

## THE WRITINGS OF ALBERT THE GREAT

**H**IS HOLINESS Pope Pius XI, proclaiming Albertus Magnus a Saint and a Doctor of the Church, said of him, that he knew everything that was to be known.<sup>1</sup> And indeed his outstanding characteristic was the universality of his learning. In his writings he covered the whole field of knowledge, and he was as great in philosophy and theology as in meteorology, astronomy, geography, mineralogy, chemistry, physics, zoology, botany, physiology, and in the other natural sciences. It is, therefore, not surprising that on account of the eminence and universality of his learning he was known among his contemporaries, as he has been known ever since, as the *Doctor Universalis*, and as *Magnus*, 'the Great.'

His complete works were printed for the first time in 1651 at Lyons, in twenty-one volumes in folio, and again at Paris in 1890-98, in thirty-eight volumes in quarto. Besides these, many authentic writings are still in manuscript in the libraries and archives of various cities of Europe. Scholars consider that, if published, they would fill at least ten folio volumes.

But it is impossible to appreciate the imposing personality of the *Doctor Universalis* without having a thorough knowledge of his writings, and that is an exceedingly difficult task without a sure guidance, as all those who are acquainted with mediaeval studies well know. At the moment this difficulty is the greater owing to the lack of a critical edition of his works, and to the fact that some of those published are either dubious or clearly spurious. Not to be misled in such a vast field, it is, therefore, necessary to distinguish the authentic works from the spurious, and to solve

<sup>1</sup> Bull, *In Thesauris Sapientiae*, December 16th, 1931, published in the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, January, 1932.

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the many literary problems connected with, or arising from, the questions of date, purpose, and contents of each book.

It was thus an excellent idea of Fr. Meersseman, O.P., of the Dominican Institute for Historical Research, recently established at Santa Sabina in Rome, to offer to all those who are interested in the study of St. Albert a reliable introduction to his *Opera Omnia*.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of the learned Dominican is not to discuss all the historical and critical problems which such a study must suggest. In particular, the author purposely omits a very important point, namely the discussion of the difficult question of the chronological order of the books, since historians are too far from agreement about it. His chief intention is to collect and co-ordinate in a convenient work the sound conclusions achieved in this field by historical research. His materials are drawn not only from articles scattered in various volumes and reviews, but especially from Albert's own writings, both printed and in manuscript. Thus we are given all the necessary information about the nature, purpose, classification and characteristics of each book, enabled to distinguish the authentic writings from the false, and introduced to important works not yet published. We must be grateful to Fr. Meersseman for giving us, in a small volume, a very good *Organon*, or 'Aids' to the study of St. Albert's vast 'Encyclopaedia.' An alphabetical index of the different titles of the books and *opuscula* is of much assistance in the use of this Introduction.

I shall attempt, in this short note, to give some idea of St. Albert's *Opera Omnia*, as it is manifested in Fr. Meersseman's book.

<sup>2</sup> P. G. Meersseman, O.P., *Introductio in Opera Omnia B. Alberti Magni, O.P.* (Bruges: Beyaert. Pp. xiv, 173. 10 Belgas.)

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The long list of the works attributed to the *Doctor Universalis* may be classified as genuine, spurious and dubious. If we arrange them according to their contents we may distinguish philosophical, theological, and Scriptural writings.

According to the catalogues of St. Albert's works, drawn up by his old biographers, he wrote two complete courses of philosophy and theology.

It is well known that the Schoolmen used two different methods in the interpretation of the Bible, Aristotle, Peter Lombard, or of any other authority. First, *Commentarium*, that is to say, an explanation of the text-book, giving the divisions and sub-divisions of each part of the book, an analysis of each part, and also a short commentary on each sentence. The interpreter sometimes left aside the divisions and analysis, and explained the text, more or less briefly, after the manner of a paraphrase. Second, *Scriptum super*, or when the interpreter, taking a particular point in the text, used it as the basis for a full and complete discussion of a question arising from or connected with it.

