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AQUINAS, SCRIPTURE AND THE RESURRECTION OF CHRIST

Henk J.M. Schoot

Introduction¹

The Gospel of Matthew records an earthquake twice; one when Jesus dies on the cross (27,51) and one when an angel of the Lord descends from heaven and rolls away the stone of Jesus' grave (28,2). A double earthquake. Thomas Aquinas records in his *Catena Aurea* the traditional saying by Bede, that a healthy fear should precede both the faith in the passion and the faith in the resurrection of Christ. The worldly hearts must be moved to penitence. In his commentary on Matthew, the *reportatio* of it, Aquinas, however, slightly adjusts Bede's gloss, and gives us an alternative spiritual reading of the double earthquake. The first indicates the movement of the hearts, for through death man is liberated from sin. The second indicates the translation into glory. And then Aquinas quotes Ro 4,25: "Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification." Christ's death is associated with the forgiveness of sins, and his resurrection with the new life of justification.²

This mystical, spiritual reading of the earthquakes in Matthew, is in fact a profound theological reading of death and resurrection of Christ, and gives a double portrait of the salvation brought about by Christ. Paul's letter to the Romans helps Thomas to interpret the Gospel of Matthew. It forms a fine example for what I would consider to be the lasting relevance of the way in which

¹ A former version of this contribution was delivered as an invited lecture at the international conference *The Biblical Commentaries of Thomas Aquinas and its Contemporary Relevance*, at the Nicolaus Copernicus University in Torun, Poland, on April 21-23, 2015.

² *Catena Aurea In Mattheum* 724; *In Mattheum* 28, 459.

Thomas Aquinas reads the Bible, and applies that in his theology. And I will explain that shortly.

The first what came to my mind, when I was asked to contribute to the study of the contemporary relevance of Aquinas's exegesis, was Aquinas' treatment of the resurrection. At the Utrecht institute of Aquinas research, we spent, at the end of the last century, much effort on place and function of Scripture in Aquinas's theology. Especially our colleague Pim Valkenberg published widely on this subject, lastly in 2000 in his book "Words of the Living God. Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas." In this book, Valkenberg designs a 'heuristic framework' to investigate Aquinas's theology, focusing on his theology of the resurrection of Christ. Valkenberg proves convincingly that to treat Scripture in a superficial way, as proof of dogmatic statements, may be the case in neo-scholasticism, but not in Aquinas' theology itself. And so I decided that the subject of my contribution should be the resurrection of Christ in Aquinas, one of the most biblical parts of Aquinas's theology.

There are in fact two more reasons for this choice. Firstly, the history of the theology of the resurrection of Christ is extremely interesting. As I hope to be able to show you, the vast differences between the ways in which the resurrection is approached is very instructive for different ways of conceiving the role of Scripture in theology, and even for different ways of conceiving the task of theology as such. And secondly, from a historical and a theological perspective, it is quite interesting to see that Aquinas renews theology in renewing the theology of the resurrection. He does new things with the resurrection, that are indicative of - next to a more scriptural approach - a more soteriological way of doing theology.

In my contribution I will take two steps. The first step will be to take a look at Aquinas's commentary on the sentences, the *Scriptum*, and place it in the history of the theology of Christ. The next step will be to examine the *Summa Theologiae*, and traces the changes that the theology of the resurrection shows. In studying these changes, we will be able to conclude that there is one major reason for these changes, and that is the intense work of biblical

exegesis that Aquinas undertook between writing his *Scriptum* and his *Summa Theologiae*. Exegesis is responsible for a new course in dealing with the resurrection of Christ.

1. Aquinas on the resurrection of Christ in his *Scriptum*

Even after the massive work undertaken by Thomas Marschler, it still stands that Thomas Aquinas was the first ever to introduce a question concerning the resurrection of Christ in his commentary on the sentences of Peter Lombard. It raises many questions. Why is it that Peter Lombard hardly gives any attention to the resurrection of Christ? And why does Thomas consider it necessary? Which questions does he actually treat?

Let me first draw your attention to a very fundamental theological move that was performed by Aquinas. Peter Lombard does pay attention to the resurrection of Christ, but only in the context of the general resurrection of the dead, at the end of time. For him the resurrection of Christ is first and foremost an eschatological subject, understood in the sense of a future subject. When Aquinas decides to design a question on the resurrection in the context of the theology of Christ, what we nowadays call Christology, he does something very significant. From eschatology to Christology, or better even: from eschatology to soteriology. In his view, it is not enough to end the treatment of Christ with the theology of his death.

