Introduction

This chapter explores the respective exegetical methods and practices of Thomas Aquinas and Ratzinger/Benedict XVI as applied within the account of primeval history narrated in Genesis 1-3. Before treating commonalities between Aquinas and Ratzinger, the latter’s critiques of neo-scholasticism are addressed first so as to make it clear that Ratzinger is not strictly speaking a Thomist. With this initial caveat in place, there follows an overview of principles illustrating key points of contact in which Ratzinger implicitly (and explicitly at points) connects his exegetical programme with that of Aquinas. Finally, the core of the chapter consists in illustrating how the shared principles of Aquinas and Ratzinger are applied to specific realities within the biblical text. It will be shown that Ratzinger conducts his exegesis of Genesis in a way that is much in the spirit of Thomas and indeed shares many parallels with Thomas’ exegesis of the same texts. At the same time, it will be made clear that Ratzinger makes significant advances beyond Aquinas with the help of the modern scholarly tools to which he is privy. Thus it will be seen that Aquinas’ exegesis continues today to exert its influence and to remain profitable even as it needs to be supplemented by the best scholarship currently available—precisely the view advanced by a leading biblical scholar who was to become bishop of Rome.

Ratzinger’s Critiques of Neo-scholasticism & Preference for Bonaventure

Before exploring commonalities in the exegetical projects of Ratzinger and Aquinas, a word is in order concerning the former’s critical stance towards scholasticism in the form it had assumed within the century prior

* Benedictine College, 1020 N. 2nd St., Atchison KS 66002 (USA); mramage@benedictine.edu
to Vatican II. In the interview book *Salt of the Earth*, Cardinal Ratzinger sums up his view at the time of the council:

«I was of the opinion that scholastic theology, in the form it had come to have, was no longer an instrument for bringing faith into the contemporary discussion. It had to get out of its armor; it also had to face the situation of the present in a new language, in a new openness. So a greater freedom also had to arise in the Church»¹.

Instances of such criticism abound in Ratzinger’s reflections published after the council in the volume *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*. Here he relates that the council’s preparatory schema on revelation, framed upon the basis of a «cramped» neo-scholastic theology with an «excessively one-sided zeal», was imbued with the same «anti-Modernistic neurosis which had again and again crippled the Church since the turn of the century»².

Young Fr. Ratzinger was critical of scholasticism broadly speaking, but in a few places it emerges that he had difficulty relating with Thomas Aquinas specifically. Reflecting on his seminary experience at Freising, he writes, «I had difficulties in penetrating the thought of Thomas Aquinas whose crystal-clear logic seemed to me to be too closed in on itself, too impersonal and ready-made»³. Ratzinger traces the cause of this difficulty to his experience with a certain Thomist professor who «presented us with a rigid, neo-scholastic Thomism that was simply too far afield from my own questions…[I]t seemed that he himself no longer asked questions but limited himself to defending passionately, against all questions, what he had found»⁴.

While Fr. Ratzinger struggled to relate with the thought of Aquinas early in his career, he did find a like-minded partner in Bonaventure. He indicates in his *habilitation* thesis on Bonaventure’s theology of history, «For the questions with which I was concerned, Bonaventure was naturally

¹ J. RATZINGER, *Salt of the Earth*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1997, p. 73. Note that this chapter at times refers to the one man Ratzinger/Benedict by his surname and other times by papal name in the effort to distinguish writings composed during his pontificate from those preceding it.


a more likely subject for study than Aquinas. Bonaventure dealt more directly than Aquinas with the themes that interested Ratzinger—specifically questions at the intersection of divine revelation, history, and metaphysics. Moreover, while Bonaventure did not target Thomas himself in his critiques of contemporary Aristotelianism, it is likely that what Ratzinger describes as an «anti-Thomism» in Bonaventure exerted its influence upon him insofar as Bonaventure was wary of a theology that would rely too heavily upon the thought of Aristotle.

While Bonaventure’s lesser reliance on Aristotle had its appeal for Ratzinger, the latter acknowledges that neither Bonaventure nor Aquinas discussed the nature of divine revelation in the sense it has been understood within fundamental theology in the modern period. As one finds in the treatise on prophecy in the *Summa* (II-II, qq. 171-74), the theologians of the Middle Ages were more concerned with the nature of “revelations” than with the objective reality or content of «revelation» as such. Ratzinger elaborates:

> «[In the High Middle Ages] “revelation” is always a concept denoting an act. The word refers to the act in which God shows himself, not the objectified result of this act. And because this is so, the receiving subject of revelation is always also part of the concept of “revelation.”. Where there is no one to perceive “revelation,” no veil has been removed».

Bonaventure’s understanding of «revelation», which referred to the unveiled spiritual sense of Scripture rather than its letter, had a profound impact on Ratzinger’s theology of revelation as evinced in writings spanning his entire career.

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Aquinas and Benedict: Points of Contact

Notwithstanding young Fr. Ratzinger’s criticisms of neo-scholastic thought, from both what was stated above and from what he states elsewhere in his corpus it is clear that Ratzinger’s problem was not with Thomas himself so much as with the overly rigid presentation of Aquinas’ thought common in preconciliar theology. The following will tease out four points of contact between the thought of Aquinas and Ratzinger implied by the latter’s suggestion that Thomas’ exegesis offers an antidote to deconstructive forms of modern exegesis.

An Open Philosophy

In a number of key places Ratzinger explicitly acknowledges the significance of Aquinas’ thought within his own exegetical programme. After explaining that his Jesus of Nazareth is not a «Life of Jesus» or a «Christology», Ratzinger explicitly states that Aquinas’ treatise on the life of Christ in the Summa is «closer to my intention» and that with this work «my book has many points of contact» 10. Though privy to scholarly tools not available in Aquinas’ day, Ratzinger identifies with the Angelic Doctor in his patient attentiveness to God’s word and his desire to put believers in touch with the «figure and message» of Jesus Christ11.

