

On the Many Senses of Scripture: Romans 1:19-20 in the *Summa theologiae*

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in Thomas Aquinas' biblical exegesis in general, and in his reading of Romans in particular, little attention has been given to the way Thomas actually uses scripture to do theology in his most enduring and influential work: the *Summa theologiae*. This article makes a preliminary attempt to remedy this neglect by exploring the role played by Romans 1:19-20 in the *Summa*. Given the deep connection of both Romans 1 and Aquinas to the perennial debates about natural theology, we might expect Thomas' engagement with those verses to be concerned chiefly and resolutely with the questions animating these debates. But this is not at all the case. Far from being limited to arguments for philosophical knowledge of God, the *Summa's* more than twenty citations of Romans 1, I argue, re-present the whole drama of Christianity in microcosm. Even according to the letter, Paul's words have many senses for Thomas. The goal of this article is to draw out these many senses and demonstrate the creative interplay of scripture and theology in Thomas' *Summa*.

Keywords

Romans 1, Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, biblical exegesis, senses of scripture, natural theology

This essay offers a speculative interpretation of Aquinas' use of Romans 1:19-20 in the *Summa theologiae*.¹ Although there is growing interest in Thomas' biblical exegesis in general, and in his reading of Romans in particular, little to no attention is customarily given to the ways Thomas actually uses scripture to do theology in his most

¹ Henceforth simply *Summa* in the main text and *ST* in citations. All quotations from the *Summa* are my own translations of the Latin text as found in St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fr. Lawrence F. Shapcote, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, Wyoming: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).

well-known and influential work: the *Summa theologiae*.² This is not surprising – interest in Thomas’ *Summa* tends to be more theological or philosophical in kind, whereas scholars of Thomas’ biblical exegesis tend to focus on his biblical commentaries – but it is unfortunate. Why should it be that one of the church’s most significant works of theology, written by someone who by training and vocation was a *magister in sacra pagina*, has generated such little attention to the way its author *uses scripture* to do theology? This essay is a modest, preliminary attempt to remedy this oversight by attending to Thomas’ use of a single but crucial passage of scripture in the *Summa*.³

How then does Thomas use Romans 1:19-20 in the *Summa*? The answer may surprise. For while Paul’s words themselves are the scriptural *locus classicus* for debates about natural theology, and no single figure has been more central to those debates than Thomas Aquinas, citations of these verses in the *Summa* have, in the vast majority of cases, nothing to do with questions of the natural knowledge of God. The contexts in which Thomas cites these verses in the *Summa* range from those about rapture, the knowledge of angels, and hatred of God, to those concerned with teaching theology, the sacraments, and the missions of the divine persons. My argument, in fact, is that the various citations of Romans 1:19–20, strewn across the *Summa*, do nothing less when gathered together kaleidoscopically than re-present in microcosm the *entire* four-part sequence of the biblical drama. Far from being limited to a narrow corridor of philosophical debate, Paul’s words are pregnant, in Thomas’ mind, with theological, ecclesial, and moral ramifications.

² For an example of “growing interest in Thomas’ reading of Romans,” see the collection of essays in *Reading Romans with St. Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Matthew Levering (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2012). John Boyle’s concise essay, “On the Relation of St. Thomas’s Commentary on Romans to the *Summa theologiae*” (pp. 75-82), brings together Thomas as exegete and Thomas as theologian in insightful ways; and Adam Cooper’s essay, “Degrading the Body, Suppressing the Truth” (pp. 113-126), is an excellent treatment of the question of the relation between moral and intellectual virtues in Aquinas’ reading of Romans 1:18-25. But while the focus of both is close to mine here, neither engages Thomas’ reading of Romans 1:19-20 in the *Summa* nor the significant issues raised by it. For careful and insightful attention to Thomas’ Romans commentary with an eye toward constructive, theological matters, see Eugene F. Rogers, *Aquinas and the Supreme Court: Race, Gender, and the Failure of Natural Law in Thomas’ Biblical Commentaries* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

³ For a lovely example of someone attending to the use of scripture in the *Summa*, see Matthew Levering, “A Note on Scripture in the *Summa theologiae*,” *New Blackfriars* 90, no. 1030 (2009): 652–58. Levering attends to the way Thomas uses *clusters* of scriptural texts to elucidate the theological meaning of a few particular articles in the *Summa*. My approach here is precisely the converse: to show how Thomas employs a *single* biblical text across numerous, discrete articles. See also the detailed study of Wilhelmus G.B.M. Valkenberg which explores the role of scripture across *all* of Thomas’ writings, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2000).

