Chapter III

Recovering the Significance of Aquinas's Imaginative Angelology

INTRODUCTION

Pressing onward at this point, both chronologically and thematically, we shall now explore an uncharted region of Thomas Aquinas's angelology. Assessments of his angelology are too often based upon the *Summa Theologiae*, leading many to characterize his adaptation as overtly philosophical, rather than biblical and exegetical. However, his commentaries on Scripture, most of which are still in Latin, reveal imaginative, Christocentric, and scriptural dimensions of his angelology. While these elements are present in the *Summa Theologiae*, it is in the less formal setting of Aquinas's commentaries that the angel emerges from the text to become compatible with the creation, a hermeneutical device he uses to indicate the cosmos is thick with supernatural presence. As with Old Testament writers and pseudo-Denys, Aquinas was not merely reconstructing old truths about angels, but inventing new patterns of use. His flexible interpretation of higher-order beings transforms the planet into a place that ultimately points to God by bringing him closer to the perceptible world. Picking up where Denys left off, Aquinas pushes the semantic range of the word "angel" as a means of permanently saturating earth with heaven, rather than restricting angels to liturgical roles. His approach provides a template for imagination in modern angelology as

well, and in the final chapter, I illustrate how Aquinas's playful contributions correct the disenchanted and dour world of pure environmentalism.

Although a number of books written about Aquinas in the last century cover the historical, ideological, and theological aspects of his life and teaching, few of them mention his angelology. One explanation for this gap is that much of the emphasis within Thomistic scholarship has been placed upon producing reliable Latin copies of his oeuvre. Formed in 1880 in response to Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni patris*, the Leonine Commission accepted the monumental task of creating critical versions of Aquinas's works from extant medieval manuscripts. Rather than producing English translations of his writings, this international, and exclusively Dominican, endeavor aims to provide the academy with authoritative editions of the originals. Valuable though this may be, one is still left wanting when it comes to easily-accessible versions of Aquinas's angelology; in fact, while the papal imperative also spurred a renewed interest in Aquinas among Catholic scholars, only J. D. Collins—in his 1947 dissertation *The Thomistic Philosophy of the Angels*—has produced a thorough evaluation of the Angelic Doctor's angelology.[1] Collins work is far from exhaustive, however, because he fails to interact with the commentaries on Scripture.

During the middle of the last century, scholars like Etienne Gilson and Ludwig Ott addressed general philosophical components of Scholastic angelology.[2] However, they skipped the theological use of angels in Aquinas's commentaries in order to focus upon issues like the different metaphysical assumptions in Aquinas's and Bonaventure's angelology.[3] Moreover, post-Vatican II authors have attempted little with the topic of angels in general—the glosses of McBrien and Rahner being among the exceptions.[4] More recently, Steven Chase emphasized the role of angels in mediaeval spirituality (though he does not deal with Aquinas

1. Collins, *The Thomistic Philosophy of the Angels*.

2. Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 160 ff.; Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, 114–21.

3. Perhaps the most significant disagreement between Aquinas and Bonaventure on this issue had to do with their application of Aristotle's hylomorphism to angelology. Bonaventure felt that since God is the only pure spirit, all other things, including angels, must be regarded as composite beings composed of form and matter. Aquinas argued that since angels are purely intellectual beings, like God, they are purely spiritual.

4. McBrien, *Catholicism*, 255–56. Rahner, "Angels," 4–13.

specifically).[5] A number of essays compiled in *Angels in Medieval Philosophical Inquiry* highlight the ubiquitous function of angels in cosmology, epistemology, ethics, and theology during Aquinas's era.[6]

Like the tiny network of literature that addresses the topic of Aquinas's angelology, only recently has there been an effort to evaluate his biblical commentaries. Several years ago *Aquinas on Scripture*, and its predecessor, *Aquinas on Doctrine*, aimed to introduce readers to his views on *sacra Scriptura* and s*acra doctrina*, respectively.[7] Eleonore Stump has dedicated a chapter to his biblical commentary in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas* as well.[8] The problem, again, is that none of these volumes addresses the matter of angels within Aquinas's biblical commentaries.[9] Thus the present chapter is directly influenced by this gap in the literature and seeks to fill the lacuna in a manner that may inspire further research into Aquinas's angelology. By illustrating his approach to angels within his commentaries on Scripture, I also hope to undermine, albeit indirectly, any misgivings about the theological convictions that animated Thomas and his angelology.

