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Aquinas and the Praise of Wisdom in Sirach 24: An Example of the Richness and Limitations of His Reading of the Old Testament*

Abstract. In recent decades, scholars have increasingly sought to understand Aquinas's theology through his role as a *magister in sacra pagina*. This article examines Aquinas's approach to the Old Testament by analyzing his interpretation of Sirach 24:1–14 as a representative example. After discussing the significance of this passage in the book of Sirach, the article highlights two particularly notable instances where Aquinas references Sirach 24:1–14 in his writings. In *Sent.* III, d. 11, q. 1, a. 1, he identifies the created wisdom in Sirach 24:14 as either angelic nature or Christ's human nature. In *ST* I, q. 41, a. 3, Aquinas presents created wisdom as a participation in uncreated wisdom. Here, he identifies created wisdom as Christ's human nature without referencing angelic nature. Additionally, Aquinas suggests that Sirach 24:5 *insinuates* to us the mode of divine generation. The article further considers Aquinas's affirmation in *ST* II–II that the Trinity and Christ were explicitly believed by the elders before Christ's incarnation. The article concludes that Aquinas's way of reading the Old Testament can be reassessed in light of recent advancements in exegesis and fundamental theology. The article highlights a tension in Aquinas's thought: the belief that divine revelation reaches its apex in Christ's death and resurrection versus his approach to the Old Testament as an inspired and prophetic text, where he seeks to discern the central mysteries of faith in a literal manner.

Keywords: Thomas Aquinas, Sirach, wisdom, Old Testament, exegesis, revelation, incarnation

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Introduction

To comprehend Thomas Aquinas's interpretation of the Old Testament, one might focus on his commentaries on Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, and parts of the Psalms. However, we have chosen a different approach, leveraging our respective areas of expertise. Kenny Ang has explored how Aquinas reads Scripture in developing his doctrine of creation,¹ while Juan Carlos Ossandón, a biblical scholar, has primarily studied Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, among other Old Testament books. Consequently, we opted to examine how Aquinas interprets the book of Sirach in his works, specifically focusing on Sirach 24, which contains the famous self-praise of wisdom. This text is far from random; it represents a pinnacle of theological reflection in Israel.²

A search in the *Index Thomisticus* for passages where Aquinas cites any phrase from this praise of wisdom (Sirach 24:1–31 according to the Vulgate numbering; 24:1–22 in most modern Bibles) yields more than 80 texts. After reviewing them, we deemed it appropriate to limit our analysis to his citations of verses 1–14. It should be noted from the outset that all of Aquinas's references to Sirach 24 are occasional; he never commented on this passage as a unified whole. Consequently, he sometimes reflects on a phrase without fully respecting its place within the discourse of wisdom. Criticizing him for this would be, in our view, unfair and disproportionate.

1. The Praise of Wisdom in Sirach 24

Before delving into Aquinas's texts, it is essential to briefly introduce the book of Sirach and the significance of chapter 24 within it. The book was written in Hebrew by Jesus Ben Sira around 180 B.C. It is a wisdom book that integrates elements of Israel's prophetic and historical literature, representing a mature synthesis of Israel's tradition.³

¹ See Ang 2024.

² For a commentary, see Gilbert 1974, 326–348.

³ The complete book has reached us only in the Greek translation. However, in 1896, thanks to the discovery of two manuscripts in Cairo, nearly two-thirds of the Hebrew text were recovered. Nothing of chapter 24 is preserved in Hebrew. Among the numerous bibliographical sources, we recommend Marböck 2013, 677–691.

Ben Sira addresses a wide variety of topics, from the fear of God (see Sir 1:11–40) to the office of the physician (see Sir 38:1–15). His advice ranges from how to behave at a banquet (see Sir 31:31) to warnings about the dangers of wine and women (see Sir 9:1–10; 19:2). The central theme of the book, around which the others revolve, is wisdom. In its biblical sense, shared with Egypt and Mesopotamia, wisdom (חָכְמָה) denotes an eminently practical knowledge present in many human activities. This term describes the skill of the craftsmen who built the Ark of the Covenant (see Ex 36:1–2), the knowledge of the mother who educates her children, and the prudence of the king who governs a country. It includes what we would today refer to as art and technique. It also encompasses moral and political wisdom, providing guidance on how to behave and live within society.

