

# Principles of Hexaemeron Interpretation according to St Thomas

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**S**T Thomas Aquinas, the "Angelic Doctor" and the "Leader of Studies" (1), is generally hailed as the great teacher of Philosophy and of Speculative Dogmatic Theology. That he is so nobody does deny as this is stated by the authoritative voice of the Church. Leo XIII says this, in seven Encyclicals (2) and his immediate successor Pius X in other six encyclicals (3). This Pope even went so far as to say that "since the happy death of the Holy Doctor there was no Council held by the Church in which he was not present with the riches of his doctrine (4). All the Popes since then have lavished abundant praises on this same Angel of the Schools.

And yet we must add that he is much more than this. He is quoted always with great praise, on many points in Moral Theology, in Ascetics and in Holy Scripture. And this is no wonder. For in the days of St Thomas all these subjects were studied as one great subject namely "Theology". This was the case especially regarding Holy Scripture. St Thomas in the 13th century could not have dreamt of separating the study of Dogmatic Theology from the study of Holy Scripture; for Theology till about a century and a half before St Thomas, consisted merely in the interpretation of the Holy Books and the "Summae" of the Scholastic were only methodical collections of such interpretations; for though the Scholastics gave a tremendous importance to the speculative element in the study of Theology St Thomas could still say "words of Scripture have more authori-

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- (1) *En cycl.* Letter "Studiorum Ducem" AAS 15 (1923).
  - (2) "Aeterni Patris" (1879), *Jampridem* (1879), *Etsi nos* (1882), *Officio Sanctissimo* (1887), *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), *Inter graves* (1894), *Depuis le jour* (1889).
  - (3) "In praecibus" (1904), *Pieni Panimo* (1906), *Sub exitu* (1907), *Pa-scendi* (1907), *Sacrorum Antistitum* (1910), *Doctoris Angelici* (1914).
  - (4) *Motu Proprio* "Doctoris Angelici" AAS 6 (1914). 336.

ty than the most exalted human intellect (5); and he shows this authority of the Holy Books when after enunciating the objections to a doctrine made generally on philosophical grounds, he says "but on the contrary the authority of Scripture suffices (6). His respect for the Holy Books is further seen by the fairly large number of his Exegetical works on the Old and New Testaments, which writings, however, "due to a Master in Theology are, as is fitting, works of Theology" (7).

No wonder then, that I propose to examine the doctrine of St Thomas not on a point of speculative Dogmatic Theology but on a point of Scriptural interpretation, that is, to see what St Thomas has to say about the interpretation of the Biblical narrative of creation in Genesis 1, 1-2, 3. My special object in this study however shall be to show that St Thomas in the 13th century gave such **principles** for the interpretation of the Hexaemenon, which an exegete of today, following the directions issued by the Biblical Commission and having at his disposal all the linguistic researches and the critical work of seven centuries made since St Thomas can still follow without being stamped either antiquated or quixotic if only he makes a few minute changes that are required by the very nature of the subject and these too, according to the spirit of St Thomas.

First, then, we must investigate what are today the **principles** of right interpretation of the biblical narrative of creation. This is no hard task, for these principles, already enunciated in various previous decrees of the Church were collected in the decree about the subject issued by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (8).

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- (5) "Major est Scripturae auctoritas quam omnis humani ingenii capacitas" S. THOMAS—Summa Theologica (henceforth S.Th) I, q. 68, art. 2 in corp.—The translations from the Summa are from "The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas literally translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province"—London Burns Oates & Washbourne. In this passage St Thomas is quoting St Aug. in Gen. ad litt. chap. 5.
- (6) "Sed in contrarium sufficit Scripturae auctoritas" S.Th. I, q. 69, art. 1; q. 70, art. 1, art. 2; q. 71, art. 1 etc.
- (7) E. CAYRE—Manual of Patrology—Vol. II, 553 Tournai 1940 quoting A. GARDEIL—Les procédés de S. Thomas—Rev. Theol. 1903, 423-457 and P. SYNAVE—Les commentaires Scripturaires de S. Thomas—Vie Spirituelle 8 (1923)—455-469.
- (8) Enchiridion Biblicum (henceforth EB) 332-339.