In the section of his 1988 Erasmus Lecture entitled «Basic Elements of a New Synthesis», Ratzinger expounds at greater length on the importance of Thomas’ thought for helping believers encounter Christ through his word. In contrast with a Kantian «ready-made philosophy», Aquinas’ «open philosophy» is «capable of accepting the biblical phenomenon in all its radicalism» by admitting that a real encounter of God and man is witnessed in history –and made possible today– by the Scriptures12.

11 BENEDICT XVI, Jesus, xvi.
«critique of the critique» requires a rejection of the false presuppositions of those who would exclude a priori God’s ability to speak through human words. Aquinas’ method, deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition with its conviction that the boundary of time and eternity is permeable, allows Ratzinger to perceive in the Bible an inspired witness to the marvelous interplay of divine and human freedom such as it unfolded over more than a thousand years of salvation history.

Divine Pedagogy & Condescension

In his Erasmus Lecture Ratzinger identifies a second point of contact with Aquinas: the recognition of salvation history’s Christological teleology. According to Ratzinger, Thomas serves as a «counter-model» to Kantian exegesis in that he presupposes the action of divine providence which guided salvation history to its destination in Christ. Christ is «the unifying principle» of history «which alone confers sense on it». God’s action gradually leading his people towards Christ is thus «the principle of the intelligibility of history».13

The centrality of this principle comes into full relief if one steps back to observe how Ratzinger articulated his exegetical proposal over the span of more than two decades. Written during his pontificate, Verbum Domini states that «God’s plan is manifested progressively and it is accomplished slowly, in successive stages and despite human resistance».14 The pontiff alone) is interesting because it reveals more explicit connections with Aquinas than the original English version published in the volume Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI 1989.

13 Ratzinger, «Biblical Interpretation in Conflict», 24, n. 37. It should be observed that Ratzinger here is also dependent upon the thought of Bonaventure. Critiquing Joachimite theology while recasting it within an ecclesial context, Bonaventure underscored the progressive nature of divine revelation. In doing so, he shifted the emphasis from Christ being the telos of salvation history as one finds in Aquinas and elsewhere to Christ being “the true center and turning-point of history.” Ratzinger, Theology of History, 118. See also Benedict’s remarks on the same subject in Holy Men and Women of the Middle Ages and Beyond., Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2012, p. 45.

14 Ratzinger elsewhere describes the Bible as the story of a twofold struggle: God’s struggle to «make himself understandable to them over the course of time», and the people of God’s struggle to «seize hold of God over the course of time».
explains that God patiently and gradually revealed himself in order to «guide and educate… training his people in preparation for the Gospel». What is needed for correct interpretation, therefore, is «a training that interprets the texts in their historical-literary context and within the Christian perspective which has the Gospel as its ultimate hermeneutical key»15. This text itself echoes Dei Verbum and the Catechism, which eloquently states: «The divine plan of revelation involves a specific divine pedagogy: God communicates himself to man gradually. He prepares him to welcome by stages the supernatural revelation that is to culminate in the person and mission of the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ»16.

For Ratzinger, this patristically-based hermeneutic of divine pedagogy articulated by Dei Verbum and the Catechism is precisely the bridge that enables one to reconcile the unity of Scripture traditionally emphasized by Christian exegetes with the development, diversity, and apparent contradictions observed by modern scholars. The hermeneutic of divine pedagogy affirms that Scripture has a unity in light of the fact that it proceeds from God’s one, wise educational plan for mankind. At the same time, the hermeneutic is comfortable with diversity and apparent contradictions in Scripture since it sees these within the greater context of a progression towards Christ.

For both Benedict and Aquinas, the rationale for the progressive nature of divine nature lay within man’s nature. In continuity with the patristic and medieval tradition, Benedict explains that the sometimes puzzling language of the Bible is the result of divine «condescension» whereby God’s word becomes true human words adapted to the thought patterns of ancient cultures17. For his part Thomas articulates, «Man acquires a share of this learning, not indeed all at once, but little by little, according to the

This familiarization between God and man was a journey of faith, and «only in the process of this journeying was the Bible’s real way of declaring itself formed, step by step». Ultimately, however, the whole Old Testament is “an advance toward Christ,” and as such its real meaning becomes clear only in light of him who is its end. In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall, trans. B. RAMSEY, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1995, pp. 10-11

15 BENEDICT XVI, Verbum Domini, 42 (emphasis Benedict’s); cf. sections 11 and 20 of the same document for Benedict’s use of the term “divine pedagogy.”

16 Catechism of the Catholic Church §53.

17 BENEDICT XVI, Verbum Domini, 11.
mode of his nature». In *De veritate* he extends this principle from the individual to the whole human race: «Just as there is a progress in the faith of an individual man over the course of time, so there is a progress in faith for the whole human race. This is why Gregory says that divine knowledge has increasingly grown over the course of time». Aquinas instantiates these principles a number of times within his treatise on the six days of creation in *ST* I, qqs. 65-74. As will be seen below, the general explanation for why Moses (whom Aquinas, unlike Ratzinger, takes to be the sole author of the Pentateuch) penned certain seemingly erroneous texts was that he had to accommodate himself to the understanding of an «uncultivated» and «ignorant» people. Thus as Thomas states concerning divine providence earlier in the *Summa*, «[I]t belongs to His providence to permit certain defects in particular effects, that the perfect good of the universe may not be hindered, for if all evil were prevented, much good would be absent from the universe».

**The Essential Point**

A third point of contact between Aquinas and Ratzinger is not explicitly made in the latter’s corpus but is readily observable in the way he always seeks to determine the «essential point» asserted in apparently erroneous biblical texts. The problem of admitting the presence of contradictory

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18 Aquinas, *ST* II-II, q.2, a.3; I, q.12, a.4. For a more thorough treatment of Aquinas and the principle of development within divine revelation, see M. RAMAGE, *Dark Passages of the Bible: Engaging Scripture with Benedict XVI and Thomas Aquinas*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2013, ch. 3.