AQUINAS IN HIS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Numerous theologians had already advanced a variety of theories regarding the doctrine of angelology by the time Aquinas arrived on the scene during the mid-thirteenth century. The rabbinical authors of mystical Hekhalot literature forged a highly allegorical approach to angels by attempting to decipher the deeper significance of the composite beings found in Ezekiel 1 and elsewhere.[10] Earlier theologians like Origen,

5. Chase, *Angelic Spirituality*.

6. Iribarren and Lenz, *Angels in Medieval Philosophical Inquiry*. Of special note is Iribarren's chapter on the controversy between Aquinas and Durandus of St. Pourcain concerning the angel's role in the perfection of the universe. Also, see Nichols, *Discovering Aquinas*, 82–90. While Nichols provides a strong introduction to Aquinas's angelology, the work is essentially a reflection upon the angels of the *Summa Theologiae*.

7. Weinandy, *Aquinas on Scripture*.

8. See Kretzmann and Stump, *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, 252–68.

9. This includes other works such as: Levering, "A Note on Scripture in the *Summa Theologiae*," 652–58; Waldstein, "On Scripture in the Summa Theologiae," 73–94; Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God*.

10. For a good overview of the genre, see Halperin, *Faces of the Chariot*; Elior, "Mysticism, Magic, and Angelology." Jim Davila refers to the essence of Merkavah mysticism and its heavy reliance upon angelic motifs as a form of Jewish shamanism

though also heavily engaged in allegorical interpretations, furthered the doctrine by musing about angelic guardianship, and whether Christ's atonement might extend to even the most depraved angel.[11] While many Greek fathers wrote extensively about angels, it was John Damascene who indirectly popularized the doctrine by collating their views in *De Fide Orthodoxa*.[12] During the early High Middle Ages, Anselm asked critical questions about the ratio of holy angels to redeemed humans (though Augustine introduced the topic in the fourth century), which eventually led to his assertion that fallen humanity has a duty to obey God as the holy angels do, a view he ultimately tied into his Christology, anthropology, and theory of atonement.[13] Finally, it is clear that pseudo-Dionysius's *Celestial Hierarchy* was a standard text in the academic curriculum of Aquinas's day, and was supplemented with commentaries by Eriugena, Hugh of St. Victor, and John the Saracen.[14] The tone of these myriad contributions ranges from the self-evident to the esoteric, but despite their differences, it is our ancestors' mutual confidence in the significance of angels which aligns them with one another. Should one expand this abbreviated history of angelology by including the number of Christian thinkers who have broached the subject since the earliest days of the church, it might appear that everything that could be said about celestial beings had already been written by Aquinas's time.

Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to overstate the widespread fascination with higher order beings during the thirteenth century, a period that David Keck has aptly distinguished as "the flowering of medieval angelology."[15] It is not that earlier angelologies were discarded during this period as much as it is that angels were interpreted and systematized according to new rubrics; the old angelologies, it appears, had lost some of their luster

in light of new philosophical frameworks that had been trickling into Europe. During this time when theology was still unburdened from

in Davila, *Descenders to the Chariot*.

11. See, Origen, *Homilies on Numbers* 24:3; *Commentary on Matthew* 13:26; *Homilies on Ezekiel* 1:10; *De Principiis*, 1.6.1–3; 3.6.5.

12. For an overview of the sprawling angelology of both Greek and Latin fathers, see Danielou, *Angels and Their Mission*. See John Damascene, *De Fide*. III.3–4.