The principles that have some importance for us are the following:—

1. That the literal historical sense (*sensus litteralis historicus*) **cannot be excluded** in interpreting the first Chapters of Genesis (EB, 332);

2. That regarding those passages of which different Fathers of the Church gave different interpretations without giving anything definite or certain an exegete may follow any of their interpretations (EB, 335);

3. That not all words are to be taken in their proper sense but one may reject the proper meaning when the words are evidently said improperly or metaphorically or anthropomorphically (EB, 336);

4. That in Moses' narration of creation one is not to expect exact scientific expressions for it was not the intention of the sacred writer to teach the intimate constitution of visible things in a scientific way but only to give to his fellow men a popular narration accommodated to their senses and to their intelligence (EB, 338).

Our task, then, is to trace back all these principles to the Angelic Doctor. And, following the order in which we enunciated the principles, we ask in the first place: "Did St. Thomas **exclude** the literal historical sense? This is a very difficult question owing to many reasons. The first and by far the most weighty is the fact that "we find a certain amount of hesitation in St. Thomas when giving his opinion on the subject; for it clearly appears that he never really made up his mind whether to accept or reject St. Augustine's idea about the subject (9) and as is well known, in any biblical interpretation the opinion of St. Thomas is much influenced by the interpretation of St. Augustine (10). For even as St. Thomas is called "the great interpreter of St. Augustine" whose "interpretation of any statement from him is given preference over all others (11) even so St. Augustine is the great teacher of St. Thomas especially in bib-

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- (9) E. MESSENGER—*Evolution and Theology*—London 1931, p. 70.  
 (10) STOPPANI in *L'Esameron*, Torino 1893 vol. I, p. 25 writes:  
 "... il sommo San Tommaso per cui in fatto di esegesi l'autorità di S. Agostino è sempre perentoria..."  
 (11) M. S. Mc KEOUGH—*The meaning of the Rationes Seminales in St. Augustine*, Washington, 1926 p. xi.

lical matters. In order, then, to understand fully the interpretation of St Thomas we must examine that of St Augustine. The opinion propounded by the latter is today called "allegorica litteralis" St Augustine said that God created all things simultaneously. Regarding the disposition and succession of the works mentioned in the scriptural narrative he says that the day means only the intellectual act of the angels by which they came to know about creation. He explains evening and morning by his famous distinction of "lux vespertina" (evening light), in so far as the angels discerned the works by means of created species and the "lux matutina" (morning light), in so far as they discerned them in the Divine Essence. St Augustine therefore says that what in the narrative is said to have been created, say, in the third day was not in reality created after the works of the second day but all things were created in the first instant of time only however with the difference, that the inorganic universe was then actually created, while living things were only potentially created or in their "seminal reasons". There exist many controversies as to the true nature of these seminal reasons especially as to whether they are active or passive principles given to matter; but it is not within the object of this paper to speak about them (12). According to St Augustine the actual order of appearance is narrated in chapters 2 and 3 of Gen. Now this system of St Augustine is **literal** in so far as it admits that the narration really says that "**God created all things in the beginning of time**" (which is in fact the only truth, explicitly mentioned by the Biblical Commission (13), of which the literal historical sense cannot be put in doubt), and it is allegorical because of the way in which it explains the disposition of things. The reasons that led St Augustine to propound such an opinion and which must have certainly merited the consideration of St Thomas are the following:—

First, basing his interpretation on the Vulgate rendering of the Septuagint of Eccles 18. 1 "Qui vivit in aeternum creavit omnia **simul**", he said that any interpreter who explains the

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(12) For information about this subject cfr.: (a) C. BOYER, *La Théorie Augustinienne des Raisons Seminales*, in, *Essais sur la Doctrine de St Aug.*, Paris 1932; and (b) Mc KEOUGH, *op. cit.*

(13) EB 337.

narrative in a strict literal historical sense would be contradicting this scriptural text.

Secondly, since in chapters 2 and 3 of Genesis he read of things being created in an order different from that of chapter 1 he said that to avoid contradiction one must say that chapter 1 is not strictly and historically literal. In fact his edition of the Latin Bible read as follows: "cum factus est dies fecit Deus caelum et terram et omne viride agri", which he understood to mean that at the same moment in which God created the day He created also heaven and earth and plants.

Thirdly he said that a strict literal interpretation cannot explain all the difficulties put forward by scientists. Thus for example he says how could there be evening and morning before the creation of the sun?

Evidently this interpretation allegorica-litteralis is more allegorical than literal; and had St Thomas accepted this interpretation in all its entirety he could scarcely be said to have given what most modern exegetes understand by a system not excluding the literal historical sense (14).

But now the great question comes in. Did St Thomas accept it? I do not think he did. This I say after a detailed examination of qq 66-74 of the Summa Theologiae and in dist. 12 and the following of the book "In Sententias Petri Lombardi" Part II, where St Thomas deals with the question.