He calls them to mind and puts them hermeneutically to work in *loci* that span the whole range of his theological horizon.

The plan of this essay tracks the *Summa's* exegesis of Romans 1:19-20 through what I've called the four acts of creation, fall, redemption, and vocation. The citations, I argue, tell first of the witness the Lord has made for himself in the created order which is clothed with the divine presence. But, following immediately upon this, they show, second, how that witness is circumscribed and how humans characteristically suppress it and misuse it for idolatrous ends, so that, third, the Lord must cloak *himself* with the visible stuff of creation in order to restore it and bring it to glory. Finally, Romans 1:19-20 establishes the pattern of the Christian life: the Lord accommodates to fleshly, transient beings, as Thomas says, by leading them by the hand through the visible into the invisible.⁴ Importantly, my argument is not that Thomas reads Romans 1:19-20 in fundamentally different or opposing ways. Most, if not all, of the citations have at their core the idea of God's visible manifestation. How could they not, after all? This is Paul's claim. My argument is rather about the surprising range of *contexts* in which these citations occur and the *uses* to which Thomas puts them. At a very basic level, I hope to convey a sense of the *range* of Thomas' exegetical and theological vision. This range is not at all limited to the dimensions we might expect if we are accustomed to thinking of Thomas as a philosophical theologian exercised by a narrow set of problems and not rather as a creative medieval exegete whose horizon of thought embraced a vast theological landscape.

Creation: The Witness of Things Visible

Of the twenty-two citations of or allusions to Romans 1:19-20 in the *Summa*, only *five* (!) occur in what we might describe as characteristically epistemological contexts and serve to highlight how creation witnesses to its Maker on the plane of "natural reason."⁵ Three of these five emphasize the *object* of creation's witness, namely the Lord, while two emphasize that creation itself is the *means* to knowledge of God.

ST I.65.1 is a case in point of the latter. Thomas asks: "whether corporeal creatures are from God?" The third objection contends that, no, flesh-bound creatures cannot be from God because they lead us *away from* God, whereas things truly *from* God lead us *to* God. Thomas answers the objection by quoting Romans 1:20: corporeal creatures *in themselves* do not lead us away from God, for the apostle

⁴ ST I.43.7

⁵ One of the citations (ST I.84.5, obj. 2) will not be treated in this essay because it occurs in an objection to which Thomas does not respond, and thus provides nothing in the way of Thomas' constructive use of the passage.

says precisely the contrary; they make the invisible things of God conspicuous. That they sometimes lead us astray is the fault not of the creatures themselves, but “of those who use them foolishly.”⁶ Romans 1:20 thus serves here as a corrective to a more gnostic or Manichean understanding of creation. At a structural level, when everything is in good working order, creatures manifest the *goodness* of their Maker and lead us *to* him.

Paul’s words also serve to ground an argument for creation’s sacramentality. *Quaestio* I.79 concerns the human being’s intellectual powers (*de potentiis intellectiis*), and in article nine, Thomas asks whether the higher (*superior*) and lower (*inferior*) reason are, in fact, two distinct powers. He argues, in fact, that they are one. Whereas with the higher reason, we judge of *temporal* things by knowledge of things *eternal*, with the lower reason we work from the bottom up, reasoning inductively from the temporal to the eternal. But – critically – the biblical warrant for our ability to reason inductively from creation to God is Paul’s claim that “the invisible things of God... are understood from the things that were made.”⁷ Creation, according to Romans 1:19–20, is part of the sacramental economy: the material world leads us beyond itself to God.

