

EXODUS

T H O M A S J O S E P H W H I T E , O P



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This book is dedicated to my father—mentor and friend.

*As a father has compassion on his children,
so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him.*

Psalm 103:13

Two errors: 1. To take everything literally. 2. To take everything spiritually.

—Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

By a prophet the LORD brought Israel up from Egypt,
and by a prophet he was preserved.

—Hosea 12:13

I saw a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain.

—Revelation 5:6

We are apt to treat pretences to a divine mission or to supernatural powers as of frequent occurrence, and on that score to dismiss them from our thoughts; but we cannot so deal with Judaism. When mankind had universally denied the first lesson of their conscience by lapsing into polytheism, is it a thing of slight moment that there was just one exception to the rule, that there was just one people who, first by their rulers and priests, and afterwards by their own unanimous zeal, professed, as their distinguishing doctrine, the Divine Unity and Government of the world, and that, moreover, not only as a natural truth, but as revealed to them by that God Himself of whom they spoke,—who so embodied it in their national polity, that a Theocracy was the only name by which it could be called? It was a people founded and set up in Theism, kept together by Theism, and maintaining Theism for a period from first to last of 2000 years, till the dissolution of their body politic; and they have maintained it since in their state of exile and wandering for 2000 years more. . . . The preaching of this august dogma begins with them. They are its witnesses and confessors, even to torture and death; on it and its revelation are molded their laws and government; on this their politics, philosophy, and literature are founded; of this truth their poetry is the voice, pouring itself out in devotional compositions which Christianity, through all its many countries and ages, has been unable to rival; on this aboriginal truth, as time goes on, prophet after prophet bases his further revelations, with a sustained reference to a time when, according to the secret counsels of its Divine Object and Author, it is to receive completion and perfection,—till at length that time comes.

—John Henry Newman, *A Grammar of Assent*

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SERIES PREFACE

Near the beginning of his treatise against gnostic interpretations of the Bible, *Against Heresies*, Irenaeus observes that scripture is like a great mosaic depicting a handsome king. It is as if we were owners of a villa in Gaul who had ordered a mosaic from Rome. It arrives, and the beautifully colored tiles need to be taken out of their packaging and put into proper order according to the plan of the artist. The difficulty, of course, is that scripture provides us with the individual pieces, but the order and sequence of various elements are not obvious. The Bible does not come with instructions that would allow interpreters to simply place verses, episodes, images, and parables in order as a worker might follow a schematic drawing in assembling the pieces to depict the handsome king. The mosaic must be puzzled out. This is precisely the work of scriptural interpretation.

Origen has his own image to express the difficulty of working out the proper approach to reading the Bible. When preparing to offer a commentary on the Psalms he tells of a tradition handed down to him by his Hebrew teacher:

The Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in our house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding them from another place because they have their interpretive principle scattered among them.¹

1. Fragment from the preface to *Commentary on Psalms 1–25*, preserved in the *Philokalia*, trans. Joseph W. Trigg (London: Routledge, 1998), 70–71.

As is the case for Irenaeus, scriptural interpretation is not purely local. The key in Genesis may best fit the door of Isaiah, which in turn opens up the meaning of Matthew. The mosaic must be put together with an eye toward the overall plan.

Irenaeus, Origen, and the great cloud of premodern biblical interpreters assumed that puzzling out the mosaic of scripture must be a communal project. The Bible is vast, heterogeneous, full of confusing passages and obscure words, and difficult to understand. Only a fool would imagine that he or she could work out solutions alone. The way forward must rely upon a tradition of reading that Irenaeus reports has been passed on as the rule or canon of truth that functions as a confession of faith. “Anyone,” he says, “who keeps unchangeable in himself the rule of truth received through baptism will recognize the names and sayings and parables of the scriptures.”² Modern scholars debate the content of the rule on which Irenaeus relies and commends, not the least because the terms and formulations Irenaeus himself uses shift and slide. Nonetheless, Irenaeus assumes that there is a body of apostolic doctrine sustained by a tradition of teaching in the church. This doctrine provides the clarifying principles that guide exegetical judgment toward a coherent overall reading of scripture as a unified witness. Doctrine, then, is the schematic drawing that will allow the reader to organize the vast heterogeneity of the words, images, and stories of the Bible into a readable, coherent whole. It is the rule that guides us toward the proper matching of keys to doors.

If self-consciousness about the role of history in shaping human consciousness makes modern historical-critical study critical, then what makes modern study of the Bible modern is the consensus that classical Christian doctrine distorts interpretive understanding. Benjamin Jowett, the influential nineteenth-century English classical scholar, is representative. In his programmatic essay “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” he exhorts the biblical reader to disengage from doctrine and break its hold over the interpretive imagination. “The simple words of that book,” writes Jowett of the modern reader, “he tries to preserve absolutely pure from the refinements or distinctions of later times.” The modern interpreter wishes to “clear away the remains of dogmas, systems, controversies, which are encrusted upon” the words of scripture. The disciplines of close philological analysis “would enable us to separate the elements of doctrine and tradition with which the meaning of scripture is encumbered in our own day.”³ The lens of understanding must be wiped clear of the hazy and distorting film of doctrine.

2. *Against Heresies* 9.4.

3. Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” in *Essays and Reviews* (London: Parker, 1860), 338–39.

Postmodernity, in turn, has encouraged us to criticize the critics. Jowett imagined that when he wiped away doctrine he would encounter the biblical text in its purity and uncover what he called “the original spirit and intention of the authors.”⁴ We are not now so sanguine, and the postmodern mind thinks interpretive frameworks inevitable. Nonetheless, we tend to remain modern in at least one sense. We read Athanasius and think him stage-managing the diversity of scripture to support his positions against the Arians. We read Bernard of Clairvaux and assume that his monastic ideals structure his reading of the Song of Songs. In the wake of the Reformation, we can see how the doctrinal divisions of the time shaped biblical interpretation. Luther famously described the Epistle of James as a “strawy letter,” for, as he said, “it has nothing of the nature of the Gospel about it.”⁵ In these and many other instances, often written in the heat of ecclesiastical controversy or out of the passion of ascetic commitment, we tend to think Jowett correct: doctrine is a distorting film on the lens of understanding.

However, is what we commonly think actually the case? Are readers naturally perceptive? Do we have an unblemished, reliable aptitude for the divine? Have we no need for disciplines of vision? Do our attention and judgment need to be trained, especially as we seek to read scripture as the living word of God? According to Augustine, we all struggle to journey toward God, who is our rest and peace. Yet our vision is darkened and the fetters of worldly habit corrupt our judgment. We need training and instruction in order to cleanse our minds so that we might find our way toward God.⁶ To this end, “the whole temporal dispensation was made by divine Providence for our salvation.”⁷ The covenant with Israel, the coming of Christ, the gathering of the nations into the church—all these things are gathered up into the rule of faith, and they guide the vision and form of the soul toward the end of fellowship with God. In Augustine’s view, the reading of scripture both contributes to and benefits from this divine pedagogy. With countless variations in both exegetical conclusions and theological frameworks, the same pedagogy of a doctrinally ruled reading of scripture characterizes the broad sweep of the Christian tradition from Gregory the Great through Bernard and Bonaventure, continuing across Reformation differences in both John Calvin and Cornelius Lapse, Patrick Henry and Bishop Bossuet, and on to more recent figures such as Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar.

4. *Ibid.*, 340.

5. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1959), 362.

6. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.10.

7. *On Christian Doctrine* 1.35.

Is doctrine, then, not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the Bible, but instead a clarifying agent, an enduring tradition of theological judgments that amplifies the living voice of scripture? And what of the scholarly dispassion advocated by Jowett? Is a noncommitted reading, an interpretation unprejudiced, the way toward objectivity, or does it simply invite the languid intellectual apathy that stands aside to make room for the false truism and easy answers of the age?

