




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Beyond text to God: Bonaventure's transformation of exegetical method from his *Breviloquium* to *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* (1257–1259)

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## Abstract

In 1257, the election of Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1217–1274) as leader of the Franciscan Order thrust him from the regulated world of academia into the polarised world of the Order. In his *Breviloquium*, completed just after his transition from a scholastic to an administrative and pastoral role, exegesis was mainly a form of intellectual contemplation mediated by Scripture. In his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, completed in 1259, exegesis became a form of contemplative encounter with the textual origin, Christ. This transformation of exegetical method in response to changing contexts and audiences manifests a different way of relating to Scripture.

**Keywords:** Bonaventure; *Breviloquium*; hermeneutical transformation; *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*; *sapientia*

Scholarship that seeks to transform its surrounding culture is typically more the exception than the rule. In some instances, the institutionalisation and specialisation of knowledge mean that research endeavour focuses on fulfilling the norms of a scholarly community or discipline rather than revolutionising ways of thinking beyond the academic world. Some disciplines foster a form of discourse more oriented to academic issues, but with less emphasis on their practical and transformational significance. Nevertheless, exceptions have arisen over the course of intellectual history. One such exceptional individual was Bonaventure of Bagnoregio (c. 1217–1274), a Franciscan scholastic at the University of Paris and an ecclesiastical administrator of the Order of Friars Minor in the thirteenth century Latin West.<sup>1</sup> Much has been written about Bonaventure's marriage of the

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<sup>1</sup>The date of birth and other key events in Bonaventure's chronology have yet to be established. For the different authoritative perspectives, see John F. Quinn, 'Chronology of St. Bonaventure (1217–1274)', *Franciscan Studies* 32 (1972), pp. 168–86; Jay M. Hammond, 'Dating Bonaventure's Inception as Regent' © The Author(s), 2024. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

terminological precision of the scholastics with the mystical immediacy of Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226), founder of the Franciscan Order. Yet, the methodological nuance and specificity arising from Bonaventure's own contextual situation is less understood.

Bonaventure was compelled by the demands of diversifying contexts and audiences to forge a more compelling connection between the theory and practice of his innovative reading of Scripture. I argue that Bonaventure's need to communicate with expanding audiences and resolve tensions within the Franciscan Order led him to foster a more practical way of reading Scripture in terms of Christ as concretised and personalised subject of contemplative encounter. I examine the utility and meaning of Bonaventure's synthesis, not in monolithic terms, but as the specific product of an evolutionary process from 1257 to 1259. His *Breviloquium* was completed just after a critical transition in his career when he was elected Minister General in 1257. In this theological handbook, exegesis was mainly a form of intellectual contemplation mediated by Scripture. Two years into his generalate in 1259, in his mystical treatise *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, exegesis became a form of contemplative encounter with Christ, the textual origin. His changing ways of reading, constituted differently in different contexts to serve different ends and audiences, manifested a different order of relation to Christ, who is Scripture's source. Lastly, I explore what can be learnt methodologically from Bonaventure's exegetical journey.

### Bonaventure's scholastic formation in the Franciscan school

In 1243, having previously finished six years of 'liberal arts' at the University of Paris, Bonaventure entered the Franciscan Order. Over the next ten years, he pursued studies in theology and Sacred Scripture at its prestigious Convent of the Cordeliers. During his first two years of studies, Bonaventure came under the tutelage of the influential regent master Alexander of Hales (c. 1185–1245). Earlier in 1236, Alexander had assumed the Franciscan habit after fifteen or sixteen years as a distinguished secular theologian. Well-regarded by both secular religious and mendicant friars, Alexander was also an innovator of theological methodology based on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard (c. 1100–1160). Alexander's *Glossa in quatuor libros sententiarum Petri Lombardi* was a compilation of his lectures on Lombard's *Sentences* delivered between 1220 and 1227. Alexander had instituted Lombard's *Sentences* as a supplementary textbook to the Bible at the university and later as an assessment tool at the Franciscan school.<sup>2</sup> Despite having joined the Friars Minor late in life at fifty-one in 1236, Alexander's major contribution was the *Summa fratris Alexandri*. This massive text was initiated

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Master', *Franciscan Studies* 67 (2009), pp. 179–226; Maarten van de Heijden and Bert Roest, 'Franciscan Authors, 13th–18th Century: A Catalogue in Progress', (2019). <http://users.bart.nl/~roestb/franciscan/>. 'Bonaventura de Bagnorea (Bonaventura da Bagnoregio/Johannes Fianza/Giovanni Fianza, ca. 1217–1274), sanctus'. For Bonaventure's life and works, see Jacques-Guy Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure*, trans. José de Vinck (Paterson, NJ: St Anthony's Guild, 1964), pp. 171–77; Marianne Schlosser, 'Bonaventure: Life and Works', trans. Angelica Kliem, in Jay M. Hammond, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and Jared Goff (eds), *A Companion to Bonaventure* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 9–60.

