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EPHESIANS AND THE POWERS

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Power and the “Powers” in Thomas Aquinas’ *Lectura ad Ephesios*

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Abstract: In his medieval commentary on Ephesians, Thomas Aquinas interprets the various terms that refer to the “powers” throughout the letter as references to specific tiers within hierarchies of both benevolent and malevolent spiritual beings. Intriguingly, Aquinas interprets the “powers” of Ephesians 1:21 and Ephesians 3:10 as references to the benevolent, angelic hierarchy, while he interprets the “powers” of Ephesians 2:2 and Ephesians 6:12 as references to the malevolent, demonic hierarchy. This chapter will examine Aquinas’ interpretation of these terms in each of these verses and will conclude by examining the theological significance of this identification for Aquinas’ reading of Ephesians. Ultimately, Aquinas sees Christ as the form and exemplar of true divine power, which is most fully expressed in Christ’s resurrection and exaltation over all spiritual beings. Thus, while Aquinas does not contradict modern scholarship’s focus on the subjugation of malevolent forces, he dramatically reorients the discussion around Ephesians’ presentation of Christ as the exalted one through whom the appropriate divine power extends to every creature—physical and spiritual.

Key Words: Divine Power; Angelic Hierarchy; Demonic Hierarchy; Spiritual Beings; Thomas Aquinas

Introduction

Though *Summa Theologiae* stands as his most enduring contribution in the field of systematic theology, Thomas Aquinas’ “ordinary labor,” particularly during his service as *Magister in Sacra Pagina* (“Master of the Sacred Page”) at the University of Paris, was to teach Holy Scripture.¹ Records of Thomas’ exegetical teachings include commentaries on five Old Testament books, two Gospels, and the Pauline

1. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Vol. 1 The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 55.

corpus (which, for Aquinas, includes the book of Hebrews).² Most of Aquinas' Pauline commentaries, including his work on Ephesians, are technically in the form of a *reportatio* (a record) of Thomas' classroom lectures made by Reginald of Piperno.³ Thus, his commentary on Ephesians is more formally known as the *lectura ad Ephesios* – the “lectures on Ephesians.”

In his engagement with Ephesians, Aquinas uses a verse-by-verse style of commentary to highlight significant exegetical and theological elements of the biblical text to his class. Because Thomas, of whom it has been said “speculated with more precision and consistency about the nature of spiritual beings than anyone before him,”⁴ produced such a detailed exegetical and theological treatment of Ephesians, analyzing his *lectura ad Ephesios* can offer a unique approach to the difficulty of understanding the role of “the powers” in this letter. Aquinas' teaching on passages

2. The Aquinas Institute hosts a free website (<https://aquinas.cc>) that contains Aquinas' complete works, including the biblical commentaries in Latin and, where available, English translation. The Aquinas Institute has also published hardcover diglot versions of the commentary on Job: [Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Book of Job*, ed. The Aquinas Institute, trans. Brian Mullady, Latin-English Opera Omnia 32 (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2016)], a four-volume set of the Gospel commentaries on Matthew and John [Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospels of Matthew and John*, ed. The Aquinas Institute, trans. Jeremy Holmes, Beth Mortensen, and Fabian R. Larcher, 4 vols., Latin-English Opera Omnia 33–36 (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013)], and a five-volume set of the commentaries on the Pauline epistles [Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul*, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Fabian R. Larcher, 5 vols., Latin-English Opera Omnia 37–41 (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012)]. At the time of writing, Thomas' other Old Testament commentaries (on Psalms 1–54, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lamentations) are currently being translated through the institute for future publication.

3. Reginald of Piperno served as Thomas' *socius continuus* (“constant companion”). According to Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Vol. 1 The Person and His Work*, 273, a *socius continuus*, having been appointed by the Dominican order to serve lecturers and masters in theology, “followed them everywhere, on trips as well as in the priory, and helped them personally in the preparation of their lessons. They served not as domestics...but as assistants and secretaries. In the present case, things went even further than that for, if we can believe Reginald, he exercised the role of Thomas' ‘nurse’ (*quasi nutricis officium*), even to the point of watching over his diet and making him eat so that his distraction (*abstractio mentis*) would not be harmful to his health.” In his analysis of Aquinas' lectures concerning the Pastoral Epistles, Michael G. Sirilla, *The Ideal Bishop: Aquinas's Commentaries on the Pastoral Epistles*, Thomistic Ressourcement 8 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 83 notes that “the statutes in place at the University of Paris at the time required that all *reportationes* be personally corrected and edited by the master before their publication . . . We can be confident, then, that Reginald's *reportationes* faithfully express the lectures as Thomas gave them.”

There is some disagreement as to whether these reports come from Thomas' preliminary lectures on the Pauline epistles during his period of teaching in Rome 1265–1268 CE, as Matthew L. Lamb, “Introduction,” in *Commentary on Saint Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians*, trans. Matthew L. Lamb, by Thomas Aquinas, Aquinas Scripture Series 2 (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1966), 28 and Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Vol. 1 The Person and His Work*, 255 suggest, or whether they come from Thomas' second Pauline lectures, which were given during in Naples in 1272–1273 CE shortly before his death, as Norman Kretzmann, *The Metaphysics of Theism: Aquinas's Natural Theology in Summa Contra Gentiles I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 256 suggests.

4. Euan Cameron, *Enchanted Europe: Superstition, Reason, and Religion 1250-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 93.

Eric Covington: *Power and the “Powers” in Thomas Aquinas’ Lectura ad Ephesios* relevant to the “powers” in Ephesians demonstrates that he has a highly refined understanding of a hierarchical organization of both benevolent and malevolent spiritual creatures that he sees referenced in the biblical text. However, Thomas’ emphasis throughout his *lectura* remains on God’s unrivaled power exemplified in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ.

Power and Spiritual Creatures in Thomas Aquinas’ Philosophical Theology

One of the defining characteristics of Thomas’ exegesis is that his scriptural interpretation is deeply informed, and indeed cannot be separated from, his broader philosophical theology.⁵ This makes his commentaries dense and rewarding, yet also difficult, to engage. In examining Thomas’ understanding of the “powers” in Ephesians, there are two particular components of Aquinas’ broader thought that must be initially addressed: his understanding of divine power and his understanding of the reality of spiritual creation.

Aquinas defines *power* as the ability to accomplish an action,⁶ and for Aquinas, an *action* is understood, in an Aristotelian sense, as the ability to bring something potential to actuality.⁷ To exercise *power*, then as Ralph McInerney states, means “to be able unqualifiedly to bring action to its intended term.”⁸ Thomas’ understanding of divine power is dependent on his understanding of God’s ultimate perfection as pure actuality (*actus purus*).⁹ God is the only reality whose existence is the same

5. So also, Franklin T. Harkins, “*Docuit Excellentissimae Divinitatis Mysteria*: St. Paul in Thomas Aquinas,” in *A Companion to St. Paul in the Middle Ages*, ed. Steven R. Cartwright, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 39 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 236. Referring to Aquinas’ broader systematic thought as “philosophical theology” corresponds to the terminology of Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6.