In some of his works Albert used both methods; for instance, in the Nicomachean Ethics; in others, he confined himself to one.

His chief aim in philosophy was to make known to the Western world in a coherent and complete form the contents of the Aristotelian synthesis.

To secure this achievement, he sought *per diversas mundi regiones*<sup>3</sup> the various translations of the books of the Philosopher, and also the best works of his followers among the Greeks, the Arabians, and the Jews. Sometimes he used versions derived from the Arabic, but he preferred graeco-latin translations when he could get them. His method was to transcribe the text

<sup>3</sup> *De Mineral.* III, track. 1, Cap. 1 (ed. Borgnet, Vol. V, p. 59).

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and expound each sentence according to Aristotle's meaning. He followed Avicenna in making a paraphrase rather than a developed exposition. His rendering was made in his own style and words, but inserted in the text in such a way that it is often difficult to distinguish between the Aristotelian text and the commentator's own additions. He reserved the full discussion of obscure or difficult passages for particular digressions or excursuses, and he completed the whole by summing up all that he had previously discussed. His purpose was to produce a full course of philosophy; and in his zeal he completed those treatises that were unfinished, and reconstructed some that were lost!

Though his chief intention was to present the peripatetic doctrine to scholars, he sponsored Plato's teaching also when it was not in opposition to Aristotle: *Interdum etiam Platonis recordabimur, in his in quibus Peripatheticorum sententiis in nullo contradicit.*<sup>4</sup> In this way he gathered up the intellectual legacy of the ancient thinkers into a real *corpus doctrinae*.

Philosophy was divided into three parts: Rational, Real, and Moral Philosophy.

Rational philosophy, or Logic, in the thirteenth century, comprised the *Logica vetus* (i.e. the *Isagoge* of Porphyry, or *de Praedicabilibus*; the Aristotelian Categories, or *de Praedicamentis*, and the two books of *Perihermeneias*): and the *Logica nova* (i.e. the Analytics, the Topics and *de Sophisticis Elenchis*). Boethius' *de Divisione* and the *de Sex Principiis* of Gilbert Porretanus were also added to the *Organon*.

Albertus Magnus expounded all these books, following, as a rule, the Boethian version and using at the same time the arabo-latin translations, and quite often

<sup>4</sup> *De Intellectu et intelligibili*, I, tr. 1, c. 1 (Bor. IX, p. 478).

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a graeco-latin one of a certain John, not otherwise known.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes he critically compared one version with another: *Et haec litera melior est, et est translatio cuiusdam Iohannis a graeco facta, sicut translatio Boethii.*<sup>6</sup> In his commentaries he carefully compared, examined and criticized Algazel, Alfarabi and Avicenna in their expositions of Aristotle. He accepted or rejected them to the extent in which he considered them to express Aristotle's real thought.

St. Albert's commentary *in librum Boethii de Divisione* is not included among the printed *opera omnia*; it was only published in 1913 by Fr. de Loe, O.P.

Real philosophy, also called Speculative or Theoretical science, was divided into three essential parts: Physics, Mathematics and Metaphysics.

St. Albert dealt with the Physics in twenty-two books, using the same method as in the Logic for the exposition of the treatises *Physicorum, de Coelo et Mundo, de Generatione, de Anima, de Sensu et Sensato*. The very important commentary *de Animalibus libri XXVI*, is still preserved in Albert's autograph at Cologne; a critical edition was recently issued by Professor H. Stadler.

Albert frequently asserted his intention of expounding the entire corpus of Mathematics, which at that time comprised Arithmetic, Music, Geometry, and Astronomy. It is also certain that he did actually expound at least some parts of it, for example *super Geometriam Euclidis, super Almagestum Ptolomaei, super Perspectivam Alacenis, super Sphaeram Iohannis de Sacro Bosco, super Speculum Astrolabicum*, etc., but none of these have been published.

The highest part of theoretical philosophy is Metaphysics, also called *scientia divina*, which considers

<sup>5</sup> He may be John Basingstoke who, together with Nicholas the Greek, worked with Grosseteste in his translations.