19 Aquinas, *De Ver*, q.14, a.11.

20 Aquinas, *ST* I, q.22, a. 2. Another text from the *Summa* also illumines how the Scriptures sometimes portray reality in seemingly problematic terms, which are nonetheless the design of divine providence. On the question of whether the divine will is always fulfilled, Aquinas states, «The rule in forms is this: that although a thing may fall short of any particular form, it cannot fall short of the universal form...Something may fall outside the order of any particular active cause, but not outside the order of the universal cause; under which all particular causes are included: and if any particular cause fails of its effect, this is because of the hindrance of some other particular cause, which is included in the order of the universal cause... Hence that which seems to depart from the divine will in one order, returns into it in another order.» Aquinas, *ST* I, q.19, a. 6.
biblical texts, of course, lies in squaring it with the doctrine of inerrancy such as it is articulated in *Dei Verbum*: «[E]verything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit»\(^{21}\).

Ratzinger assesses concrete problems in a way that is compatible with and builds on Aquinas’ understanding of inspiration and revelation. Paul Synave and Pierre Benoit state in their commentary on the *Summa’s* treatise on prophecy:

«Truth is the *adequatio rei et intellectus*. It exists only in the judgment. And by “judgment” we obviously do not mean every proposition made up of subject, verb, and predicate, but the formal act by which the intellect affirms its conformity (*adequatio*) to the object of knowledge… An [inspired] author does not speak of everything in an absolute way. He tells the truth or he is mistaken only within the limits of the field of vision which he has established for himself and in which he forms his judgment. We must therefore respect the varying degrees of his assent, rather than take all his sentences as categorical affirmations»\(^{22}\).

As Abbot Denis Farkasfalvy explains, inspiration does not imply that every sentence of the biblical text must be found free of error from every conceivable point of view. The key is that God’s word never asserts error notwithstanding the reality that its message is expressed with the imperfections one would expect to find in the documents of ancient cultures\(^{23}\). One might expand upon this point with a Thomistically-inspired distinction, explaining that apparent

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\(^{21}\) Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 11.

\(^{22}\) P. SYNAVE – P. BENOIT, *Prophecy and Inspiration*, Desclee Co., New York 1961, pp. 134-135 and p. 142: «[God] certainly cannot prevent [the sacred author] from using in one way or another these erroneous views and, consequently, from letting them show through in his text. For example, no one will deny that the biblical authors had now outmoded cosmological ideas in which they believed, and that they employed them in their writings because they were unable to think apart from contemporary categories. But they do not claim to be teaching them for their own sakes; they speak of them for a different purpose, e.g. to illustrate creation and divine providence.»

contradictions in Scripture are in reality material imperfections rather than formal errors. As Aquinas himself indicates in his *Commentary on the Sentences*, some biblical statements pertain to the substance of the faith (*ad substantiam fidei*), while others pertain to the faith only accidentally (*per accidens*). With respect to Genesis, Aquinas thus states that the doctrine of creation belongs to the substance of the faith, but how and in what order the world was made (*quo autem modo et ordine factus sit*) pertain to the faith only accidentally. In other words, the text of Genesis faithfully conveys the substance of the faith and what its divine author intended to express. As *Dei Verbum* has it, «[T]he books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching solidly, faithfully and without error that truth which God wanted put into sacred writings for the sake of salvation».

For his part, Ratzinger often seeks to reconcile apparently erroneous biblical texts by inquiring into their «substance», «kernel», or «essential point», that is to say by asking what message the human and divine authors intend to teach or assert in a given text. The bulk of this chapter’s inquiry into Ratzinger’s exegesis of Genesis below will focus precisely on examples in which he makes this type of move.

### The Spiritual Sense

This leads to a fourth and final connection between Ratzinger and Aquinas: their agreement concerning the need for a rich doctrine of the senses of Scripture. While the principles already articulated are sufficient to account for biblical texts that appear to contradict the nature of God, Ratzinger identifies spiritual exegesis as an essential component of his programme. Indeed, it is here that the word of God achieves its end of «taking flesh» in our human lives and becoming truly a «living» word. In *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict draws on Aquinas, himself citing Augustine, to emphasize the importance of the spiritual sense and the reality that «it is impossible for anyone to attain to knowledge of that truth unless he first have infused faith in Christ» since «the letter, even that of the Gospel, would kill, were there not the inward grace of healing

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24 Aquinas, *In II Sent.*, dist. 12, a. 2.
faith»26. In the Erasmus Lecture Cardinal Ratzinger speaks to this at greater length:

«To discover how each given historical word intrinsically transcends itself, and thus to recognize the intrinsic rightness of the rereadings by which the Bible progressively interweaves event and sense, is one of the tasks of objective interpretation. It is a task for which suitable methods can and must be found. In this sense, the exegetical maxim of Thomas Aquinas is much to the point: “The task of the good interpreter is not to consider words, but sense»27.

In contrast with those whose methodologies focus solely on the «words» of Scripture, Ratzinger shares with Aquinas the conviction that the words of Scripture were meant to be «re-read» over time, to point beyond themselves to a reality revealed through them but which transcends them28. In this way, their rich teaching on the senses of Scripture, while giving due attention to its words, also points beyond the words so as to show that even Scripture’s most problematic passages may put believers in touch with Christ. The text in its wholeness, Ratzinger says, must become Rabbenu, «our teacher»29. To put it in language based on that of Thomas, the words of Scripture signify something in addition to their human authors’ original intended meaning: realities in the lives of believers of all ages who meditate on these texts in order to gain the knowledge and strength they need to live a life in Christ. These Christians may be privy to the fullness of revelation in a way our elder brethren of the Old Testament epoch were not, but Ratzinger affirms that the ancient truths taught therein «are of course valid for the whole of history, for all places and times» and «always need to be relearned»30.

