



Another Look at the Plurality of the Literal Sense

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There has been no unanimity among interpreters of St. Thomas Aquinas as to whether he held a doctrine of the plurality of the literal sense of Scripture, and the chief reason for this diversity of modern opinion lies in the few texts in which Thomas broaches the subject. While at first glance suggesting a doctrine of plurality, these texts have not been thought to state it with a clarity that puts the matter beyond all doubt; scholars who have denied that Thomas held the doctrine have felt free to interpret his texts by other means, such as by his doctrine of theology's basis in the literal sense, or of the inner and outer word.¹

1. Those who have denied that Thomas held a doctrine of plurality include the following: Paul Synave, "La doctrine de s. Thomas d'Aquin sur le sens littéral des Ecritures," *Revue Biblique* 35 (1926): 40–65; Synave, note in *Bulletin Thomiste* 3 (1930–1933): 711–718; J.-M. Vosté, *Revue Biblique* 36 (1927): 112; Ceslao Spicq, note in *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 20 (1931): 331; Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au moyen âge*, BT 26 (Paris: J. Vrin, 1944), pp. 276–279; N. Assouad, *France Franciscaine* 13 (1930): 409–504; G. Parella, "Il pensiero de s. Agostino e s. Tommaso circa il numero del senso letterale nella S. Scrittura," *Biblica* 24 (1945): 279–302; P. Benoît, *La prophétie* (Paris: Desclée, 1947), appendix 2, pp. 356–359; Synave and Benoît, *Prophecy and Inspiration: A Commentary on the Summa Theologica II-II, Questions 171–178* (New York: Desclée, 1961), pp. 150–153;

I think, however, that the texts state clearly a doctrine of plurality, but have not been read with sufficient care even by those who maintain that Thomas did hold for the plurality of the literal sense.² My intention in this article, then, is to take another look at the disputed texts and to show that Thomas maintained the doctrine, with respect not only to Scripture's divine author, but also to its human authors as well. And in the course of the article I shall take a first look at a new text on the matter from Thomas's recently discovered Roman *Scriptum* on book 1 of the *Sentences*. When read in their context, the texts manifest a doctrine of plurality.

Steven Baldner, "The Use of Scripture for the Refutation of Error According to St. Thomas Aquinas," in *Hamartia: Essays in Honor of John M. Crossen* (Toronto: Cullen, 1984), pp. 149–169; Robert G. Kennedy, "Thomas Aquinas and the Literal Sense of Scripture" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1985), pp. 212–229.

2. Among those who have maintained that Thomas held a doctrine of plurality, see the following: F. Albert Blanche, "Le sens littéral des Ecritures d'après saint Thomas d'Aquin: Contribution à l'histoire de l'exégèse catholique au moyen âge," *Revue Thomiste* 14 (1906): 192–212; F. Cueppens, "Quid S. Thomas de Multiplici Sensu Litterali in S. Scriptura Senserit?" *Divus Thomas* 33 (1930): 164–175; S. M. Zarb, "Utrum S. Thomas unitatem an Vero Pluralitatem Sensus Litteralis in Sacra Scriptura Docuerit?" *Divus Thomas* 33 (1930): 337–359; Zarb, "Unité ou multiplicité des sens littéraux dans la Bible," *Revue Thomiste* 15 (1932): 251–300; Zarb, "De Ubertate Sensus Litteralis in Sacra Scriptura Secundum Doctrinam Sancti Thomae Aquinatis," in *Problemi scelti di teologia contemporanea*, *Analecta Gregoriana* 68 (Rome: Pontifical University Gregoriana, 1954), pp. 251–273; Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, *De Deo Uno* (Paris: Desclée, 1938), pp. 74–76; A. Colunga, "Dos palabras aun sobre los sentidos de la S. Escritura," *Ciencia Tomista* 64 (1943): 327–346; D. E. Nacar, "Sobre la unicidad o multiplicidad del sentido literal de las Sagras Escrituras," *Ciencia Tomista* 64 (1943): 193–210; Nacar, "Sobre la unicidad o la duplicidad del sentido literal en la Sagrada Escritura," *Ciencia Tomista* 68 (1945): 362–372; Henri du Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'Ecriture* (Paris: Aubier, 1964), 2 / 2: 276–285; Maximin Arias Reyero, *Thomas von Aquin als Exeget: Die Prinzipien seiner Schriftdeutung und seine Lehre von den Schriftsinnen* (Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1971), pp. 143–144; Mark D. Jordan, *Ordering Wisdom: The Hierarchy of Philosophical Discourses in Aquinas*, *Publications in Medieval Studies* 24 (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), pp. 27–28. The major Thomistic commentators, such as Cajetan, Bañez, and John of St. Thomas, all side with the view that Thomas did have a doctrine of multiplicity. See Cajetan, *In I Partem divi Thomae Aquinatis Summae Theologiae* 1.10, in *Sancti Thomae Aquinatis: Opera Omnia* (Rome: Propaganda Fidei, 1888), 4:26; Bañez, *Scholastica Commentaria in Primam Partem Summae Theologiae*, ed. L. Urbano (Madrid: Editorial FEDA, 1934), 1:90–99; John of St. Thomas, *Cursus Theologicus* 1.2.12 (Paris: Solennes, 1931), p. 410, n. 19. Salamanca Thomists universally held

The whole issue is of some importance because it touches upon Thomas's general vision of scriptural interpretation, in which he of course was often engaged. And an understanding of his teaching on this matter is crucial if he is to be correctly understood in the broader context of the history of scriptural exegesis—in determining both his place among his contemporaries and, especially, his debt to the past.

Thomas's teaching on what the literal sense of Scripture is remains constant throughout his teaching career. He maintains consistently that the literal sense of Scripture is what the author of Scripture intends to be understood by the words that are written. The author is twofold, for Thomas maintains that the Holy Spirit is the principal author of Scripture, while a human author operating under the Spirit's inspiration has the role of an instrument. The medium of words makes the literal sense different from the spiritual senses, since in the spiritual senses the medium of meaning is through the things signified by the words of Scripture and is intended by the Holy Spirit alone, whereas in the literal sense the medium of meaning is the words alone, intended both by the human author and the Holy Spirit.³ And because the spiritual senses of Scripture are based on the similitudes that are to be found among the things signified by the words of the text of Scripture, Thomas denies them any argumentative power, since the similitude at the basis of these senses can be employed in an indefinite

the interpretation. See the commentaries on *Summa* 1.1 edited by C. Pozo in *Fuentes para la historia del método teológico en la Escuela de Salamanca* 1, Biblioteca Teológica Granadina 6 (Granada: Facultad de Teología, 1962). Melchior Cano (p. 275) and Francisco de Vittoria (pp. 119–120) make the claim and investigate the matter somewhat, while Domingo de Soto (p. 214) makes the claim but only in the form of a conclusion, standard in that tradition of commentary. Ambrosio de Salazar (pp. 326–327) makes the same claim and, alone among the commentators, refers explicitly to the important text from the *De potentia*.

