

The Reading of Scripture in Thomas More's *Dialog Concerning Heresies*

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In his *Dialog Concerning Heresies*, Thomas More presumes and, in part, defends a long standing way of reading scripture which he had received from the Middle Ages. It is this inheritance that is the subject of this paper. It is not my intention to address specific instances of debated interpretation as they appear in the *Dialog*, but rather to articulate a particular vision of scripture and its interpretation that is, in fact, not More's own but that of the church he so ardently defends. I shall first discuss some elements of this vision and then turn to the *Dialog* itself.

The Tradition of Interpretation

When St. Augustine, as a young pagan, first turned his attention to scripture, he rejected it for its lack of sophistication. The bishop, reflecting on this episode, speaks to the very character of sacred scripture:

So I resolved to make some study of the sacred scriptures and find what kind of books they were. But what I came upon was something not grasped by the proud, not revealed either to children, something utterly humble in the hearing but sublime in the doing, and shrouded deep in mystery. And I was not of the nature to enter into it or bend my neck to follow it. When I first read those scriptures, I did not feel in the least what I have just said; they seemed to me unworthy to be compared with the majesty of Cicero. My conceit was repelled by their simplicity, and I had not the mind to penetrate into their depths. They were indeed of a nature to grow in Your little ones. But I could not bear to be a little one; I was only swollen with pride, but to myself I seemed a very big man.¹

Augustine notes a peculiar feature of scripture. At first encounter it is a humble text. Indeed, Christ's little ones can enter into it. But it is also a difficult work shrouded in mystery, a work of unimaginable depths. It is precisely this conjunction of the humble and the mysterious that makes scripture so arresting and fascinating. But it is, in its way, deceptive. One might not see the difficulty for the seeming simplicity of it. One might, like the young pagan Augustine, think that one all too easily grasps it. But such is not the case; the difficulty and mysteriousness of scripture is a theme throughout Augustine and the fathers.

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, III.5, from the translation of Frank Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), 39.

Concerned precisely with the difficulties in interpreting scripture, Augustine explicitly dedicated two of the four books of his *De doctrina Christiana* to the problem of obscure and ambiguous passages of scripture and their interpretation. The work does not address particular passages, but rather the principles necessary for such interpretation. Specifically, he speaks to those who find themselves troubled in the face of scripture's difficulties or who have no troubles at all and think the text is quite self-evident. A few comments on this work may prove helpful.

One might ask to begin with, why God would write a text so difficult to interpret. We have already seen an answer in the *Confessions* and Augustine addresses it here in *De doctrina* with much the same answer: to conquer pride and combat disdain in the reader.² But a divine rationale does not address the particulars of how one is to go about reading this difficult text (apart from humbly), and to that we turn.

Augustine tells us that written things are not understood for one of two reasons: the signs are either unknown or ambiguous. He deals with unknown signs in Book II and ambiguous signs in Book III. Words, for Augustine, are conventional signs. As signs they can be proper signs (*signa propria* sometimes translated "literal") or figurative signs (*signa translata*).

They are called literal [proper] when they are used to designate those things on account of which they were institute; thus we say *bos* [ox] when we mean an animal of a herd because all men using the Latin language call it by that name just as we do. Figurative signs occur when the thing which we designate by a literal sign is used to signify something else; thus we say "ox" and by that syllable understand the animal which is ordinarily designated by that word, but again by that animal we understand an evangelist, as is signified in the scripture.³

One can speak of unknown proper or figurative signs. The remedy for unknown proper signs is knowledge of the languages involved, their vocabulary, and their expressions.⁴ Figurative signs for Augustine in *De doctrina* is a broad category. It includes any kind of signification that looks beyond simply what the word means in its proper signification to uses that engage the thing signified by the word itself. This is the world of poetry, metaphor, and literary devices; it is also the world of scriptural prefiguration. Such figurative signs may be unknown. As with unknown proper signs, this might arise from ignorance of the language and its expressions. It could also be from ignorance of things signified. Thus Augustine says the interpreter of scripture needs to have knowledge of things: of animals, stones and plants, of numbers, of history, of the arts (i.e. of how things are made), of the science of disputation, and of philosophy.⁵

In other cases, the problem is not that the sign is unknown, but that it is ambiguous. Here too, Augustine says one needs to be attentive to whether the words are proper or figurative. In the case of words taken properly, sometimes the ambiguity arises from questions of grammar and punctuation.⁶ Words taken figuratively that are ambiguous are particularly knotty and get much attention.⁷ Often times the ambiguity can arise when figurative terms are compared across scripture. Thus the Kingdom of God may be like leaven, but one should beware the leaven of the Pharisees. In both cases, leaven is used figuratively, but the import would seem to be different as

² *De doctrina Christiana*, II.vi (7); translations will be taken from *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobs-Merrill, 1958).

