about the faith [in scripture] do not allow commentary.’”

24 See Theodore, “Opposition,” 75.

25 See McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 19.

26 Theodore, “Opposition,” 76.

teach, prayers, or a form of novella. Despite this lack of clarity over what sense of “historical” Theodore spoke of, this repudiation of the allegory in the above quotes “can primarily be seen as a delimitation against an allegorical interpretation,” according to a leading expert in Patristic exegesis.<sup>27</sup>

In summary, Diodore and Theodore maintained that, beyond the literal sense, there was nothing in Scripture; finding more would be blasphemy. This reduced the word of God to historical narratives and the comparisons thereof.<sup>28</sup> As such, the words of Scripture are closed in on their own signification, such that they *cannot* signify beyond what a typical person would likely grasp in them.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Kannengiesser, *Handbook*, 215. For example, Kannengiesser, *Handbook*, 173–74: “A strong sense for the metaphorical *littera*,” i.e., the kind of metaphorical trope that belongs to the literal sense, “is shown by Diodore of Tarsus, who certainly was not inclined to confuse it with allegorical exegesis. In his commentary on Psalm 1, from verse to verse, he clarifies one metaphor after another. . . Verse by verse the poetic images are turned into the prosaic, an exegesis that is no longer metaphorical at all, but, as Diodore terms it, ‘moralizing’— ἠθικός.” Diodore even had the tendency to put tropes belonging to the literal sense into plain language. Much more so, then, did he and his intellectual heirs narrow the Scriptural narratives to their strict literal sense. Again, Ondrey, *Minor Prophets*, 158–59: Prophecy perceived by a spiritual reading of the Scriptural text is excluded. Prophecy’s value is relegated to its moral and pedagogical use—after its fulfillment. The very recognition that there was a prophecy is discovered after the fact, by paying attention to its use of hyperbole which was otherwise inexplicable before the fulfillment of the prophecy.

28 Even when they did not close Scripture off from more spiritual interpretations, later theologians indebted to them would further their original methodology to an even more narrow literalism. See Michelson, *Philoxenos of Mabbug*, 129.

29 See Kannengiesser, *Handbook*, 216–17. Note that it is anachronistic to treat this theory as the common system of the theologians in and surrounding Antioch. To say nothing of St. John Chrysostom, exegetes such as Theodoret of Cyrus were opposed to this nearly singular usage of the literal sense that prejudiced figures and prophecies that required an allegorical reading.

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*The Alexandrian School: Origen*

Origen Adamantius (c. 185 – c. 253),<sup>30</sup> the Alexandrian School's greatest exegete, had a similar understanding of the literal sense—though he did not emphasize it to the degree that the Antiochians did. As it was indisputable that the text of Scripture was a product of the Holy Spirit's own authorship, the literal sense was of abiding importance. As Henri de Lubac describes Origen's view, "If the reality of the visible world is a figure for the invisible world, then the reality of biblical history will also be a figure for the things of salvation and will serve as their 'foundation.'"<sup>31</sup> Origen considered the protection and connecting of the things of the visible world, like the literal/historical sense, to be the first duty of the exegete.<sup>32</sup> His respect for the text itself, the *littera*, is clear in a Christological analogy that he gives:

So also when the Word of God was brought to humans through the Prophets and the Lawgiver, it was not brought without proper clothing. For just as there it was covered with the veil of flesh, so here with the veil of the letter, so that indeed the letter is seen as flesh.<sup>33</sup>

Scripture and the Church require the literal sense of the text just as the humanity of Jesus Christ is prerequisite for humanity's salvation.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Origen said, "every word of the Scriptures

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<sup>30</sup> See Mark J. Edwards, "Origen," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/origen/>.

<sup>31</sup> Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007), 104.

<sup>32</sup> An example of this is how Origen consistently defended the literal sense of Scripture when it came to the miracles, the Creation narrative, and the Deluge against attacks by pagans who rejected them as literal impossibilities: de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 106-108.

<sup>33</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley, vol. 83 (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 29.

<sup>34</sup> See de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 105.

has its meaning.”<sup>35</sup>

Although this foundational respect for the literal sense of Scripture is ubiquitous in Origen’s writings, it is not absolute. Origen says,

[F]or occasionally the records taken in a literal sense are not true, but actually absurd and impossible, and even with the history that actually happened and the legislation that is in its literal sense useful there are other matters interwoven.<sup>36</sup>

This is a departure from the Patristic norm. Indeed, it is controversial, both then and now (though there are today certainly defenders of Origen on this front),<sup>37</sup> especially since it was a practice of the early Church to use difficulties uncovered in Scripture as opportunities for reflecting on the mysteries of God, not as grounds for any kind of a refutation of the literal text, as Origen suggested.<sup>38</sup> Much of Origen’s reaction against what is

35 Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America, 2009), 145. Indeed, Origen here extends the power of the literal sense of Scripture and the value of individual words all the way to the definite article of the Gospel’s Greek text.