The other three citations of Romans 1:19–20 which concern the witness of creation demonstrate, for Thomas, the other side of the same coin: that the visible things of creation point to *God*. Perhaps the most famous of these comes from *ST* I.2.2 in which Thomas responds to the question, whether God’s existence can be demonstrated. As usual, several objections are entertained, then comes the *sed contra*. Thomas writes: “The Apostle says to the Romans (I) that *the invisible things of God are conspicuous to the intellect from the things that were made*. But this would not be so unless through the things that were made it was possible to demonstrate that God exists, for the first thing necessary to understand about something is whether it exists.”⁸ In other words, Paul could not have said that the invisible things of God are knowable to us, could not even have claimed “God” (*Deus*) as an object of knowledge, were it not possible to demonstrate that God exists. Thus Romans 1:20, in this context, provides Thomas the biblical warrant for thinking that God’s existence can in fact be shown through *ratio*.⁹ In the very next article, *ST* I.2.3, Thomas then famously demonstrates God’s existence in “five ways.” Note, however, that the kind of demonstration possible in this case is the weaker kind, not *a priori* through the cause, but *a posteriori* through the effects. For the kind of knowledge about God

⁶ *ST* I.65.1, *ad* 3.

⁷ *ST* I.79.9.

⁸ *ST* I.2.2, *sed contra*.

⁹ Which is itself quite interesting: Thomas wants a *biblical warrant* for thinking this.

Paul refers to in Romans 1:20 is knowledge, not of God's essence, but of God's effects.¹⁰

The context is similar a few questions later in *ST* I.12.12 where the issue is whether in this life we can know God through natural reason. Once again, Thomas quotes Romans 1:19 in the *sed contra*: “that which is known of God was manifested in them, that is, what is knowable about God through natural reason.”¹¹ We can be led in this life by our senses, that is, not “to see the divine essence,” but rather to know of God “whether God exists and what must necessarily belong to him.”¹² This much, God has given to human nature simply by continuing to preserve it from annihilation after the rebellion of sin. This knowledge is the gift of the ongoing grace of creation.¹³ Later, near the middle of the *Secunda Pars*, in the tractates on law, Thomas asks whether the eternal law is known to all. In his reply to the first objection, he cites Romans 1:20 to justify his affirmative answer, for although “we cannot know the things of God in themselves [*in seipsis*], nevertheless they are manifest to us in their effects, according to Romans 1:20...”¹⁴ Thus here as above in *ST* I.2.2 and I.12.12, Thomas finds in Paul's words from Romans 1:19–20 encouragement from scripture to affirm that, yes, in a certain sense, the things God has made lead us to knowledge of God; creation has a sacramental character.

Thus, these five citations in the *Summa* of Romans 1:19–20 show us Thomas' sense that God's creatures, when things are in good working order, tend toward God as to their final end and, in this way, establish conditions for the possibility of knowing something of God. And yet, already in this section, especially with *ST* I.2.2 and I.12.12, we have trespassed into the next. For these two articles, with their citations of Romans 1:19–20, both give and take away in the same breath: yes, a certain of knowledge of God can be had in this life when reason, finely tuned, rightly orders the sensory impressions the body receives from the world; but this knowledge is of a diminutive sort, knowledge not of God's essence, which brings *beatitudo*, but of God's effects, reflected as if in a mirror.

¹⁰ We might add to this point of diminishment also Thomas' words from *Summa Theologiae* I.1.1, namely that even what *can* be known of God in this life through rational investigation can be known only “by a few [*a paucis*], and through a long period of time [*per longum tempus*], and with the admixture of many errors [*cum admixtione multorum errorum*]...”

¹¹ *ST* I.12.12, *sed contra*.

¹² *ST* I.12.12.

¹³ For further elaboration on this point see Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth: Sacred Doctrine and the Natural Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 183–188.

¹⁴ *ST* I-II.93.2, *ad 2*.