Compared to Egyptian and Mesopotamian wisdom literature, the biblical tradition uniquely references wisdom in relation to the God of Israel, the one Creator God. Following a path opened by the book of Proverbs, Ben Sira asserts that various forms of wisdom proceed from God, who possesses it in the highest degree. The book's first assertion states: "All wisdom is from the Lord, and with him it remains forever" (Sir 1:1).⁴

Given the centrality of the theme of wisdom in Ecclesiasticus, one of its most important passages is the praise that wisdom gives of itself in chapter 24. This text is undoubtedly a development of a similar discourse in Proverbs 8:1–36, particularly beginning with verse 22: "The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago." In the book of Sirach, the praise extends up to 24:31, but we will focus specifically on 24:1–14. These verses are the most frequently cited by Aquinas, who reads the book in the Latin version found in the Vulgate.⁵ Accordingly, in this article, we will quote from the Vulgate and adhere to its verse numbering, which differs from most modern versions.⁶

⁴ In the absence of any specific indication, the English translation of Scripture used is from the *New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (NRSVCE).

⁵ This translation is not the work of Saint Jerome, who did not want to translate Sirach because it was not accepted by the Jews. The codices of the Vulgate contain the Latin version of this book preceding Jerome, known as the *Vetus Latina*. See Lang 2023, 591–592.

⁶ The difference in verse numbering is not trivial: the Latin text is characterized by containing expansions or glosses, making it significantly longer than other forms of the text. We quote according to the edition of Weber and Gryson 2007. In the verses cited by Aquinas that will be collected here, there are no differences with Weber-Gryson's text. On the biblical text available to Aquinas, see Light 2012, 380–391.

After an introduction (vv. 1–4), Wisdom declares herself as coming forth from the mouth of God. She is the first of his works, the firstborn: “*ego ex ore Altissimi prodivi primogenita ante omnem creaturam*” (v. 5). Not only does Ben Sira affirm that Wisdom comes from God, but more specifically, he identifies her with what comes from his mouth, namely, his word. Ben Sira here unites the reflections on wisdom and creation from the book of Proverbs with those on the word or voice by which heaven and earth were made, as narrated in the Genesis creation account (see Ps 33:9; Jdt 16:14). Verse 6 alludes to Genesis 1:3, reinforcing the identification between Wisdom and the divine creative word: “*ego in caelis feci ut oriretur lumen indeficiens et sicut nebula texi omnem terram.*” Wisdom asserts that she has played an active role in everything that has been created, beginning with the light. She therefore has the right to move unrestrictedly everywhere—heaven, abyss, sea, and earth—like someone strolling through their property (vv. 7–8). This cosmic presence of Wisdom also includes the human realm. She is present among all the peoples of the world (v. 9), holds primacy among them, exercising political power (v. 10), and is also present within every individual (v. 11a).

Then, the text takes an unexpected turn. Wisdom says that she set out to find a place to dwell (v. 11bc) and received a divine command: “*tunc praecepit et dixit mihi creator omnium [...] et dixit mihi in Iacob inhabita* [Gr. κατασκήνωσον] *et in Israhel hereditare et in electis meis ede radices*” (vv. 12–13).

Obedying the explicit command of her Creator, Wisdom pitched her tent in the land of Israel—a theme clearly alluded to in John 1:14. Once established there, what activities did she engage in? Here comes a gloss that interrupts the narration but cannot be neglected, as it is one of the texts most cited by Aquinas: “*ab initio ante saeculum creata sum et usque ad futurum saeculum non desinam*” (v. 14ab). Then, Wisdom says that she ministered in the holy tent: “*et in habitatione sancta coram ipso ministravi* [Gr. ἐλειτουργησα]” (v. 14c).

The praise of Wisdom continues, but what has been presented here is sufficient for our purposes. In sum, for Ben Sira, Wisdom proceeds from God as the first fruit of creation. She is omnipresent, yet especially resides in the land of Israel. After creation, her activity is primarily focused on the liturgical acts carried out in the Temple of Jerusalem.

