

“This brief study focuses appropriately on the foundational principles that control the thought of Aquinas, showing, along with its notable strengths, the deep tensions inherent in it and its incompatibility as a whole with epistemology that would be true to the self-attesting revelation of God in Scripture. This fundamental failing is brought to light especially in his related views of natural reason as neutral and natural theology. The author’s treatment warrants careful consideration by all those interested in understanding Thomas and subsequent Thomist positions.”

—**Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Aquinas is a name not simply relegated to college textbooks on medieval philosophy or theology. There are schools and colleges by that name, one of which stands for magisterial Roman Catholic teaching.

“Oliphint takes a well-known name and gives it a life and historical context—which he accomplishes brilliantly, demonstrating Aquinas’s premodern foundationalism, and then entering the complex world of Roman Catholic Aquinas interpretation. Having first mastered the massive primary sources and a host of competing scholarly interpretations, Oliphint in his clear writing style and with his vast knowledge of the material boils down complex issues as he draws his readers into solid conclusions.

“Had he stopped there, the work would be valuable for its penetrating analysis. But Oliphint’s critique is the icing on the cake. Beyond the fact that Aquinas did not properly account for the depth of sin in non-Christian thinking, Oliphint argues compellingly that Aquinas was completely incorrect concerning the self-evident nature of the knowledge of God, was inadequate in his proofs for God’s existence, and had a faulty doctrine of God.

“One piece of critique cake is Oliphint’s analysis of God’s simplicity, beginning with Aquinas and following through to Alvin Plantinga. Another is Oliphint’s presentation of Aquinas’s mishandling of important apologetic texts (such as the Areopagus address and parts of John), demonstrating that some of Aquinas’s fundamental errors are still included in contemporary evangelical and Reformed commentaries.

“Scott Oliphint has spent a lifetime walking with Christ, speaking about Christ, preaching and teaching Christ, and defending Christ’s name in the public arena. His books and articles have proved extremely helpful to me and to thousands of others. All of us interested in presenting Christ in his fullness rejoice at this latest contribution from Oliphint’s pen, and we look forward to more.”

—**Richard C. Gamble**, Professor of Systematic Theology,  
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“Thomas Aquinas is a familiar name to students, clergy, and theologians. He towers over the history of theology. But his work is often simplistically dismissed or badly misunderstood. Regrettably, while many read about him, few read him. But that is rapidly changing: we are in the midst of a revival of serious interest in Aquinas, particularly among Reformed theologians. Historians of the Reformed tradition working in primary texts have reminded us of facts easily overlooked: that there is Thomas and there are Thomisms, that Thomisms of various kinds significantly influenced the early Reformed theological tradition, and that understanding the relationship of Thomisms to Reformed theology requires patience and nuance. In an earlier generation, Cornelius Van Til helped focus some of the most important epistemological and theological questions that we must ask of Aquinas and his legacy. Professor Oliphint has come along to help us do just that, with the result that we have an informed,

succinct, and edifying entrée to one of the most important thinkers in the history of Christianity. Students of Aquinas would start their reading here with great profit.”

—**Mark A. Garcia**, President and Fellow of Scripture and Theology, Greystone Theological Institute

“Thomas Aquinas epitomizes the best and the worst of medieval scholasticism. While acknowledging the Angelic Doctor’s keen mind and prolific pen, Scott Oliphint exposes some serious defects in Aquinas’s theological method that have significant ramifications for theology proper. In short, Thomas attempts to place sacred theology on an edifice of ‘natural theology’ that he erects with the tools of autonomous human reason. The result, sadly, is a theological enterprise that resembles the efforts of the tower-builders at Babel (Gen. 11:1–9): a theology from the ground up. In contrast, Oliphint commends a distinctively Reformed method of theology based on the principles of *sola Scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *solus Christus*. In so doing, he follows the pattern established at Bethel (Gen. 28:10–22): a theology from above that begins and ends with the self-revelation of the triune God. Serious students of theology should acquaint themselves with Aquinas’s contributions to theology. But they should also be aware of his critical missteps. That’s why Oliphint’s primer on Aquinas’s theological prolegomena is so important. I highly recommend it!”