Aquinas faces a tradition of theology of Christ, in which most of the attention is spent on two subjects only: incarnation and satisfaction. The theology of the hypostatic union and its consequences is in fact the discussion ground for all questions concerning the person, the identity of Christ. And satisfaction pretty much sums up, especially since Anselm, all theology of the work of Christ. In a seminal article in *Theological Studies*, as far back as in 1970, Gerald O'Collins, who devoted most of his academic life to studying the resurrection of Christ, complains about this state of affairs. What is at stake? He mentions a Manichean uneasiness with the body, and a Pelagian preference for human action above the unique divine action in the resurrection. Marschler speaks about Monophysite tendencies; due to these tendencies, that tend to approach the soul and the body of Christ as glorified, there was in

fact no need to discuss or highlight the resurrection. Resurrection was in fact something that already was contained in the incarnation, in as much as the human nature that the Word assumed was in fact glorified, or just temporarily passible. From this point of view, the death of Christ was not very 'dead', so to say, and that minimizes the importance of the resurrection.

So when Aquinas adds a *quaestio* devoted to the resurrection of Christ, this may be seen as programmatic. However much he collects and reorganizes questions that were formulated during the first half of the thirteenth century, the step as such is quite meaningful. As we shall see, it forms Aquinas's first step in the direction of a theology of Christ which is more biblical in character. Which are the issues that he addresses? They are four. They concern the reasons for the resurrection in the first place. Whenever Aquinas addresses such a question, he is not after an absolute necessity, but instead tries to understand why happened what happened in the life of Christ. It is a form of '*fides quaerens intellectum historicum*' (Schillebeeckx); how does the resurrection fit in in Gods salvation history? What is its fittingness? We cannot discuss Aquinas's answer in detail, but it is very clear that the thrust of the discussion is still very much 'incarnational' so to speak; Aquinas is concerned that body and soul apart are only imperfect; a body needs a soul, but a soul needs a body as well, and this is confirmed by the resurrection of Christ.

There is, by the way, a vast hermeneutical difference between modern approaches to the resurrection and medieval ones. In many respects. But let me emphasize here that medieval theologians commonly and without exception accept that the human soul of Christ is both eternal and glorious. Eternal, just like any human soul, and glorious, since Christ enjoys from his conception onwards the beatified vision, following the principle of perfection according to which the Son of God should possess a perfect human nature.³ This means that medieval theologians do not look at the resurrection in order to restore the human soul to life,

³ See my *Christ the 'Name' of God. Thomas Aquinas on naming Christ*, Publications of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht vol. I, Louvain: Peeters, 1993, p. 179ff.

that is, not in the sense in which they do so concerning the human body. There is, however, the concept of the resurrection of souls, but this does not regard souls coming to life after death, but souls coming to life after sin. Aquinas and others speak about spiritual resurrection. This is the type of resurrection not so much associated with the end of times, but with baptism. When Aquinas moves the resurrection of Christ from eschatology to Christology, this is an important motif for that move. One can discern it in two answers given to objections in the first article in the *Scriptum*: the resurrection concerns the beginning of a new life, and the perfection of human nature to the good.⁴

The other questions Aquinas addresses in his commentary on the Sentences concern the three days after which Christ resurrected, and the signs of the resurrection that the risen Christ offered, both in general as well as specifically.

Valkenberg, having tested this text with his heuristic device, draws the conclusion that Scripture here forms source and framework of Aquinas's approach. Nevertheless, this is even much more the case with Aquinas's treatment of the resurrection in the *Compendium Theologiae* and the *Summa Theologiae*. We will focus now on the latter, in our second step.

Intermezzo: the *Summa contra Gentiles*

Let me just, by way of short intermezzo, ask one question concerning the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which will add to the profile of the *Summa Theologiae*. Looking at the *Summa Gentiles* from a modern apologetic perspective, one would have expected Aquinas to give a large treatment of the resurrection of Christ there. It is well-known that in the traditional apologetic theology that was born in reaction to the enlightenment, the resurrection of Christ was given a privileged place. In fact, as Francis Fiorenza has shown, the resurrection of Christ, considered as the largest miracle of all, historically proven by the empty tomb, was the main extrinsic proof

⁴ *Scriptum* III 21.2.1 ad 3 and ad 4.

for the veracity of the Christian belief.⁵ The fact of the resurrection proved both the possibility and the factuality of divine revelation and intervention, and the contents of the Christian belief. At least, thus was the way in which traditional fundamental theology was set up. It was assumed that Aquinas was one of the godfathers, if not the only one, of this approach. But where does Aquinas treat the resurrection of Christ in the *Summa contra Gentiles*? Indeed, he nowhere does. The resurrection is only approached in the part on eschatology, but nowhere else, and thus only from the perspective of the general resurrection.