13. See Anselm, *De Casu Diaboli* as well as the first several sections of *De Veritate*.

14. See the editorial notes concerning the Paris Dionysian corpus in Appendix 3 of Aquinas, *Divine Government*, 14:184.

15. Keck, *Angels & Angelology in the Middle Ages*, 93.

the divisions created by the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, there was an overwhelming sense that in order for doctrines like angelology to press forward, one needed to adopt and experiment with innovative points of view. Thus, Aquinas's contribution to the doctrine's history was an attempt to reconcile the angelology of his ancestors with the emerging conceptual frontiers of his day.

By way of a systematic discussion of angels in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas distinguishes himself from his theological forebears whose ruminations on angels are peppered throughout their respective theologies. The angelology of the *Summa Theologiae* is, by contrast, deliberate, progressive and focused; one can see the great Aquinas took pains to leave no stone unturned as he applied philosophical categories like being and essence to the angels. While this philosophical influence is also evident in the biblical commentaries, there, Aquinas rejoins his theological forebears by periodically weaving angels into his unassuming reflections on the biblical text. His mind may have been with the logicians, yet his heart remained anchored to his Christian ancestors, to whom he frequently appealed as support for his view of angels. However, the allegorical approach to angelology one finds in Aquinas's commentaries is sufficiently innovative to distinguish him from both ancients and moderns.

Recently, a computerized version of his works revealed that before he died at forty-nine years of age, Aquinas had penned over 8,686,577 words, the equivalent of more than 34,700 pages of typed text.[16] Even with his use of up to four amanuenses at a time—it is thought that he would turn to them in sequence, dictating different topics to each—Thomas's output is astonishing both in quantity and quality. This, combined with his dense logic, demonstrates that he possessed a remarkably systematized mind from which he could dictate for hours at a time.[17]

A cursory glance at this works, overflowing with quotations and citations from diverse fields of study, testifies to the quality of education he enjoyed within the Dominican order. It is easy to understand how Aquinas could be construed as a dry academic in light of these feats of

16. If disputed works are included, the number swells to approximately eleven million. Kenny, *Aquinas on Mind*, 11. My calculation of the page equivalencies is based upon: 250 words per page, doubled-spaced, 8.5 x 11 paper.

17. Given his ability to appeal to hundreds of authorities, it is quite possible that Aquinas had a photographic memory; his contemporaries report that he never forgot anything which he had read. See, Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 3.

intellectual prowess. However, Chesterton points out how tragically misinformed one would be to hold such a position:

> It would be every bit as false to say that Aquinas drew his primary inspiration from Aristotle. The whole lesson of his life, especially of his early life, the whole story of his childhood and choice of a career, shows that he was supremely and directly devotional; and that he passionately loved the Catholic worship long before he found he had to fight for it. . . . It seems to be strangely forgotten that both these saints [Aquinas and Francis] were in actual fact imitating a Master, who was not Aristotle let alone Ovid, when they sanctified the senses or the simple things of nature.[18]

So too, even someone as unlikely as Luther held Aquinas in esteem for his deep spirituality, not least for the way he crossed himself under his cowl when someone praised him, as a way of guarding against the sin of pride.[19] "[I]t is also worth considering that Luther, until the end of his life, never ceased referring to Thomas as 'Sanctus Thomas,' 'Beatus Thomas,' or 'Divina Thomas,'" observes Denis Janz.[20] Despite the fact that many of the questions he raised were, and continue to be, of philosophical interest, Christ is anterior to all philosophers, Scripture remains central, and tradition is crucial in all of Aquinas's theological works.

