

## ST THOMAS'S INTERPRETATION OF THE PASSION PSALM

POSSIBLE references to the sufferings of the future Messiah are not the sole monopoly of any one Psalm. St Thomas Aquinas, the Prince of mediaeval exegetes, speaks of no less than five Psalms as being amply descriptive of Our Lord's Passion.<sup>1</sup> Yet one of them, Psalm 21 (Ps. 22 in the Hebrew Bible), is the *Passion Psalm*. It takes the priest no time to discover it, as he prayerfully turns over the pages of his Breviary at Prime on a Friday, or at Matins on Good Friday during the Tenebrae service. 'Deus, Deus meus, respice in me, quare me dereliquisti? . . . Diviserunt sibi vestimenta mea, et super vestem meam miserunt sortem . . .'<sup>2</sup> At the stripping of the altars on Maundy Thursday evening, the people in the pews as much as the surpliced choristers would entertain no doubts as to the messianic import of these verses or of the Psalm at large. And rightly so. *Hoc enim sentite in vobis quod et in Christo Jesu*, Christ, as he hung on the Cross, uttered aloud the opening words of the Psalm in question (Mt 27, 46; Mk 15, 34); even if he did not recite it through to the end, as he may have done, those opening words had such strong evocative force, as to call up for his Jewish bystanders the entire Psalm, with nothing short of an implicit avowal on the lips of the dying Redeemer that the psalmist's words somehow suited the Speaker nailed to the Cross as much at least as they suited the psalmist himself.<sup>3</sup> St John and presumably St Matthew seem to have taken it for granted, once their quotation from verse 19 concerning the garments divided among the executioners is introduced by their characteristic formula

<sup>1</sup> 'Sciendum est autem quod quinque Psalmi agunt de passione Christi prolixè [Pss. 21, 34, 54, 68, 108]: quorum iste Psalmus [Ps. 21] primus est. Alii enim brevius tangunt passionem Christi. . . . Et hoc propter quinque plagas Christi: vel propter quinque effusiones sanguinis. Et unus est modus procedendi in omnibus, quia ex passione facta est salus omnibus hominibus' (Comm. ad Ps. 21). — St Thomas's *In Psalmos Davidis expositio* is quoted throughout according to the Parma edition: 'Sancti Thomae Aquinatis Doctoris Angelici Ord. Praed. opera omnia ad fidem optimarum editionum accurate recognita', XIV, Parmae, 1863, pp. 148ff.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Gelin, *Les quatre lectures du Psaume XXII*, in *Bible et Vie Chrétienne* No. 1 (1953) 38: 'Citer le début d'un livre ou d'un document, pour un Juif, c'était évoquer le document avec son sens total.' See also J.A. van Dodewaard, *La force évocatrice de la citation mise en lumière en prenant pour base l'évangile de St Matthieu*, in *Biblica* 36 (1955) 482-491, esp. 484. With reference to Mt 27, 46 (= Ps. 21, 1), we read on page 486: 'L'accent ne tombe pas ici sur l'abandon, mais sur le contenu de tout le psaume.'

that the scripture might be fulfilled.<sup>5</sup> Obviously, no mention is made in the Gospels of the soldiers' having likewise shared between them the garments of both thieves at the Crucifixion, which they must have done; but that is because the Evangelists were concerned rather very exclusively with Christ, in the face of an O.T. passage that found its fulfilment so admirably in him. The ingenious remark about the thieves' clothes is Maldonatus's, not mine.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, not unlike the innocent psalmist, Christ on the Cross experienced parching thirst,<sup>7</sup> while his enemies stood staring or mocking at him, using the very words we read in verse 9.<sup>8</sup> The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (2, 9-12) quotes verse 23 as though uttered by Jesus who tasted death on behalf of us all. One other verse, at the least, seems to find its full realization in Our Lord: 'They have pierced my hands and my feet' (v. 17), though we still cannot tell what exact meaning may be attaching to the hapaxegomenon verbal root כָּנַח.

