

Lactantius's Power Theology¹

JASON GEHRKE
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, IN

IN THEIR INTRODUCTION to Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* [*Inst.*], Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey emphasize the significance of the term *virtus* in his thought and remark on the special difficulties it poses for both translators and theological interpreters.² To the translator,

¹ The author wishes to thank several people whose contributions led to the publication of this article. Michel Barnes read, conversed, and commented from the earliest stages of this idea. Lewis Ayres freely gave extensive guidance that helped me reimagine not only this article, but the whole process and genre of scholarly journal publication. His guidance improved on not only this piece, but many to come, I hope. Michael Cover has been a regular conversation partner. His wide-ranging knowledge, interests, and questions improved my thinking on more points than could be explained in a single note. This article would not have succeeded without his mentorship. Likewise, Blandine Colot saved me from several significant mistakes and offered very helpful corrections to a previous edition. Finally, Remi Gounelle and the Faculty of Protestant Theology at Strasbourg University provided friendship and resources during a year of research that allowed me to complete this project. For all of your support and efforts, thank you.

² For introduction, see Anthony Bowen and Peter Garnsey, *Lactantius: Divine Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 1–57. Lactantius (ca. 250–325) was the last of the pre-Nicene Latin apologists. He was appointed professor of Latin rhetoric under Diocletian at Nicomedia (ca. 303), but soon took up the apologetic mantle in response to Diocletian's persecution. He was later tutor to Constantine's son Crispus at Trier (ca. 315–317). It has been suggested that Lactantius's *Divine Institutes* may have been delivered orally to the court at Trier and influenced Constantine's Letter at Arles; see Elizabeth Depalma Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles: Dating the Divine Institutes," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. 1 (1994): 32–52. However, Eberhard Heck argues, contra Digeser, that Lactantius remained in Trier until June 313 ("Constantin und Lactanz in Trier," *Historia: Zeitschrift für*

the term conveys a range of meanings that span from the foundational sense of “power” to the moral connotations of “virtue.”³ To the theologian, *virtus* appears to substitute doctrinally significant language with an unsubstantial moral rhetoric.⁴ Lactantius’s use of *virtus* has thus contributed to

Alte Geschichte 58, 1 [2009]: 118–30). Lactantius is believed to have died at an unknown time after 324 CE, but is not viewed as a player in the Nicene controversies.

- 3 Bowen and Garnsey, *Divine Institutes*, xi, 26–28. Bowen’s and Garnsey’s comment reflects the general trend as they connected the linguistic and theological: “*Virtus*, here mostly translated as ‘virtue’ is a particular problem. Lactantius was more of a moralist than a theologian and the worth of his arguments varies greatly, even within a paragraph, for he measured worth more on a rhetorical than on an intellectual scale.”
- 4 Referring to Lactantius’s account of Christ’s *virtus* and an analogy from Roman law at *Inst.* 4.29, René Pichon entered a verdict that remained influential in later scholarship: “Lactantius expresses this unity [between the Father and Son] by a comparison drawn directly from Roman law; the Word appears as a son associated with his father in the government of the household. This remains a wholly tangible and latin image, one very apt to strike his non-Christian readers [*les lecteurs profanes*]. Concerning all that follows [*Sur tout le reste*] about the true name of the Word and the manner in which God begot him, Lactantius, who has more good sense than imagination, [simply] bows down before the mysteries neither denying nor claiming to expound them [*sans les nier ne prétendre les expliquer*]” (*Lactance: Etude sur le mouvement philosophique et religieux sous le regne de Constantin* [Paris: Hachette, 1901], 117). In 1976, Basil Studer relied on Pichon and Loi to say: “Lactantius had no success at defining exactly the relationship between the Father and the Son. . . . He hardly distinguishes his [the Son’s] eternal generation from that of other spirits. . . . He conceives of the unity of the Father and Son only in a moral sense” (“La Soteriologie de Lactance,” in *Lactance et Son Temps: Recherches Actuelles: Actes Du IVe Colloque d’Etudes Historiques et Patristiques, Chantilly, 1976*, ed. J. Fontaine and M. Perrin [Paris: Beauchesne, 1978], 259). Studer relied on V. Loi, who arrived at similar conclusions: “Since, as we have shown, the process of the generation [*spirazione*] that provides the Son’s origin is not, for Lactantius, substantially different from that which provides the Angels’ origin, we must place this under the lactanzian conception of the divinity” (*Lattanzio nella storia del linguaggio e del pensiero teologico pre-niceno* [Zürich: Pas-Verlag, 1970], 203). See also Antonie Wlosok, *Laktanz und Die Philosophische Gnosis: Untersuchungen zu Geschichte und Terminologie der gnostischen Erlösungsvorstellung* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1960), e.g., 188–95, 211–14, 224. Unless otherwise noted, all English translations from non-English secondary sources are my own.

Generally speaking, Loi and Wlosok served as the basis for larger narratives. For example, Aloys Grillmeier cited both at length to explain that: “With a *tour de force*, Lactantius sought to create a link between Christian reality and hermetic theory. . . . Although this Christ has many traditional features, he is dangerously near to becoming a mythical being. Arianism is only a step away” (*Christ in the Christian Tradition*, volume 1, *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon*

a general scholarly impression that his theology is deficient. As Blandine Colot summarizes his reputation: "C'est lorsqu'on l'aborde d'un point de vue doctrinal qu'on juge Lactance par trop désordonné et insaisissable, et sa théologie, médiocre, voire inconsistante."⁵

The presumption of Lactantius's doctrinal shortcomings motivated scholars to seek his contributions outside of theological matters.⁶ Although historical studies continue to examine his significance for the Constan-

(451), 2nd ed. [London and Oxford: Mowbrays, 1976], 119). More recently, Elizabeth Depalma Digeser often relies on Loi and Wlosok when characterizing Lactantius's theology in *Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 64–90.

- ⁵ Blandine Colot, *Lactance: penser la conversion de Rome au temps de Constantin* (Florence, IT: Leo S. Olschki, 2016), xii; see also 102–58, on virtue. Louis Ayres's brief look at Lactantius is the exception that proves the rule: "Modern scholars have treated Lactantius' theology as idiosyncratic and Lactantius as ignorant of other Latin theology. . . . At the same time, the standard scholarly account of Lactantius as primarily indebted to non-Christian philosophy has long needed reconsideration: he may also be read as *an admittedly eccentric witness* to the Latin theological traditions of his day" (*Nicaea and Its Legacy* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004], 71–75, at 73; emphasis mine). He is the only recent scholar who reads Lactantius as a witness to theological trajectories. Ayres was the first to note Lactantius's use of Tertullian's power-causal formulations, but did not devote an extended study to the topic.

- ⁶ Without imagining any sort of rigid univocity on the issues, a substantial majority of scholarship on Lactantius has been concerned, even in recent years, with the characterization of his work in terms of the social context of his thought in the Constantinian era (e.g.: Colot, *Lactance*; Gábor Kendeff, "Lactantius as Christian Cicero, Cicero as Shadow-Like Interpreter," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Cicero*, ed. William H. G. Altman [Leiden: Brill, 2015], 56–93), continuing evaluation of his use of earlier pagan and Christian sources (e.g., Jochen Walter, *Pagane Texte und Wertvorstellungen bei Laktanz* [Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2006]) and his political contributions to the Roman Empire (e.g.: Jeremy Schott, *Christianity, Empire, and the Making of Religion in Late Antiquity* [Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010]; Elizabeth Depalma Digeser, *The Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000]; Digeser, *A Threat to Public Piety: Christians, Platonists, and the Great Persecution* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012]). By contrast, readings of Lactantius's doctrinal theology—with a few notable exceptions—rely mainly on Pierre Monat, *Lactance et la Bible: une propédeutique latine à la lecture de la Bible dans l'Occident constantinien* (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1982), John McGuckin, *Researches into the Divine Institutes of Lactantius* (DPhil dissertation, Durham University, 1980), Loi, *Lattanzio*, Wlosok, *Laktanz und die philosophische Gnosis*, and Pichon, *Lactance*. Scholarly judgments are by no means uniform, but the general neglect of Lactantius's doctrinal contributions underscores a general consensus about Lactantius's marginal status as a theologian.

tinian period, theologians have made only slight modifications to the narrative of his insufficient theology.⁷ Lactantius's oratorical skill seemed to reconcile his theologically marginal position with his apparently significant role in the Constantinian era.⁸ The *Divine Institutes* use of *virtus* fits neatly into the larger narrative of Lactantius's political life.⁹

Recent patristic scholarship calls, however, for a significant rereading of Lactantius's doctrinal positions and for careful attention to the notion of *virtus*.¹⁰ Following the work of Michel Barnes, patrologists have come to recognize the technical signification of the term *power* (*vis*, *virtus*, *potestas*, δύναμις) and the formula "*power and nature*" in early Christian Trinitarian theologies, both Greek and Latin.¹¹ What Barnes has termed

⁷ Notable exceptions are Colot, *Lactance*, which makes significant improvements, although her work is not a study of Lactantius's theology. Gabor Kendeŕffy also represents a promising new direction in "*Velamentum Stultitiae*: 1 Cor. 1:20f. and 3:19 in Lactantius's *Divine Institutes*," in *Invention, Rewriting, Usurpation. Discursive Fights over Religious Traditions in Antiquity*, ed. J. Ulrich, A.-Chr. Jacobsen, and M. Kahlos (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2012), 57–70, as does Christiane Grossman, "Die neutestamentlichen Grundlagen der Gerechtigkeitsdefinition im 5. Buch der Institutionen des Laktanz. Eine Untersuchung zu Inst. V 8, 5–9," *Mittel-lateinisches Jahrbuch* 37 (2002): 395–403. Neither conducts a historical reading of Lactantius's theological ontology.