—**Robert Gonzales**, Academic Dean, Reformed Baptist Seminary

“Despite the limited scope and brevity of Oliphint’s discussion of Thomas Aquinas, it wonderfully contrasts how Aquinas and later Reformed theology think of the two foundations of the Christian faith: namely, knowledge and existence. This study accurately captures the central points of Aquinas’s view and offers a

cogent, biblical, Reformed corrective. Furthermore, this study nicely demonstrates how a Reformed corrective to Aquinas is foundational to a sound Christian theology today, especially as grounded in the glorious triune God and his revelation. I enthusiastically recommend this work for all students of theology and apologetics.”

—**Stephen J. Wellum**, Professor of Christian Theology,  
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—**John M. Frame**, Professor of Systematic Theology and  
Philosophy Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary,  
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**AQUINAS**

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To my mentor and colleague, William Edgar,  
and his wife, Barbara—unconditional love, lived.



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## SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers'

work and address them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to the “whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon  
Seoul, Korea

## FOREWORD

A number of medieval theologians have gained wide respect from Reformed readers over the years: authors such as Anselm and Bernard of Clairvaux, John Wycliffe and Jan Hus. But Thomas Aquinas, who was in some ways the quintessential medieval theologian, has not been among them. Heavyset and taciturn, he was dubbed the “Dumb Ox” by his fellow Dominicans, but one of his teachers said of him, “This ox will one day fill the world with his bellowing.” Aquinas began teaching at the University of Paris in 1252. Four years later, he was awarded the doctorate in theology and appointed a professor of philosophy at the university. Over the next eighteen years, he primarily sought to organize the knowledge of his day in the service of his medieval Catholic faith.

Although Aquinas was indebted to Augustine’s theology of grace, which has deeply informed the Reformed tradition as well, his use of Aristotelian philosophy and his development of such Reformation bugbears as transubstantiation made Reformed thinkers generally wary of him. Moreover, the ardent opposition to the Reformation by a number of sixteenth-century Thomists

such as Thomas Cajetan didn't help make Aquinas popular among the Reformers and undoubtedly provided a further reason for the Reformed tradition's suspicion of the Dominican theologian.

Yet the impact of Aquinas on such twentieth-century thinkers as G. K. Chesterton and Alasdair MacIntyre is indicative of the fact that he is undoubtedly a great theologian whose thought cannot be simply ignored. Thus the importance of this relatively slim monograph. Although Oliphint has limited this study of Thomas to a couple of areas of the medieval thinker's thought—epistemology and the existence and character of God—they are both foundational issues and thus well serve the monograph's twofold purpose: to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of the medieval theologian's reasoning and to reflect on how Reformed theology can best utilize the thought of this great thinker. All in all, this monograph is an excellent example of theological *ressourcement*.

Michael A. G. Haykin  
Louisville, Kentucky

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I would like to thank Nate Shannon for inviting me to contribute to this project. Thanks also to P&R, and especially James Scott and John Hughes, for their commitment to publishing this kind of material. Thanks also to Cameron Clausing for creating the glossary for this work. Finally, thanks to my colleague, Dr. Lane Tipton, for helpful feedback and comments on portions of this work.



# 1

## INTRODUCTION

Anyone familiar with Thomas Aquinas and his influence will be skeptical that a work of this size can do justice to him. That skepticism is warranted. Aquinas composed more than sixty works in his relatively short lifetime. Some of those works were multivolume sets. Given the sheer volume of Thomas's output, then, we must admit at the outset that the goal of this book will have to be a modest one.<sup>1</sup>

There are a vast number of helpful resources from and on Aquinas that one can consult with profit. We need not detail those here; some will be referenced below. Instead, what we hope to do in the pages that follow is to focus our discussion on two specific areas of concern. These concerns, we hope to make clear, will find their home in the context of Reformed theology. That is, we will argue that there are significant aspects of Thomas's thought that either cannot be incorporated into the theology that is consistent with the emphases of the Reformation, or, if

1. "Thomas Aquinas" means "Thomas of Aquino," referring to his ancestral home in the county of Aquino in present-day Lazio, Italy. Scholars call him either Thomas or Aquinas, and both names will be used in this book.

incorporated, must be reworked and reoriented—“reshaped,” as it were—in order to be consistent with a Reformed theological context.