36 Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 294 (4.3.4). When quoting from *On First Principles*, the translation from the Greek text has been preferred. See de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 111–12.

37 See Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration & Interpretation*, 120–21. Defenders of Origen, such as Farkasfalvy, make excellent points about Origen’s holistic exegesis. The fact remains that Origen’s style often sweeps so swiftly over the literal sense of Scripture or deals with spiritual matters pertaining to the text even when he is working *more* literally, that the impression of Origen as mainly an allegorist continues to persist. As de Lubac says above, Origen’s exegesis, for all its strengths, would prove a problematic methodological synthesis.

38 See de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 115; Origen, *On First Principles*, 285–86 (4.2.9). Origen speaks of these very kinds of difficulties as “stumbling-blocks” recognized by all the Fathers. These generally are spoken of as protecting the difficult truths of Scripture from pagans, heretics, and others who might misuse Scripture. Origen goes farther than just saying that Scripture contains

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literally in the narrative of Scripture likely arose from his disinclination to systematization and the apparent rigidity of his vocabulary. In de Lubac's assessment,

often . . . the form of Origen's reasoning is more provocative and lends itself to misunderstandings. In any case, if systematized, it is assuredly open to criticism. It is fair to judge that the consideration of the spiritual meaning is introduced into it in an artificial and rather petty way, "from outside."<sup>39</sup>

Origen was not interested in giving a clear account of how he understood the literal text or how he moved beyond it,<sup>40</sup> especially when the text was so problematic to him that he went so far as to say that the literal sense was false.<sup>41</sup> He also thought one reaches the more valuable spiritual sense of a text more

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stumbling-blocks, however, and says that at times Scripture has mistruths in it.  
39 De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 125. While de Lubac is here speaking of Origen's exegesis on Genesis 13, the observation stands in general. Moreover, such instances tend toward a certain biblical utilitarianism. See Jean Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, trans. John Austin Baker (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1973), 285: "The literal meaning is taken as corresponding to a stage in the spiritual life; it is therefore of use only where the letter of the text is edifying in itself. On the other hand, wherever this literal meaning is shocking or merely disputed, it is necessary to have recourse to moral allegorism of Gnostic *θεωρία*, both of which, therefore, will always be in requisition. For Origen, the practice of exegesis is marked by the quality of *ωφέλεια*, utility."

40 See de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 160–61; Daniélou, *Gospel Message and Hellenistic Culture*, 284; Origen, *On First Principles*, 275–77 (4.2.4). Note that it is not claimed that Origen nowhere describes a movement from the literal sense to the moral sense to the allegorical sense. Rather, Origen does not explain this in *precise and universal scientific terms*. Instead, Origen prefers to give a flowing description of this threefold motion of exegetical ascent in biblical and spiritual images and is comfortable ignoring any greater precision.

41 See Hermann J. Vogt, "Origen of Alexandria (185–253)," in *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser, vol. 1, *The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, 536–74, 546.

swiftly when setting aside the literal sense as relatively unimportant.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, Origen's acceptance of the literal sense is somewhat equivocal, though this lack is more due to an imperfect or nascent methodology than to a quasi-dogmatic judgment about the Biblical texts.<sup>43</sup> In this respect, Origen contributed to the Patristic failures in systematization.<sup>44</sup>

Despite this, Origen welcomed a more open form of literal exegesis than the Antiochian school. For Origen, the words of Scripture are "divinely inspired and . . . were spoken with all power and authority."<sup>45</sup> Therefore, as de Lubac puts it, "Everything that was written is mystery. . . [T]his mysterious character of the Bible is not affirmed to the detriment of its historical character."<sup>46</sup> The Holy Spirit wrote such that the literal text would have mysteries related to its signification.<sup>47</sup> That the literal points beyond itself to the spiritual was manifest to Origen. As such, he wrote,

Now the reason why all those we have mentioned hold false opinions and make impious assertions about God appears to be this, that Scripture is not understood in its

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42 See de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 170–71: "Most often, he passes immediately from the historical sense, briefly recalled, to the 'interior' sense on which he dwells: he hastens to come 'ad interiora mysteria, ad interiora doctrinae spiritalis.'"