3. Thomas's main treatments of the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture are the following: *Super Sent.* 1.pro.5 and 2.12.1.2; *De quolibet* 7 6.1–3; *De potentia* 4.1; *Lectura super Sent.* [Rome] 1.pro.4; *Summa theol.* 1.1.9–10. For other texts in which Thomas mentions the senses of Scripture, see *Super ad Galatas* 4.7; *De quolibet* 3 14.1; *Super Psalmos* pro.; *Super Boethii De Trin.* 2.4; *Super Job* 1. Note also that for Thomas the literal sense includes the use of metaphor (as throughout *Super Job* and in *Summa theologiae* 1.1).

number of ways, and hence they lack certitude.⁴ Only the literal sense can serve as a scriptural basis for argument in sacred doctrine.⁵

But in a few of Thomas's writings he appears to think that even the literal sense of Scripture can have many meanings; these texts raise difficulties, since a doctrine of plurality would seem to call into question the dependability of theology's argumentative basis in the literal sense of Scripture. I shall examine each text in turn, and, after establishing that Thomas does hold a doctrine of plurality, I shall suggest why his doctrine on this matter should not be considered troublesome.

Six texts touch on a plurality of the literal sense of Scripture. Chronologically ordered, they are the following passages:⁶

1. *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2 (1252–1256)
2. *Super Sent.* 4.21.1.2.1 ad 3 (1252–1256)
3. *De quolibet* 7 6.1 ad 5 (1256)
4. *De potentia* 4.1 (1265–1266)
5. *Lectura super Sent.* 1.pro.4 (1265)
6. *Summa theol.* 1.1.10 (1266–1267)

I will now consider them in order.

SCRIPTUM ON THE SENTENCES

In his general treatment of the Christian doctrine of creation, in book 2, distinction 12, of his Parisian commentary on the *Libri sententiarum*, Thomas asks whether all things were created together. The question arises because of two differing interpretations

4. See *Super Sent.* 1.pro.5 and *De quolibet* 7 6.1 ad 4, where Thomas borrows the Augustinian example of the term "lion" being able to refer equally to Christ or the devil.

5. See *Summa theol.* 1.1.10 ad 1, as in *Summa theologiae*, ed. Ottawa Institute of Medieval Studies (Ottawa: Collège Dominicain, 1953), 1:10.

6. The dating is worked out in James A. Weisheipl, "A Brief Catalogue of Authentic Works," in his *Friar Thomas d'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Work*, 2d ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1983), pp. 355–405. For the dating of the Roman commentary see L. E. Boyle, "Alia Lectura Fratris Thome," *Mediaeval Studies* 45 (1983): 418–429, p. 424.

given by the Fathers to the text of Genesis 1:2, "and the earth was formless and void" ("terra autem erat inanis et vacua"). Thomas's main concern here, as in the parallel text from *De potentia*, is to show that the two different expositions do no violence to the context of the literal passage and that both interpretations can be sustained. The seventh difficulty at the outset of article 2 holds that, on the authority of Augustine, we should say that the world was, in fact, created in six days, for Augustine himself says that the authority of sacred Scripture on this matter surpasses the mind of any human being. To understand the text from Genesis in any other way, the argument implies, would be to derogate the authority of sacred Scripture. When Thomas replies, however, he does not appear even to address the argument, for he invokes the ability of the Holy Spirit to make the scriptures pregnant with more meaning than any human being can grasp. Hence no derogation of Scripture occurs, he claims, when it is given different interpretations that preserve the faith.⁷ But the difficulty's whole point is that one should not expound Scripture "in many ways" (*diversimode*) at all. How can Thomas start with diverse expositions as a given? The answer to this question lies in his response in the body of the article.

Things pertain to the truth of faith in two ways, directly (*per se*) and indirectly (*per accidens*). That God is one and triune pertains to faith directly and cannot be denied by any believer; such teaching pertains to the substance of faith, without which further teaching cannot proceed. Other things, such as historical events narrated in Scripture, pertain indirectly to faith, insofar as denial of them is implicitly a denial of the truthfulness both of the Holy Spirit, who is the author of sacred Scripture, and, through Scripture, of faith. Now the two expositions of the Fathers—of Augustine, on the one hand; and of Basil and Gregory of Nyssa, on the other—do not deny in any way that God did indeed create the world, which pertains directly to faith. Their expositions differ, however, as to the order in which the creation of things took place, which Thomas thinks pertains indirectly to faith. For Augustine, the order expressed in the Genesis account of six days signifies the order of learning, the order of nature. For

7. *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2 ad 7.

Basil and Gregory and Ambrose, however, the six days explain the temporal order of creation, an interpretation that Thomas notes is more common and more in accord with the letter of the text, at least on the surface.⁸ The point here is that both expositions preserve the truthfulness of faith. Granted that they do differ, they nonetheless differ in the explanation of a secondary matter. In differing as to how creation came about, both accounts presuppose and safeguard the fact of creation, about which believers cannot disagree.⁹ And even granted the truth of the various accounts, no account that at least preserves the substance of faith would seem able to exhaust the plenitude of truth virtually contained in the passage of Scripture: "quia majori veritate eam [scripturam] Spiritus Sanctus fecundavit quam aliquis homo adinvenire possit."¹⁰ This passage is important for that very reason, for it indicates what would have to be the basis for a plurality of the literal sense of Scripture: the fullness of the Holy Spirit's knowledge and the Spirit's ability to impregnate a text with more meaning than any human being can discern. And the text from the *Scriptum* is also important because Thomas makes his claim in this particular doctrinal context, to which he returns in the important texts on the plurality of the literal sense of Scripture in the *De potentia*. He gives no further indications as to the exact way in which such a filling with more meaning comes about, but we shall encounter some of his ideas on this subject later in this survey.