³ *De doctrina Christiana*, II.x (15), p. 43.

⁴ *De doctrina Christiana*, II.xi (16)-xv (22).

⁵ *De doctrina Christiana*, II.xvi (23)-xlii (63).

⁶ *De doctrina Christiana*, III.ii (2)-iv (8).

⁷ *De doctrina Christiana*, III.v (9)-xxxvii (56).

one referent is good and the other evil. More famously, the lion of Judah signifies Christ but the roaring lion seeking something to devour signifies the devil.⁸ We need not replicate the many variations on ambiguous signs in *De doctrina*; more to the point, Augustine articulates principles for determining the figurative signification and for determining when a term with a nonetheless clear proper signification nonetheless ought to be taken figuratively. One takes figuratively what does not pertain to virtuous behavior or truths of faith in its proper signification.⁹ The principle is clear enough even if the application will necessarily be a matter of debate.

Augustine's principles in *De doctrina* do not resolve all disputes in the interpretation of scripture. An influential passage in the *Confessions* is telling. In Book XII Augustine turns his attention to the interpretation of Genesis 1. He addresses some of his critics who have charged that his interpretation is false as it is not what Moses meant. Augustine quickly disposes of the problem of authorial intention. How do his critics know what Moses meant? They have what he has: the words of scripture. When one looks at the words, Augustine's interpretation fits the text. The problem is that other different interpretations also fit the text. The words are ambiguous. There is not a way to adjudicate among these competing interpretations and Augustine goes even further: there is no reason to do so. Perhaps Moses intended all of these different interpretations; and if Moses did not, God could have. Multiple interpretations is not a fault; it is part of the very mysterious depths of scripture.

Does this mean that any interpretation, provided it fits the text, is true? This would be a source of mischief in the case of the ambiguous. Augustine affirms that some interpretations may be false, but one does not appeal either to the words themselves (the very source of the problem) or to the even more elusive intention of the author. Instead, Augustine posits negative criteria: a true interpretation cannot be contrary to reason or to the faith. Thus, many interpretations may fit a text and, to Augustine's mind, be true. They cannot be true, even if they fit the text, if they violate either reason or the faith.¹⁰

In addition to the criteria of the *Confessions*, we should note an additional criterion made explicit and insisted upon in the *De doctrina*. All of scripture is ordered to the end of love of God and love of neighbor. If this is the end of scripture, then any reading that is not ordered to that end is false.¹¹ Thus another negative rule: any interpretation that is contrary to the love of God or the love of neighbor is not a true interpretation.

The Middle Ages is heir to the interpretive work of the early church, both in its particulars and in its principles. In the case of the Latin west, Augustine is dominant, but fundamentally, there is remarkable unanimity among the fathers on the principles which is precisely why there is so little discussion of them in the Middle Ages itself. Some clarification and specification occurs and we can note some particulars.

With the Middle Ages we get the increasingly refined articulation of the senses of scripture (ultimately most commonly given as four). Most important here is the nearly universal distinction between the literal (or historical) and spiritual (or mystical) senses. The literal sense considers what the words signify. This sense scripture shares with all other written works (indeed, with anything expressed in human speech). One could ask what the word "lamb" signifies in the Passover instructions given to the Jews in Exodus, to which the answer is a woolly mammal.

⁸ For both examples, *De doctrina Christiana*, III.xxv (35).

⁹ *De doctrina Christiana*, III.xv (23)-xvi (24).

¹⁰ *Confessiones*, XII.xiv (17), xviii (27), xxiii (32)-xxxii (43).

¹¹ E.g. *De doctrina Christiana*, I.xxxvi (40).