For even though all along he quotes the opinion of Augustine and answers some objections from Augustine's standpoint; and even though he calls this opinion "rationabilior et magis ab irrisione infidelium Sacram Scripturam defendens" (15), and explicitly says that it pleases him more (16), he does not seem to make it his own when he says his last word in the Summa Theologiae. In fact here he does neither explicitly accept nor explicitly reject the opinion of St Augustine. For what St Thomas says of St Augustine to defend him of his Platonism we may repeat of St Thomas to defend him of his Augustinism on this point. St Thomas says "Now in many things relating to Philosophy Augustine makes use of the opinions of Plato not assert-

(14) EB 332 sqq.

(15) In II Sent. dist. 12 art. 1; cfr. *ibid.* art. 3 in corp.

(16) "et haec opinio plus mihi placet", *ibid.* art. 2.

ing them as true but only relating them" (17). On these words I dare make a similar sentence to the point. In many things relating to exegesis St Thomas makes use of the opinions of Augustine not asserting them as true but only relating them. What De Wulf says regarding the relation of the philosophies of St Augustine and St Thomas may be said more rightly regarding their Scriptural interpretation "St Thomas does not contradict him... instead he transforms the meaning of his statements, sometimes by slight corrections sometimes by violent interpretations that do violence to the text" (18). And this he did because as Messenger says "so great were the reverence and respect that St Thomas felt for the Doctor of Hippo that he could never bring himself formally to set up his own opinion against that of the latter" (19). This is true especially about his hexaameron exegesis for as Ceuppens (20) and Mangenot (21) say, owing to the great authority of the Doctor of Hippo, no schoolman with the exception of St Bonaventure did ever dare to condemn the interpretation of simultaneous creation put forward by St Augustine. But (I think), "not to condemn a doctrine" and "to make a doctrine one's own" are totally different things. It is obviously certain that St Thomas **does not condemn** St Augustine's interpretation but it is equally certain that in the end he did not make it his own. For in his last most mature and by far the greatest of his works namely the "Summa Theologiae" in which as Grabmann says (22) "he often gives his final decision on a question", the opinion of Augustine is nowhere called "rationabilior". In this book "the Great Master modifies to some extent his judgement. The opinion of Augustine beyond any doubt still enjoys his sympathies but he never gives his final judgement in favour of Augustine's opinion or of the other. He minutely analyses and confronts the two interpretations, sees the true and the good parts in each, tries to find a point of contact between the two and then concludes without preferring a judgement even declaring that he has no intention of prejudic-

(17) S. Th. I q. 77, art. 5 ad 3um.

(18) History of Medieval Philosophy, Vol. II, p. 7.

(19) op. cit. p. 41

(20) De Hexaameron, Romae 1931, p. 46.

(21) Article "Hexaameron" in Dictionnaire de Theologie Catholique.

(22) Introduzione alla Somma, p. 39.

ing any of the two — “so that no sentence would be prejudiced we are to answer by both kinds of arguments” (S Th I, q 74 art 2) (23). Now these last words “so that no sentence would be prejudiced” are in favour of my assertion that St Thomas did not accept St Augustine’s sentence. For to accept a sentence means to discard another. Now St Thomas did not want to discard the sentence of Ambrose and the others. And so he did not accept the sentence of St Augustine. This may be confirmed still further. For St Thomas does not seem to admit the simultaneity of creation which is the speciality of the interpretation of St Augustine. In fact, discussing the query whether all these days are one day (S Th I q 74 art 2 title), after putting four objections he says “but it is not so, because in Gen. ch. 1 it is said: and evening came and morning came, the second day and the third day and so on. But where there are second and third there are more than one. There was not therefore only one day” (24). Here St Thomas clearly admits some sort of succession. What does he say here about the opinion of Augustine? He quotes it saying: “On this question Augustine differs from other expositors. His opinion is that all the days that are called seven are one day represented in a sevenfold aspect” (25). Here he does not say that it pleases him more!

But St Thomas himself thought quite otherwise as is seen from the answer he gives to the fourth objection. It runs as follows: “The entire work ascribed to one day God perfected in an instant for with each work are the words ‘God said and it was done’. If, then, he had kept his next work to another day it would follow that for the remainder of a day he would have ceased from working and left it vacant which would be superfluous. The day therefore of the preceding work is one with the day of the work that follows” (26). And St Thomas answers: “All things **were not distinguished and adorned together** not from a want of power on God’s part as requiring time in which to work, but, that due order might be observed in the instituting of the world. Hence it was fitting that different days should

(23) D. CALLUS—*La Cosmogonia Biblica secondo S. Agostino—Conferenze Agostiniane*, Malta 1932, pp. 32-34.