26 BENEDICT XVI, Verbum Domini, 29; cf. ST I-II, q. 106, a. 2.
28 For the reality of revelation being broader than the Bible see Verbum Domini, 16.
29 RATZINGER, «Biblical Interpretation in Conflict», p. 27.
Aquinas’ Exegesis of Genesis

This section will explore Aquinas’ assumptions concerning the text of Genesis as well as offer concrete illustrations of how he applies some of the aforementioned exegetical principles. The analysis will be divided into subsections, each briefly summarizing how he deals with particular facets of the creation accounts which will then serve as a basis for comparing Ratzinger’s thought on the same texts.

The Seven Days

To his credit and contrary to what those unfamiliar with medieval exegesis might assume, Thomas was well aware of the difficulties entailed by Genesis describing creation as having taken place over the course of seven days. As is ever his concern, Aquinas seeks an explanation which «defends Sacred Scripture from the derision of infidels»31. Following Augustine, he offers two rules for interpreting the days:

«The first is, to hold the truth of Scripture without wavering. The second is that since Holy Scripture can be explained in a multiplicity of senses, one should adhere to a particular explanation, only in such measure as to be ready to abandon it, if it be proved with certainty to be false; lest Holy Scripture be exposed to the ridicule of unbelievers, and obstacles be placed to their believing»32.

That said, Thomas does offer some clear conclusions regarding the work of creation. First, as seen above, Moses spoke in this way «to make the idea of such matter intelligible to an ignorant people»33. Second, Aquinas concludes that «Moses, instructing an ignorant people about the creation of the world, divides into parts things that were made simultaneously»34. He says that this can be compared to the way one teaches geometry. Although the parts of a figure constitute the figure without any order of time, nevertheless the geometer teaches that the constitution comes to be

31 Aquinas, *In II Sent.*, dist. 12, a. 2 (author’s translation).
32 Aquinas, *ST* I, q.68, a.1.
33 Aquinas, *ST* I, q.66, a.1, ad 1
34 Aquinas, *In II Sent.*, dist. 12, a. 2 (author’s translation).
by drawing line after line\textsuperscript{35}. The bottom line is thus that the «days» of which Genesis speaks do not describe a succession of events in time but rather «denote merely sequence in the natural order»\textsuperscript{36}.

**The Waters above the Heavens**

«And God made the firmament and separated the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament.» (Gen 1:7)\textsuperscript{37} Responding to the objection that there are no waters above the heavens, Thomas cites Augustine to the effect that the waters truly exist, although «[a]s to the nature of these waters, all are not agreed.» Moreover, the waters cannot be interpreted simply as symbols or even as spiritual substances. Rather, «We must hold, then, these waters to be material, but their exact nature will be differently defined according as opinions on the firmament differ»\textsuperscript{38}. Although medieval Christians were aware of the scientific difficulties entailed by this claim, for Aquinas the material nature of the waters cannot be written off as accidental to the central point of Gen 1:7.

A particularly fascinating feature in his discussion of this point concerns Thomas’ awareness that the text Genesis resonates at certain points with other ancient cosmological worldviews. In discussing the «darkness [that] was upon the face of the deep» (Gen 1:2), he remarks, «The text of Genesis, considered superficially, might lead to the adoption of a theory similar to that held by certain philosophers of antiquity, who taught that water was a body infinite in dimension, and the primary element of all bodies.» With flawless logic, he proceeds to the conclusion, «As, however, this theory can be shown to be false by solid reasons, it cannot be held to be the sense of Holy Scripture». Why, then, does Genesis seem to say things, which in fact it does not? Here as above Thomas invokes one of his favorite principles, «It

\textsuperscript{35} Aquinas, *In II Sent.*, dist. 12, a. 2. For another germane example of a geometry analogy, see Aquinas, *In Heb.*, caput 11, lectio 1. Here Aquinas argues that, just as one who possesses merely the principles of geometry already possesses its substance, so those with a simple faith (as in the case of many in Old Testament epochs) possess the entire substance of the faith by virtue of their assent to its most fundamental articles.

\textsuperscript{36} Aquinas, *ST I*, q.68, a.1; cf. *ST I*, q.69, a.1.

\textsuperscript{37} Unless indicated otherwise, biblical citations will be taken from the RSV even though this is obviously not the translation Aquinas used.

\textsuperscript{38} Aquinas, *ST I*, q.68, a.2.
should rather be considered that Moses was speaking to ignorant people, and that out of condescension to their weakness he put before them only such things as are apparent to sense. Moses speaks of «waters above the heavens» instead of describing air «to avoid setting before ignorant persons something beyond their knowledge»39. While Aquinas’ exegesis of the waters is lucid and reasonable, below we will see that Ratzinger follows similar principles yet arrives at a different conclusions because of a difference in premise. Unlike Aquinas, Ratzinger does not assume that the waters or many other figures described in Genesis require a physical referent in the first place.

Adam, Eve, and the Serpent in Eden

It is illuminating to observe the great care with which Thomas endeavors to distinguish which assertions in Genesis are to be taken literally and which admit or even require a spiritual interpretation. On the one hand, in treating Gen 2:7, he argues that God’s breathing into man «is not to be taken in the material sense; but as regards the act of God, to breathe (spirare), is the same as to ‘make a spirit’»40. On the other hand, Aquinas appears to assume that the same verse’s depiction of man’s creation from the dust of the earth, as well as the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib in Gen 2:22, are to be taken in a material sense: «Now God alone, the Author of nature, can produce an effect into existence outside the ordinary course of nature. Therefore God alone could produce either a man from the slime of the earth, or a woman from the rib of man»41.