2. Aquinas on the resurrection of Christ in his *Summa theologiae*

Against this background, it is even more remarkable what Aquinas does in the *Summa Theologiae*. Now he is the first, and the only theologian of the Middle Ages, who designs a theology of Christ in two parts, the first part of which is devoted to the incarnation (qq. 1-26: *de ipso incarnationis mysterio*) and the second part of which is devoted to the mysteries of the life of Christ (qq. 27-59: *de his quae per ipsum Salvatorem nostrum, idest Deum incarnatum, sunt acta et passa*).⁶ The first part concerns the conditions of possibility for what is studied in the second part, and thus bears a certain metaphysical and linguistic character. The second part concerns salvation history itself. The treatment of these mysteries follow the order of the creed, and end with six questions concerning the exaltation of Christ: resurrection, ascension, the sitting at the right hand of the Father and judgment. Aquinas does not place the resurrection outside of the theology of Christ, as a neutral point of reference and proof, but inside the treatment of salvation history, as one of the main mysteries, one of the main subjects of faith. Not philosophy, or history for that matter, but theology determines the approach to the resurrection.

⁵ *Foundational Theology*, pp. 6 and 7.

⁶ Quotations from the prologue to the *Tertia Pars*. See also the introduction to q. 27.

Marie-Dominique Chenu has considered this treatise as a piece of Biblical theology, and so it is. Valkenberg's analysis confirms that these texts are developed extremely close to the biblical foundations of it. And even more so, the *Summa Theologiae* is much more biblical than the *Scriptum* already was.

I will draw attention to four elements, in order to corroborate this thesis of a remarkable biblical character of Aquinas's treatment of the resurrection of Christ: the arguments *sed contra*, Aquinas recognizing that the resurrection of Christ is first believed on hearsay evidence, his soteriological approach, and the way in which he handles Romans 4,25.

2.1 *The sed contra-arguments*

It is well-known that *sed contra*-arguments often contain authorities. Authorities either from Scripture, or from Fathers, or otherwise. At first sight, the use of these authorities may be interpreted as proof by authority. In the case of Scripture, it would indicate an extrinsic handling and bespeak a penchant for rationalism.

On the contrary in this case, I would argue. On the contrary, since if one examines the authorities adduced in *Quaestio* 53, one can easily establish that these quotations are in fact the origin of the very question itself. The question whether it was necessary for Christ to rise again, arises from a consideration of the meaning of Jesus himself saying to the disciples in Emmaus "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead" (Lk 24, 46). It is in fact an exegetical question that is raised: why does Christ say that it was written and necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead? The same goes for the question whether it was fitting that Christ rise on the third day, which arises having read what Jesus foretold in Matthew: "and on the third day he will rise again" (Mt 20,19). The following question concerns the issue whether Christ was the first to have risen. In the argument *sed contra* both the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians and a gloss are quoted: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of all who have fallen asleep", and the gloss says: "the first in time and dignity". In fact, a number of exegetical issues are

dealt with in this question. The way in which Christ's resurrection differs from those who were brought back to life by Elia, Elisha and Christ himself. And also the question how we have to interpret the tombs opening up, at the time of the crucifixion, even before the resurrection of Christ. This, for instance, is a question we see dealt with in Aquinas' commentary on Matthew as well.

This will suffice for now. In fact, I think that most of the sixteen questions that are raised, are raised on the basis of reflection on Scripture, mentioned in the *sed contra*-argument. On the *sed contra*-argument of the last question raised, we will return shortly.