6. Or, as Gilles Emery, “Central Aristotelian Themes in Aquinas’s Trinitarian Theology,” in *Aristotle in Aquinas’s Theology*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 16 has it: “Power is the principle of an act, and the principle of what is produced by an action.”

7. See John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II*, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy 47 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 196: “Absolutely central to Thomas’s argumentation for the presence of power in God is his conviction that God is pure actuality, totally devoid of matter and passive potentiality.”

8. Ralph McInerney, “Aquinas on Divine Omnipotence,” in *L’homme et son univers au moyen âge: actes du septième congrès international de philosophie médiévale (30 août-4 septembre 1982)*, Volume 1, ed. Christian Wenin, *Philosophes Médiévaux XXVI* (Louvain-la-Neuve: Editions de l’Institut supérieur de philosophie, 1986), 441.

9. Note also Tyler R. Wittman, “‘Not a God of Confusion but of Peace’: Aquinas and the Meaning of Divine Simplicity,” *Modern Theology* 32.2 (2016): 154, who suggests that Aquinas’ doctrine of God begins “with the demonstration of God’s existence in which God is characterized as the pure actuality [*actus purus*] related to all things causally as their ultimate efficient, exemplary, and final cause.”

as his essence—who is fully and completely actual¹⁰—and, thus, “in God there is active power in the highest degree.”¹¹ For Aquinas, then, *power* refers to the ability to accomplish that which one wills, and, by necessity of his understanding of divine perfection, God is the only reality that exercises infinite power and is omnipotent.¹²

Aquinas’ understanding of the created order, including spiritual beings, builds on the foundation of his understanding of God’s perfection and power. For Aquinas, everything else in existence—including immaterial elements like the human soul and spiritual beings—has been created by God and, thus, every being within the created order is dependent upon God.¹³ Within this understanding of creation in which all things are causally ordered to God, Aquinas reflects a medieval Christian tradition that assumes the presence of immaterial, spiritual beings.¹⁴ These

10. See, for example, *ST* 1.1.4.resp.: “For a thing is perfect in proportion to its state of actuality, because we call that perfect which lacks nothing of the mode of its perfection.” Citations from the *Summa* will follow the standard order of listing part (1), question (50), and article (1). Where a more specific reference is required, the following abbreviation pattern will be used: prologue (prol.), arguments (arg. 1/2/3), *sed contra* (s.c.), response (resp.), and replies to arguments (ad. 1/2/3).

11. *ST* 1.25.1.resp. In *ST* 1.25.1.ad 3, Thomas clarifies that, technically, divine power is not a principle of action, because *action* refers to a movement from potential to actual, and there can be no such movement in God since he is fully and completely actual. So, then, “the notion of power is retained in God in so far as it is the principle of an effect.” This informs the observation made by Oliva Blanchette, “The Logic of Perfection in Aquinas,” in *Thomas Aquinas and His Legacy*, ed. David M. Gallagher (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 109, that Aquinas can refer to God as *perfect* only by extension “since he is not thought of as coming or having come to be in any way.”

12. Thomas details the infinite power of God in *ST* 1.25.3 and divine omnipotence in *ST* 1.25.4. McNerny, “Aquinas on Divine Omnipotence,” 442 summarizes Aquinas’ understanding of divine omnipotence: “If something can be, God can bring it about; His power extends to any thing or state of affairs which does not involve a contradiction.” McNerney further indicates that “God’s power is grounded in (is identical with) His infinite being which is the sum of all perfection. Thus, what is said to be possible with respect to His power is anything whatsoever that can be” (p. 440). This leads to an interesting reflection on a question of the limits of God’s power in regard to sin: If sin is a potential, and God cannot sin, does that mean there is something God cannot do? McNerney summarizes Thomas’ response to such an objection: “A capacity to act is defined in terms of successful, not of defective, action. Being able to fail is not a way of successfully achieving what one sets out to do. Thus, to be able to act without restriction, that is, to be able unqualifiedly to bring action to its intended term, excludes and is incompatible with acting defectively” (p. 441).

13. This is based on Thomas’ broader metaphysical understanding of the distinction between *essence* and *existence* in created beings. As Kevin Corrigan, “A Philosophical Precursor to the Theory of Essence and Existence in Saint Thomas Aquinas,” *The Thomist* 48 (1984): 220 has it: “In all created things, however, existence is not contained in the notion of essence and must, therefore, come from outside the essence and enter into composition with it. Only in God are existence and essence identical . . . Every creature possesses existence, therefore by participation; and the substance that participates in existence is something other than the participated existence. Hence, the essence stands as potency to the act of existence which it receives from God.”

14. An assumption of bodiless, intelligent beings was not unique to the middle ages or to Christian theology, though. Serge-Thomas Bonino, “Aristotélisme et angélogologie chez Saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Bulletin de Littérature Ecclésiastique* 113.1 (2012): 3 provides a reminder that in addition to the scriptural presentation of spiritual beings, ancient philosophy, especially Aristotelian and Platonic traditions, were highly influential in the development of Christian understandings of spiritual beings. Even though, according to David Keck, *Angels and Angelology in the Middle Ages*

spiritual beings are a necessary component of the divine providential order that pervades the cosmos,¹⁵ and, for Aquinas, they “rank between God and corporeal creatures.”¹⁶ As such, they function as intermediaries between God and creation.¹⁷ Aquinas was particularly influenced by (Pseudo-)Dionysius’ *De Coelesti Hierarchia* in understanding a hierarchical structure of angelic beings.¹⁸ Spiritual beings, for Aquinas, are hierarchically ordered and differentiated both by species and by function.¹⁹ Each of the angelic orders is named in a top-down demarcation that relates their function in communicating the knowledge of God from the higher to the lower

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 4, the subject of angelology has been said to be “the most neglected topic in medieval studies,” there are a number of helpful studies concerning medieval and Thomistic angelology. See, for example, James Daniel Collins, *The Thomistic Philosophy of the Angels*, Philosophical Studies 89 (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947); Tiziana Suarez-Nani, *Les anges et la philosophie*, Études de philosophie médiévale (Paris: Vrin, 2002); Tiziana Suarez-Nani, *Connaissance et langage des anges selon Thomas d’Aquin et Gilles de Rome*, Études de philosophie médiévale (Paris: Vrin, 2003); and Tobias Hoffmann, ed., *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy*, Brill’s Companions to the Christian Tradition 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

15. Thomas discusses spiritual beings in a number of places throughout his work, including, among others, *ST* 1.50–64; *SCG* 2.46–55; *Quaestio Disputata de Spiritualibus Creaturis*; and *De Substantiis Separatis* (*Treatise on Separate Substances*).

16. *ST* 1.50.1.ad.1.

17. Juanita Feros Ruys, “Nine Angry Angels: Order, Emotion, and the Angelic and Demoniac Hierarchies in the High Middle Ages,” in *Ordering Emotions in Europe, 1100-1800*, Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions 195 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 14–15. Or, as Potter, *Angelology*, 110 states: the angelic hierarchy functioned “as a means of permanently saturating earth with heaven.”