⁸ See Heck, "Constantin und Lactanz." Charles Odahl has given Lactantius a prominent role in Constantine's milieu, although his narrative exceeds the evidence and has been criticized for significant historical mistakes (*Constantine and the Christian Empire*, 2nd ed. [New York: Routledge, 2010], 72, 123; see Hervé Ingelbert's book review in *Latomus* 66, no. 3 (2007): 774–76). See also T. D. Barnes, "Lactantius and Constantine," *Journal of Roman Studies* 63 (1973): 29–46, and Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 12–14, 149.

⁹ Francois Heim, *La Théologie de Victoire de Constantin à Théodose* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1992), esp. 51–57; Heim, "L'influence exercée par Constantin sur Lactance: sa Théologie de la Victoire," in *Lactance et son Temps: recherches actuelles, Actes du I^{er} colloque d'études historiques et patristiques*, Chantilly, 21–23 Septembre 1976, ed. J. Fontaine and M. Perrin (Paris: 1978), 55–70.

¹⁰ Throughout this article, the term "Trinitarian Theology" designates only the field of historical inquiry.

¹¹ For *power* in Origen, Tertullian, and Hillary, see Michel René Barnes, *The Power of God: Dynamis in Gregory of Nyssa* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 94–125. See also: M. Barnes, "Latin Trinitarian Theology," 70–84, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); M. Barnes, "One Nature, One Power: Consensus Doctrine in Pro-Nicene Polemic," in *Studia Patristica* (Louvain: Peeters, 1997), esp. 1–5; *Divine Powers in Late Antiquity*, ed. Anna Marmodoro and Irini-Fotini Viltanioti (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); Adam Ployd, *Augustine, the Trinity, and the Church: A Reading of the Anti-Donatist Sermons*

as “power theology” provides a stable point of comparison for assessing Lactantius’s theology relative to other pre-Nicene Latin authors.¹² The technical sense of “power” clarifies his use of *virtus* by distinguishing his notions of “power” and “virtue,” and by demonstrating the theological tradition to which his use of the term belongs—a pre-Nicene Latin tradition that builds upon the thought of Tertullian. Because of his nearness to Constantine, revising scholarly accounts of Lactantius’s theology invites further modifications to the story of his witness to Christianity in the Constantinian period and of his influence on later theologians, not least of whom was Saint Augustine.¹³

To reconsider Lactantius’s theology, this article offers a doctrinal account of his presentation of the Father and the Son by examining the notion of *virtus* in his account of the Son. After a brief review of power theology, I examine the meaning of *virtus* in the early discussion of the divine nature in the *Divine Institutes* (*Inst.* 1.3–26 and 2.8). A third section

(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), esp. 7, 144–84; Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Mark DelCogliano, “The Interpretation of John 10:30 in the Third Century: Antimonarchian Polemics and the Rise of Grammatical Reading Techniques,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6, no. 1 (2012): 117–38; Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Transformation of Divine Simplicity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Carl Beckwith, *The Trinitarian Theology of Hilary of Poitiers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*.

¹² Ayres also supports this suggestion insofar as he observes the use of “*X from X*” language to describe the production of the Son from the Father in a range of pre-Nicene Latin authors, and he notes Lactantius’s debt to Tertullian and the similarity of his thought with concepts in Novatian (*Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 73).

¹³ See Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 12–17, esp. 14: “Among Latin Christian writers, it is Lactantius, not Augustine, who first denies that Romans ever knew true justice because they had failed to know and worship the true God.” See also: Peter Garnsey, “Lactantius and Augustine,” in *Representations of Empire: Rome and the Mediterranean World*, ed. A. K. Bowman, H. M. Cotton, M. Goodman and S. Price (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 153–79; and G. Piccaluga, “Ius e Vera Iustitia (Lact.Div.Inst.VI 9.7): Rielaborazione cristiana di un valore assoluto della religione romana arcaica,” *Letica cristiana dei secoli III e IV: eredità e confronti* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinum, 1996), 257–69; John R. Bowlin, “Tolerance Among the Fathers,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26, no. 1 (2006): 20–28. Notable is that all of these are dealing with Lactantius’s moral thought, which is tied to his notion of virtue (*virtus*). In Lactantius, these discussions begin, however, with the *virtus Dei*. Understanding Lactantius’s account of the divine nature is the first step to understanding his ethics and political theology.

uses these initial findings to reconsider Lactantius's Christology (*Inst.* 4.6–10), and to observe Lactantius's reception of Tertullian and Cyprian, along the way. A final section shows that the technical sense of "power" (*virtus*) grounds several analogies for the unity between Father and Son (*Inst.* 4.29), which conclude *Inst.* 4. As a result, this article establishes the foundational meaning of *virtus* in Lactantius's theology. It shows that the causal and moral senses of *virtus* rely upon the technical sense of "power," and that Lactantius's discussion is consistent with leading voices of pre-Nicene Latin Christianity—Tertullian, Cyprian, and Novatian. Such a reading supports the conclusion that Lactantius advocated a traditional pre-Nicene Latin theology. He framed his account for the apologetic context, while remaining sensitive to third-century doctrinal controversies. As the last pre-Nicene Latin apologist, Lactantius brought a traditional "Catholic" doctrine to bear upon the issues of his day.¹⁴

Power Theology: A Very Brief Review

In recent patristic scholarship, the term "power theology" refers to a set of technically defined propositions that were foundational to the philosophy and theology of the early Common Era. As Barnes explains, "δύναμις was, for the early Church, a foundational term in Trinitarian theology, foundational in the way that σοφία and λόγος are understood to have been."¹⁵ In the early Common Era, power theologies, whether among Christians or others, entailed a set of causal claims that supported a philosophical account of being. That account appropriated notions drawn from ancient medicine for use in theological contexts.¹⁶

In the context of patristic usage, the first and most basic notion of power theology is the agreement to conceive of reality in causal terms and therefore regard the manifestation of "power" as the primary indicator of

¹⁴ I use the term "Catholic" because Lactantius used it to define himself (*Inst.* 4.30.10–11). In that respect, "Catholic" offers an historical clarity that terms like "mainstream" or "central" lack. My usage aims *only* to recognize a historical continuity that Lactantius seems to identify between himself and the authors he uses—Tertullian, Cyprian, Novatian. Textually, that continuity is recognized by the use and acceptance of Tertullian's *Adversus Praxeas* [*Prax.*] by each of them. Linguistically, that continuity is recognized by the acceptance, adaptation, and correction of Tertullian's metaphors and logic by the latter authors. Theologically, that continuity is recognized by the mutual opposition of all these theologians to the third-century heresies Tertullian opposed—Monarchianism, Gnosticism, and traditional Roman paganism.

¹⁵ For definition and diffusion of *power theology*, see note 5 above.

¹⁶ M. Barnes, *Power of God*, ch. 1.

existence. As Barnes explains:

The most fundamental understanding of *δύναμις* is that of the capacity of an existent to affect. This *capacity to affect* is understood in three related ways. First, *δύναμις* is the capacity of an existent to affect insofar as it exists. . . . What is meant by “to exist” is in large part the capacity to affect or to be affected.¹⁷

This primary sense of “power” describes an existent in terms of causal relationships. It means that to advocate or reject the power of a thing becomes a way of confessing or denying that thing's existence. This notion correlates “*power* and *nature*” and uses the phrase as a technical formula.¹⁸ As will be seen, this primary sense of *power* is a foundational assumption of Lactantius's argument against the Roman gods.