43 On Origen's equivocal use of the literal sense: Origen, *On First Principles*, 290–91 (4.3.2). On the antiquity of Origen's exegetical system, see Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration & Interpretation*, 120–21.

44 See Charles Kannengiesser, "A Key for the Future of Patristics: The 'Senses' of Scripture," in *In Dominico Eloquio—In Lordly Eloquence*, ed. Paul M. Blowers et al. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), 103: "[De Lubac] . . . made it clear that such a systematic theory of scriptural senses was not developed by the patristic authors themselves. . . [T]hey provided the essential elements for it, but they lacked the critical distance from the biblical text that would have allowed them to systematize their own hermeneutics."

45 Origen, *On First Principles*, 264 (4.1.6).

46 De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 103–104.

47 See Origen, *On First Principles*, 272 (4.2.2); Vogt, "Origen of Alexandria," 547.

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spiritual sense, but is interpreted according to the bare letter. . . That there are certain mystical revelations made known through the divine scriptures is believed by all, even by the simplest of those who are adherents of the word. . .<sup>48</sup>

Therefore, when he said that “every word of the Scriptures has its meaning,” he both dignified the immediate sense of the words and demanded that they all have a further spiritual significance.<sup>49</sup>

For Origen, the spiritual interpretation of Scripture is natural to the text since Providence intentionally ordered the events and words so as to point beyond themselves. Without the spiritual senses, the Divine pedagogy would be frustrated as so much of Scripture would remain “merely” literal and ignore the Mysteries of Revelation. To teach the faith for the ongoing life of the Church, the Biblical events and words must always point beyond themselves to these Mysteries. As one Origen scholar puts it,

For Origen, there was a twofold pedagogy of the Logos. The original, historical teaching of the Logos was found in the literal sense of Scripture, whereas the contemporary pedagogy of this Logos resided in the spiritual sense and was perpetually directed toward new audiences. The task of the allegorical exegete was to reenact the ancient teaching activity of the Logos for a contemporary audience. . . By arranging these contemporary teachings so that they correspond well to the differing needs and levels of hearers, Origen’s aim as an exegete was to facilitate “a progression of stages in the Christian’s progress

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48 Origen, *On First Principles*, 271–72 (4.2.2).

49 Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, 145. See Daniélou, *Gospel Message*, 274: “He is convinced that every detail of the scriptural text, in addition to its literal sense, has other significations; and therefore he searches to the utmost of his power for the truth of which this detail is the type or the allegory.”

#### THE ORDER BETWEEN THE LITERAL AND ALLEGORICAL SENSES

toward perfection.” In short, biblical interpretation was principally “the mediation of Christ’s redemptive teaching activity to the hearer.”<sup>50</sup>

To Origen, the essence of words is pedagogical. They may rightly demand an ordered growth in their audience’s understanding through layered meaning all ordered toward a single end. In the case of Scripture, Origen emphasizes this end as the saving knowledge of the Logos:

And in the first place we must point out that the aim of the Spirit who by the providence of God through the Word . . . enlightened the servants of the truth . . . , was pre-eminently concerned with the unspeakable mysteries connected with the affairs of men . . . —his purpose being that the man who is capable of being taught might by “searching out” and devoting himself to the “deep things” revealed in the spiritual meaning of the words become partaker of all the doctrines of the Spirit’s councils.<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, Scripture’s significance has a certain “teleology” that makes possible an ordered movement beyond its literal words—nor should such teleology be surprising for divinely inspired texts, which have a pedagogical use under Divine Providence. As the spiritual is the end to which the literal points, these spiritual mysteries are the main content of Scripture. Yet it remains true that Origen left this teleological order in a disordered state since he neither completely accepted the literal sense nor explained the movement between these senses.

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<sup>50</sup> Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 10. Martens is quoting Karen Jo Torgesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Structure in Origen’s Exegesis* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1985), 12; *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>51</sup> Origen, *On First Principles*, 282 (4.2.7).

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*The Order Between the Literal and Allegorical  
in Thomas Aquinas*

It is not surprising that this state of affairs in Biblical exegesis is vague and confused. What is the precise relation between the literal and the allegorical? How does one pass from what a word literally means to what it allegorically may symbolize? It is easy to recognize that most theologians have used these senses of Scripture, but their rigorous systemization has not been universal.<sup>52</sup> Thus, the above summaries are in no way intended to exhaust the methods that can be found by a full reading of the Church Fathers and other early Ecclesiastical authors. Nonetheless these authors failed to systematically present the order between the literal meaning of the written words and their spiritual content. This task was taken up by later authors.