Furthermore, one cannot separate Aquinas from the influence of his religious order without doing a disservice to his angelology. Dominican academics like Aquinas's teacher, Albert the Great, whose writings include commentaries on Aristotle and pseudo-Dionysius's *Mystical Theology*, demonstrate that despite their commitment to Scripture, the order was comfortable with Aristotelian and Neoplatonic concepts.[21] In fact, Neoplatonism had already made great inroads into Christian theology by this time, most notably through the writings of Augustine, pseudo-Dionysius, and others such as Theodoric of Chartres.[22] While Aquinas affirmed many older Neoplatonic concepts with respect to angels, it is

18. Chesterton, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 14.

19. One of his earliest biographers shares a tale, apocryphal perhaps, that when the crucified Christ appeared to Aquinas one day, saying "You have written well of me, Thomas. What do you want as a reward for your labor?," the monk replied, "None but thyself, O Lord." See Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 24, 53 n.i.

20. Janz, *Luther on Thomas Aquinas*, 7.

21. See Tugwell, *Early Dominicans*, 25.

22. See D'Onofrio and O'Connell, *The History of Theology*, 208–12.

possible to exaggerate his access to and acceptance of new ideas.[23] John Inglis notes, "In the middle of the thirteenth century members of the Dominican order were forbidden to study the arts, including logic, at the universities. The master of the order, Raymond of Penafort, reiterated this rule in the edition of the Dominican constitutions that he completed in 1241."[24] Inglis notes that the study of Aristotle was an exception to the rule, but Penafort's edict suggests that there may have been more tension between the study of theology and philosophy in Aquinas's day (and in Aquinas) than what is typically assumed. For example, Article 28 of the Primitive Constitutions reads:

> They shall not study the books of pagans and philosophers, even for an hour. They shall not learn secular sciences or even the so-called liberal arts, unless the Master of the Order or the general chapter decides to provide otherwise in certain cases. But everyone, both the young and others, shall read only theological books. We further ordain that each province is obliged to provide brethren destined for study with at least three books of theology. Those so assigned shall mainly study and concentrate on Church History, the Sentences, the Sacred Text, and glosses.[25]

Nonetheless, it was the confluence of Scripture, the Fathers, Aristotle, Avicenna and Averroes in his work that helped establish Aquinas as the figurehead for the theological triumph known today as Scholasticism.

In this brief section, I have introduced Aquinas's doctrine of angels as an extension of several philosophical and theological antecedents. Although his methodology was eventually challenged by the Nominalism of Scotus and the fideism of figures like Francisco Sanche, Michel de Montaigne, and Pierre Charron, Thomas was confident that faith and reason were two ways of knowing; thus, he derived his axioms from Scripture, philosophy, and nature.[26] This threefold witness allowed him

23. Wayne Hankey argues that pseudo-Denys is central to Aquinas's understanding of Scripture, Augustine, and Aristotle. Whether his claim that Aquinas transforms pseudo-Dionysian thought to accommodate a Latin political understanding of hierarchy, metaphysics, and Trinitarian theology is true or not, is less certain. See Hankey, "Dionysian Hierarchy in St. Thomas Aquinas."

24. Inglis, *Spheres of Philosophical Inquiry and the Historiography of Medieval Philosophy*, 267.

25. Raymond of Penafort, "Dominican Documents: Primitive Constitutions," *Dominican Central Province*. http://opcentral.org/blog/the-primitive-constitutions-of-the-order-of-friars-preachers/.

26. Of course figures like Kierkegaard pushed faith to its extremes, whereas Locke

to create an obscure masterpiece (which I shall discuss in the latter half of this chapter) in the form of an angel that is as comfortable on earth as it is in heaven. Thus, out of this sketch of a nobleman who swam, against his family's wishes, into the vortex of the world's greatest questions and propositions, emerges a saint with an angelomorphic contribution all his own. Unlike earlier theologians whose system was to collect and organize the glosses of their predecessors, Thomas, who often used theology and her handmaiden to construct his own views, stands as a systematician in the truest sense of the word. What is remarkable, however, is not that Aquinas is still regarded as a figure that influenced intellectual history to a considerable degree, but that many of his contributions to that history in the form of biblical theology have yet to be widely appreciated, especially at the point of angelology.