The other highlighted text from the *Scriptum*, book 4, is important to us if only because it is the first place in Thomas's writings where he employs the notion of "adaptation" in the context of scriptural exposition.¹¹ The immediate doctrinal context here is that of the sacrament of penance, and in this passage, occasioned by Lombard's text, Thomas is speaking of the venial sins that are cleansed in purgatory. The tradition after Augustine, Lombard maintains, has understood that the words of Paul in 1 Cor. 3:12–13, "wood, straw and stubble" (*lignum, foenum et stipula*), refer to venial sins that are

8. *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2 corp.

9. *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2 corp.

10. *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2 ad 7.

11. See the articles of Synave and Zarb, cited above in notes 1 and 2. Both authors get the terminology of "adaptation" from this text, as well as from the text from the *De potentia*.

destroyed by the fire of probation after this life.¹² The difficulty with which Thomas must contend is that no less an authority than Jerome uses these very words in discussing formal heresy, which is a mortal sin, not a venial sin. Apparently, then, *lignum*, *foenum*, and *stipula* are not venial sins. Thomas replies by pointing out that, beyond the principal sense of Scripture, which the author intends, other meanings can be not unfittingly adapted (*non incongrue aptari*), and this is what Jerome is really doing here.¹³

Some students of Thomas's thought see this text as an indication that Thomas did maintain a doctrine of the plurality of the literal sense of Scripture, and this for two reasons.¹⁴ First, Thomas seems to use *principalis sensus* in an ordinal way, which would therefore allow for a posterior, second sense; at first glance, this seems tantamount to an admission of plurality. Second, he uses the verb *aptari* here and will use derivations of this verb in *De potentia* 4, where he seems to allow for a plurality of the literal sense.¹⁵

Despite some scholars' seizing on this as a proof-text for the plurality of the literal sense, a counsel of caution is in order here. The wording of the text may perhaps suggest a plurality of the literal sense, but those who cite this text do not mention that it lacks something that all later texts on a plurality of the literal sense propose: Thomas's claim that such an adaptation is a proper sense of Scripture.¹⁶ As we shall see, when speaking of a plurality of the literal sense, Thomas customarily emphasizes that those meanings found in Scripture by its expositors that the Holy Spirit has already understood but that the

12. Peter Lombard *Sententiae* 4.21.2, ed. Ignatius Brady, (Grottaferrata: CSB, 1981), 2:380.

13. *Super Sent.* 4.21.1.1 ad 3.

14. I have Zarb particularly in mind here. See his "Utrum S. Thomas Unitatem," especially p. 339.

15. See *De potentia* 4.1, as in *Quaestiones Disputatae* 2, ed. P. Pession (Turin: Marietti, 1965), p. 105.

16. It might also be added that Thomas points out that Jerome's "certain kind of adaptation" is not Paul's intention. See *Super Sent.* 4.21.1.2.1 ad 3. Could this mean that Thomas took Jerome's use of the passage to be against the intention of Paul? The text does not say, but when Thomas later comments on the passage from the first letter to the Corinthians, he takes Paul's intention to be that "*lignum, fenum et stipula*" are venial sins. See *Super I Cor.* 3.2, as in *Super Epistolas S. Pauli Lectura* 1, ed. R. Cai (Turin: Marietti, 1953), p. 262, no. 155.

human author did not know are truly senses of Scripture. In fact, in one text he speaks of plurality in this sense as a property, a *proprium*, of sacred Scripture; he does not do so in this text. If for no other reason, it seems best not to cite this particular text as authoritative on the matter.

Furthermore, in all likelihood the verb *aptari* means something quite different here from what it means when Thomas employs it in describing plural senses of Scripture. We can gather this from the context of the argument to which Thomas is replying. The argument employs Jerome's comments on Isaiah 5:8, in which the prophet is foretelling the doom that will befall the land-grabbers who amass to themselves many houses and much property, for the Lord intends to destroy it all. Jerome sees a similarity between this amassing of property and the practice characteristic of heretics, who heap heretical teaching upon heretical teaching. Thus, they whose Christian house ought to be built with glorious and precious materials such as gold, silver, and precious stones, build them instead with the wood, straw, and stubble (*lignum, foenum et stipula*) of heresy.¹⁷ Thomas presents the difficulty in this way:

Praeterea, Isa. 5:8, super illud "vae qui coniungitis domum ad domum," dicit Hieronymus: "haeretici dogmata dogmatibus conjungunt, et qui super fundamentum aedificare debuerunt aurum, argentum, et lapides pretiosos, aedificant lignum, fenum et stipulam"; sed haeretici dogmata falsa confingentes non peccant venialiter. Ergo lignum, fenum et stipula non sunt peccata venalia.¹⁸

What Jerome did, then, was to take the words from the passage in the first letter to the Corinthians and use them in a different context, because the same words could be fitted (*non incongrue aptari*) to the new context. In any case, if perhaps Thomas does intend by this text to teach a real plurality of the literal sense of Scripture, he has left students of his thought many other texts that they can consult, and with greater profit. This text could not be used to prove absolutely that Thomas maintained a doctrine of plurality of the literal sense. Nor could it be used, as Zarb used it, to establish the terminology

17. For Jerome's text, see *In Esaiam* 2.5.8, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 73/1/2 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1963), p. 69, lines 21–27.

18. *Super Sent.* 4.21.1.2.1 ob.3.

that Thomas might use in explaining a doctrine of a plurality of the literal sense.

DE QUOLIBET 7

Our next text, *De Quolibet* 7 has escaped the notice of scholars but clearly has something to say about the plurality of the literal sense.¹⁹ The text is from the disputed question *De sensibus sacrae scripturae*, Thomas's *De quolibet* 7 6. In the first article, Thomas asks whether other senses are to be found beyond the literal sense of Scripture, and he replies in the affirmative. The five preliminary difficulties raise different problems. Some argue that if there are other senses beyond the literal sense, then confusion and error will arise from sacred Scripture, and that is unfitting. Again, another points out, the spiritual senses cannot be used to make a sure point, and their presence would accordingly not befit sacred Scripture. The fifth argument, however, has a different approach. That argument holds that any meanings taken from the words of some passage that the author did not intend are not the proper meanings of that passage. But since, as Aristotle points out, one cannot understand many things at the same time, and perforce cannot understand many things in one Scripture, there cannot be many proper senses to sacred Scripture.²⁰

For Thomas the answer to this difficulty is to be found in the principal author of Scripture, who is the Holy Spirit. The Spirit has already understood in one word of Scripture many more things than the expositors of Scripture can expound or discern: "Ad quantum dicendum quod auctor principalis sacrae scripturae est Spiritus sanctus, qui in uno verbo sacrae scripturae intellexit multo plura quam per expositores sacrae Scripturae exponantur, vel discernantur."²¹ But Thomas continues. He denies the argument's claim that the human author cannot understand many things in one word. Invoking Jerome's

19. The import of this text was first suggested to me by Walter Principe.

20. The authority is Aristotle *Topics* 2.10.114b34–35, as in Boethius's version, *versio Boethii*, ed. Lorenzo Minio-Paluello, AL 5/1–3 (Leiden: Brill, 1969), p. 46.