Power theology entails a second notion, which follows from the first. The claim is that any nature is composed of a plurality of individual and material powers, which communicate their respective identities through their effects. As Barnes explains:

Secondly, *δύναμις* is that capacity which is specific or peculiar to the existent. . . . [It] follows not simply from the fact of existence, but from the *identity* of the existent. Fire, to take a famous example, has the *δύναμις* of heat, because the existence of the *δύναμις* of heat follows specifically from what fire is. Fire is not fire without heat, and wherever there is heat, there must be fire.¹⁹

This second premise of power theology enables a significant epistemological procedure. By observing the *power* of an entity, one determines its nature or character. Because a power communicates its identity to an existent, the actions of an existent—be it fire or a person—reveal its nature. As Barnes has shown, this is the central notion of Tertullian's anti-Monarchian argument, which consistently served later stages of Latin Trinitarian theology.²⁰ As Michel Barnes has shown, Tertullian defended the economy of

¹⁷ M. Barnes, “One Power, One Nature,” 205–206. Cf. M. Barnes, *Power of God*, 29: “The effect of a *δύναμις* is identical with the *δύναμις* itself; a *δύναμις* acts by manifesting itself, thereby replacing (or dominating) the previously manifested *δύναμις*.”

¹⁸ M. Barnes, *Power of God*, 37–44.

¹⁹ M. Barnes, “One Power, One Nature,” 206.

²⁰ See M. Barnes, “Latin Trinitarian Theology,” 70–91.

the monarchy by arguing that common works disclose a common power and thus reveal a unity of nature:

Through the works [*opera*] then the Father will be in the Son and the Son in the Father. And so through [their] works, we understand that the Father and Son are [*esse*] One. [John] kept pressing this point in order to bring us to see that two should be believed albeit in one power [*in una virtute*] because the Son could not be believed unless two is believed.²¹

As will be seen, Lactantius's use of *virtus* extends Tertullian's formulation and the theological tradition it represents. His reliance upon the "one power, one nature" argument indicates Lactantius's concern to convey a traditional Latin theology and to do so in terms sensitive to earlier theological controversy.

These two premises of power theology serve two stages of Lactantius's argument. First, power theology supports Lactantius's critical arguments against the traditional gods. It allows him to establish a definition of the divine nature that excludes traditional Roman deities. Lactantius argues that the divine nature contains a single plenipotentiary power that contains all capacities in himself. The argument grounds, notably, his moral polemic against Rome's gods. Moral failure indicates a weakness, a lack of *virtus*, which is inconsistent with divinity.²² Second, Lactantius's account of God's single power allows Lactantius to identify the Son's divinity and unity with the Father and to distinguish the Son from other beings by using a technically defined theological vocabulary. The argument places Lactantius in a succession of authors who draw their Christological language from Tertullian.

The Power of God in Lactantius

The technical sense of *power* is apparent from Lactantius's earliest arguments with traditional Roman religion (*Inst.* 1.3–2.8).²³ Parallel to the terms *potentia* and *potestas*, *virtus* means "power" and signifies the unique

²¹ Tertullian, *Prax.*, 22.13. See M. Barnes, *Power of God*, 103–10.

²² For this term see discussion of Teloh, Souille, and others in Barnes, *Power of God*, 56, Fn. 2–4.

²³ I use the term "Trinitarian thought" only to designate a field of theological discussion and *not* to make any anachronistic claim about Lactantius's theology. The term simply allows one to avoid circumlocution.

and undivided nature of God's person.²⁴ Lactantius first asks rhetorically, "whether the world is ruled by the power of one god [*potestate unius dei*] or many?"²⁵ *Virtus* soon appears as a synonym of *potestas*. All rational people know, he argues, that "there is One [God], who both founded and controls all things by the same power [*virtute*] by which he founded them."²⁶ That *virtus* signifies *power* is evident from its close association with *potestas* as a near synonym and by the ablative usage with transitive verbs (*condidit, moderetur*) in the same context. The construction makes *virtus* the efficient cause of God's creation.

At this early stage of Lactantius's argument, *virtus* denotes that causal capacity by which God creates and governs the cosmos. Lactantius immediately juxtaposes the moral and physical senses of that capacity under the term *virtus*. God's singular *virtus* discloses God's unicity:

God, moreover, who is eternal mind [*mens aeterna*], is in every part [a being] of perfect and consummate *virtus* [*virtutis*]. If that is true, he is [*est*] necessarily one. Absolute virtue [*virtus*] or power [*potestas*] retains its very own distinct integrity [*propriam firmitatem*].²⁷

These lines are the earliest point of departure for evaluating his account of the divine nature in terms of *power*. Lactantius places *virtus* and *potestas* as synonymous terms that designate the unity of the divine nature, while

²⁴ The terms *persona* and *natura* both appear in the larger context of this discussion in Lactantius. See *Inst.* 1.3.9–10: "Virtutis autem perfecta natura in eo potest esse . . ." (see below at notes 32–34 for surrounding and translation; all translations from *Inst.* are my own). See also *Inst.* 4.29.11: "Since he had put forth two persons [*duas personas*] of God the King, that is, of Christ and of God the Father, who raised him from the depths after his passion."

²⁵ *Inst.* 1.3.2, quoted in Eberhard Heck and Antonie Wlosok, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, vol. 1 (Munich: K. G. Saur, 2005), 9. Cf. Cicero, *De re publica*. 1.55–56.

²⁶ *Inst.* 1.3.2.

²⁷ *Inst.* 1.3.4. See Grillmeier, *Christ and the Christian Tradition*, 193–216. Grillmeier did not address this text or consider Lactantius's arguments of *Inst.* 4 in light of *Inst.* 1. Grillmeier begins with Wlosok and then works entirely in book 4. Loi is aware of the terms *vis*, *virtus*, *potestas*, and *summa potestas*, but not of the etiological schema these terms evoke. Loi is also aware of the New Testament origin of Lactantius's title *virtus Dei*, but his judgment that Lactantius does not distinguish the nature of the Son from the angels shows again that he overlooked the ontological significance of power as designator of nature; Loi, *Lattanzio*, 72–75 and 212–15.

mens represents the unity of action that expresses that *power*.²⁸ The point is evident from both the lexical context and the logic. Since God's *power* is complete, God's person (i.e., nature) is not plural, but One.²⁹ Lactantius's opening claims thus entail the first and foundational notion of *power theology*. He describes God's power in order to characterize God's nature. The linked terms *power* and *nature* denote the entirety of God's person.

At the conclusion of *Inst.* 1.3, Lactantius places this notion in opposition to a Roman Stoic explanation of the traditional gods. He argues that the singularity of God's *power* (*virtus*, *potestas*, *vis*) precludes any attempt to connect philosophical accounts of God with traditional Roman mythologies.³⁰ The argument presents Lactantius's power theology as sharing foundational notions with a larger philosophical tradition.³¹ He applies the first premise of power theology negatively—an absence of *power* denotes an absence of *existence*:

²⁸ Cf. Cicero, *De legibus* 1.21–22: “Do you grant for us, Pomponius . . . that all nature is ruled by the power [*vi*] of the immortal gods, or by nature [*natura*], or reason [*ratione*], or virtue [*virtute*], or mind [*mente*], or divine power [*numine*], or whatever other word I might use . . .” (my translation).

²⁹ See note 24 above.

³⁰ For examples of such an attempt, see Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.58–62, which conducts the entire discussion in terms of *power*. See also Seneca, *De beneficiis* 4.7–8. For Lactantius's work as opposition to Roman ideology, see Colot, *Lactance*, esp., 2–48.

³¹ Consider J. Rufus Fears, “The Cult of Virtues and Roman Imperial Ideology,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* (part 2) 17, no. 2 (1981): 827–948, at 838. Fears's remarks here on Cicero (*De natura deorum* 2.60) show that the plurality of deities is reconciled with philosophical monotheism through “the deification of abstract ideas”: “A specific condition or quality, like peace, victory, martial prowess, or fidelity, is recognized as the operation of a characteristic and peculiar divine power, which in turn is designated by the condition or quality which it produces. *Concordia* is the godhead which establishes *Concordia*; *Pax* is the godhead which establishes *pax*.” This phenomenon is the same as what M. Barnes's terms “*X from X*” causality (*Power of God*, 105–86; see note 84 below). Furthermore, although it falls outside the scope of this article, my thoughts are in line with a growing recognition that philosophical theology and Roman religion were more closely associated than scholars have often seen. See: Peter van Nuffelen, *Rethinking the Gods: Philosophical Readings of Religion in the Post-Hellenistic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Attilio Mastrocinque, “Creating One's Own Religion: Intellectual Choices,” in *A Companion to Roman Religion*, ed. Jorg Rupke (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 378–91.