<sup>2</sup>For Alexander's institution of the *Sentences* as a permanent feature of theological education since the 1220s, see Nancy Spatz, 'Approaches and Attitudes to a New Theological Textbook: The *Sentences* of Peter Lombard', in Nancy Elizabeth Van Deusen (ed.), *The Intellectual Climate of the Early University: Essays in Honor of Otto Grundler* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), pp. 27–52; Philipp W. Rosemann, *The Story of a Great Medieval Book: Peter Lombard's Sentences* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 2007), pp. 60–70; Philipp W. Rosemann, 'Conclusion: The Tradition of the *Sentences*', in Philipp W. Rosemann (ed.), *Mediaeval Commentaries on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 496–8.

in collaboration with his leading disciple John of La Rochelle (c. 1190–1245). Its multiple authorship is evident from the significant contributions made before and after their deaths in 1245, by William of Middleton and other Franciscans. However, it was likely left uncompleted due to William's death in 1260.<sup>3</sup> Also known as *Summa universae theologiae* or *Summa halensis*, it became a standard pedagogical tool for Bonaventure and other theology students.<sup>4</sup> The *Summa* shaped an original synthesis, combining experiential reading of Scripture of the fathers and twelfth-century monastics with the speculative rigour of Aristotle. Since the early 1200s in the Latin West, a new form of Aristotelian science in theological method had emerged; its use was catalysed by the rediscovery of certain Aristotelian philosophical writings through Islamic commentators such as Avicenna (980–1037) and Averroës (c. 1126–1198).<sup>5</sup> The *Summa* demonstrated how the new Aristotelian learning could be used in conjunction with traditional exegetical methods to serve a positive theological end.<sup>6</sup> The innovations of the Alexandrine scholastic tradition would inspire Bonaventure and other scholars.

It is conceivable that the young scholar Bonaventure had to prove his worth to the wider university community and to his fellow Franciscan scholastics, particularly those conservative elites who considered themselves 'faithful disciples' and guardians of the consolidated intellectual vision inherited from Alexander – the 'Irrefutable Teacher' (*Doctor irrefragibilis*) and 'Teacher of Teachers' (*Doctor doctorum*).<sup>7</sup> As early as the 1250s, just a few years after Alexander's death, Bonaventure had started to hone his own intellectual voice. Evolving his own synthesis in unity and difference from the strictly analytical Alexandrine approach, Bonaventure was beginning to develop a more personal and experiential approach to encountering Christ in Scripture. This divergence is evident in Bonaventure's major scholastic work completed in 1253, his *Commentary on the Sentences*. For example, Bonaventure posits that the 'gift of wisdom [*sapientia*] is partly cognitive, and partly affective, since it might be begun in cognition and consummated in affection...'<sup>8</sup> The divine gift of *sapientia* is actualised through a

<sup>3</sup>Victorin Doucet, 'Prolegomena in librum III necnon in libros I et II "Summae fratris Alexandri"', in *Alexandri de Hales Summa Theologica* (Quaracchi: Collegii S. Bonaventurae, 1948), vol. 4, pp. 306, 360–61, 367; Victorin Doucet, 'The History of the Problem of the Authenticity of the *Summa*', *Franciscan Studies* 7 (1947), pp. 26–41, 274–312; Ignatius Brady, 'The *Summa Theologica* of Alexander of Hales: (1924–1948)', *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 70 (1977), pp. 437–47; Hubert Philipp Weber, 'Alexander of Hales's Theology in His Authentic Texts (Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard, Various Disputed Questions)', in Michael Robson (ed.), *The English Province of the Franciscans (1224–c1350)* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), pp. 275, 289–93.

<sup>4</sup>For Alexander's life and works, see Christopher M. Cullen, 'Alexander of Hales', in Jorge J. E. Garcia and Timothy B. Noone (eds), *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 104–08.

<sup>5</sup>Hastings Rashdall, *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), esp. pp. 37–9. For the influence of Islamic scholarship on the Aristotelian heritage of the Latin West, see George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981), pp. 224–70; Cristina D'Ancona, 'Greek into Arabic: Neoplatonism in Translation', in Peter Adamson and Richard C. Taylor (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy* (Cambridge: CUP, 2006), pp. 10–31.

<sup>6</sup>Lydia Schumacher, ed. *The Summa Halensis: Sources and Context* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 1–7; Lydia Schumacher, *Early Franciscan Theology: Between Authority and Innovation* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019).

<sup>7</sup>Robert Prentice, 'The *De Fontibus paradisi* of Alexander IV on the *Summa Theologica* of Alexander of Hales', *Franciscan Studies* 5 (1945), pp. 349–52; Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure*, p. 18.

<sup>8</sup>Bonaventure, *Commentarius in quatuor libros Sententiarum*, 3:774 (bk. 3, d. 35, a. 1, q. 1, concl.): '... actus doni sapientiae partim est cognitivus, et partim est affectivus: ita quod in cognitione inchoatur et in

total abiding in God, and not through abstraction from the things of sense as in the Alexandrine *Summa*.<sup>9</sup> Bonaventure apprehends God in reality (through the totality of an experience) instead of abstracting a notion of God in things (as through an intellectual medium).<sup>10</sup> In his later *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure likewise defines *sapientia* as ‘perfect wisdom’ or the mystical knowledge of divine goodness, integrating theological speculation and practical knowledge in light of their proper end, that is conformity with Christ.<sup>11</sup> This shows that Bonaventure was developing his nascent synthesis of Christ and *sapientia* as the basis for a practical approach to issues of gospel living.

