

# Who are we? Where are we headed?

## Reflections not only in the post-pandemic context – review article

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**Abstract**— The review examines Rev. Professor Tomasz Maria Dąbek OSB's monograph *The Joyful Striving Toward the Goal of Human Life*, which concludes the series *Biblical Calls to the Development of Culture*. The author of the review analyses the structure of the book, the scope of the biblical material, and the exegetical method employed, with particular attention paid to the eschatological perspective on human existence. The review highlights the contemporary relevance of the work in the context of modern experiences of existential uncertainty, suffering, and the crisis of meaning. The monograph is presented as both a solid scholarly study and a valuable guide to the biblical understanding of the purpose and value of human life..

**Keywords**— meaning of life; eschatology; biblical literature; Christian anthropology; purpose of human existence, COVID-19

### I. INTRODUCTION

The latest fruit of Father Professor Tomasz Maria Dąbek's many years of scholarly work is the eighth volume in the series *Biblical Calls to the Development of Culture*. Following earlier analyses of biblical concepts such as silence, tolerance, work, the dignity of women, justice–honesty–decency, imitation of God and Christ, peace, and the body, the Author now undertakes an in-depth reflection on Old and New Testament texts that "document" the joyful striving toward the goal of human life (Dąbek 2022).

As the Author himself notes, the volume under review, devoted to human aspirations toward achieving the proper goal of existence from a biblical perspective, constitutes the closing work of the *Biblical Calls to the Development of Culture* series.

The eschatological perspective on human existence adopted in this final volume appears at a moment when the collapse of the former world order has become all too evident. This affects entire societies and individuals painfully marked by experiences of loneliness, suffering, existential fragility, illness, and death. It is difficult to imagine a better time for reflections on the purpose and value of human life, a topic that is dramatically relevant in a world afflicted by war, poverty, and the COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus.

### II. MAIN PART

The events of recent years have undermined the foundations of thinking about the human being as a conqueror of the world and the cosmos, endowed with inexhaustible creative energy and ingenuity. At the same time, they have exposed the illusory faith in the omnipotence of progress and science, destroyed the sense of independence, the prideful conviction of strength, and the mirage of control over reality. For many, these circumstances proved to be traumatic experiences that generated an urgent need to seek answers to fundamental questions about human nature in relation to the world, God, and other people. Such answers may become a source of strength necessary for survival and for rebuilding life on a new, solid foundation: God's truth about the purpose and value of human existence as expressed in the Bible, a work fundamental to Western civilization. In this way, Father Professor Tomasz Maria Dąbek's study may go far beyond the basic function of a scholarly work and become a guide to the Book of Books for

those who have lost their way in the complex reality of the contemporary world.

The reviewed book follows the structure familiar from previous volumes. After a concise introduction that synthetically presents the main theses of the entire work, the Author outlines the principal themes and issues analyzed in detail in the subsequent chapters. These are followed by an extensive bibliography, as impressive as always in this Author's work, which includes both Polish and international biblical scholarship. Alongside general commentaries on the Old and New Testaments, there are numerous specialized studies devoted directly to the issues under discussion. Such a bibliography testifies to the Author's scholarly reliability and inspires confidence in the content presented, while also providing a valuable resource for further, in-depth reading and study.

The well-established division into two parts, devoted respectively to the Old and the New Testament, greatly facilitates orientation within the work as a whole. The internal structure results from the selection of biblical texts that reveal successive aspects of the phenomenon under examination. This clear arrangement largely repeats the solution adopted in earlier volumes of the series, with one modification: in the first chapter, texts drawn from the entirety of the Bible are invoked.

The opening of the reflections undertaken in the first chapter, *The Biblical Concept of Time*, sets the background for further analyses. It concerns the biblical understanding of time, fundamentally different both from the pagan cyclical concept of natural time prevalent in the ancient world and from modern intuitions. For ancient Israelites, the flow of time begins with successive salvific initiatives undertaken by God. This specific continuum of divine action forms the basis of a concept of time that, as "filled" with God's presence, acquires a sacred dimension (Zajaczkowski 1988).

In presenting the Old Testament biblical concept of time, the Author draws on a wide range of arguments. He refers to theoretical works by recognized theological and biblical authorities such as Gerhard von Rad, John Bright, Augustyn Jankowski, and Gordon J. Wenham, as well as to numerous Old and New Testament passages cited from the *Millennium Bible*. Crucially important truths are presented in the original languages, which greatly enriches the philological level of the work, especially since the cited terms are accompanied by precise lexicographical explanations. A significant asset is also the inclusion of transliterations of Hebrew texts, making the discussion accessible to readers unfamiliar with biblical languages.

Particular attention in the first chapter is devoted to the vision of God as the Lord of history, the One who gave it its beginning and who knows and plans its end. This truth, often forgotten or treated with skepticism in contemporary times, has found many confirmations of its neglect in recent months around the world. Restoring this conviction to modern consciousness may become a seed of inner peace, flowing from the assurance that world history is not chaotic, hostile, or meaningless, but has its origin in the plans of a merciful Creator. The reminder that history is both a gift and a task entrusted to humanity is of profound

importance.