This series of biblical commentaries was born out of the conviction that dogma clarifies rather than obscures. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible advances upon the assumption that the Nicene tradition, in all its diversity and controversy, provides the proper basis for the interpretation of the Bible as Christian scripture. God the Father Almighty, who sends his only begotten Son to die for us and for our salvation and who raises the crucified Son in the power of the Holy Spirit so that the baptized may be joined in one body—faith in *this* God with *this* vocation of love for the world is the lens through which to view the heterogeneity and particularity of the biblical texts. Doctrine, then, is not a moldering scrim of antique prejudice obscuring the meaning of the Bible. It is a crucial aspect of the divine pedagogy, a clarifying agent for our minds fogged by self-deceptions, a challenge to our languid intellectual apathy that will too often rest in false truisms and the easy spiritual nostrums of the present age rather than search more deeply and widely for the dispersed keys to the many doors of scripture.

For this reason, the commentators in this series have not been chosen because of their historical or philological expertise. In the main, they are not biblical scholars in the conventional, modern sense of the term. Instead, the commentators were chosen because of their knowledge of and expertise in using the Christian doctrinal tradition. They are qualified by virtue of the doctrinal formation of their mental habits, for it is the conceit of this series of biblical commentaries that theological training in the Nicene tradition prepares one for biblical interpretation, and thus it is to theologians and not biblical scholars that we have turned. “War is too important,” it has been said, “to leave to the generals.”

We do hope, however, that readers do not draw the wrong impression. The Nicene tradition does not provide a set formula for the solution of exegetical problems. The great tradition of Christian doctrine was not transcribed, bound in folio, and issued in an official, critical edition. We have the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, used for centuries in many traditions of Christian worship. We have ancient baptismal affirmations of faith. The Chalcedonian definition and the creeds and canons of other church councils have their places in official church documents. Yet the rule of faith cannot be limited to a specific set of words, sentences, and

creeds. It is instead a pervasive habit of thought, the animating culture of the church in its intellectual aspect. As Augustine observed, commenting on Jer. 31:33, “The creed is learned by listening; it is written, not on stone tablets nor on any material, but on the heart.”⁸ This is why Irenaeus is able to appeal to the rule of faith more than a century before the first ecumenical council, and this is why we need not itemize the contents of the Nicene tradition in order to appeal to its potency and role in the work of interpretation.

Because doctrine is intrinsically fluid on the margins and most powerful as a habit of mind rather than a list of propositions, this commentary series cannot settle difficult questions of method and content at the outset. The editors of the series impose no particular method of doctrinal interpretation. We cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of scripture. We have no clear answer to the question of whether exegesis guided by doctrine is antithetical to or compatible with the now-old modern methods of historical-critical inquiry. Truth—historical, mathematical, or doctrinal—knows no contradiction. But method is a discipline of vision and judgment, and we cannot know in advance what aspects of historical-critical inquiry are functions of modernism that shape the soul to be at odds with Christian discipline. Still further, the editors do not hold the commentators to any particular hermeneutical theory that specifies how to define the plain sense of scripture—or the role this plain sense should play in interpretation. Here the commentary series is tentative and exploratory.

Can we proceed in any other way? European and North American intellectual culture has been de-Christianized. The effect has not been a cessation of Christian activity. Theological work continues. Sermons are preached. Biblical scholars turn out monographs. Church leaders have meetings. But each dimension of a formerly unified Christian practice now tends to function independently. It is as if a weakened army had been fragmented, and various corps had retreated to isolated fortresses in order to survive. Theology has lost its competence in exegesis. Scripture scholars function with minimal theological training. Each decade finds new theories of preaching to cover the nakedness of seminary training that provides theology without exegesis and exegesis without theology.

Not the least of the causes of the fragmentation of Christian intellectual practice has been the divisions of the church. Since the Reformation, the role of the rule of faith in interpretation has been obscured by polemics and counterpolemics about

8. *Sermon 212.2.*

sola scriptura and the necessity of a magisterial teaching authority. The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible series is deliberately ecumenical in scope, because the editors are convinced that early church fathers were correct: church doctrine does not compete with scripture in a limited economy of epistemic authority. We wish to encourage unashamedly dogmatic interpretation of scripture, confident that the concrete consequences of such a reading will cast far more light on the great divisive questions of the Reformation than either reengaging in old theological polemics or chasing the fantasy of a pure exegesis that will somehow adjudicate between competing theological positions. You shall know the truth of doctrine by its interpretive fruits, and therefore in hopes of contributing to the unity of the church, we have deliberately chosen a wide range of theologians whose commitment to doctrine will allow readers to see real interpretive consequences rather than the shadow boxing of theological concepts.

The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible has no dog in the current translation fights, and we endorse a textual ecumenism that parallels our diversity of ecclesial backgrounds. We do not impose the thankfully modest inclusive-language agenda of the New Revised Standard Version, nor do we insist upon the glories of the Authorized Version, nor do we require our commentators to create a new translation. In our communal worship, in our private devotions, in our theological scholarship, we use a range of scriptural translations. Precisely as scripture—a living, functioning text in the present life of faith—the Bible is not semantically fixed. Only a modernist, literalist hermeneutic could imagine that this modest fluidity is a liability. Philological precision and stability is a consequence of, not a basis for, exegesis. Judgments about the meaning of a text fix its literal sense, not the other way around. As a result, readers should expect an eclectic use of biblical translations, both across the different volumes of the series and within individual commentaries.

We cannot speak for contemporary biblical scholars, but as theologians we know that we have long been trained to defend our fortresses of theological concepts and formulations. And we have forgotten the skills of interpretation. Like stroke victims, we must rehabilitate our exegetical imaginations, and there are likely to be different strategies of recovery. Readers should expect this reconstructive—not reactionary—series to provide them with experiments in postcritical doctrinal interpretation, not commentaries written according to the settled principles of a well-functioning tradition. Some commentators will follow classical typological and allegorical readings from the premodern tradition; others will draw on contemporary historical study. Some will comment verse by verse; others will

highlight passages, even single words that trigger theological analysis of scripture. No reading strategies are proscribed, no interpretive methods foresworn. The central premise in this commentary series is that doctrine provides structure and cogency to scriptural interpretation. We trust in this premise with the hope that the Nicene tradition can guide us, however imperfectly, diversely, and haltingly, toward a reading of scripture in which the right keys open the right doors.

R. R. Reno

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ABBREVIATIONS

General

ad	adversus	LXX	Septuagint
can.	canon	n.	number
chap(s).	chapter(s)	NASB	New American Standard Bible
corp.	corpus	NIV	New International Version
esp.	especially	NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
ESV	English Standard Version	para(s).	paragraph(s)
i.e.	that is	pr.	prologue to a question

Biblical Books

Acts	Acts	Ezek.	Ezekiel
Amos	Amos	Ezra	Ezra
1 Chr.	1 Chronicles	Gal.	Galatians
2 Chr.	2 Chronicles	Gen.	Genesis
Col.	Colossians	Hab.	Habakkuk
1 Cor.	1 Corinthians	Hag.	Haggai
2 Cor.	2 Corinthians	Heb.	Hebrews
Dan.	Daniel	Hos.	Hosea
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Isa.	Isaiah
Eccl.	Ecclesiastes	Jas.	James
Eph.	Ephesians	Jer.	Jeremiah
Esth.	Esther	Job	Job
Exod.	Exodus	Joel	Joel

John	John	1 Pet.	1 Peter
1 John	1 John	2 Pet.	2 Peter
2 John	2 John	Phil.	Philippians
3 John	3 John	Phlm.	Philemon
Jonah	Jonah	Prov.	Proverbs
Josh.	Joshua	Ps(s).	Psalms(s)
Jude	Jude	Rev.	Revelation
Judg.	Judges	Rom.	Romans
1 Kgs.	1 Kings	Ruth	Ruth
2 Kgs.	2 Kings	1 Sam.	1 Samuel
Lam.	Lamentations	2 Sam.	2 Samuel
Lev.	Leviticus	Sir.	Sirach
Luke	Luke	Song	Song of Songs
2 Macc.	2 Maccabees	1 Thess.	1 Thessalonians
Mal.	Malachi	2 Thess.	2 Thessalonians
Mark	Mark	1 Tim.	1 Timothy
Matt.	Matthew	2 Tim.	2 Timothy
Mic.	Micah	Titus	Titus
Nah.	Nahum	Wis.	Wisdom of Solomon
Neh.	Nehemiah	Zech.	Zechariah
Num.	Numbers	Zeph.	Zephaniah
Obad.	Obadiah		