18. *De Coelesti Hierarchia* (*The Celestial Hierarchy*) is a 5th-century CE text originally composed in Greek. Though the author writes under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite (a reference to the Athenian convert of the Apostle Paul mentioned in Acts 17:34), the true identity of the author remains unknown, leading recent scholarship to refer to the author as Pseudo-Dionysius. For more on the identity of the author, see Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers (London: Continuum, 1989), 1–2.

A Greek text and a Latin translation of the title are preserved in Jacques Paul Migne, ed., *Patrologia Graeca* 3:119–370a (Paris, Migne: 1857). A critical edition of the original Greek is available as “*De Coelesti Hierarchia*” in *Corpus Dionysiacum II: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita: De Coelesti Hierarchia, De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia, De Mystica Theologia, Epistulae*, eds. Günter Heil and Adolf M. Ritter; Patristische Textue und Studien 36 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991), 5–60. The work was originally translated into English by John Parker, trans., *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 2 vols. (London: James Parker and Co., 1897). A modern English translation of the work is available in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 143–192. For more on (Pseudo-)Dionysius’ angelology, see Dylan David Potter, *Angelology: Recovering Higher-Order Beings as Emblems of Transcendence, Immanence, and Imagination* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016), 64–109. For a study on an earlier theological engagement with (Pseudo-)Dionysius’ work reflected in John Scotus Eriugena’s commentary of *De Coelesti Hierarchia*, see Paul Rorem, *Eriugena’s Commentary on the Celestial Hierarchy*, Studies and Texts 150 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005).

19. Note Bonino, “Aristotélisme et angélogie chez Saint Thomas d’Aquin,” 32: “L’ange Gabriel se distingue de l’ange Raphaël, comme les chevaux se distinguent des lions, et non pas comme Bucéphale se distingue de Rossinante” [Personal translation: “The angel Gabriel is distinguished from the angel Raphael as horses are distinguished from lions, rather than as Bucephalus is distinguished from Rocinante”].

orders.²⁰ For Aquinas, spiritual beings are not merely passive instruments; rather, they have particular functions within creation that they consciously undertake.²¹

The potentiality of the spiritual beings' task and their existence as creatures allows for the possibility of sinful, fallen spiritual beings,²² and indeed, Aquinas assumes the reality of malevolent spiritual beings who followed Lucifer in rebellion against God.²³ Aquinas, echoing a received Augustinian tradition, understood the demonic realm to consist exclusively of fallen angels.²⁴ As fallen angels, the demonic realm reflects both the hierarchical ordering and the creaturely limitations of the benevolent, angelic realm.²⁵ However, they were understood in inverse relationship with the angelic hierarchies. Though they "were arranged in replication of the angelic hierarchies," the demonic beings, for Aquinas, are ordered antithetically away from God.²⁶ Aquinas assumes the reality of this spiritual creation, and it informs his interpretation of four passages within Ephesians that refer to "the powers": Ephesians 1:21, 2:2, 3:10, and 6:12.

Power and "the Powers" in Ephesians 1:21

In Aquinas' exposition of Ephesians, Paul's primary aim in writing the letter was to strengthen believers in their faith,²⁷ and the apostle's prayer in Ephesians 1:17–19a contributes to this overall theme by affirming the certainty of the believers'

20. Ruys, "Nine Angry Angels," 18.

21. Serge-Thomas Bonino, *Angels and Demons: A Catholic Introduction*, trans. Michael J. Miller (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 231.

22. Bonino, *Angels and Demons: A Catholic Introduction*, 198.

23. Tobias Hoffmann, "Theories of Angelic Sin from Aquinas to Ockham," in *A Companion to Angels in Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Tobias Hoffmann, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 35 (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 238. For an overview of Aquinas' position within the broader medieval understanding of demons, see Alain Boureau, *Satan the Heretic: The Birth of Demonology in the Medieval West*, trans. Teresa Lavender Fagan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 94–118.

24. David L. Bradnick, *Evil, Spirits, and Possession: An Emergentist Theology of the Demonic*, Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Studies 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 43.

25. Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 97. For an example of the limitations of demonic abilities, see Travis Dumsday, "Natural Evil, Evolution, and Scholastic Accounts of the Limits on Demonic Power," *Pro Ecclesia* 24 (2015): 76–81.

26. Ruys, "Nine Angry Angels," 27. Ruys continues: "Although they had become demons through their own attempted overthrow of divine order, so pervasive was the doctrine of order in the medieval world that they were nevertheless pictured as submitting to order in their new forms" (Ibid).

27. *Ad Ephesios*, prol.1. References to *ad Ephesios* will give chapter, lecture, and paragraph number according to the Marietti numbering (e.g., 1.7.56) corresponding with the numbering and translation used in The Aquinas Institute's Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Matthew L. Lamb and Fabian R. Larcher (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012). Though the Pauline authorship for Ephesians is now disputed, Aquinas assumes it is an authentic letter of the apostle Paul.

eschatological hope of glory.²⁸ Aquinas tells his students that Ephesians 1:19b–23 affirms the reality of this eschatological hope, which lies beyond the scope of temporal reality, by describing God’s power—that is, the ability to accomplish what he wills. For Thomas, this passage presents Christ’s resurrection and exaltation as the “form and exemplar” of the believers’ eschatological hope of “glory and exaltation.”²⁹ Believers can be assured of God’s ability to accomplish their eschatological hope because God’s power has been manifest in the resurrection and exaltation of Christ.

Based on Ephesians 1:20–23, Aquinas identifies three elements of God’s power expressed in Christ: (1) the transition from death to life, (2) the exaltation to the utmost heights of glory, and (3) the elevation to the greatest power.³⁰ He provides little exposition of Christ’s resurrection as stated in Ephesians 1:20a, except to note that it was accomplished according to the operation of the power that God the Father shares with Christ.³¹ Aquinas spends significantly more time, though, in discussing Christ’s exaltation to the “height of glory” and his elevation to the greatest power.³²

Aquinas finds in Ephesians 1:20b–21 three different perspectives from which to understand Christ’s exalted position: (1) its relation to God, (2) its relation to material creatures, and (3) its relation to spiritual creatures. Aquinas uses a thrifty 134 Latin words to interpret Ephesians 1:20, suggesting that the verse presents the exalted Christ being seated “at the right hand” in equality with God the Father and placed “in the heavenly places” in superiority to the material creation. Yet, Thomas devotes 877 Latin words, more than 6 times what he used to discuss the first two perspectives, to comment on Ephesians 1:21 and Christ’s relationship with spiritual creatures.

Aquinas suggests that Ephesians 1:21a refers to specific spiritual creatures over which Christ is exalted with the terms “Principality” (*principatum*), “Power” (*potestatem*), “Virtue” (*virtutem*), and “Dominion” (*dominationem*), according to the Latin Vulgate.³³ Aquinas interprets these disputed terms in Ephesians 1:21a as references to specific ranks of benevolent angelic beings. Aquinas, whom Karl

28. Aquinas’ exposition of Ephesians utilizes a medieval exegetical method known as *divisio textus* (“division of the text”). This method begins the interpretation of a text by identifying its central theme and then by creating divisions and subdivisions that help identify how every chapter and verse of the book contribute to the text’s central theme. For more on the *divisio textus* in Thomas’ Ephesians commentary, see Eric Covington, “*Divisio Textus* and the Interpretive Logic of Thomas Aquinas’ *Lectura Ad Ephesios*,” *Journal of the Bible and Its Reception* 4.1 (2017): 21–41.

29. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.56.

30. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.58.

31. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.59. This is not to suggest that the resurrection is unimportant for Aquinas, but, rather, that his focus in interpreting the passage is the demonstration of God’s power.

32. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.60.

33. There is a terminological difference between the Latin Vulgate, which Aquinas used, and the Greek text of NA²⁸: πάσης ἀρχῆς καὶ ἐξουσίας καὶ δυνάμεως καὶ κυριότητος (“every rule and authority and power and dominion”). For more on the Vulgate tradition of Aquinas, see Jean-Eric Stroobant de Saint-Eloy, “Avertissement,” in *Commentaire de l’épître Aux Éphésiens*, by Thomas Aquinas, Thomas d’Aquin Aux Éditions Du Cerf: Commentaires Scripturaires (Paris: Cerf, 2012), 47.

Barth called “probably the greatest angelogue of all Church history,”³⁴ tells his class, “To understand this, note that there are nine ranks of angels, of which the Apostle here mentions only the four middle ranks.”³⁵ Thomas identifies nine-tiers of angelic beings, which are organized around three hierarchies each composed of three different ranks of angelic beings, and he uses this verse as an opportunity to discuss in some detail his understanding of the benevolent spiritual beings he sees referenced in Ephesians 1:21a.

“Since everything that happens among creatures occurs with the assistance of angels,” Thomas explains, the three ranks of angelic beings have functions associated with “the threefold way of conceiving the structure of reality.”³⁶ The highest tier operates according to reality “as it is present in the first cause of everything, namely in God,” and, thus, the function of the highest three ranks is to facilitate “the governance of reality in relation to God.”³⁷ The highest tier of angelic beings is composed of three ranks of angelic beings: Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones.³⁸ The order of the ranks within the first hierarchy is agreed by “all the doctors,”³⁹ however, Aquinas reminds his class, none of the ranks of this highest tier are referenced in the text of Ephesians 1:21.

The middle tier of the angelic hierarchy operates according to the nature of reality “as it is in the universal causes,” and so the three angelic ranks that compose this tier are named and given functions “associated with power since the universal causes are present in the lower and individual things by their power and strength.”⁴⁰ Within the middle tier, the initial rank of angelic beings are the Dominions who are tasked with giving “direction by their commands” and, thus, give orders to the angelic ranks subordinate to them.⁴¹ The second rank of the middle hierarchy, the Virtues are tasked with disposing “any impediments to the fulfillment of these commands” and, thus, they are said to “facilitate the execution of the commands.”⁴² The third

34. CD III/3: 391. [Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. III.3: The Doctrine of Creation §50–51 of *Study Edition* 18 (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 102.] It should be noted, though, that Barth does go on to indicate that Thomas’ position “has nothing whatever to do with the knowledge of the *veritas catholicae fide* [“true catholic faith”], or with attention and fidelity to the biblical witness of revelation.”

35. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.61.

36. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62.

37. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62.

38. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62: “The seraphim are so called because they are burning with love and through it are united to God. The cherubim are, as it were, radiant inasmuch as they possess a supereminent knowledge of divine mysteries. The thrones are so termed inasmuch as in them God carries out his judgments.”

39. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.61. “Doctors” refers to those who received the *licentia docendi*—the ultimate qualification and license to teach in the university system. According to Torrell, *The Person and His Work*, 50, Aquinas received his license to teach in Paris in 1256.

40. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62.

41. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62.

42. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62.

rank of the middle hierarchy, the Powers “must arrange how others will carry out the commands.”⁴³

On the third tier of the hierarchy “devolves the guidance of things in relation to individual causes,” and the three ranks of angelic beings are given names according to their particular functions.⁴⁴ The highest rank of the third tier, the Principalities “preside over each of the provinces” of the earth.⁴⁵ The middle rank, the Archangels, are tasked with “the salvation and utility of greater personages”—that is, humans of higher authority in the world. Finally, the lowest rank, the Angels “carry out what pertains to the salvation of individual persons.”⁴⁶

In concluding his comments on the formation of the angelic hierarchy, Aquinas notes the central organizing point of the entire angelic hierarchy: “Christ is above all of these ranks.”⁴⁷ Not only is Christ’s exaltation over the angelic ranks—the preeminent exemplar of God’s power—the culminating feature of Aquinas’ discussion of the angelic hierarchy, it is the reason, in Thomas’ exposition, that Ephesians 1:21 mentions four of the angelic ranks in ascending order (*principality, power, virtue, and dominion*) rather than listing all nine ranks. Aquinas explains that Ephesians 1:21a describes Christ’s exaltation position above specific ranks of benevolent spiritual beings who are directly responsible for the divine administration of that which occurs on the earth.⁴⁸

For Thomas, this emphasis on the divine power expressed through Christ’s resurrection and exaltation is affirmed by the phrase “and above every name that is named” in Ephesians 1:21b. He interprets this phrase as a general summation of Christ’s exaltation “above every substance which can be known and comprehended

43. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62.

44. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62.

45. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62.

46. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.62. In the immediately preceding section (*ad Ephesios* 1.7.61), Thomas notes that there is some disagreement between the correct ordering of angelic ranks in the middle and lower hierarchies. The cause of the division, Thomas tells his students, is because Dionysius favors the hierarchical ordering that follows the text of Ephesians 1:21, whereas a hierarchical arrangement proposed by Pope Gregory I in *Homilia 34 in Evangelia* Gregory more closely follows the text of Colossians 1:16, which indicates that in Christ all things were created, whether “thrones or dominions or rulers or powers.” Aquinas further notes that he will reserve discussion of Gregory’s classification until the (forthcoming, it would seem) lectures on Colossians, but to guide his interpretation of Ephesians 1:21, Thomas says, “we will follow Dionysius’s approach since it accords with the text at hand.” Aquinas’ comments here point to the primary significance that the scriptural text as primary authority continued to exercise in Aquinas’ commentaries. This stands in stark contrast to Barth’s criticism of Aquinas’s angelology, noted above in n. 34, as having nothing to do with the biblical witness. Aquinas’ interpretive fidelity to the biblical texts may be questioned depending on how one interprets this passage, but he certainly cannot be critiqued for not paying attention to scripture.

47. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.63.

48. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.63: “The Apostle only makes a special mention of four of them. The reason is that the names of these four ranks are given them for their dignity, and since he is dealing with the dignity of Christ, he names them especially to show that Christ surpasses all created dignity.”

by a name.”⁴⁹ This includes everything in the cosmos—physical and spiritual—except for the “substance of divinity,” which alone “can neither be contained nor designated by a name.”⁵⁰ Finally, Ephesians 1:21 includes the phrase “not only in this world but also in that which is to come” to affirm, according to Aquinas, that even realities that may occur in the future, and so cannot be comprehended or named in the present, are subject to Christ.⁵¹

Aquinas ultimately ties Christ’s exalted position over all creation with the full expression of divine power based on his interpretation of Ephesians 1:22a: “and he has subjected all things under his feet . . .” For Thomas, this phrase “discusses the power of Christ with respect to the whole of creation.”⁵² Specifically, Aquinas maintains, this verse indicates that in his resurrected and exalted position over creation, Christ exercises “universal power since God the Father *has subjected all things under his feet*.”⁵³ Christ exercises the complete power of God the Father as the one to whom all of creation is subject.

This affirmation causes Aquinas to reflect on the way in which all things are subjected to Christ, and in his exposition, a hint of Aquinas’ understanding of the reality of malevolent spiritual beings appears. Aquinas maintains that things may be subject to Christ’s power in two ways: voluntarily or involuntarily.⁵⁴ Some creatures are subject to Christ’s divine power willingly “as to their Savior.”⁵⁵ Aquinas describes those who willingly submit to Christ’s power as “the just who fulfill God’s will in the present life.”⁵⁶ Other creatures, though, are subject to Christ’s power “unwillingly, as to their judge.”⁵⁷ Aquinas identifies these unwilling creatures as “the

49. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.64.

50. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.64.

51. *Ad Ephesios* 1.7.64.

52. *Ad Ephesios* 1.8.65.

53. *Ad Ephesios* 1.8.66. Emphasis original indicating scriptural quotation. The importance of Christ’s resurrection for Thomas’ understanding of his exaltation and power is indicated in an interesting metaphorical interpretation of “under his feet”: “By the feet the lowest part of the body is understood, and by the head the highest. Although the humanity and divinity should not be thought of as parts of Christ, nonetheless the divinity is preeminent in Christ and may be understood as his head—the *head of Christ is God* (1 Cor 11:3). The humanity is lower and may be taken as the feet—*let us worship at his footstool* (Ps 132:7). The meaning of this passage is then that the Father has not only subjected all of creation to Christ as he is God, to whom everything is subject from eternity, but also to his humanity.”

54. *Ad Ephesios* 1.8.67. Aquinas maintains that Origen misunderstood these two different ways of subjection, and that this misunderstanding “occasioned an error on his part” when Origen contended that “the demons and damned will be saved at some time since they are subjected under Christ’s feet.” Aquinas appeals to Jesus’ proclamation of judgment in Matthew 25:31–46 as scriptural precedent that illustrates the “error” of Origen’s universal interpretation. Aquinas maintains that though all things—including “the demons and damned”—are subject to Christ’s power, they are not subject to it in the same salvific way.

55. *Ad Ephesios* 1.8.67.

56. *Ad Ephesios* 1.8.67.

57. *Ad Ephesios* 1.8.67.

wicked”; however, Aquinas maintains that Christ’s will is still accomplished (that is, Christ’s power is affirmed) in the midst of their unwilling subjection. Though he briefly introduces the reality of creatures both physical (*damnati* – “the damned”) and spiritual (*daemones* – “the demons”) who may be opposed to Christ’s power, the overall focus of Aquinas’ exposition of Ephesians 1:20–22 is on Christ’s unrivaled exaltation above every element of creation (both spiritual and physical) and the ultimate divine power that he exercises. Even those creatures that may oppose Christ’s reign are subject to the divine power so that Christ’s will is accomplished among both those who willingly and unwillingly are subject to his power.

Power and “the Powers” in Ephesians 2:2

Ephesians 2:1–3 continues the letter’s emphasis on God’s resurrection power exhibited through Christ, which “restored us to the life of grace from the death of sin”⁵⁸ by focusing on “the need for such a blessing...where he describes so well their sin.”⁵⁹ In a characteristically meticulous division, Aquinas creates two further subdivisions within the passage: Ephesians 2:1–2 discuss “the state of sin with reference to the pagans” and Ephesians 2:3 discusses the state of sin “with reference to the Jews.”⁶⁰

Ephesians 2:1, in Aquinas’ interpretation identifies the consequence of the Gentiles’ sin “with the worst type of death, spiritual death,”⁶¹ while Ephesians 2:2–3 describes a “twofold cause of their sin.”⁶² Aquinas identifies the first cause of the Gentiles’ sin in Ephesians 2:2a—which describes them as walking “according to the course of this world”—as an alluring “by mundane matters into a worldly life.”⁶³ In Aquinas’ exposition, an individual’s attraction to the mundane, rather than the celestial, is the first cause of sin. That is, the initial cause of sin is the individual’s own culpability in misplacing their focus and thus ordering their actions away from God.

Aquinas identifies the second cause of sin in his reading of Ephesians 2:2b: “...following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient.” Aquinas indicates that this phrase refers to the “demons whom they served,” intriguingly inferring the presence of a plurality of malevolent spiritual beings (the *daemones*) even though Ephesians 2:2 refers to a singular “ruler” (according to Aquinas’ Vulgate: *principem potestatis aeris* – “prince of the power of the air”). This demonic cause of sin is only applicable with reference to Gentiles. Thomas explains, “The Apostle had designated two causes when dealing with the sin of the gentiles, one on the side of the world and the other on that of the demons

58. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.73.

59. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.74.

60. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.72.

61. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.74

62. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.75.

63. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.75.

whom they worshiped. The Jews were like the gentiles in their sinful condition in regard to the first cause, but not the second.”⁶⁴ Thus, for Aquinas, while malevolent spiritual beings have some role in the cause of sin, it is secondary and only applicable to Gentiles. Aquinas makes this distinction because he equates the “demons whom they served” specifically with the practice of idolatry by citing *Wisdom* 14:27: “The worship of abominable idols is the beginning and cause and end of all evil.” Aquinas, thus, associates this demonic cause of sin with idolatry, which is misplaced worship of God.

Aquinas indicates that Ephesians 2:2b goes on to detail three features of the demonic cause of sin: (1) their strength, (2) their location, and (3) their activity. Of the three aspects of the demonic cause of sin, Aquinas is particularly interested in discussing their strength, expressed by the biblical description of the malevolent being as a prince “of power.” Aquinas draws a strict distinction between God’s power and the power of this malevolent prince. This “prince” does not have the same power as God, whose power is a natural component of his identity as Lord and Creator. Rather, Aquinas notes that the “power” of this “prince” is a “power” that has been given him through the sin of humanity. Aquinas states, “He exerts a power, not by the fact that he has it naturally, since he is neither the lord nor creator by nature, but to the degree that he dominates over men who subject themselves to him by sinning.”⁶⁵ Aquinas suggests that the only “power” this prince is able to exert has been given him by the misplaced, sinful activities of humanity. In human sin, this prince is given some small demonstration of power; the only power the prince has to accomplish anything, according to Aquinas, is temporarily given, not naturally held.

