

STUDENT ESSAY

St. Thomas Aquinas, Providence, and the Book of Job



Patient Job by Gerard Seghers

Introduction: Divine Providence and the Problem of Evil

Reconciling the existence of worldly suffering and evil with the existence of an all-powerful loving God is a challenge for many modern men and women. While some suffering is brought about by natural causes such as natural disasters and sickness, much of it is directly caused by the evil acts of men. While physical evils such as earthquakes and cancer

cause tragic consequences they should not be considered equivalent to moral evil. Modern man is faced with the question of how can evil and God's providence coexist? Moral evil is particularly powerful because it directly impacts our entire being in both a spiritual and a physical manner. Unlike other doubts it is not solely an intellectual problem but one that can affect our whole being. We see evil, we feel evil, and we suffer evil's consequences both directly and indirectly. In this paper I would like to address how Saint Thomas Aquinas addresses evil and God's providence by discussing his work on the Book of Job, *The Literal Exposition on Job A Scriptural Commentary Concerning Providence*.

How can we talk about God in the face of suffering? The theme of suffering is one that theologians have taken up with great interest during the last fifty years. Since the beginning of the Twentieth Century, the world has experienced a seemingly unending series of tragedies that have changed theological thinking about these questions. These events can be manmade like the Holocaust, September 11, Rwanda, Darfur, etc., or they can be natural like the tsunami that struck South Asia in 2004, the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, and the earthquake with resulting tsunami in Japan in 2011.

Our society is obsessed with looking for new victims. Lucien Richard in, *What are they Saying about the Theology of Suffering*, says, "Our contemporary culture is characterized by its overwhelming attempt to eliminate negativity; it is marked by the repression of pain and the consequent incapacity to suffer; it

fosters the incapacity to confront and appropriate the reality of suffering” (Richard 10). The fundamental modern premise of progress helps foster this attitude concerning natural disasters that abruptly end many lives. In evaluating the evil of these disasters it is important to have an honest recognition that no tomorrow is guaranteed for anyone. I do not want to minimize the loss experienced by loved ones in these situations; still it has never been the case in this world that everyone lives a full length of years.

René Girard in his, *“I See Satan Fall Like Lightning”*, says “Our society is the most preoccupied with victims of any that ever was” (Girard 161). He makes the point that no prior historical period or any known previous society has ever been as concerned with victims of suffering as our current society (161). Part of this new recognition of suffering occurs because knowledge of the terrible events that have occurred in the Twentieth Century are made real for us by communication advancements. The other part of our bewilderment regarding suffering owes to our greater capacity to change our conditions and alleviate past dangers and sufferings. Examples of this are the eradication of smallpox and with antibiotics infant mortality rates have been brought down to a very low point in many parts of the world.

The most notable example of evil in our recent memory is the Holocaust. This event has had the greatest impact on modern theologians and philosophers to readdress the problem of radical evil and God’s providence. Jurgen Moltmann in his book *The Crucified God* asks where God was when a young boy was being hung by the Nazi’s (Moltmann 273-274). Moltmann describes a scene from *Night* by Elie Wiesel, a holocaust survivor where a young boy did not die immediately when he was hung but rather due to his light weight hung in torment for a long time. For Moltmann, God was present at the scene and suffered with the boy. Interestingly, when we look at Wiesel’s actual words there is confusion as to whether God suffered alongside the boy or God died on the gallows with the boy. “Behind me, I heard the same man asking: “Where is God now? And I heard a voice within me answer him: “Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows” (Wiesel 62). Many commentators on the book say that at that point God was dead for Wiesel. A Christian could say about the same experience that “Christ is hanging here on this gallows” and in that light what Wiesel a Jew says is true in the most profound of ways.

In response to this new awareness of suffering modern man has created a passible God who is able to suffer. For them, an impassible God minimizes the tragedy of human suffering and domesticates evil. They believe that the power and destructive effects of evil need to be recognized in our world. In order to live the message of the Gospel we need to be attentive to the cries of those who experience radical forms of suffering that seem to have no meaning and we need