When it comes to the events surrounding Adam and Eve in Eden, Thomas likewise maintains that Eden was a physical location on this planet. For, while he grants with Augustine that Eden may have a spiritual signification, the events described therein really occurred in history: «For whatever Scripture tells us about paradise is set down as matter of history; and wherever Scripture makes use of this method, we must hold to the historical truth of the narrative as a foundation of whatever spiritual explanation we may offer»42. The same holds for the tree of life and the tree

39 Aquinas, ST I, q.68, a.3.
40 Aquinas, ST I, q.90, a.1.
41 Aquinas, ST I, q.92, a.4.
42 Aquinas, ST I, q.102, a.1.
of good and evil situated within the garden (Gen 2:9). These were material
trees which also had spiritual significations.43

Finally, Thomas sticks to the same hermeneutical paradigm in the case
of the serpent who enters Eden in Gen 3. On the one hand, he follows
Augustine in explaining that «the concupiscence of sin in the sensuality
[is] signified by the serpent» and that «the lower reason, by pleasure, [is]
signified by the woman»44. At the same time, this is not to deny that the
temptation of Adam and Eve was caused by the devil acting through an
actual serpent: «Accordingly, the serpent spoke to man, even as the ass on
which Balaam sat spoke to him, except that the former was the work of a
devil, whereas the latter was the work of an angel»45. Once again, Aquinas’
exegesis is brilliant and balanced, yet Ratzinger will draw different
conclusions insofar as he interprets as symbols many of the referents which
Aquinas believes to have existed physically within history.

Neo-scholastic Anti-Modernism and the Exegesis of Genesis

Although Ratzinger has great respect for Aquinas and operates with
a similar exegetical method to that which we observed above, a decisive
difference between the two results simply from the fact that Ratzinger is
a modern. As a modern, he is privy both to additional exegetical tools as
well as to more nuanced premises made possible in light of the greater
knowledge we now possess of the ancient world in which the Bible arose.
Among Ratzinger’s greatest criticisms of neo-Thomism in the past century
was its antipathy towards modern exegetical methods. As he states in his
volume Milestones, «The liberal-historical method created a new directness
in the approach to Sacred Scripture and opened up dimensions of the text
that were no longer perceived by the all-too-predetermined dogmatic
reading»46. On the other hand, the preparatory schemata of Vatican II,
like many magisterial documents from earlier in the century, «gave an
impression of rigidity and narrowness through their excessive dependency
on scholastic theology»47.

43 Aquinas, ST I, q.102, a.1, ad 4.
44 Aquinas, ST I, q.165 a.2.
45 Aquinas, ST I, q.165 a.2 ad 4.
46 RATZINGER, Milestones, p. 52.
47 RATZINGER, Milestones, p. 121.
A couple key texts in Ratzinger’s corpus specifically target what he calls «the anti-modernistic decisions at the beginning of [the twentieth] century, especially the decisions of the Biblical Commission of that time»48. In the judgments contained within these documents, Ratzinger writes that «the Magisterium overextended the range of what faith can guarantee with certainty and that, as a result, the Magisterium’s credibility was injured and the freedom needed for exegetical research and interrogation was unduly narrowed»49. There were a number of such responsa offered at the time, but a few are directly germane to the subject of this chapter. In order to understand the exegetical moves Ratzinger makes below, it is important to be aware of the approach which he wishes to purify by taking into account not only the best of the Catholic interpretative tradition, but also the best modern exegesis has to offer. For the sake of brevity, only the most poignant instance of this approach will be discussed.

A document certainly looming behind Ratzinger’s comments above, the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s 1909 decree On the Historicity of Genesis 1-3 was issued at a time when the PBC served as an official organ of the Magisterium50. Consisting in a series of questions and answers, at points the document stands in tension with or even opposition to Ratzinger’s exegesis later in the century. In its opening question, the commission rejects the arguments of «various exegetical systems that have been devised and supported under the pretense of science for the purpose of excluding the literal historical sense of the first three chapters of Genesis»51. While there is nothing overly problematic about this first example, it at least reveals the PBC’s attitude toward those who «under the pretense of science» attempt to apply modern exegetical tools to study of Genesis.

49 Ratzinger, «Exegesis and the Magisterium of the Church», in Opening Up the Scriptures, p. 133.
50 These discrepancies would not be nearly as significant if they occurred between a reigning pope and the PBC today. The PBC was restructured by Paul VI in 1971 so that it no longer acts an official organ of the Magisterium but rather an advisory forum in which the Magisterium and expert exegetes to work together in the quest to illumine matters concerning Sacred Scripture.
The document’s lengthy second question is more revealing and therefore merits to be cited in full:

«Second Question: Whether we may teach that these three chapters of Genesis do not contain narratives of things that actually happened – that is, narratives referring to objective, historical reality; and whether we may teach that they contain fables derived from the mythologies and cosmologies of ancient peoples, which the sacred author has purified of all polytheistic error and adjusted to comport with monotheistic teaching, or allegorical and symbolic stories without any foundation in objective reality but presented under the guise of history for the purpose of inculcating religious and philosophical truth, or, finally, certain legends partly historical and partly fictitious, freely constructed for the instruction and edification of souls.

Response: Negative to each part.»

In the initial question within this document, the PBC wishes to make it clear that the events narrated in Genesis actually happened in what it calls «objective, historical reality.» While the text does articulate precisely what it means by «objective» here, the question that immediately ensues sheds some light into its intention. According to the PBC, one may not teach that the creation accounts contain material derived from pre-existent pagan mythologies52. Nor may one hold that Genesis 1-3 narrate a merely symbolic portrayal of human history in order to teach religious or philosophical truths. Finally, it is impossible to affirm that the sacred word contains legends in which fiction and fact and woven together for the purpose of edifying souls.