If there are many gods, they will be weaker [*minus valebunt*], insofar as the others have as much as exists in each one. Therefore, the gods' *virtutes* and powers [*virtutes et potestates deorum*] will accomplish less [*minus valebunt*], since each individual will lack, however much was in the others; so, the greater in number, the weaker they are.³²

Along with the synonymous usage of *potestas* and *virtus*, Lactantius's argument from relative strength (*valere*) and weakness indicates that the primary sense of *virtus* as a marker of existence is operative throughout the passage. Hence, Lactantius associates *power* (*virtus, potestas*) and *nature* (*natura*) as complementary notions:

Moreover, the perfect *nature* of *virtus* [*virtutis autem natura perfecta*] is able to exist in the one in whom it is whole [*totum*] rather than in him in whom some part [*pars*] is lacking from the whole. If then God is perfect, as he must be, he can only be one [*unus*]. Hence, all things are in him.³³

Lactantius's notion of *power* [*virtus*] thus sustains his definition of God as One. Lactantius claims that participation in divine power equates to a diminution of the divine person. His argument resolves into a narrative using *virtus* and *vis* as divine titles.³⁴ In short, the basic notion in Lactantius's account of the divine nature is *virtus*; it reflects his usage of *power theology*.

At a later phase in the discussion, Lactantius introduces a phrase that reappears in his Christology (*Inst.* 4.6.1–2). Lactantius mainly reiterates his previous discussion, but the new term betrays important textual influences and the technical nature of his usage. Borrowing from Tertullian's *Apologeticus* 23, Lactantius entitles God *unus maximus et pollens*:

So then, the other gods will not be gods but satellites and ministers, whom that one greatest and powerful over all [*unus maximus et pollens omnium*] compels to their duties; and they will serve his reign. If all are not equal, then all are not gods. Nor is it possible

³² *Inst.* 1.3.9–10.

³³ *Inst.* 1.3.9.

³⁴ *Inst.* 1.3.9: "Why is it that the Highest Power over all things [*summa illa rerum potestas*], that Divine Strength, [*vis divina*] cannot be at the same time divided." Lactantius argues this way at length; see *Inst.* 1.2.9–11. Cf. *Inst.* 1.11.5 and 5.1.2, where he locates his work in relation to Tertullian, Minucius Felix and Cyprian.

that the same one can be servant and master. For if “God” is the name of the Highest Power [*nomen summae potestatis*], he ought to be incorruptible, complete, impassible, and subject to nothing. . . . Now, let us consider the oneness [*unitatem*] of the divine power in the literary witnesses [*testimoniis*].³⁵

The above title, *maximus unus et pollens*, marks the exclusivity of God’s person. Lactantius establishes it as a title that reappears in the *Divine Institutes* account of the Son’s divinity.

The juxtaposition of traditional gods with angels and demons updates Tertullian’s apologetic. The argument gives *virtus* a simultaneously moral and physical signification. *Virtus absoluta* and *perfecta* is effective, by definition, while God’s power is inherently perfect and good.³⁶

To the above account of God in terms of power, *Inst.* 2.8.8–2.9 shows that Lactantius distinguishes human from divine by defining what forms of action characterize divine and human natures. The argument makes *creatio ex nihilo* a decisive premise in Lactantius’s account of the divine nature. It also anticipates his later Christology, which gives the Son a role in creation—the distinctive action that reveals divine power. Lactantius says:

God will be of lesser power [*minoris potestatis*], if he makes from what is pre-made [*ex parato*]; and this [*quod*] is characteristic of humanity [*quod est hominis*]. A craftsman will build nothing without wood, because he is not able [*non potest*] to make wood for himself. ‘Not to be able [*non posse*]’ is characteristic of the weakness of humanity [*imbecillitatis humanitatis*]. God himself makes matter on his own, because he is able [*potest*]. Indeed ‘to be able [*posse*]’ is characteristic of God, for if he is not able, he is not God. A person makes out of that which exists, because through mortality he is weak [*per immortalitatem imbecillus est*] and through that weakness [*per imbecillitatem*] characterized by a definite and delimited power [*definitae ac modicae potestatis*]. God, by contrast, makes out of that

³⁵ *Inst.* 1.3.22–24. Cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 23.1–3.

³⁶ *Virtus* is a particularly apt term because of its polyvalence in Roman usage. See argument and bibliography in Myles Anthony McDonnell, *Roman Manliness: Virtus and the Roman Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). McDonnell shows that the original significance of *virtus* as “manliness,” or even “strength,” was primary, and that the commonly known sense of *virtue* arrived only later in the Late Republic as a result of philosophical influence.

which is not, because through eternity he is strong [*fortis*] through the strength of his immense power [*per fortitudinem immensae potestatis*], which lacks end or limit [*fine ac modo careat*], as the life of the Maker itself.³⁷

The above lines present God's capacity to create as the action which distinguishes the character of God's power from that of humans.³⁸ Lactantius uses *posse* as a synonym for *esse* (*non posse* = *non esse Dei*) while contrasting the plenipotentiary nature of God's power in creation with the weakness of traditional gods: "How then would that divine power [*divina illa vis*] differ from humanity," Lactantius asks, "if, like a human, God also needs some external strength [*ope indigent aliena*]?"³⁹ The action of creation *ex nihilo* distinguishes divine power from its pale imitations. Divine power, in turn, reveals divine nature.

Lactantius's argument from *creatio ex nihilo* distinguishes his use of power theology from traditional "pagan" uses of the same notion. Lactantius takes up the logic of Minucius Felix's defense of divine *unicity*, but employs a technical language that reflects a later phase of theological debate.⁴⁰ Lactantius specifies his position by introducing the term *simplex*:

³⁷ *Inst.* 2.8.26–29. Lactantius's opposition between God's *potestas immensa* and humanity's *potestas definita ac modica* further marks the technical discourse that animates this discussion. As noted above, in arguments based on the technical sense of "a power," each *power* is considered individual and material (Barnes, *Power of God*, 21–31). In Latin, this technical usage first appears in Lucretius, who draws his *power causality* from Democritus and the Epicurean tradition. Lucretius speaks of "quid possit oriri, quid nequeat, finita potestas denique cuique, quanam sit ratione atque alte terminus haerens" ("what is able to come into existence [*possit oriri*] and what cannot, and by what reason there is in each thing a delimited power [*finita potestas*] and deep inherent end [*alte terminus haerens*]") (*De rerum natura* 1.79; see also 5.43 and 5.73). *De rerum natura* 3.266–270 shows that Lucretius was working with *power causality*, wherein a plurality of powers combined to form a common nature: "There is a certain scent, color, and savor, and nevertheless from all these one perfect bulk of body [*augmen corporis*]. So also heat and air and the invisible power of wind [*venti caeca potestas*] when mingled create one nature [*mixta creant unam naturam*]." Lactantius's reference here evokes this Lucretian language in order to evoke an established association of delimited *potestas* with mortality.

³⁸ *Inst.* 2.8.17: "Which, if it happens, he is of an imperfect power [*imperfectae virtutis*], and so the institutor of matter will have be judged more powerful." Cf. *Inst.* 2.8.20.

³⁹ *Inst.* 2.8.17.

⁴⁰ Novatian, *De trinitate* 5.6: "He is indeed simple [*simplex*] without any bodily combination [*corporea concretionem*]" (my translation).

For if there is anything before him, if anything was not made by him, then he loses the name and power of God [*potestatem et nomen Dei amittet*]. . . . Thus it can only be that the nature of the eternal one is simple [*aeterni natura est simplex*] and all things descend from it as a source [*ex fonte*].⁴¹

Expounded at length between *Inst.* 2.8 and 2.9, this argument clarifies Lactantius's debate begun in *Inst.* 1.3. For him, the divine nature contains every specific causal capacity without participation by any other power. The divine *virtus* is plenipotentary, and thus not conjoined with any other.⁴² In this specific sense, God's nature is simple, and therefore separate from all others. As the argument unfolds, Lactantius measures Rome's traditional deities against this standard of divine simplicity.

An extended scrutiny of the traditional gods occupies the pages between Lactantius's early definitions of the divine nature (*Inst.* 1.3) and the above explanation of divine simplicity (*Inst.* 2.8–2.9). The intervening discussion offers an extended restatement of the Latin apologists traditional Euhemerist argument.⁴³ The argument shows the way Lactantius's apparently diverse usages of *virtus* apply a fundamental concept across dimensions of activity, be they physical or moral. Lactantius grounds the moral sense of *virtus* in the prior sense of *power*. "Virtue" simply indicates a power of action directed toward non-material conflicts.⁴⁴ His discussion

⁴¹ *Inst.* 2.8.32.