After 1257, as Minister General, Bonaventure continued to distinguish himself by his prolific literary output. He would develop a new approach to Franciscan identity and vocation (*vita*) modelled on biblical *sapientia*, particularly in response to the prevailing conflict with the seculars at Paris and the internal conflict over the Franciscan *vita*. Bonaventure would justify the Franciscan way of life to his confreres and their antagonists, as seen in his *Breviloquium*. Completed just after his transition from a scholastic to an administrative and pastoral role, this liminal text had a hybrid exegesis that integrated Franciscan mystical experience within the doctrinal structures of the Alexandrine tradition. By the time of the *Itinerarium* in 1259, Bonaventure had transcended the scholastic method to enact his synthesis for the edification of the friar ministers in his Order. As Jacques-Guy Bougerol attested, Bonaventure had ‘been able during these two years to develop and control even more fully the theological synthesis already elaborated, assimilating it both by reflection and by experience’.<sup>12</sup>

### Understanding experience *qua* text: the *Breviloquium*

Between 1243 and 1257, while studying and teaching at the Franciscan school, Bonaventure had encountered the growing conflict over the right dispensation of the Order’s *vita*. Since the death of Francis in 1226, the Order’s increasing engagement with scholastic learning had raised concern among some *zelanti* and other reformers. They believed that the Order was too oriented to institutions of worldly power to safeguard the Franciscan ideals of *humilitas* and *simplicitas*.<sup>13</sup> This concern was powerfully

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*affectione consummatur...*’ (trans. mine). Book 3 of Bonaventure’s *Sentences* commentary has yet to be translated in its entirety.

<sup>9</sup>See *Alexandri de Hales Summa Theologica*, vol. 1, Tr Int, q. 2, m. 3, ch. 4, *ad objecta* 3 (n. 23), 35–36.

<sup>10</sup>Bonaventure’s explicit use of Alexandrine terminology to set out his own position indicated certain reservations with Alexandrine doctrines. This led certain of his peers to accuse him of departing from the Alexandrine doctrinal fold to the point that Bonaventure had to defend himself and assure them of his orthodoxy. See his *Praelocutio* to Book 2 of his *Sentences* commentary. Fedele da Fanna, *Ratio novae collectionis operum omnium S. Bonaventurae sive editorum sive anecdotorum* (Turin: Marietti, 1874); Pietro Maranesi, ‘The *Opera omnia* of Saint Bonaventure: History and Present Situation’, in Jay M. Hammond, J. A. Wayne Hellmann and Jared Goff (eds), *A Companion to Bonaventure* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), p. 66; Ignatius Brady, ‘The Edition of the *Opera omnia* of Saint Bonaventure (1882–1902)’, *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 70 (1977), pp. 367–70; Matthew T. Beckmann, ‘Bonaventure and Alexander: Friend or Foe?’, in Michael Cusato and Steven J. McMichael (eds), ‘*Non enim fuerat Evangelii surdus auditor...*’ (1 Celano 22): *Essays in Honor of Michael W. Blicstic, O.F.M. on the Occasion of his 70th Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 389–90.

<sup>11</sup>Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, trans. Dominic Monti, *Works of St. Bonaventure*, vol. 9 (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2005), pt. 1, ch. 1, n. 1–4, 27–29.

<sup>12</sup>Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure*, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup>See John Moorman, *A History of the Franciscan Order: From its Origins to the Year 1517* (Oxford: OUP, 1968).

evoked in the poetic ‘catch-cry’ of the *zelanto* Franciscan poet Jacopone da Todi (d. 1306): ‘In sorrow and grief I see Paris demolish Assisi, stone by stone./With all their theology they’ve led the Order down a crooked path’.<sup>14</sup> These *zelanti* wished to strictly observe Francis’ Spirit-led way, whereas their clerically trained brothers wished to inculcate institutional structures in the Order.

Perhaps due to the ensuing uncertainties over the dispensation of the Franciscan life, it was apparent to Bonaventure that the theological and spiritual formation of novices needed a more normative structure of implementation to reliably equip them for ministry. In his *Breviloquium*, he used his synthetic skills to refine a sure theological and methodological foundation for the Order. This concise but powerful handbook of Franciscan theology proved to be more useful in the field of Franciscan ministry than the Alexandrine *Summa*, with its prolix and technical idiom and series of disputations on philosophical topics far removed from the realm of everyday experience. The Minister General, now writing for a bigger audience within and beyond the university, had to satisfy the ministry needs of his itinerant friars as well as the pedagogical demands of the Franciscan teachers and students. He deployed a hybrid exegesis that progressed beyond the Alexandrine scholastic framework by incorporating the dynamic and living character of Franciscan mystical experience. The *Breviloquium*’s general method of presentation revealed a certain liminality in Bonaventure’s thinking and habituation – a clear sign that he had one eye on what he could retrieve from his scholastic past and the other on what he could produce for the Order’s future. This ‘transitional’ or ‘borderline text’ occupied a ‘pivotal position’ straddling Bonaventure’s time as a scholastic before 1257 and his time as a pastoral and an administrative leader from 1257 onwards.<sup>15</sup>

The *Breviloquium* represents a methodological advance on Bonaventure’s *Sentences* commentary and other works completed before 1257. He proceeds beyond the alternation of premises and conclusions typical of scholastic dialectical exegesis to what Stephen Brown calls ‘the permutation of semantic properties’.<sup>16</sup> Driven by a pedagogical need to summarise the synthesis of Franciscan theology for his students, Bonaventure innovates hermeneutically in a way that fosters a deeper logical penetration of the form of scriptural or mystical experience. The formative authority in his exegetical reshaping is the dogmatic metaphysician Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), whose concept of the *rationes necessariae* enabled Bonaventure to penetrate logically the matters of faith in Scripture.<sup>17</sup> Philosophical reasoning, far from being used to

<sup>14</sup>Jacopone da Todi, *Jacopone da Todi: The Lauds*, trans. Serge Hughes and Elizabeth Hughes (London: SPCK, 1982), p. 123; George T. Peck, *The Fool of God: Jacopone da Todi* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1980), p. 102; Michael F. Cusato, ‘Who Destroyed Assisi?: The Lament of Jacopone da Todi’, in Patrick Zutshi and Michael Robson (eds), *The Franciscan Order in the Medieval English Province and Beyond* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2018), pp. 229–54, esp. p. 245.