In the questions that follow, the document offers precisions which balance what was just stated above. The fifth question, for example, grants that «not all words and phrases must be taken according to their literal sense». The sixth question affirms the validity of interpreting certain

52 Pius XII would later emend this view with a helpful corrective: «If, however, the ancient sacred writers have taken anything from popular narrations (and this may be conceded), it must never be forgotten that they did so with the help of divine inspiration, through which they were rendered immune from any error in selecting and evaluating those documents. Therefore, whatever of the popular narrations have been inserted into the Sacred Scriptures must in no way be considered on a par with myths or other such things». Pius XII, Humani Generis, 38-39.
passages according to their allegorical or prophetic sense. The seventh question teaches that one is not obliged «to look for the precision proper to scientific discourse» in Gen 1-3 which the sacred author composed as a «popular account» and with language «adapted to the intellectual capacities of his audience». These last remarks are perfectly consistent with Aquinas’ hermeneutic discussed above in which he ascribed oddities in the creation narratives to the condescension required by Moses in order to instruct an ignorant people in the truths of the faith. Even so, the negative stance on modern exegetical methods evident in the first question here as in the other PBC decrees at the time, as well as the problematic requirements outlined in the second question, exemplify the precise mentality targeted by Ratzinger in his various remarks against the neo-scholasticism of his day. At the same time, it is worth noting that Ratzinger never criticizes Thomas himself for lack of willingness to use the best tools available to him in his day; nor does he attack the Angelic Doctor for holding the truncated view of history and truth he attributes to the PBC’s decrees53.

**Ratzinger’s Exegesis of Genesis**

Up to this point we have been surveying points of contact between Ratzinger and Aquinas and anticipating ways in which Ratzinger’s exegesis differs from that of Thomas and the neo-scholastic tradition of the early twentieth century. At last we are in a position to examine several illustrations of Ratzinger’s exegesis to see how the example of Aquinas is made profitable in the work of this biblical scholar who became pope. Ratzinger discusses the creation accounts at many points in his corpus and in a way that is congenial with the aims of Aquinas.

53 Other texts germane to this discussion include the PBC’s June 23, 1905 decree Concerning Historical Narratives, published in the same volume as the document on Gen 1-3, as well as the 1948 text Regarding the sources of the Pentateuch and the historical value of Genesis 1-11, available only in Italian and French from the Vatican website. This latter piece, written four decades after the PBC’s more anti-modernist decrees, exhibits a greater awareness of the Pentateuch’s sources and literary forms and thus offers an understanding of historicity much more aligned with that which one finds in Ratzinger’s corpus. Its principles would be incorporated into Pius XII’s 1950 encyclical Humani Generis discussed above.
The Seven Days and the Real Purpose of the Creation Account

Like Aquinas, Ratzinger does not take Genesis to be teaching creation over the span of seven literal days. Indeed, he is so confident in this conviction that he describes the very issue as not particularly urgent: «For it is obvious even in the Bible that this is a theological framework and is not intended simply to recount the history of creation»54. Noting that the two creation narratives are not the only creation accounts in the Bible, he continues:

«In the Book of Job and in the Wisdom literature we have creation narratives that make it clear that even then believers themselves did not think that the creation account was, so to speak, a photographic depiction of the process of creation. It only seeks to convey a glimpse of the essential truth, namely, that the world comes from the power of God and is his creation. How the process actually occurred is a wholly different question, which even the Bible itself leaves wide open»55.

The «essential truth» or «essential core» of Genesis’ account has nothing to do with a relaying a video or photographic depiction of the universe’s first hours. The Bible leaves open the question of how creation happened. In language reminiscent of Aquinas’ warnings against making the faith look ridiculous to pagans, Ratzinger argues that this process «should not be explained away by forced interpretations» such as trying to square science with a wooden literalistic reading of Genesis.

According to Ratzinger in the above quote, what really concerns the author of Genesis is to demonstrate that «the world comes from the power of God and is his creation.» As he explains at greater length in In the Beginning, the real thrust of the Genesis narratives is to teach monotheism:

54 Ratzinger, Salt of the Earth, p. 31.
55 Ratzinger, Salt of the Earth, p. 31. While recognizing Genesis contains mythological elements and accepting evolution as a reasonable scientific theory, Ratzinger immediately proceeds to offer an ironic critique an overly facile adoption of evolutionary theory: «Conversely, I think that in great measure the theory of evolution has not gotten beyond hypotheses and is often mixed with almost mythical philosophies that have yet to be critically discussed.» On the issue of multiple creation accounts and how their presence demonstrates the gradual process of development by which the Old Testament came into being, see In the Beginning, 14-16. The «normative» creation account is found within the New Testament and its treatment of the Logos in John 1.
«They do not depict the process of becoming or the mathematical structure of matter; instead, they say in different ways that there is only one God and that the universe is not the scene of a struggle among dark forces but rather the creation of his Word. But this does not imply that the individual passages of the Bible sink into meaninglessness and that this bare extract alone has any value. They too, express the truth –in another way, to be sure, than is the case in physics and biology. They represent truth in the way that symbols do– just as, for example, a Gothic window gives us a deep insight into reality, thanks to the effects of light that it produces and to the figures that it portrays»\textsuperscript{56}.

For Ratzinger, individual passages of the creation narratives are like pieces of a great mosaic or parts of a Gothic window, which shed great light even while not intended to represent their subject photographically. Just as each piece of a stained-glass window makes no sense when considered in isolation from the whole, so individual biblical periscopes or narratives must be interpreted in light of the whole of Scripture.

Another element in the text above –an element Ratzinger is able to identify thanks to modern knowledge of the ancient Near East– is that the Genesis account is not simply teaching monotheism in a vacuum but rather in the context of a polemic against pre-existing creation myths from ancient Babylon. Diverging from the view advanced by the earlier PBC, Ratzinger grants that the text of Genesis is «in part based» on such pagan creation myths\textsuperscript{57}. Creation became a dominant theme in Israelite thinking during the time of the Babylonian Exile, and it is in this period that the biblical creation accounts assumed their present form\textsuperscript{58}. In contrast with the Babylonian \textit{Enuma Elish}, which depicted creation as the product of a struggle between dark forces, Genesis intends to show that the world was not a demonic contest but rather the created expression of the one true God’s \textit{logos}:

«Scripture would not wish to inform us about how the different species of plant life gradually appeared or how the sun and the moon and the stars were established. Its purpose ultimately would

\textsuperscript{56} RATZINGER, \textit{In the Beginning}, pp. 25-26.
\textsuperscript{58} RATZINGER, \textit{A New Song for the Lord}, pp. 10-11.
be to say one thing: *God* created the world. The world is not, as people used to think then, a chaos of mutually opposed forces; nor is it the dwelling of demonic powers from which human beings must protect themselves. The sun and the moon are not deities that rule over them, and the sky that stretches over their heads is not full of mysterious and adversary divinities. Rather, all of this comes from one power, from God’s eternal Reason, which became—in the Word—the power of creation.\(^59\).

