CONCLUSION: THE TRADITION OF THE SENTENCES

Philipp W. Rosemann

In a previous publication, The Story of a Great Medieval Book: Peter Lombard’s “Sentences” (2007), I offered a preliminary sketch of the structure of the tradition of Sentences commentaries. In that study, I understood structure primarily in terms of literary form, so that my analysis focused upon the development of the literary shape that Sentences commentaries took between 1158, when Peter Lombard released the final redaction of his magnum opus, and 1511, the year in which Martin Luther completed his term as baccaleureus Sententiarum. In addition, I showed how changes in the literary form of the Sentences literature went hand in hand with corresponding shifts in the conception of the theological project itself; in other words, how literary history and the history of ideas are connected. Quickly summarized, The Story of a Great Medieval Book argued that the Sentences literature unfolded in a dialectical movement of expansion and contraction; furthermore, the book suggested that this movement was itself inscribed within the larger, but similarly structured history of the reception of Sacred Scripture.

Scripture stands at the center of a tradition that developed around it in increasingly distant layers of explanation and gradual transformation of the biblical narrative into theological doctrine. This centrifugal movement soon came to be balanced by a countermovement “inward”: the Christian intellectual tradition, spawned by reflection upon the sacred text, proliferated, yet the more it broadened in scope, the greater was the need which was felt to prevent its fruits from dispersing. As early as the fifth century, Prosper of Aquitaine’s Liber sententiarum Sancti Augustini, the first sentences collection, endeavored to boil the Bishop of Hippo’s huge and frequently doctrinally ambiguous oeuvre down to a more manageable form so that it could be studied more methodically. By the twelfth century, sacra pagina—the study of the “sacred page,” understood as not only grounding but encompassing all theological reflection—had advanced to such an extent that the time had come for a comprehensive summary. Peter Lombard addressed this task in his Book of Sentences, which henceforth became
the center of a second set of circles of expansion and contraction. For, the new \textit{sacra doctrina} or \textit{scientia divina}, which arose out of and in the \textit{Sentences} commentaries of the thirteenth century, was no longer grounded directly in Scripture but rather indirectly, precisely through the \textit{Sentences} and the \textit{Sentences} literature. Bit by bit even the Book of \textit{Sentences}, however, lost its paradigmatic force. Theology, as a consequence, while gaining in conceptual sophistication, lost much of its immediacy to the sacred text and spiritual appeal. Moreover, it lost its synthetic force as a comprehensive account of the Christian faith. This crisis, which was characteristic of the nominalism of the fourteenth century, led to a vigorous movement backward, back to the sources: back to Augustine, back to the acknowledged authorities of an earlier age, back to the \textit{Sentences}, and ultimately back to Scripture itself.

These developments in theological method were accompanied, mirrored, and facilitated by parallel developments in the literary form of the \textit{Sentences} commentaries: initially, the glosses and commentaries followed Peter Lombard’s text very closely; in the thirteenth century, the theologians’ advanced debates began to take off, as it were, from the text of the \textit{Sentences}; and the “commentators” of the fourteenth century normally used the \textit{Book of Sentences} as a mere pretext to develop their own reflections on topics of contemporary interest—topics, moreover, which not infrequently appealed to them for their logical rather than properly theological relevance. Then, in the long fifteenth century, authors such as Denys the Carthusian and Gabriel Biel once again offered complete and comprehensive \textit{Sentences} commentaries.

These were the salient theses of my earlier book. Since \textit{The Story of a Great Medieval Book} was based upon the analysis of a small selection of \textit{Sentences} commentaries—for the most part, works available in modern critical editions by some of the better-known theologians of the later Middle Ages—these theses could not claim to be more than working hypotheses awaiting confirmation, qualification, and correction as research in the field would advance. Now the contributions to the present volume have added significantly to our picture of the reception of the \textit{Sentences}. This is why I would like to employ these concluding pages to update the findings from \textit{The Story of a Great Medieval Book}. The following remarks will take their starting point from claims about the tradition of the \textit{Sentences} that I advanced in my earlier book; they will then proceed to examine how these claims are