

**Matthew Levering, Piotr Roszak, Jörgen Vijgen (eds.),**  
***Reading Job with St. Thomas Aquinas*, The Catholic**  
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*Marco Vorcelli, Università degli Studi di Padova*

In the past few years, the medieval exegeses of the Book of Job have caught the attention of various scholars. Their work has resulted in useful contributions, including a collective volume spanning the whole history of medieval Joban interpretations (Harkins-Canty 2016), an English translation of Albert the Great's *Super Iob* (1274 ca.) (Harkins 2019), and a few papers exploring Albert's commentary indebtedness to his philosophical output (Cerrito 2018, Perfetti 2018). *Reading Job with St. Thomas Aquinas* falls within this inquiry into the "medieval Job", undoubtedly standing out as a major accomplishment to appreciate the shrewdness and beauty of Thomas's *Expositio super Iob ad litteram* (1261-1264) and to grapple once again with the never-ending challenges that the biblical book has always given rise to. In the words of its editors (p.3), the volume aims to fill a lacuna in the literature by bringing together thirteen essays by both theologians and philosophers that take the *Expositio* as their starting point to address a wide array of historical, exegetical, and moral questions.

The book is divided into three parts. The first ("Job and *Sacra Doctrina*") comprises three contributions.

In view of the fact that Thomas reads *Job* "as a quintessential university exercise" (p.23), i.e., as an example of Scholastic *disputatio*, John F. Boyle charts the argumentative development of the *Expositio*, paying particular attention to the moral and intellectual character of the disputants. Indeed, for Thomas, *Job* is not a mere skein of "speculative arguments buried under a poetic narrative" (p.24), but is similar to a Platonic dialogue, in which the opinions and the demeanour of the interlocutors are pivotal elements of the discussion and are susceptible to changes throughout it. Whereas Job's friends stubbornly stick to the same erroneous beliefs, the protagonist gradually approaches the truth on God's ordering of the world and comes to realise man's destiny in the afterlife.

In the second contribution, Jörgen Vijgen focuses on the presence of "the Philosopher", i.e., Aristotle, in the *Expositio* (the

numerous references to Aristotelian zoological works in the commentary on Job 40-41 could be the object of a separate study and are deliberately left out of the picture). After examining how the *Expositio* resorts to Aristotle for topics as diverse as providence, the passions, and resurrection, Vijgen lays emphasis on the facility with which Thomas employs the Philosopher to interpret the Bible, which provides a remarkable example of the fruitfulness of “the integration of faith and reason” (p.67).

The last essay of the first part rests upon the premise that for Thomas Scripture is not a collection of books to be read in isolation, but is rather “a providentially ordered unity, a canon whose parts should mutually illumine each other” (p.87). In light of this, Matthew Levering surveys the eleven quotations from the Gospel of John scattered across the *Expositio*, which Thomas weaves into the text to discuss the contrast of light and darkness and the life-giving Word of God. By doing so, the *Expositio* casts new light on both *Job* and *John*, thus reinforcing the idea that in Thomas’s mind Scripture is a deeply coherent whole.

The second part of the volume (“Providence and Suffering”) comprises the contributions from the fourth to the ninth.

In the opening paper, Serge-Thomas Bonino, OP offers some remarks on the *Expositio*’s treatment of the unfathomable wisdom of God. If even corporeal substances are not entirely transparent to us – as Thomas famously asserts, no philosopher would be capable of fully grasping the nature of a fly – it should come as no surprise that the realities far removed from our senses, let alone God’s *consilium*, defy our comprehension, even when divine grace assists us. This epistemic condition entails a complex ethic as to how man should stand in God’s presence: on the one hand, “God’s incomprehensibility forbids every presumptuous challenge of the divine government” (p.124), on the other, Thomas presents Job as a model for the theologian who, notwithstanding the insurmountable limits, should try to penetrate the contents of faith.

It is usually remarked that Thomas composed the *Expositio*, whose central question is God’s providence of human affairs, while working on book III of the *Summa contra Gentiles*, which is also devoted to divine providence. Hence, it is reasonable to read Thomas’s commentary against the backdrop of his systematic treatise, which is precisely what Rudi te Velde accomplishes in the fifth essay. After weighing up the main points of the *Summa*’s discourse on providence, te Velde goes on to

examine their presence in the *Expositio*, with a focus on God's solicitous care for rational creatures as opposed to His instrumental treatment of irrational ones.

The sixth paper, by Guy Mansini, OSB, is dedicated to the revelations of the Book of Job. First, in Thomas's exegesis, the biblical narrative manifests the moral virtue of its protagonist, whose forbearance sets the example of the ordered relationship to external goods and to God. From this viewpoint, Thomas's embrace of Moses Maimonides's reading, which accentuates the theme of providence, is less of a departure from Gregory the Great's idea that *Job's* purpose is to lay the integrity of a righteous man before our eyes. The second revelation is spoken by God Himself in Job 38-41. Mansini points out that God's intervention is not "a silencing of Job by *force majeure*" (p.158), but is rather a way of addressing him personally so as to console him, as one would expect of a true friend.