Modern Editions

- ANF* *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe. 10 vols. Repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957
- De Malo* Thomas Aquinas. *On Evil* [*Quaestiones disputatae de malo*]. Translated by R. Regan. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003
- EDP Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologiae*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947
- In Div. Nom.* Thomas Aquinas. *In librum beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus expositio*. Edited by C. Pera. Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1950
- In Ioan.* Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on the Gospel of John* [*Lectura super Ioannem*]. 3 vols. Translated by James Weisheipl and Fabian Larcher. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010
- In Rom.* Thomas Aquinas. *Commentary on the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans* [*Super Epistolam ad Romanos*]. Translated by F. Larcher. Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute, 2012

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- NPNF*¹ *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. 1886–89. 14 vols. Repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956
- NPNF*² *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Series 2. Edited by Philip Schaff. 1886–89. 14 vols. Repr. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956
- Quodlibet*. Thomas Aquinas. *Quaestiones quodlibetales*. Edited by Raymundi Spiazzi. Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1949
- SCG* Thomas Aquinas. *Summa contra Gentiles*. 4 vols. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955–56
- ST* Thomas Aquinas. *Summa theologica*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947
- WA* *D. Martin Luther's Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimarer Ausgabe). Edited by J. F. K. Knaake et al. 57 vols. Weimar: Böhlau, 1883–

INTRODUCTION

The Darkness and Light of God

God calls us out of the limitations of our finite nature, our created lights, into his incomprehensible darkness. We are tempted to restrict our understanding to the sphere of our physical world, our temporal state, and our created condition. But the purpose of the book of Exodus is to call the soul into a deeper union with God. This entails that we look away from creatures and into the divine darkness of God. “Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (Exod. 20:21).¹ “Clouds and darkness are round about him: righteousness and judgment are the habitation of his throne” (Ps. 97:2 KJV). The scriptures, then, speak of God as a darkness that enshrouds the human mind.

The darkness into which God draws the human being can be said to signify four things. First, it symbolizes God’s transcendence of all that is sensible. God is the author of the physical world, but the divine nature cannot be perceived under the image of any sensible thing. “You shall not make for yourself a graven image” (Exod. 20:4). Dionysius comments that upon entering the darkness of Mount Sinai, Moses is understood to approach God spiritually by faith, in such a way as to transcend rightfully the mere appearances of the senses.²

Second, the darkness of God represents the incomprehensibility of the divine essence on the level of natural knowledge, for God can only be known indirectly through the consideration of his creatures, which are his effects. “Ever since the

1. Citations from the Bible in English in this volume are taken from the Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

2. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, chap. 1.

creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (Rom. 1:20). And yet even if one comes to think rightly of God as wisdom, goodness, being, and the like, all created limitations that one associates with these very designations must also be removed. In that sense, God is not wisdom, goodness, or being as we know it. Consequently, to rightly contemplate his mystery one must enter not only into a darkness of the senses but also into a darkness of understanding. Gregory of Nyssa teaches that “one who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and (lifting up his own mind, as to a mountaintop, to the invisible and incomprehensible) believe that the divine is there where the understanding does not reach.”³

Third, the darkness of God can be seen to represent the nature of God insofar as it connotes a supernatural mystery. That is to say, the illumination of faith not only draws the intellect of man beyond the range of his ordinary sensation and toward a limited natural understanding of God derived from creatures, but it also imparts to him a positive knowledge of a mystery that is utterly inaccessible to unaided human reason as such. In that sense, the person who encounters the unveiled God, the “face” of his love, must also walk beyond the boundaries of all natural intelligence and be illuminated by what is not normally given to human reason. This is why Dionysius speaks of a “ray of the divine shadow.”⁴ The divine illumination of faith can be said to darken the human intellect insofar as the supernatural mystery that is revealed is obscure to the mind by comparison with all natural knowledge. So Aquinas says, “We attribute to God the darkness of intangibility and invisibility insofar as he is light inaccessible, exceeding all [natural] light that we see, whether by the senses or by the intellect.”⁵

Fourth, the darkness of God denotes the mystery of divine love. In creatures the capacity to love is something other than the capacity to know. Human love is determined from within by knowledge of the beloved, but it also moves one person to love another who remains always only partially understood and partially unknown. Consequently, love moves human reason from within toward a reality that reason does not fully comprehend. This is even more the case when one considers the love of God. God is entirely intelligible in himself. But his wisdom and love are infinitely superior to anything found in creatures and therefore evade our perfect understanding. So if the human heart must transcend the realm of

3. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* 1.46 (Malherbe and Ferguson 1978).

4. Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, chap. 1 (Luibhéid and Rorem 1987).

5. Aquinas, *In Div. Nom.* 7.3 (Pera 1950) (my translation).

total comprehension to pursue what is beloved in other creatures, this must be even more the case when it strives to possess God. “By night / I sought him whom my soul loves” (Song 3:1).

This darkness does not connote the mere absence of knowledge but is the sign of a corresponding divine illumination. Accordingly, the book of Exodus denotes the proximity to God by means of the symbols of light. “And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night” (Exod. 13:21). The Torah tells us that this light was present at the beginning of the world (Gen. 1:15, 17). Dionysius notes that the creation of physical light is affirmed to be “good” by God (Gen. 1:18) and so manifests the uncreated goodness of God, a goodness that is luminous.⁶ When God commands the people of Israel to do what is right according to his law, he likewise enlightens them so that they may partake of his divine goodness.

The precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes. (Ps. 19:8)

Yea, thou dost light my lamp;
the LORD my God lightens my darkness. (Ps. 18:28)

Just as the darkness of God can be understood in a fourfold manner so also can the illumination of God be understood.

First, God illumines the minds of men through physical symbols and images drawn from creation. This is especially the case in the divine ordinations of the sacred liturgy, about which the book of Exodus is particularly concerned.

Oh send out thy light and thy truth;
let them lead me,
let them bring me to thy holy hill
and to thy dwelling! (Ps. 43:3)

As Aquinas states, “The condition of human nature . . . is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible. Now it belongs to divine providence to provide for each one according as its condition

6. Dionysius, *Divine Names*, chap. 4.

requires. Divine wisdom, therefore, fittingly provides man with means of salvation, in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments.⁷ Accordingly, Exodus is in great part a book about the institution of the sacraments of the Old Law.

Second, the revelation of God provides a genuine enlightenment to natural human reason. God is “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Exod. 3:6), but he is also the God of the philosophers. “In the beginning was the Logos” (John 1:1). God is the author of all human intellectual insight. Consequently, divine revelation respects every authentic facet of natural rationality, and it advances the cause of reason in all human cultures. The light of the Torah heals and elevates wounded human reason so that it may discover its own true dignity—both through the contemplation of God and through a complete consideration of the dimensions of the moral law. “And nations shall come to your light, / and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Isa. 60:3).

Third, faith is an illumination that communicates knowledge of the hidden identity and inner life of God. God in his incomprehensible darkness speaks to Moses personally and reveals himself from within the depths of his own being. “I am the One who is” (Exod. 3:14, my translation). Aquinas tells us that the formal object of faith “is nothing else than the First Truth.” That is to say, by the light of supernatural faith we come to know in a quasi-immediate way who God truly is.⁸ “For with thee is the fountain of life; / in thy light do we see light” (Ps. 36:9).

Fourth, faith illumines the human mind through love. Love creates a bond between the soul and God so that a kind of friendship is established. “My beloved is mine and I am his” (Song 2:16). The soul is given to sense by a spiritual instinct what pertains to the will of God and what is contrary to his will. In this way, the mind is enlightened from within by the movements of divine love; love can answer the question “why” with the gift of itself and thereby become a light to the beloved.

Now, three things should be said about this unique and ultimate form of illumination that pertains to faith.

First, it is a genuine light because it communicates truth about God, but it is simultaneously a light received through trust in the teaching of another, based upon an act of the will. Such knowledge therefore implies some degree of obscurity and darkness. The believer in this world lives simultaneously in both the *claritas* and the *obscuritas* of the faith.