Fall: Idolators Inexcusable

We move now to Act II, as it were: how Thomas cites Romans 1:19–20 to demonstrate, not the promise of natural knowledge of God, but the *limits* of human knowing, a demonstration which renders idol worshippers without excuse.

First, Thomas raises the rather ambitious question: “whether the trinity of divine persons can be known through natural reason.”¹⁵ The first objection quotes Aristotle and Augustine in its favor, and then offers a gloss: “For it is said in a gloss on Romans 1 and Exodus 8 that the magicians of Pharaoh failed in the third sign, that is in the knowledge of the third person, which is the Holy Spirit, and thus they knew at least two [persons].”¹⁶ That this reference to Romans 1 is a reference to vv.19–20 specifically is clear from Thomas’ *Commentary on Romans* where the very same gloss is discussed in connection with Paul’s tripartite mention of “invisible things,” “eternal power,” and “divinity.”¹⁷ What’s interesting about the *Summa*’s version of this gloss is that when Thomas picks it up again in his *response* to the objection, he unfolds its meaning by quoting further from Romans 1: “nevertheless they are said to have failed in the third sign, that is in knowledge of the third person, since they deviated from goodness, which is appropriated to the Holy Spirit, when ‘although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God...’”¹⁸ Those who supposedly “knew God,” therefore failed critically in two ways. First, their knowledge of God, even if it could be stretched to include the binity of Father and Son (which, Thomas thinks, it cannot), lacks knowledge of the Holy Spirit, and thus of God as Trinity, the condition for *beatitudo*. Second, and more significantly, Thomas says that they failed to worship God; this “knowledge,” far from guiding them on their way to right worship, actually led them astray. This means, as he says in the *Romans Commentary*, that such knowledge serves only, in the end, to remove any claim that *ignorance* can deliver someone from culpability before God. Idolators have no excuse.¹⁹

Later in the *Prima Pars*, Thomas has shifted his gaze from theology to angelology and raises the question: whether an angel knows God through the qualities of its own nature. To answer the question, Thomas makes a threefold distinction: things can be known first, “through the presence of a thing’s essence in the knower”; second, “through the presence of an image in the knowing power”; and third, “when the image of the thing known is not received immediately from

¹⁵ *ST* I.32.1.

¹⁶ *ST* I.32.1, obj. 3.

¹⁷ See Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Super Epistulam ad Romanos* (Brepols: 2010), § 122.

¹⁸ *ST* I.32.1, ad 1.

¹⁹ See especially Aquinas, *Super Epistulam ad Romanos*, §§ 123–30.

the known thing itself, but from another thing in which the former reverberates, as when we see someone in a mirror.”²⁰ Our interest here lies with this third kind of knowledge: knowledge from reverberations in a mirror. For in the following paragraph Thomas identifies *this* kind of knowledge – the lowest of the three kinds – with the kind of knowledge Paul speaks of in Romans 1:19–20. Thus is the Romans 1 knowledge of God now a third-tier knowledge, knowledge reflected dimly in a mirror. This is essentially the same point Thomas elsewhere when probing the soul’s knowledge of higher things. The question there (*ST* I.88.3) is whether God is the first object (*quod primum*) of the human mind, and the answer is a double no: not only can the human intellect in the present life “not understand the essence of the uncreated substance” (i.e., God), but “it cannot [even] understand *created* immaterial substances” (i.e., angels).²¹ The proof-text given for the first ‘no’ is Romans 1:20: “but rather do we arrive at the cognition of God through creatures.”²² Romans 1:20 knowledge is thus lower than both full knowledge of God *and* knowledge of angels.