21. *De quolibet* 7 6.1 ad 5, as in *Quaestiones Quolibetales*, ed. R. Spiazzi (Turin: Marietti, 1956), p. 146.

authority, Thomas points out that the prophets spoke about present events in such a way that they intended to signify future things as well. And so it is not impossible to understand many things at once, insofar as one thing is the figure of another.

Nec est etiam inconueniens quod homo, qui fuit auctor instrumentalis sacrae Scripturae, in uno verbo plura intelligeret: quia Prophetæ, ut Hieronymus dicit super Osee, ita loquebantur de factis presentibus, quod etiam intenderunt futura significare. Unde non est impossibile simul plura intelligere, in quantum unum est figura alterius.²²

The point to be made here is that Thomas explicitly allows for the possibility ("nec est etiam inconueniens") that a human author, and not just the Holy Spirit, might have understood and intended more than one thing when writing a particular text—in this case intending both present and future events. Since Thomas emphasizes here the meaning of the words of the text ("in uno verbo plura intelligeret"), and not the signification by things signified by those words, which pertains to the spiritual sense and which human beings cannot accomplish, it seems clear that he is allowing here a plurality of the literal sense. This appears even more clearly when the passage is read alongside our next text, taken from *De potentia*.

DE POTENTIA 4.1

De potentia 4.1 contains what may safely be called Thomas's most thorough presentation of a doctrine of the plurality of the literal sense. In this article, Thomas is treating the question about the creation of matter and whether unformed matter was created prior in time to the creation of things. The treatment thus parallels that found in his Parisian *Scriptum* on the *Sentences* 2.2. Augustine, on the one hand, and Ambrose and the Greek Fathers, on the other, held different views on this question; but their explanations of the text from the first chapter of Genesis did no violence to the text and its context, and both interpretations preserved the truth that the world was created by God. For that reason Thomas felt compelled to respond

22. *De quolibet* 7 6.1 ad 5. For Jerome's text, see *In Osee* pro., ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 76/1/6 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1969), p. 3, lines 83–88.

to both sides when he answered the arguments proposed by each view in his commentary on the *Sentences*, although he himself preferred the explanation of Augustine.²³ Before answering the immediate query of the article, Thomas provides a preface of sorts, concerning the discussion of the meaning of the text of Genesis, and he counsels caution on two matters. First, something clearly false should not be attributed to sacred Scripture, which is teaching the creation of things, because sacred Scripture is given to us by the Holy Spirit and cannot be subject to falsehood, just as the Holy Spirit is not subject to falsehood.

The second matter takes us almost to the other extreme. Whereas the first concerns the attribution of falsehood to Scripture, the second concerns an excessive limitation of the truthfulness of Scripture. We should not constrict the meaning of a text of Scripture in such a way as to preclude other truthful meanings that can, without destroying the context, be fitted to Scripture: "*Aliud est ne aliquis ita Scripturam ad unum sensum cogere velit, quod alios sensus qui in se veritatem continent, et possunt, salva circumstantia litterae, Scripturae aptari, penitus excludantur.*"²⁴ The ability of Scripture to admit of many meanings is part of its dignity, Thomas continues, for because of these many meanings it can happen that the different minds of human beings can grasp a truth found in Scripture, and that those human beings will accordingly marvel in that grasping. These many senses seem to serve two purposes. The first purpose, is the edification of the faithful: the individual believer can read Scripture and delight in grasping some understanding of the text; the believer sees that an explanation he or she gives to a particular passage is both internally consistent, a prerequisite of anything true, and in accordance with the text and its context.

The second purpose is that defense of the truth of Scripture can more effectively be made. If an unbeliever were to give an interpretation of a passage of Scripture that is false, the believer has the option of turning to another sense that the unbeliever must acknowledge.

What does Thomas mean here by having recourse to "another sense of Scripture?" Is he speaking here of the spiritual senses of

23. See *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2 corp. At the end of *De potentia* 4.1 corp., Thomas reiterates his intention to respond to both sides.

24. *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2 corp.

Scripture and not at all about a plurality of the literal sense.²⁵ This seems unlikely for two reasons. First, Thomas consistently denies any argumentative power to the spiritual sense, because it is based upon similitude, which can be employed in an indefinite and hence uncertain number of ways.²⁶ Why would he suggest defending the faith against unbelievers by means of a type of theological argumentation the very efficacy of which he categorically denies?

Second, the context of the article precludes the spiritual sense. The creation of the world that Moses describes is intended neither to signify the New Covenant, since the Old Covenant had not yet been made, nor heavenly bliss, nor the moral actions of human beings. Moses is simply explaining the creation of the world.²⁷ If creation is understood as entailing total dependence in being on the part of all created things, then the possibility of creation's having been simultaneous or successive remains open, for both modes of creation presuppose total dependence in being.

Thomas does not provide us with an example of what "another meaning" (*alius sensus*) might be, but what he has said thus far may be of some help. He has cautioned against restricting the meaning of the text to one meaning because other meanings that are truthful and that fit the passage without disrupting its context may exist. If so, then one might be able to interpret a disputed passage of Scripture differently from how an unbeliever interprets the same passage. If the interpretation of the believer contains truth and is therefore not nonsense, and if it fits the letter of the passage and its surrounding context, then the believer can at least show that the unbeliever's interpretation is not necessarily the one intended by the passage, thereby preserving the inerrancy of Scripture.²⁸

Having allowed for a plurality of meanings that preserve the surroundings or context of the passage, Thomas explains by whose agency

25. See Baldner, "Use of Scripture," p. 160.

26. *Super Sent.* 1.pro.5; *De quolibet* 7 6.1 ad 4.

27. *De potentia* 4.1. Note, however, that when Thomas presents the four senses of Scripture while expounding Galatians, he exemplifies them in the phrase, "Let there be light." See *Super ad Galatas* 4.7 (ed. Cai p. 621, no. 254).

