

Reviews

THOMAS AQUINAS: A VERY BRIEF HISTORY by Brian Davies, *SPCK*, London, 2017, pp. xv + 137, £7.99, pbk

The publisher of this book tells us on its website that its *Very Brief Histories* series contains volumes that are ‘Short, accessible, and written by world experts on their subjects’.

Brian Davies OP is certainly an authority on St Thomas Aquinas, having authored numerous important books and articles on Aquinas. He is also an experienced university teacher. What is meant by ‘short’ is presumably indicated by the book itself: just over one hundred and thirty not densely printed pages in fairly large type. And how Davies understands ‘accessible’ is explained by him in the Preface (p.xiii): ‘intended for readers approaching certain topics for the first time... Specifically, I have tried to introduce Aquinas to readers who have no previous knowledge of him, of medieval thinking, or of academic philosophy and theology.’

Meeting the requirements of brevity and accessibility poses significant challenges to the writer. Aquinas’s works are voluminous and widely-ranging in subject matter. Although his prose style is clear, he uses many technical terms. Aquinas’s thought is also systematic, and so many of his arguments are interconnected. Moreover, since this is ‘A Very Brief History’, Davies presumably needs to meet the additional requirement of presenting Aquinas in his historical context.

Since this is a highly introductory volume, I will focus my comments on how Davies fares in meeting the requirements indicated above.

Regarding the challenge of accessibility, consider the following (p. 26):

‘It is often said that those who believe that God exists have no business doing so unless they can *prove* God’s existence. Aquinas, however, does not accept this view. He does not think it always irrational to believe what one cannot prove since he is aware that learning often heavily depends on accepting things on someone’s say-so. He also recognizes that, as Aristotle emphasized, in order to avoid an infinite regress, we cannot argue at all unless we take some propositions to stand without demonstration.’

The language in this passage is admirably clear. The sentences are short and crisp, and there is a minimum of technical language. The sometimes thorny issue of the epistemic warrant of testimony, a major topic among professional philosophers, is deftly referred to in everyday language: ‘learning often heavily depends on accepting things on someone’s

say-so'. Terms like 'propositions' and 'demonstration,' also areas of much discussion among professional philosophers, are sufficiently part of everyday language that their use seems fairly unproblematic in terms of accessibility.

But what about 'infinite regress'? This is one of the very few times Davies uses a term that could be considered not part of everyday language without giving an explicit explanation of what the term means. On the one hand, the issue of infinite regress is central to the cosmological arguments of Aquinas. It is difficult to avoid mentioning the term when discussing them. On the other hand, to give an explanation of 'infinite regress' might divert the reader unnecessarily. It is also plausibly a term that ought to be familiar to those who have at least some previous knowledge of general philosophy, which lessens any concern about accessibility. But even in this case Davies gives some indication of what 'infinite regress' means: 'we cannot argue at all unless we take some propositions to stand without demonstration'. In any case, to raise these points about the use of 'infinite regress' is to highlight the kind of difficulties encountered when presenting complex ideas in highly accessible terms and with brevity. There is perhaps no approach that would suit every reader. That this reader found very few examples that raised even a hint of concern about accessibility is a tribute to Davies's skill in expressing Aquinas's thought in simple and clear language.

Regarding the requirement of brevity, Davies manages to cover in this short book a wide range of central topics in Aquinas: natural theology, Incarnation, Trinity, anthropology, ethics, and the sacraments. In addition to a glossary of key terms, there is a helpful chapter explaining central terms and concepts in Aquinas: essence, nature, accidents, form, matter, act and potency. Those familiar with Aquinas's thought would presumably have their suggestions about issues they would like to have been addressed in this book but were not. But that is perhaps unavoidable in the case of a short introductory volume on a subtle and complex thinker who produced a vast corpus of writings.

The book finishes with a section on Aquinas's legacy, comprising two chapters. The chapter on how Aquinas's thought has relevance for contemporary debates, for example on science and religion, is helpful and will hopefully stimulate the appetites of readers to explore Aquinas's thought further. A full chapter on how Aquinas's thought has been received over the centuries is, however, arguably excessive in a volume intended for the reader coming to Aquinas for the first time. It comes across as designed to meet a publisher's brief that might be more appropriate in the case of some of the other volumes in the series.

This point notwithstanding, Davies's book can be warmly recommended. There are few introductory books on Aquinas that come close to this volume in making the central ideas of Aquinas so accessible and with such concision. Much skill is required to write this sort of book.

In meeting the demands of his deceptively simple task Davies has done an excellent job.

JOHN D. O'CONNOR OP

GENESIS 1–11. A NEW OLD TRANSLATION FOR READERS, SCHOLARS, AND TRANSLATORS by Samuel L. Bray and John F. Hobbins, *Glossahouse*, Wilmore, KY., 2017, pp. 313, \$14.99, pbk

This fine book published by *GlossaHouse* offers good contributions to biblical translations. Its authors, a law professor at the University of California at Los Angeles and a Reformed pastor and scholar of classical Hebrew, seriously engage with contemporary exegetical literature in order to provide their readers with a good English rendering of the Hebrew text of *Genesis* 1:1 – 12:9, accompanied by comments upon selected phrases. The volume consists in three sections: ‘Before the Translation’ (pp. 1-16), ‘The Translation’ (pp. 19-38), ‘After the Translation’ (pp. 39-313). In the first, some general criteria inspiring the version are given: the newly crafted translation is aimed at public reading and private worship, is conceived in a substantial continuity with the Tyndale Bible and the King James Version, is willing to mirror the Semitic original albeit highly mindful of the style and pace of the English text. The translation itself unfolds with paragraph breaks which reflect the blanks left in the Masoretic Leningradensis Codex, comprises three Hebrew traditional titles (*bereshit* at the head of *Gen* 1:1, *nóach* before 6:9 and *lek-leka* before 12:1), nicely italicises verses opening new sub-sections (2:4; 5,1a; 6:9a; 10:1; 11:10a). The third section of the book contains more detailed justifications of the criteria followed in the translation (‘To the Persistent Reader’, pp. 41-64), ‘Notes’ (pp. 65-200), some elements about the ‘Dramatis Personae’ (i.e. God, Adam, Eve, the serpent, Cain, Abel, etc., pp. 201-206), a ‘Glossary’ with the Hebrew Texts, the old and modern translations and a selection of major ancient and modern interpreters (pp. 207-222), a few recommendation for further readings (‘Of the Making of Books’, pp. 223-225), ‘Abbreviations’ (pp. 226-234), ‘Works Cited’ (pp. 235-267) and indexes (pp. 268-313).

For the purposes of the present review specific premises addressed ‘To the Persistent Reader’ and some selected notes to the translation are worth discussing. Bray and Hobbins acknowledge that each textual tradition, such as the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, has a coherence in its own, consider a variety of ancient reading (both within the Hebrew-Aramaic and the Greek tradition), thus often referring to Qumran finds, the Samaritan Pentateuch, Aquila, the Targums etc., but opt to follow