2.2 *Resurrection is first believed on hearsay evidence*

The second element I want to bring to the fore, is Aquinas's attentiveness to something that lacks in Scripture. In q. 55.2 he treats the question whether it was fitting that the disciples saw Christ's resurrection. The *sed contra*-argument concludes tellingly that no one saw Christ rise from the dead, and the question is to the meaning of this important feature of the resurrection stories. In his book *Eternal life?* Hans Küng once argued that one of the important differences between the canonical and the non-canonical gospels indeed is that some of the latter contain stories about what actually happened on the moment that Christ rose from the grave.⁷ The so-called gospel of Peter for instance, contains a rather bizarre description of the event. Their lack of description of the event of the resurrection is what makes the canonical scriptures even more trustworthy. But before Hans Küng, Thomas Aquinas already underlined the importance of this lack of description in the canonical Gospels. It gives him the opportunity to emphasize the unique character of the resurrection; Christ did not return to a manner of life which was open to the common knowledge of mankind, Aquinas says. He rose to a life which was immortal and conformed to God. Therefore Christ's resurrection should not have been seen immediately by men, but it was fitting that it was made known to them through the ministry of angels. Whatever else will be said about the ways in which Christ risen makes himself known,

⁷ H. Küng, *Ewiges Leben?* (München: Piper, 1982), Chapter V: Schwierigkeiten mit der Auferweckung Jesu, pp. 127-154.

first and foremost it is through hearing that the apostles believe in Christ's resurrection.⁸ They saw Christ with their own eyes, but they were the eyes of faith.

2.3 *A soteriological approach of the resurrection*

For the third element let us return to the first question formulated by Aquinas, concerning the necessity of his resurrection. We already mentioned that this question is an interpretation of what Jesus risen said to the disciples upon returning from Emmaus. Compared to his treatment of the same question in the *Scriptum*, Aquinas' discussion here is more biblical, more theological and more mature. In the solution he offers five reasons why the resurrection is necessary or fitting. The first concerns the merit of Christ. Divine justice needs to reward Christ, who humiliated himself out of charity and obedience. Exaltation is his reward, the first stage of which is the resurrection. The second and third reason have to do with faith and hope. Here we have the Pauline understanding of the resurrection as confirming the divinity of Christ, which in modern times became so important. It was already for Aquinas, since the resurrection confirms that Christ was crucified through weakness, but now lives through the power of God. Had he not been raised, our believing would be useless. Hope is at stake here, since Christ's resurrection is the promise of the general resurrection. I know that my redeemer lives, Christ risen from the dead. Faith and hope are both firmly rooted in chapter 15 of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Just as the second and the third reason for the necessity of Christ's resurrection originate in the same Pauline thought, the fourth and fifth do as well. The fourth and fifth contain two quotations from Paul's letter to the Romans, that are of paramount importance to Aquinas's theology of the resurrection. In Romans 6,4 Paul says: "So that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life." We could call this a moral motif for the resurrection of Christ, since it instructs the faithful how to live their lives, that is by dying for sin but being alive for God in Christ Jesus (Ro 9.11). This is the spiritual resurrection we earlier spoke of. This resurrection is not

⁸ *STh* III, 55.2 ad 1.

reserved for the future, but starts here and now in the life of anyone baptized. Aquinas considers Romans 6.4 as in fact an explanation of an earlier saying of Paul, the one I quoted at the outset of my contribution: “He was put to death for our sins and raised to life to justify us” (Ro 4,25). Here Aquinas gives us the fifth and last reason for the resurrection, and I think it is the most important one. The resurrection is a complement to our salvation. Death and resurrection are two sides of the same coin. By death Jesus endured evil in order to free us from it. By his resurrection he was glorified that he might move us towards what is good. Death is negative, the forgiveness of sins and the doing away with evil. Resurrection is positive, moves towards what is good, towards the justification. Justification is the word here with which Aquinas sums up the fundamental positive contribution of the resurrection to our salvation.

It is quite telling that four out of these five reasons for the fittingness of the resurrection concern us, those who believe in Christ. The resurrection is for Christ, but most of all for us. The soteriological nature of the resurrection is underscored in a way Aquinas did not before. The three motifs he mentioned in his commentary on Peter Lombard were antropological, concerning human nature, christological, concerning merit, and only third and last soteriological. In his mature exposition Aquinas underscores the salvific meaning of the resurrection, and it is Paul who puts him on this track.

2.4 *Quoting Romans 4,25*

We can easily see that we are dealing here with a development in Aquinas’s theology of the resurrection, simply by looking up all the places where Aquinas quotes Romans 4,25. Aquinas does so thirteen times, most of them in the context of the resurrection. The first, chronologically speaking, is his commentary on Matthew 28, with which I began my lecture. The double earthquake associated with death and resurrection, and with sin and justification. Then we encounter Aquinas quoting this verse in his commentary on John, where he speaks about the corporeal and the spiritual resurrection,

and in his commentary on Romans, where he does the same.⁹ Then in the text we just spoke about, STh III 53.1 c. But Aquinas quotes this verse not only in the very first question on the resurrection, but also in the very last that he treats, in q. 56.2, and he does so twice, both in the *sed contra*-argument as well as in the last answer. He says that this verse can mean nothing else except the resurrection of the soul. He also quotes a gloss on a Psalm, saying “Christ’s resurrection is the cause of the resurrection of souls at the present time and of the resurrection of bodies in the future.”