The medieval West, for example, already tended to systematize, and this tendency included finding an order among these senses of Scripture. One of the greatest systematic theologians during this time was the Universal Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225/27 – 1274 AD).<sup>53</sup> Although Aquinas did not write a distinct treatise on Scriptural exegesis, he is clear in the few places in which he addresses the issue. In particular, near the beginning of the *Summa Theologiae*, he states,

The author of Holy Writ is God, in whose power it is to

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52 For example, Mary B. Cunningham, “The Interpretation of the New Testament in Byzantine Preaching: Mediating an Encounter with the Word,” in *The New Testament in Byzantium*, ed. Derek Krueger and Robert S. Nelson (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2016), 192: “Following Origen, Byzantine exegetes sought above all to discern the sense or ‘mind’ (*dianoia*) of scripture. . . While avoiding any strict idea of ‘four senses’ . . . Byzantine preachers nevertheless adopted methods that fell roughly into the same categories, although they may not have formally identified them as such.”

53 For dates, see Daniel Kennedy, “St. Thomas Aquinas,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York, NY: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14663b.htm>.

THE ORDER BETWEEN THE LITERAL AND ALLEGORICAL SENSES

signify His meaning, not by words only (as man also can do), but also by things themselves. So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification.<sup>54</sup>

Here, Aquinas recognizes that a distinction in kinds of signs must be made when reading the Biblical texts, whereas too few previous theologians methodologically asked to what genus of sign allegorical signifiers directly belonged—as distinct from the signifiers of the literal sense.<sup>55</sup> Aquinas explicitly recognizes that there are two kinds of sign operative in the narratives of Scripture, the words themselves and those realities, which are prior in the order of nature to the words. Because he made this distinction, Aquinas was able to assign the literal sense to the words contained in Scripture and the allegorical sense (as well as the other spiritual senses) to the things signified through Scripture.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, his account clearly set the boundaries

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54 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 10, c.; translation taken from *Summa Theologiae Prima Pars*, 1–49, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012). See also Thomas Aquinas, “Quodlibetal 7, Question 6, On the Senses of Sacred Scripture,” in *Eros and Allegory: Medieval Exegesis on the Song of Songs*, ed. and trans. Denys Turner (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1995), 343–55, 344 (*Quod. 7, q. 6, a. 1, resp.*).

55 See Origen, *On First Principles*, 286 (4.2.9). Origen usually operated in his exegesis in this swift way, but he was clearer in his systematic work.

56 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 9, c.; Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall Inc., 1997), 102–104; Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 71. The allegorical sense, therefore, is distinct from the many literary tropes, including literary allegory. The exegetical problems surrounding these may, therefore, be relegated to the literal sense. See Timothy F. Bellamah, “The Interpretation of a Contemplative: Thomas’s *Commentary Super Iohannem*,” in *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas*, 242: “Thomas and his contemporaries considered literary figures as falling within the human author’s intention, and thus as belonging to the literal sense, wherein words signify realities (*res*). No longer

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of the literal sense of Scripture while also giving a clear springboard to the spiritual senses.

An example of this exegesis may be found in the Ezekiel 44:2,

And he said to me, “This gate shall remain shut; it shall not be opened, and no one shall enter by it; for the LORD, the God of Israel, has entered by it; therefore it shall remain shut.” (RSVCE)

This line literally speaks of the east gate to the Temple in Jerusalem and that it has been sealed in a vision due to the mysterious fact that God had made use of it when entering or exiting the Temple. While this reading does satisfy the words found in Scripture, they do not seem to be of any purpose. However, the reality of the Lord’s passage through his highest sanctified dwelling does serve a purpose in pointing to a further reality in the New Testament. Here, Christ Jesus passed through his Blessed Mother when she gave birth to him while her virginity was kept intact—it was never opened and was kept shut, per Ezekiel’s words—denoting the historical and dogmatic fact of her perpetual virginity.<sup>57</sup> Thus, the words of the text of Ezekiel had a clear—though mysterious—literal sense and the reality spoken of through these words had another, less clear but more meaningful, spiritual sense.