⁴² Cf. Cicero, *De natura deorum* 2.28–29, where the Stoic figure Balbus accounts for the divine nature as embracing many powers in a single nature.

⁴³ Cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 18.7.5–13; Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 21.11.

⁴⁴ Lactantius's most extended discussion of the clearly philosophical sense of "virtue" occurs in *Inst.* 3.7–12. Engaging that argument exceeds the scope of this article, but I note that discussion is entirely conducted in terms of *power* and *effect*. Cf. *Inst.* 3.8.30: "Why then did he prefer to call knowledge [*scientiam*] rather than wisdom itself the highest good, each has the same meaning and power [*utriusque significatio et vis eadem*]?" Perhaps the most succinct definition is in *Inst.* 3.8.32. Again, "virtue" has a distinct *vis* and *officium*; see *Inst.* 3.8.36: "If it is not possible to attain any good except through labor [cf. *Fin.* 5.77–79], it appears that *virtus* is the means by which one arrives [at the highest good], since the *vis* and *officium* of *virtus* lies in undertaking labors and bringing them to completion [*quoniam in suscipiendis ac perferendis laboribus vis officiumque virtutis est*]. Now then, by definition, the highest good cannot be that through which one arrives at something else. But since they did not know what *virtus* causes or that to which it tends [*quid efficeret virtus aut quo tenderet*], they sought nothing more noble than it [*honestius*]; and they ultimately substituted in the name of *virtus* itself [*in ipsius virtutis nomine*], that which they said should be desired for the sake of no further

gives precise philosophical justification to an otherwise merely *ad hominem* argument against Rome's traditional gods.

Lactantius scrutinizes the Roman gods by applying Tertullian's argument that works disclose nature in a negative way.⁴⁵ Lactantius introduces a contrast between the creative works that reveal God's *virtus* and the works of Rome's gods, which disclose their weak humanity. His presentation relies heavily on the second notion of *power theology*—the claim that every existent has a distinct capacity that communicates its identity in its works. Lactantius begins with a definition of the divine nature:

How then does anyone think anything difficult or impossible for God, who pondered such great and marvelous works [*tanta tamque mirifica opera*] in his providence [*mirifica opera providentia*], established them by his *virtus* [*virtute constituit*], perfected them by his reason [*ratione perfecit*]; he who even now sustains them by his spirit [*spiritu sustentat*] and governs them by his power [*potestate moderetur*], the Incomprehensible Ineffable One, known to none other than himself?⁴⁶

The above paragraph sets the stage for a negative argument. The lines specify creation as the grand and distinctive work that expresses God's unique *virtus*. Lactantius then uses this claim to criticize actions that disclose a power unequal to such a work. Lactantius soon contrasts God's ingenerate status with the derivative natures of Rome's traditional deities. His scrutiny of the traditional gods turns on the notion that their powers are unequal to the definition above:

Thus, as I often reflect upon so great a majesty, those who worship the gods seem to me blind, thoughtless, foolish, barely different from mute animals, since they believe that those begotten by the intercourse of man and woman could have had anything of divine

advantage, and thus established as a good something that lacked any good at all [*ut bonum sibi constituerent quod bono indigeret*].” In this respect, the technical sense of *power* does much to clarify the ambiguity that Bowen and Garnsey find in his usage (see note 1 above). Colot also connects Lactantius's discussion of moral virtues—e.g., *humanitas*, *pietas*, *miserericordia*—to Lactantius's notions of *affectus* and *officium* (*Lactance*, 302–5). She observes here that, for Lactantius, “human beings possessed in their *affectus* itself the ‘active principle’ of their *virtus*.”

⁴⁵ See note 20, above.

⁴⁶ *Inst.* 1.8.2

virtus and majesty [*maiestatis*].⁴⁷

In this statement, the logic of power theology already operates under the form of Lactantius's oratory. His attack entails a specific syllogism: God's *virtus* is complete, perfect, and effective of his wise, reasonable, and orderly creation. The traditional gods' *virtus* is derivative and incomplete. Therefore, the *virtus* of the traditional gods is characteristic of human weakness, not divine power. The argument leads to Lactantius's fundamental criticism that the traditional gods were human natures, not divine:

If anyone considers what the works of God actually are, he will judge ridiculous all those things which people so foolish marvel at. Indeed, these are not to be measured by the divine powers [*divinis virtutibus*], which they do not know, but by the infirmity of their own strength [*infirmirate suarum virium*].⁴⁸

The parallel between *virtus* and *vis* in these lines shows again the way "virtue" and "power" encompass a spectrum of meaning unified by the notion of causal capacity. Presented as opposites of *infirmitas*, both terms indicate the gods' ability to carry out some action; if the gods were not divine, they nonetheless demonstrate some form of *virtus*. That *virtus*, however, was human, since it was imperfect, incomplete.

Lactantius's judgment about the gods' *infirmitas* sets the stage for an extended scrutiny of Roman *virtus*. His argument undertakes a traditional medical examination.⁴⁹ He finds that all the gods display some weakness, some capacity for death, which proves that their *power* is imperfect, and therefore their *nature* is not divine. Hercules is his first patient: "Very famous on account of his *virtus*, Hercules is considered a sort of Africanus among the gods. Yet is it not said that in drunken adulteries he sinned against the very earth which he wandered and purged?" The claim is not a simple *ad hominem*. It is a minor premise in an argument about divinity. Hence, Lactantius's vocabulary reflects the early definition of God's "great and marvelous works," as he subjects Hercules to a standard of divinity laid out in the early chapters: "Even those great and marvelous things [*magna et mirabilia*] which he did accomplish should not be judged as belonging to the sort [*talia*] that seem worthy of being attributed to divine powers

⁴⁷ *Inst.* 1.8.3.

⁴⁸ *Inst.* 1.9.6.

⁴⁹ For diagnosis of the *powers* in Greek medicine see Barnes, *Power of God*, 34–37.

[*divinis virtutibus*].”⁵⁰ Where actions disclose the character of the power, Hercules’s actions prove his human nature.

Lactantius subjects Jupiter to a similar procedure. Invoking the *Triumph of Cupid*, Lactantius recalls Jupiter’s famous exploits and emphasizes the god’s failed *virtus*—that is, the fact of his weakness. His remarks elide the physical and moral senses of *virtus* as forms of power:

Having enumerated the affairs of each [of the gods], he portrayed a parade in which Jupiter is lead in chains before the chariot of the triumphant Cupid. Indeed, anyone so absent of *virtus* [*virtutis est expers*], who is conquered by cupidity and evil lusts, as the author portrayed him, is subject not to Cupid, but to eternal death [*morti subiectus est sempiternae*].⁵¹

These remarks parallel Lactantius’s early language of divinity: “If God is the name of the highest power, he must be incorruptible, perfect, impassible, subject to nothing [*nulli rei subiectus*].”⁵² Jupiter, by contrast, is subject to passion and death [*morti subiectus est sempiternae*]. By the same logic, Jupiter’s subjection to the fates shows that his power is not supreme, just as his one act of continence is not attributable “to any *virtus* [*non virtute ulla*], but to fear of a successor,” a quality characteristic of one who is “mortal, weak, nothing [*mortalis et imbecillus et nihili*].”⁵³ His moral polemic establishes a minor premise in a philosophically articulated dispute about the divine nature and its *virtus*.⁵⁴ Lactantius’s Christology applies the same logic to an inverse effect.

Maxima Virtus Patria: The Son

Lactantius’s Christology begins in earnest at *Inst.* 4.6–10.⁵⁵ Tertullian’s

⁵⁰ *Inst.* 9.1–2. Contrast Bowen and Garnsey: “Even the great and wonderful deeds he did ought not to compel the judgment that they must be attributed plainly to divine virtues in him.” Cf. *Inst.* 1.8.2 and note 24 above.

⁵¹ *Inst.* 1.11.2–3.

⁵² *Inst.* 1.3.23.

⁵³ *Inst.* 1.11.14–16. Bowen and Garnsey overlook the technical language here, reading *non virtute ulla* (*Inst.* 1.11.15.1) as “no good instinct.”

⁵⁴ Saturn gets the same treatment. *Inst.* 1.13.5: “Furthermore, why did some greater power [*vis aliqua maior*] exist which could overcome his power [*potestatem*]?” *Inst.* 1.12.1: “Since we have unveiled the mysteries of the power and found Saturn’s parents, let’s return to his powers and deeds [*ad virtutes et facta*].”

