Peter John Olivi, *The Sum of Questions on the Sentences [of Peter Lombard]*\(^1\)
(translated by David Flood, OFM, and Oleg Bychkov)

**Part I**

**Question One**

*What is the subject matter\(^2\) of sacred Scripture and of this book?*

[Arguments in favor]

9 Also, the subject of a law is the act which it enjoins (e.g., human laws have to do with acts of human justice) or the subjects whom it directs (e.g., the subject of human laws is man as a political or civil being). But this Scripture is [precisely] a law and not an ordered body of knowledge. No ordered body of knowledge issues commands and passes laws, admonishes, threatens, and punishes, but law does. Scripture does all of this. Therefore the subject of Scripture will be the act that it prescribes and the subjects over whom it rules. And it prescribes worship of God, in faith and charity, and it rules over man, as capable of restoration and beatification. Therefore, and so on.

[Arguments to the contrary]\(^3\)

10 It seems that we cannot settle on any subject in Scripture. We cannot assign, univocally or equivocally, any one subject to a scripture that includes in itself many things which, such as they are, cannot be gathered into any body of knowledge, or at least not into any one body of knowledge. But sacred Scripture is of this sort. It contains many mysteries and many future contingents, many precepts and counsels and many particulars, so much so that these things, taken for what they are, belong to its principal purpose. However, these things, taken for what they are, cannot be known through reason and have no place in any body of knowledge. It contains much about God, about angels [and] demons or their actions, both spatial and not; about virtues and vices, about heaven and eternal things, about the human body, insofar as it is subject to suffering both in us and in Christ and was once and will be immortal; and other things of the sort. These things, however, taken for what they are, cannot be assumed into any body of knowledge. Therefore, and so on.

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12 Also, [disciplines] which do not share the characteristics of a body of knowledge in a univocal manner cannot ‘have a subject’ in the same sense, since the ability to serve as a body of knowledge depends—as on its formal object—on the ability [of something] to have a [unified] subject. But this Scripture does not have the characteristics of a body

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\(^1\) This translation is based on the following Latin edition: Peter Olivi, *Summa Quaestionum super Sententias, Pars I, qu. 1*, edited by E. Stadter, *Franziskanische Studien* 44 (1962): 2-12.

\(^2\) I.e., the material cause; see Bonaventure, Prologue to the *Commentary on the Sentences*, qu. 1.

\(^3\) There are no strictly defined Pro and Contra in this text. Instead, the initial statements can be loosely divided into those that suggest that theology does have a unified subject and those that deny that.
of knowledge in the same sense as do other bodies of knowledge. Indeed, everything we have here reaches us in a way more appropriate to faith than to a body of knowledge. That is so because, first, everything presented there⁴ [in Scripture] must have an equal standing and degree of certainty.⁵ Second, everything [in Scripture] has to be presented simply and absolutely and not by reason of anything which proves or infers it (indeed, if things were believed principally by reason of such processes, they would be scientifically known rather than believed). And third, [Scripture] passes on many things in its principal mode of communication which in no way can be known through reason or through the intellect insofar as it works with principles—such as God being one and three, and God being man and a descendent of Abraham, or that Adam was the first man, and that the Antichrist will come, and things like that. All of these examples are particular and have to do with piecemeal things rather than with universals. Nor can they be examined by reason. Nor can those things that derive from them alone. Indeed, if their principles cannot be grasped rationally, neither can those things themselves, insofar as they follow from these [principles], be known through rational causality based [solely] on belief in those principles, but can only be taken on faith. It follows then that this Scripture does not have the kind of structuring characteristic of a [single] subject in the way that other bodies of knowledge do.

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[Olivi’s Reply
A. — Opinions of Others]

Various opinions⁶ have circulated and still circulate on this question. Some say that things and signs are the subject of this body of knowledge (scientia); or Christ with his members; or the works of restoration; or God and his works. Some say God. Some⁷ say the truth of faith, or the salutory good, or perfect truth leading into God.

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[B. — Peter Olivi’s Opinion.]

Some others⁸ have said that sacred Scripture does not have one subject. That is the case, they explain, if we use the word subject properly and univocally. Scriptural knowledge does not abide by the notion and method of a science, in its proper sense, in the way other sciences do. Scripture simply makes statements about laws, sciences, histories, about plans of action. It foretells events, it reveals much about God which in no way can be

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⁴ The grammar in this paragraph suggests that the following statements are made about science (ibi), not about Scripture (hic). However, in this case one must take a counter-intuitive reading, because, unless there is a textual problem here, most of what follows logically corresponds better to the situation in Scripture—which is the way this translation takes it.

⁵ Presumably, as opposed to the usual order and hierarchy of information presented in sciences.

⁶ These opinions in part come from Alexander of Hales’ Sum of Theology, Prologue, ch. 3, arg. n. 1-3, and Bonaventure’s Commentary of the Sentences, Prologue, qu. 1, arg. a-c.