7. *ST* 3.61.1. All citations of *ST*, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the 1920 translation of the English Dominican Province (EDP 1947).

8. *ST* 2–2.1.1.

Second, this light implies an invitation to love, for love is at the heart of personal trust. In turn, love can cause the knowledge of God in us to grow more intense. Consequently, faith is a dynamic process that must develop or fail, depending on Israel's cooperation with love. This helps us understand both the absolute exigencies of the divine commands and the uncompromising response that Israel is expected to give (Exod. 20:6). Such commands and responses need to be understood in light of a deeper mystery of love. Such love is both given and reciprocated in darkness. Faith initiates, then, a new and strange kind of friendship between God and Israel. "Thus the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exod. 33:11). It is a dangerous friendship in which Israel is placed at the mercy of God and continually risks rightful punishment or even death by God's hand (Exod. 4:14, 24). God is incomprehensible, but God is also more morally "sensitive" than man—and infinitely more just. To stand in the darkness of God, then, it is necessary to be illumined in regard to the presence of God's mercy. God proclaims "mercy" in saying his very name to Israel (Exod. 33:19). It is not an accident that the mercy seat of God is placed above the ark of God that contains the law. Believers who wish to progress into the knowledge of the inner life of God must proceed according to the customs of the divine mercy.

Third, this illumination of faith is ordered toward the eternal vision of God, a vision that is beatific.

The sun shall be no more
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give light to you by night;
but the LORD will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory. (Isa. 60:19)

What begins for Israel in the exodus from Egypt culminates not in the physical land promised to Abraham, settled by Joshua, and ruled by David, but in the eschaton promised by the prophets. This final illumination consists in the immediate perception of the very life of God. The movement from Egypt to the land promised to Abraham is ultimately an outward symbol of a deeper and more ultimate journey of humanity into the knowledge of the very life of God.

The Torah was composed in order to induct Israelites into the life of faith that is described above. That life is dynamic. It is meant to introduce us into the darkness and obscurity, the illumination and light of the covenant with God. By this same measure it points forward to the mystery of Christ, who opens that same

covenant to the Gentiles and so to the whole of humanity. It speaks to each soul, inviting him or her to leave the Egypt of this world—with its moral taint—so that purified, illumined, and protected by the rites of the true religion, that soul might serve God in this life and enter into the light of God in the next. It is these literal and spiritual senses of the book of Exodus that I will treat in this commentary.

The Divisions of the Book of Exodus

The book of Exodus begins with the Israelites in the darkness of slavery, as prisoners to a society of efficiency, cruelty, and idolatry. It finishes with the Israelites in the desert at Mount Sinai, as they enter into the light of God's covenant—recipients of God's laws and of the sacred worship of the tabernacle. As I shall soon make clear, this movement from Egypt into the desert and toward the promised land is a symbol of the Church, who is in pilgrimage in this world, through the power of the grace of Christ and in view of eternal life in the world to come.

The book of Exodus has five main parts.

Exodus 1–12 is concerned primarily with the *deliverance of Israel from Egypt*. First, we are given to see the need for the divine law, which is illustrated by the Egyptians' cruelty and moral blindness, itself reflective of the wider moral condition of humanity. Second, we are told that God is the Lord, who has revealed himself to Moses and commissioned him as his prophet. Third, the liberation of the Israelites from Egypt functions as a kind of catechesis regarding the identity of the Lord as the only true God and Creator of all that exists. Finally, the ceremony of the paschal lamb in Exod. 12 is meant to initiate the reader typologically into the ceremonial law of Judaism, which pertains to the cultic worship of God.

Exodus 13–18 is concerned with the experience of Israel in the *wilderness*, from the Red Sea to the foot of Mount Sinai. This section is meant to illustrate the exodus or going out of Israel from the Gentile nations as a preparation for their eventual instruction in the law and their entry into the land of Israel. This section of scripture is especially symbolic of the later life of Israel (and, by extension, the Church) as a people who must continually recognize their absolute dependence upon God as he sustains them throughout their history.

Exodus 19–24 takes place at Mount Sinai and is concerned with the giving of the *covenant and the law*. In Exod. 19, the central covenant between God and Israel is made manifest for the first time in the Torah. The ten most central precepts of the moral law are then given (the Ten Commandments) in Exod. 20. Exodus 21:1–24:11 spells out particular juridical laws for the governance of

the people. Exodus 24:12–18 serves as a transition that closes the Book of the Covenant and prepares for the giving of the ceremonial and cultic laws of the tabernacle and temple.

Exodus 25–31 is concerned with the *cultic rituals* of the people of Israel. In them we are initiated into a theology of the ark and the tabernacle, of sacrifice and the priesthood, and of the accoutrements of Israelite religious ceremonies. This entire section is typologically indicative of the temple and the sacrifices of later Israelite religion, as well as of the one true sacrifice of Christ and the sacramental ceremonies of the New Law.

Exodus 32–40 is concerned with the *fall and restoration* of Israel, which takes place due to Israel's idolatrous worship of the golden calf in Exod. 32. Here we are instructed in the mystery of God's justice and mercy as he not only submits the people to judgment and punishment but also reveals himself as the merciful guardian of an eternal covenant with the people. In Exod. 33–34, the intercession and mediation of Moses are seen to be of central importance, as is the deepening understanding of the "name" of the Lord (3:14–15), which entails the attribute of divine mercy (34:6). In Exod. 34–35 the covenant is restored between God and the people, and in Exod. 36–40 the tabernacle is constructed according to the specifications initially commanded by God in Exod. 25–30 (prior to the golden calf incident). Consequently, the book of Exodus concludes with the people at the base of Mount Sinai, in the presence of the tabernacle. According to the terms of the covenant instituted by the Lord through the mediation of the prophet Moses, the Israelites are in true communion with God. They have passed from the slavery of Egypt to the freedom and nobility of being, in truth, a people uniquely chosen by God.

The Four Senses of Scripture

What does it mean to distinguish the "literal" and "spiritual" senses of scripture? This commentary regularly appeals to the classical distinction of literal, typological, moral, and anagogical senses—of which the latter three are deemed "spiritual." This fourfold distinction is traditional in Catholic thought, but the interpretation of its content is debated.⁹ It is useful, then, to give an overview of the approach

9. For an overview of the medieval discussions, see Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1970); Ceslaus Spicq, *Esquisse d'une histoire de l'exégèse latine au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Vrin, 1944); Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 4 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64).

taken in this commentary by discussing briefly the Thomistic theology of the “four senses” and how it may be applied to Exodus in a modern light, taking into account questions and approaches that arise from modern historical-critical study of the Torah.

Aquinas on the Four Senses of Scripture

This commentary interprets Exodus from within the Catholic Christian tradition. As such, it takes special inspiration from the theological insights of Thomas Aquinas. In a sense, the entire commentary is “Thomist” in character, with many references to Aquinas’s theology throughout. This is not due uniquely to the fact that Aquinas commented extensively on the Old Law (though he did). More fundamentally, it stems from the fact that Aquinas is considered the *doctor communis*, or “common doctor,” of Catholic theology—a figure of real, if limited, theological authority. Readers should take note that this appeal to the theology of Aquinas is not an exercise in the study of medieval commentary on scripture, nor is it an anachronistic projection of outdated forms of interpretation onto a modern intellectual landscape. The presupposition, rather, is that the theological principles of Thomism constitute a living tradition that has a central vitality in modern Catholic theology, one that engages fruitfully and decisively with typically modern concerns about faith and reason, as well as history and dogma.

