

## OPUSCULA SELECTA

### William Ames's *Prolegomenon in Psalmum Secundum*

#### INTRODUCTION

William Ames (1576–1633), the well-known pastor and theologian, studied at Cambridge under William Perkins, the “father of Puritanism.” Ames then served as a fellow of Christ’s College, Cambridge, but eventually left the university after his involvement in a controversy over vestments. Under increasing pressure for his Puritanism, Ames moved to Holland, where he ministered to several English congregations. He participated in the debates over Arminianism that culminated in the Synod of Dort (1618–1619), where Ames served as an adviser to the moderator. His more well-known works include *Medulla Theologiae* (1627), a compendium of Reformed systematic theology, and *De Conscientia Eius Iure et Casibus* (1632), which concerned ethics.

The selection here is from his posthumously published commentary on the Psalms, *Lectiones in CL. Psalmos Davidis* (1635). Hugh Peter, an English minister at Rotterdam, where Ames spent the last portion of his life, dedicated the work to the officials of the city on Ames’s behalf. The title page of the commentary describes it as a work in which “through analysis and, where necessary, through questions the meaning is clearly and concisely revealed and, furthermore, lessons are everywhere drawn out and skillfully applied to their uses.” The target audience includes “all who practice piety, and in particular ministers of the Word.”

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1. The title of this selection is Ames’s, but all subheadings are the translator’s. Bracketed contents are also editorial insertions, though where such brackets contain Latin text, the Latin is Ames’s. Scripture references have been conformed to modern conventions. The selection is from William Ames, *Prolegomenon in Psalmum secundum, in Lectiones in CL. Psalmos Davidis* (Amsterdam: Joannes Janssonius, 1635), pp. 11–14.

The following selection breaks from the pattern established throughout the commentary. Rather than addressing particular features of a Psalm, Ames addresses an underappreciated area of 16<sup>th</sup>- and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Reformed thought: hermeneutics. The Reformed ministers of this period are rightly commended for their contributions to systematic theology and devotional literature. But, as Ames demonstrates, they were also careful, perceptive exegetes, even where we must depart from them, and consciously developed and applied their interpretive principles. Here Ames critiques the Roman Catholic *quadriga* (the fourfold pattern of exegesis, which Ames will describe in greater detail below), explains his approach to typological and allegorical exegesis, and illuminates the nature of meaning in biblical interpretation. This aids us not only in understanding the Psalms, but in interpreting Scripture as a whole. The view Ames articulates is an example of what is described in the Westminster Confession of Faith 1.9: “The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (*which is not manifold, but one*), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly” [italics added].

#### PROLEGOMENON ON THE SECOND PSALM<sup>1</sup>

We see three interpretations of this Psalm in those who have written on it. (1) That of the Jews, who understand the whole Psalm to be about David. (2) That of nearly all the fathers, who explain it as being simply about Christ. (3) That of the most learned Reformed theologians who, by a kind of synthetic method, interpret it partly about David, but especially, properly, and primarily about Christ.

Therefore, we have at the outset a question we must resolve. It is clearly the same one that the Ethiopian eunuch put to Philip long ago: “I ask you, about whom does the prophet say this, about himself? Or about someone else?” (Acts 8:34).

Clearly this Psalm cannot be explained as being simply about David, because it contains some elements that are not proper to David, such as those which appear in verses 8 and 12, and because we know from the testimony of the apostles that we should not do so (Acts 4:25; 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5).

There is no compelling reason to explain it as being simply about Christ, while completely excluding David from consideration. For David prefigured matters that pertain to Christ not only by his words, but also by his deeds and the nature of his life and office.

The synthetic method of interpretation is the most commendable. According to this method, the statements made here are certainly true of David, on the whole, but they do not have their complete or perfect meaning unless they correspond primarily to Christ Jesus.

As scriptural passages of this sort provided an opportunity, an error gradually crept into the church. This error holds that the Scriptures are to be interpreted in a manifold sense. Since the papists still firmly hold and fiercely defend this error, this will be a good opportunity to examine it briefly.