AQUINAS'S ANGELOLOGY IN THE *SUMMA THEOLOGIAE*

Citations and bibliographies reveal that many theologians evaluated Aquinas's sprawling angelology based upon the germane sections in his *Summa Theologiae*, namely 1.1.50–64; 106–14. However, this selective sample only reflects one facet of his angelology: a refined, systematized version that reveals little about Aquinas's perception of the angel in the biblical narratives. Incorporating his biblical commentaries into the discussion will provide a more complete picture by making available an alternative genre by which to evaluate Thomas's angelology. Even so, for the sake of comparison, it would be equally unhelpful not to provide an outline of his angelology as represented in the *Summa Theologiae*. There, as a subset of his discussion about the superessential activity and glory of God, Aquinas probes topics such as the substance, intellect, will, origin, speech, and guardianship of angels, subjects that he tends to avoid in his commentaries on Scripture.

His conclusions in the *Summa Theologiae* are that angels are purely spiritual beings who, despite being much less free when compared with God, surpass humans in every direction—specifically with regard to ontology, morality, and intellectual potency.[27] As supernatural beings, they

prioritized reason to the point of nullifying faith; eventually, the logical positivists finished the work that Locke began.

27. The obvious caveat is that angels can sin, but only some have. *ST* 1.63–64,

do not share in the human cycle of life; they have no bodies of any sort, are not born, do not reproduce, and cannot die.[28] Furthermore, since angels are non-corporeal, their perception of creation is neither sense-dependent nor inductive. Whether this means they understand things conceptually, as if seeing the world in terms of mathematical coordinates, or simply that they possess the ability to perceive everything in terms of its Platonic *form*, is impossible to say.[29] Nevertheless, Aquinas believed their perpetually-active minds do not learn, but are divinely infused with the ability to know things instantaneously and perfectly.[30] This, however, is different from knowing *all* things, which is an attribute peculiar to God.[31] Kenelm Foster summarizes, "[Aquinas's] teaching on angelic knowledge might be described as a series of answers to the question, *What would thinking be like with no sensations to think about?*"[32]

Angelic Communication

The peculiarities of angelic communication coaxed Aquinas to extend epistemology's reach beyond the earthly realm; how he gained such insights into heavenly minds is admittedly more a function of his own deductive logic than a verity of Scripture. He infers, for example, that angels communicate with one another effortlessly by sharing their thoughts telepathically. This is a reasonable assumption since angels do not rely upon faculties humans need to communicate with one another: vocal cords, tympanic membranes, facial expressions, and temporal lobes.[33] Though speculative in tone, one need not follow those who consider such theories unbiblical, because many of Aquinas's second-order hypotheses are derived from first-order, Scriptural principles. His assumptions remind one that angels are described by biblical writers as relational beings (Ps 148:2; Luke 15:10; Heb 12:22), and as spirits who communicate with one another (Mark 12:25; Luke 20:36; Heb 1:14; Isa 6:3; Zech 3:4). Aquinas notes that in Isa 6:3, seraphim, who are phantasms (*phantasmatum*), call

109, 114.

28. *ST* 1.60.1–3.
29. See *ST* 1.58.4.
30. *ST* 1.58.1–3.
31. *ST* 1.57.3.
32. *ST* 1.53.
33. *ST* 1.107.1–5.

out to one another their praises of God.[34] My view is that inter-angelic communication operates in similar fashion to the way one communicates with God via unspoken prayer. Given depictions of heaven as a sanctuary where angels praise the Godhead (Rev 5:11–14), it is important to think of angelic communication in terms of its content rather than its inner workings.