<sup>15</sup>Emmanuel Falque, *Saint Bonaventure and the Entrance of God into Theology*, trans. Brian Lapsa and Sarah Horton (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2018), p. lviii; Dominic Monti, ‘Introduction’, in *Breviloquium* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2005), p. xv.

<sup>16</sup>Stephen F. Brown, ‘The Intellectual Context of Later Medieval Philosophy: Universities, Aristotle, Arts, Theology’, in John Marenbon (ed.), *Medieval Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 133.

<sup>17</sup>For Bonaventure as for Anselm, the divine Word as regulative idea gives the intrinsic connection between what is said and what is. Sigurd Baark, ‘Anselm: Platonism, Language and Truth in *Proslogion*’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63/4 (2010), pp. 382–4; Marcia L. Colish, *The Mirror of Language: A Study in the Medieval Theory of Knowledge* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 112–3; Jacques-Guy Bougerol, ‘The Church Fathers and *Auctoritates* in Scholastic Theology to Bonaventure’, in

establish the truth of articles of the faith by certain proofs or arguments, is simply pressed into the service of making intelligible what is already disclosed in faith. Bonaventure thereby sums up the method of his inquiry:

Because theology is, indeed, discourse about God and about the First Principle, as the highest science and doctrine it should resolve everything in God as its first and supreme principle. That is why, in giving the reasons for everything contained in this little work or tract, I have attempted to derive each reason from the First Principle, in order to demonstrate that the truth of Sacred Scripture is from God, that it treats of God, is according to God, and has God as its end. It will be seen, therefore, that this science has true unity and order, and that it is not improperly called theology.<sup>18</sup>

Theology is cognised in, with, from and for God. It is not thinking from a standpoint outside the divine self-revealing, but a specular reflection on the mystery of God from within his revelation. This fusing of mystical immediacy with scholastic rationality sums up Bonaventure's hybrid exegesis during this liminal phase of his hermeneutical journey.

The *Breviloquium* is a doctrinal treatise that does not operate by rational demonstration of proof. 'It is based on Scripture, and Scripture is based on divine authority'.<sup>19</sup> In his earlier *Sentences* commentary, the starting point of Bonaventure's exegesis is the *quaestio*, which configures understanding on the meta-level of doctrine. He follows the dialectical method modelled by Lombard's *Sentences* in using Scripture as a point of departure for the logical resolution of philosophical problems. This scholastic tendency of reading the biblical text according to *quaestiones* means that the order of exegetical inquiry is shaped by the reader's direction in the tradition rather than by the biblical text itself. Since Scripture is always referred back to an ulterior discourse, it becomes merely a proof-text for a reader's line of argumentation that is otherwise extrinsic to scriptural concerns. The scholastic does not find it necessary to know scriptural reality *per se*, but the ways in which scriptural reality can interpret, interrogate and inform its various significations in the tradition. Now, in his *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure transcends from using experience to interpret the discourse about the biblical text to understanding the text of experience itself. It is a more direct assumption of mystical experience *qua* text that goes beyond the meta-understanding of the *quaestio*. Following Anselm, Bonaventure approaches the analysis of Scripture and the Triune God that it mediates, in terms of 'the exact relation at a literal level between the word or expression and what it designates'.<sup>20</sup> Bonaventure thus employs a uniquely hybrid exegesis.

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Irena Backus (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), pp. 319–22.

<sup>18</sup>Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, *Opera omnia*, 5:208: *Quia vero theologia sermo est de Deo et de primo principio, utpote quia ipsa tanquam scientia et doctrina altissima omnia resolvit in Deum tanquam in principium primum et summum: ideo in assignatione rationum in omnibus, quae in hoc toto opusculo vel tractatulo continentur, conatus sum rationem sumere a primo principio, ut sic ostenderem, veritatem sacrae Scripturae esse a Deo, de Deo, secundum Deum et propter Deum, ut merito ista scientia appareat una esse et ordinata et theologia non immerito nuncupata.* See also Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, prol., s. 6, n. 5, pp. 22–3.

<sup>19</sup>Stephen F. Brown, 'The Theological Context: Reflections on the Method of Bonaventure's *Breviloquium*', in Dominic Monti and Katherine Wrisley Shelby (eds), *Bonaventure Revisited: Companion to the Breviloquium* (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 2017), p. 22.

<sup>20</sup>Gillian R. Evans, *The Language and Logic of the Bible: The Earlier Middle Ages* (Cambridge: CUP, 1984), pp. 17–26, esp. p. 22.