2. Two Texts Where Aquinas Cites Sirach 24

Among the numerous references to Sirach 24:1–14 in the corpus of Aquinas, we have selected two texts: one from the *Commentary on the Sentences*, an early work written between 1252 and 1256, and another from the *Prima Pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*, a mature synthesis composed between 1265 and 1268.⁷

2.1. *Commentary on the Sentences*

In *Sent.* III, d. 11, q. 1, a. 1, Aquinas inquires whether the Son of God is a creature. Our focus is not on the argument itself, but rather on Aquinas's use of Sirach 24. The first objection reads:

It appears that the Son of God is a creature. For Sirach 24:14 says: “Before the ages, in the beginning, I was created;” and it is speaking of divine wisdom. But the Son of God is the wisdom of God. Therefore, he is a creature.⁸

This passage identifies the Son of God with divine creative wisdom, a view grounded in certain New Testament texts (see Jn 1; Col 1). Given the created nature of wisdom presented in Sirach 24, the objection concludes that the Son of God is a creature.

Aquinas's response is as follows:

Those words should be understood either to refer to a created wisdom, namely, angelic nature, which exists before the temporal ages, not in terms of duration but in the order of nature. Alternatively, they could be understood to refer to the Son

⁷ All references to the chronology of Aquinas's works are derived from Torrell 2015.

⁸ *Sent.* III, d. 11, q. 1, a. 1, arg. 1: “Ad primum sic proceditur. Videtur, quod Filius Dei sit creatura. Eccli. 24, 14: *ab initio et ante saecula creata sum*: et loquitur de divina sapientia. Sed Filius Dei est Dei sapientia. Ergo ipse est creatura.” Whenever possible, we will cite works of Aquinas from the Leonine Edition. For works of Aquinas that do not yet have critical editions, we will use the best available editions listed in the Bibliography. All English translations of Aquinas's works are our own unless otherwise noted. For *Summa Theologiae*, we have occasionally used the translation by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province with some modifications. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1920).

of God in his assumed nature, which, though not created before all ages, was nevertheless foreseen from eternity to be created.⁹

Aquinas does not dispute the created nature of the wisdom spoken of in Sirach 24:14, for Ben Sira unambiguously asserts that wisdom is a creature: in addition to verse 14 cited in the above passage, one can also recall verses 5 and 12. Central to this passage is the affirmation of the distinction between the wisdom mentioned in Sirach 24 and the Son of God. Remarkably, Aquinas is not content with merely establishing this distinction but feels compelled to propose two possible interpretations of the wisdom in Sirach 24:14. He posits that it refers either to angelic nature¹⁰ or to the Son of God in his human nature.

The first interpretation is surprising if one considers the entire discourse of wisdom in Sirach 24. Is it possible to think of an angel who comes forth from God's mouth, collaborates with him in creation, establishes itself in Israel, and ministers in the Temple of Jerusalem? The second interpretation—that Sirach 24:14 points to Christ's human nature—seems even less convincing. We will return to this point in light of the text from the *Prima Pars*.

2.2. *Summa Theologiae*

Article 3 of Question 41 in the *Prima Pars* is the sole instance in the *Summa Theologiae* where Aquinas cites Sirach 24:14. This question, situated within the treatise on God (*ST I*, qq. 2–43), explores the notional acts of the divine persons.

⁹ *Sent.* III, d. 11, q. 1, a. 1 ad 1: “Ad primum ergo dicendum, quod istud verbum vel intelligitur de sapientia creata, scilicet angelica natura, quae est ante tempora saecularia, etsi non duratione, tamen ordine naturae; vel intelligitur de filio Dei quantum ad naturam assumptam, quae etsi ante saecula creata non fuerit, fuit tamen ab aeterno praevisa creari.” In *Super De Trinitate*, pars 2, q. 3, a. 4, arg. 9, written between 1257 and 1258, we find a nearly identical text: “Praeterea, Eccli. 24 dicitur ex persona divinae sapientiae: *ab initio et ante saecula creata sum*, et sic idem quod prius.” The response in pars 2, q. 3, a. 4 ad 9 goes as follows: “Ad nonum dicendum quod illud verbum et alia similia, quae de sapientia Dei leguntur, vel sunt referenda ad sapientiam creatam, sicut sunt Angeli, vel ad ipsum Christum secundum humanam naturam. Et sic dicitur ab initio vel initio creatus, quasi ab aeterno praedestinatus creaturam assumere.” In *ScG IV*, written between 1261 and 1265, Aquinas similarly cites the misuse of Sirach 24:14 in responding to the errors of Arius and Eunomius; see *ScG IV*, c. 6, n. 11; c. 8, n. 10.