My theological appeal to Aquinas begins with his theory of the four senses of scripture. Diverse theories proliferated in the medieval era, and Aquinas’s understanding of the subject was fairly original. Subsequently, it has also been influential.¹⁰

As regards the literal sense, Aquinas makes two fundamental claims. First, the literal sense of the text of scripture pertains primarily to *the realities signified* by the human author of the text, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. That is to say, the literal meaning is to be found in the reality the text signifies or indicates.¹¹ It is not necessary that this reality be historical in kind. For example, if a text articulates a moral precept, then the literal sense of the text is a moral truth: “You shall not murder” (Exod. 20:13 NRSV). If the text directly signifies the eschatological age that is to come (as in Rev. 21–22), then it is the literal sense of the text that denotes this mystery. If the text is poetic, we might ask in turn,

10. Most recently, the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes use of Aquinas’s theory, appealing specifically to *ST* 1.10.115–18. For analysis of Aquinas on this topic, see John F. Boyle, “St. Thomas Aquinas and Sacred Scripture,” *Pro Ecclesia* 4 (1995): 92–104.

11. *ST* 1.1.10 corp.; Aquinas, *Quodlibet*. 7.6.2.

what does it refer to? In the Song of Songs, the literal sense pertains to the nature of human and divine love. In Exod. 15, the poetry signifies the historical event of the deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea.

Second, then, Aquinas claims that the spiritual sense of scripture is *always founded in the literal sense*. This idea is proposed in a complex manner. The literal sense denotes the realities themselves, by way of the inspired text of scripture. The realities themselves, meanwhile, are authored by God, the Creator of all that is and the Redeemer of humanity. Consequently, God can act in a way no human author does, making use of the realities themselves to signify, in turn, other realities. It is this meaning of things that gives rise to the spiritual senses of scripture denoted by the text.¹²

How, then, might we account for the distinctions of the senses of scripture that emerge? Here Aquinas distinguishes between the things that scripture denotes are to be believed and the things that scripture denotes are to be done. Insofar as the realities denoted in scripture act as exemplars for moral instruction (things to be done), they have a moral spiritual sense.

With regard to things to be believed, there is a twofold distinction. If the realities denoted by the literal sense prefigure historically or symbolize mystically things that are to come to pass later, then those realities have a sense that is either typological (also called “allegorical”) or anagogical. They are typological when the realities in question denote realities pertaining to Christ and the Church. They are anagogical when they denote the eschatological life of the world to come. The distinction stems from the fact that the Church occupies a midway point between the old covenant and the dawn of the new life of the resurrection. Insofar as the Church stems from the old covenant and from Christ, it can be denoted typologically. Insofar as the Church is itself a sign and anticipatory presence of the life of the world to come, the Church and its teachings (in the New Testament) are indicative of the eschaton and can be interpreted anagogically. That is to say, if the reality signifies the mystery of eternal salvation or eternal damnation, it has an analogical sense. I read this broadly to mean that texts that relate to mystical union with the divine also have an anagogical sense, insofar as they prefigure the final union that is to come in the blessedness of the beatific vision.

12. *ST* 1.1.10: “So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property, that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it.”

So, for example, the account in Exod. 32 of the intercession of Moses on behalf of the people who have sinned is meant to denote literally a reality in Israel's past. But it can also be seen typologically as a prefiguration of Christ, who prays for all of humanity on the Cross, or of the Church, who prays for the salvation of human beings from sin and death. The crossing of the Red Sea in Exod. 13 also denotes literally an event in Israel's past. However, it is employed by the New Testament in Rev. 4:6 as an image of the blessed who stand on the far side of the divide between heaven and earth. Their Passover has led them into the eternal life of God. On this reading, the spiritual sense of Exod. 13 is clearly anagogical and denotes the mystery of eternal life.

It follows from this understanding of the spiritual senses that the Old Testament and the entire life of Christ will typically have four senses. One might question how the moral sense in the Old Testament can be figurative or how the life of Christ might be typological. However, even when the old covenant simply espouses a moral teaching (as the literal sense), this teaching is anticipatory or typologically prefigurative of the recapitulation of the moral law given within the new covenant, by Christ and the apostles. Even when Christ is seen to act in history as the culmination of typologies in the old covenant (in the literal sense of the Gospels), his mystery prefigures typologically in some way the life of the Church. Moral teachings in the New Testament, meanwhile, are anticipatory of the life of glory that is to come, and so they retain an anagogical sense. Only teachings that pertain directly to the eschaton have no other sense than literal because they denote a state that is final and cumulative.

This Thomistic account of biblical interpretation is significant for understanding the finality or ultimate purpose of scriptural inspiration. First, the teaching of the Old Testament has an integral literal signification that must be explored for its own sake. Even within the Hebrew scriptures themselves, however, various texts clearly seek typologically to indicate realities of history that emerge subsequent to one another, so as to demonstrate a pattern of divine intervention. As such, the exodus is understood typologically to foreshadow the exile of Israel in Babylon. The events of the life of Israel foreshadow a definitive eschatological intervention of God, foretold in books such as Isaiah and Daniel. Likewise, then, the events of the Old Testament indicate obscurely and typologically the mystery of the incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection of Christ, as well as the mystery of the Church. The life of the early Church in Acts prefigures the subsequent life of the Church in the postapostolic age, and the whole economy of salvation in both the Old Testament and the New contains prophetic teaching and sacraments that signify the life of the world to come.

In this way, the finality of scriptural revelation and the finality of the grace of supernatural faith are seen to converge. The grace of faith is given to human beings as an anticipation of the immediate vision of God promised in the world to come.¹³ First and foremost, it gives us understanding of who God is in himself, but it also permits us to understand creatures in light of God.¹⁴ It teaches us by an inward instinct how to act practically as disciples of Christ and members of his body the Church.¹⁵ Correspondingly, inspired scripture is given to us to nourish our faith, hope, and charity in view of union with God in the life to come. Scripture teaches the knowledge of the identity of God and allows us to understand creatures in light of God. Scripture functions practically, teaching us to live as disciples of Christ by the grace of the Holy Spirit and to avoid all actions that separate us from God and his Church.

Obviously this spiritual reading of scripture should not be employed so as to obscure or ignore the many nuanced and difficult historical and textual topics that modern exegesis brings to light. However, it is a unifying principle for understanding the ultimate purpose of the book of the Bible as a vehicle for divine instruction and grace in the larger life of the Church.

The Literal Sense: Is the Exodus about a Historical Event?

How, then, might we make use of this Thomistic vision of the inspired character of scripture and its several senses when considering the book of Exodus in a modern context? After all, historical-critical study of the Torah suggests with warrant that there are many literary sources within the text, that these stem from diverse traditions with complex histories, and that the work of multiple editors lies behind the book as we have it today.

One way to focus this question is to ask if the literal sense of Exodus, taken in a general way, pertains to a historical event. Or is it primarily a literary construction that serves as a vast metaphor for the Israelite experience of exile in Babylon in the sixth century BC? Without seeking to radically oppose these two options, I lean decidedly toward the former view.

Here I follow moderately conservative modern exegetes and historians such as Roland de Vaux (most especially), Marie-Joseph Lagrange, Walther Eichrodt, and Brevard S. Childs. I take it that the genesis of the ancient Israelite religion

13. *ST* 2–2.1.4.

14. *ST* 2–2.1.1.

15. *ST* 2–2.7.2, 2–2.8.1 and 3, 2–2.9.1 and 3.

was due to a movement of slaves that left Egypt, perhaps late in the thirteenth century BC; this movement was led by a seminal religious leader and legislator who provided an initial religious identity and corporate organization. Theologically speaking, the Christian tradition holds that this figure, Moses, was inspired by God as an instrument of revelation to initiate a new monotheistic religion that would eventually have universal import for all humanity. Likewise, I believe in a historical settlement of the land of “Israel” by this people, which gave rise to an eventual tribal confederation and monarchy. This people had a complex social and religious history that is difficult to reconstruct theoretically with certitude. However, we do know a great deal about many of its core beliefs and stable features. The people of Israel were clearly affected in diverse times and places by religious syncretism. Nevertheless, despite all of this complexity, elements of the original exodus tradition were maintained, expanded, and commented upon, presumably and primarily by priests and scribes over the course of hundreds of years.