In Ratzinger’s view, the truth that the world as a whole issues from the creative mind of God is «precisely what the belief in creation means».\(^60\)

Moreover, Ratzinger emphasizes that the *logos* is not only the source of creation but also its *telos*. All of creation is ordered toward the Sabbath wherein it returns to and rests in God. In this way, «The metaphor of the seven-day week was selected for the creation account because of the Sabbath».\(^61\) Because he shares with Aquinas a non-literal interpretation of the seven days, Ratzinger elsewhere is then able to state that the seven-day narrative «is not directly true, in its bare literal meaning, but rather insofar as it has been taken up into the New Testament perspective.» In other words, it is «valid only in union with the New» inasmuch as it forms «part of the history leading up to Christ».\(^62\) As seen above in discussing Aquinas on the divine pedagogy, so here Ratzinger affirms that the Old Testament can only be understood properly in light of the fullness of truth revealed in Christ.

Perhaps most importantly, Ratzinger follows Aquinas in emphasizing the need to distinguish what is *de fide* from what pertains to the faith only accidentally. As he puts it, «the doctrinal message of the Bible» (e.g. the doctrine of monotheism) is distinct from «what may be only the temporary contingent vehicle for its real theme» or its «world view» (e.g. the framework of seven days). This is expressed well when Ratzinger discusses how the ancient Israelite worldview was received by the Fathers:

\(^59\) RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord*, p. 5 (emphasis Ratzinger’s). Ratzinger thus describes the Genesis account as «the decisive ‘enlightenment’ of history and as a breakthrough out of the fears that had oppressed humankind.» Ratzinger, *A New Song for the Lord*, p. 14.


\(^61\) RATZINGER, *A New Song for the Lord*, p. 84; cf. RATZINGER, *In the Beginning*, p. 27.

«The early creation accounts express the world view of the ancient Near East, especially of Babylon; the Church Fathers lived in the Hellenistic age, to which that world view seemed mythical, pre-scientific, and in every way intolerable. One consideration that helped them, and ought to help us, is that Bible is really literature that spans a whole millennium. The literary tradition extends from the world view of the Babylonians to the Hellenistic world view that shaped the creation passages of the Wisdom literature, which give a picture of the world and of the creation event completely unlike that of the familiar creation accounts in Genesis, which of course are not uniform themselves. The first and the second chapters of this book present largely contrasting images of the course of creation. But this means that, even within the Bible itself, faith and world view are not identical: the faith makes use of a world view but does not coincide with it. Over the course of biblical development, this difference was clearly not a theme for reflection but, rather, was taken for granted»63.

Another way Ratzinger articulates the difference between faith and world view is to say that «the content» of Scripture is distinct from its «form» (not taken here in its Aristotelian sense but rather in the sense of literary form). In a wonderfully evocative image, he states that interpreters must learn again and again, with the changing of the times, how to distinguish between «fixed stars» and «planets», between “permanent orientation» and «transient movement»64. With respect to Genesis, it cannot be denied that the author lacked the knowledge possessed today thanks to modern physics, but this detracts nothing from the core message of his text. The cosmology of his day was not what the author wanted to teach; it was the vehicle for his teaching. Like any good author, he operated within a cultural context and conveyed his point through the media available to him at the time.

For Aquinas, this means that Moses had to condescend to the level of his audience in order to make the truth about God known to them.

63 Ratzinger, «Belief in Creation and the Theory of Evolution», p. 137. For other instances where Ratzinger emphasizes the importance of the Bible’s development over the course a more than a millennium, see God and the World, pp. 151-152. As in the case of his exegesis as a whole, he illustrates and applies this thought in many different venues. For example, see his speech at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris (September 12, 2008).

64 Ratzinger, «Farewell to the Devil?», pp. 198-199.
Ratzinger, however, while adopting the same principle of condescension, applies it differently. He accentuates not Moses’ condescension, but rather the condescension of God as the principal author of Scripture. Unlike Thomas, Ratzinger does not assume that Moses had a superior cosmological worldview to the simple folk living in his day. Indeed, at various points in his corpus it is clear that Ratzinger rejects the assumption of Aquinas—and with him a host of other authors within the Catholic tradition—that Moses substantially authored the Pentateuch in the first place. For Ratzinger, the authors and redactors of Genesis were firmly rooted in the culture of their respective ages, but the Lord worked through that culture to teach his chosen people the truth that would eventually prepare them for the coming of his Son in the flesh.

Adam and Eve and Other «Images»

While the above section surveyed convergences and differences between Aquinas and Ratzinger’s exegesis of the seven days, the divergences come across all the more clearly in the context of man’s creation and fall from grace. In contrast with Aquinas, Ratzinger emphasizes not the literal historical existence of man’s first parents but rather the life of Adam and Eve relived in every human being since the dawn of our species. This conviction is made clear in several places throughout Ratzinger’s corpus, but the following illustrations are particularly forceful:

«When Holy Scripture presents an image of the creation of man—with God as the potter, who shapes him and who then breathes the spirit of life into him—that is meant as being archetypical for each and every one of us. In the psalms, man says with respect to himself: You have shaped me with clay; YOU have breathed into me the breath of life. What is thereby portrayed is the fact that each person stands in direct relationship with God. And each has thus in the great web of world history a significant place and role that have been assigned to him and by means of which he can make an irreplaceable contribution to history as a whole.»