The spiritual or mystical sense considers not what the words signify, but what the things signified by the words signify. This signification of things themselves is unique to scripture as it is dependent upon a signification which is intrinsic to things and is only possible if the creator and Lord of history who has so invested these things with such signification is Himself also the author of scripture. Thus, while the word “lamb” in Exodus signifies the little woolly creature sacrificed at Passover; the lamb itself signifies Jesus Christ. A thing signifies another thing. The number and description of senses within the spiritual sense of scripture are many and varied, although the most common is three. In his treatment of figurative signs, Augustine had put together both literary and poetic devices and the unique spiritual signification of scripture. The Middle Ages sifts the distinction, putting the purely literary with the literal and reserving the peculiarly scriptural with the spiritual.¹²

With the Middle Ages arises a new important factor in the reading of scripture, which is the work of the doctors of the church. Aquinas, for example, speaks of the intrinsic role of the doctors in *sacra doctrina* and thereby the reading of scripture.¹³ The point is not that the doctors agree in all points of interpretation; they do not and the Middle Ages is the happy heir to Augustine’s affirmation of multiple legitimate interpretations. But it is the case that the doctors on essential matters of doctrine do not differ.¹⁴ Such is the foundational affirmation of the Middle Ages.

Thomas Aquinas also appeals to the same principles as Augustine for determining the truth of an interpretation. Thomas articulates a bit further the implications of multiple true interpretations of the literal sense of scripture with two negative principles: first, one ought not assert something false to be found in scripture, especially what would contradict the faith (here he follows Augustine); and second, one ought not to insist upon one’s own interpretation to the exclusion of other interpretations which in their content are true and in which “the circumstance of the letter” is preserved.¹⁵ This is seen throughout the practice of interpretation in the Middle Ages in which authors happily set forth multiple interpretations culled from the saints with no adjudication between them. They are all legitimate and each contributes to the deepening understanding of sacred scripture.

The Dialog

Throughout the *Dialog*, More undertakes the defense of the traditional interpretation of scripture. Little, if anything, is new. What is new is the sustained defense of it in response to the attacks of the reformers. At the same time, the tradition of reading scripture undergirds the *Dialog* from the beginning. There is no need to note each instance of dependence or defense in the *Dialog*. A few instances will be sufficient to aid the reader of the *Dialog* in seeing the traditions at work in it.

The engagement with scripture is immediate in the *Dialog*. The messenger sets forth in the first chapter his principles for reading scripture. First, no study other than that of scripture is necessary for there is no light other than that of scripture. Second, it is good to learn many passages by heart. Third, he seeks out the “sentence and understanding” of scripture as best he can by himself. Fourth, he does not use interpreters and glosses; he does not have time for them. Fifth, he resolves

¹² The distinction is articulated neatly in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I.1.10.

¹³ *Summa theologiae*, I.1.8.ad 2m.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Lectura romana in primum Sententiarum Petri Lombardi*, prol. 4.3.

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, 4.1.resp.

difficulties in passages by the “best and surest interpretation” of comparing scriptural passages one to another. He says that such passages do not fail to declare themselves in this way, which he finds “sufficient and surest.” Sixthly, and finally, with the help of God, every reader is able to do enough.¹⁶

Anyone with a grasp of the tradition of reading scripture could not help but be struck by the naïveté of the messenger as a reader of scripture. He is rather like the young Augustine who presumes a simplicity and self-evidence to scripture that is false. One sees it in his simple dismissal of all learning and sources of learning apart from scripture, as if they are not only of no use, but necessarily harmful to the right reading of scripture. He presumes that he (as apparently any capable reader) should seek out the meaning on his own—a tribute either to his own intelligence (the Messenger does not seem especially proud in this regard) or to the relative obviousness of scripture’s meaning. Commentaries and glosses are dismissed as simply a waste of time which follows readily enough from the clarity of scripture’s meaning. The meaning of difficult passages is determined by comparing Scriptural passages one to another. This is a venerable procedure of antiquity. But here too the Messenger shows his naïveté. This is apparently sufficient for resolving difficulties as he appeals to no other means of reading difficult passages; indeed, this way is “sufficient and surest.” His confidence in such comparison is so great that he says such passages do not fail to declare themselves. This is far from the world of Augustine’s *De doctrina Christiana*. A final bow to God’s grace given to readers exhausts what the Messenger has to say about sacred scripture and its interpretation.