Following in the wake of the N.T. writers, the Fathers of the Church unanimously supported the messianic interpretation of Psalm 21. In 1910 the Pontifical Biblical Commission decreed that, therefore, 'it is necessary to admit a number of prophetic and Messianic psalms, which foretold the future Saviour's coming, kingdom, priesthood, passion, death, and resurrection'.<sup>9</sup> But nowhere are we specifically told to regard this or that Psalm as literally messianic, or else messianic in merely its typical sense. In every problem of messianic fulfilment of prophecy, it may be well to remind ourselves of Christ's own assertion: 'All things must needs be fulfilled, which are written in the Law of Moses and in the Prophets and in the Psalms, concerning me' (Lk 24, 44). But the problem would then be still awaiting solution. Presuming, on the strength

<sup>5</sup> Jn 19, 24 and, according to Vulgate and Peshitta, Mt 27, 35; see also Mk 15, 24 and Lk 23, 34.

<sup>6</sup> 'Non dubito quin consuetudo eadem apud Judaeos et Romanos fuerit, quam nunc apud omnes gentes esse videmus, ut eorum, qui capite puniuntur, vestes carnifex tollat. Quare et latronum vestes a milicibus, qui carnificum munere fungebantur, distributas fuisse credendum est; sed nimium Evangelistae, quia nec latronum sed Christi historiam narrabant, et in vestium latronum distributione nullum sciebant fuisse mysterium, sola enim consuetudine fuisse divisas, divisionem autem vestium Christi non consuetudine solum, sed etiam mysterio factam fuisse, ut Davidis impleretur propheta: *Diviserunt vestimenta mea sibi, et super vestem meam miserunt sortem* — de vestium latronum divisione mentionem non fecerunt, de distributione sortitioneque vestium Christi fecerunt' — J. Maldonatus, *Commentarii in Quatuor Evangelistas*, Comm. ad Mt 27, 35.

<sup>7</sup> Ps. 21, 16 = Mt 27, 48; Mk 15, 36; Lk 23, 36; and Jn 19, 28, which reads: 'Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the scripture might be fulfilled, said: 'I thirst.' = Ps. 68; 22.

<sup>8</sup> Mt 27, 39, 43; Mk 15, 29; Lk 23, 35.

<sup>9</sup> *Enchiridion Biblicum*, 347.

of its title or superscription, that the Psalm under consideration is Davidic in authorship, we could read its contents of David himself in their literal sense and of Christ in a typical sense alone, or else we could even understand them literally of Christ himself.

Only in recent years have Catholic scholars come to call in question the literally messianic interpretation of this Psalm. Twentieth-century Psalm criticism may be said to have started with Hermann Gunkel (non-Catholic), whose 'form-critical' methods are now, though not without some reserve, the absolutely indispensable basis of any understanding of the Psalms. He has taught us to determine first the literary categories or types (*Gattungen*) of the Psalms and then the purpose for which each and every Psalm was written in a particular historical situation (*Sitz im Leben*). It is only natural, therefore, that the latest Catholic commentary on the Psalms — Father Castellino's contribution to the Garofalo series — should concern itself so largely with determining in each case the definite 'situation in life' out of which the several Psalms arose. In this way, the historical or literal sense is being well looked after or, rather, is looking after itself. Could we say of Thomas Aquinas, who died some six hundred years before Herman Gunkel was born, that he too gave at least a cursory thought to what we now know as the *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalms? It all depends on the extent to which he investigated their literal sense.

We should be committing ourselves to a hasty reply in the negative, if all we knew about St Thomas's interpretation of this Psalm were that he actually wrote: 'Among other matters this Psalm has as its special theme the Passion of Christ; hence this is its literal sense'.<sup>8</sup> It would make all the difference to learn that St Thomas said in addition: 'And so, although in a figurative sense the Psalm speaks of David, yet especially it refers literally to Christ'.<sup>9</sup> Such terminology calls for elucidation.