28. This reading of Thomas's text is in accord with his standard apologetical norm that one cannot prove the teachings of faith to those who do not accept the principles; all one can do is solve their arguments and thereby spare the faith from the charge of falsehood. See *Summa theol.* 1.1.8.

such plurality might come about. He sees nothing incredible in thinking that Moses and other inspired writers could understand, by divine concession, the different truths that people might understand, and that they in turn could detail these truths in one passage, thus rendering each separate meaning a meaning of the author. "Unde non est incredibile, Moysi et aliis sacrae Scripturae auctoribus hoc divinitus esse concessum, ut diversa vera, quae homines possent intelligere, ipsi cognoscerent, et ea sub una serie litterae designarent, ut sic quilibet eorum sit sensus auctoris."²⁹ Who is the *auctor* here? Could the *auctor* be simply the Holy Spirit? While such a reading would help the interpretation of Synave and Zarb, who both deny a plurality of intended meaning on the part of the human author, the *auctor* here must nevertheless be the human author. To begin with, Thomas has just devoted a fairly complex sentence to explaining the possibility of the human writer's knowing and intending the many truths to be discovered by others. It would be very odd if Thomas were then without warning to attribute the intended communication of this knowledge to someone other than the human authors of whom he had been speaking. In addition, what follows this text precludes any interpretation other than that the *auctor* mentioned here is the human author; for, when he continues, Thomas distinguishes this author from the Holy Spirit, who would be the only other possible candidate for *auctor*. Even if it should happen, he says, that the author does not know some of the truths that expositors of Scripture fit to the text, there is no doubt that the Holy Spirit already knew these truths, and the Holy Spirit is the principal author of Scripture: "Unde si etiam aliqua vera ab expositoribus sacrae Scripturae litterae aptentur, quae auctor non intelligit, non est dubium quin Spiritus sanctus intellexerit, qui est principalis auctor divinae Scripturae."³⁰ Thomas finally brings this whole discussion to its end and concludes: every truth that can be adapted to divine Scripture, so long as it preserves the context of the passage, is its *sensus*, its meaning.³¹

The intelligibility of these passages depends on Thomas's conception of the authorship of sacred Scripture. He consistently maintains

29. *De potentia* 4.1.

30. *De potentia* 4.1.

31. *De potentia* 4.1.

that the author of Scripture is twofold: principal and instrumental.³² The principal author of sacred Scripture is the Holy Spirit, and the instrumental author is the particular man who wrote the text. Now the Holy Spirit, it goes without saying, fully understands the message intended to be handed on to human beings. The human author, on the other hand, whom the Holy Spirit employs as an instrument, does not know what the Holy Spirit intends to hand on, except to the extent that he is moved by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to know the truths to be handed on.³³

The meaning, then, of the passage from the *De potentia* is this: Granted the possible deficiency of the human author's knowledge, it can still happen that the Holy Spirit should so inspire the human author that the human author would know the many true things that are contained virtually in his words, and thus intend to pass on any of those truths by the word or words he employed. And while it may or may not be the case that the human author understands the total virtuality of his words, it is clear that the Holy Spirit first understood the total virtuality that the words contain, and to that extent the Spirit wills all truthful predication by expositions of sacred Scripture that fits the words used.

32. See *De quolibet* 7 6.1 ad 5: "auctor principalis sacrae Scripturae est Spiritus sanctus . . . homo . . . fuit auctor instrumentalis sacrae Scripturae"; 6.3: "in ista Scriptura, cuius Spiritus sanctus est auctor, homo vero instrumentum; secundum illud Psalmi 44: 'Lingua mea calamus scribae velociter scribentis'; *De potentia* 4.1: "non est dubium quin Spiritus sanctus intellexerit, qui est principalis auctor divinae Scripturae."

33. Kennedy uses Thomas's commentaries on the logical works of Aristotle as rule for interpreting Thomas's notion of biblical meaning and so feels compelled to deny the straightforward meaning of this text from the *De potentia*. Kennedy invokes instead Thomas's teaching from *Summa theol.* 2-2 on the imperfection of human knowledge in prophecy in order to diminish Thomas's claim here regarding the human author's ability to know and intend many meanings in the text that the author produces. See Kennedy, "Aquinas and the Literal Sense," pp. 228-229. Such a reading runs counter both to the flow of the text and to Thomas's own language. The use of *designarent* in this text is simply too strong in its meaning to suggest that the human author physically wrote some words that just happened to have many possible meanings, unbeknownst to the author. Of the 1405 occurrences of the verb *designo*, *-are* noted in the *Index Thomisticus*, fully one-third are found in Thomas's scriptural commentaries, and they overwhelmingly entail the notion of expressly pointing something out or detailing. See *designo*, *-are*, in *Index Thomisticus* sect.2 concord.1, pp. 843-858.

The main difficulty with these texts from the *De potentia* is seeing what might fit the literal sense of Scripture. Thomas is not specific here, but again perhaps the little he does say will be of some help. To start with, he seems to require two things: that the diverse truths be truthful in themselves and that their being fitted to the scriptural passage be consistent with the context.

What is it that contains truth within itself? Thomas gives us no immediate hint, but the context of the article does. The doctrinal question being considered here, again, is the creation of things and whether the creation was effected all at once or over time. Augustine's account of Genesis conceives the order of creation as the order of nature, and hence of learning. The Greek Fathers, on the other hand, see the order depicted by the text as referring to the temporal order of things, for they thought that the lack of form did not mean the lack of all form but, rather, the lack of the full, formal perfection of things. The point that Thomas makes in the middle of the determination of the present article is that neither of the two accounts is discordant with the Christian teaching that the existence of things depends totally on the creative activity of God.³⁴ If either account were discordant, then that account could not be said of Scripture, and for two reasons. The first reason is simply that such a predication would be false, for the subject could not admit of the predicate; to speak of the manner of the creation of things in a way that denied the very creative causality of God would be self-refuting. The second reason, which we have seen Thomas give before, is that God just does not tell untruths.³⁵

What Thomas seems to have in mind by the phrase "continet in se veritatem" is simply that the subject of which the expositor of Scripture wishes to make a predication must be susceptible of that predication. Thus it may be said that the predications "Socrates is breathing," "Socrates is thinking," and "Socrates is running" require for their truth that Socrates be the sort of subject that is capable of breathing, thinking, or running.

But since Scripture is more specific, since its aim is not simply to provide a list of things of which possible predications can be made, Thomas stresses the importance of the context of the passage, the

34. *De potentia* 4.1.