In order to narrow our analysis sufficiently, we will focus our attention primarily on the relationship of Aquinas’s thought to the two *principia* of Reformed theology. That is, we want to analyze Thomas in light of the two foundations of the Christian faith: the foundation of *existence* (*principium essendi*), which is God himself, and the foundation of *knowledge* (*principium cognoscendi*), which is God’s revelation.

In analyzing Thomas from the perspective of two central, Reformed truths, we are not promoting an anachronistic reading of him. Thomas, like all of us, was a man of his time. He did not have the advantages that we have, with two thousand years of the church’s thought behind us. Thomas had only twelve hundred years of church history behind him, and thus he was not privy to the great truths that gained ascendancy from the sixteenth century forward. He did, however, have extensive and thorough knowledge of Augustine and many in the early church, as well as of Aristotle, from which the theological notion of *principium* is derived.<sup>2</sup> As we will demonstrate below, Thomas was well aware of the importance of a foundational starting point, both for existence and for knowledge.

Our interest, however, is not so much historical as it is theological. Though Thomas had no access to the theology that issued forth from the Reformation, he did have the same body of truth available to him in God’s revelation. What he

2. According to Richard Muller, “The roots of the search for a *principium* can be extended back into the intellectual history of the Western world to Aristotle’s declaration that all *archai* or first principles are the ground or ‘first point from which a thing either is or comes to be or is known . . . of these some are immanent in the thing and others are outside.” Richard A. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena to Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 431.

could not have seen historically, he could have seen biblically and theologically.

The theological analysis that we will engage in is, to be sure, much more clearly seen now. But that does not mean that we ourselves would have seen it in Thomas's day. So the point of our analysis is *not* to say that we could have seen what Thomas failed to see. Instead, it is to highlight that, as people of our own time, we should now see what Thomas did not see then, and we should be careful to expunge from our theological data those aspects of Thomas that are not consistent with the theology of Scripture, as that theology has been expressed since the Reformation.

Whatever "Reformed Thomism" might be, or might mean, in our current context, it cannot be a synthesis of biblically foreign Thomistic teachings and a consistent, biblical theology. In our theological analysis, then, we need not be historically sensitive to the neglect or near eclipse of theological accuracy. Our primary concern will be that accuracy, with less direct concern for the historical context.

Aquinas was born in southern Italy in 1224/25. When he was five or six, he was offered by his parents as an oblate to the Benedictine abbey of Monte Cassino. At the abbey, he began his study of Scripture and of the church fathers, especially Augustine and Gregory.<sup>3</sup>

At the age of fourteen, Thomas went to Naples to begin studies at the recently founded *studium generale*. It was there that Thomas began to study the newly translated works of Greek and Arabic philosophy.

After becoming a Dominican priest, Thomas went to Paris to study, from 1245 to 1248, under Albert the Great. There he

3. There are almost too many biographies of Thomas to count. The material below is a summary, primarily of the chapter "Life and Works," by Jean-Pierre Torrell, in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15–32.

was introduced to the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, as he continued as well to focus his study on the works of Aristotle. During this time, because Thomas was a quiet and reserved student, he earned the nickname “the Dumb Ox” (not “dumb” in intellect, but in his lack of speech). It was Albert who, after hearing one of Thomas’s brilliant defenses, said, “We call this young man a dumb ox, but his bellowing in doctrine will one day resound throughout the world.”<sup>4</sup>

After a four-year stint in Cologne (1248–52), Thomas returned to Paris to earn his master’s degree in *sacra doctrina*. While there, Thomas worked diligently on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Lombard’s *Sentences* were, in one sense, the systematic theology of the day, without which one could not presume to be fit for theological discussion. The *Sentences* were grouped into four books of the opinions (*sententiae*) of the church fathers and of many medieval theologians. The four books consisted of (1) the doctrine of God, (2) his works, (3) the incarnation, and (4) the sacraments and last things. Thomas’s comments on the *Sentences* included around 2,000 quotes from Aristotle, 1,500 from Augustine, 500 from Denis the Areopagite, 280 from Gregory the Great, and 240 from John Damascene, as well as others. Clearly the influence of Aristotle on Thomas’s reading of church history was substantial and significant by this point in his life. It was during this time that Thomas wrote *De principiis naturae* (On the Principles of Nature) and *De ente et essentia* (On Being and Essence). The latter work would frame his entire metaphysical position for the rest of his life. Both of these works “display a strong Avicennian influence.”<sup>5</sup>

4. Daniel Kennedy, “St. Thomas Aquinas,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912), vol. 14, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14663b.htm>.

