This essay endeavors to consider some of the important aspects of Thomas Aquinas’s account of metaphors’ in Scripture in la, Question 1, article 9 of the Summa theologiae. In the background of this article lies the shadow of the theologies of the pagan myths and the pagan poets, with their metaphorical accounts of divine realities. It might appear that the account of the divine given by the Christian Scriptures rests on the same aesthetic principle of understanding as the pagan, in that both use the same means, that privileged device of the poet: metaphor. But Aquinas, as we shall see, thinks precisely the opposite, that the Christian Scriptures use metaphors to stress a negative principle of understanding, based on a firm grasp of the clear distinction between the human and the divine, the natural and the supernatural. Another important background is the intellectualism of the thirteenth century, the belief that the non-metaphorical scientific form of knowing is the highest kind of human knowing. It is this belief which makes it problematic that Scripture should use metaphors, and it appears that it is partly in order to defend Scripture against the charge of being an inferior form of speaking about the truth that Thomas writes this article.

Before proceeding to examine the content of the article, We should first observe that Thomas raises the question of Scripture’s use of metaphor in the context of his treatment of the nature and range of what he calls sacra doctrina, which designates the form of inquiry of the Summa itself. The fact that it occurs in this context causes certain difficulties, for sacra doctrina is a very slippery phrase in the first question of the Summa. Sometimes it seems to refer to the science of theology understood as a science in the Aristotelian sense of a form of inquiry based on first principles which reasons by necessary logical steps to certain conclusions. This is precisely the sense in which Thomas uses the term science in an earlier article of the question, and it is with science in this sense that Thomas identifies sacra doctrina at several points. Sometimes however the phrase seems to refer to something other than the kind of systematic study Thomas is undertaking in the Summa. At one point, for instance, sacra doctrina is described as “the science of God and the blessed,” by which Thomas seems to mean the knowledge which God and the blessed enjoy, God through simply knowing himself and the blessed through seeing the essence of God. Finally, Thomas often simply identifies sacra doctrina with the Holy Scriptures. What are we to make of such a variable phrase? We cannot settle that matter here, but one possible explanation is that sacra doctrina is a kind of catch-all phrase which covers all these different meanings while at the same time not being identifiable with any one of them. This sacred teaching exists according to diverse modalities, but in itself transcends each of them.

Turning to the article proper, We see that in the first objection Thomas poses the main difficulty with Scripture’s using metaphors: metaphors are the devices of poetry, and poetry is the lowest of the sciences, therefore it seems that the highest science, Scripture, ought not to use them to express its sublime truths. This objection implies a certain conception of poetry which is very scholastic and related to the nature of the medieval university curriculum. Aquinas includes

1 St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologica, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1911; repr., Allen, Texas: Christian Classics, 1981), Ia, Q.1, a. 2, resp. (=I.1.2). Subsequent references to the Summa will be made in the text when necessary.
poetry among the sciences, giving it the lowest position. He therefore sees poetry, not
specifically as a fine art, but rather as one of the disciplines in the several-storied tower of studies
that constituted the medieval curriculum. The curriculum of a medieval university was structured
around a set of studies hierarchically ordered in ascending degrees of importance according to
subject-matter. The highest studies were the ones with the highest subject-matter: philosophy and
theology. Just beneath these were the four arts of the quadrivium, Whose subject is matter as
such, and just beneath those, the three arts of the trivium, Whose subject is the human mind and
its linguistic operations. Perhaps at the very bottom, or included as a species of logic or rhetoric,
was poetry. To-day we tend to think of poetry as a very lofty and important human activity, one
of the supreme manifestations of the human mind. We do so because, for good or ill, we have
inherited a Romantic aesthetic centered on the idea that poetry is a unique and superior Way of
knowing. But this notion would have baffled a medieval thinker. The medieval aesthetic held
that poetry was a subspecies of one of the lower arts of rhetoric or logic; it was an operation of
the human mind based on seeing and expressing comparisons between the things in nature, and
in doing so was bound to move in the region of material things; as such, it occupied a rather low
place in the house of intellect, Whose highest places were reserved for those sciences Whose
methods and subjects were most removed from sensible objects-were the most immaterial. This
first objection is Written with this educational structure and aesthetic doctrine in the background,
and what Aquinas is doing at the outset of the article is locating the place of poetry and sacred
science in relation to each other Within a comprehensive curriculum of university studies and on
the map of human activities.

Poetry’s inferior place among the other disciplines is precisely the problem, for in
Scripture the highest study seems to join with the lowest, the top rung seems to bend down and
touch the bottom rung. Something seems topsy-turvy about this. Thomas is an intellectualist, a
follower of Aristotle and Plato, and locates the height of human intellectual achievement in the
sciences. Science leads through discursive, logical reasoning to clear and certain truth; poetry
leads only to opinion and obscure knowledge through material images. So Why should the
highest science not be expressed in scientific form? Why did God not Write a Summa to reveal to
man the truth about Himself? That is the nub of the question for Thomas.