Bonaventure's developing focus and method are manifest in his treatment of the threefold way of being-in-God: 'All creatures...may be referred to their Creator in three ways: namely, as the principle who creates them, the end who motivates them, or the gift who dwells within them'. This 'triple vision' is the object of a threefold faculty of the human individual circumscribed by Hugh of Saint Victor (1096–1141). Hugh's notion of a 'triple eye' encompasses 'the eye of flesh, the eye of reason, and the eye of contemplation'.<sup>21</sup> Bonaventure extends Hugh's sacramental approach to theology as follows:

Now, a creature cannot have God as its origin without being configured to that principle in accordance with unity, truth, and goodness. Nor can it have God as its object if it does not grasp God through memory, understanding, and will. Finally, it cannot possess God within itself as an infused gift without being conformed to God through the three-fold dowry of faith, hope, and love.<sup>22</sup>

What prevails is no longer the scriptural validation of theological arguments, but the experiential cogency of Scripture. Bonaventure observes the special conditions or qualities of divine influence on the creature. He concludes that things caused by God are unified, whole and aptly purposed in God. How does Bonaventure come to this conclusion? He understands from Christian mystical experience that the soul 'has' God when its intention, understanding and manner of operation are like those of Christ. Thereby, the soul focuses its whole vision, orders its whole understanding and conforms its whole way of being-in-the-world to Christ. This existential unity arising from single-minded devotion to a transcendent centre and source of meaning ensues in an integrative mode-of-being that is effectual in obtaining this centre. Having observed reflexively the intrinsic causal chain of spiritual origination, internal realisation and outward embodiment, Bonaventure is able to register this causal nexus on the speculative plane.

Bonaventure's explanatory mode of scriptural exegesis tends towards a certain spatiality. Scriptural reality is a 'machine' dissected rather than a living, breathing organism listened to, seen and touched. In being fundamentally controlled by the text, Bonaventure's scholastic exegesis tends towards a certain interpretive fixity. Meaning is fixed and vested in text. In other words, what is being contemplated is not God himself manifest in his living address through the biblical medium, but the experience itself. Such interpretation focuses on conceptualising meaning-relations intrinsic to the texts of Scripture and experience, rather than on literally embodying the words and the realities these words signify. However, it appears that Bonaventure is eager to pass beyond this rigid scholastic formality, insofar as his commitment to a symbolic level of theology invests his theological speculations with a certain descriptivity. Significantly, it is a proposition of *experience* that is verified and registered at the level of experience – but a

<sup>21</sup>Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, pt. 2, ch. 12, n. 2, pp. 96–7; n. 5, p. 98; Also see Hugh of St. Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith (De Sacramentis)*, trans. Roy Deferrari (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America Publications, 1951), bk. 1, pt. 10, ch. 2, p. 167.

<sup>22</sup>Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, *Opera omnia*, 5:230: *Et quoniam creatura habere non potest Deum sicut principium, quin configuretur ei secundum unitatem, veritatem et bonitatem; nec Deum sicut obiectum, quin eum capiat per memoriam, intelligentiam et voluntatem; nec Deum sicut donum infusum, quin configuretur ei per fidem, spem et caritatem, seu triplicitem dotem*. See also Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, pt. 2, ch. 12, n. 3, p. 97.

proposition nonetheless. The hermeneutical implication is that the biblical experience *qua* text, rather than God himself, is the actual subject of Bonaventure's hybrid exegesis.

Bonaventure's concise theological guide used experience merely to witness the necessary causal connection between things on the intellectual level without an eventual re-manifestation on the level of life. In 1257, transitioning from a purely academic environment to the wider world of the Order with its practical and pastoral needs, Bonaventure had begun to move beyond the literal understanding of scriptural experience to mystical enactment. His later writings, such as the *Itinerarium*, brought out the performative potential of his synthesis. Completed in 1259, Bonaventure's first major mystical treatise used concrete, programmatic steps to demonstrate how this understanding can be practically manifested by the soul. The entire synthesis was transposed from the speculative to the performative plane, with a deeper initiation in sacramental experience as the source, model and medium of the *sensus plenior*.

### Beyond text to God: mystical enactment in the *Itinerarium*

Bonaventure's assumption of the generalate in 1257 thrust him from the regulated world of academia into the polarised environment of the Order. Responding to different contexts and audiences gave the Minister General impetus to foster a new form of scriptural reading. Before 1257, writing for a primarily academic audience, Bonaventure was professionally bound to observe the dialectical mode. The scholastic approach to reading Scripture involved the pursuit of formal correspondences between life and biblical text. By inferring causal relations from the meaning-relations between words on the textual level, a productive intellectual system could be built up using classifications extrinsic to the original subject of exegesis. Such alienating distantiation was not congenial to the demands of practical ministry. Friar ministers had to respond urgently to the practical and spiritual needs of others, demanding a form of mystical immediacy foreign to the scholastic practice of abstractive contemplation. After 1257, Bonaventure's methodological transformation would prove significant to those less concerned with scholastic abstractions and more interested, by necessity, with the everyday experience of faith. Bonaventure's mystical-experiential transformation of his earlier scholastic synthesis was part of an effort to authoritatively re-interpret the Franciscan tradition and erect norms of spiritual life and interpretation.