5. Torrell, “Life and Works,” 17. Avicenna (980–1037) has been called the first Arabic philosopher. Through Latin translations of his work, he became a significant

It is noteworthy that Thomas, as a master of theology, composed numerous commentaries on the Bible. In addition to writing commentaries on Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Lamentations, he taught courses on Job, Matthew, John, and the Psalms. These commentaries have suffered some historical neglect, but are becoming increasingly relevant in showing the relationship between Thomas's understanding of Scripture and his more speculative theology. As we will see below, his understanding of Scripture was, in significant ways, overshadowed by his speculative thinking.

In order to understand Thomas's writing, and his entire way of thinking, it is important to recognize that, aside from writing commentaries, one of the requirements for a master of theology was to sponsor and engage in "disputed questions." After morning lessons, the master and a bachelor would join the other students in the afternoon in order to "dispute" on a given topic. Topics chosen would be discussed for three hours. The discussions would include objections, replies to the objections, and then final determinations on the question. This procedure required not simply a certain knowledge of a particular topic, but also a knowledge of the objections to the topic, replies to those objections, and the final conclusions given, all things considered. We can see why, then, Thomas's *Summa theologiae* conforms to this basic approach.

During this period, Thomas wrote the only commentary in the thirteenth century on Boethius's "On the Trinity," as well as a commentary on Boethius's *De hebdomadibus*,<sup>6</sup> which began

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influence on Thomas's view of being, the eternity of the world, and other topics. The best concise discussion of this can be found in John Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), esp. ch. 2, "The Latin Avicenna as a Source for Thomas Aquinas's Metaphysics."

6. The title is probably from Boethius's reference to "our hebdomads," or groups of seven. See Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 794. Note,

Thomas's reflections on his all-important principle of participation. During this time as well, probably in 1257, Thomas (along with Bonaventure) received his doctorate of theology.

Between 1261 and 1265, Thomas wrote one of his most important works, the *Summa contra gentiles*. Torrell's assessment of this work is worth quoting:

The work proposes to study all that human reason can discover about God:

I. What is proper to God: His existence and His perfections.

II. The procession of creatures from God; that is to say, the act of creation.

III. The ordering of creatures to God as their end: providence and divine governance.

IV. The truths inaccessible to reason and known only by faith: God as Trinity, the Incarnation of the Word and redemption, sacraments and the last things.

The order of the first three books clearly echoes the structure Aquinas had already found in the *Sentences* of Lombard,

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however: "All held that what Boethius had meant by his phrase 'from our hebdomads' was 'from axiomatic statements,' statements he could describe as such that no one who understood them could rationally deny. The formula of Boethius himself is a straight translation of the Stoic *koinai ennoiai*, 'common conceptions.' A gratuitous difficulty for his mediaeval readers was that they were faced with the mysterious term 'hebdomad,' evidently proposed by Boethius as synonymous with 'common conception'; they had no notion that 'hebdomad' means 'a seven.'" Thomas Aquinas, *An Exposition of the "On the Hebdomads" of Boethius*, trans. Janice L. Schultz and Edward A. Synan (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), xxiv.

and it prefigures the circular structure that he sets out in the *Summa theologiae*: all things come from God and all things return to God under His guidance. It should also be said that this structure also follows Aquinas's own logic.<sup>7</sup>

It was during this time as well that Thomas developed his doctrine of the Eucharist and composed a commentary on the Gospels, the *Catena aurea*. In the *Catena*, Thomas shows remarkable familiarity with the patristic writers of the church. He is particularly fond of quoting Gregory the Great and John Chrysostom, but is most indebted to Augustine (roughly ten thousand quotations in his corpus). Thomas was also the first in the Western church to use the complete corpus of the first ecumenical councils.