This movement saw itself as emerging from an original inspiration and leader, but it was also periodically affected by new prophetic revelation, which served to expand the tradition organically and reorient the people of Israel in new circumstances of history. Over time this gave rise to a more ornate and complex theology, bodies of law, customs, and sacerdotal practices. This same tradition had numerous crises and was especially subject to self-examination during the time of the Babylonian exile. During this time and perhaps just afterward, various bodies of law and primal traditions, which had been previously composed, were gathered together and formed coherently into the Torah as we have it today. Exodus is a book, then, composed of diverse, ancient textual sources written largely within the preexilic era, with some elements dating back to the original Mosaic movement itself. These sources may well differ in age but also contain elements of ancient tradition. Consequently, I take the book of Exodus to be a hybrid of traditions but also in some way reflective of ancient events.

Modern scholars since the nineteenth century have typically postulated the possibility of four main bodies of textual tradition in the Torah, based upon the main divisions of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis. The Elohist source material is thought to be a mid-ninth-century-BC body of material redacted and reformulated by priests in northern Israel after the settlement, following the early Mosaic movement. The Yahwist source is believed to be a redaction and representation of traditional material that took place in the eighth century BC, during the early stages of the monarchy of the kingdom of Judah. The Deuteronomical material (mostly found in the book of Deuteronomy, though not exclusively) is associated

with the religious reformation that took place in seventh- and sixth-century BC Israel prior to the Babylonian exile. The Priestly material is associated with the postexilic priests of the sixth century BC, who were concerned with the preservation and reformulation of Judaism in the wake of the destruction of the first temple of Solomon. One may very well hold to the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis while also maintaining the following points as historically likely. First, each of these “sources” are postulated not in definitive, fixed terms but rather as likely hypotheses that help us understand in realistic and reasonable terms the conceptual, linguistic, and editorial layering of the text of the Torah. Second, each of these purported “sources” is composed of traditions and can contain much older materials dating back to original events, or stemming from those events. Third, the notion of “sources” is not exclusive to only the four mentioned above, and there can be a broader set of influences in the text as we have it today. Fourth, theologians should make use of hypothetical notions of textual sources with a degree of epistemological reserve since such theories are ultimately unverifiable and are based on conjectures of historical likelihood.

For the purposes of this commentary, I presume a moderate position on historical sources that does not depend essentially upon the definitive truth of any one theory. Some scholars dispute the value of the Graf-Wellhausen hypothesis in an effort to claim that all or most of the material in the Torah is of a much earlier origin, derived from Moses and his initial circle of followers. While I do believe there is material in the Torah that derives from the earliest historical period (including the possibility of Mosaic authorship of some sections), I also think it is evident from any close reading that the text contains a multiplicity of sources. The same events or laws are often recounted several times from different vantage points, even in separate books. Singular events are reported by means of a collage of traditions that have been spliced together. It does not seem to me that the admission of sources in the text in any way compromises a basic commitment to the underlying historicity or inspired character of the Mosaic movement and its universal, world-historical importance.

Meanwhile, other scholars (mostly contemporary) dispute the Documentary Hypothesis on the grounds that it is too artificial and that there are innumerable traditions present in the Torah, most of which were forged together at a later date, in the sixth to fourth century BC, without any real correlation to ancient events that happened at the actual time of the exodus. This viewpoint seems to me not only entirely unverifiable but also excessively skeptical. It is a fool’s errand to set out to prove in negative terms that what is purported in scripture

as a record of very ancient history must never have happened. Such affirmations can never be demonstrated and may result at most in the skeptical admission that the modern historian cannot say with certitude if something in the past really took place or not. As for the division of the text of scripture, the discernment is more literary than historical in kind. Does there seem to be a set of themes and vocabulary that one might reasonably associate with the Yahwist school as distinct from the Deuteronomist school? It seems to me that one can reasonably perceive patterns in the text according to these “traditional” modern divisions of the Documentary Hypothesis. At the same time, this should be thoroughly qualified. For the purposes of this commentary, I am not presuming the definite validity of the Documentary Hypothesis. On the contrary, my two basic presuppositions are more modest. First, I presume that what is recounted in Exodus has some basis in real events of ancient history. Second, I assume that there are sources in the text and that the text has been heavily redacted so as to show how the ancient event is symbolic of the later historical and spiritual life of the people of Israel. One should note that these two presuppositions could, in principle, be maintained according to any of the three theories mentioned above, which include the early authorship of the Torah by a collection of scribes around Moses, the Documentary Hypothesis (according to a diversity of modalities of qualification), or the later redaction of ancient materials at the time of the Babylonian exile and thereafter.

As for the events of the exodus itself, I take it that there were ancient Hebrews living in Egypt who came to be politically oppressed by the Egyptian government. Some of them were liberated through the “prophetic” work of Moses, a self-designated religious leader who took it upon himself to act on behalf of the people. I believe theologically that there were *mirabilia Dei* involved in the liberation of the people from Egypt, though the character of these divine interventions is difficult to perceive with clarity given the heavily symbolic and markedly folkloric character of elements of the Exodus text. The people liberated did travel in the Sinai Peninsula for an extended time period and were subject to an internal religious ferment, which was characterized by a set of legislative and cultic initiatives on the part of their leaders. I take it then that some of the traditions in the last four books of the Torah do reflect information and belief that come down from the original movement. As for realities that can be attributed directly to Moses, I think it likely that the divine name, the Ten Commandments, the ark, some kind of tent of meeting, and the notion of a covenant with the Lord all stem directly from him.

All this being said, I also take it for granted that the Torah is formed in great part from later tradition, with influences from the ages of the settlement, monarchy, Deuteronomical reform, and the exile. In the redacted text, the event of the exodus is undoubtedly portrayed as prefigurative of the later life of Israel. This means that the events are often depicted in largely symbolic and typological terms and are meant to signify the later religious and cultic life of the people of Israel. The most obvious example in this respect is the tabernacle in the wilderness, which is depicted typologically throughout Exodus as a sign of the temple in Jerusalem. Consequently, the “history” in question is often iconic in kind. It contains elements that may be taken literally to signify historical events, but it also clearly contains elements that are powerfully archetypal, or symbolic, which are meant to denote the perennial mystery of God’s covenant with Israel. Moreover, the narrative of the exodus, insofar as it is historical, has a decidedly archaic form. Consequently, we should be cautious when ascribing historical foundations to the event (which I believe we should) and make sure to consider that the mode of signifying history is very different than the mode used in modern or even ancient Greco-Roman history, as is characteristic of the New Testament.

One may ask what gives rise to this extraordinary list of convictions. Here I would like to make clear that what I have just spelled out in the previous paragraphs is presented out of respect to the reader. All interpreters have deep-seated theological (or a-theological) as well as philosophical, exegetical, and historical judgments that inform their work. Stating these clearly is not meant to prohibit other views but rather to make reasoned argument possible. My own views are affected by a combination of theological beliefs about Christian revelation, philosophical views about monotheism, and exegetical and historical judgments that derive from a limited but conscientious textual study of the Bible with the aid of modern exegesis. Although my standpoint is undoubtedly conservative by contemporary standards and the theology in this volume is deeply Catholic in nature, there is no animus toward historical-critical exegesis in this commentary. On the contrary, I am well-disposed toward that field and believe very much in its necessity, even if I also *do not believe* that it is a form of study that operates in pure scientific autonomy, unaffected by any theological views (or lack thereof), or independently from profound philosophical convictions (which are always inevitable, even in the most naïve interpreter).

My basic reasons for treating the exodus as a foundational historical event in the life of ancient Israel derive both from the Catholic faith and from natural reason.