In his effort to unify the Order, Bonaventure had to deal with a long-standing tension between the idealisation of Francis' Spirit-led way of absolute poverty and its practical realisation in the context of the expanding Order's organisational needs. At one extreme were those friars who clung to Francis' simple literal obedience to the gospel, independently of an institutional intermediary. Francis' own itinerant and involved lifestyle meant that scriptural revelations were often materially enacted without much recourse to interior reflection. At the other extreme were those friars of a more clerical cast who believed that the Franciscan life required a normative institutional foundation. The Franciscan tradition over which Bonaventure had gained custody had not been able to provide any clear direction on this issue. The mystical, relational mode of life of the Order's founder was not reducible to any one human formality, with room for many interpretations about how this mode might best be temporally instituted in the Order. Bonaventure's strategy involved his own re-interpretation of the Franciscan tradition in continuity with Francis' own mystical vision. In attempting to bridge the opposing factions, Bonaventure accorded the primitive and clerical ideals a relative status as expressions or temporal institutions of the true Franciscan ideal – namely



the total, self-transcending worship of Christ as *sapientia*. In his *Itinerarium*, the Minister General made provision for both interior formation of the clericals and outward ministry of the *zelanti* as equally instrumental and institutional modes of the worship of Christ through Francis. Bonaventure uplifted the Seraphic Founder as the model and regulative principle of his performative-mystical approach to Christ or Scripture.

The *Itinerarium* distinguishes three modal dimensions within Francis' hermeneutical experience of seraphic encounter on Mount La Verna in Italy in 1224: material embodiment, interior realisation and ecstatic union in Christ. Bonaventure's threefold depiction arises from a dialogue of his scholastic synthesis with Francis' hermeneutical experience. This was mediated through the monastic *lectio divina* and mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius (fifth and sixth centuries) by way of Victorine Thomas Gallus (c. 1200–1246).<sup>23</sup> Francis enacts the truth of his relation to God, monastic *lectio divina* ponders this truth as a precursor to living it, and Pseudo-Dionysian mysticism penetrates beyond all knowledge and experience to the heart of God himself. Bonaventure synthesises these three traditions to interpret Christ in three senses:

By Scripture we are taught that we should be *purged, illumined and perfected* according to the threefold law handed down in it: the law of nature, of Scripture and of grace; or rather, according to its three principal parts: the law of Moses which *purifies*, prophetic revelation which *illumines*, and the gospel teaching which *perfects*; or especially, according to its threefold spiritual meaning: the *tropological*, which *purifies* one for an upright life; the *allegorical*, which *illumines* one for clarity of understanding; and the *anagogical*, which *perfects* through spiritual ecstasies and sweet perceptions of wisdom.<sup>24</sup> (emphasis added)

The scriptural functions, as concrete articulations of human potentiality, are meant to be understood and lived in the fullest sense. The soul apprehends things in three senses by virtue of their profundity. Firstly, the soul seeks to live things on account of their origin and seeks to be purged of all falsehood. This is the tropological. Secondly, the soul seeks to be illumined with all truth through a cleaving to the pure truth of the scriptures. This is the allegorical. Thirdly, the soul penetrates beyond all knowledge and experience to the heart of God himself. This is the anagogical, that overpowering sweetness perfecting understanding. The soul personally cleaves to Christ through this threefold action: loving deeds – what the soul does in returning with Christ to

<sup>23</sup>Boyd Taylor Coolman, 'The Medieval Affective Dionysian Tradition', in Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang (eds), *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2011), pp. 85–102. For the mystical method of Gallus, widely considered the purest medieval representative of the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius, see Thomas Gallus, 'Extraction of the Celestial Hierarchy: Chapters I, II, XV', in A. B. Scott, A. J. Minnis and David Wallace (eds), *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism c.1100–c.1375: The Commentary-Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 173–92.

<sup>24</sup>Bonaventure, *Itinerarium*, *Opera omnia*, 5:307: ...per [Scripturam] docemur purgari, illuminari et perfici, et hoc secundum triplicem legem in ea traditam, scilicet naturae, Scripturae et gratiae; vel potius secundum triplicem eius partem principalem, legem scilicet Moysaicae purgantem, revelationem propheticae illustrantem et eruditionem evangelicam perficientem; vel potissimum secundum triplicem eius intelligentiam spiritualem: tropologicam quae purgat ad honestatem vitae; allegoricam, quae illuminat ad claritatem intelligentiae; anagogicam, quae perficit per excessus mentales et sapientiae perceptiones suavissimas... See also Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, trans. Ewert Cousins (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978), ch. 4, n. 6, p. 91.

God the Father, faithful belief – what the soul understands to be true about itself in Christ, and ecstatic union – the soul insofar as it is united with Christ.<sup>25</sup> This is a personal assimilation to Christ – a mystical-experiential orientation – rather than an interpenetrated understanding in the mind. This is contrary to both Alexandrine idealism that penetrates beyond sense experience to ideal knowledge, and to Pseudo-Dionysian mysticism that penetrates beyond experience and knowledge in the divine love without context or coordinates. Bonaventure’s synergy in the divine love of material embodiment (Franciscan exegesis), interior realisation (*lectio divina*) and ecstatic union in Christ (Pseudo-Dionysian mysticism) personalises sapiential reading to its very core and adduces a threefold context for relational theology.