Scripture’s ability to have a spiritual sense beyond the literal is unique because it is divinely inspired. As St. Thomas

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obliged to relegate symbolic language to the realm of spiritual interpretation, commentators treated it as understood and intended by the human author.” Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 173. Perhaps the failure to distinguish literary allegory from the spiritual-allegorical sense is why the high focus on verbal intricacies became characteristic of the Antiochene School; see Peter W. Martens, ed., *Adrian’s Introduction to the Divine Scriptures: An Antiochene Handbook for Scriptural Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> See Paul Haffner, *The Mystery of Mary* (Chicago, IL: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 150-59.

explains,

Whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification.<sup>58</sup>

As the realities behind the Biblical texts are themselves susceptible to the Creator's providential and teleological ordering, they themselves can point to spiritual truths that had not occurred when the text had originally been composed. Indeed, these signifiers are the ultimate reason why Biblical texts are important beyond their hortative use. As one Thomistic scholar puts it,

Aquinas has only one hermeneutical key in his interpretation of Scripture: in a systematic-theological context, the texts of Scripture are important because they tell us something about God, who is the primary author of Scripture.<sup>59</sup>

As God himself is beyond the sensible/comprehensible world, these signifiers must have a spiritual meaning that organically proceeds from the text itself. This spiritual inclination is, therefore, in the signifiers (i.e., things and events) that are themselves signified through the words and narratives of Scripture.<sup>60</sup>

More specifically, the allegorical sense—as distinct from the moral and anagogical senses—is how the things and events of the Old Testament signify the things and events of the New Testament, particularly about the person of Christ and his Church.<sup>61</sup> As such, the allegorical sense is not just the *post hoc*<sup>62</sup>

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58 Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 10, c.

59 Valkenberg, "Words of the Living God," 223.

60 See Bellamah, "Interpretation," 250.

61 See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 10, c.

62 See McLeod, *Theodore of Mopsuestia*, 20: "Theodore briefly sums up what he believes to be what Paul actually means by 'allegory' in the present context: 'This is [what] (Paul) means . . . He calls an allegory the comparison that

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recognition of something secretly intended by God (as the Antiochians spoke of prophecy and their version of “allegory”), but it would have actually been why the historical things and events existed in the way that they were recorded in Scripture. Therefore, while the allegorical sense is dependent on the words of the Biblical text insofar as this sense is for the sake of the reader’s understanding, the signs that belong specifically to the allegorical sense are the very things and events signified by those words.<sup>63</sup> Thus, the allegorical sense directly depends upon the intrinsic signifying powers of realities that have been ordered providentially by God to point beyond themselves and only indirectly upon the Scriptural text that recorded these realities. For example, the manna in the desert, referred to in Exodus 16:4–36, was designed by God to intrinsically indicate the true Bread of Life in the sacrament of the Eucharist, as Christ taught in John 6:29–51. The allegorical sense of Exodus 16:4–36 is that “the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world” (John 6:33 RSVCE). Christ Jesus was always the one ultimately and providentially indicated by this manna since he is “the living bread which came down from heaven” and since it is of this bread that Christ said “[it] is my flesh” (John 6:51 RSVCE).

The allegorical sense must remain inherently connected to the literal sense. Indeed, since the realities and events of Scripture are only conveyed to the reader insofar as they are expressed within the words themselves, the allegorical sense depends on the literal sense as a summit upon a mountain. Thus, understanding that the Eucharist is signified allegorically

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*can be made* between what happened long ago and what exists at present.”  
Emphasis added.

<sup>63</sup> It should be mentioned that this system offers a much needed systematic clarity to Alexandrian methodology, since it locates the spiritual senses’ specific kind of signs behind the text of Scripture.

by the manna in Exodus 16 depends upon a right understanding of the important role that the manna has in the narrative of the Old Testament. They are ordered such that the literal sense is exegetically and pedagogically prior while remaining interconnected such that the literal cannot be without the spiritual senses. Together they produce, as one account puts it, a “theology grounded in historical understanding bearing the fruit of authentic spirituality.”<sup>64</sup> Therefore, the literal manna of Exodus is to be theologically understood as having historically existed for the sake of allegorically signifying Christ in the Eucharist.<sup>65</sup> Insofar as these senses’ order between themselves—the literal

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64 Mayeski, “Quaestio Disputata,” 149.

65 For another example of their interconnectedness, see Bellamah, “Interpretation,” 251: “Situating it within his exposition of a narrative wherein Jesus himself provides an allegorical interpretation for the gift of manna to Moses and his people (Exodus 16, 4-35), Thomas intends to say something about the senses of Scripture. Within this framework, the literal sense of the Exodus text describing the manna in the desert is in some way caused by and derived from the spiritual sense given it by the letter of the Johannine text. So it is that without abandoning his principle that the spiritual senses are founded upon the literal, Thomas suggests that the literal sense is *aliquo modo* dependent upon the spiritual. The mode of this dependence comes into view in his subsequent remark that while corporeal food is converted into the nature of the body, spiritual food is not converted into the nature of the spirit, but being imperishable, it changes the eater’s spirit into itself. Applied to the senses of Scripture, this could be taken to mean that, as distinct from the spiritual sense, the literal is perishable. But this is not what Thomas has in mind. A fairer reading of his comment would indicate that the literal sense of Exodus 16 has been transformed and given new meaning by Jesus’ reinterpretation of it in John 6. By signifying directly the spiritual reality that is signified only allegorically in Exodus 16, the literal sense of John 6 is itself spiritual.” Bellamah here explains that Aquinas taught an interrelated dependence between the literal and spiritual senses. After the proclamation of the Gospels, the literal sense of the Old Testament inherently requires spiritual reading. Given how loaded the literal sense of the New Testament is, especially insofar as it fulfills the Old, it is inherently spiritual. While the literal sense of Scripture remains prior to the spiritual, these two senses of Scripture are so interconnected that they cannot do without each other.