35. *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2; *De potentia* 4.1.

circumstantia litterae. The fact is that Scripture details certain events that did, in fact, occur. One consequence is that while what did occur can occur, two mutually exclusive attributes cannot have occurred simultaneously. Although Moses could be at the foot of Mount Sinai or on its top, when he was on the top of Mount Sinai, he could not also have been at the foot. Similarly, the creation of things to which the text of Genesis bears witness could have occurred all at once or over time. Neither of these two modes of creation admits of the other, however, and unless the context of the text of Genesis, its *circumstantia litterae*, indicates to us clearly the modality of the creation of things, we shall not know that modality for certain. Thomas contends that the context allows for both accounts,³⁶ despite the fact that the text of Genesis seems to indicate a temporal succession,³⁷ in which case the account of the Greek Fathers and Ambrose would seem to have the upper hand; but Augustine's interpretation cannot absolutely be excluded. Therefore both accounts can be sustained, and both are in accordance with faith. The result is that, since the Holy Spirit knew that the words of Genesis would allow for either reading (which Moses would have known and intended, had the Holy Spirit so informed him) and since the accounts of Augustine and of the Greek Fathers and Ambrose do no violence to the text, then it can be said that at least the Holy Spirit, if not Moses himself, intended both accounts, and that they are, to that extent, senses of Scripture.

To my mind far too much emphasis has been placed on the notion of *adaptatio* by recent writers on this issue.³⁸ This is understandable in part, for the verb *aptari* and its related abstract noun *adaptatio* are mentioned here in this important text from the *De potentia* and the earlier text from book 4 of the Parisian commentary on the *Sentences* (discussed above). But because writers on both sides of this topic fix on

36. *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2.

37. *De potentia* 4.1. The important biblical text for Augustine here, which led him to his position that the account in Genesis is an account of the order of nature and of doctrine, is Ecclesiasticus 18:1, "Qui vivit in aeternum creavit omnia simul." See *De genesi ad litteram* 6.6, ed. J. Zycha, CSEL 28/3/2 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1894), pp. 177-178, lines 24-13.

38. Here again I have particularly in mind Synave and Zarb.

the notion of *adaptatio*, they do not concern themselves with the more crucial question at stake here. The crucial question is not about the so-called adapted senses, which expositors of Scripture discover without the human author's having intended so, but about the multiplicity of meanings known and intended by the human author of Scripture. It is precisely in the context of explaining why he accepts the equal scriptural fidelity of the accounts of Augustine and of Ambrose and the Greeks that Thomas goes so far as to say that Moses through the concession of God could have known and detailed the many diverse truths that would arise in the minds of later interpreters, and that, furthermore, each of these truths would be the meaning of the author.³⁹

In sum, Thomas holds in this text that the human author of Scripture could know and intend a multiplicity of meanings that would arise from the letter of the text the author himself produces: a multiplicity of the literal sense. To be sure, Thomas points out that the human author can do this because of divine concession, but that does not change the fact that the resulting meaning on the part of the human author is restricted to the literal sense, since human beings can only signify by words. It is also true that this assertion on Thomas's part raises other questions, but that does not change the fact that this text from the *De potentia* explicitly allows for a multiplicity of meanings. And while Thomas never discusses his teaching on this matter in as much detail again, his subsequent discussions on the literal sense remain open to his teaching here, and none repudiates it.

THE ROMAN COMMENTARY ON THE SENTENCES

At this point we can turn to a text from Thomas's recently discovered Roman commentary on book 1 of the *Sentences*, a text that is contemporaneous with the *De potentia*. Although most

39. Note that in the passage from *De quolibet* 7 6.1 ad 5, Thomas says that the prophets "intended" to signify more than one thing: "quia Prophetæ, ut Hieronymus dicit super Osee, ita loquebantur de factis presentibus, quod etiam intenderunt futura significare."

likely a student's *reportatio* of Thomas's classroom lectures at Santa Sabina in Rome, the text is authentic and solid enough to be used for studying Thomas's teaching.⁴⁰

In the context of the general discussion of the nature and scope of sacred doctrine, Thomas includes an article that concerns the manner of procedure in *sacra doctrina*: "Videtur quod modus procedendi in hac scientia sit inconueniens." Among the four objected difficulties with which Thomas must contend, the third claims that sacred doctrine is handed on in an unfitting manner because a multiplicity of senses confuses the mind: "Multitudo sensuum confundit intellectum. Set hec habet multiplicem sensum. Ergo confundit intellectum, et sic inconuenienter traditur."⁴¹

Thomas begins his reply by acknowledging that there is a multiplicity in sacred Scripture that comes about because of its author, who is the Holy Spirit.⁴² This multiplicity is the twofold sense of Scripture, the literal and mystical senses, and they differ because the literal sense is the one that the words convey while the mystical sense is the one whose meaning arises not from the words but from what is signified by the words. Thomas next gives the standard explanation of the spiritual or mystical sense of Scripture. The reason for the spiritual sense, he says, is that the Holy Spirit ordained things in such a way that the things signified by the words of Scripture should in turn signify something else. Thomas then adds that there are "many literal senses in Scripture" and that each of them is true.

Item aliud proprium est quia in ista sunt plures sensus litterales et quilibet est uerus. In aliis autem unus solus sensus est uerus, ille scilicet quem auctor intendit. Cum enim sacra Scriptura tradita sit per Spiritum sanctum et nichil in ipsa possit excogitari quod non excogitauerit Spiritus sanctus,

40. For a brief account of the discovery and the authenticity of the Roman commentary, see my "Alia Lectura Fratris Thome: A List of the New Texts of St. Thomas Aquinas found in Lincoln College, Oxford, MS. Lat. 95," in *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 57 (1990):34–61. See also L. E. Boyle, "Alia Lectura Fratris Thome," and Hyacinthe-F. Dondaine, "Alia lectura fratris Thome? (Super I Sent.)," *Mediaeval Studies* 42 (1980): 308–336. I shall be citing from my own transcriptions of the text. A critical edition is being prepared by John F. Boyle and L. E. Boyle.

41. *Lect. super Sent.* [Rome] 1.pro.4 ob.3, Oxford, Lincoln College lat. 95, f. 4v.