Far from marking the functions of mystical experience on the speculative plane, the *Itinerarium* uses embodied writing to initiate the reader into a ‘threefold way’ in God. The Victorine structuring notion of the ‘triple eye’ of flesh, reason and contemplation, formative for Bonaventure’s analogous discussion in his earlier *Breviloquium*, is now superseded by his more performative notion of the *triplex via* in the order of Gallus or Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153).<sup>26</sup> Firstly, Bonaventure enjoins the reader to contemplate things in themselves. This is done, not by formalising the object in a scientific fashion according to the dictates of a research agenda, but by receiving the object’s reality. By means of this passive reception, the reader begins to observe how certain things originate from other things and how some things effect the movement of others. Observing all the varied connections of cause and effect between things on the physical level enlightens the reader to the intelligible structure of reality. Secondly, the reader detects certain powers within himself that parallel those found in things. This causal synthesis is compared against the divine Word as its paradigm. The words and meaning-relations of Scripture become paradigmatic of the relations observed on the physical and psychic levels. Thirdly, this conceptual understanding models what is seen on an even higher level, namely the spiritual intuition of the divine essence. The essential attributes of things such as unity, truth and goodness shine forth with especial clarity. The reader passes beyond this intuition to the encounter with God, who imparts himself to the reader in terms of deepest intimacy. At the climax of this mystical ascent, the reader goes beyond what he can intellectually grasp with his mind to being grasped by God. The reader must ‘let go’ of every pre-understanding, and rest in God alone. This ‘*itinerarium mentis in Deum*’ (*Journey of the Mind into God*) is thus akin, in the symbolic-mystical fashion of Bernard or Gallus, to ‘three days journey into the wilderness (Exodus 3:18), and to the threefold intensity of light

<sup>25</sup>Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey into God*, ch. 4, n. 1–8, pp. 87–93, esp. n. 3–4, pp. 89–91.

<sup>26</sup>In his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Bernard offers ‘three loaves’ of the biblical discourse on *sapientia*. The ‘first loaf’ – discursively embodied by Ecclesiastes – is ‘self-control’ which is an ‘antidote’ to ‘misguided love of the world’. This is the beginning of *sapientia*. The ‘second loaf’ – discursively embodied by Proverbs – is ‘enlightened reason’, which is an ‘antidote’ to ‘an excessive love of self’. This is the culmination of *sapientia*. The ‘third loaf’ – discursively embodied by the Song of Songs – is ‘endless union with God’. Turning from ‘human pursuits and worldly desires’ demands self-control; and purification of the soul demands discernment between good and evil. Breakthrough to greater intimacy in God is the natural consequence of the previous two steps. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Cantica Canticorum: Eighty-Six Sermons on the Song of Songs*, trans. Samuel J. Eales (London: Eliot Stock, 1895), homily 1, n. 2–3, 7–8. For Bonaventure’s moral-psychological notion in comparison to Bernard’s, see Ilia Delio, ‘Bonaventure and Bernard: On Human Image and Mystical Union’, *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 34/2 (1999), pp. 251–63. For Bonaventure’s theological reliance on Bernard of Clairvaux, see Bougerol, ‘The Church Fathers and *Auctoritates*’, pp. 326–9.

during a single day: The first is like evening, the second like morning, the third like noon'.<sup>27</sup> As such, signifier and signified fuse within the total horizon of God. There is no longer any outside perspective from which to view God – the human horizon becomes interior to God's own.

Such interpretive dynamism generated through the relationality of encounter with the textual subject is an innovative feature of Bonaventure's post-1257 exegesis. In his 1923 classic treatise *I and Thou*, Jewish philosopher Martin Buber points out the importance of naming God as 'Thou'; since an 'It' cannot respond by itself to the reader's call for understanding. An *It* is a construction of the reader's agenda, not an actual subject of the reader's existence, nor an authority or an agent in the reader's quest for meaning. An *It* cannot divulge itself but only what the reader determines as worthwhile or useful for his own research ends.<sup>28</sup> In the *Itinerarium*, at the apex of the mind's ascent into God, Bonaventure ceases to treat God the textual subject as an 'It' – a 'something' to be understood or explained. Instead, Bonaventure begins to address God as a 'Thou' – a 'Someone' to be experienced and answered. Bonaventure does not seek merely to explain the biblical text to others, but to truly know its divine author, registering the divine Spirit and intention through creaturely determinations. God's Word becomes no longer a mere object of understanding, but a mode of relating to its Author. As such, Bonaventure transcends the authority of the scholastic method and manifests something of Francis' exemplary experience. For Bonaventure as for Francis, love for the divine author disposes the reader to understand and live the Author's words in ways that lead him back to this Author (love actualising knowledge). This was a divergence from the Alexandrine *Summa*, in which real experience of the Author prefaced a fuller analysis of his works (faith seeking understanding). Bonaventure transcended from making connections on the purely intellectual level to responding to the words of Scripture with body and voice. This practical engagement oriented the soul in the world of meaning so that it could see God. By this stage of his hermeneutical journey, Bonaventure had focused on experiencing Christ as the embodiment of *sapientia*, instead of simply understanding Christ in terms of a speculative principle or *datum*.

### Methodological lessons from Bonaventure's exegetical journey

From 1243 to 1257, Bonaventure was professionally bound as a scholastic exegete to observe the rigid formality of Lombard's *Sentences*. In his *Sentences* commentary and other scholastic works, Bonaventure's theological explorations were marked by a conformity to the format of the *quaestio* and thus primarily borne on the meta-level of doctrine: questions such as 'How do I reconcile the role of sense and spirit within the divine horizon?' or 'What is the epistemological relation between faith and reason?' Such questions are largely extrinsic to the reality they seek to define. After his assumption of the generalate and his liberation from the 'ivory tower' in 1257, his *Breviloquium* progressed beyond the meta-understanding of his scholastic works that simply used experience to interpret the discourse about the biblical text. Instead, this liminal work interpreted the text of experience itself. Two years later, in his *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure progressed beyond this form of textual understanding to focus on the self-enactment of these principles in mystical experience. Penetrating beyond the hermeneutics of text to consider

<sup>27</sup>Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, ch. 1, n. 3, 61.