That the Angelic Doctor by no means discarded the historical sense of the Psalms can be gauged already from what we read in the general introduction to his Commentary, namely: 'But as regards the order of the Psalms, it should be noted that some of the Psalms refer to historical situations, but are not arranged in chronological order. . . ; wherefore, they connote in addition something else besides history proper'.<sup>10</sup> St

<sup>8</sup> 'Et inter alia specialiter iste Psalmus agit de passione Christi. Et ideo hic est ejus sensus litteralis' (Comm. ad Ps. 21, 1).

<sup>9</sup> 'Et ideo licet figuraliter hic Psalmus dicatur de David, tamen specialiter ad litteram refertur ad Christum' (ibid.).

<sup>10</sup> 'Sed circa ordinem Psalmorum sciendum est, quod Psalmi quidam tangunt historias, sed non sunt ordinati secundum ordinem historiae. . . : unde aliquid aliud significant praeter historiam tantum.'

Thomas had commented the first 51 Psalms and no further, when death overtook him on his way to Lyons and the Oecumenical Council of 1274; and those fifty Psalms, we are told, deal with the grief and afflictions weighing heavy on David on account of thankless friends and treacherous foes. A vexed question in our day is that of identifying these villainous enemies in those of the Psalms which like Ps. 21 are now classified as 'Individual Laments'.<sup>21</sup> In some cases the psalmist's enemies are self-righteous neighbours and even erstwhile friends who see in his sufferings the clear evidence of retribution for sin. In other cases the psalmist contrasts himself with his enemies in terms of one who is poor, afflicted, humble, or downtrodden (Hebr. *anaw*) in opposition to those who are rich, powerful, arrogant and oppressive. Theories have been proposed, identifying these national enemies with either internal enemies alone (a party of worldly men within the State) or external ones alone (i.e., foreign pagans) or both at a time. According to Father Castellino's interpretation, the snares those enemies have laid for the psalmist are to be understood as temptations against his religious convictions and pious way of life. As regards St Thomas, who assumes David to be the author of Psalms 1-50, he speaks of Psalms 1-30 as describing David's twofold affliction and Psalms 31-50 his twofold persecution. In the first place, David had been grieved by individual persons, namely his son Absalom (Pss 1-10) and his father-in-law Saul, father of his bosom friend Jonathan (Pss 11-20), as well as by the community as a whole (Pss 21-30). In the second place, he suffered persecution by the agency of several private rivals (Pss 31-40) and public enemies (Pss 41-50).<sup>22</sup> Therefore, in Ps. 21, which ushers in the third decade of Psalms as we have seen, the persecution spoken of is that for which the entire community is answerable, once David has been forsaken by all and left to fall a prey of the jealous whims of Saul, who in a final desperate attack of turning on him with pent-up fury condemned him to exile. The Angelic Doctor, it may be noted, does not contrive theories of bodily sickness — as so many moderns have done — to account for the psalmist's sufferings generally expressed in highly figurative language. Enough has now been said to show that in Thomas's Commentary on the Psalter the historical sense is never left out of account.

There is one thing that perplexes the reader as yet unacquainted with the exegetical methods of Thomas Aquinas. We have already quoted St Thomas as saying: 'And so, although in a figurative sense (*figuraliter*)

<sup>21</sup>Cf. H.H. Rowley (ed.), *The Old Testament and Modern Study*, Oxford, 1951, p. 171f.; and G. Castellino, *Libro dei Salmi*, Torino-Roma, 1955, pp. 254-63.

<sup>22</sup>See concluding paragraph of the Prooemium Sancti Thomae or General Introduction to *In Psalmos Davidis expositio* (op.cit., p. 150).