By 1265, Thomas moved to Rome to found a *studium* and began in earnest to write his *Summa theologica*.<sup>8</sup> That work occupied him for the rest of his life, with the *Supplementum* being added by his students, who based their work on Thomas's commentary on the *Sentences*. Torrell, who gives a helpful précis of its contents, adds this:

As to its sources, the Thomistic synthesis owes tribute to multiple philosophies from stoicism (through Cicero and St. Ambrose) to Neoplatonism (through Augustine and

7. Torrell, "Life and Works," 19.

8. We will be primarily using Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2009) (hereinafter *ST*). The title alternates between "*theologica*" and "*theologiae*," depending on personal preferences. Since page numbers are not given in my digital edition of the *ST*, I will cite the text location instead. Notice also: "The entire '*Summa*' contains 38 Treatises, 612 Questions, subdivided into 3120 articles, in which about 10,000 objections are proposed and answered." When Thomas stopped writing, it "had been completed only as far as the ninetyeth question of the third part." Kennedy, "St. Thomas Aquinas," <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14663b.htm>.

Pseudo-Dionysius), but Aristotle is the dominant authority along with his Arabian (Avicenna and Averroës) and Jewish (Avicebron and Maimonides) commentators. From a theological point of view, the predominant influence is that of the Bible and the Fathers of the Church.<sup>9</sup>

Though Thomas's *Summa* is not his only important writing, it does give a useful summary of his views, some of which, however, would change as he grew older.

While in Rome, Thomas also wrote *De potentia*, a series of ten questions that deal with the power of God, but also with the relationship between God's simplicity and his triunity. During this time, Thomas also wrote a commentary on the *Divine Names*, by Pseudo-Dionysius. In this commentary, the Platonic and Neoplatonic elements of Thomas's thought are most obvious. For Thomas, however, unlike Pseudo-Dionysius, God is not beyond being, but is alone the *ipsum esse subsistens* (subsistent being itself). Thomas also wrote a number of commentaries on Aristotle's works, which commentaries were written in order to prepare for the *Summa*.

When Aquinas went back to Paris in 1268, he was engaged in controversy with many who saw Aristotle as a threat to the Christian faith. Specifically, Aristotle's view of the eternity of the world was considered to be contrary to Christian teaching. Thomas took up this matter in *De aeternitate mundi*, which was written in 1271. In this work, he endeavors to defend Aristotle, but also argues that it cannot be demonstrated that the world either is eternal or had a beginning. That matter can be settled only by faith, he says, not by reason.

By 1272, Thomas was sent back to Naples to found another *studium*. There, says Torrell, "due to repeated mystical experiences

9. Torrell, "Life and Works," 23.

and massive physical and nervous fatigue, Aquinas ceased writing and teaching.”<sup>10</sup> One report of the end of Thomas’s life puts it this way:

On 6 December, 1273, he laid aside his pen and would write no more. That day he experienced an unusually long ecstasy during Mass; what was revealed to him we can only surmise from his reply to Father Reginald, who urged him to continue his writings: “I can do no more. Such secrets have been revealed to me that all I have written now appears to be of little value.”<sup>11</sup>

On his way to the Council of Lyon, Thomas fell and died on March 7, 1274. He was canonized by John XXII in 1323, and was made a Doctor of the Church by Pius V on April 15, 1567. Nor was that all:

In the Encyclical “*Aeterni Patris*”, of 4 August, 1879, on the restoration of Christian philosophy, Leo XIII declared him “the prince and master of all Scholastic doctors.” The same illustrious pontiff, by a Brief dated 4 August, 1880, designated him patron of all Catholic universities, academies, colleges, and schools throughout the world.<sup>12</sup>

As to the reasons for Thomas’s genius, one author has this to say:

Facts narrated by persons who either knew St. Thomas in life or wrote at about the time of his canonization prove that he received assistance from heaven. To Father Reginald he

10. *Ibid.*, 27–28.

11. Kennedy, “Thomas Aquinas.”

12. *Ibid.*

declared that he had learned more in prayer and contemplation than he had acquired from men or books. These same authors tell of mysterious visitors who came to encourage and enlighten him. The Blessed Virgin appeared, to assure him that his life and his writings were acceptable to God, and that he would persevere in his holy vocation. Sts. Peter and Paul came to aid him in interpreting an obscure passage in Isaias. When humility caused him to consider himself unworthy of the doctorate, a venerable religious of his order (supposed to be St. Dominic) appeared to encourage him and suggested the text for his opening discourse.<sup>13</sup>

Clearly, then, it is the view of Roman Catholic tradition that Thomas's genius was supernaturally given to him. But from a biblical, Protestant perspective, these reports have no basis in fact.

13. *Ibid.*