to combat passivity in the face of evil. Weinandy in his *Does God Suffer?*, says “Contemporary theologians have not come to the Bible and the Fathers philosophically neutral, but rather already convinced that an impassible and immutable God will not do (Weinandy 84). Weinandy says that the moderns misconceive and so misinterpret the Fathers and Aquinas. “This failure has forced them to jettison the tradition and to search instead for something more philosophically persuasive (84). I believe that by studying Aquinas and the Fathers we can address these concerns of modern society. By focusing on Aquinas’ *Exposition on Job* we can become refreshed with the wisdom of a prior age.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that creation has both goodness and perfection but is not yet complete. “The universe was created “in a state of journeying” toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it. We call “divine providence” the dispositions by which God guides his creation toward this perfection” (302). The *Catechism* also addresses the question of why a God who cares for all of us would allow evil to exist in the world. There are no easy answers and we need to look to the entirety of the Christian faith to help us:

the goodness of creation, the drama of sin, and the patient love of God who comes to meet man by his covenants, the redemptive Incarnation of his Son, his gift of the Spirit, his gathering of the Church, the power of the sacraments, and his call to a blessed life to which free creatures are invited to consent in advance, but from which, by a terrible mystery, they can also turn away in advance. There is not a single aspect of the Christian message that is not part an answer to the question of evil. (309)

Another question addressed by both the *Catechism* in Section 310 and by Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* [*STh*] I, 25, 6 and his *Summa contra Gentiles* [*ScG*] III, 71 is why did God not make so perfect a world so that no evil could exist in it. With God’s infinite power he could have made something better. But God in his infinite wisdom and goodness freely willed to create a world “in a state of journeying” toward its ultimate perfection. “In God’s plan this process of becoming involves the appearance of certain beings and the disappearance of others, the existence of the more perfect alongside the less perfect, both constructive and destructive forces of nature. With physical good there exists also physical evil as long as creation has not reached perfection” (310). Change by its nature involves the loss or end of some good and the emergence of another as its replacement. Thus any world that involves time and thus change will inherently involve the loss of good.

Aquinas' Interpretation of Job: Background

Aquinas was born at a time when a renewed emphasis upon Scripture was beginning to develop. The usual practice for Dominicans to study scripture was *lectio divina*. Reading the scripture they looked to be transformed and deepen their spiritual journey. "For Aquinas, Christianity is a way of life founded upon the assent of believers to what they heard of God's revelation. That assent—faith—is made possible by the Holy Spirit and the preaching of the Church" (Healy 13). Aquinas did not see his task as determining the meaning of scripture. "The purpose of *lectio* and *disputatio* is to see to it that the Church and its members live the Christian life more apostolically, in greater obedience to Jesus Christ" (Healy 19).

In the Judeo-Christian tradition the Book of Job is the classic work on the problem of evil and God's providence. It is the most famous and sustained biblical treatment of the reality of innocent suffering. The story of Job is well known and has been commented on by many theologians and others throughout the ages. Briefly, Job is a righteous man who has been faithful to the demands of God. He has been rewarded with a large family, large property holdings, and excellent health. When God brags about Job's righteousness to Satan, Satan challenges God saying that if Job did not have so many blessings, he would not be so righteous. Take away his blessings, challenges Satan, and God will discover that Job will curse his name. God accepts the challenge and Job eventually loses his wealth and possessions, his children, and even his health. Job cries out that he would have been better off if he had never been born. His friends come to comfort him but they uphold the view that the justice of God punishes the guilty and not the innocent. Destitute and covered with boils, Job still does not curse God. He does, however, demand an explanation of God. Confident in his innocence, Job wants to know what reason God could have for sending such misfortune on him. God basically answers that He is the Creator and he created the world. God tells Job that he is a creature and has no right to question the wisdom of God. Job accepts the word of God. Job presents a direct challenge to a worldview that suffering is based on the principle of strict retributive justice.

Aquinas wrote his *Exposition on Job* when he was a *magister in sacra pagina* for the Dominicans. One of his central duties was to lecture on the Scripture and the Book of Job was a fitting complement to the systematic doctrinal work he was concurrently doing on the *Summa contra Gentiles*. Both the *ScG* and his book on Job center on the theme of providence. These two works point to the close connection between Aquinas' biblical commentaries and his systematic works. (Yocum 22). In the prologue to the *Exposition*, Aquinas says that providence is a major theme. "The entire *intentio* of the book is to show by probable reasons that

human affairs are ruled by divine providence” (Torrell 120). During the same period of time Aquinas also wrote the Third Book of the *Summa contra Gentiles* which also addresses God’s Providence. Torrell tells us that the book is one of the most beautiful scriptural commentaries that Aquinas left us. But he warns us that we should not look for a modern exegesis from the book nor the kind of immediate spiritual application that Gregory the Great gives to his readers. Torrell cites a passage from the editors of the *Leonine* edition of the works of St. Thomas to illustrate his point:

Since Saint Gregory, commentators have seen in the Book of Job an exhortation to patience during trials; God has permitted the just man to be tormented so that he would show his constancy in suffering; that is a moralizing aim. With Saint Thomas, the story of Job presents the occasion for discussion of the metaphysical problem of providence; the subject of the dispute, the suffering of a just man, establishes the limits of the debate. This, in effect, presupposes that we are already in agreement on the fact of divine government over natural things. Doubt arises on the subject of human affairs because the just are not just spared from suffering; for such persons to be afflicted without cause seems to contradict the idea of providence. (Torrell 121)

Aquinas, like the Book of Job itself, offers us a reflection on the most fundamental questions put to man. We study how the suffering and tragic reality of the just and innocent person can inspire doubts about the existence of divine justice. This is particularly difficult in a world where there is no hope for a future world where the good are rewarded and the evil are punished (Torrell 121).

Aquinas’ Interpretation of Job: Method

In the *Exposition* Aquinas gives us a theology of providence that God cares for all of us as individuals throughout this life and into the next where we will be either justly rewarded or punished. “While the truth of the divine rule and care for all individual rational creatures is not something that can be demonstrated, that is, definitively proved, once one has grasped the doctrine as revealed in the New Testament, including the promise of resurrection to a future judgment, it increases the intelligibility of the world” (Yocum, 21). This emphasizes that the best understanding of the Book of Job is in light of the New Testament and the revelation of Christ. This book of the Old Testament needs to be interpreted canonically—i.e. in light of the whole of scripture.

Aquinas’ exposition follows the basic progression in the actual book of Job. Aquinas starts with a Prologue introducing the work and setting out the

theme of the book as a whole and then “he breaks the book into four sections: the opening prose narrative; the debate between Job and his friends, including the intervention of Elihu; God’s revelation to Job; and the narrative epilogue”(22). Torrell again cites the *Leonine* edition in describing the original way that Aquinas explains Job’s journey through the different discourses.

Thomas distinguishes three kinds of discourses by Job: those in which he is led by his sensibility, those in which he rationally disputes with his friends, and those, finally, in which he gives in to divine inspiration.” Divine inspiration, manifesting itself not by an exterior word but in the pathways of a man’s conscience; thus one can follow “the successive stages through which the just man who is afflicted passes, from the first overturning of his sensibility even to his total conversion *de Deum*, without doing violence to the unity of the person.” For it is indeed the same man from one end of the process to the other. And we thus better understand his human and religious evolution. (Torrell 121)

According to Aquinas, “the whole intention of [the book of Job] turns on showing through plausible arguments that human affairs are ruled by divine providence” (Thomas, *Exposition* 68). “If divine providence is taken away, no reverence for or fear of God based on truth will remain among men. For nothing calls men back from wickedness and leads them toward good so much as fear of and love of God” (68). When Aquinas speaks of providence, he means the ordering of things to their end, the purpose for which they were created.

Aquinas will argue in the *Exposition*, that Providence is concerned with a just order in the affairs of human beings, in which the consequences of human actions are not left to chance, nor governed by caprice, but by divine wisdom that includes appropriate rewards and punishments that culminate in final attainment or non-attainment of one’s end (*ScG*, III, 140-141). But all of this is in terms of an eternal—not temporal perspective. God does not reward or punish strictly in terms of life on earth.

Aquinas makes an excellent distinction between the fear of God and the love of God and takes reverence toward God to be the proper end of human beings. “The kind of reverence and fear that Aquinas is interested in is loved based on a conviction about the truth of the relation between God and human beings” (Yocum 24). Thomas says that the chief difficulties with accepting that God governs human affairs providentially arise from the fact that no certain order appears in human affairs. Good things happen to bad people and bad things happen to good people and there seems to be no reason for why things happen.

For Aquinas, Job is a real historical figure though he said that this was not necessary as the truth of the book could also have been told as a parable. Aquinas interpreted the book differently than modern biblical scholars. He was willing to look beyond what the human author may have understood at the time of writing. This is important for Aquinas' interpretation of Job, because he wanted to unpack the poetic figures Job uses to describe his condition or to make his argumentative points (26). For Aquinas the literal meaning of Scripture—the meaning intended by the divine author—is the meaning that emerges from reading the Bible as a whole, the work of a single divine author (27). Yocum says that the modern option of *sensus plenior* comes closest to, but yet is distinct from Aquinas' method (27). Aquinas practices what could be called a “doctrinal” form of exegesis—interpreting any particular biblical book or passage in light of the whole of Christian doctrine, even when the author of that book would not have known that doctrine because revelation was not yet complete.

