

THE METAPHOR OF THE BOOK OF NATURE IN EARLY DOMINICAN PREACHING AND THEOLOGY

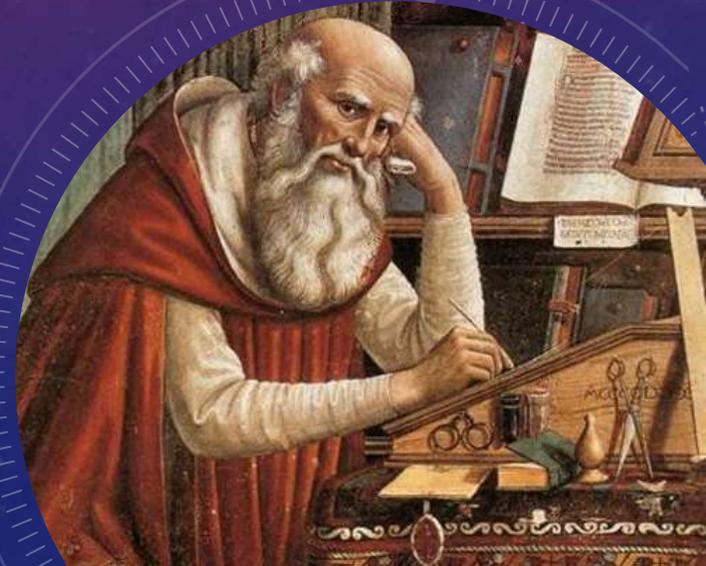
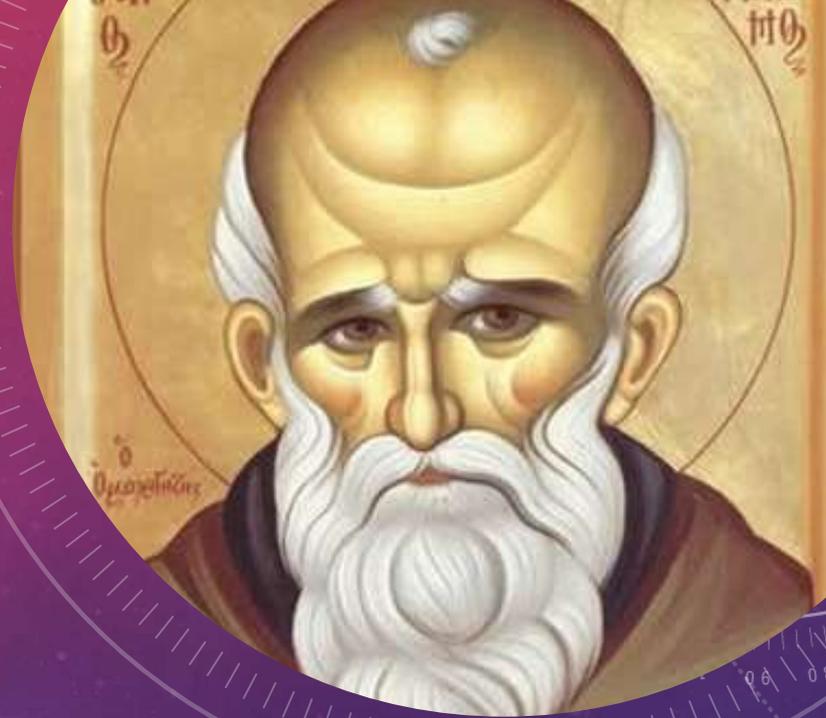
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BACKGROUND IN A NUTSHELL



FATHERS

- Alexandrian theology (Philo, Clement, Origen)
- Augustine
- Maximus the Confessor



MIDDLE AGES

- John Scottus Eriugena (c. 800–877)
- Hugh of Saint Victor (c. 1096–1141)
- Saint Bonaventure (1221–1274)





THE EARLY DOMINICAN BOOK OF NATURE

- Widely diffused preaching manuals: Thomas of Chobham and Humbert of Romans
- Richard Fishacre
- Hugh of Saint-Cher
- Saint Thomas of Aquinas



THOMAS OF CHOBHAM (C. 1160–1233/1236)

- English Dominican, studied in Paris in the 1180s
- Manuel of preaching: *Summa de arte praedicandi* (written around 1221–22)
- “This world is full of many different creatures: as if it were a book containing many different characters and phrases; a book in which we can read whatever we ought to imitate or to avoid.”
- (*Totus enim mundus, diuersis creaturis plenus est; quasi liber scriptus uariis litteris et sententiis plenus in quo legere possumus quicquid imitari uel fugere debeamus.*)