⁵⁵ Cf. *Inst.* 2.8.4: Lactantius introduces a very brief statement of the Son’s generation amid the so-called “dualistic passages,” which were interpolated by a redactor.

theology most thoroughly shapes his doctrine, while Cyprian guides his exegesis.⁵⁶ Drawing on Psalm 33, Proverbs 8, and Hebrews, Lactan-

Scholars agree that the redactor was probably Lactantius himself, although the most recent editors acknowledge it is uncertain; see Digeser, "Lactantius and Constantine's Letter to Arles"; Heck and Wlosok, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, 1:xxxix ("Praefatio"); and Eberhard Heck, *Die Dualistischen Zusätze und die Kaiseranreden bei Lactantius* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1972). The passage is an early statement of what Loi has termed Lactantius's "cosmological dualism" (*Lattanzio*, 270). Lactantius accounts for the origin of evil by relating the generations of the Son and of Lucifer in parallel. The early passages confirm that power theology undergirds his thinking: "Since the source of full and consummate good was in itself, as it always is, so that the good springs from it as a river and flows broadly forth, he produced a spirit like himself [*similem*], who was endowed with the powers of God the father [*virtutibus patris*]. (We will attempt to teach why [God] would want him in the fourth book.) Then [the Father] made another, in whom the inborn quality of divine lineage [*divinae stirpis*] did not remain. And so willingly [*suapte*] was he infected by the poison of envy and crossed over from good unto evil; and by his own choice [*suo arbitrio*], which had been given to him free [*liberum*] by God, he adopted for himself a contrary name, whence it appears that he is the brackened font of all kinds of evils [*fontem esse livorem*]" (*Inst.* 2.8.4). Notably, these lines employ a central metaphor of pre-Nicene Latin power theology, "like a river from its source" (see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 71–74). The phrase places *Inst.* 4.6.10's later *virtutibus patris dei praeditus* into a certain lexical context. *Virtus* means *power* and designates the Son's identity relative to the Father and in contradistinction from the *alterum spiritum*. This also means that Lactantius's dualism arises from his understanding of reality in terms drawn from medicine. Hence, at *Inst.* 2.12.4–6, he evokes Empedocles, Lucretius, and Varro before explaining the *quattuor elementa* and their principles of opposition. Lactantius thus says humanity was made, just as the world itself, "[ex bono et malo], ex luce ac tenebris, ex vita et morte." The phrase *ex bono et malo* appears in brackets because the editors regard it as a later addition. If Wlosok is right to describe "die dualistische Tendenz des Laktanz" arising from Manichaean influences in his North African Christianity (*Laktanz und die philosophische Gnosis*, 191n28), her comment can be correct only if Manichaeism is to be understood as an appropriation of medical causalities.

⁵⁶ Cyprian guides Lactantius's reading of the Old Testament, though not exclusively. Lactantius also shows the influence of Theophilus of Antioch (*Inst.* 1.7.7; 2.12.19; 3.20.15; 4.5.6), Tertullian (see below and Heck and Wlosok, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, 4:796 [*Index Locorum*]), and Justin Martyr (*Inst.* 4.18.22); see also R. M. Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 88–96, and Pierre Monat, *Lactance et La Bible: une propédeutique latine à la lecture de la Bible dans l'Occident constantinien* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1982). For Lactantius's evaluation of pagan sources, see Jochen Walter, *Pagane Texte und Wertvorstellungen bei Laktanz* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2006), and Alain Goulon, "Les Citations des Poètes Latins dans L'œuvre de Lactance," in *Lactance et son Temps: Recherches Actuelles: Actes du IV Colloque D'Etudes*

tius refers to Christ as God's Word, Wisdom, and Spirit, and even as an angel. The terms *doctor iustitiae* and *dux virtutis* also appear within the context of Lactantius's account of Christ's work.⁵⁷ Along with pivotal cues from Cyprian's *Ad quirinum*, Hebrews 1:1–7 shapes the structure of his account.⁵⁸ Lactantius's several Christological titles are best understood theologically by reference to the notion of *virtus*. Power theology allows

Historiques et Patristiques Chantilly 21–23 Septembre 1976, ed. J. Fontaine and M. Perrin (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1978), 107–57. In English, see Jackson Bryce, *The Library of Lactantius* (New York: Garland Publications, 1990). This is an unedited version of his 1973 dissertation. See also Ogilvie, *The Library of Lactantius*.

⁵⁷ *Inst.* 4.13.1.

⁵⁸ *Vetus Latina [VL]* of Heb 1:1–7, in *Vetus Latina: The Remains of the Old Latin Bible*, ed. Roger Gryson, vol. 25/2, ed. Hermann Josef Frede (Freiburg in Breisgau: Herder, 1987). The below lines of the *VL* follow the A line and place significant variants in brackets. The A line stops at verse 5, after which I use the D line. Words in bold correspond to language in *Inst.* 4.6–10 and 29: “1Multis partibus et multis modis ante deus locutus est patribus **in prophetis**. 2postremo in his diebus locutus est nobis in filio quem posuit heredem omnium per quem etiam **fecit** et saecula 3qui est splendor gloriae et imago [figura – J] **substantiae** eius gerens [ferens – D] omnia **verbo virtutis** suae purgatione peccatorum a se facta sedit in dextera **excelsis** tanto melior **factus angelis** quanto excellentius [differentius/differentior – V] **nomen** accepit [hereditavit – J]. 5cui enim dixit aliquando angelorum ‘filius meus est tu ego hodie **generavi** te et iterum ego ero illi in patrem et ipse erit mihi in filium,’ 6deinde iterum cum inducit **primogenitum** in creatione dicit et ‘adoret illum omnes angelos dei et 7ad **angelos** quidem dicit qui facit **angelos** suos **spiritus** et **ministros** suos ignem urentum.” I place this observation at the beginning as a point of reference for what follows and encourage the reader to refer back to it. It is not only the choice of key terms, but also the logical progression and themes, which indicate that Hebrews 1:1–7 shapes this passage. Lactantius first introduces the major movements of his narrative with a reference to the “scriptures” or “the prophets.” The references easily gloss Hebrews 1:1. He then designates the Son with the terms *virtus*, *verbum*, and *maiestas* that together suggest Hebrews 1:2–4. As the argument unfolds, he notes a *differentia* which serves to distinguish the Son from the angels with a reference to Psalm 33[32]:6. *Differentia* gently adapts the *differentius* of Hebrews 1:4, while the assertion that the angels are created for ministry reflects Heb 1:7—a background Monat also notes (*Lactance et La Bible*, 174)—while the notion that they are therefore “ministering spirits” encompasses the larger context all the way to Hebrews 1:14. Lactantius thus uses the key terms of Hebrews 1—*virtus*, *maiestas*, *virtus*, *verbum*, *ministerium*, *differentia*[us], *generare*—in a definite sequence. Individually, one could find an alternative source of any and/or all of these terms. Notably, John McGuckin finds Hebrews 1:4, Hebrews 1:7–8 and Hebrews 1:12–14 in this section (McGuckin, “Lactantius as Theologian: an Angelic Christology on the Eve of Nicaea,” *Rivista di Storia e Letteratura Religiosa* 22, no. 3 [1986]: 492–97, at 493).

Lactantius to express the unity of nature between the Father and the Son in terms of *virtus*. The same ontological notions distinguish the Son from the “other angels.” The whole account is made intelligible by the logic and language of *power theology*.

Proverbs 8 and Hebrews 1 provide the basis for Lactantius’s opening remarks on the Son.⁵⁹ The account begins with an explanation of the pre-existent Son. Lactantius attributes to the Son a distinctive title, which marks the Son as divine in the way that the Father is divine:

Therefore (as I said in the second book) God the Maker and Constitutor of the world, before he attempted this brilliant work of the universe, generated [*genuit*] a holy and incorruptible spirit [*sanctum et incorruptibilem spiritum*], whom he officially designated as his son [*nuncuparet filium*]. Although afterwards he had created countless others, whom we call angels, he nevertheless deemed this Firstborn alone worthy of the Divine Name [Heb 1:4], in that he was exercising [*pollentem*] the Father’s *virtus* and majesty [*patria virtute et maiestate* = Heb 1:3–4]. Moreover, not only do the words of the prophets agree unanimously [Heb 1:1], but even the preaching of Trismegistus and the predictions of the Sibyls show that he is the Son of the Most High and endowed [*praeditus*] with the supreme power [*maxima potentia*].⁶⁰

These lines indicate the Son’s status as God by showing that the Son bears the Name, which signifies the Son’s possession of the Father’s distinctive

⁵⁹ Cyprian, *Testimonia Quirinum* [*Quir.*] 2.1. This comment does not negate the fact that *Quir.* 2.1 shapes Lactantius’s presentation until *Inst.* 4.9.