the Psalm speaks of David, yet especially it refers literally (*ad litteram*) to Christ.<sup>13</sup> If in its historical sense the Psalm refers to David's afflictions, as we have seen, how could it be said to refer likewise to Christ in its literal sense? At all events, what exactly does the Angelic Doctor mean when he says that the Psalm speaks of David *figuraliter*? The terminology is that found elsewhere in the Commentary, for instance in the general introduction we read: 'The first fifty Psalms, therefore, relate to the soul in its (initial) state of penance or purification, and so it is in a figurative sense (*figuraliter*) that they deal with the afflictions and persecutions of David as well as with his deliverance. Now, to classify them according to their literal sense (*secundum litteram*), David, once established in his kingdom, prays against a twofold oppression or persecution...'.<sup>14</sup> So, *figuraliter* and *secundum litteram* are here used promiscuously or, at any rate, with reference to the very same historical situation — that of David. Are we then to admit two levels of literal interpretation, as though the Psalm spoke literally of David and literally of Christ? It need not be a matter for surprise that St Thomas reaches this conclusion, keeping as he does in full view the unity of both Testaments and their common Divine Authorship. If, at all, at this juncture the reader should call back to mind St Thomas's oft-quoted 'non est inconveniens... si etiam secundum litteralem sensum in una littera Scripturae plures sint sensus' (borrowed from St Augustine) or some such similar passage from his other works, he may as well realize that St Thomas need not be understood as though admitting the plurality of heterogeneous literal senses.<sup>14</sup> The two literal senses advocated by him for Psalm 21 are in reality not two completely distinct and heterogeneous senses, but simply a homogeneous whole — something peculiar to O.T. prophecy. The 'figurative' language in prophetic utterances may, for the sake of example, be likened to the figurative language in a parable. The story of the Prodigal Son is not told for its own sake. In the parable of the husbandmen we understand the works, in their obvious literal sense, of the householder's son and sole heir whom the unfaithful vine-dressers stoned to death as they had done to the other emissaries; but through him we see portrayed God's only-begotten Son whom the Jews rejected and killed as they had done to the prophets.

<sup>13</sup> 'Prima ergo quinquagena pertinet ad statum poenitentiae, et ideo figuraliter tractatur in ea de tribulationibus et impugnationibus David, et liberatione eius. Et ut divisio fiat secundum litteram, David in regno suo existens, contra duplicem impugnationem vel persecutionem orat...' (ibid.).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. A. Fernández in *Institutiones Biblicae*, 1<sup>o</sup>, Romae, 1951, p. 357f. Similarly, A. D. Sertillanges (ed., Saint Thomas D'Aquin: *Somme Théologique: Dieu*, Tournai, 1925, p. 332) lays stress on the fact that in practice as well as perhaps in theory St Thomas did not admit the multiple *literal* sense.

Similarly, David's sufferings in Psalm 21 pre-figure the sufferings of Christ, the 'Son of David'. With regard to the parables, St Thomas had remarked in the *Summa Theologiae* (I, q. I, a. 10, ad. 3): 'Nec est literalis sensus ipsa figura; sed id quod est figuratum'. Likewise, with regard to the prophecies, we read in the general introduction to the Commentary on the Psalms: 'Prophetiae autem aliquando dicuntur de rebus quae tunc temporis erant, sed non principaliter dicuntur de eis, sed in quantum figura sunt futurorum.' Applying this principle to Psalm 21, he writes: 'Sicut supra dictum est, sicut in aliis prophetiis, ita hic agitur de aliquibus tunc praesentibus in quantum erant figura Christi et quae ad ipsam prophetiam pertinebant.' In other words, the contents of Psalm 21 refer literally both to David and to Christ, but especially (*specialiter* or *principaliter*) to Christ.

The objection need not be raised that St Thomas might, after all, be understanding the Psalm of Christ in a typical sense. Such expressions as 'specialiter ad litteram refertur ad Christum' rule out the possibility altogether. Or even, the terminology 'figuraliter... de David' and 'ad litteram... ad Christum' cannot be taken to mean that, while admittedly referring to Christ in a literal sense, the Psalm speaks of David in a typical sense — as though Christ were type and David antitype (!). I do not share the opinion of those few scholars of to-day who hold this view in connexion, for instance, with Ps. 15.<sup>15</sup> We have already shown that, at least in the Commentary on the Psalter, St Thomas's *figuraliter* and *secundum litteram* are far from being mutually exclusive terms. Besides, the Saint of Aquin is explicit about the whole matter of O.T. — N.T. relationship: 'In sacra enim Scriptura praecipue ex prioribus posteriora significantur; et ideo quandoque in sacra Scriptura secundum sensum litteralem dicitur aliquid de priori quod potest spiritualiter de posterioribus exponi, sed non convertitur. Inter omnia autem quae in sacra Scriptura narantur, prima sunt illa quae ad vetus testamentum pertinent'.<sup>16</sup> It only remains for us now to try and determine further the nature of the two literal senses whereby St Thomas has interpreted the Psalm respectively of David and of Christ.