<sup>28</sup>Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2012).

the divine intentionality at its heart, he asked questions arising directly from the context of everyday relation with the (divine) Other: 'Who am I to God? Who is God to me?' Such questionings receive their pattern from the genesis of their meaning. Central to this hermeneutic mode is what Martin Buber called the 'I–Thou' relation of reader and textual subject. Buber says that the engagement or encounter with the personality behind the text precedes the determination of what is actually said. In other words, the actual is a person who can be known and encountered, and who reveals himself through the biblical medium. This is the all-defining moment in exegetical method: that a reader knows the actual by appealing to God directly, and not by ideal abstraction from the text.<sup>29</sup> The reader contemplates the object on the interior of the experience itself, in the sense that he simply receives the reality of the object and lets his understanding exude within himself. Simply being with God – loving, delighting and responding to him in the midst of the everyday – actualises the *sensus plenior* of God. In a fundamental sense, Bonaventure's hermeneutical journey exemplifies the soul's own spiritual journey in God, which turns upon the discovery of the person of Christ as *Someone* to be encountered beyond a *datum* to be known.

Considering the cultural–temporal gap between Bonaventure's age and our own, this question must be posed: What do modern readers and authors gain from understanding and enacting Bonaventure's scriptural exegesis? His exegetical innovations are applicable, not least, to our modern treatments of Scripture and other texts. Bonaventure's formality is systematic; but it is of an order that is dynamic and living, and constantly adjusted to the exegete's horizon. Accordingly, the framework of understanding arises from the exegete's experience of God as his origin and is negotiated in relation to that origin, rather than thought from a standpoint outside the experience itself. Hermeneutically, the questions the exegete poses towards Scripture are the same questions he asks of God. These are fundamental questions of human existence: 'Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?' They are answerable only in God, whose words are manifest to the exegete directly in the words of Scripture. Scripture is, for Bonaventure, not simply a conceptual bank of faith principles to be instantiated in the exegete; rather, it is a living word addressed from God to his beloved, negotiated from within the context of the exegete's own relationship with God. The doctrinal query: 'How and why does God love the sinner?' is of a different order of inquiry to the question: 'How and why does God love *me*?' The latter question transposes the biblical truth of the self-giving love of God from the doctrinal to the personal level. Systematic insight is not renounced but is simply actualised by the relationality of encounter with Christ the medium. Formal connections made on the doctrinal level only hold insofar as they have been manifested on the practical level, and thus have existential resonance for the believer.

An example is John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world, as to give his only begotten Son; that whosoever believeth in him, may not perish, but may have life everlasting'.<sup>30</sup> If we interpret 'God' and 'world' to mean not God 'up there' or the world 'out there', but 'you' and 'I', they no longer represent functions in a system of cognitions. Instead, they become concrete articulations of divine and creaturely potentiality. The whole reason why I know God loves the world in the incarnation is because he loves me. The

<sup>29</sup>This notion has received relevant contemporary expression in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, 5 vols., trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1988–1998). The original German text was completed in 1983.

<sup>30</sup>*Douay-Rheims Bible* (London: Baronius Press, 2017); *Douay-Rheims Bible*. <https://vulgate.org/>.

incarnation is not some hegemonic or tyrannical theological construct that must be foisted into the terms of my existence; but it is the actual drawing near of God, his constant presence with me even in my brokenness or sin. It ceases to become *the* incarnation in general and becomes *God's* incarnation *to me*. I now know on a deeper level the truth of John 3:16 through real experience than I could ever know through pure intellection. The point of entry for scriptural understanding is lived experience realised through a relationship with God, not a purely cerebral knowledge realised through the hermeneutics of the text. In responding to Scripture, I begin to assimilate it both habitually and spiritually, living in ways that lead back to its Author.

## Conclusion

My study of Bonaventure's exegetical journey reveals three foundational truths of hermeneutic praxis. Firstly, meaning is determined, not simply by the needs of the audience nor by authorial intent alone, but by both interacting in the field of the text. The author, just like Bonaventure, has to negotiate new styles of exegesis in response to the needs of each specific audience. Secondly, understanding of the text is never static but continually re-shaped and deepened in response to changing contexts. A given insight into Scripture changes with proximity and time in the actual, giving rise to new forms of appropriation of the same text. Specific methodological skills are deployed to meet the demands of specific interpretive moments. Thirdly, this responsiveness to context in scriptural reading means that the *corpus* of Bonaventure, or of any other thinker, need not be treated as a single monolithic whole. In other words, the same ideas are not simply repeated at varying communicative cadences across the breadth of his *corpus*. Rather, methods and foci developed over time, presupposing a transformation in hermeneutical results. Instead of simply seeking to render the same forms in different words, Bonaventure was intentionally reshaping his exegetical approach to Scripture and other sources in response to changing audiences and contexts.

Bonaventure's hermeneutical transformations demonstrate how a scholastic-speculative and/or mystical-performative idiom can be productively reimagined to signify more vitally in respect to different audiences and contexts of interpretation. While a more personal form of presentation suits certain audiences more than others, it is up to the researcher to hone a mode of expression that best meets the needs and captures the imaginations of his specific audience. Thus, he proves himself to be an intellectual at the service of the community of which he is a part.<sup>31</sup>

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