⁶⁰ *Inst.* 4.6.1–3. See Elizabeth Digeser, *Making of a Christian Empire: Lactantius and Rome* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 70–73, where this passage is supposedly grounded in *Asclepius* 8. The term *virtus ac maiestas* is taken as evidence that a Hermetic influence dominates his thinking on Christ. Monat sees the influence of Proverbs 8 in this chapter and notes also Hebrews 1:4 at 4.6.8 (*Lactance et La Bible*, 168–74). *Biblia Patristica* II notes Hebrews 1:7. Additionally, Lactantius’s above association of a Wisdom Christology with the theology of the Name has a clear precedent in Tertullian, *Prax.* 19.4.30: “In the Scriptures, this power [*vis*] and this arrangement of the divine mind [*sensus*] is also shown under the name of Wisdom. Cf. *Inst.* 4.8.11, where Lactantius pairs *virtus* and *sensus*. Loi refers *virtus* in this passage to 1 Cor 1:24 (*Lattanzio*, 213n37). René Braun also attributes it to 1 Corinthians 1:24 and Luke 1:35, noting the currency of this meaning in “Justin et ses successeurs” (*Deus Christianorum: Recherche sur le vocabulaire doctrinal de Tertullien*, 2nd ed. [Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1977], 280–81).

virtus.⁶¹ Lactantius identifies the divinity of the Son by the terms *maxima potentia* and *pollentem patria virtute*. The significance of this title is shown by comparison with *Inst.* 1.3.23–34.⁶² In Lactantius's anti-pagan argument, *maximus et pollens* marks the Father's exclusive nature. The title attributes to Christ precisely what it denied to the traditional gods—the *virtus* and *potestas* of the divine nature.⁶³ This language of power, shaped by Cyprian's exegesis, locates Lactantius's theology within the Christological trajectories of pre-Nicene Latin Christianity.⁶⁴ His terms take up the earlier formula and confirm that Lactantius's use of *virtus* to represent the Son entails a *power theology*.

After briefly explaining that the Son was born twice, Lactantius situates the Son relative to the “other angels.” His theological sequence is shaped by

⁶¹ McGuckin, *Researches*, 183. McGuckin notes that Lactantius derives this title from Hebrews 1:3, and further distinguishes Christ's status as a name, “which no other except [the Father] knows. . . Here the Epistle uses the distinction of the ‘name Christ has inherited’ as the measure of his essential superiority over the angels. In both Hebrews and the DI this distinguishing title is one of Sonship.” Cf. *Inst.* 4.7.4: “Although none other knows his name, which the Father placed upon him in the beginning, he has nevertheless one designation [*aliud vocabulum*] and among human beings another.”

⁶² See *Inst.* 4.2; see also note 34 above.

⁶³ Loi, *Lattanzio*, 212. Lactantius's use of Proverbs 8 and the notion of the Son as “spirit” belies the influence of Tertullian's *Prax*. Loi showed this linguistically here: “If The expression *vox dei* in reference to the Son is not attested prior to Lactance, the theological conception contained within it is not therefore extraneous to Tertullian and other earlier writers.” However, Loi continues here: “La equivalenza stabilita da Lattanzio tra le espressioni *Verbum Dei* e *Vox Dei* conferma il carattere realisticamente antropomorfo della concezione lattanziana della generazione divina attraverso il processo della *prolatio vocis ac spiritus*” (“The equivalency that Lactantius establishes between the expressions *Verbum Dei* and *Vox Dei* confirms the realistically anthropomorphic character of the Lactantian conception of the divine generation through the process of the *prolatio vocis ac spiritus* [bringing forth of the word and spirit]”). Barnes, however, has shown that the use of Proverbs 8 and Hebrews 1 is a feature of the earliest Christian pneumatologies, which arise from the Jewish context. Tertullian and Origen change this exegesis in the context of their anti-Monarchian argument (Michel Barnes, “The Beginning and End of Early Christian Pneumatology,” *Augustinian Studies* 39, no. 2 [2008]: 169–86, esp. 171–73 and 184–86). Lactantius's identification of the Son with Wisdom is a mark of that influence. For the anti-Monarchian context of Origen's theology see Stephen Waers, *Monarchianism and Origen's Early Trinitarian Theology* (Unpublished Dissertation, Marquette University, 2016).

⁶⁴ Cyprian, *Quir.* 2.1–4, lists all of the texts that were most significant for pre-Nicene Latin power theology and places them in an order of presentation that Lactantius employs.

the first chapter of Hebrews and the sequence of Cyprian's exegesis:

How then did he produce [him]? First, the divine works [*opera divina*] can be neither known nor explained by anyone. Still, it has been safeguarded for us in the Holy Scriptures [Heb 1:1] that the Son of God is the audible word [*sermonem*] and that the other angels are the breath of God [*dei spiritus*—Heb 1:3–4]. For an audible word [*sermo*] is breath [*spiritus*] brought forth with signification [*Prax.* 8.5]. Nonetheless, since breath and an audible word are brought forth from different parts—for breath proceeds from the nostrils but speech from the mouth [Ps 33:6]—there is a great difference [*differentia* = Heb 1:4] between this Son of God and the other angels . . . [4.8.11] . . . by so much more [than our words] must we believe that the Word of God remains forever attended [*comitari*] by the *virtus* and understanding [*sensus*], which it draws from the Father like a river from its source!⁶⁵

These lines are typical of pre-Nicene Latin theology in two ways. First, Lactantius's distinction between the Son and the angels, along with his identification of the Son as the Word, is immediately supported by references to Psalm 33:6 and Psalm 44:2. Shortly hereafter, Lactantius quotes the Sibylline Oracle to illustrate the argument from pagan sources. This exegesis underscores Lactantius's reliance on biblical sources.⁶⁶ Secondly,

⁶⁵ *Inst.* 4.8.6–9. Cf. *Inst.* 4.8.11. Monat notes the close resemblance of this thought with Hebrews 1:4 but still finds that, “Lactance n’est pas assez théologien pour établir nettement une distinction entre nature et fonction” (*Lactance et la Bible*, 174). McGuckin, says, “In fact, Lactantius follows the angelic doctrine of Tertullian which interprets it as a description of a function rather than a nature and applies it with the context of a revelatory Logos-theology” (“Lactantius as Theologian,” 495). Lactantius, however, follows Tertullian by identifying the nature through the observance of the power disclosed by the functional distinction. Of course, angelomorphic Christology (and Pneumatology) recalls the enduring influence of Jewish traditions in Lactantius as well. See Charles Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), and more recently, Bogdan Bucur, *Angelomorphic Early Pneumatology: Clement of Alexandria and Other Early Christian Witnesses* (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

⁶⁶ *Inst.* 4.6.5–6. See Monat's comments underscore the traditional character of this exegesis: “The teaching about the Word given in *Adversus Praxeum* makes apparent in conjunction with three texts of 8.27/Psalm 33:2/John 1:1–3 . . .” (*Lactance et La Bible*, 176); Lactantius does not quote John 1:3 until *Inst.* 4.9.3, a chapter borrowed largely from Tertullian, *Prax.* 5.3. See Heck and Wlosok, *Divinarum Institutionum Libri Septem*, 336.

the definition of "an audible word brought forth with signification," along with the reference to the Son as *spirit* and the use of Proverbs 8:22–31, bears the imprint of Tertullian's *Adversus Praxeam* 8–9.⁶⁷

A comparison of the above text with Tertullian's (*Adv. Prax.* 8–9) shows the way Lactantius adapts the traditional pre-Nicene theology for his apologetic context. Lactantius's concern with the Son's position relative to the angels is traditional.⁶⁸ It is not, however, a concern of *Adversus Praxeam* 8, where Tertullian defends the notion of "two" in an anti-Monarchian argument.⁶⁹ Lactantius does not simply restate Tertullian's theology. He receives Tertullian's theology, but fashions an account that is attentive both to later theological developments within Christianity and to the concerns of his non-Christian audience.

Lactantius opposes anti-Monarchian theology, but two additional factors shape his presentation. The first factor is Lactantius's need to avoid self-contradiction. His denunciation of the traditional gods asserted that the One Power cannot be divided among a plurality of powers.⁷⁰ In that context, he repeated Tertullian's claim that such derivative powers would be merely "satellites and ministers of God."⁷¹ Distinguishing Christ from the angels by means of *virtus* forestalls the claim that Lactantius has reintroduced the very pluralistic doctrine he rejected. This section thus navigates the Scylla of contradiction and the Charybdis of Monarchianism.

The second factor explains Lactantius's choice to situate the Son relative

⁶⁷ See Tertullian, *Prax.* 8.5: "This will be the 'projection' of the Truth, the guardian of the unity, and because of it we say that the Son was 'brought forth' [*prolatum*] from the Father, but not separated . . . just as root and shoot, font and flow, sun and ray." Cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 21.11 and Lactantius, *Inst.* 4.6.8–9. Cf. *Inst.* 3.3.1. See Loi, *Lattanzio*, 215–16. On Tertullian, Joseph Moingt compares this to Athenagoras and Theophilus as well (*La Théologie Trinitaire de Tertullien* [Paris: Aubier, 1966], 243).