From faith, due to the principles of Christology revealed in the New Testament: The Catholic Church teaches that God has become a man, living in history as a true human being with a human soul and physical body. If God has become incarnate in time and in flesh, then it is only fitting to believe that the Old Testament that bears witness to the mystery of Christ prefiguratively is also grounded in a physical history, albeit one that we know only imperfectly. Here one might make a christological parallel: Irenaeus's understanding of Christ lies at a midpoint between the gnosticism of Valentinus and the "materialism" of the Ebionites. The gnostics retain a spiritual meaning in regard to the event of Christ's life but evacuate the mystery of all physicality and historicity. The Ebionites insist on the fundamental human reality of Jesus but are unable to maintain sufficiently the divinity of the Christ and the inner spiritual nature of Old Testament law. Analogously speaking, one can say that the historical character of the Torah is understood, theologically, in an all too gnostic way, particularly if the document is evacuated of virtually all historicity and understood merely symbolically. Against this view, we must say that the Word has become flesh, beginning with the patriarchs and continuing with the exodus, as a genuine historical event. However, an "Ebionite" literalism that ignores the multiple layers of symbol, typology, and archetype is also unrealistic and overly literalist or materialist. The Torah is primarily given to us not to determine precise historical facts about an ancient event but to introduce us into the mystery of the covenant of God with Israel. The christological balance we are seeking is to understand the divine revelation of God and his law taking place in and through a true historical event, grounded in the flesh, but this event must be understood spiritually in light of God's enduring covenant with Israel through time. Much of the significance of the exodus event was understood retrospectively in light of subsequent prophecy. This spiritual sense of the events is often given to us in the Torah in a highly symbolic form, fashioned by those who transmitted earlier traditions, interpreted them prescriptively, and edited them into a unity. The word is present in the flesh truly, but a materialistic reflection on the factual "flesh" of Israelite history, while warranted and necessary, is not sufficient. One must enter into the deeper "spirit" of the Torah, which is its perennial significance as a revelation of God given to the people of Israel.

A word should be said here regarding metaphysics. At multiple points in this commentary I presume that the text of Exodus literally denotes truths about the mystery of God that are metaphysical or ontological in kind, pertaining to the divine names: God's omnipotence, aseity, and the like. "Literally" here should be understood in a particular way, based primarily upon the object signified rather

than the mode of signification. One can denote the attributes of God by use of a metaphor, such as God turning his “back” toward Moses in Exod. 33:23–34:7. Metaphors and intuitive concepts are often pregnant with ontological signification and give rise to subsequent, distinctively philosophical reflection. Consequently, the reader should not be surprised that I will often employ the interpretations of Aquinas or other metaphysical readers of scripture to interpret the text. I do not take this to be a naïve anachronism projected back onto the text. There are implicitly ontological notions latent throughout Exodus that form a central theme in the book. Patristic and medieval theological tradition rightly paid attention to this theme. The presumption, then, is that there exists an organic tradition of reflection on the nature of God both within scripture and subsequent to it, from the Old Testament prophets to the time of the apostles to the modern era. In saying this I am following in my own way the thinking of John Henry Newman on the development of doctrine. Because this is a work of Catholic theology, the interpretations offered make no pretension to being prescriptively normative, but they do presuppose the perennial truth of Catholic doctrine, as well as the possibility of profound coherence between the teaching of scripture, classical Catholic tradition, and the reflections of modern theology.

There are also motives of natural reason to believe in an ancient origin of the Israelite religion by way of the exodus. I will briefly list some of these reasons.

First, it is clear to any mindful reader that the text of the Torah is not merely the product of a postexilic scribal workshop or the product of a single, late-ancient author. The text contains many obvious non sequiturs, stylistic differences, and alternative versions of the same events. Sometimes the latter have clearly been combined or spliced together. The laws of the Torah show strong literary indications of deriving from diverse times and historical settings. An analogy is helpful here: the differences between the four canonical Gospels demonstrate that they cannot all be the work of one person, and yet they share between them preexisting traditions they each received. Likewise, the layers of text in the Torah demonstrate the existence of numerous traditions regarding Moses, his legislation, and the exodus event that were prior to the final redaction. Furthermore, the exodus is referred to clearly by early prophets like Micah and Hosea, the Elijah narratives, a great number of the psalms, and other later prophets. Consequently, we should presume reasonably the existence of some kind of event behind the independent witnesses of so many diverse and independent traditions.

Second, the religion of Israel is striking for its coherence and originality. Many argue that there is a polytheistic or syncretistic religious history hiding behind the

text of the Old Testament that has been censored by the later editors. Even if we allow for elements of truth to this theory (due to the syncretism of Yahwism in the earlier epochs), it is impossible to avoid the impression of the Old Testament as a thematically unified text having many core theological themes of a deeply original character. Over the course of hundreds of years, the ancient Israelites clearly maintained the conviction that they had been chosen to have a unique relationship with God, who made an exclusive claim on them as a people. In light of their perseverant convictions about God, they believed themselves warranted to subject the religious behavior of their neighbors and themselves to extreme critique, despite being subjected by superior national powers to severe oppression and persecution for their beliefs. Judging simply from the perspective of natural reason, historical movements with this degree of coherence and intensity are unlikely to come about without a powerful underlying conception that unifies them, and it is simpler to attribute this stimulus to the Mosaic movement (to which the Bible itself ascribes it historically) than to try to identify it elsewhere in some invisible historical agent who remains largely unknown.

Similarly, there is a judgment from philosophical reason. The Torah presents us with an extremely elevated monotheistic understanding of God, one that purifies human reason of all false deification of the physical universe as well as the human political realm. It also contains a profound, noble, and very beautiful moral teaching that has greatly affected the whole of humanity (especially through the medium of Christianity). There is no presence in ancient Greek philosophy of many of the profound insights formulated in the Torah hundreds of years before the epoch of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. To this day, the Torah, when rightly understood, casts a ray of enlightenment upon human reason that frees human beings from superstition and idolatry and turns them toward authentic religious and ethical behavior. Consequently, it is reasonable to perceive in the formulation of the Torah no mere historical accident but a kind of profoundly inspired work of God meant to benefit the whole of the human race.

The Typological Sense: The Old Law Prefigures Christ and the Church

In the Catholic tradition, the word “typological” is often used synonymously with the word “allegorical.” I employ the former term consistently, in part to distinguish the practices of this commentary from so-called allegorical readings that depart freely from the literal sense of the text. Typological interpretations ought to be well grounded, as Aquinas notes, in the literal sense of scripture.

They may denote how one historical event foreshadows another, but they need not. Often the events of Exodus are portrayed typologically so as to communicate a claim about the ongoing workings of God's grace in the covenant with Israel, and so they foreshadow typologically the life of the elect people that unfolds subsequently. When the Israelites struggle with the Amalekites in Exod. 17 or when Moses is given counsel by Jethro the Midianite priest in Exod. 18, these figures are traditionally seen within Judaism to represent diverse relationships between Israel and the Gentile peoples. Consequently, one's sense of what is typological can be fairly broad because the literal sense of scripture is similarly broad in meaning. That being said, typological reading ought not to drift into a use of allegory that is more or less arbitrary and unconnected from the literal sense of scripture.

Typological readings of scripture can be better understood as both textually warranted and theologically profound precisely because of modern exegesis. Historical-critical interpretation heightens one's sensitivity to natural causalities of authorship that lie behind a given text and to the role that presupposed traditions or beliefs play in the work of human authors. Consequently, modern readings make us more sensitive to the ways that earlier events are often being "reread" by human authors in light of later events, in either the composition of the texts themselves or in their redaction and editing. When Hosea enjoins Judah to "return" to fidelity to God, he makes allusion to an idealized relationship that existed between God and Israel in the wilderness, demonstrating that he has knowledge of some kind of prior tradition (Hos. 12–14). When the Torah is given its final redacted form, the exodus is seen as a prefiguration of the exile. The Gospel of Matthew repeatedly depicts Jesus of Nazareth as a new Moses, who recapitulates in his own life the mysteries of Exodus. Paul makes generous use of typologies in his letters to explain the sense of the Hebrew scripture in light of Christ. The Bible, then, is riddled through with typology. It is a thematic constant that every genuine interpreter must confront.

To this a key theological premise must be added: the belief that the texts of scripture are aligned not only by the ingenuity of human authors but also by the primal causation of God the Holy Spirit. That is to say, God has acted in history to reveal himself and has given a supernatural inspiration to the prophets and apostles to understand in their faith and to communicate truly in their teaching the inward meaning of history and of divine revelation as intended by God. The typologies elaborated by human authors and editors reflect a divine intention to communicate to us divine truth.