If Job truly is the sinless man depicted in the prologue of the book, how is it that God makes him suffer such terrible misfortunes? This crucial question lies at the heart of Harm Goris's essay, the seventh one, which deals with the connection between sin and suffering in the *Expositio*. By drawing on Thomas's systematic works, Goris discusses the taxonomy and the origin of sin, corroborating the conclusion that Job is not punished for any moral flaw. The rationale behind his plight must thus be looked for elsewhere.

In the eighth contribution, John F. X. Knasas takes up this challenge and shows how a "Thomistic philosopher", i.e., a philosopher arguing within a Thomistic framework, would (not) solve it. Indeed, just as Thomas is philosophically neutral on the problem of the creation of the world from eternity or in time, so too he seems to hold "a similar philosophical neutrality on human suffering" (p.188) and destiny. However natural our "desires to see God, to be happy, and to live forever" (p.196) might be, their fulfilment is only a possibility supported by probable reasons. Given this uncertainty, what our natural powers offer to soothe pain is virtue, whose laws stem from man's metaphysical awareness of himself as *intellector* of being.

The ninth paper, by Joseph P. Wawrykow, centres on the interrelated concepts of grace, merit, and reward. After examining the relationship between them in the *Summa theologiae*, with respect to both the prize of eternal salvation and God's meting out of temporal goods, Wawrykow goes on to address the *Expositio's*

teaching on the topic. Interestingly, he points out that “the argument of the friends, with its consolation – ‘Turn to God, and temporal prosperity will follow’” (p.254) is not proven correct in the epilogue of the book, where the protagonist’s goods are indeed restored, because Job had never turned away from God, not even when he was complaining about his tragedy.

The last four essays form the third part of the volume (“The Moral Life and Eschatology”).

In the tenth one, Daria Spezzano reads the *Expositio* through the notions of hope and filial fear. For Thomas, though Job’s faith is initially “overshadowed by the expression of his sensible suffering” (p.289), it is evident – unequivocally in Job 19:25-27 – that the protagonist is a true *servus amoris*, who hopes for the resurrection and experiences chaste fear. Spezzano also notes that the *Summa theologiae*’s full-fledged doctrine of the two objects of hope, i.e., eternal bliss and God’s *auxilium* to achieve it, is already adumbrated in the *Expositio*, which thus constitutes a “laboratory” of theological speculation.

The eleventh contribution, by Brian Thomas Beckett Mullady, OP, revolves around the moral themes of the *Expositio*, including the passions, man’s final end, and the ethical bearing of providence. As for the passions, Mullady underscores that Thomas sides with Aristotle and against Stoicism to argue that it is only natural for anyone in Job’s situation to feel pain, since it would be absolutely inhuman if it were otherwise.

The penultimate paper, by Anthony T. Flood, outlines the *Expositio*’s portrayal of friendship, both between humans and with God. Flood lays particular stress on Thomas’s conviction, couched in the terms of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, that ordered self-love is the foundation of the healthy love of others. If one also takes into account the priority of the love of God over that of anything else, one can conclude that the love of God regulates that of oneself, “which in turn allows for the proper love of neighbor” (p.348).

In the concluding essay, Bryan Kromholtz, OP, recapitulates the main motifs of the *Expositio* (especially providence and eschatology), highlighting the profound consistency of the work. The final remarks emphasise the importance of Thomas’s commentary as a model for today’s hermeneutics: to read *Job* through a philosophical and theological lens as Thomas did is not undue *eisegesis*, i.e., thrusting into a text something alien to it, because “bringing what one knows into the task of interpretation

is [...] unavoidable. [...] no one approaches a text as a true *tabula rasa*” (pp.381-383).

It is clear from this overview that a book of such breadth and richness is a landmark study on the topic. In particular, it is noteworthy that many papers underline that the *Expositio*'s engagement with a literary narrative contributes to the concreteness of its reflections. As Harm Goris excellently puts it, Thomas's commentary “is truer to life compared to the abstract and formal analyses of his other works. [...] The price Aquinas might have to pay for this vividness is that his commentary detracts from the comprehensiveness and scope” (p.162) of his *summae*. However, what the *Expositio* lacks in order and precision, it more than makes up for in expressive power.

What is perhaps missing is a comparison between Thomas's exegesis and other coeval readings of *Job*, especially that of Albert the Great. Indeed, the novelty of Albert's *Super Job* and its proximity to the *Expositio* have been largely underestimated (p.44, n.9). One can even detect a tendency to dismiss Albert's work as inferior to that of Thomas (p.57, n.69), while it should be simply recognised that their interpretations move from different perspectives. Hopefully, the relationship between the texts of the two great Dominicans will be the subject matter of future inquiries.

### **Bibliography**

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