Since the Scriptures also include examples of angels interacting with humans, Aquinas entertains the question of whether they should be associated with physical bodies. These narratives do not explain why celestial beings appear to have organic bodies, which they use to speak, move, see, eat, and even wrestle.[35] Aquinas suggests in *ST* 1.51.2 that on occasion, angels "need an assumed body, not for themselves, but on our account; that by conversing familiarly with men they may give evidence of that intellectual companionship which men expect to have with them in the life to come." Also, he adds that Old Testament angelophanies were "a figurative indication that the Word of God would take a human body; because all the apparitions in the Old Testament were ordained to that one whereby the Son of God appeared in the flesh."[36] Calvin arrived at the same conclusion concerning both the angels' assumption of physical bodies and the interpretation of Old Testament angelophanies as Christophanies.[37] By attempting to resolve the dilemma of why angels appeared to have human bodies, Aquinas seized an opportunity to interject christological insights where the biblical record might have implied a truth without communicating it explicitly. This propensity to extract spiritual observations and solutions from the biblical narrative, without psychologizing it, is a hallmark of his angelology.

Scripture provided the raw ingredients for discussions about angel-to-angel and angel-to-human communication, and Aquinas assimilated them according to his own recipe before serving them. Equally significant is that Calvin, rather than removing his apron "whenever the Lord

34. *ST* 1.107.4.

35. Gen 18:8; 19:1–3; 32:24–30.

36. *ST* 1.51.2.

37. Calvin writes: "Moreover, when we read that angels appeared in the visible form of men and clothed in garments, we must remember that this was done to offset human weakness." Calvin, *Calvin*, 169. In *Institutes* 1.13.10, "[T]he Word of God was the supreme angel," he conjectured, "who then began, as it were by anticipation, to perform the office of Mediator."

shuts his sacred mouth," offers his readers similar fare.[38] Thus, it is worth entertaining the possibility that Aquinas's angelology only appears radical when isolated and sensationalized. Barth, for instance, caricatures it: "This work of probably the greatest angelogue of all church history unfortunately has nothing whatever to do with the knowledge of the *veritas catholicae fidei*, or with attention and fidelity to the biblical witness to revelation."[39] Curiously, Barth's critique fails to interpret Thomas within the context of medieval hermeneutics, choosing instead to impose Neo-Orthodox expectations.

In the final chapter, I evaluate Barth's angelology as one that virtually cuts off the finite from the infinite; for now, his accusations are either embarrassingly misinformed or intentionally selective regarding Aquinas's relationship to Scripture. Others have since jumped on Barth's bandwagon by mischaracterizing Aquinas's angelology as "not very biblical."[40] Even if one is unfamiliar with his biblical commentaries, it requires an astonishing degree of inattention to overlook the 25,000 biblical quotations throughout the *Summa Theologiae*.[41] "[T]he bare enumeration of the texts of Scripture cited in the *Summa Theologiae*," notes Daniel Kennedy, "fills eighty small-print columns in the Migne edition."[42] Excluding biblical allusions, in questions dealing specifically with angels in part one of the *Summa Theologiae*, I tallied sixty-six biblical citations in questions 50–64, and ninety-four in questions 106–14, equating to 4.4 and 10.4 citations per question, respectively. One could hardly demand more of a biblical presence.

As explained later in this chapter, what some have interpreted as unrestrained imagination in Aquinas's angelology was actually a key element of medieval exegesis, which emphasized allegorical interpretations. As Richard Bauckham observes, "Hopeful imagining is protected from mere speculation in that it is grounded in the promises of God and resourced by the images of scripture."[43] Bauckham's theory, which he applied to eschatology, is pertinent to Aquinas's angelology because Thomas had been attempting to codify the deeper implications of biblical

38. Calvin, *Institutes* 3.21.3.
39. Ibid., 392.
40. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, 132.
41. Valkenberg, *Words of the Living God,* 211–27, 259.
42. Kennedy, "St. Thomas Aquinas," 670.
43. Bauckham, "Eschatology," 317.

imagery. He was one for whom the allegories, imagery, poetic retellings, nuanced explanations, and narrative gaps that punctuate every book of the Bible were invitations to imaginative creativity. The *essence* of what Aquinas asks one to imagine in the *Summa Theologiae*, however, is not only that angels are spiritual beings with an extraordinary ability to experience the cosmos above the level of physical and emotional sensations, but that they epitomize the goodness and ingenuity inherent in God's communicative and creative acts.[44]