In the last answer, Aquinas attempts to distinguish between the salvific value of the passion and the resurrection. He says that the justification of the soul means the remission of sins and the newness of a life of grace. Both are brought about by the power of God, both by Christ’s death and his resurrection. So much for the effective causality. But in terms of exemplar causality “passion and death of Christ are properly the causes of the remission of our faults, for we die to sin. The resurrection, on the other hand, more properly causes the newness of life through grace or justice.” Or, as Aquinas says in his *Compendium Theologiae*: “As Christ destroyed our death by His death, so He restored our life by His resurrection.”¹⁰ All of these quotations belong to the last eight years or so – depending on the uncertain dating of his exegetical works – of Aquinas’s writing career; he never did in all the years before. Jean-Pierre Torrell suggests that it may have been the case that Aquinas lectured on Romans when he was in Rome, between 1265 and 1268.¹¹ Judging from the subject we are now discussing, that would be plausible indeed, since Aquinas’s commentary on Ro 4,25 contains all the elements that we recognized in the other texts where he quotes this verse. It must have been his lectures on Romans which got Aquinas on this track. Aquinas emphasizes that Christ’s resurrection is effectively salvific for us, his human nature being an instrument of his divinity, a thought he borrows from John of Damascus. The effect is similar to its cause, for the death of our sins

⁹ *In Joannem* 5, lectio 5; *Ad Romanos* 4, lectio 3; 8, lectio 7; cf. *Ad Col* 3, lectio 1; and *I Ad Thess* 5, lectio 1.

¹⁰ *Compendium Theologiae* I, 239.

¹¹ *Initiation*, p. 367.

is caused by Christ's death, and the resurrection to new justice is caused by Christ's resurrection to the new life of glory.

This wraps up the four elements that I wanted to adduce, in order to corroborate my thesis that Aquinas's treatment of the resurrection of Christ in the *Summa Theologiae*, is in fact a very biblical treatment of the topic. The *sed contra*-arguments show how all questions are indeed Biblical in origin. Resurrection is first believed on hearsay evidence, as Aquinas recognizes from Scripture's silence about the resurrection itself. Salvation history is present much more in his treatment of the fittingness of the resurrection. And Romans 4,25 marks the difference between the early and the later interpretation of the resurrection. Aquinas, much more than in his commentary on Peter Lombard, is guided by Scripture, most notably by the writings of Paul.

Conclusion

Francis Fiorenza states that the modern apologetical approach to the resurrection of Jesus was in fact overhauled by the progression of biblical exegesis, in the course of the twentieth century.¹² A better understanding of prophecy and miracles in Scripture made this view of the resurrection obsolete. Aquinas would never have felt the need for approaching the resurrection in an apologetical way, if this is not totally anachronistic to say, since he works from the assumption of the *unio hypostatica*. His is an approach both from 'above' and from 'below', not only from below. But, and this is the point I want to stress, the Biblical character of his interpretation would have prevented him from doing so. The material I have presented leads convincingly to the conclusion that Aquinas considers the resurrection of Christ more and more from a faith perspective, and from the perspective of salvation history.

Does that mean that we have to read the Bible in the way Aquinas did? Now here is a question that cannot be answered in a facile way. Much of what Aquinas has written which belongs to what we nowadays call exegesis is outdated, for lack of proper

¹² *Foundational Theology*, pp. 9 and 10.

resources and of disciplines, such as history and language. But I would strongly recommend Aquinas's exegesis in three respects. Aquinas's approach operates with the unity of Scripture, and merits the name of 'canonical exegesis'; we have seen a small but important example of it, seeing how Romans helped to explain Matthew. Aquinas's approach is spiritual; we have seen an important example of it as well, since the spiritual meaning of the resurrection of Christ is of paramount importance to Aquinas's reading of Scripture. And third and last Aquinas's approach to Scripture is theological; that is to say, Aquinas is despite all the details that rightfully belong to a meticulous reading, always intent on answering the question what Scripture is saying, ultimately, about the mysteries of faith. And when theologizing about these mysteries of faith, this theological reading of Scripture is never far away, on the contrary, always near at hand. This makes his reading of the Bible theological, and his theology Biblical.

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