¹⁰ See a similar identification in *De potentia*, q. 3, a. 18, arg. 17, and q. 3, a. 18 ad 17.

Aquinas specifically investigates whether the divine person, through the acts of generating and spirating, proceeds from nothing or from something.

Central to our analysis of Aquinas's interpretation of Sirach 24 is the fourth objection presented:

Further, every creature is from nothing. But, in Scripture, the Son is called a creature; for it is said in the person of the Wisdom begotten, "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High, the firstborn before all creatures" (Sir 24:5); and further on it is said as uttered by the same Wisdom, "Before the ages, in the beginning, I was created" (Sir 24:14). Therefore, the Son was not begotten from something but from nothing.¹¹

Aquinas reiterates the objection in *Sent.* III, d. 11, q. 1, a. 1, arg. 1, albeit in a different context. The phrases from the discourse on wisdom unmistakably affirm a created nature (Sir 24:5, 14). If applied to the Son, the objection concludes that he is a creature and thus proceeds from nothing.

Aquinas's response to this objection warrants careful consideration:

When it is said that "Wisdom was created," this may be understood not of the Wisdom which is the Son of God, but of the created wisdom God distributed to creatures: for it is said, "he created her"—namely, wisdom—"by the Holy Spirit and poured her out over all his works" (Sir 1:9, 10). Nor is it inconvenient for Scripture, in one context of speech, to speak of the Wisdom begotten and wisdom created, for wisdom created is a kind of participation of the uncreated Wisdom. The saying [that Wisdom was created] may also refer to the created nature assumed by the Son, so that "Before the ages, in the beginning, I was created" means "I was foreseen to be united to a creature." Or, through the mention of wisdom as created and begotten, the mode of the divine generation is insinuated to us. Indeed, in generation what is generated receives the nature of the generator, which pertains to perfection; in creation, however, the one creating is not changed but the created thing does not receive the nature of the one creating. Therefore, the Son is called both created

¹¹ *ST I*, q. 41, a. 3, arg. 4: "Praeterea, omnis creatura est ex nihilo. Sed filius in Scripturis dicitur creatura, dicitur enim Eccli. XXIV, ex ore sapientiae genitae, *ego ex ore altissimi prodii, primogenita ante omnem creaturam*; et postea ex ore eiusdem sapientiae dicitur, *ab initio, et ante saecula, creata sum*. Ergo filius non est genitus ex aliquo, sed ex nihilo."

and begotten, in order that from creation the immutability of the Father may be understood and, from generation, the unity of nature in the Father and the Son.¹²

This passage, nearly identical to ScG IV, c. 8, n. 10, presents a more nuanced and elaborate argument than that found in *Sent.* III, d. 11, q. 1, a. 1 ad 1. Four key points are pertinent to our article, focusing on Aquinas's approach to interpreting the Old Testament.

First, it is crucial to note that Aquinas respects the literal sense of the biblical assertion. The wisdom spoken of in Sirach—besides Sirach 24, he cites Sirach 1:9–10 here—is created and begotten. This is the meaning of these Scripture passages within their *contextus locutionis*.

Second, Aquinas distinguishes between created wisdom and uncreated wisdom, relating them through the concept of participation. Created wisdom is *participatio quaedam* of uncreated wisdom. Certainly, Sirach does not explicitly advocate this metaphysical concept, but Aquinas justifiably employs it, aware of its compatibility with the text. Moreover, the concept of participation aids us in understanding Sirach's theology and its relation to the New Testament.¹³ It fits well with one of the central teachings of Sirach 24: Ben Sira strives to show how the same reality—wisdom—is found in various ways in many parts. Wisdom is of divine generation, occupies the entire world, moves among the peoples, establishes itself in Jerusalem, and ministers in the Temple. The recourse to the idea of participation in biblical exegesis is a point where Old Testament exegesis can learn from Aquinas.¹⁴