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sense being prior to the allegorical while still depending upon the allegorical—does not entail a contradiction or impropriety,<sup>66</sup> the allegorical and literal senses of Scripture are compatible. In St. Thomas's words,

[W]hen there is a variety of senses such that one does not follow from the other, then a plurality of utterances results; but the spiritual sense is always based upon the literal and follows from it; hence, from the fact that sacred Scripture is interpreted both literally and in a spiritual way, no such plurality results.<sup>67</sup>

In this way Aquinas takes to heart Theodore's concerns about an inordinate spiritualism that could use some device "in order to rise above [Scripture's] historical narrative."<sup>68</sup> The only licit move from the literal sense to the allegorical occurs when the exegete spiritually—and clearly—passes through the actual words explicitly found in the Biblical text.<sup>69</sup> In other words, the literal sense pertains directly to the words of the texts, and the allegorical sense goes beyond the words to directly pertain to the significance of the historical things and events, *insofar as these realities were already relayed by Scripture*.<sup>70</sup> The literal is ordered

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66 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* III, ch. 155.

67 Aquinas, "Quodlibetal 7, Question 6," in Turner, *Eros and Allegory*, 344 (*Quod. 7, q. 6, a. 1, resp.*).

68 Theodore, "Opposition," 76.

69 See Theodore, "Opposition," 78: "But more than all else, these [Scriptures] condemn him by proving that he cannot accurately assert and prove [his position]—not even in one of those [cases] where he has rashly dared to oppose the Scriptures." Unless the allegorical builds upon the literal, in the way described by Aquinas, the exegesis will fall outside the order of the inspired significance found in Scripture. If this proper order is observed, however, there will be no opposition and sufficient proof of continuity will be maintained.

70 See Mayeski, "Quaestio Disputata," 148–50: This should not be pedantically interpreted as if the realities of God and his Church must be explicitly and directly signified by a single word or sentence, but that this literal signification must be holistically connected to the spiritual senses (especially the allegorical/

to the allegorical so that Scripture can better signify the things of God the Word in His Incarnation, using a concrete means (this written format of Scripture) as revealed to concrete persons who otherwise would not be capable of perceiving such spiritual truths.<sup>71</sup> God is signified best by the meeting of the various kinds of signs relayed by Scripture. Moreover, prudential care for Scripture would dictate that this ordered motion from literal to allegorical be made evident by the exegete with all proper precision.

### Conclusion

The Antiochian School of exegesis narrowly focused on the literal sense of Scripture for understandable reasons. Given the intellectual and political environment of his day, Diodore of Tarsus

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typological) so that these same realities could be relayed to the faithful. The Marian dogmas are good examples of this point. See Pablo Gadenz, “Overcoming the Hiatus between Exegesis and Theology: Guidance and Examples from Pope Benedict XVI,” in *Verbum Domini and the Complementarity of Exegesis and Theology*, ed. Scott Carl (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), 55–56: “[T]he Marian dogmas are still related to Scripture, if Scripture is understood in its full significance. Specifically, with the mention of ‘typological’ interpretation, Ratzinger points to the importance of considering not only the literal sense but also the spiritual sense of Scripture. As Aquinas might say, this involves understanding not just the meaning of the words, but also the meaning of the *realities* signified by the words, even so as to *participate* in the power of those realities through faith, hope, and charity. In this regard, Ratzinger’s view seems to correspond to what Levering calls ‘participatory’ biblical interpretation.” See Joseph Ratzinger, *Daughter Zion: Meditations on the Church’s Marian Belief*, trans. John M. McDermott (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1983), 67–68; 79–80; 81–82; Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 60–61.