More’s safe course in the interpretation of scripture is in clear contrast to that of the Messenger.¹⁷ More is worried about the devil’s efforts such that “a good wit may abuse his labor bestowed upon the study of Holy Scripture.” To avoid this danger—a danger not found in the sunny realms described by the Messenger—More offers this “poor advice.” He first advises for those studying scripture “to have special regard for the writings and comments of old holy fathers.” He then speaks to two things the Messenger had not mentioned at all. First, the grace and help be gotten with “abstinence, prayer, and cleanness of living.” The Messenger had spoken of God’s grace in helping to see the clear meaning; More speaks differently of the grace that makes possible the virtuous life which is itself a safeguard to the right reading of scripture. This is behind the oft repeated characterization of the fathers and doctors in the *Dialog* as holy. More’s point is not simply that God speaks his meaning, but that such is part and parcel of the holy life, especially as exemplified by the holy doctors. It is precisely in this light that one should see More’s insistent refrains on the lewdness and immorality of the reformers, especially in the culminating chapters of Book IV. This is not an exercise in detraction, but an argument against their claims to authority to interpret scripture.

More’s second piece of advice is even more important. Before one undertakes the reading of either scripture or the fathers, one should be “well and surely instructed in all such points and articles of faith the church believeth.” The Messenger had said nothing of the church; More gives her first place. This is at the heart of one of the principal debates of the *Dialog*. The Messenger insists that everything the church teaches is to come from scripture (implicitly from the self-

¹⁶ Thomas More, *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, I.1 (33.21-34; 54-55). Citations to the *Dialogue* (or *Dialog*) will be by internal division and then, in parentheses, to the page and line number in the critical edition edited by Thomas Lawler, Germain Marc’hadour, and Richard Marius in *The Complete Works of St. Thomas More*, vol. 6, part 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981). I have modernized the orthography and punctuation. The page reference to the edition rendered in modern English by Mary Gottchalk (New York: Scepter Press, 2006) follows.

¹⁷ What follows is taken from *Dialogue* I.22 (126.13-128.6; 153-55).

evidence he thinks it carries). More insists that the church comes—and came—before scripture and that her teachings must be the guide to the sound interpretation of scripture. The debate continues throughout the whole of the *Dialog*. From the vantage point of the Middle Ages, this is perhaps the most novel and unusual aspect of the *Dialog*'s treatment of scripture. It is, in some ways, a retreat to the debates of the early church and I know of nothing like it in the Middle Ages, in which the priority of the doctrine of the church was established and scripture was read in the light of it. More clearly sees that something new (or rather, very old) is afoot and thus it receives great attention throughout the *Dialog*. Certainly the church's reading of scripture stands or falls with her doctrinal authority. Thus it is that much of the *Dialog* which would seem to be about competing readings of scripture is about the church, for the Messenger, who assigned no role to the church in the interpretation of scripture, needs to be led to see its primary place, and even more, to see the need for it to have that place.

More then turns to the interpretation of "doubtful texts." He states that reason and the articles of faith are two good rules by which to "examine and expound all doubtful texts" for the reason that no text is to be interpreted as standing against both or any part of Catholic doctrine. We see here Augustine's negative criteria: the rejection of interpretations that are contrary to reason or the truths of the faith. Here More especially insists on the role of the articles of the Catholic faith.

If one has a passage of scripture that would seem contrary to the articles of the faith, what is one to do? This is, of course, precisely the circumstances of the reformation. More proposes two approaches to such texts to help the reader see how the doubtful passage is to be read truly. The first is in the light of natural reason and the collation of other texts. Here is the Messenger's "sufficient and surest" method of comparison of scriptural passages. Notable is More's linking of it with the light of natural reason. More offers no further explanation, but it is perhaps in general terms not needed. The collation of texts necessarily will require skills in reasoning if one is not, in the most extreme circumstances, to be left with scripture contradicting itself.

But the light of reason and the collation of texts are not sufficient and surest for More. He continues, "or else (which is the surest way) he shall perceive the truth in the comments of the good holy doctors of old to whom God hath given the grace of understanding." More's "surest way" is that of the holy doctors. The rationale is their holiness as a result of which God has given them the grace of understanding. More has used the Messenger's appeal to God's grace but has yoked it not to any reader, but to the holiness of the doctors of the church, as if to say, if God's grace is requisite, who better to have it for such a task as the exposition of sacred scripture than the holy doctors.