The final two citations under this heading come from the *Secunda Secundae*. The first occurs in the tractates on faith, in *ST* II-II.2.3 wherein Thomas asks: “whether it is necessary for salvation to believe?” One objection tries to cite Romans 1:20 as evidence that, no, salvation does *not* require belief because “those things which are conspicuous to the intellect are not believed [but rather *seen*].”²³ But Thomas won’t let this pass. In the article’s corpus he returns to the fundamental point of *ST* I.1.1 and argues that human perfection consists in something beyond our given nature, namely “in a certain supernatural vision of God, to which the human being cannot extend except through the mode of one who learns from God the teacher [*nisi per modum ad-discentis a Deo doctore*].”²⁴ Then, in reply to the Romans 1 objector, Thomas asserts that “faith perceives the invisible things of God in a higher mode than natural reason proceeding from creatures to God.”²⁵ *Beatitudo*, our appointed end, depends on something more than what our minds can perceive through the senses. This is what Romans 1:19–20 teaches.

The third citation comes in the *quaestio* concerning hatred of God. The first article under this heading asks whether it is possible for anyone to hate God. Answer: it depends; we need a distinction. For, as we have seen, humans apprehend God in at least two distinct ways, first as God is in his essence, and second, as God is manifested in his effects

²⁰ *ST* I.56.3.

²¹ *ST* I.88.3, emphasis mine.

²² *ST* I.88.3.

²³ *ST* II-II.2.3, obj. 3.

²⁴ *ST* II-II.2.3.

²⁵ *ST* II-II.2.3, *ad* 3.

– and here Thomas quotes Romans 1:20 to make the essence/effects distinction. According to the first mode of knowledge, Thomas says, “it is impossible... to hate God,” for “God, in his essence, is goodness itself, which no one can hate.”²⁶ But under the second, lower aspect of knowledge, knowledge of God through God’s effects, it *is* possible to hate God. For some of God’s effects “are repugnant to a will depraved by sin.”²⁷ According to this article, then, the knowledge of God to which Paul refers in Romans 1:19–20 is of just the right kind and amount to enable the one who has it to hate God.

Redemption: The Divine Missions as God’s Visible Manifestation

If the two previous contexts for citation of Romans 1:19–20 – that creation witnesses to God, but that such witness extends only so far as to remove the excuse of ignorance – were the only ones Thomas had found for Paul’s words, our situation would be tragic indeed. Though this is what we might reasonably expect from an exegesis of Romans 1:19–20. After all: what further theological point could be drawn from these verses? The answer to this question lies in two articles which concern the missions of the divine persons.

Thomas opens the *Tertia Pars* by asking whether it was fitting for God to become incarnate. After a series of possible objections – God should not change, creatures are infinitely distant from God, flesh is opposed to spirit – Thomas provides the stunning *sed contra*: “it seems to be supremely fitting that the invisible things of God be shown through visible things, for to this end the whole world was made, as is clear from the word of the Apostle.”²⁸ He then quotes Romans 1:20. Thomas continues: the incarnation accomplishes precisely this visible *monstratio*, for, as John of Damascus says, “through the mystery of the incarnation is shown simultaneously the goodness and wisdom and justice and power or might of God...”²⁹ Thomas then goes on in the body of his response to show how it belongs to the nature of goodness to communicate itself, and that, since God is goodness essentially, it belongs to God supremely to communicate the divine self. Here, then, in the opening salvo of Christology, Thomas sees in Romans 1:19–20 the scriptural witness to, as well as the deep, structural logic of, not knowledge of God by the power of human reason, but God’s self-revelation in creaturely form. Paul’s words provide the divine solution to the hellish problem they created in the first place. Why was it fitting for God to become incarnate? Romans 1:19–20.

²⁶ *ST* II-II.34.1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *ST* III.1.1, *sed contra*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

But the Son is not the only one of the divine persons who is sent. The Spirit also has a mission, and Thomas offers a strikingly similar mode of argument in *ST* I.43.7 by appealing, once again, to Romans 1. The question here is, whether it is fitting for the Holy Spirit to be sent visibly. Thomas first cites Matthew 3:16 in the *sed contra* (“the Holy Spirit descended on the baptized Lord in the form of a dove”) and then responds:

God provides for all things according to the unique mode of each. But the natural human mode is to be led by the hand through visible things to the invisible, as is clear from what was said above... so it was fitting that the invisible missions of the divine persons also be manifested by certain visible creatures... nevertheless the Son and the Holy Spirit differently...and therefore the Son was sent visibly as the author of holiness, but the Holy Spirit as the sign of holiness.³⁰

The reference to “what was said above” is a reference to *ST* I.12.12, which, as we saw earlier, grounds *its* argument about human movement through the visible to the invisible in Romans 1:19–20. Thus, here in *ST* I.43.7, Paul’s words are present both in the corpus’ pattern of words (*per visibilia ad invisibilia manducatur*) and in the reference to *ST* I.12.12. Moreover, this trinitarian article shares its mode of reasoning with the Christology article above: in both cases, Thomas finds the biblical logic of God’s self-manifestation to have been given scriptural expression in Paul’s words from Romans 1:19–20. Whereas in the *Tertia Pars*, *Christ* is the visible manifestation of the invisible God, here in the *Prima Pars*, it is the *Holy Spirit*. Both trinitarian movements attest to God’s making his “invisible” self “visible.”

Vocation: The Sacramental Pattern of the Christian Life

At this stage, we have seen how Thomas cites Romans 1:19–20 in the *Summa* not only to demonstrate the ability of human reason to discern God’s created effects, but also to establish and judge the critical limits of that knowledge, as well as explicate the logic of God’s self-manifesting response to our tragic situation. Already, that is, we have seen the acorn of Paul’s words begin to unfold in Thomas’ mind as a tree with branches in a variety of theological *loci*. But nine citations (nearly half!) remain still unaccounted for. These nine belong to the final act of the biblical drama: the Christian vocation. Five of these describe features of this life *in general*, I suggest, while four describe *certain particular forms* of it. We begin with the general.

³⁰ *ST* I.43.7.

Near the end of the *Secunda Pars*, we find a series of questions which concern “gratuitous graces... given to certain people.”³¹ With one of these questions, Romans 1:19–20 would seem to have little to do: the question of rapture. Rapture presents Thomas with a thorny issue, for one of his most treasured axioms is that God works with creatures, not violently, but graciously and interiorly, according as the mode of their natures requires. Rapture, by contrast, means being “elevated contrary to nature [*contra naturam elevatum*].”³² In his response to the question, Thomas gives an account of how and why rapture (either by God *or* by demons) might occur, and then he turns to the first objection: “it is natural to a human,” he concedes, “to stretch out into divine things through the apprehension of sensible things, according to Romans 1:20... but that mode by which someone is elevated to divine things by an abstraction from the senses [i.e., rapture] is not natural to a human.”³³ What Romans 1:20 seems to establish here, for Thomas, is that the *normal* mode of God’s dealings with creatures, and therefore of the creature’s ordinary, vocational advance into God, is to stretch them out toward God *through the sensible world* – the “gratuitous grace” of rapture represents a violent, if sometimes blessed, departure from this norm.

Two further citations concerning the Christian life generally are connected to worship and the sacraments. First, in *ST* II-II.81.7, Thomas asks: “whether religion has an external act?” Why, one objection goes, should God not simply require worship in spirit, apart from the body, as John 4:42 seems to imply? The answer, Thomas says, lies in the logic of Romans 1:19–20: “in order to be joined to God, the human mind needs to be led by the hand though sensible things, since...” and he quotes our favorite verse.³⁴ Romans 1:20, in other words, is scriptural witness *par excellence* to the need for an “external act of religion” which involves bodies and sense-perceptible objects. God uses tactile means to lift the human mind to spiritual heights, by means of which the mind is joined to God. This sacramental context is even more explicit in question 60.2 of the *Tertia Pars*. The question is, “whether every sign [*signum*] of a holy thing is a sacrament.” The first objection cites Romans 1:20 and argues that *not* every sign of a sacred thing can be called a sacrament, because, according to Romans 1:20, “*all* sensible creatures are signs of sacred things.”³⁵ *And yet*, the objection concludes, not all sensible creatures are called sacraments. Therefore the name *sacramentum* must have a more limited reference. Although Thomas to some extent grants this objection in his reply, he finds it important to mark a distinction between the sensible creatures

³¹ *ST* II-II.171-178, *Proemium*.