<sup>71</sup> See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 12, a. 4, c.; q. 84, a. 1, c.; q. 88, a. 1, ad 2–3. As objects are known according to the knower’s own proper mode, here a knowledge above the human mode of knowing (the Revelation, in itself, found within Scripture according to its spiritual signification) is transmitted under signs both literary and in real things so that these objects may be received according to the human mode of knowledge through material connection.

applied himself to saving the narrative of Scripture, which the Holy Spirit had inspired, from the attacks of the Emperor Julian. His attitude was transmitted to most of his students and intellectual heirs in and around Antioch. This method of exegesis was most infamously used by his younger contemporary Theodore of Mopsuestia, who made sure that the text of Scripture remained delineated against any allegorical understanding of what it signified. In this way, the meanings of the words were not themselves directed toward further related truths beyond the words' own particular meanings.<sup>72</sup> Thus the defensive bias for the literal sense of Scripture became a sort of methodological doctrine. Their concern for the dignity and inspiration of the Biblical text itself, however, was praiseworthy.

Farther west in the Alexandrian School, Origen Adamantius understood the Biblical text as signifying the immutable things of God and his works in the Church. Due to this contemplative insight, Origen was often led either to pass over the literal sense too swiftly or to not attend to it at all. Indeed, at times he denied the reality or validity of the narrative. While he never tried to denigrate the importance of the literal sense, his methodological sidelining of the narrative took its toll. Given the fact that Origen was capable of systematization, as seen in his *On First Principles*, it is easy to understand

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<sup>72</sup> For an example of Antiochian exegesis taken to further theological extremes, see Michelson, "Proof Texts of the Ineffable: On Knowing Christ Through Scripture," in *Philoxenos of Mabbug*, 113–43. By proposing this theory of the literal sense, Theodore may have given the in direct occasion for others to create heresies more erroneous than what Nestorius had himself taught. In so doing, Theodore may have created the very situation where both the dyophysite church and the miaphysite Syriac heretics, who would arise after Theodore's death, would oppose him. Here, the Dyophysites accepted both the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture and condemned both Theodore and his denial of the allegorical reading of Scripture, at the Fifth Ecumenical Council, while the Miaphysites would accept Theodore's radical understanding of the literal sense and extend it to the point that Theodore himself was heretical.

why others have imagined his practice of setting aside the literal as part of his exegetical approach. Yet it is also true that Origen did not shut off the words of Scripture from any other signification, as Diodore and Theodore had. He correctly understood the Biblical text as spiritually inclined to meanings not immediately evident in the text. Indeed, his understanding of the spiritual sense was critical in the patristic-medieval age.

As a disciple of the Patristic Age, St. Thomas Aquinas provides a summarized systemization of the literal and allegorical senses of Scripture. He explicitly and consistently connected the words of Scripture with the actual things and events of which Scripture spoke. Because he distinguished the words from the things and events directly signified, Aquinas was able to distinguish the inherent order between these two signifiers: the significance of the words being inclined to a further significance of things and events. In this way, Aquinas expands the Antiochian school's understanding of Scripture so that the written narrative can signify beyond itself, but he does so in such a way that does not violate the nature of these words—themselves ultimately chosen by God through human authors. Aquinas also embraced Origen's movement beyond the literal narrative to spiritual realities, invoking the Holy Spirit's power and governance of the things of which Scripture speak. Thus, the allegorical sense is grounded in the substances and actions of Scriptural history, thereby giving Origen's spiritual sense the systematic foundation that it had lacked.<sup>73</sup>

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73 Here, the literal and allegorical senses of Scripture indicate related signs diversified according to their mode, i.e., literally of the text or some reality allegorically beyond the text. See Holmes, "Participation and the Meaning," 107: "The distinction between spiritual and literal lies not in what is signified but in how it is signified . . . . The literal and spiritual senses have different «modes» or ways of signifying, but the difference is not between signification by convention and signification by similarity, as it was for Augustine. According to Thomas, the literal sense uses signs that are only signs, whose whole purpose

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While Aquinas did not originate this exegetical understanding, he did give it precise methodological expression, thereby presenting the basis of a true “theological exegesis.”<sup>74</sup> This methodological clarity was both a kind of term to a historical development (insofar as Aquinas lived near the end of the progression from the Patristic era through the High Middle Ages)<sup>75</sup> and a boon to contemporary theologians.<sup>76</sup> This is critical to the sound understanding of Revelation and to the right scientific practice of theology, and therefore it is right to end by precisely enunciating these two senses of Scripture in their openness to each other. First, the literal sense is the meaning of the *words* written by the human, though inspired, author. Second, the allegorical sense is the meaning of the providentially ordered *realities* that are signified through these same words, the majority of which are found in the writings of the Old Testament and signify something proper to the New Testament and the Church. Providentially, therefore, the words of Scripture literally and directly signify those realities, which inherently and naturally go on to signify Christ and his Mystical Body. The Divine origin of the different senses of Scripture—and their contents—is thereby maintained within Catholic theology.