But what if after all of this, the reader finds the passage still seems contrary to the faith of the church? More quickly notes that the reader should, following Augustine, be attentive to the possibility of faulty texts, editions, or translations. In the end, More says, let him "reverently acknowledge his ignorance." He should cleave to the teachings of the church and leave the passage aside until it please God to disclose its meaning to him. This is the world of scripture in all of its mysteriousness in striking contrast to the Messenger's confidence in readily discovering scripture's meaning. The prudence of More's approach is seen in the conclusion of chapter 22 in which he so aptly summarizing the thinking of the tradition:

And in this wise shall he take a sure way by which he shall be sure of one of two things; that is, to wit, either to perceive and understand the scripture right, or else at the least wise never in such wise to take it wrong, that ever may turn his soul to peril.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Dialogue*, I.22 (128.2-6; 155).

More speaks of the “consent and common agreement”¹⁹ of the fathers; the reformers, finding the fathers arrayed against them, speak to the differences of opinion among the fathers and doctors. More makes an important and tidy distinction. The issue is not with regard to passages on which the articles of faith do not hang. More notes, in accord with the tradition, that there may be ten senses of one text and all “good enough.” In such cases, he implies, the fathers disagree and without consequence for the argument of the reformers. The issue, More says, is of contrary senses of texts on necessary points of faith. It is here that More insists that the fathers and the church are of one accord against the new doctors.

As a final point, let us consider the question of plain and evident texts. Both the Messenger and More speak of such texts. The Messenger takes this to mean that they require no interpretation, no “gloss.” Careful reading is sufficient. “Me thinketh, quod he, the text is good enough and plain enough, needing no gloss if it be well considered and every part compared with other.”²⁰ More replies that he thinks it hard to find anything quite so plain. For More, plain seems to be rather more relative. He proposes a non-scriptural plain text to the Messenger of “twice two ganders always makes four geese” and teases out the difficulties and thereby the implicit glosses that attend to a correct understanding of it.

The issue reaches its crisis, however, when plain and evident texts of scripture seem to contradict other plain and evident texts of scripture. It is here that the Messenger’s use of comparison shows itself to be too simple. How to resolve two contradictory plain passages? Such battles of texts is precisely what the church faced in the reformation. The situation was similar in the early church, perhaps most famously in the Arian controversy to which More notably refers in I.26. How to overcome the impasse? Here the question of reason and comparison of multiple texts comes into play, not in theory, but in practice. We see this most fully in chapter 11 of Book IV. More is explicitly trying to demonstrate the duplicity of heretics by giving an account of the interrogation of an English Lutheran. In the course of that account, however, we are given a concrete debate precisely with regard to plain and evident texts as presented on both sides. More concedes the heretic has knowledge of both scripture and human learning. In spite of this learning, he is shown to be in error. How is this done? He is shown to be inconsistent in his position. This is, of course, an appeal to reason. The man’s own claims are not harmonious; they are contrary if not contradictory. So how does a learned man get himself in this position that he can be shown to be a heretic and his position internally dissonant? The answer is by his very use of scripture. He cannot account for multiple passages of scripture. He is presented with not just two but several passages of scripture that are plain and evident – or should be by his principles – and he is unable to offer a rational account of them. What trips him up is scripture itself. This is precisely what Athanasius and the orthodox did in the long debate with the Arians. In the end, they gave a more coherent account of the totality of scripture than the Arians could. Part of More’s point throughout is that in the essential matters of doctrine, the church has come in 1500 years to a coherent and unified reading of scripture and this is precisely what one finds in the comments and glosses of the old and holy fathers and doctors.

By the time of Thomas More, the church had achieved a remarkable integrity of her doctrine as a whole (at least in areas of ancient controversy). This rested in part upon the sophisticated interpretive tools for reading scripture – in its plain texts, in its ambiguous ones, and across the

¹⁹ *Dialogue*, See I.28 (169.30; 199).

²⁰ *Dialogue*, I.28 (168.16-18; 197).

whole of scripture. It is this achievement that More sees, rightly, to be threatened by the naïveté of the reformers in their rejection of the teachings of the Catholic church.