It is true that a Christian reading of the typologies of the Old Testament can render obscure the original literal sense of the text, so that the interpreter ignores what the sacred author actually intended to say. However, this need not be the case. On the one hand, the Old Testament books are themselves compiled alongside one another by a harmonious yet open-ended alignment of typologies. The Old Testament prophets are so fundamentally eschatological that their teaching calls out for a resolution beyond itself. This “openness” can be understood in ways that do no violence to the integrity of the Old Testament as revelation but that suggest its integral completion by the New Testament revelation. On the other hand, the New Testament itself provides the main interpretive keys for understanding the “fulfillment” of the types so that the Old Testament is not jettisoned but reactualized in a new way within the Christian era, at the heart of the life of the Church. Indeed, the Old Testament continues to speak to the Church not only about the past but also of the eschaton and in this way actively reveals to the Church what is yet to come, even in the light of Christ.

The Moral Sense: Christian Ethical Teaching in the Old Testament

Catholic theology traditionally divides the laws in the Torah into “moral,” “ceremonial,” and “juridical” categories. In this commentary, I employ this distinction thematically. The moral laws of the Torah are understood to be of perennial importance within Christianity—particularly the Ten Commandments as reinterpreted and interiorized by Christ and the apostles. The ceremonial law is abrogated by the coming of Christ, his death and resurrection, and the institution of the sacraments of the New Law. These ceremonies foreshadow the mystery of Christ and the Church but also cease to have their living function once Christ appears, who in a real sense supersedes them. The juridical precepts, which concern concrete judgments or social punishments for serious transgressions, are understood by most Christian commentators not only to be inherently morally defensible but also to stem from a particular people and epoch in an ancient social setting. They are sometimes very stern and centered around an ethic of strict religious justice, which is tempered only moderately by clemency. They are historically provisional in nature and need not be adopted in subsequent times and places, but they do contain an inward spiritual content that continues to inspire our moral understanding.

Some modern commentators criticize this distinction, claiming either that it is an arbitrary imposition of divisions from a later era or that it is anti-Judaic and

fails to take seriously the teachings of the Torah on its own terms. To my thinking, both of these claims are seriously erroneous. First, the traditional Christian analysis of the Torah is grounded in the New Testament revelation itself. In the teaching of Christ and the apostles, many elements of moral law from the Torah are retained and intensified. The basic laws of cleanliness and uncleanness, as well as the temple rituals, are said to be abrogated or sublimated-by-fulfillment in the mystery of Christ. Many practical civic judgments and punishments prescribed by the Torah are seen not to apply to Christians (both Jewish and Gentile) living under the laws of the Roman Empire.

Moreover, it should be noted that while the Christian interpretation of the Torah can act as a source of division between Christians and Jews, it is also this classical interpretation that binds the Church most closely to the people of Israel. Principally through the Church the Torah has become a “light to all the nations,” especially in its moral components, and it is in great part due to this profound connection that Christians and Jews may find ways not only to understand one another theologically but also to cooperate practically. Talmudic Judaism itself has ceased to celebrate the parts of the ceremonial laws associated with sacrifice and the temple and has adapted many of the juridical precepts to the later political, Gentile epochs in which the Jewish people have lived, in part through a kind of spiritual interpretation of these precepts. Consequently, the classical Catholic approach to the moral law of Exodus is in many ways convergent with that of Judaism, even if there are many nontrivial differences that remain irreducible. Ecumenism is about recognizing differences as well as similitudes, and the careful reader will notice that throughout this commentary there is an attempt to engage in a sustained Catholic theological appreciation of the significance of the Old Law, Judaism, and the mystery of Israel.

It may surprise some readers, particularly those of a more historical-critical formation, that I interpret the Ten Commandments in this volume in light of the contemporary teaching magisterium of the Catholic Church. Furthermore, I claim that in some real sense this modern Catholic teaching represents the literal sense of Exodus. This may seem like a historically infeasible affirmation, but I offer a theological argument for why I take this path of interpretation. Aquinas affirms that the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20) present what he calls “second-order” precepts of the moral law.¹⁶ Since human beings can fail to understand or believe them, they are not inevitably known to human reason, but they are fairly intuitive

16. *ST* 1–2.100.3.

notions that emerge readily from rightly ordered moral reflection. They give rise, in turn, to “third-order” precepts that are more nuanced and developed, which follow organically and logically from them. For example, from the precept that it is always wrong to murder (to take innocent human life) one can derive the precept that it is wrong to take innocent human life at any stage, from conception to natural death. This latter teaching is implied logically by the former, if the former is applied in a consistent and informed manner. Understood in this way, the Torah reveals profound truths of the natural law that may be eclipsed in human culture due to the effects of original and personal sin. However, a developed understanding of this teaching has often taken place gradually, especially in the light of Christian revelation and in the life of the Catholic Church, herself safeguarded and illumined by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, I am working under the presupposition of the moral legitimacy of the ecclesial use of the moral law of the Torah within a Christian landscape.

***The Anagogical Sense: The Passover of Israel and the Church
into the Eternal Glory of God***

The mystical, or anagogical, dimension of scripture is omnipresent and is the “last word” in scriptural interpretation. One might suspect appeals to the anagogical sense are in some way arbitrary and may be projected onto the text extrinsically. Rightly understood, however, the anagogical sense is that which is the most concrete, and in a certain way, that which is most purely identical with the literal sense. The reason for this, as Aquinas notes, is that the spiritual senses are always grounded in the literal sense, but the literal sense pertains to the realities themselves of the economy of salvation. What is most essential to the economy of salvation is the presence of God’s divinizing grace acting in human souls. Without this grace there is no salvation history. At its deepest level, the covenant between God and Israel consists “formally” in the mystery of union between man and God, made possible by faith, hope, and love. When Moses is depicted as “seeing God” in Exod. 34, the deepest literal sense of this event is mystical or anagogical. That is to say, it depicts God’s intention to unite human beings to himself by grace, bespeaking a deeper mystery of divine inhabitation present among the people of Israel. The text is not merely information. More profoundly, it acts as an invitation to the interior life, as a way of living in covenant with the God of Israel by that same grace denoted in the text.

Furthermore, the revelation given is always teleologically oriented in kind. This formal or essential mystery of union with God, which lies just beneath the surface

of the literal sense, is always oriented toward an eschatological horizon. God chose the Hebrew people in ancient Egypt *in view of* the covenant, the elaboration of ancient Judaism, and the formation of the Torah. God inspired the prophets in ancient Israel *in view of* the mystery of the eschaton and the fulfillment of the covenant in Christ. God became human and suffered, died and was buried, rose from the dead in his human nature, and established the Church *in view of* the historical economy of the Christian people and the universal preaching of the possibility of salvation to all the world. The mystery of the Church was established *in view of* the eschaton, and the invitation given to each human being to see God face-to-face and to be raised from the dead to eternal life.

Consequently, the life of grace present in humanity from Abraham to John the Baptist is unitive: it invites the saints of the older covenant into friendship with God. This friendship is implicitly oriented toward Christ and eschatological in its horizon: it leads toward the divinizing life of the beatific vision and the bodily resurrection from the dead. The anagogical sense of scripture, then, is that which is most ultimate and eschatological in nature, as well as that which is most profound or essential. The work of grace in humanity is at the heart of the covenant, but this same work of grace is ordered toward the glorification and transformation of human existence.

When I speak of mystical union in this commentary, the sense of the term is both personal and collective, both actual and eschatological; it pertains to both soul and body. Often I do not overtly distinguish between these different senses of union with God. They are presumed to be interrelated. Union with God in ancient Israel was implicitly related to union with God in Christ. Salvation of the individual is always related in some way to corporate salvation, since our union with Christ relates us intrinsically to his mystical body, the Church. The illumination of the soul and its unitive love for God cannot be divorced from the mystery of the resurrection of the dead and the glorification of the body. Here I am simply presupposing the teaching of the New Testament: that all grace given to human beings, no matter where in the history of the divine economy, is in some way Christ-conforming. Those who live in friendship with God are initiated in some way into union with the life, death, and resurrection of the Son of God, either by way of anticipation (in ancient Israel) or by way of consummation (in the life of the Church). In both ways, the people of God approach the mystery of the Cross and find in it not only their true Passover but also the passage through the sea of this world into that land where God is king forever.