¹² ST I, q. 41, a. 3 ad 4: “Ad quantum dicendum quod, cum dicitur, sapientia est creata, potest intelligi, non de sapientia quae est filius Dei, sed de sapientia creata, quam Deus indidit creaturis, dicitur enim Eccli. I, *ipse creavit eam*, scilicet sapientiam, *spiritu sancto, et effudit illam super omnia opera sua*. Neque est inconveniens quod in uno contextu locutionis loquatur Scriptura de sapientia genita et creata, quia sapientia creata est participatio quaedam sapientiae increatae. Vel potest referri ad naturam creatam assumptam a filio, ut sit sensus, ab initio et ante saecula creata sum, idest, praevisa sum creaturae uniri. Vel, per hoc quod sapientia creata et genita nuncupatur, modus divinae generationis nobis insinuat. In generatione enim, quod generatur accipit naturam generantis, quod perfectionis est, in creatione vero, creans non mutatur, sed creatum non recipit naturam creantis. Dicitur ergo filius simul creatus et genitus, ut ex creatione accipiatur immutabilitas patris, et ex generatione unitas naturae in patre et filio.”

¹³ The origin of the idea of participation is Platonic, not biblical. See, for example, te Velde 2020, 122–140.

¹⁴ See Levering 2008, 32–35.

Third, compared to *Sent.* III, d. 11, q. 1, a. 1, Aquinas does not suggest in *ST* I, q. 41, a. 3, that Sirach 24 refers to angelic nature. Nevertheless, he reiterates that the discourse of Sirach 24 could refer to the created nature foreseen before the ages to be assumed by the Son. While Aquinas speaks from the perspective of divine eternity rather than a historical-temporal perspective, this assertion appears problematic when considering the quoted phrases from Sirach 24 within their context. This context includes references to the establishment in the land of Israel, the exercise of worship, and, beyond the verses in question, the identification of wisdom with the book of the Mosaic law (see Sir 24:32–33). Since Aquinas never comments on the book of Sirach as a whole or even the entire chapter 24, it seems that he cites Sirach 24:14 without considering its full discourse.¹⁵ Indeed, we do not see how the human nature foreseen for Christ before the ages could establish itself in Jerusalem and exercise worship in the Temple. Could it be plausible that Christ's humanity acted in history before the incarnation? Beyond these difficulties, the simple fact that Aquinas even mentions this interpretative possibility perplexes us more significantly. Would it not have been easier to omit it?

At this point, we shall venture a hypothesis, stemming from our review of all the mentions of Sirach 24 in the Thomistic corpus. From the way he cites the verses of this chapter, one gets the impression—though it is never clearly stated—that Aquinas takes the wisdom discourse as if it had actually been pronounced by someone other than Ben Sira, not as words attributed to a literary personification, that is, a figure of speech whose meaning is not to be taken word-for-word. This might be why Aquinas deems it necessary to precisely identify who is speaking.

Finally, it is worth pondering over the verb *insinuare*. By saying that wisdom is simultaneously created and begotten by God, Sirach 24:5—as Aquinas reads it—*insinuates* to us the mode of divine generation. This statement elucidates a way of relating the Old Testament to the revelation of the Trinitarian mystery. It is also interesting as it contrasts with other texts of Aquinas that do not clearly manifest an awareness of the partial character of divine revelation before Christ. This point is the focus of the final section of this article.

¹⁵ It would be interesting to study whether there is any difference between the citations of biblical books that Aquinas commented on compared to biblical books he did not comment on. When he comments on a book, he analyzes its structure and attempts to perform an exegesis that takes into account the entire discourse. For more explanation on this way of studying Aquinas, see Ang 2024, 13–14, 24–25.

3. Aquinas and Revelation before Christ

The affirmation that some Old Testament passages hint at the Trinitarian mystery, as found in the recently cited *ST* I, q. 41, a. 3 ad 4, entails a recognition of the difference between the revelation of the two testaments. A more explicit reflection appears in other texts. For example, in the treatise on the law, Aquinas addresses the problem of the perfection of the old law: if it was perfect, why did Christ promulgate a new one? If it was imperfect, how could it come from God? The answer is that it was perfect *secundum tempus*, not *simpliciter*, as a child on the way to adulthood can be.¹⁶ One can find other elements for a reflection on the status of the revelation to Israel in the treatise on faith¹⁷ and even more in the treatise on prophecy.¹⁸