Similarly, when discussing the “activity” of the malevolent spiritual beings—indicated by the biblical phrase “that now works on the children of despair”—Aquinas highlights the limited efficacy of the malevolent prince’s power. Aquinas maintains that it is only among these children of despair that the “prince of the power of this air” is able to express any power to “freely operate” and “lead to whatever he wills.”⁶⁶ Aquinas contrasts the prince’s ability to freely operate among the children of despair with his limited power toward anyone else.⁶⁷ In contrast, those “who sin from ignorance or weakness” are not to be despaired because the prince does not have the ability—the power—to work among them according to his desire.⁶⁸ For Aquinas, a defining feature of this malevolent “prince of power” is his distinct lack of free, natural power to accomplish his own will. Rather, any power he is able to exercise

64. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.80.

65. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.76.

66. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.78.

67. At *ad Ephesios* 2.1.78, Aquinas suggests that the “children of despair” may refer either to “those who reject the fruit of Christ’s passion,” “those who have no faith in eternal realities nor hope in salvation through Christ” or, alternatively, to “those of whom we should despair because they sin out of malice.”

68. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.78.

Eric Covington: *Power and the “Powers” in Thomas Aquinas’ Lectura ad Ephesios* is given him from misplaced homage and action that should have appropriately be given to God.

While Aquinas’ primary interest in describing the strength and activity of the demonic cause of sin is to identify its limitations and inferiority, his comments concerning the location of the demonic cause of sin—which he reads in the biblical phrase “of the air”—provides the most detailed glimpse into his understanding of the plurality of malevolent spiritual beings. Aquinas’ focus is still on the limited “power” exercised by the prince; he indicates that the phrase “of this air” demonstrates that the prince only exercises power “in this darksome atmosphere” (*aere caliginoso*). This statement then leads Thomas into a discussion of which particular demons have residence in the “air,” and his answer evidences a hierarchical conception of the ordering of malevolent spiritual beings that approximates the nine-tiered hierarchy of benevolent spiritual beings he identified in Ephesians 1:21.

Aquinas notes that “two opinions exist among the doctors” concerning the hierarchical identification of these malevolent spiritual beings—which he further identifies as “demons who had fallen”—exercising limited power in the “air.”⁶⁹ The first opinion, which Thomas associates with John Damascene,⁷⁰ holds that these demons of the air refer to fallen angels of the lower ranks whose original charge had been over “the terrestrial order,” suggesting that “*of this air* is interpreted that they were created to preside over this atmosphere.”⁷¹ Thus, the interpretation of this passage associated with John Damascene holds that a specific order of the demonic hierarchy—those originally created to preside over the terrestrial order of the “air”—are in view here. The second opinion, which Aquinas thinks more likely with reference to Jude 1:6, is that the “powers of this air” refers to the fallen angels “from the highest ranks” who are residing in the “air” as their place of punishment until “the day of judgment.”⁷² These demonic forces have some ability to “test men”

69. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.77.

70. Matthew Lamb, ed., *Commentary on Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1966), 279n.44 suggests that Aquinas is here referring to John Damascene’s discussion of demons in *De Fide Orthodoxa* II.4, though it should be noted that this passage does not reference Ephesians 2 or a discernable hierarchical order associated with the demons. Damascene does explicitly mention in this chapter, though, the limited power of the demons: “And so, all evil and the impure passions have been conceived by them and they have been permitted to visit attacks upon man. But they are unable to force anyone, for it is in our power either to accept the visitation or not” [John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith in Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr., Fathers of the Church 37 (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1958), 210].

71. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.77.

72. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.77. Aquinas’ exposition of this section ends with a linguistic defense of his interpretation of Eph 2:2 as a plurality of malevolent spiritual beings, indicating a tension between his interpretation and the singular referent of the biblical text: “Observe also how one reading has *of the spirit* which, as a genitive singular, stands for the plural *of the spirits*. Another reading gives *spirit* in the accusative case; as if to say: *according to the prince spirit*, that is, the prince who is a spirit.”

before the final day of judgment;⁷³ however, even their limited activities result in the furthering of God's ordained order: Aquinas maintains the demons are sent by God "to try men, by which the good would be prepared for glory and the wicked for eternal death."⁷⁴

Thomas' interpretation assumes a plurality of malevolent spiritual beings that apparently have a corresponding, though inverse, hierarchical order to the benevolent spiritual beings with various tiers and strata. Even here, though, when Aquinas arguably extends the biblical text's discussion of a singular malevolent entity to include a plurality, the emphasis remains on the appropriate hierarchical subordination to the ultimate divine power expressed in Christ. The malevolent spiritual beings in Ephesians 2:2 are already in a place of punishment awaiting their final sentence on the day of judgment when they will be "thrust back into hell," and they play a divinely mandated role in preparing humans for their ultimate end.⁷⁵

Power and "the Powers" in Ephesians 3:10

Aquinas interprets Ephesians 3 to contribute to the letter's ultimate purpose of strengthening the church by discussing the divine blessings given specifically to the apostolic author himself.⁷⁶ Ephesians 3:10–12, according to Aquinas, describes the great worth of the content of Paul's apostolic mission: the revelation of God's manifold wisdom.⁷⁷ Aquinas identifies the "principalities and powers in heavenly powers" of Ephesians 3:10 as the ones to whom the revelation is directed. Aquinas indicates that these "principalities and powers" are explicitly stated to be "in heavenly places" since "there are also princes and potentates on earth."⁷⁸ Returning to the assumed hierarchical order of supernatural beings already evident in his discussions of Ephesians 1:21 and Ephesians 2:2, Aquinas identifies these heavenly "principalities and powers" as two ranks of "the holy angels by whom the saints are directed and protected."⁷⁹ As he did in Ephesians 1:21, Aquinas interprets the "principalities and powers" of Ephesians 3:10 with specific benevolent angelic orders who play particular roles in God's administration of the created order.

The identification of the "principalities and powers" as benevolent spiritual beings, though, "presents no small problem" and raises a question that Aquinas spends the rest of his third lecture on Ephesians 3 addressing: how and why are

73. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.77.

74. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.77.

75. *Ad Ephesios* 2.1.77.

76. *Ad Ephesios* 3.1.133.

77. *Ad Ephesios* 3.3.152. This worth (*dignitas*) consists "in the revelation of great realities to eminent persons."

78. *Ad Ephesios* 3.3.158.