⁷ Cf. n. 6 above; also cf. Alexander of Hales, Sum of Theology, Prologue, ch. 1, arg. n. 3 and reply to 3; cf. Bonaventure, Sent. I, prol. qu. 1, arg. c; cf. ibid., q. 2, contra c.

⁸ As throughout the rest of this section, by the expression ‘others’ Peter is referring to his own opinion that he cautiously presents as ‘another group of theologians.’
investigated. Among these and similar types of material Scripture includes many individuals: Christ and the Virgin, their ancestors and the apostles, others who led the reprobate, such as Cain, Pharaoh, Saul, and others. It includes many particular acts: the deeds of those ancestors, the wars of kings and peoples, and the whole course of particular instances of time, the journey of the people of God all the way to Christ. Scripture contains as well many particular actions and marvels and kindnesses of God, such as the creation of the world on a certain day in a certain year, and so with all which follows. And in that [course of events] it contains many future contingents, at least the most important events in the future up to the last judgment and what that involves, and the troubles with the Antichrist and other such things.

We cannot say, as those others⁹ do, that Scripture offers these events only as examples and cases in order to reach by induction universal propositions or universal statements of faith. The reason is that these are in themselves of the substance of faith, just like those universal statements. Many other things in Scripture are useful in themselves, besides serving to reach universal principles of that sort. I believe that the singular person of Christ, together with his actions, his sufferings and achievements and virtues, as well as those of the Blessed Virgin and all the great saints whom Scripture mentions, all this has many uses and purposes far beyond the aforementioned ['leading to universals']. Moreover, they say, it is rather those universals [doctrinal statements] that ensure that we adhere to these particulars perfectly rather than the other way around. For there will be no blessedness in abstraction, as they say, but rather in fact. Indeed, it is in the readiness to go along with (credulitate) this one concrete Christ and with the other saints and in the love of them that there is justification now.

As these theologians explain, all this is in harmony with rational arguments.

a. Scripture shows this by its inclusiveness. We cannot gather everything in it under one heading or treat the material as a single subject. We cannot handle Scripture’s contents as if Scripture followed one approach rather than another and arranged everything under one general topic.

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c. Scripture shows this further in handing down, or in the way it hands down, its contents. Scripture passes them on as things to believe. The unity of faith does not require that whatever is believed about anything have one scientific rationale or one subject, as the unity of science requires. By the faith by which I believe my father I can believe many assertions and negations of various kinds, even insofar as they are of different kinds, and many particular facts. However, I cannot know the particulars by one type of reasoning from principles, or through a principle of one sort. Nor can I know [in this way] things of different kinds as such. In fact, the only thing that I can know through principles is universals and different things insofar as they can be organized, analogically or univocally, under the same aspect.

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⁹ See Alexander of Hales, Sum of Theology, Prologue, ch. 1, reply to arg. 1.
The theologians who think this way offer the following example. Let us suppose that a father wants to lay out for his sons and his friends in writing a distinctive way of going about life. So he compiles for them a brief text that contains some medical and nutritional data, something about mathematics and physics, and a few recent stories about ancestors of theirs, and all of this with advice, rules, warnings and corrections, put together and weighed in accordance with what he thought would be useful. He adds as well forecasts of coming events. We would not be able to say that his compilation had any one subject, in a way sciences have a single subject, seeing as it contains material that is related to many particular and general bodies of learning. In addition, it would contain much else which has nothing to do with the notion of science.

They say that this agrees well enough with the teachings of earlier masters. When these masters say that Scripture is “not a science in the same sense as other sciences” (for it does not proceed by analysis and demonstrations, nor entirely through principles that are evident [to us], save for the faithful), it is sufficiently clear that they do not really want to assign Scripture a subject in a completely uniform sense, as in other sciences, but only in terms of one general principle, which includes all Scripture’s material gathered together: as coming from one efficient cause; or for one final purpose; or with regard to the way of its communication, which is through revelation and through faith; or under Scripture’s general contents, which include all its parts.

[Answers to the Objections]

As for the arguments, they do not devolve from the propositions, or at least not from what is commonly conceded, or possibly they go further in their conclusions than allowed.

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Consequently, if sacred Scripture spoke about God and his works in this way, i.e., without mixing in, as in the initial proposal, some legal details, general information, or bringing in history and mysteries and prophecies, then it certainly would have the organization of a science, and then God with things of God would be its subject, or the divine being insofar as it relates to God and his works. (By his works here I mean created substances and not their attributes, because if the latter were taken in their totality, they would not have the organization of a whole nor a partial subject.) However, as it is, sacred Scripture not only does not speak about them [i.e., God and his works] in this fashion—nay, it even introduces much of the aforesaid material, as in the initial proposal. 5 As for the fifth argument, I answer that Scripture as a whole has the restoration of the human race as its purpose, as well as its [subject] matter of an indeterminate nature, which [nevertheless] includes many determinate matters. It is not that, as a whole, it has this as determinate [subject] matter, as regards which it would everywhere treat of, and prove [something] according to determinate principles. <...>

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11 Legal details, laws, etc.