ANGELS AS EMBLEMS OF A PERFECT UNIVERSE

Aquinas's angel was not the quixotic, nymph-like figure commonly associated with contemporary greeting cards; instead, he maintained that angels were requisite beings who symbolized the perfection of the created order.[45] Reasoning that if the cosmos is understood as a celebration of God's grandeur and a direct expression of the goodness of his will and being, he argued that it would be incomplete should there be no heavenly spirits.[46]

> There must be some incorporeal creatures, for what is principally intended by God in creatures is good, and this consists in assimilation to God Himself. And the perfect assimilation of an effect to a cause is accomplished when the effect imitates the cause according to that whereby the cause produces the effect; as heat makes fire. Now, God produces the creature by His intellect and will. Hence the perfection of the universe requires that there should be intellectual creatures.[47]

44. Yet he notes in *ST* 1.63–64 that this is not true of all angels, because the evil angels, though they would naturally have known their existence depended upon God, engaged in a form of wilful ignorance that stemmed from pride, and ultimately resulted in their fall. Their activities and thoughts are the polar opposite of the good angels.

45. Despite his disapproval of Aquinas's angelology, Barth's hyperbolic assertion—"to deny the angels of God is to deny God himself"—captures the spirit of Thomas' interpretation. Barth, *CD* III/3, 486.

46. Ps 19:1; 50:6; Rom 1:19–20.

47. *ST* 1.1.50.1. It appears the Medieval Age identified heat with fire; perhaps a more scientifically accurate statement would be that wood burns because of its participation with fire.

Here, Aquinas defines angels as immaterial intelligences who derive their existence from the Godhead.[48] It is from the divine being that they receive their intrinsically good, rational and spiritual essence.[49] The concept is not unlike Neoplatonic emanationism in that higher forms are more like the One than the lower; though as I noted in chapter 2, biblical angels cannot be entirely reconciled with those diffusive divinities.

Nevertheless, Aquinas's larger conclusion, which ties the existence of angels to the perfection of the universe, is not without its problems. He appears to be saying that the *quality* of the world is contingent upon the *quantity* of angels within that world. This may not imply an inversely proportional relationship between quality and quantity, but his argument does require that the universe contain no less than one incorporeal creature, which *is* a quantitative metric. Also, what is meant that the universe *requires* angels for its perfection? Certainly Aquinas cannot be guilty of committing the anthropomorphic fallacy that the universe itself has volition. Instead, is he not proposing that God is required to create these beings if the universe is to be complete? Although Aquinas argues elsewhere that God creates out of will rather than necessity, it is not clear how a necessity peculiar to the quality of the cosmos, like the need for ontological plenitude, does not also obligate God to create angels.[50] According to his argument, the non-existence of such beings would, *de facto*, be a blemish upon the cosmos and the principal intention of God.

The answer may lie with Leibniz's argument that if God creates, he must create the best of all possible worlds; this would mean the current number of angels simply fulfils the requisite quota. However, Aquinas's premise is easier to digest if approached ontologically, which is why his idea of cosmic perfection is better understood in terms of "completeness." As Aristotle's *Scala Naturae* had already suggested, there is something intellectually satisfying about a world where no categories are left unfilled. However, the problem is that this ideal appears to interpose the cosmos between God and the human being, since the angel, not the human, is the indispensable component which defines completeness. This transposition risks exalting cosmology and angelology over anthropology by subordinating humans, as the *imago Dei* for whom Christ died, beneath the primary objective of a complete or perfect creation.

48. *ST* 1.50.1–2.
49. *ST* 1.61.1–4.
50. *ST* 1.61.2.