42. *Lect. super Sent.* [Rome] 1.pro.4 ob.3, Lincoln College lat. 95, f. 5r.

quicquid dicitur de sacra scriptura, dummodo non contradicat veritati fidei, est proprium sibi, sicut dicit Augustinus XII Conf.⁴³

One sees here an unmistakable similarity to the text from the *De potentia*. As in the *De potentia*, the fullness of the Holy Spirit's knowledge is invoked to justify the claim of plurality. Anything one could think about sacred Scripture, the Holy Spirit has already understood. About this there is no doubt.⁴⁴ In the Roman *Sentences*-commentary Thomas provides as well the warning regarding the contradiction of the teaching of faith, although no mention is made here of the *circumstantia litterae* that figured in the *De potentia*. But then, perhaps, "dummodo non contradicat veritati fidei" subsumes into one phrase what Thomas said in two phrases in the *De potentia*. The attribution to Scripture of something that does not save the context of the passage would by that fact contradict the faith to the extent that such an attribution denies what Scripture really says to be true.⁴⁵

The importance of this text rests in the use of the phrase "plures sensus litterales." Thomas does not use this exact phrase in any other work, and although it seems to be innocuous, some have been hesitant to use it in describing Thomas's teaching, because they fear that the attribution of plural senses to the literal sense renders the literal sense subject to equivocation and, consequently, renders suspect the faith that is revealed through Scripture.

Another point of interest in this text is Thomas's consideration of the plurality of the literal sense as a *proprium*. While precisely how he is using the word *proprium* is not definite—in the logic of Thomas's day the term usually admitted of four uses⁴⁶—Thomas apparently means that this plurality is found only in sacred Scripture, as is the spiritual sense, though neither is to be found in every passage. But this can only be a guess.⁴⁷ At any rate it seems clear that, if this property

43. *Lect. super Sent.* [Rome] 1.pro.4 ad 3, Lincoln College lat. 95, f. 5r.

44. *De potentia* 4.1.

45. See *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2 and *Summa theol.* 1.32.4.

46. See, for instance, Peter of Spain *Summule logicales* 2, ed. Lambertus M. de Rijk (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1972), p. 22.

47. Why not, say, in the fourth and most proper way listed by Peter of Spain? Might this not attest all the more to the dignity of Scripture? If this were Thomas's meaning, then it would seem that each and every literal passage of Scripture would

of many literal senses is found only in sacred Scripture, then this must be because of the breadth of its divine authorship, to which Thomas makes constant reference when he speaks of the all-encompassing grasp of the Holy Spirit's knowledge.

Thomas does not say here, as he did in the *De potentia*, that the Holy Spirit could have communicated its fuller knowledge to the human author, who could then have known and intended many meanings when writing the text. But Aquinas does not deny the *De potentia*'s teaching either. Either way, he repeats here the more important contention about the fullness of the Holy Spirit's knowledge, which makes possible the human author's knowing and intending many meanings. Given that the *De potentia* is a finished product of Thomas's public teaching, while this text is an unfinished report of elementary classroom teaching, the absence of one element from the present text need not be telling.

SUMMA THEOLOGIAE

Our survey of the texts in which Thomas speaks of a multiplicity of the literal sense comes to a close with a consideration of the text in the *prima pars* of the *Summa theologiae*. This text is found in the determination of 1.10, an article devoted to the senses of Scripture. Thomas does think, of course, that there are four senses to Scripture, one literal and the other three spiritual, and he begins his response with the now-standard answer that God is the author of sacred Scripture. God's power is such that God is able not only to make words signify things, as human beings can do, but also make the things signified through words further signify other things. Thomas follows all this with a description first of the literal sense and

be subject to this plurality, and so none would have an indubitable meaning. Perhaps there is an analogy here with Thomas's denial that scriptural exposition must always be done according to all four senses, the one literal and the three spiritual. See *De quolibet* 7 6.2 ad 4: "dicendum quod quatuor isti sensus [unus litteralis et tres spirituales] non attribuuntur sacrae Scripturae, ut in qualibet eius parte sit in istis quatuor sensibus exponenda; sed quandoque istis quatuor, quandoque tribus, quandoque duobus, quandoque uno tantum." Perhaps, for like reason, if Scripture does admit in some places of many literal senses, it need not be the case that each and every passage of Scripture be read according to many literal senses.

then of the three spiritual senses that depend on the literal sense. But after describing the manifold possibilities of the spiritual senses, Thomas returns to the literal sense and adds a clarification. "Quia vero sensus litteralis est, quem auctor intendit; auctor autem Sacrae Scripturae Deus est, qui omnia simul suo intellectu comprehendit; non est inconueniens, ut dicit Augustinus XII Confess., si etiam secundum litteralem sensum in una littera Scripturae plures sint sensus."⁴⁸ Here, as in both the Roman commentary and the *De potentia*, Thomas makes reference to the knowledge of God, who comprehends all things at once in God's understanding, when he stresses the divine authorship of Scripture. He does not point out here, as he did in both the *De potentia* and the Roman commentary, that the Holy Spirit has already understood whatever truth might be said about Scripture, but the phrase "qui omnia simul suo intellectu comprehendit" serves that function here. The phrase also seems to provide one of the terms for what seems to be a suppressed premise, namely, that whatever truth can be found in Scripture, God intends. Thomas invokes, for the second time, the authority of a passage from Augustine's *Confessions* that speaks explicitly of a plurality of the literal sense of Scripture.⁴⁹

Some might be hesitant to say that Thomas is holding here for a multiplicity of the literal sense, but both his argument and his citation of Augustine seem to show that he does. His brief presentation of the literal sense at the outset of his response is not contradicted by this clarification, for that presentation did not claim that the literal sense must be one, and one only.⁵⁰ In addition, Thomas's placement of this

48. *Summa theol.* 1.1.10.

49. Thomas had invoked Augustine in the Roman commentary; see *Lectura super Sent.* [Rome] 1.pro.4 ad 3, f. 5r. The source is *Confessiones* 12.31.42, ed. L. Verheijen, CCSL 27/1/1 (Turnholt: Brepols, 1981), p. 240, lines 1–7. Note how Thomas's text from the *De potentia* recalls Augustine's "per quem deus unus sacras litteras vera et diversa visuris multorum sensibus temperavit." Compare *De potentia* 4.1, "hoc esse diuinitus concessum, ut diversa vera, quae homines possent intelligere, ipsi cognoscerent."

50. Note, however, that shortly after his response Thomas does refer to the literal sense as "one." In responding to the article's first difficulty, which had argued that many senses in Scripture would breed falsehood, Thomas maintains that Scripture does not produce confusion when understood in his way, since all the other senses are based upon one, namely, the literal sense, from which alone argumentation can be taken (*Summa theol.* 1.1.10 ad 1). But Thomas's argument here simply seems to

clarification at the end of the response makes sense only if it is seen as taking the discussion of multiplicity found in the spiritual senses and applying it to the literal sense as well. When read in light of the two previous texts from the *De potentia* and the Roman Commentary on Sentences 1, with which it is roughly contemporary, this text from the *Summa theologiae* seems to bear witness to a teaching that is by now firmly rooted in Thomas's mind.