St Thomas, I believe, hit the right nail on the head when he argued from the nature of prophecy. That is what recent scholars have done. If we are imbued with a deep sense of historical development, we realize that the Old Testament is a record of a living and growing revelation.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., G. Castellino (op.cit., p. 275) merely proposes it along with other alternative interpretations.

<sup>16</sup> Quodlibetales, VII, a. 15, ad 5 — Cf. J. Gribomont, *Le lien des deux Testaments selon la théologie de saint Thomas*, in *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 22 (1946) 70-89.

At each stage of the evolution we see the same features, the same religious themes, becoming steadily clearer until the Messiah comes. This means that at no stage of the process may we expect perfection until the New Testament is reached. No single prophet had before his eyes the whole picture of the Messiah and his kingdom.<sup>17</sup> Endowed with rare prophetic insight or what may be termed 'synoptic vision', the sacred writer could foresee events pertaining to the future messianic kingdom which, however, through lack of perspective are made to appear as coinciding with events contemporaneous with the prophet: this is sometimes known as the compenetration of proximate and remote objects of description. The resultant picture combines, as it were, overlapping objects which we cannot clearly distinguish except through the medium of posterior revelation. For it is only the prophet who could envisage both the figure and the reality — and this last only imperfectly, 'modo vago et subobscuro'.<sup>18</sup> This is known as the theory of the *sensus plenior*, which is quite recent in name, though in actual fact it dates back to as early as the fourth century: for, indeed, not unlike the  $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\iota\kappa\acute{\alpha}$  of the exegetical school of Antioch, the *sensus plenior* is not a separate and independent sense but rather an extension of the literal sense.<sup>19</sup> A happier name for it, perhaps, would be that of *sensus totalis*.<sup>20</sup> The existence of such a scriptural sense would seem to find strong confirmation in those words of *Providentissimus Deus*: 'There is sometimes in the biblical passages a wealth of meaning more abundant and more profound than the letter of the text or the laws of interpretation seem to indicate.'<sup>21</sup> To be sure, the great Thomas Aquinas himself would seem to imply as much when, in the case of Psalm 21, he writes: 'Et ideo quandoque ponuntur aliqua quae ad Christum pertinent, quae *excedunt* quasi virtutem historiarum.' He had already remarked in the general introduction to his Commentary: 'Prophetiae autem aliquando dicuntur de rebus quae tunc tem-

<sup>17</sup> Cf. R.C. Fuller in *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*, London-Edinburgh, 1953, 39kl, where the reader is referred to O. Cullmann's *Christ et le Temps* (Neuchâtel, 1947).

<sup>18</sup> Cf. A. Fernández in *Institutiones Biblicae*, p. 383f.; also C. Lattey, *The Emmanuel Prophecy*, in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 8 (1946) 369-376.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. A. Vaccari, *La  $\theta\epsilon\omega\rho\iota\kappa\acute{\alpha}$  nella scuola esegetica di Antiochia*, in *Biblica* 1 (1920) 3-36, esp. the quotations from this article in *Institutiones Biblicae*, p. 384 (footnote).

<sup>20</sup> Loc.cit. As the corresponding Maltese term for *sensus totalis* (or *sensus plenior*) we may accept Professor Saydon's *is-sens sħiħ*. He writes of Ps. 21: 'Għalkemm David seta' sab ruħu f'dawk ic-cirkostanzi u f'dik it-tbatija, il-mod kif huma preżentati aktar jaqbel lit-tbatijiet ta' Kristu, milli lit-tbatijiet ta' bniedem. Għalhekk ingħidu li das-salm fis-sens tiegħu *sħiħ* jitkellem fuq il-Messija' (P.P. Saydon, *Ktieb is-Salmi*, I, Malta, 1950, p. 26).