Aquinas' Interpretation of Job: Meaning

Aquinas sees the entire Book of Job as part of a providential plan. Satan did not talk God into afflicting Job. “On the contrary, He ordained it in His eternal disposition to manifest Job's virtue against all the calumnies of impious men; therefore, the calumny is premised and the divine permission follows”(Exposition 83). Aquinas finds three important things in this opening narrative. The first establishes Job's condition and character. The second establishes the mediating activity in God's providence of the incorporeal intellectual beings that the bible calls angels and demons. “Now certain spirits are evil—not by nature or by creation, since the author of both natures is God and the Supreme Good can be the cause of only good things, but they are evil through their own fault”(76). The good spirits move men to good actions and the evil spirits move men to evil actions (76). In the third section Aquinas elaborates what constitutes human good:

Since man's good is threefold, namely of the body, of the soul, and of external things, they are ordered to one another in such a way that the body is for the sake of the soul whereas external things are for the sake of the body and soul. Therefore, just as it is wrong if someone intentionally subordinates the goods of the soul to the advantage of external goods, so it is wrong if someone intentionally subordinates the goods of the soul to the health of the body. And indeed, that Job abounded in the practice of the virtues, which are the goods of the soul, could be sensibly manifest to all. (91)

Yocum says that external goods exist outside the human body. These can be material like Job's wealth or social like his children. Internal goods can relate to the body such as good health or to the soul such as virtues (Yocum 31).

Eleonore Stump in, *Aquinas on the Sufferings of Job*, says that Aquinas does not address the problem of evil in the *Exposition*. This problem is the one of reconciling the existence of evil in the world with the existence of a good, omnipotent, omniscient God. She acknowledges that Aquinas does raise the issue in the *Summa Theologiae* (Stump 333). Stump states that, whereas modern readings of the Book of Job take the issue to be doubt about God's goodness and therefore about the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God at all, the focus for Aquinas is on the nature and operation of divine providence: the horrendous evils that God sometimes permits to afflict good people are understood to be medicinal, perfectly intelligible by reference to the possibility of our attaining the ultimate goal of union with God in the afterlife (Stump 33). Medicinal in the sense that man has become disordered in his love of what is good on account of the fall. Sometimes I also think that as embodied spirits in time the immediate goods of creation are going to be more real to us than the transcendent Good that is God who can only be fully known and loved after this life. So the otherness of God as man's true End "requires" a purification of desire, including created things that are in good and more immediately "tasty" to us than God.

The next section of the *Exposition* is where Job's friends argue that Job's suffering must be recompense for sin. Aquinas raises three points:

Thomas holds a rich anthropology that builds on that of Aristotle, taking full account of the realities of the bodily and social nature of human beings, as well as the distinctive intellectual human powers that enable a life of contemplation, which is the true end of the human being. Second, Thomas extends teleology into eschatology, finding Job's speeches a confession of the resurrection to come, when human beings will be rewarded and punished according to the justice of their lives in this age, and the virtuous will be freed from the corruption and limitations that mark this age, so as to reach their divinely ordained end. Third, this eschatology is knowable only by revelation, a revelation given finally in the New Testament, and vouchsafed to Job by a special prophetic insight; nevertheless, this revelation does not nullify, but completes what is available to human reason, so that the evidence of the world of sense and history is rendered more, not less intelligible by it. (Yocum 32)

There is a fittingness that it is Job in the midst of his great afflictions who gives the earliest and clearest confession of the Resurrection (not just of life after death but the return of life to the flesh). Aquinas understands how Job because he has lost his property, his children, his health, his reputation, and the consolation of friends has good reasons for wanting to die unless there is the prospect of a hope that eventually everything will turn out good. Nothing greater proves Job's virtue than his ability to hope when deeply afflicted and with every reason to despair.