(24) *ibid.* in corp. (the translation does not exactly conform to that of the Dominican Fathers noted above).

(25) *ibid.* in corp.

(26) *ibid.* 4a objectio.

be assigned to different states of the world as each succeeding work added to the world a fresh state of perfection" (27). But it appears still more all along his interpretation, that according to St Thomas things were produced one after the other. The day in fact was not the intellectual act of the angels (28) but a period of 24 hours. In his commentary on the Liber Sent. of Petrus Lombardus he already seems not to have liked St Augustine's interpretation of the days as the intellectual act of the angels. In fact he writes In II Sent dist, 12 q. 1 art. 3, that one may admit that the succession described in Genesis in reality corresponds to a simple classification without admitting the doctrine of the intellectual acts of the angels as put forward by Augustine.

In the Summa this is somewhat clearer. In the 4th objection of LXXIV art 2 we read "if therefore he had kept his next work to another day it would follow that for the remainder of a day he would have ceased from working....." (cfr cupra for complete quotation). Now the objection is certainly speaking about a natural day (Yomism was not then in vogue) and St Thomas does not get rid of the objection by saying that the day was the intellectual act of the angels; and so he admits with the objector that the day was a natural day.

Besides to the query "whether the production of light is conveniently put in the first day", in his "sed contra" he writes: "That without which there cannot be day had to be done in the first day. But without light there cannot be day (of course a natural day and not the intellectual act of the angels). Therefore light had to be made in the first day."

All this is as regards his general system of interpretation. Besides this, his determination to follow everywhere the literal meaning, is seen when to the query "whether there are waters above the firmament" he answers "These words of Scripture have more authority than the most exalted human intellect. Hence whatever these waters are and whatever their mode of existence we cannot for a moment doubt that they are there (29)". He does this throughout; but I think that it is outside the purpose of this paper, in which I am speaking only about **principles**

(27) *ibid.* ad 4um.

(28) S. Th. I q. 67, art. 4 (words in brackets ours).

(29) S. Th. I q. 68, art. 2 in corp. quoting Augustine.



to give St Thomas' literal interpretation of the Hexaemeron; and so we shall pass on to find in St Thomas **the second principle of interpretation** which was thus enunciated: that regarding those passages for which different Fathers gave different interpretations without giving anything definite or certain an exegete may follow any of their interpretations. St Thomas says this clearly: "In his quae de necessitate fidei non sunt licuit Sanctis diversimode opinari sicut et nobis (30). But he teaches this still more clearly all along his hexaemeron interpretation not in so many words but by his mode of procedure. Let us quote some examples: To the query "whether formlessness of created matter preceded in time its formation", he answers "On this point Holy Men differ in opinion" (31), and quotes St Augustine saying one thing and St Basil, St Ambrose and St John Chrysostom saying another. To the query "whether the production of light is fittingly assigned to the first day", he answers "there are two opinions as to the production of light" (32), and when giving such alternate explanations of the Fathers he generally leaves it to the reader's choice to decide which is to be accepted but sometimes he shows clearly that he is in favour of one side of interpreters. Thus to the question whether the empyrean heaven was created at the same time as formless matter (33) he quotes St Bede's and St Basil's arguments and adds "Their reasons however are not very cogent", and then quotes and approves the opinion of St Augustine.

We shall now pass to the third principle which runs as follows: That not all words are to be taken in their proper sense but one may reject the proper meaning when the words are evidently said improperly or metaphorically or anthropomorphically.

We may say that this is in fact the basis of St Thomas' interpretation. As a matter of fact he writes (34): "In discussing questions of this kind (i.e. of exegesis) two rules are to be observed:—

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- (30) In II Sent. dist. 12, q. 1, art. 3, quoted also by Pope Leo XIII in his Encyclical "Providentissimus Deus".  
 (31) S. Th. I, q. 66, art. 1.  
 (32) S. Th. I, q. 67, art. 4.  
 (33) S. Th. I, q. 66, art. 3.  
 (34) S. Th. I, q. 68, art. 1, quoting Augustine.

i) The first is to hold the truth of Scripture without wavering;

n) The second is that since Holy Scripture can be explained in a multiplicity of senses one should adhere to a particular explanation only in such a measure as to be ready to abandon it if it be proved with certainty to be false; lest Holy Scripture be exposed to the ridicule of unbelievers and obstacles be placed to their believing."

