

Symbol and Symbolic Theology in Grosseteste's *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy*

In his preface to the *Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy* Robert Grosseteste, the Bishop of Lincoln (1235–1253), wrote:

It must also be recognized that in a Latin translation, and especially in one that is made word for word, in so far as the translator can meet that challenge, there must be occasions on which a lot of expressions will occur which are said ambiguously and with many meanings, things which in the Greek tongue cannot have many such. It follows that someone who comments on this book without having the Greek text before him, or who does not know Greek, when he comes across such ambiguous meanings cannot but be in very many cases ignorant of the mind of the author in those expressions – that mind which could not escape a person with a moderate or even slight acquaintance with the Greek language. For this reason I say that even if people who do not know Greek may upon occasion expound ambiguous meanings of this kind and bring out true interpretations, or more subtle ones than were proposed by those who know Greek, the former are not entitled to pride themselves over those who are not ignorant of the Greek tongue [by thinking] that they themselves can reveal the mind of the author more truly; their only title to superiority in their own estimation might be, that when it comes to ambiguities they are better at guessing and conjecturing.

(cited from J. McEvoy, *Thomas Gallus Vercellensis and Robertus Grossatesta Lincolniensis How to Make the Pseudo-Dionysius Intelligible to the Latins*, in *Robert Grosseteste: His Thought and Impact*, ed. J. P. Cunningham, Toronto 2012, p. 20).

Commenting on the writings of pseudo-Dionysius, a mysterious author who lived at the turn of the fifth and sixth centuries, Grosseteste demonstrates remarkable methodological awareness. Having access to at least two earlier translations of Dionysius's treatises and Latin commentaries, the Bishop of Lincoln decided to conduct a new comprehensive study of his works. He ordered the preparation of a new Greek manuscript of the treatises, taking into account variants of the various manuscripts that were available to him. Then, he translated them and provided an exhaustive commentary, including both philological linguistic considerations and explanations of the philosophical and theological content. One may also notice a polemical note in the comments quoted above. Grosseteste's veiled criticism is aimed directly at Thomas Gallus, an abbot in the Italian town of Vercelli, who, despite his ignorance of Greek, loosely paraphrased the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius in accessible Latin. To the regret of Grosseteste, it quickly gained popularity and became widely read.

The planned research aims at a thorough analysis of Robert Grosseteste's *Commentary* focused on the conceptions of symbol and symbolic theology. Pseudo-Dionysius attributed a significant role to biblical symbolism and the sacraments, which served to uplift the human soul to the intellectually unknowable and invisible supernatural reality of God and the angels. In the research, I will attempt to answer the question of how Grosseteste reformulated Dionysius's original teaching and to what extent he remained faithful to its original ideas. While scholars have analyzed numerous commentaries on the *Celestial Hierarchy* as independent works, the research aims to set Grosseteste's commentary in the context of the older tradition. Therefore, I will compare his work to the earlier commentaries on the same treatise and reveal the differences between them. I will consider both the published commentaries of Eriugena, Hugh of St. Victor, and the aforementioned Thomas Gallus, as well as the commentary of John Sarracen, available only in the manuscript tradition. Only such a comparative analysis will make it possible to reveal a new and original Grosseteste's perspective.