The second objection develops an implication of the first: if Scripture is intended to make
truth clear to man, why does it use metaphors, since metaphors are indirect Ways of speaking
about something and therefore only serve to obscure what they are intended to reveal? Aquinas
sees something teasing and mysterious about Scripture. Scripture seems almost deliberately
designed to frustrate man’s best attempts to understand it, to invite different interpretations, like
a great riddle the answer to which contains the secret of the universe. This same problem had
disturbed Augustine, who concluded that Scripture was written in such an obscure way in order
to lead men to investigate its meaning deeply and thereby to be instructed. But for Aquinas, as he
says in the Prologue to the entire Summa, the teacher is one who sets forth the subject-matter of a
discipline in a clear and orderly fashion so that his students can understand what is being taught.
According to this conception of teaching, Scripture seems a poor teacher, speaking in figures and
riddles, and leaving men to grapple with their meaning.

In the third objection, Aquinas sets forth another decisive problem, this time a more
metaphysical one: not only does Scripture use metaphors, but it uses comparisons to the material
things in order to express the highest spiritual truths. Most often Scripture does not compare God
to angels, or heavenly bodies, or even to men, but rather to rocks, and lions, and mountains; and it does not use elevated examples to express other spiritual truths, either; it expresses the realities of grace through the most homely metaphors to material things. The objection Aquinas advances here implies that there is something scandalous and grotesque about this. From the standpoint of Thomistic metaphysics, with its levels of beings, if Scripture is going use images, it ought to use the loftiest ones available.

Notably the *sed contra* here is based on a quotation from one of the prophets, Osee, stating the fact that he has used “similitudes” to express his vision. If there are any books of the Bible guilty of expressing divine truths through metaphors, it is surely the prophetic books, the only competitor being perhaps Jesus himself. For Aquinas this fact is enough to authorize the use of metaphors by “sacred science,” and in the body of the article he seeks to explain why.

Aquinas’s reply is twofold: first he addresses the question why Scripture should use metaphors at all, and second the question Why it uses comparisons to corporeal things. In the first part of his reply, he makes an argument based on the nature of human knowing. Since man is a composite of body and soul, and since all human knowledge begins in the senses, it is fitting that the highest science should communicate its truths to men by means of bodily images. The fittingness of Scripture’s method of teaching spiritual truths is, in other Words, based on the fact that human knowing has a certain natural structure. Had God chosen to communicate with men in another fashion, then, there would have been something disproportionate about it. Having made man to know even the highest things through the mediation of the senses, God wisely chose to communicate knowledge of supernatural realities through means that conform to the structure of his creation. And like the creation itself, Scripture has two levels, the bodily surface and the deeper, spiritual meaning. The terms of comparison in the metaphors of Scripture bear the same relationship to each other as the body does to the soul in a human being, the “sensible object” corresponding to the body, and the “spiritual truth” to the soul, to the mysterious deeper dimension of the human person which is seen through the senses but not by the senses. One wonders whether this comparison actually indicates an extremely close relationship between the metaphors of Scripture and their spiritual meanings, for the union between body and soul is very deep according to Aquinas.

In the second part of his reply, Aquinas explains Why Scripture uses comparisons to material things and not to things higher on the ladder of being. His explanation is simple and profound and reflects a realistic appraisal of ordinary human limitations as well as an understanding of the ultimately universal purpose of God’s self-revelation in Scripture. He says that Scripture expounds spiritual truths by means of corporeal images because Scripture is Written not just for some special class of philosophers, some elite, but for everyone. As Aquinas had argued in article 1 of this same question, sacred doctrine was revealed because man was made for perfected happiness, which cannot be attained in this life but only in the life to come through the vision of God. To attain this end it was necessary for man to know it, otherwise he would not have been able to direct his actions toward it. But it would be nearly impossible for most men to grasp the truth about the final end if it were expounded by means of a logical systematic treatise of theology or by means of rarefied images. Thus Scripture uses “figures taken from corporeal things,” expresses its sublime truths through comparisons to things which are familiar and intelligible to even the most limited human intellect.
To some extent Thomas must owe the second part of his reply to the interpretive principle laid down by Christ himself regarding his parables and to Christ’s own practice of teaching men through parables. In the Gospels, when the apostles ask Christ to interpret his parables, he responds by stating the principle of two audiences: there are those Whom Christ teaches in figures and there are those Whom Christ teaches more directly. The members of the college of apostles constitute the second group, and the first group is represented in the Gospels by the large crowds that Christ always teaches in parables. The Scriptures then, in Thomas’s view, seem to be merely an extended example of God’s practice of teaching the mass of mankind through parables, a practice in which God himself engaged While he Walked among men on earth. Perhaps Thomas identifies the more direct teaching with the conceptual and propositional form which sacra doctrina is given by the theological tradition and Church teaching.

