Hugh of St. Cher and Thomas Aquinas: Time and the Interpretation of the Psalms

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The psalms played a central role in the life of the Church in the Middle Ages. Whether in their function in the eucharistic liturgy and the divine office, as the basis for spiritual reading, or in the classrooms of the cathedral schools and universities, the psalms were ubiquitous texts for medieval Christians. Scholastic commentaries on the psalms appropriated the exegesis of Augustine, Jerome, and Cassiodorus, among others, to shed light on the multiple layers of meaning latent in the Psalter. Scholars have often noticed the move away from allegorical or tropological interpretations to the literal sense in the thirteenth century. This essay provides additional evidence to that observation and also highlights the significance of an increasingly more sophisticated divisio textus.

The development from more spiritual exegesis to more literal exegesis and from a relatively simple divisio textus to a more complex one can be seen in the Psalms commentaries of Dominican theologians Hugh of St. Cher and Thomas Aquinas. Moreover, their distinct modes of exegesis, emphasizing allegorical and literal respectively, reveal each mode’s implicit assumptions about the ways exegesis defines spiritual presence and the spiritual use of time.


Hugh of St. Cher compiled his *Postilla super Psalterium* probably in the mid- to late 1230s, and his prologue to the long version emphasizes the contemplative dimension of the psalms. The scriptural verse which opens the *accessus* is Song of Songs 3, 11: “Go forth, O daughters of Zion, and behold King Solomon, with the crown with which his mother crowned him on the day of his wedding, on the day of the gladness of his heart.” Hugh uses the opening word, “egredimi,” to reflect on how spiritual life involves different kinds of *egressus* (departures, journeys). The *egressus* of evil involves moving away from God, neighbor, and oneself through pride, avarice, and selfish indulgence (*luxuriam*). The *egressus* of goodness, however, involves a series of three movements from individual selfishness to God. The first movement is from the flesh to the spirit through contrition; the second movement occurs through meditation on the divine law and is from nature to those things which are above nature; the third movement is from earth to heaven and occurs “through the dissolution of the body and soul or through contemplation.”

The “daughters of Zion” are clerics, theologians, and religious. Hugh is clear that these three groups of people are not sons, but daughters on account of their “exceptional fecundity,” which is manifested in “true doctrine, good works, and a holy existence (*conversatione*).” But why are they “of Zion”? Hugh asserts that “Zion” means speculation, and that speculation consists of three things: inquiry, prayer, and contemplation. “In the first,” Hugh says, “the Bridegroom is sought, in the second, He is asked, and in the third He is found. In the first the Bridegroom speaks to the bride, in the second, He is asked, and in the third He is found.”

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5 Regarding Hugh’s spiritual exegesis, see Gilbert Dahan, “L’Exégèse de Hugues. Méthode et Herméneutique,” in *Hugues de Saint-Cher (+1263): Bibliste et Théologien*, pp. 65–99 (89–94). Martin Morard goes so far as to say that there is an “atrophy” of the literal sense (pp. 138–144).

6 Scriptural citations are from the RSV except where noted.

7 De mundo ad coelum, per corporis, et animae dissolutionem, seu etiam per contemplationem, *Postilla super Psalterium* (*Opera omnia in universum Vetus et Novum Testamentum* (Lyons, 1645), 1, fol. 2ra).

8 Etenim non filii, sed filiae dicuntur genere foeminino, non propter sexus infirmitatem, sed propter prolis foecunditatem, quam debent habere in doctrina vera, in operatione bona, in conversatione sancta, *Postilla super Psalterium*, fol. 2ra.