79. *Ad Ephesios* 3.3.159.

angelic beings taught God’s wisdom by the church?⁸⁰ Aquinas bases his response in large part on the limited abilities of the angelic realms in comparison with divine knowledge. For Aquinas, angels are created beings and thus do not share in the complete divine knowledge of future events or of the “inner thoughts of the human heart, except by inference in the same way that people are capable of doing.”⁸¹ Their knowledge of God’s grace is partial and is predicated on their order within the angelic hierarchy. Even those of the highest ranks only know something of God’s “intelligible patterns of the mysteries of grace which transcend the whole of creation . . . as they unfold in their effects.”⁸² To further explain how this creaturely limitation of spiritual beings answers the difficulty of the passage, Aquinas uses the metaphor of an architect building a house: “This is like . . . the concept of a house to be built, in the mind of an architect. As long as it remains in his mind it can be known to no one—except God who alone penetrates into human souls. However, once the concepts are realized externally in the construction, in the house after it is built, anyone can learn from the building what previously was concealed in the architect’s mind.”⁸³ Ultimately, Aquinas can conclude from Ephesians 3:10 that the angelic hierarchy “know the mysteries previously hidden in the divine mind as they unfold in the apostles themselves.”⁸⁴

Aquinas’ interpretation of the “powers” in Ephesians 3:10 echoes important elements of his interpretation of these terms in Ephesians 1:21 and Ephesians 2:2. His comments indicate the assumption of a hierarchical order of spiritual beings ordered to God with specific functions to fulfill within the created order. Yet, Thomas’ interpretation also emphasizes the limitations of the power of these spiritual beings in relationship to God.

Power and “the Powers” in Ephesians 6:12

Aquinas summarizes Ephesians 4:1—6:9 as Paul’s description of “general and particular instructions aimed at destroying the old man of sin and encouraging the

80. *Ad Ephesios* 3.3.160. Indeed, modern commentators, like Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians*, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 322–23, have similarly wrestled with the question of what purpose making known God’s wisdom to “friendly spiritual beings” would serve in this passage.

81. Cameron, *Enchanted Europe*, 94–95.

82. *Ad Ephesios* 3.3.160.

83. *Ad Ephesios* 3.3.160.

84. *Ad Ephesios* 3.3.160. Interestingly, this conclusion concerning Ephesians 3:10 leads Aquinas to address a further hypothetical question in *ad Ephesios* 3.3.162 concerning the limits of angelic knowledge concerning the “mystery of the Incarnation.” Aquinas details two different approaches to the question, one by Peter Lombard and the other by (Pseudo-)Dionysius, and expresses his preference for Dionysius’ perspective that both the higher and the lower angelic hierarchies “were ignorant of some aspects of the mystery and knew others.”

newness of grace.”⁸⁵ But in the climactic section of Ephesians 6:10–17, Aquinas suggests, the letter’s attention turns to speak “of the power by which we must carry out these precepts, for we must trust in divine assistance.”⁸⁶ Aquinas identifies the key theme of this section as the necessity of trusting in divine power for assistance in accomplishing the new life lived in response to grace. In Aquinas’ interpretation of this passage, Ephesians 6:10–11 contains this primary admonition, and Ephesians 6:12 explains it in further detail.⁸⁷ That is, for Aquinas, the reference to the “powers” in Ephesians 6:12 must be understood as a further explanation of divine power.

Aquinas begins by detailing two necessary conditions for someone to trust another: “One is that the person is charged with protecting him; and the other reason is that he is strong and prepared to defend him.”⁸⁸ Aquinas maintains that these two necessary conditions are realized in God’s relationship with humans. Thomas cites 1 Peter 5:7 as proof of God’s care for humanity before affirming that God is powerful to provide assistance.

The affirmation of God’s power leads Aquinas to address two hypothetical misunderstandings of a life lived in response to God’s power. Aquinas articulates the first potential misunderstanding of God’s power: “Someone might say: if God is powerful and wills to protect us, we ought to be unconcerned.”⁸⁹ However, in response to this, Thomas maintains that Ephesians 6:11, and the admonition to “put on the armor of God” indicates that such a statement misconstrues the true nature of the life lived under God’s power. Aquinas likens one who is “unconcerned” to an unarmed man who goes into a battle: “no matter how much the king protected him,” Aquinas maintains, “he would still be in danger.”⁹⁰ Rather, as Ephesians 6:11 indicates, God has given his people armor, which for Aquinas are “gifts and virtues” that “protect man from vices.”⁹¹ Aquinas understands the nature of the malevolent beings’ attacks to consist of temptations to vices, and the armor which God provides to protect from these temptations consists of divine gifts and virtues.

The second hypothetical misunderstanding of a lived response to God’s power is presented in a form more familiar from Aquinas’ more well-known work, the *Summa Theologiae*. Aquinas articulates a potential objection (*sed contra*) before offering a personal response (*respondeo*): “An objection: the Lord is so powerful a king that no one can attack him. I reply. This is true concerning violence; yet the devil

85. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.351.

86. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.351. Here, the Latin term translated as “power” is *virtus* rather than *potestas*. In the next section of his lecture, Aquinas further details the relationship between these two terms: *virtus* and *potestas* are identical in God since “virtue is the ultimate of power, and as it were the perfection of power.”

87. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.351.

88. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.352.

89. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.353.

90. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.353.

91. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.353.

does attack him, not in himself, but in his members through deceit and illusions.”⁹² Aquinas illuminates a significant truth in this conjectural objection: the forces aligned with the malevolent spiritual hierarchy are unable to seriously mount a “violent” counter-attack against God’s power. The power of the malevolent forces is incapable of directly challenging God’s power. However, Thomas further maintains, there are still challenges that come from these forces that attempt to use deceit and trickery to ensnare people in vices and rebellion against God’s created order. It is precisely this challenge that Ephesians 6:12 explains in further detail for Thomas. Aquinas sees three components expressed in Ephesians 6:12–20: (1) Ephesians 6:12 describes the “snares of the enemies,” (2) Ephesians 6:13–17 describes “what arms should be taken up,” and (3) Ephesians 6:18–20 concludes describing “the confidence which must be had in Christ.”⁹³ Here, again, Aquinas roots his discussion in the need for confidence in God’s power in light of the reality of the deceitful attacks of the enemy.

The reason that Ephesians 6:12 describes the “snares of the enemies” is to demonstrate the seriousness of the opponent. Aquinas begins his exposition of the passage suggesting that an ineffective enemy does not give much reason “to be on one’s guard,” however, “when he is strong (*potens*), evil (*callidus*),⁹⁴ and shrewd (*timendus*), then he ought to be dreaded.”⁹⁵ Ephesians 6:12 reminds its readers that “these latter three are found in the devil.”⁹⁶ Interestingly, though, in his exposition of this verse, Aquinas does not explicitly identify *potens* (“power”/“strength”) as a characteristic of the devil; rather, the biblical phrase “our wrestling is not against flesh and blood” from Ephesians 6:12 demonstrates, for Aquinas, that “he is not weak” (*non est debilis*).⁹⁷ Aquinas’ makes a clear distinction in his use of this negated characteristic between the devil who is “not weak” and God, who is truly “powerful.”

Aquinas further indicates that the biblical phrase “flesh and blood” refers to “sins of the flesh,” which raises a tension for Thomas: such a statement “seems to be false no matter how it is understood” based on other verses like Galatians 5:17 (“for the flesh lusts against the spirit”).⁹⁸ Against this potential objection, Aquinas has two responses. First, one can read the verse as though it rhetorically assumes the word “only,” so that it presents the idea that our wrestling is “not only against flesh and blood without it also being against the devil.”⁹⁹ The second response is that the focus of this biblical phrase (“our wrestling is not against flesh and blood”) is on the

92. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.353.

93. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.354.