Thomas’s replies to the objections elaborate upon the basic principles articulated in the body of the article and draw out some of the other reasons Why God chose to use metaphors taken from bodily things to teach his sacred doctrines. In the first reply, he explains that the highest science and the lowest science (poetry) use the same means- metaphor-but for different ends. Poetry uses metaphors to delight people, the highest science uses them propter necessitatem et utilitatem. This reply is a good example of the paradoxical way in which the Christian views the world. The bottom is on the top, the lowest and the highest unite, the last shall be first, those who lower themselves shall be exalted: Scriptures’ use of humble metaphor, the device of the lowest of the disciplines, exemplifies this paradoxical pattern of reality. Scripture is a kind of divine rhetoric reflecting the inverse valuation of the world which Christianity espouses. In this connection, it might also be pointed out that from a the standpoint of classical rhetoric’s levels of style-high, low, and middle-Scripture represents an anomaly, for it expresses the highest subject-matter in the lowest style; that is, it expresses the most abstract and spiritual things in the most concrete and material terms. It therefore violates a basic classical canon of good style: that style should be appropriate to subject. St. Augustine, trained as a rhetorician according to the Roman model and accustomed to the elegance and beauty of Roman rhetoric, had been disconcerted by this very aspect of Scripture when he had first converted. He speaks of the humillimum genus loquendi which Scripture uses and which bothered him until he realized that it concealed altitude sacramentorum.

Thomas is indebted to Augustine in throughout this article, but especially in the replies to the second and third objections, where he follows both Augustine and Dionysius to answer the objection that metaphors obscure what they are designed to reveal and that if Scripture is going to use metaphors it ought to take its comparisons from the noblest bodies in creation. I-le explains that in part Scripture’s pedagogical purpose requires such metaphors in order to exercise the minds of the pious and to protect Scripture from the impious-here again he follows Christ’s own explanation of Why he teaches in parables—but that the main reason has to do with the relationship between earthly and divine things: Scripture uses material images, and particularly images taken from “less noble bodies,” in order to reduce any possibility of confusing the image with the reality, the sign with the signified. It is worth quoting his perfect and succinct formulation of this point: “The ray of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sensible imagery wherewith it is veiled, as Dionysius says; and its truth so far remains that it does not allow the minds of those to whom revelation has been made, ‘to rest in the metaphors, but raises them to the knowledge of truths.”

The mind is not made to know mere images; rather it is made

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2 Conf. VI, 5.
3 I.1.9,r.o.3
to know immaterial reality. And Scripture’s images assist it in this. They do not pose a threat to knowledge of truth, but are a kind of gateway to it, and kind of helping hand to the weak human mind, abetting its movement to the highest truths. This is why Scripture uses them. And it uses homely metaphors, paradoxically, precisely in order to reduce the possibility of the metaphor’s becoming an obstacle to the truth, so that men do not risk confusing the metaphors with “literal descriptions of divine truths.” This possibility would have been increased had the images been nobler. The errors of the pagan religions—confusing myth with literal description and imagining God to be a part of the World—might have beset the Christian religion. But whereas the myths of the pagans serve to propagate theological and metaphysical errors, the myths of Scripture, if this expression be permitted, serve to reinforce the distinction between God and the World, material and spiritual, natural and supernatural; and thus fittingly they serve the truth.

Finally, it should be noted that Thomas’s treatment of the question of metaphor in Scripture concurs precisely with the apophatic character of his natural theology in the Whole of the treatise on the Divine Essence in QQ. 1-13 of the *Summa*. We might say that Thomas’s Whole treatment turns the pagan natural theologies on their heads: for whereas they had thought the things of this World to be reliable guides and symbols of the nature of divine reality, Thomas thinks that earthly things, at least to some extent, merely serve to guide us in understanding what the nature of the divine is not. And Scripture supports this negative kind of human knowledge of divine things, even though it may appear at first to contravene it. It is significant, I think, that the famous phrase, “For what He is not is clearer to us than what He is,” occurs in this article, for it suggests the harmony between the metaphorical language of Scripture and the abstract, propositional language of theology that lies beneath their superficial opposition: it suggests that they are not expressing two different kinds of knowledge of God, nor contradicting one another, but that they are both giving the human mind access, in a negative Way and by different means, to the same ineffable reality.

Thomas’s account of metaphor inevitably invites comparison to Plato’s account of the religious myth of the Greeks. Plato derided the mythos of the poets because he thought that it lead to false beliefs about the nature of the universe and the gods. His solution was to explain reality through the dialectic of logos. Thomas’s article intimates that he perceives the same potential conflict between mythos and logos in their different accounts of the divine. But beneath this potential conflict, Thomas sees a deep unity, a synthesis between logos and mythos that reconciles their seemingly opposed accounts. And he sees this unity as being based on the very thing which Plato objected to in the metaphors of the poets: that they were mere images of images, not literal descriptions of reality. But whereas Plato thought that using images to speak about the divine would increase the possibility of mistaking the images for the realities, Thomas thinks that using images reduces this possibility, that the images of Scripture proclaim their own failure to represent God, and hence stress the negative character of our knowledge of God in this life.