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for being is to signify, while the spiritual sense uses signs that also have their own historical integrity and proper functions as things.”

74 Mayeski, “Quaestio Disputata,” 150.

75 See Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 17–35.

76 See Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*, 211–27; Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration & Interpretation*, 145–48; *ibid.*, 150–52.

THE AQUINAS REVIEW  
OF  
THOMAS AQUINAS COLLEGE

Vol. 26, No. 2, 2023

ISSN 1076-8319

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*The Aquinas Review is published semiannually by the Office of the Dean, Thomas Aquinas College, Santa Paula, California; Paul O'Reilly, President; Michael J. Letteney, Dean. Unsolicited articles, reasoned criticisms of articles, and letters are welcome.*

*Correspondence should be addressed to: Editor, The Aquinas Review, 10,000 Ojai Road, Santa Paula, CA 93060. A subscription form follows the final article.*

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## *Editor's Statement*

This past autumn marks the tenth anniversary of the death of Ronald P. McArthur, the founding president of Thomas Aquinas College and the original editor of *The Aquinas Review*, and this issue of the review completes the thirtieth of its own existence. We hope that this review has continued to fulfill the end for which Dr. McArthur established it in 1994, namely, to

speak to those off the campus who share the same concerns as the teachers, alumni, and students who have, over the years, participated in the life of the college community. . . [and to] stimulate a continuing conversation with an every widening audience about some of the important topics which should concern us as men and as Christians, topics which we ignore at a risk which is much too dangerous for the health of our souls.<sup>1</sup>

In recognition of these thirty years, at the back of this issue is included an index to the articles published in previous issues, organized by topic and by author.<sup>2</sup>

The seven essays in the present issue span several subjects, though they center around theology and philosophy. First, while emphasizing the finitude of Christ's human knowledge in contrast to his divine omniscience, Urban Hannon challenges a tendency among contemporary theologians to minimize the scope and depth of that human knowledge. Second, John McCarthy spells out the principles underlying St. John Henry Newman's idea of the nature and aim of a university and how only a Catholic university can offer the perfection of this idea. Third, Fr. Edmund Waldstein reflects on the little recognized distinction

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<sup>1</sup> Ronald P. McArthur, "Editor's Statement," *The Aquinas Review* 1 (1994), iii.

<sup>2</sup> Note that all previous issues are available in digital form free of charge at [www.thomasaquinas.edu](http://www.thomasaquinas.edu).

between two kinds of universals contemplated by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, and how it helps to untie several conceptual knots. Fourth, Marie George defends the traditional understanding of the difference between plants and animals, arguing that, despite hyperbolic claims made by some biologists, observations do not suggest that plants can sense the world around them. Then Andrew Seeley reflects on Lady Philosophy's diagnosis of the root of Boethius's misfortune in *The Consolation of Philosophy*—not his imprisonment but his deep forgetfulness of what it is to be human. Sixth, Fr. Hugh Barbour presents the implicit complementarity between two approaches to immaterial substance, that of Plato and that of Aristotle, that are employed by St. Thomas. And finally, David Sherwood explains the inadequacy of the literalist and the allegorist approaches to Sacred Scripture, when isolated from each other, but their perfection when brought together in proper order in the hands of the Angelic Doctor.

Christopher A. Decaen  
Thomas Aquinas College  
November 2023

## *Preface*

At Thomas Aquinas College we often say that the education we provide is only a beginning. For the most part, our students are reading the important works in our program for the first time, and the class discussion, while certainly helping them to better understand the principal arguments and themes in the readings and to acquire the intellectual virtues, only introduces them to the profoundest truths and deepest questions that have engaged mankind for centuries.

Accordingly, it is fitting that the College publish *The Aquinas Review* to honor its patron and to provide a forum for deeper consideration of those matters which constitute its curriculum and are central to genuine Catholic liberal education. Consistent with the nature of the College itself, this review is marked by fidelity to the *Magisterium* of the Catholic Church and a respect for the great tradition of liberal learning which is our common heritage.

The essays in *The Aquinas Review* reflect positions taken by their authors and not necessarily by the College itself. The editor—in collaboration with the editorial board—determines the contents of each issue. Any interested person may submit an essay for consideration or letters or comments on articles already published.

It is our hope that *The Aquinas Review* will be a source of wisdom to its readers and contributors.

Paul O'Reilly  
*President, Thomas Aquinas College*



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