THOMAS OF CHOBHAM

- “For the Lord created various creatures having various natures, not only for the sustenance of men, but also for their teaching. So that through the creatures we would not only consider what is useful for the body, but also what is useful for the soul. [...] For there is no creature that does not proclaim that God who created it is **omnipotent**, and that God who disposed and informed it is **wise**, and that he who conserved it in being is **merciful**. And to speak more generally, there is no creature in which we cannot consider **some property that invites us to imitate God, or some property that moves us to flee the devil.**”
- Pseudo-Dionysius’ symbolic theology: all the properties of creatures can be used to preach about God
- Thus, “the entire world is like a kind of book in which we can read God.”
- *(Et ideo oportet predicatorem considerare naturas rerum et proprietates per quas possit diuinitas intelligi, et per quas possint simplices Deum cognoscere. Non enim aliqua creatura cui se dederit Deus aliquam proprietatem, immo multas proprietates; per quas proprietates ipse creator possit intelligi, ut totus mundus sit quasi liber quidam in quo Deum legamus.)*

HUMBERT OF ROMANS (C. 1200–1277)

- 5th Master General of the Order of Preachers (from 1254 to 1263) and one of the major organizers of the Dominicans
 - Wrote a treatise *On Preaching (De eruditione praedicatorum)*
 - Giving instructions concerning the knowledge required of preachers, Humbert encourages them to first know the Scriptures well, and then, the book of nature:
- After the study of the Holy Books, should follow the study of creatures, for the Creator has placed in these many profound lessons. St. Anthony, the hermit, observes that they are like a book, containing many edifying thoughts for those who take the trouble to read. The Redeemer often had recourse to this type of knowledge in His discourses, as, for instance, when He said: ‘Look at the birds of the air... See how the lilies of the field grow... [Matthew 6:26-28].’

RICHARD FISHACRE (C. 1200–1248)

- English Dominican; the first Dominican friar to hold a chair of theology in Oxford and the first person to write a commentary on Lombard's *Sentences* there (between 1241 and 1245).
- The book of nature: in his prologue to his *Commentary on the Sentences*, preached as an inaugural sermon.
- General theme: divine wisdom
- Two types of wisdom: from above and from below
 - The latter is “earthly, animal, diabolical” (*terrena, animalis, diabolica*): James 3:15 Vg
 - We should aim for wisdom from above, which is written in *three books*: the book of life, the book of Scripture, and the book of creation.
 - Book of life – read by blessed spirits in heaven
 - Book of creation – read by Adam in paradise
 - Book of Scripture – for us in this exile

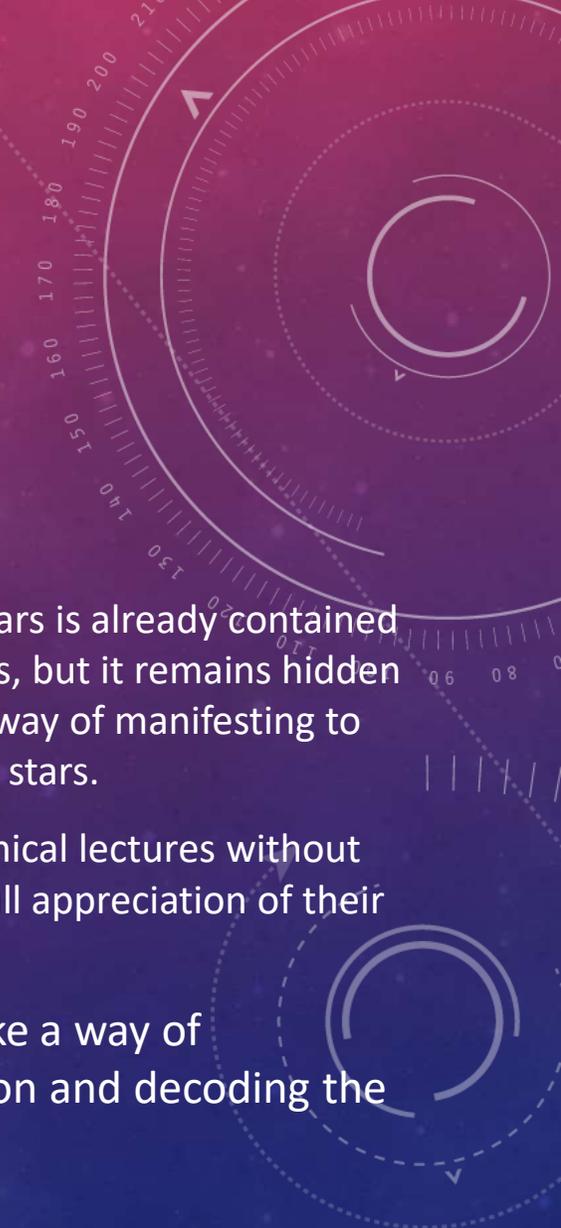
RICHARD FISHACRE

- But is the book of creation irrelevant now? Not entirely.
 - Men desire to know all things
 - All things have been written in the divine mind
 - This book is God himself, and human eyes are unable to bear the brightness of its letters.
 - Therefore, that our desire to know might not be entire frustrated, “it was fitting that everything would be written in some obscurer book—and not in one only, but two.”
- Why two? Because, as Aristotle say, all knowledge starts from the senses.
- Now, human learning depends principally on two senses: hearing and sight. Through hearing we receive doctrine, and through sight a visible example.
 - i.e. both doctrine and seeing are necessary for the mind to fully grasp the reality.