<sup>6</sup> *In Post. Analyt.*, I, tr. 4, c. 9 (Borg. II, p. 108).

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being, not as limited in this or that thing, but in itself and in its perfection. Albertus Magnus expounded Aristotle's metaphysics, using a graeco-latin translation, in which the eleventh book was missing. Thus Books XI, XII and XIII of Albert's paraphrase correspond to Books XII, XIII and XIV in the Greek.

The famous *liber de Causis*, translated into Latin from the Arabic by Gerald of Cremona, was at that time generally ascribed to Aristotle and considered to be the supreme achievement of peripatetic metaphysics. Albert wrote a commentary on it, as the completion of Aristotle's metaphysics, although he did not share the common enthusiasm for it. He denied its Aristotelian origin, and attributed it to a certain David the Jew, who, he considered, compiled it from various passages of Aristotle, Avicenna, Algazel, and Alfarabi.<sup>7</sup>

Metaphysics cannot be considered complete without the treatise on God. So Albert quite often mentions his idea of commenting on *de Natura deorum*. But, if the idea was ever realized, the work has not been discovered.

The last part of philosophy is Moral, which Albert completed by expounding the Ethics, Economics and Politics of Aristotle.

In his commentaries on the Nicomachean Ethics, Albert followed the graeco-latin version of Grosseteste. This work is nothing but a pure paraphrase of Aristotle; the digressions, which we meet with so frequently in his other commentaries, are entirely omitted. On the contrary, in his commentaries on the Politics, he abruptly changed his method. These are neither a paraphrase, like his other works on Aristotle,

<sup>7</sup> *De Causis*, II, tr. I, cap. I (Bor. X, p. 433; cfr. p. 435). But in the *Summa Theol.* he variously attributed it to Aristotle and Hermes Trismegistos.

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nor a *scriptum*, but a literal exposition of the Aristotelian text, preceded by divisions and analyses, such as we are accustomed to find in St. Thomas's commentaries on Aristotle and the Bible. In this work he used William Moerbeke's new translation into Latin from the Greek.

The characteristic feature of the forty-five books, which form the corpus of the entire peripatetic philosophy as re-written for the West by St. Albert, is its impersonality. His aim, as he often asserted, was not to give his own teaching and ideas, but a full, complete and sure knowledge of the learning of Aristotle and of his School, and thus to offer to scholars a text-book of corrected Aristotelian doctrine. Albert's own philosophical and original teaching is to be looked for in his second course of philosophy, which is entirely his own composition and written in the manner of a *scriptum* and *quaestiones*, in which he fully explained all his ideas and thoroughly discussed all the philosophical and scientific problems arising from the Aristotelian thought. These contributions were his class-lectures, and it seems that they were never written down by himself, but reported by his pupils, and most probably only revised by him.

Thus we possess his remarkable *Quaestiones* on the Nicomachean Ethics, reported by Thomas Aquinas while his pupil at Cologne, which are still unpublished. Mgr. Pelzer edited the first chapter and the titles of the first book. Then Fr. Pelster, S.J., has found in the Ambrosian Library at Milan the *Quaestiones super libris de Animalibus*. He has also suggested that the *Summa de Creaturis* is in reality the *Quaestiones* on *de Anima, de Sensu et Sensato, de Memoria et Reminiscentia*, and *de Somno et Vigilia*. It is undoubtedly a considerable loss to the intellectual world that the majority of this section of Albert's writings have not been preserved, or at least not yet discovered.

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It is a well-known fact that in the Middle Ages the Bible was the basis of all teaching and learning, and it was the special business of a Master in Theology to explain it. The biblical writings of Master Albert fill nearly eleven volumes of the *Opera Omnia* in the Paris edition. He commented on the greater part of Holy Writ, namely : Job (not included in the *Opera Omnia*; a critical edition was issued in 1904 by Weiss), the Psalms (?), *de Muliere Forti* (Proverbs, chap. xi), Daniel, the twelve Minor Prophets, Baruch, the Four Gospels, and the Apocalypse. He also commented on the Canticle of Canticles, Isaias, Jeremias, Ezechiel and the Epistles of St. Paul, which commentaries are still unpublished.