One of the biblical texts that most clearly expresses the difference between divine revelation before Christ and that which took place through him is the beginning of the Letter to the Hebrews (see Heb 1:1–2). Hence, it is interesting to consider Aquinas's commentary on these two verses. He focuses on the ontological supremacy of Christ as the Son of God, which, for Aquinas, constitutes the letter's central theme.¹⁹ He hardly dwells on the temporal contrast that the author of Hebrews establishes between the two moments: *olim* and *novissime istis diebus*. Yet he does note that there is progress and that, before the incarnation, it was not possible to believe some things:

[The letter] addresses the timing of the delivery of this doctrine, which is the past. It indicates that [God] spoke “of old”—not suddenly—because the things spoken about Christ were so great as to be incredible unless they had been taught incrementally over time. Hence, Blessed Gregory says, “Through successions of times, the increase of the divine knowledge grew.”²⁰

¹⁶ See *ST* I–II, q. 98, a. 2 ad 1.

¹⁷ See *ST* II–II, qq. 1–16; consider, for example, q. 1, a. 7 ad 2.

¹⁸ See *ST* II–II, qq. 171–178. An exposition of the content of this treatise can be found in Manresa Lamarca 2018, 149–224, especially 183–224.

¹⁹ See Weinandy 2005, 223–244. As we were finalizing this article, we learned of the imminent publication of *Reading Hebrews with Saint Thomas Aquinas*, see: Levering, Roszak, and Vijgen 2024. Regrettably, we were unable to consult this work.

²⁰ *Super Heb.*, c. 1 l. 1 (n. 10): “Secundo tangit tempus traditionis huius doctrinae, quod est tempus praeteritum, quia *olim*, id est, non subito, quia tam magna erant quae de Christo

Unfortunately, Aquinas is not always clear. He often seems to narrow the gap between the two testaments. We are not merely referring to the interpretation of the Old Testament in light of the New, which for Christians is not only permissible but necessary. Rather, we are pointing to the conjecture that certain Old Testament texts, in their literal sense, explicitly speak of Christ or the mystery of the Trinity. For instance, even in what is explicitly presented as a literal exposition, Aquinas interprets the *sanctus, sanctus, sanctus* of Isaiah 6:3 as a reference to the three divine persons.²¹ He also posits that the word *spiritus* in Genesis 1:2 and Psalm 103:30 references the Holy Spirit.²²

One of the most striking texts in this context appears in Aquinas's treatise on faith. In *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 8, he asserts that the Trinity and Christ were explicitly believed by some individuals, termed as the "elders" (*maiores*), before Christ's incarnation.²³ The rationale for the necessity of an explicit revelation of the mystery of Christ before his incarnation is discussed in the preceding article, *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 7. Aquinas initially affirms that "the mystery of Christ's incarnation ought to be believed by all people at all times, yet diversely according to the diversity of times and persons." He then elaborates that after the original sin, "the mystery of Christ was explicitly believed not only as to the incarnation but also as to the passion and resurrection, through which the human race is delivered from sin and death." This explanation by Aquinas justifies the recognition of Christ in the sacrifices of the Old Law: the "elders" must have explicitly acknowledged them as foreshadowings of Christ's passion. In this context, Aquinas likely has in mind 1 Peter 1:10–12.²⁴

dicebantur, quod non poterant credi, nisi cum incremento temporum prius didicissent. Unde dicit beatus Gregorius: *per successiones temporum crevit divinae cognitionis augmentum*." The same text of Gregory appears as the *sed contra* when Aquinas inquires in *ST* II-II, q. 1, a. 7 whether the articles of faith have grown over time.

²¹ See *Super Is.*, c. 6 l. 1 (ln. 267–269).

²² See *ScG* IV, c. 17, n. 6; c. 20, n. 2; *ST* I, q. 74, a. 3 ad 3–4.

²³ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 8: "eo modo quo mysterium Christi ante Christum fuit quidem explicite creditum a maioribus, implicite autem et quasi obumbrate a minoribus, ita etiam et mysterium Trinitatis."

²⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 2, a. 7 co.: "mysterium incarnationis Christi aliquantulum oportuit omni tempore esse creditum apud omnes, diversimode tamen secundum diversitatem temporum et personarum. [...] Post peccatum autem fuit explicite creditum mysterium Christi non solum quantum ad incarnationem, sed etiam quantum ad passionem et resurrectionem, quibus humanum genus a peccato et morte liberatur. Aliter enim non praefigurassent Christi passionem quibusdam sacrificiis et ante legem et sub lege. Quorum quidem sacrificiorum

It seems to us that this type of assumption does not sufficiently uphold the progressive nature of historical revelation as attested by biblical texts. Certainly, Aquinas is not an isolated author in this respect but is situated within a broader tradition. However, this contextualization alone is insufficient to justify his stance.²⁵ If we hold that the mystery of the Trinity has been fully revealed by Jesus Christ through his preaching, his miracles, and, above all, his passion, death, and resurrection, how can we assert that this mystery was explicitly known beforehand? What, then, distinguishes the prophets—who are likely the ones Aquinas had in mind when referring to the *maiores*—from the apostles?²⁶

If taken to the extreme, the thesis that some—the “elders”—explicitly believed in the mystery of the incarnation before Christ could potentially diminish the significance of the revelation presented in the New Testament. It might suggest that Jesus made accessible truths that were previously known only to a privileged few, thereby transforming the New Testament revelation into a democratization of already established doctrines. This perspective appears problematic in its intellectualism and, one might argue, elitism. Where, then, lies the novelty of Christ’s revelation? Could faith in God remain unchanged before and after the cross? Did the tangible experience of the Word of life (1 Jn 1:1–4) and the profound act of God sending his Son to give his life for the world (Jn 3:16) hold no weight?

We are not asserting that Aquinas supports an intellectualist or elitist view of revelation. Our aim is merely to indicate that, as far as we can ascertain, he

significatum explicite maiores cognoscebant, minores autem sub velamine illorum sacrificiorum, credentes ea divinitus esse disposita de Christo venturo, quodammodo habebant velatam cognitionem.”

²⁵ See Pontifical Biblical Commission 1993, III.B.2: “The fathers look upon the Bible above all as the Book of God, the single work of a single author. This does not mean, however, that they reduce the human authors to nothing more than passive instruments; they are quite capable, also, of according to a particular book its own specific purpose. But their type of approach pays scant attention to the historical development of revelation. Many fathers of the church present the ‘Logos,’ the Word of God, as author of the Old Testament and in this way insist that all Scripture has a Christological meaning.” This criticism of the Church Fathers seems applicable also to Aquinas.

²⁶ In *ST* II–II, q. 1, a. 7 ad 4, Aquinas places John the Baptist, who did not witness the resurrection, on par with the apostles regarding knowledge of the mysteries of faith. However, Aquinas himself appears to qualify this assertion in *ST* II–II, q. 174, a. 6: “Quantum vero ad fidem incarnationis Christi, manifestum est quod quanto fuerunt Christo propinquiore, sive ante sive post, ut plurimum, plenius de hoc instructi fuerunt. Post tamen plenius quam ante, ut apostolus dicit, ad Eph. III.”

did not formulate an explanation that reconciles the progressive and historical aspects of God's revelation to his people with the prophetic nature of the Old Testament.

This conundrum refers not only to the classic problem of the relationship between the two testaments but also to the understanding of the literal sense of Scripture, especially the Old Testament, in relation to the concepts of revelation and inspiration. In our view, the divine inspiration of the books—that is, the truth that the Holy Spirit inspired the Scriptural authors—must be subordinated to the revelation they contain, which progresses throughout history. The ecclesial reception of the Old Testament as an inspired word is linked to the recognition of the partial and incomplete nature of the revelation it testifies to.²⁷

We believe that, at this point, Aquinas's interpretation of the Old Testament can be reevaluated in light of recent advancements in exegesis and fundamental theology. This assertion would require a more detailed explanation that cannot be fully developed here. It is important, however, to state it because, to the best of our knowledge, existing literature has not extensively articulated this perspective. While many authors understandably prefer to emphasize aspects of Aquinas they find valid today, a comprehensive presentation also necessitates identifying his limitations. Therefore, it is crucial to spotlight the tension in Aquinas between the belief that divine revelation reaches its apex in Christ's death and resurrection (Heb 1:1–2) and his approach to the Old Testament as an inspired and prophetic text (1 Pet 1:10–12), where he endeavors to discern the central mysteries of faith in a literal manner.

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²⁷ See *Dei Verbum*, Chapter IV. See also Ossandón Widow 2021, 53–111.

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