<sup>21</sup> *Enchiridion Biblicum*, 93 (trans. R.C. Fuller, in op.cit., 39k).

poris erant, sed non principaliter dicuntur de eis, sed in quantum figura sunt futurorum', noting further: 'et ideo Spiritus Sanctus ordinavit quod, quando talia dicuntur, inserantur quaedam quae *excedunt* conditionem illius rei gestae, ut animus elevetur ad figuratum.' As a matter of fact, I have already pointed out that verse 17 of this Psalm ('They have pierced my hands and my feet') seems to find its full realization in Christ alone. And as regards vv. 28-9, it is easy to perceive that no single Israelite unless he was the Christ could have expected, as the outcome of his sufferings, the conversion of the Gentiles. The passages which I have just now quoted in their original Latin leave me in no doubt as regards St Thomas's admissibility of the current distinction between the *obvious literal sense* and the *plenary literal sense*: graphically these may be described as two concentric circles, not as parallel (let alone unparallel) straight lines.

The fifth Oecumenical Council, held at Constantinople in the year 553, had condemned the Christological errors of Theodore of Mopsuestia, deprecating amongst other things his calling in question the messianic interpretation of Psalm 21.<sup>22</sup> St Thomas, not unlike his predecessors and contemporaries, was well aware of this condemnation, and it is easy to see that it was all along uppermost in his mind: 'Circa modum exponendi sciendum est, quod tam in Psalterio quam in aliis prophetiis exponendis evitare debemus unum errorem damnatum in quinta synodo' (general introd.); 'quidam Theodorus Mopsuestenus, qui hunc [i.e., Ps. 21] ad litteram de David exponebat, fuit damnatus, et propter alia multa; et ideo de Christo exponendus est' (Comm. ad Ps. 21). The Angelic Doctor, therefore, thought himself left with no other choice but that of avoiding at all costs an expression like 'ad litteram dicitur de David'; he had to adopt a directly messianic interpretation of the Psalm, if he was to be true to the Church and true to the Sacred Text. This accounts for his 'figuraliter . . . de David'. And it was because of this, not in spite of this, that he applied the golden rule which he borrowed from St Jerome's Commentary on Ezekiel: '(Psalmi) sic sunt exponendi de rebus gestis, ut figurantibus aliquid de Christo vel Ecclesia.' The suffering David was through space and time the *figure* pointing to the *reality*, the suffering Christ. This was intended by the primary author and intended likewise, however vaguely, by the secondary author: 'et ideo Spiritus Sanctus *ordinavit* quod, quando talia dicuntur, *inserantur* quaedam quae *excedunt* conditionem illius rei gestae . . .' (see above). The same religious theme — the suffering Christ — becomes already somewhat clearer by the time of Deutero-Isaias: indeed, in the same way that Ps. 21 is *the* Passion Psalm, Is. 52, 13-53, 12 (the 4th Servant Song) is *the* Passion

<sup>22</sup>Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, IX, 211f.



Prophecy.

#### CONCLUSION

Ingeniously enough, St Thomas Aquinas couched his interpretation of Ps. 21 in terms that seem to bridge over the gap of some 700 years between then and now: 'And so, although *in a figurative sense* the Psalm speaks of David, yet *especially* it refers *literally* to Christ.' In the light of the above investigation, the present writer feels justified in taking these words to mean: 'And so, although *in its obvious literal sense* the Psalm speaks of David, yet *in its plenary literal sense* it refers to Christ.\*'

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\*This paper was read at the Aquinas Celebrations of the Royal University Students' Theological Association on March 3, 1959. The writer is pleased to note that — independently of him or he of the other — John J. O'Rourke has written, however casually: '... The identity [in compenetration] of the remote object of any such description would be an object of the *sensus plenior* as described and defended above. It might be added that this concept of proximate and remote objects of description could be the key to interpreting the teaching of many of the great exegetes and theologians of earlier ages who defended as possible the multiple literal sense' — *Marginal Notes on the Sensus Plenior*, in CBQ 21 (1959) 67f.