The second chapter, *Earthly Prosperity as a Reward for a Good Life. The Happy End of the Righteous*, highlights values whose image in contemporary culture is deeply distorted. Keeping one's word, fidelity to commitments, faithfulness to the covenant, prudence, and the care for sound life choices are often associated today with naivety or weakness, although for centuries they formed the basis of personal honor and social life. The Bible reminds us that cultivating these qualities also means building a relationship with God, whose strength lies in unwavering love and fidelity to the Creator. Such an attitude becomes a source of peace and happiness, merits divine blessing, and conditions the prosperity of the individual and their close ones. Achieving it requires maturity, painstakingly acquired in struggle with worldly temptations and the mirages of quick and easy success. This maturity and consistency in pursuing it are often lacking in the contemporary person focused solely on themselves and on short-sighted goals far removed from God's plan. A manifestation of this immaturity is also the refusal to accept the consequences of one's actions, even when they clearly result from errors, poor choices, or sins. The reminder of this essential biblical truth, that God is the foundation of a happy life, a peaceful old age, and the end of one's days, is of inestimable value.

Chapters three, *The Prosperity of Sinners as a Difficulty for the Righteous of the First Covenant*, and four, *The Innocent Suffering of the Righteous*, address a problem that is difficult and often incomprehensible to modern people: how to reconcile the prosperity of sinners and the innocent suffering of the righteous with God's justice.

Such dilemmas are timeless. They concerned not only contemporary humanity but also ancient Israelites, as evidenced by numerous citations from the Books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Judges, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Wisdom, Job, Tobit, and many prophetic writings. These texts reveal the mentality and value system of ancient Israel, which understood justice as reward for good and punishment for evil. Traces of similar thinking can be found in cultures unfamiliar with the Bible. In Far Eastern philosophy, such as Buddhism or Hinduism, the concept of karma functions as a kind of energy operating in the universe. Human activity continuously affects its surroundings, particularly the social environment, provoking tangible reactions and consequences. There is a deep conviction that good or evil performed by a person attracts corresponding energy, which in turn produces good or bad effects. In this sense, karma "returns," bringing good or evil already in earthly life.

Departure from this "natural" order of thinking occurs very slowly in Israelite tradition, a process faithfully recorded in the Bible. Here, it is no longer the human being, their plans and actions, that occupy the center of the universe. Human life gains a new perspective that transcends the here and now: the perspective of God's eternal plan, in which humanity is invited to cooperate in the work of redemption with the One who truly stands at the center of the universe, the only and omnipotent Creator.

Following Old Testament pericopes, Father Professor

Tomasz M. Dąbek carefully “documents” this gradual movement toward a spiritual, metaphysical understanding of suffering. Suffering is no longer seen solely as a negative sign of the absence of God’s blessing or as punishment. It acquires new meaning as a trial, as in the case of Job, or as an experience with a soteriological function, as exemplified by the suffering Servant of Yahweh.

The fifth and final chapter of the first part, *The Formation of the Doctrine of Future Life and Eternal Recompense for Earthly Deeds*, offers a concise, precise, and extremely important exposition of the transformation in the biblical understanding of the value of human life. The Author emphasizes that a full view of this issue becomes possible only from the perspective of eternal, post-mortem life, in which the human fate will be fulfilled through reward for a good and righteous life or punishment for an unjust one. His detailed analysis traces the evolution of Israelite thought from the early concept of Sheol as a sorrowful realm of the dead with no return, through the distinction between joy in the Garden of Eden for the righteous and eternal suffering in Gehenna for sinners, to the mature concept of resurrection to new life after death.

In accordance with the biblical message, the activity and teaching of Christ are strongly emphasized in the second part of the book. In terms of volume, this section is approximately 30 percent longer than the first, which, given the incomparably smaller size of the New Testament, indicates a much more detailed analysis of biblical pericopes.

New Testament texts introduce a new perspective and a new understanding of the value of human life. The very coming into the world of God in human flesh, the Son of God, has fundamental significance for evaluating human existence.

The biblical texts gathered extensively in the first chapter of the second part, *Christ’s Teaching on Eternal Life, Eternal Reward and Punishment*, demonstrate that human life is not accidental but is integrated into a history of salvation designed in love by the Creator, who was not scandalized by human sin and infidelity. Humanity’s task within the new plan of redemption and restoration of harmony in creation is to discover its role and then to fulfill it faithfully and selflessly, finding in this union with God the meaning and joy of life. (Borutka 2020) This is the highest virtue and it will not remain without eternal reward. Closing oneself off from God’s will and from the needs of others leads to the pursuit of illusions and unjustified claims, inevitably resulting in spiritual and moral degeneration. Such a path becomes in itself a source of failure and misery and cannot meet with divine reward (Szarlej 2013).