RICHARD FISHACRE

- Example: astronomy
 - In principle, all the wisdom concerning the stars is already contained in an excellent manner in the heavenly bodies, but it remains hidden from us. Books that explain astronomy are a way of manifesting to our mind the wisdom that is contained in the stars.
 - On the other hand, only listening to astronomical lectures without seeing the stars would surely fall short of a full appreciation of their reality. Both hearing and sight are necessary.
- Therefore, the doctrine of the Scriptures is like a way of uncovering the wisdom of the book of creation and decoding the language of nature.



RICHARD FISHACRE: 4 NOTEWORTHY FEATURES

- The book of creation is *wisdom from above*
 - Not an earthly book, but divine
 - Similar to Fathers: not simply nature, but a form of divine revelation
- It seems that, in principle, the book of creation contains all the divine wisdom
- It is not fully clear how the book of creation is meant to be read now
 - Key point: reading creation and Scriptures together
- The three books (of life, of Scripture and of creation) resemble Bonaventure's triad in *Quaestiones disputatae de Mystero Trinitatis*, written in 1255 (while Fishacre passed away in 1248).
 - (Hugh of St Victor wrote of *liber vitae*, but with a different meaning)
 - Did Bonaventure get the idea from Fishacre?



EXPOSITIO SUPER APOCALYPSIM: HUGH OF SAINT-CHER? (C.1200–1263)

- A French Dominican friar who became a cardinal and a noted biblical commentator
- *Expositio super Apocalypsim* (for a time attributed to Aquinas)
- The author comments on the notion of the “book of life” and states that there is a “fourfold book. First, the book of **glory**, second the book of **grace**, third the book of **nature**, fourth the book of **Scripture**.”

EXPOSITIO SUPER APOCALYPSIM

- The book of glory: “God himself, whose unfolding makes those who behold or read him blessed. [...] This book is also called the book of life, because all the living are inscribed in it, and none of the dead.”
- The book of grace is Christ:
 - “a great book [...] before the Incarnation, but through the assumption of the flesh he became a small book. [...] Before the Incarnation, this book was written in an angelic manner (*stilo Angeli*), for it was readable to the angels. But afterwards, it was written in a human manner (*stilo hominis*), for it became readable to man. [...] Blessed is he who studies this book [...] which teaches us four things in particular, namely humility, meekness, charity and truth.”

EXPOSITIO SUPER APOCALYPSIM

- “The book of nature is the world, in which there are as many letters as there are natures [or properties]
- (*Liber naturae mundus est in quo sunt tot literae quot naturae.*)
 - “This book teaches us—and never ceases to teach—what its Creator is like and what we should be like.”
 - (*Hic liber docet nos et docere non cessat qualis sit creator ejus, et quales nos esse debeamus.*)
- What the Creator is like: the Trinity:
 - Magnitude – power of the Father
 - Beauty – wisdom of the Son
 - Communication (of goods?) – the good of the Spirit
- And “its unity demonstrates the unity of its Maker, and so this book teaches that its writer is Three and One.”
- (*Sua magnitudine docet nos potentiam patris. Sua pulchritudine docet nos sapientiam filii. Sua communicatione docet nos bonitatem spiritus. Sua unitate monstrat unitatem factoris: et sic docet liber iste scriptorem suum esse trinum et unum.*)

EXPOSITIO SUPER APOCALYPSIM

- What we should be like: constantly praising God, because all creatures invite us to praise God
- *(Praeterea, cum quaelibet creatura creatori suo seruiat incessanter et gratis, et nos propter ipsum docet, quales nos debemus esse. Unde Augustinus, mirum est quomodo omnis homo Deum non semper laudat, quoniam omnis creatura ad eum laudandum semper invitat.)*

THOMAS AQUINAS (1225–1274)

- In an Advent homily: reference to “the book of creation and the book of Scripture.”
 - *(Consistunt autem ista scripta in duplici libro: scilicet in libro creaturae et in libro scripturae.)*
- Commentary on Romans (1:20): “God has manifested himself” to men in two ways, interiorly and exteriorly: “interiorly by infusing the light, exteriorly placing before them visible creatures, in which the knowledge of God is read like in a kind of book.”
 - *(Sic ergo Deus illis manifestavit vel interiorius infundendo lumen, vel exteriorius proponendo visibiles creaturas, in quibus, sicut in quodam libro, Dei cognitio legeretur.)*
- the creatures manifest a certain likeness thereof by way of participation in the unity of the divine essence under the aspects of goodness, wisdom, power and other attributes, which in God are all one.



AQUINAS: WHY SO MARGINAL?

- Aristotelianism? (Blumenberg, *Die Lesbarkeit der Welt*)
- A dislike for the excessive symbolist mentality of the 12th century?
- Did this contribute to the decline of the metaphor among subsequent generations of Dominicans?
 - (Eckhart uses it, but he is more Neoplatonic...)