65 For Aquinas’ distinction between the learned and the simple in relation to condescension in the Old Testament, see RAMAGE, Dark Passages, pp. 103-108.
66 RATZINGER, God and the World, p. 75.
Here Ratzinger does not explicitly deny that Genesis has two specific individuals in its sights; rather, he takes Adam to be an archetypal image of not just the first man but every man. Like Aquinas, he does not read the breath of life bestowed upon man literally. «The essential point in this picture», he writes, «is the double nature of man» – not any particular details about how or when the first man was created or even who he was, but rather the union of body and spirit in man67. In others works this is taken a significant step further. As he writes in an article on human origins, «The picture that describes the origin of Adam is valid for each human being in the same way. Each human is Adam, a new beginning; Adam is each human being»68. Even more to the point is this selection from a text on the question of evolution.

«With respect to the creation of man, “creation” does not designate a remote beginning but, rather, has each of us in view along with Adam; every man is directly in relation to God. The faith declares no more about the first man than it does about each one of us, and, conversely, it declares no less about us than it does about the first man»69.

At this point Ratzinger bluntly parts ways from a more traditional interpretation of Genesis. It appears that he takes the application of Adam’s story to every man not just as a moral sense of Genesis but rather its author’s originally intended literary sense. Important issues could be raised at this point concerning the implications of such an interpretation for the doctrine of original sin. While the constraints of this chapter do not leave room for such a discussion, Ratzinger does devote considerable time to expounding his view of original sin in light of the foregoing exegesis70. This will be touched on just briefly below.

As Ratzinger’s exegesis tends to eschew a literal interpretation of man’s creation, it is also highly illuminating to see how he extends this

67 RATZINGER, God and the World, pp. 76-77.
70 For Ratzinger’s understanding of original sin as a damaged network of relationships in existence passed down since the first sin at the dawn of our species, see In the Beginning, pp. 71-74 and God and the World, pp. 84-88.
approach to other elements within Genesis 1-3 and indeed to various other images from Genesis and Exodus. Unlike Aquinas, he characterizes the creation of Eve from Adam’s rib as a «myth» and «legend»71. For Ratzinger this is one of the Bible’s «great archetypal images» which expresses «the common nature of man and woman» as well as the reality that they are turned toward each other»72. The garden and tree of life, too, are seen in terms of a metaphorical «image for the undamaged creation and for secure existence within it».73. Adam and Eve’s garments are likewise a «symbolic representation of the attempt to be ourselves, whereby we attempt and external restoration of the personal dignity that has suffered intimate damage»74.

When it comes to the Fall and original sin, Ratzinger is not going to deny a Catholic dogma, but he does describe the term ‘original sin’ as «certainly misleading and imprecise»75. Ratzinger emphasizes that sin constitutes «a rejection of relationality» or a «loss of relationship» which cannot be restricted to the individual and hence has been passed down from generation to generation since the inception of the species76. In contrast with Aquinas, he does not view the serpent who tempts Adam and Eve as a physical creature but again as a «great image» and «symbol of that wisdom which rules the world and of the fertility through which human beings plunge into the divine current of life. » In particular, in Ratzinger the serpent is taken to be a «symbol» of the attractive temptation Eastern fertility cults exerted upon Israel for centuries. At the same time and in keeping with Aquinas’ understanding that certain referents in Genesis have both a literal and spiritual sense, Ratzinger adds that man’s first temptation signifies «the nature of temptation and sin in every age»77.

72 Ratzinger, God and the World, p. 80.
73 Ibid., p. 64, p. 77.
74 Ibid., p. 88.
75 Ratzinger, In the Beginning, p. 72.
76 Ibid., pp. 72-73.
77 Ibid., p. 66; cf. Benedict XVI, Saint Paul, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2009, p. 93. Another illuminating piece which ties together many of these images in relation to theology is the International Theological Commission’s Communion and Stewardship: Human Persons Created in the Image of God, especially sections 62-70. Published in 2004 while Ratzinger was the commission’s president, the document bears great resemblance with the exegesis discussed here.
Conclusion

The texts discussed above are certainly not the only instances in which Ratzinger applies his hermeneutical principles to the text of Genesis, but these examples are particularly revealing because they allow one to glimpse points of convergence and divergence in the thought of Aquinas and Ratzinger. As this chapter has shown, Ratzinger is not a Thomist of the strictest observance. On many points –especially early in his career– he exhibited great discomfort with a certain anti-modernistic mindset observable in his neo-scholastic contemporaries as well as in the theology of Magisterium earlier in the past century. All the same, Ratzinger’s esteem for Aquinas is evident in that he implicitly and explicitly connects his exegetical programme with that of the Angelic Doctor at various points. Likewise, many of his particular exegetical conclusions may differ from those arrived at by Thomas, yet they share a common project in endeavoring to ascertain the essential points or affirmations of challenging biblical texts. This involves a keen awareness of the need to ascertain the sense or senses according to which a given text ought to be read. Since he is privy to modern scholarly tools –in particular a broader knowledge of the ancient Near Eastern milieu in which Genesis reached its final form– Ratzinger is able to make advances upon the prior tradition of which Aquinas formed an integral part. Yet this is by no means to say that the Angelic Doctor’s exegesis of Genesis has nothing to contribute to our understanding of the text today. Indeed, Ratzinger would never have been able to produce his brilliant theology if he had not been standing on the shoulders of the great exegetical and theological giants of the Middle Ages.

78 On the many other examples that could be offered here, Ratzinger’s God and the World is particularly insightful. In this text he applies his hermeneutical principles to the story of the Flood, Babel, and the giving of the Ten Commandments in Exodus. Ratzinger, God and the World, pp. 141-145; pp. 165-168.