Albert's scriptural contributions mark a considerable advance in the development of biblical exegesis. He perfected the new method of exegesis introduced by his contemporary the Dominican Cardinal Hugh of St. Cher, which consisted in making conspicuous the logical connection of each part of the book by analysing, dividing and sub-dividing each section of it, clearly distinguishing between the literal and spiritual sense, and giving a separate explanation of each of them.

Division and logical analysis of the Scriptural text; preference given to the explanation of the literal sense, without neglecting the allegorical, and with a moderate use of the tropological; reference on a large scale to similar passages of the Bible; frequent quotations from ecclesiastical and secular writers (Aristotle, Plato, Avicenna, Pliny, Horace, Lucretius, etc.); explanation of Greek and Hebrew words; dogmatic and polemic discussions : these are the features of Albert's exegetical method, which undoubtedly place him among the best interpreters of Holy Scripture in the thirteenth century. He was the first among the Scholastics who insistently urged the interpretation



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of the literal sense; thus in the biblical field also he was a pioneer.

The chief merit of St. Albert as a theologian was that he was the first to realize the value of carefully distinguishing between faith and reason, theology and philosophy, and the first to formulate clearly their separate domains; and consequently the first to consider theology as a real and separate science.

His contributions to theology are the Commentaries on the pseudo-Dionysius, and on the Sentences of Peter the Lombard; two *Summae Theologicae*, and some minor theological treatises.

He is the only Scholastic who commented upon all the works of the pseudo-Areopagite. *De Divinis Nominibus*, of which Père Théry, O.P., is preparing the first edition, represents with the Nichomachean Ethics his class-lectures at Cologne as reported by St. Thomas. Experts think that the manuscript preserved in the *Biblioteca Nazionale* at Naples is in Aquinas' hand-writing. This great work is of paramount importance for the question of the influence exercised by Albert on his pupil.

The first *Summa*, called *de Creaturis*, written at the same time as the commentaries on the Sentences, is incomplete, and as yet only partly published. Although he had planned the whole of it, he never brought it to completion.

In order to help professors of theology, especially those of his Order, who were unable to study the scholastic problems with satisfaction from lack of *originalia* (i.e., original works, and not merely extracts collected in anthologies), he set himself in the last years of his life to the task of writing a new *Summa Theologica: Summa pro fratribus legentibus et disputantibus, qui non semper habent copiam originalium*. In this work he multiplied quotations *in extenso*, and it is rather a well-

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digested work. He followed more or less closely the same order as in the Sentences, discussing fully all theological questions and giving his own views and thought; but the doctrine is more Aristotelian than in the first *Summa* and in the Sentences. At the end of the first two books his mind failed him, and thus it remained unfinished.

Besides these great works, he composed many other philosophical and theological opuscula, as well as several ascetico-mystical treatises, and many sermons.

The two excellent pamphlets *de Adhaerendo Deo* and *Paradisus animae* are not Albert's. The famous *Compendium theologiae veritatis*, attributed sometimes to him and sometimes to St. Thomas, is in reality by Hugh of Strassburg, O.P. *Philosophia Pauperum*, *Speculum Astronomiae*, and several opuscula printed under Albert's name, are at least dubious. Certainly spurious, though often printed as Albert's, are the *Secretum secretorum*, *Experimenta Alberti*, *De Mirabilibus Mundi*, and other similar books.

On the other hand, some of the genuine writings, known to us by the old catalogues and chronicles, have not yet been discovered.

This is but a very meagre idea of the writings, both published and unpublished, of St. Albert the Great. For more detailed and important information one must read Fr. Meersseman's valuable book, which I recommend to all those who are interested in the study of St. Albert's works.

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