³² *ST* II-II.175.1, *sed contra*.

³³ *ST* II-II.175.1, *ad* 1.

³⁴ *ST* II-II.81.7.

³⁵ *ST* III.60.2, obj. 1, emphasis mine.

of Romans 1:20 which “signify something holy... inasmuch as they are *in themselves* holy...” and *sacraments* which, in fact, *make* us holy.”³⁶ As in *ST* II-II.81.7 above, here too the logic of the sacramental economy either emerges from or concerns itself at a subterranean level with Romans 1:19–20. In the latter case, Thomas calls upon Paul’s words to distinguish between the cosmos of sacrament-like creatures and the small handful of official sacraments; in the former case, he sees in them the biblical warrant for embodied, sacramental worship.

The two final citations in this sub-category concern the *gift* of knowledge connected to the theological virtue of faith. In *ST* II-II.27.3 Thomas cites Romans 1:19–20 while comparing the works of knowledge and charity. One of the objections claims that God should be “*loved* on account of something else” because Paul tells us that God is “*known* on account of something else,” namely visible things; and “love follows knowledge.”³⁷ Thomas responds to the objection by affirming that, yes, our knowledge of God – knowledge given by the Spirit through faith – *is* mediated by creatures, but the conclusion that God is loved for the sake of creatures is a *non sequitur*: for “after [God] is known, he is not known through other things [*per alia*], but through himself [*per seipsum*].”³⁸ In a similar context, Thomas calls upon Romans 1:19–20 to make the same point. Here again, an objection tries to cite Paul’s axiom in his favor – knowledge, the objection contends, concerns *both* divine *and* human things – but once again Thomas concedes in part and refutes the rest: yes, the gift of knowledge (*donum scientiae*) concerns God materially, but formally it concerns creatures, since by this gift we judge divine things *by human means*; when we judge *human* things by the things of *God*, on the other hand, we call this gift “wisdom [*sapientia*].”³⁹ Thus with these two citations of Romans 1, Thomas shows how knowledge operates in the context, not of *ratio naturalis*, but of *fides*. As a gift of the Spirit, it marks the path of Christian vocation by proceeding from creatures to God.

Our final four citations concern particular vocational forms of the Christian life. First, Thomas cites Romans 1:19–20 to establish the disciplinary and vocational division between the science of metaphysics and the science of *sacra doctrina*. In *ST* 1.6, Thomas asks whether sacred doctrine (*sacra doctrina*) is the same as wisdom (*sapientia*). He answers affirmatively: “this doctrine is supremely [*maxime*] wisdom among all human forms of wisdom.”⁴⁰ It belongs to the “wise one [*sapiens*]” in every branch of knowledge to consider the very highest matters of that branch, its first principles, its highest cause. In the art of

³⁶ *ST* III.60.2, *ad* 1, emphasis mine.

³⁷ *ST* II-II.27.3, obj. 2.

³⁸ *ST* II-II.27.3.

³⁹ *ST* II-II.2.9, *ad* 3.

⁴⁰ *ST* I.1.6.

building, this is the architect; in human life generally this is the prudent person. When it comes to knowledge of divine things (*divinorum cognitio*), this is the person who considers God as the highest cause. But there are two sorts of people who do this, Thomas notes. There are the philosophers, who, practicing the science of metaphysics, “designate God as the highest cause... in so far as God is knowable through *creatures*” – and here Thomas quotes Romans 1:20 – and there are those who do so “as far as God is known to himself alone [*sibi soli de seipso*] and to others through revealed communication.”⁴¹ These latter are the practitioners of sacred doctrine.

