

THOMAS AQUINAS ON HEBREWS

THE EXCELLENCE OF CHRIST¹

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Due to the influence of his two great *Summae*, Thomas Aquinas' reputation as a 'systematic' theologian far surpasses his reputation as a biblical exegete. Yet his commentaries merit attention due to Thomas' ability to explicate Scripture, his contributions to the development of exegesis, and the fact that his commentaries reflect the same doctrinal and theological concerns as his better-known works. An examination of Thomas Aquinas' commentary on Hebrews is worthwhile, given the growing interest in pre-modern exegesis as well as the priority that Thomas assigned to the epistle. Organizing the entire corpus of Scripture according to the purposes of God, Thomas orders the Old Testament books in regard to God as king or Father and the New Testament books in regard to Christ and the church. In Thomas' scheme, Hebrews comes immediately after the four gospels. Among all the epistles, Hebrews is preeminent, according to Thomas, because it reveals the power of the grace of Christ as head of the church. The aim of this dissertation is to understand and appreciate Thomas' exposition of Hebrews in the context of his theological works and in the context of medieval exegesis.

Thomas' commentary on Hebrews is a series of lectures on the text, delivered at the University of Paris or at a Dominican school. Thesis chapters on Thomas' academic and exegetical context consider the exegetical tools and authorities in use during his time and survey his approach to writing biblical commentaries in light of his exegetical heritage. The seminal work of Augustine and the influence of the Victorines are particularly important. Thomas relies primarily on the literal sense of Scripture throughout his commentaries, as the sense best

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suit for instruction and argumentation; the literal sense includes metaphor and figuration. The spiritual senses—allegorical, tropological, and anagogical—have the literal sense as their foundation. Thomas' method in each lecture is to divide and outline the text of Hebrews; he then discusses textual and lexical issues before moving on to doctrine or theology. Each word, and the placement of each word, matters, leading Thomas to apply grammar, logic, and related Scripture verses in order to examine closely the words and meaning of each phrase and verse.

A discussion of prologues to medieval commentaries addresses their development and concerns, and, for Thomas, their programmatic function. According to his prologue to the Hebrews commentary, the excellence of Christ is the epistle's subject, and Paul is its author. Thomas opens the prologue with Psalm 86:8 ('There is none among the gods like unto you, O Lord: and there is none according to your works.') and gives a sermon on this verse showing the superiority of Christ's person and works to angels, prophets, and priests. The prologue closes with the Aristotelian causes of Hebrews, in which its material cause is its contents, its formal cause is its shape as a letter, its efficient cause is Paul, and its final cause is the grace of Christ as head of the Church.

The concerns articulated in the prologue shape the commentary on Hebrews 1–10, as Thomas considers the excellence of Christ's person in and of himself; the comparative excellence of Christ's person in relation to angels, Moses, and priests; and the excellence of Christ's threefold work of creation, illumination, and justification. Framing his Hebrews commentary according to Christ's person and works is valuable, given that who Christ is determines the work that he does in order to save us. This person-work relationship is constitutive not only of the argument of Hebrews but also of the *Tertia Pars* of Thomas' *Summa Theologiae*, in which he considers both who Christ is and what he has done to benefit the human race. Additionally, whether discussing Christ's person or his works, Thomas frequently examines the Father-Son relationship, the relationship between Christ's humanity and divinity, and the associated errors of heretics. Hence, issues raised at the Councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon maintain a significant presence, and Trinitarian theology and Christology comprise a large part of the doctrinal element of this commentary.

Thomas discusses the inherent excellence of Christ's person in his first two lectures on Hebrews, which cover Hebrews 1:1-2 and 1:3, respectively. Explicating Hebrews 1:3, Thomas shows that, in relation to the Father, Christ possesses the three divine attributes of coeternity, consubstantiality, and equality of power. And both lectures demonstrate Christ's excellence in terms of the uniqueness of his origin, the greatness of his dominion, the power of his activity, and the loftiness of his dignity.

Having established Christ's excellence as to his origin, dominion, power, and dignity, Thomas uses these four categories to liken Christ to angels, Moses, and priests, and to prove his comparative excellence to all three Old Testament personages. Christ's superiority to angels is readily demonstrated, given that angels are creatures, servants, and ministering spirits, whereas Christ is the unique incarnate Son, as well as the creator and Lord who sits at the Father's right hand. Similarly, as superior as Moses is, Christ is far more excellent, being the Son, not the servant, who is faithful not just in God's house but throughout the world, and who was obedient to the point of death where Moses was not.

The comparison of Christ to the Old Testament priesthood is complex, dealing as it does with Hebrews 5:1–10:18, the longest and most complex section of Hebrews. Thomas adapts his comparative strategy to the person/work motif of this section, so that origin and dignity become aspects of discussing the person of Christ as high priest, and dominion and power become aspects of discussing the work of Christ as high priest. Here Thomas finds that, in contrast to earthly priests, Christ's person is unique and his work is uniquely efficacious; for only Christ is Son and Lord, as well as high priest, and only Christ represents his people before God in a heavenly tabernacle, removing their past and future sins.

Concerning the excellence of Christ's work, Thomas examines the triad of Christ's work in creation, illumination, and justification five times in his commentary. Regarding Hebrews 1:1-2, Thomas explains the relationship of Christ's threefold work to his identity as both Word and Lord. He also discusses how human sin, mentioned in Hebrews 1:3, necessitates Christ's threefold work. Understanding sin to include transgression, the loss of the light of reason, and deformation of the image of God in which humans were created, Thomas shows how Christ's work undoes the effects of sin, as Christ justifies, illuminates,

and recreates us, respectively. Regarding Hebrews 2:12, Thomas sees Christ as the one who declares his Father's name to his brethren, and who thus creates, illumines, and gives life to the church. Thomas' exposition of Hebrews 8:10b-12 has an implicit *exitus/reditus* scheme as it delineates the return to God that Christ has made possible for us. Thomas' exposition of these verses describes the completion of Christ's work in us in the areas of creation, illumination, and justification, giving us life, light, and union with God.

Thomas Aquinas' commentary on Hebrews displays his skill as a teacher and an exegete. The organizational strategies used to structure his commentary include the prologue and its opening Scripture citation, his outline and division of the text of Hebrews, his discernment and application of categories to the text, and his procedure of teaching the epistle's words and phrases in a manner consistent with his reliance on the literal sense. Thomas' dialectical method is evident in the consideration of questions and the citations of church Fathers, heretics, and numerous verses of Scripture. His penchant for pairs and polarities, such as person/work, humanity/divinity, Father/Son, and Old Testament/New Testament provides a dialectical subtext, as well. Thomas excels not only at teaching Scripture; he also applies it in occasional hortatory comments directed to his students as to what they need to learn or to do. Thomas' comparative approach to Hebrews allows him to present both the essential and relative excellence of Christ in regard to his person and his work, giving the reader of Hebrews, and of this commentary, every reason to choose Christ and the New Testament over the Old Testament and its representatives. An appendix on Thomas' knowledge and use of the rhetorical category of syncretism in the Hebrews commentary concludes the dissertation.