These objections may be too anthropocentric, because one may resolve the difficulty by allowing that Aquinas's conclusion gives priority to the attributes of God rather than the cosmos, angel, or human. Rather than assuming that an indispensable element of creation—in this case, the angel—impinges upon God's freedom by forcing him to create in a certain way, one might consider the matter from the perspective of God's nature. In other words, God freely and willingly fits angels into the cosmos because his character, not the existence of the cosmos, requires him to do so. This accentuates the fact that the only thing that God is *obligated* to make is that which is consistent with his pure character, since "what is principally intended by God in creatures is good." Seen in this light, the criterion for determining how angels contribute to the perfection of the universe is determined by whether their role illuminates God's glory and goodness. Of course, the presence of the angels also accentuates the difference between God and the material world, further avoiding the difficulty of having divinity and corporeality next to one another on the ontological ladder. It is more significant that angels fill a *moral* gap between God and humanity. Even so, it may still be beneficial to retain the idea that Aquinas's "necessary angel" interposes the objective universe between God and humanity, that is, if it produces the fruit of humility or, better yet, resacralizes humanity's perception of creation as a fellow-participant in worship on a cosmic scale.[51]

Nonetheless, directing his study of Scripture and classical philosophy toward the systematization of doctrine in the *Summa Theologiae* allowed Aquinas to establish his reputation as a leading angelogue. He subtly defends his rationale by oscillating between the doctrine's theological and philosophical implications: creatures, celestial or terrestrial, bear a relationship to the rest of creation. This relationship may be interpersonal, ontological, moral, or as the following sections argue, theological. It remains to be seen whether the future of angelology will have room for Aquinas's questions about how angels communicate, whether they are necessary for the perfection of the universe, or how they move through space. It is important, nonetheless, to uphold the value of an angelology that reconciles the supernatural and physical worlds, faith and reason, special and natural revelation. His dialectic approach may have limited appeal to those outside the discipline and his desire to harmonize as much truth as possible opened his angelology to criticism

51. Many instances exist of a biblical writer ascribing characteristics of worship to the creation.

from theologians like Barth, who finds it too exploratory. Yet in defense of Thomas, I remind the reader that even Calvin speculated concerning the purpose of embodied angels and offered christological readings of Old Testament angelophanies (as did Barth).[52]

One step toward alleviating the perception of Aquinas's angelology as overly philosophical is to establish the primacy of Scripture in his teaching, not simply by pointing to the 25,000 citations in the *Summa Theologiae*, but by representing his general interpretive model. Branding him as unbiblical perversely misses the point of his work. He was a theology professor dedicated to the formation of aspiring clerics, and Scripture was his *axis mundi*. While he penned a handful of commentaries on Aristotle's work, he never taught a course on Aristotle's philosophy. The same holds true for Aquinas's other private writings; neither the *Summa Contra Gentiles* nor the *Summa Theologiae* were ever taught in his classroom.[53]

Although it was necessary to illustrate the philosophical implications surrounding higher order beings in *Summa Theologiae* 1.1.50–64; 106–14, the remainder of the chapter focuses upon Aquinas's interaction with angels in the biblical texts themselves. There we see a side of him that calls into question the wax nose that he was a dry academic or more parts philosopher than theologian. Admittedly, the *Summa Theologiae* includes little of his warm, living faith and playful commentary, so it is easy to forget the man whose passion for God was so consuming that he left behind his family's two castles and middle-nobility for the Dominican order, dedicated himself to learning, synthesizing, teaching, and writing some of the greatest theological literature ever known, before abandoning it after what some believe was an epiphanic experience in December of 1273, stating "I cannot [continue writing], because all that I have written seems like straw to me."[54] It is to the undocumented angelology of Aquinas the biblical commentator and exegete that we shall now turn.

52. Barth, *CD III/3*, 490. Barth, however, does not demonstrate how his interpretation of Gen 18 as a Christophany is "faithful to the biblical witness to revelation."

53. One exception to this rule, according to L. E. Boyle, is his commentary on the first book of Peter

Lombard's *Liber Sententiarum,* which he taught while in Rome from 1265–66. See Boyle, *The Setting of the Summa Theologiae of Saint Thomas*, 8–15. Also, Sheets, "The Scriptural Dimension of St. Thomas."

54. Tugwell, *Albert and Thomas,* 266.