The straightforward reading of Thomas's texts indicates that he holds a doctrine of the possibility of there being a plurality of the literal sense of sacred Scripture, and, when his texts are read with sensitivity to the doctrinal issues under discussion, to the authorities he invoked, and to their context and purpose, this conclusion, while raising other questions, cannot be avoided. But while no problems arise by accepting this doctrine from a textual point of view, Thomas's teaching would seem, perhaps, to lead to other problems, problems that have prevented others of his interpreters from accepting the claims made here. Would not Thomas's teaching that it is possible that there be many literal senses lead to the very difficulty envisaged by Spicq, namely, that such an introduction of many literal senses would leave theology without a sure basis?⁵¹ This ominous claim makes sense if one thinks that the only alternative to the universally negative proposition, "There is no scriptural passage subject to a multiplicity of the literal sense," is its contrary, "Every scriptural passage is subject to a multiplicity of the literal sense." If this were true, then indeed no scriptural passage would have an indubitable literal meaning, and thus the theologian, who can argue only from the literal sense, would have no sure basis on which to argue. But of course there is a middle ground.

The acceptance of the proposition "Some scriptural passage is subject to a multiplicity of the literal sense" does not commit one to the view that each and every scriptural passage is subject to a multiplicity of the literal sense. Thomas nowhere insists that such is the case. The very fact that the question of the multiplicity of the

be setting the literal sense off from the other three senses with regard to its doctrinal authority, contrasting the one literal sense with the three spiritual senses. The text is not claiming that within the literal sense there is only one sense. That is why Thomas closes his response to the difficulty with the claim that whatever pertains directly to faith is found according to the literal sense somewhere in Scripture explicitly.

51. Spicq, *Esquisse*, p. 279.

literal sense arises only in connection with Genesis 1:2 should serve to indicate that Thomas's use of the notion of multiplicity is for the purpose of explaining the question at hand; he is not out to make assertions that pertain to the entirety of sacred Scripture.⁵²

Still, Spicq has a point. If a particular passage of Scripture is subject to many literal senses, then that passage's literal meaning will not be certain. Does this present a problem? I do not think so. Clearly not every passage in Scripture, however inspired it might be, is of equal importance to the substance of faith.⁵³ In the Gospel according to John (10:30) Jesus says, "The Father and I are One." Does this not have more to do with the substance of faith than the cause of Tobit's blindness (Tobit 2:10)? And yet both are communicated to the believer by the literal sense of inspired Scripture. Similarly, the importance of Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth," would seem, to Thomas's mind, to overshadow the importance of Genesis 1:2, "and the earth was without form and void." That God is the creator of all things is more important to the substance of faith than how God created—however interesting and beautiful that might be. Thomas's point in all of this is clear from his claim that "everything necessary to salvation is contained explicitly somewhere in the literal sense of Scripture."⁵⁴

Given that Thomas does have a doctrine of a multiplicity of the literal sense, to what end would he see it ordered? He does not say what the end would be, but he has left us a clue. In the key text from the *De potentia*, he points out that an individual who discovers a truth in the words of Scripture would marvel at the discovery.⁵⁵ If someone should have cause for marvel in his or her investigations into certain obscure scriptural passages—and if through diligent study of those passages should come to study Scripture more and more, and

52. Note also that in the very last line of Thomas's text from *Summa theol.* 1.1.10, he says that there is nothing inappropriate in there being many senses of the literal sense "in one letter" (*in una littera*) of Scripture, which could possibly mean "in one text," or "in a passage," of sacred Scripture.

53. Thus Thomas makes a distinction between those things that pertain *per se* to faith, and those that pertain *per accidens*. See *Super Sent.* 2.12.1.2; and *Summa theol.* 1.32.4 and 2-2.1.6 ad 1.

54. *Summa theol.* 1.1.10 ad 1.

55. *De potentia* 4.1.

love God more and more—then is not God drawing that someone to God, which is the final cause of Scripture? Thomas does not say, but one doubts that he would quibble here.⁵⁶

But since Thomas does hold the doctrine of the plurality of the literal sense of Scripture it is important and perhaps perplexing to note that he does not seem to invoke the doctrine when he is actually engaged in scriptural exegesis. Having to date examined his expositions on Job, the Gospel of John, the letters of Paul, and the psalms, I have not encountered the doctrine. One will see Thomas on occasion suggest that one or another interpretation of a passage is better. But one does not find him saying, at least in these expositions, that one interpretation and another are both true and that both are the intended meanings of the Holy Spirit or of the human author, which was the significant claim made in the *De potentia*.

It may be, in the end, that Thomas holds the doctrine for reasons that arise largely from his intellectual context. Significant authorities in medieval theology, Ambrose, Augustine, Basil, and Gregory of Nyssa disagreed on Scripture's meaning with regard to the order of creation, though their various interpretations, to Thomas's mind, preserve both the truth of faith regarding the fact of creation and the text and context of Genesis 1:2. Augustine himself says explicitly that the divine author of Scripture can intend more than one meaning in a passage of Scripture. And Thomas's own presentation of scriptural inspiration is quite at home with the possibility of the human author's having known and intended, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, many diverse meanings in one text of the Scripture. Given such doctrinal circumstances, it is easy to see how Thomas can assert the doctrine of plurality.

All this is not to suggest that Thomas arrived at the doctrine in order to harmonize the cacophony of patristic voices regarding a particular passage in Scripture, for the authority of the Fathers, while significant, need not be saved at all costs.⁵⁷ It would be odd for Thomas to construct a new doctrine of biblical meaning in order

56. One finds the general tenor of this thinking in Thomas's defense of the use of metaphor and *verba obscura* in sacred Scripture. See, for example, *Super Boethii De Trin.* 2.4, ed. B. Decker, 2d ed. (Leiden: Brill, 1965), p. 100; and *Summa theol.* 1.1.9 ad 2.

57. *Summa theol.* 1.1.8 ad 2 and 2-2.10.12.

to save the authority of the Fathers in a matter that he consistently regards as being of secondary importance. I would, rather, suggest that Thomas's teaching of the possibility of the plurality of the literal sense of Scripture is to his mind a faithful application of the teaching of Augustine and even Jerome. In Thomas's own hands, it becomes an instrument used to explain that a legitimate diversity in theological understanding could well be the intention of the Holy Spirit and even of the Spirit's instrument, the human author of Scripture.