#### ROMAN CATHOLIC HERMENEUTICS

The following is the papists' position. Divine Scripture very often contains at least two senses: the literal or historical, and the spiritual or mystical. The literal sense, they say, is that which the words immediately convey. The spiritual sense is that which is related to something other than that which the words immediately signify.

Furthermore, they hold that the literal sense is twofold: simple, which consists in the proper meaning of the words, and figurative, by which words are transferred from their natural meaning to a foreign one. They hold that the spiritual sense is threefold: allegorical, tropological, and anagogical. They call the meaning "allegorical" when the scriptural words, beyond the literal sense, signify something in the New Testament that pertains to Christ or the church. They call the meaning "tropological" when the words or deeds signify something that pertains to morals. And they call the meaning "anagogical" when the words or deeds signify eternal life.

When it comes to applying this fabricated distinction to interpreting sacred literature, the papist doctors partly agree with each other and partly disagree. They agree that (1) according to faith various meanings are certainly contained in one passage and (2) different mystical or spiritual senses are sometimes contained in one passage.

But they disagree and argue over this: (1) whether several literal senses are sometimes contained in the same words. Alonso Toñado says that this is certain according to faith. Thomas and most of the scholastics contend that this is the case. Bellarmine does not dare to affirm it, but says it is not improbable. Domingo Báñez acknowledges that such passages are rare, and that no passage has been sufficiently examined. Nevertheless, he concludes that it would be rash to deny that multiple, literal meanings ever exist in a passage.

They also dispute about (2) whether all the mystical senses are found in one and the same passage, and whether all the events and words of the Old Testament are to be explained mystically. They all say it is pious and very useful for the events narrated in the Old Testament, as a whole, to be construed in a mystical sense. There were also many among them who tried, violently and ridiculously, to stretch individual passages of the Old Testament into the fourfold sense. And papist preachers liked nothing better than to abuse the Scriptures like this, and feed their miserable people with the wind, as it were. There was a preacher in Spain, as Báñez reports, who

asserted, in praise of Christ's cross, that everything made of wood mentioned in the Old Testament was a figure of Christ, even Saul's spear, along with his cup, which David stole from Saul personally while his servants were sleeping [1 Sam. 26:12]. Báñez does not praise such preaching, but gravely warns all preachers that if they find any new mystical sense, they should always be careful to say what resembles the truth and what agrees with reason. He uses the same words a crafty old fox would use if he were teaching someone how to lie. For what other advice would such a liar give his disciples than to act cautiously, if not with honesty, and always to speak, if not the truth, what nevertheless resembles it?

I think that explaining the papist position clearly and refuting it are the same thing. Nevertheless, I will lay out the arguments still more plainly.

#### FIRST ARGUMENT

The first argument that undermines the fabrication of a manifold sense is that it has no basis in the Scriptures themselves.

Bellarmino, in the first place, cites the only passage from which he says one derives this division of senses: 1 Corinthians 10, where in verse 11 Paul asserts, concerning the things that happened to the Jews, that "all these things happened to them as an example [*typice*]." But we must agree about the sense of these words before we may derive from them such a manifold sense in other passages. And the meaning and intention of the apostle in this passage are far different from what Bellarmine thinks. For it is obvious from verse 6 that by "type" in this chapter the apostle just meant an example: "These things were examples [*typi*] for us, that we not desire evil." I think that here the very learned Beza dozed off for a while. He does not pay sufficient attention to the logic of the words, while he takes them as though the apostle were teaching that the Israelites' sacraments signified our sacraments, even though the purpose of the example is indicated clearly enough by the clause, "that we might not desire evil." The word is used in the same sense in 1 Timothy 4:12 and Titus 2:7. There that same apostle teaches that evangelists, and so all ministers, should show themselves in all things to be examples [*typos*] of good works.