Job argues with his friends asserting his innocence and pointing out the fault of their arguments. "The crux of Job's claim is that divine justice and providence will be apparent in a future life, where he hopes for vindication" (35). "For I know that my Redeemer lives, and on the last day I will rise from the earth. And I will be surrounded by my own hide again and in my flesh I shall see God. Whom I myself am going to see and my eyes are going to behold, and no one else" (Job 19:25-27). Yocum says that this passage is not without its interpretative difficulties. He quotes a Jewish exegete, Robert Gordis who states: "From the depths of despair he then rises to a vision of faith in the God of Justice, whom he sees vividly before him, acting as his kinsman and Redeemer, the avenger of the wrongs he has suffered" (Gordis 528). According to Gordis when Job was written the concept of resurrection after death was not yet a widespread Jewish belief which is expressed in Job 14:7-23 (528). However the concept of the *goel* or the one who is a kinsmen and hence an active defender of one's interest, redeeming one from bondage, repurchasing a field, and marrying a childless widow is mentioned several times in the Old Testament in Leviticus and Ruth and is a concept that would be understood by the Jewish people when the Book of Job was written (205).

Yocum says that Thomas' reading of the above text while not popular among modern commentators parallels traditional Jewish and Christian readings:

Thomas gives a fully-fledged Christian interpretation, digressing three times to bring in seven scriptural quotations, six from the New Testament. At this point, the teleology that Thomas has earlier adumbrated, that is, that the end of the human being is union with God, becomes an eschatology: the Redeemer is Christ and this end will come with the resurrection of the dead at the last day. (Yocum 36-37)

After the debate and Elihu has intervened, then God appears and speaks and accomplishes several things. First, God rebukes Job's friends for the injustice of their charges against a righteous man. Second, he demonstrates to Job the lack of his knowledge and power. Third, God's speech leads to Job's repentance. The

text does not say what he repents of, simply that he repents: “Thomas finds two elements. First, he repents of having spoken lightly, though not, according to Thomas, out of haughtiness or untruth and so gave an occasion for scandal by calling God to a debate with him and putting his justice first. Second, he repents, not of pride in action, but “some inward proud thought”, which God could see, even if his friends could not” (39). We will perhaps all have to repent of the conceptions we have of God when such pathetic notions give way to the vision of His mystery.

God restores Job’s property and gives him new children. Aquinas makes an effort to convey to us that this does not upset the eschatological scheme, and also does not subvert the idea that reward and punishment does not appear in this life. First, Aquinas cites Mt. 6:33 that “seek first the kingdom and all else will be added to you.” Second, Aquinas says that this is in keeping with the Old Testament, “in which temporal goods were promised so that in this way, through the prosperity which Job had recovered, an example might be given to others so that they might turn back to God” (*Exposition* 472).

Conclusion

In summary, the *Catechism* gives us hope by saying that “in time we can discover that God in his almighty providence can bring a good from the consequences of an evil, even a moral evil, caused by his creatures; ‘It was not you,’ said Joseph to his brothers, ‘who sent me here, but God.... You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive’” (CCC 312). Further, “From the greatest moral evil ever committed—the rejection and murder of God’s only Son, caused by the sins of all men—God, by his grace that “abounded all the more,” brought the greatest of goods: the glorification of Christ and our redemption. But for all that, evil never becomes a good” (312).

The Book of Job does not solve the problem of innocent suffering. It does, however, establish the inadequacy of those approaches to suffering that place all the responsibility on the person who suffers: the good law of retribution, the assumption that all humans are sinful and so deserve to suffer, and that the idea that suffering is a discipline from God (Harrington 48). While sometimes these do apply due to the life one has lived and the result of choices made, in many cases like Job’s they do not seem to apply.

The Book of Job also shows the inadequacy of imposing a human legal framework on God’s role in human suffering. Job comes to recognize that divine justice cannot be measured by human justice, that his relationship is not one between equals, and that the lawsuit mentality fails when applied to a spiritual

transformation as they try to look at life from God's perspective rather than their own (Harrington 48).

As modern theologians we need to confront suffering and learn to talk about God even in the face of unspeakable suffering. We are challenged to devise appropriate discourse about God. This discourse must always be faithful to the Catholic tradition but we also need to be attentive to the cries of suffering people. We must be able to develop methods that enable people to talk to God in the midst of their experience of suffering. Let us pray with (and for) them, for those in the darkness of doubt and pain find it difficult to pray. By listening too we give witness to God, for the experience of another's compassion can be a "sacrament" of God's compassion. By looking to Aquinas, the Fathers, and the whole of the Catholic tradition we should be able to find what can give comfort to those afflicted by suffering. There is no need to reinvent God in our own image.

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