But the relevance of Romans 1:19–20 to the vocation of *sacra doctrina* does not end there. Thomas cites it again in *ST* I.13.5 to show the theologian how to go about her chief business: when we speak of God and of creatures, do we speak of univocally? No, “predicating univocally of God and creatures is impossible” since what resides in God *simply* is known to our minds in a *divided* or *multiplied* fashion, and thus God “exceeds the signification of [any] name.”⁴² But the opposite is also false: talk of God and of creatures is not mere equivocation because “on this view, nothing could be known or demonstrated about God... and this is contrary to the philosophers who proved many things about God by demonstration, and also contrary to the apostle, who says...”⁴³ And Thomas quotes Romans 1:20. The mean between the two extremes of univocity and equivocity, Thomas claims, is *analogy* – for analogy preserves the infinite distance between God and creatures without evacuating human language of all meaning. Thus does Thomas employ Romans 1:20 to the one who would practice theology.

Third, Paul’s words instruct the theologian to furnish her austere knowledge of first principles and final ends with vivid examples drawn from the creaturely world. This is the point Thomas makes when discussing the spiritual *charisma* in *ST* I-II.111.4. The question itself is whether, in his catalogue of spiritual gifts, Paul has “fittingly distinguished” the forms of “gratuitous grace.” The answer is yes; but our interest lies in the reason why. These *charisma* show themselves, Thomas contends, chiefly in “teaching and persuading,” for this is how we help one another in the advance toward God. But in order to teach and persuade in the things of God, one needs “a plenitude of knowledge of divine things” which consists of three parts.⁴⁴ First, the teacher must know the science’s first principles. Second, she must know its chief conclusions. But third, she ought to “abound with examples and knowledge of effects, though which it is sometimes necessary to show the causes ... since ‘the invisible things of God are conspicuous through

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *ST* I.13.5.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *ST* I-II.111.4.

the things that were made.”⁴⁵ Thomas sees in Paul’s axiom the insight of a mature pedagogue.

Finally, Thomas quotes Romans 1 to provide instruction for the contemplative life (*via contemplativa*). With *ST* II-II.180.4, Thomas asks whether the contemplative life consists only in contemplation of *God*, or whether it includes also contemplation of any truth whatsoever (*cuiuscumque veritatis*). Following Augustine, Thomas affirms that the vocation of the contemplative is, firstly, to contemplate “divine truth”; “but since, through the divine effects, we are led by the hand into contemplation of God,” he continues, quoting Romans 1:20, “therefore contemplation of the divine effects also pertains to the contemplative life secondarily.”⁴⁶ Here too, then, in the context of how to order a certain form of vocation, Paul’s words provide Thomas a framework for thought.

Conclusion

“It is not unfitting, as Augustine says in *Confessions* XII, if even according to the literal sense, one word in scripture should have multiple senses.”⁴⁷ This is a fitting tag for the results of this study. Not only does it remind us that the job of the medieval exegete was to unfold the meaning of scripture in all its colorful pluriformity, but it reminds us also of the first love and vocation of the *Summa*’s author. Thomas’ day job was to lecture on, exposit, and write commentaries on the books of the Old and New Testaments. It should, therefore, not be surprising to find that he used scripture in subtle but significant ways to unfold and give shape to the influential piece of theology that was his night job. Thomas saw in Romans 1:19–20 an expansive set of hermeneutical possibilities. He certainly did not restrict his engagement with the verses to questions about reason, revelation, and natural theology, even if these are the contexts with which we tend associate both him and them. He cites them more often *outside* of the context of these debates, and sometimes, it seems, even in order to *cut against* their natural grain. It is my speculative argument that when these citations in the *Summa* are gathered up and considered together, the result is nothing less than a microcosmic vision of the *whole* Christian drama. Attending carefully to Thomas’ use of scripture in the *Summa* reveals the surprising and creative interplay of scripture and theology in his mind as well as the rich interconnections in his thought generated thereby. Perhaps the hermeneutic playfulness of Romans 1:19–20 in the *Summa* might even

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ *ST* II-II.180.4.

⁴⁷ *ST* I.I.10.

remind us that our own concerns, far down stream, may not always be as deep and fresh and clear as those we find upstream at their source.

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