This is so clear from what precedes and follows in this chapter that even some papist scholastics have noticed, though they are usually not very careful with the Scriptures. So Domingo Báñez in his commentary on Thomas, *ST I*, Q. 1, Art. 10:

By "all these things" the apostle means the punishments for the sins of the Jews. He says that these things happened to them as a figure, that is, as an example for us, so that we might gain experience from another's punishment. In other words, just as those who were not

grateful for God's blessings were severely punished, so we will be punished much more justly if we are not grateful for the greater blessings we have received.<sup>2</sup>

In the second place, Bellarmine and other papist doctors cite various passages of Scripture in which the same things are asserted in a literal sense in the Old Testament, but are explained in a spiritual and mystical sense in the New Testament. For example, what is said about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, the crossing of the sea, the manna, the water from the rock, and things like that.

But we reply:

(1) Even they hold that such a varied meaning cannot at all be proved from those passages. For even if one grants those passages a twofold sense, yet they will not prove from them a fivefold sense.

(2) In some passages of the New Testament where they think a new sense is given to some Old Testament passages, a new meaning is not actually established there. Rather, the words are only adapted by analogy to explain or illustrate something else, as in Romans 10:18: "Their sound has gone out into all the earth."

(3) We do not deny that there are also many allegories, that is, extended metaphors, or images of real things expressed in words. Nor do we deny that in the Scriptures there are types, that is, images of real things expressed by other real things. But we affirm the following: (1) allegory has an equally simple, though figurative, sense and uses words in their proper sense.<sup>3</sup> (2) The type and the reality signified by the type do not constitute two different senses, properly speaking, but two parts of one and the same sense. For the things said at one time about an image and about the person whose image it is do not have different senses, but only one. (3) If there are two senses in a typological narrative, then one sense belongs properly and immediately to the words, and the other belongs to the realities, not to the words, except through analogical adaptation.

#### SECOND ARGUMENT

The second argument against various senses in Scripture is that it has no basis in logic, grammar, or rhetoric. Since these are the arts of reason and speech, we should allow nothing in our use of reasoning or speaking that we cannot prove by them. And no one should say that this is a special quality of

divine Scripture since God is its author (which is Bellarmine's argument). For although God speaks about divine things in the Scriptures, nevertheless, he speaks in a human mode and manner so humans can understand him.

For this reason alone I think we should reject [Bartholomäus] Keckermann's position. He does not properly connect the predication used in the sacraments to logic or to rhetoric, but to a kind of improper form.

#### THIRD ARGUMENT

The third argument is that multiple senses render sacred Scripture uncertain and so weaken and diminish its authority. For multiple senses cause Scripture to abound in equivocations. On this pretext, Porphyry and Julian, who hated and mocked Christianity, long ago tried to bring contempt upon the whole doctrine of our religion.

#### FOURTH ARGUMENT

The fourth argument is that (as Bellarmine admits) efficacious arguments should be taken from the literal sense alone, since, regarding the mystical senses, it is not always evident whether they are intended by the Holy Spirit. From this concession, it follows that the various "senses" of this sort are not senses, because what is not intended by the Holy Spirit is not a sense of the Holy Spirit, nor is there any sense of the Holy Spirit from which a firm argument cannot be drawn.

#### CONCLUSION

So this is the conclusion: Scripture, as to the nature of its senses and how to interpret it, is no different from human literature, except that in Scripture God more frequently established types to express, by their own particular quality, something else.

But interpreters must not invent types of this sort arbitrarily. Rather, interpreters should recognize types when it is evident from the Scriptures themselves that it was God's intention for us to take those things as types. Otherwise, although a narrative in Scripture can occasionally be adapted by an extended comparison to explain something else, the narrative itself should not be explained in such a sense. ■

2. Domingo Báñez, *Scholastica commentaria in primam partem angelici doctoris S. Thomae usque ad LXIII. quaestionem* (Douai: Peter Borremans, 1614), p. 68.

3. *Propria verba* are words used in their proper, or natural, sense, rather than in a metaphorical sense. See, e.g., Cic. *De or.* 3.49, 149, and Quint. *Inst.* 8.3.24. [Ed. Cicero, *De Oratore*; Quintilan, *Institutio Oratoria*.]