Jesus, who defines himself as the Way, the Truth, and the Life, does not leave humanity alone in this difficult task. He does not abandon human beings to wander blindly through life. He leaves his word, first communicated personally and then transmitted by his disciples, to serve as a signpost for weary travelers whose strength diminishes with every step burdened by suffering, misfortune, persecution, and failure. This is the subject of the second chapter, *The Apostles’ Teaching on Eternal Life, Eternal Reward and Punishment*.

The New Testament is also, in its essence, a guide to a happy and fruitful life that becomes the seed of unity with God in

eternity. Referring to the verbal teachings of Jesus and his disciples, the Author understands the word in a Semitic sense, as both word and deed, as history enacted on Golgotha. Its powerful and moving image is found in Isaiah’s prophetic vision, a vision whose impact has not diminished over the centuries, provided it is known.

In the Author’s work, the fundamental truths of the Christian faith are carefully nuanced, presented in exceptional detail, and documented with numerous biblical quotations. The redemptive suffering of Christ is treated separately, as a call addressed to his disciples, in the third chapter, *The Redemptive Sufferings of Christ as a Call to Undertake Hardships for His Kingdom*. The zeal of Christ’s followers is likewise given separate treatment in the fourth chapter, *The Zeal of Christ’s Disciples in Enduring Persecution*. Numerous citations encourage zeal in God’s service, which constitutes the essence of a happy and fruitful life, exemplified by the fate of the Son of God and of his disciples, not only those known from Scripture but also those known from Church tradition throughout the centuries, including recent examples such as Blessed Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński and Blessed Róża Czacka. These themes are developed in chapters five and six, *Encouragements to Zeal and Perseverance* and *Encouragements to Make Use of the Favorable Time Given to Us*.

The second part concludes with a reflection on the Book of Revelation, *The Apocalypse on the Future Fate of the Good and the Evil*. Its literary form strengthens the message of God’s truth about the victory of the God-fearing and the defeat of sinners. Particularly valuable is the clear, unambiguous, yet detailed presentation of Jesus’ and the Apostles’ teaching on this subject for the contemporary reader. The biblical answer to questions about the end of earthly life is entirely different from all worldly truths and strikingly beautiful, full of hope. It is well worth offering it for reflection to every modern person.

Father Tomasz Maria Dąbek’s monograph “*Forgetting What Lies Behind and Straining Forward to What Lies Ahead, I Press On Toward the Goal for the Prize of the Heavenly Call of God in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 3:13–14). *The Joyful Striving Toward the Goal of Human Life* has a synthetic character, especially in the first part devoted to the Old Testament, with one exception in the chapter on the biblical concept of time. As in many other volumes of the series, the reader does not encounter a regular, exhaustive exposition, which would likely require a multi-volume work, but rather a systematic ordering of fundamental issues concerning the purpose and value of human life in the Bible, based on the analysis of vast biblical material. The Author’s concise and precise commentaries guide the interpretation of individual biblical pericopes. The chapter on the biblical concept of time is exceptional in that it encompasses material from both the Old and New Testaments and provides an unusually detailed cultural context essential for further analyses and biblical references.

This study should be regarded as a reliable and invaluable guide to the richness of the Old and New Testament for scholars and for all those who seek answers in the Book of Books to fundamental existential questions about the value and meaning

of human existence. The analyses presented in the book may serve as a basis for further scholarly research, not only in biblical studies but also in interdisciplinary fields such as philosophy, linguistics, semantics, cultural studies, or pedagogy.

The topical relevance of the issues addressed is of no small importance for the book's readers. In the chaos of a world affected by extreme experiences such as poverty, social conflicts, numerous wars, and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, pointing to biblical paths out of crisis may become a source of hope for survival and for rebuilding life endowed with a new metaphysical dimension.

I wholeheartedly recommend Father Professor Tomasz Maria Dąbek's book *"Forgetting What Lies Behind and Straining Forward to What Lies Ahead, I Press On Toward the Goal for the Prize of the Heavenly Call of God in Christ Jesus"* (Phil 3:13–14). *The Joyful Striving Toward the Goal of Human Life* to all who seek Truth amid the chaos of the world.

### III. CONCLUSION

The New Testament section places particular emphasis on the teaching of Christ and the Apostles concerning eternal life, reward, and judgment. Human existence is presented not as accidental but as embedded in a history of salvation shaped by divine love. The author convincingly demonstrates that the Christian understanding of life's ultimate goal provides a coherent answer to modern experiences of suffering and loss, offering hope grounded in the promise of resurrection and communion with God.

Overall, the monograph represents a mature and synthetic culmination of Father Tomasz Maria Dąbek's long-term scholarly engagement with biblical anthropology. It serves not only as a reliable academic study but also as a thoughtful guide for readers seeking a deeper understanding of the biblical vision of human destiny and meaning.

### IV. REFERENCES

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