In other words St Thomas means to say that if one is giving, say, the historical literal interpretation of a certain scriptural passage and finds out that such an interpretation contradicts a scientific conclusion that is certain beyond doubt one must necessarily find out another interpretation. This St Thomas himself does very often. For example even though in Genesis 1, 14 it is explicitly stated that God created the sun in the fourth day St Thomas says that the light of the first day was also the light of the sun and criticises St Basil for holding that the light of the first day came from a luminous cloud which by expansion and contraction produced periods of darkness and periods of light. As a justification for this interpretation, quoting Augustine, he says that owing to the fact that in the first three days there was no life on earth no reason could be adduced for such a wonderful miracle (35); he explains the word "fecit" of Gen 1, 14 by an extremely improper meaning. "Fecit", he says, is there only to show that it was then that the sun began its proper movement along the Ecliptic (36). Here St Thomas shows himself faithful to his principles of Exegesis (37).

We shall now pass to the last principle which runs as follows: That in Moses' narrative of creation one is not to expect exact scientific expressions for it was not the intention of the Sacred writer to teach the intimate constitution of visible things

(35) S. Th. I, q. 67, art. 4 ad 3um quoting Augustine De Gen. ad litt. II, 1. cfr. also In II Sent. dist. 13 q. 1 art. 4.

(36) In II Sent. dict. 15, q. 1, art 1 and 2 and S. Th. I, q. 67, art. 4 ad 3.

(37) Cfr. Dordolot—Le Darwinisme au point de vue de l'Orthodoxie Catholique—Bruxelles—Paris 1921 on p. 62 he writes: "Si S. Thomas ne rejette pas absolument l'interprétation admettant une succession réelle se n'est qu'à condition que l'on prenne dans un sens extrême impropre d'autres propositions de l'Hexaméron."

in a scientific way but only to give to his people a popular notion accommodated to their senses and to their intelligence.

This point, too, is taught by St Thomas all along the interpretation whenever the biblical narration does not correspond to the principles of the science of his times.

Thus in q 66 art 1 quoting Augustine as saying that the earth mentioned in Gen 1, 1 was the "materia prima" he says "for it was impossible for Moses to make the idea of such matter intelligible to an ignorant people except under the similitude of well known objects" (38). Again quoting St John Chrysostom he writes: "Because Moses was addressing an ignorant people to whom material things alone, appealed" (39). But the most clear text is the following: "It should rather be considered that Moses was speaking to ignorant people and that out of condescension to their weakness he put before them only such things as are apparent to sense" (40).

From all this we gather that St Thomas was by no means one of those interpreters, such as the Concordists, who would make us believe that Moses knew so much about the heavens as to be considered a worthy companion of Milton, Laplace and such others who taught the intimate constitution of the universe. St Thomas here enunciates the principle that is today the basis of all interpretation of such biblical passages namely that the Holy Bible is not a book that teaches physical science. St Thomas is by no means a Concordist we may conclude this paragraph by a note of Father Dorlodot, late Professor of Geology and Stratigraphic Palaeontology at the Catholic University of Louvain. "It is to be regretted", he writes, "that the Concordists did not give any heed to the teaching of St Thomas. Here, as usual, St Thomas shows himself as the spokesman of good sense. If one had given heed to him one would have abstained from wasting so much paper and from causing, in the long run, no small harm to the Religion which one was trying to serve (41).

And so we see that while on the one hand everything is old in the Aquinate, on the other hand everything appears new "even so, as truth which subjectively is gradually unfolded from day

(38) Ad Ium.

(39) S. Th. I, q. 67 art. 4 in corp.

(40) S. Th. q. 68, art. 3 in corp.

(41) Dorlodot op. cit., p. 45.

to day, is subjectively known to be eternal (42). Everything in St Thomas is old in the way that Christ, and his Gospel, the Church and her doctrine, the Fathers and their teachings are old. Everything in St Thomas is new as Christ, the Church and the Fathers are ever new. For treasures of great doctrinal value, are hidden in the pages of the works of St Thomas, and such treasures only await for the explorer to bring them to light. I hope that by this paper I have in a way helped to show that St Thomas is never old, and that however far Theologians or Exegetes shall depart from St Thomas just because he seems old to them in the long run they will all, humbly but irresistibly return to him confessing that he is ever new.

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(42) AUSONIO FRANCHI, *Ultima Critica* (ed. Palma) Milano 532, quoted by E. T. TOCCAFONDI, *Il-Metodo della Critica della Conoscenza e la filosofia Tomistica*, *Angelicum* 25 (1948) p. 88.