94. Though Thomas does not identify the connection explicitly in his comments on the passage, *callidus* is the term used in the Vulgate translation of Genesis 3:1 to describe the serpent as “more crafty” than anything else in creation.

95. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.355.

96. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.355.

97. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.355.

98. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.355.

99. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.355.

ultimate agent of the action rather than the instrument. So, then, for Aquinas, this suggests that “when flesh and blood attack us, it is not of themselves principally but from a higher moving force, namely, from the devil.”¹⁰⁰ Aquinas, then, sees the devil as the principle agent of “sins of the flesh.” Through deceit and illusion, the evil spiritual forces attempt to draw humans away from a life properly ordered to God through Christ into carnal vices.

This, then, leads to Aquinas’ next discussion of “the devil’s power” (*potentia*) in the biblical phrase, “against principalities and powers . . . of this darkness.”¹⁰¹ Echoing his exposition of the “ruler of the power of the air” from Ephesians 2:2, Aquinas focuses on a singular “prince of the world” (*princeps mundi*) before further describing the plurality of malevolent spiritual beings indicated by the “principalities and powers.” Aquinas suggests that the devil is considered the “prince of the world” either because “the worldly minded imitate him” or because he is the primary leader of the malevolent spiritual beings.¹⁰² Whereas Aquinas focused on a plurality of malevolent spiritual beings in his exposition of the singular “ruler” in Ephesians 2:2, here in Ephesians 6:12, he identifies the significance of a singular “prince” in the plural references to the principalities and powers. The two apparently cannot be separated in Thomas’ understanding of the organization of the malevolent spiritual beings.

As he turns to further describe the “principalities and powers of this darkness,” Thomas again assumes a tiered hierarchy of malevolent spiritual beings that inversely parallels that of the benevolent spiritual beings. The “principalities and powers of this darkness” in Ephesians 6:12 represent, for Aquinas, two tiers of demonic spiritual beings who have a function that directly inverses the role of the benevolent “principalities and powers.” Whereas the benevolent “principalities” were to direct and enjoin humanity to the fulfillment of the ultimate good, the malevolent “principalities” in view here in Ephesians 6:12 “incite others to rebel against God.”¹⁰³ And whereas the benevolent tier of “powers” were tasked with protecting humanity, the inverse malevolent tier of “powers” “have the power to punish those who are subjected to them.”¹⁰⁴ Aquinas’ interpretation of this passage indicates an understanding that all “sins of the flesh” are directly related to the ultimate agency of evil, which is primarily expressed as a turning away from a proper ordering to God. These forces of evil are evident throughout creation in an inverse parallel to the angelic hierarchy, whose function is to connect creation with the divine will.

Aquinas concludes his discussion of this passage with a lecture that describes the spiritual armor of Ephesians 6:13–17 as a response to the deceits and illusions

100. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.355.

101. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.356.

102. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.356.

103. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.356.

104. *Ad Ephesios* 6.3.356.

with which the malevolent spiritual forces attack. Aquinas identifies the elements of the spiritual armor as elements of moral and theological virtues paralleling the three-fold function of martial weaponry: some are “meant to cover one; others are to protect him; and still others are for fighting.”¹⁰⁵ The virtues associated with covering and protecting are designed to help the individual “check carnal desires” and to quench “present and transitory temptations with the eternal and spiritual blessings promised in Holy Scripture.”¹⁰⁶ So, Aquinas can suggest, “We conquer the earthly powers by the moral virtues.”¹⁰⁷ Finally, in Ephesians 6:17, the weaponry for fighting is expressed by “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” For Aquinas, it is an assault on “the demons themselves” when the word of God, “penetrating into the hearts of sinners, thrusts out the chaos of sins and demons.”¹⁰⁸ Ultimately, for Aquinas, this passage demonstrates how individuals are able to respond to the deceits and illusions of the malevolent spiritual forces that try to turn others away from God. It is by means of “a confirmation and strengthening in the power of God” that one is able to resist temptation by means of the moral and theological virtues.¹⁰⁹ It is through God’s ultimate power that the deceits of the “powers” come to naught.

Conclusion: Power and “the Powers” in Thomas Aquinas’ *Lectura ad Ephesios*

Throughout his lectures on Ephesians, Thomas Aquinas is deftly aware of the significance that the letter places on divine power. Aquinas’ understanding of *power* is infused with an Aristotelian sense and based on a theological understanding of God’s perfection. Aquinas’ comments concerning power continually reflect his understanding that God is the only being that truly expresses a full, active power—that is, the ability to accomplish that which He wills. Aquinas is particularly concerned with explicating how Ephesians demonstrates that Christ’s resurrection and exaltation are the ultimate representation of God’s ultimate power and how that representation of God’s power guarantees the eschatological hope of the believers and contributes to the edification of the Church. The four passages in which Ephesians discusses “the powers” (Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12) give Aquinas opportunity to discuss the implications of God’s power expressed through Christ in relation to an assumed reality of spiritual beings. Aquinas’ concern, in his comments on each of these passages, is to explicate the unrivaled power of God within the order of all material and spiritual creation.

105. *Ad Ephesios* 6.4.361.

106. *Ad Ephesios* 6.4.364–365.

107. *Ad Ephesios* 6.4.365. I have slightly modified the translation here, which translates *potesates terrenas* as “powers of darkness” to more closely reflect Aquinas’ Latin.

108. *Ad Ephesios* 6.4.367.

109. *Ad Ephesios* 6.5.368.

Aquinas equates the spiritual beings referenced throughout Ephesians as references to hierarchies of both benevolent and malevolent spiritual beings. He sees Ephesians 1:21 and 3:10 referring to the angelic hierarchy while Ephesians 2:2 and 6:12 refer to the demonic hierarchy. A demonic realm is an assumed part of creation for Aquinas; they are always portrayed in direct contrast to the ultimate divine power expressed in Christ. The only power the malevolent “powers” can exercise is given through sin, not naturally held. For Thomas, sin, particularly understood as idolatry, misattributes that which is rightfully God’s to something else. Any power these malevolent spiritual “powers” may exercise comes from this misappropriation.

By interpreting the “powers” in Ephesians as a reference to the hierarchy of benevolent and malevolent spiritual beings, Aquinas identifies in Ephesians an emphasis that Christ stands as the foundational ordering power of every element of creation. Christ is exalted as the form and exemplar of God’s power, and all things (material and immaterial, benevolent and malevolent) are ordered through him to God. For Aquinas, this same divine power, manifest in Christ’s resurrection and exaltation, will accomplish believers’ eschatological glorification. For Aquinas, believers’ eschatological hope is predicated on God’s power—his ability to accomplish his will, and, throughout his *lectura ad Ephesios*, he describes how Ephesians demonstrates the reality of God’s power to strengthen believers’ faith. Believers can stand firm in their faith and their eschatological hope because God is powerful to accomplish that which God wills. Ultimately, then, for Aquinas, the primary significance of Ephesians’ description of Christ’s exaltation over the “powers” is to demonstrate God’s unrivaled power as Creator and Lord—a power that is exemplarily evident in Christ’s resurrection and exaltation.