⁶⁸ M. Barnes, *Power of God*, 105: "Positioning the Son vis-à-vis the angels is an enduring central concern of Latin christology: *virtus* language places some burden on this argument since . . . Tertullian uses *virtutes* to mean angels, and the Son must be distinguished from these 'powers.'"

⁶⁹ Tertullian, *Prax.* 8.5. See Moingt, *Théologie Trinitaire de Tertullien*, 989–90: "The reason expressed by this metaphorical teaching is then to show [*faire apparaître*] the unity in that same place where the separation seems to be produced [*se produire*], in the act where the Son goes out from the Father, to show that this 'prolation' or 'exit [*sortie*]' is not any division, but a promotion, that is to say, a generation in the non-division of the substance."

⁷⁰ See *Inst.* 4.2. Furthermore, Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 23.12, says that the gods were in fact demons. He also says in *De carne Christi* 14, "the other gods are not gods but satellites and ministers" (my translation).

⁷¹ See *Inst.* 4.2; see also note 34.

to the angels. Scholars have taken this preoccupation with the angels as evidence of Lactantius's limited acquaintance with the most recent Latin theologies of his period.⁷² In fact, the narrative reflects the apologetic strategy that guides his use of Cyprian's *Ad Quirinum*. At *Inst.* 4.5.3–5, Lactantius justified his use of the Scriptures, even to the pagan audience, by repeating the traditional apologetic argument from prophetic fulfillment.⁷³ As he uses Cyprian's *Ad Quirinum*, then, Lactantius cites the Old Testament text Cyprian offers, but narrates the New Testament theology that shapes Cyprian's exegesis.⁷⁴ His account reflects the Johannine refer-

⁷² McGuckin argued that “the angel Christology of Lactantius, although strangely preserved up to the eve of the Arian crisis itself, which saw the final demise of this tradition, its attempted use as an argument against the deity of Christ, is fundamentally orthodox” (“Lactantius as Theologian,” 497). McGuckin argued contra Loi, who viewed the angel Christology as further evidence of Lactantius's lack of sophistication and failure to distinguish the Son's nature by a technical ontology (*Lattanzio*, 177). McGuckin also cites Grillmeier, who said that “Judaistically conditioned christology is predominantly functional, not ontological” (*Christ in the Christian Tradition*, 47–53). McGuckin cites Cyprian, *Quir.* 2.5 (“quod idem angelus et deus Christus”), as evidence for the patristic authority of this otherwise bizarre theology. The discussion shows the way scholars viewed Lactantius's theology as strange and archaic because they did not fully appreciate its logic and technical terms.

⁷³ *Inst.* 4.5.2–5: “Before I begin to speak about God and his works, I need to say a few things about his prophets, whose testimonies must now be used, even though I held off [*ne facerem temperavi*] from doing this in previous books. Before all things [*ante omnia*], he who desires to comprehend the truth [= John 1:5—*veritatem studet comprehendere*] must pay attention not only to the words of the prophets, but even [their] time [in history] . . . so that he may know what future events they proclaimed and after how many years their prophecies were fulfilled.”

⁷⁴ Cyprian's *Quir.* 2.1–4 is as much a theological arrangement making a doctrinal argument as it is a kind of *florilegium* of texts. Cyprian's *Testimonia* are just that—witnesses to Christ culled from the OT prophets and arranged as a narrative of history read through the revelation of Jesus. The organization of *Quir.* 2.1–3 is a signature example of that method. *Quir.* 2.139 reads “Quod idem sit et sapientia et uirtus dei [1 Cor 1:22–24].” The next heading is *Quir.* 2.2.1: “quod sapientia dei christus, et de sacramento concarnationis eius et passionis et calicis et altaris et apostolorum, qui missi praedicauerunt [Prov 9:1–6].” The next is: “Quod christus idem sit sermo dei: [Ps 42:6] ‘In psalmo xliii: eructauit cor meum sermonem bonum, dico ego opera mea regi.’ [Ps 33:6] Item in psalmo xxxi: sermone dei caeli solidati sunt et spiritu eius omnis uirtus eorum. [Ps 107:20] Item in psalmo cu: misit sermonem suum et curauit illos. [John 1:3] Item in euangelio cata Iohannem: in principio fuit sermo et sermo erat apud deum et deus erat sermo.” This context is a point for further investigation, given Lactantius's development of a universal historical narrative (Colot, *Penser la conversion de Rome*, 262–311), and the persistence of such a perspective in Augustine.

ence of “Quod Christus idem sermo Dei,” but his apology follows the order of presentation under the heading. He cites Psalm 42:1 and Psalm 33:6. He skips the two following references, probably for reasons of their content. Then, in much the same way that Cyprian cites John 1:1 at the end of this prophetic development, Lactantius turns to the Gospel text of John 1:3 at *Inst.* 4.9, only after demonstrating Christ’s identity from more ancient testimonies. The Johannine theology appears then as a consummation of the historical promise. Tertullian provides Lactantius’s ontological logic; Cyprian furnishes the exegesis, as he takes pains to advance a “Catholic” position (*Inst.* 4.30).

Lactantius continues at length to emphasize the ontological distinction between Christ and the angels by distinguishing between their respective power and functions.⁷⁵ Drawing still upon Hebrews, Lactantius expresses the purpose of the Son’s coming to humanity:

For those breaths [Ps 33:6] go out from God silently, because they were not created for bearing God’s teaching, but for ministry [*ad ministerium* = Heb 1:7, 14]. Although he is breath, still he proceeds as a word with vocalization and sound from God’s mouth [Ps 33:5–6], particularly for this reason, because he was going to use his word for the people. That is, because he would be [*futurus*] the master of God’s teaching in order to convey the secret of heaven to humanity.⁷⁶

The logic of *power theology* reveals the philosophical premises that sustain

⁷⁵ Cf. Tertullian, *De carne Christi* 14: “So then, the other gods will not be gods [*dei*], but his emissaries [*satellites*] and ministers” (my translation).

⁷⁶ *Inst.* 4.8.7–10: Note well that the following lines are the very same that Studer and Loi used to define Lactantius’s account of the Son as ontologically unsubstantial (See note 4 above). Monat comments: “[Lactantius’s] long explanations of the *Logos* [theology] contained in the following chapter, as well as the images intended, make the Prolation [of the Son] understood, are close to Tertullian *Apol.* 21.10–14 and a part of *Adv. Prax.* 7 as well. But in these passages, Tertullian is himself largely a tributary of Justin, Tatien, Athenagoras, and Theophilus.” Cf. Tertullian, *Prax.* 24.10: “That I am in the Father and the Father in me, or if not, believe for the very works’ sake—those works in fact through which the Father was seen in the Son, not with the eyes but with the mind” (trans. E. Evans [London: SPCK, 1948], 169). Cf. Novatian, *De Trinitate* 31.2, where Tertullian’s language of *prolatio* appears alongside an emphasis upon the Son as revealer of *arcana* and *secreta Patris*. On Ps 33:6 and Ps 104:30 as sources for theology of early Christian pneumatology, see M. Barnes, “Beginning and End of Early Christian Pneumatology,” 171–72.

this stylized presentation of an otherwise traditional Christology. Lactantius certainly uses an anthropomorphic image, but only in accordance with an exegetical precedent derived from Tertullian.⁷⁷ His text, foundational for pre-Nicene Latin power theologies, argued that, “through the works [*per opera*], we understand that Father and Son are [*esse*] One . . . [such that] . . . two should be believed albeit in one power [*in una virtute*].”⁷⁸ Tertullian worked deductively; Lactantius works back to Tertullian’s position inductively, that is, historically. Lactantius takes the epistemological element—“by the works two *are believed*”—of Tertullian’s argument as his point of departure. He first observes the distinct works of the Son and the angels. The angels perform one action (i.e., silent ministry), while the Son has another (i.e., teaching). On that basis, Lactantius discerns a “great difference [*magna differentia*]” between Christ and the other angels.⁷⁹

Lactantius’s distinction on the basis of their works leads to a firm judgment about the Son’s identity relative both to the Father and to the angels. He attributes to the Son a *virtus* which the angels do not have—the Father’s very own:

He spoke him first, that through him to us he might speak, and so reveal the word and will of God. Therefore, he is deservedly called the speech and Word of God, because God comprehended a vocal spirit proceeding from his own mouth, whom he had conceived not in a womb, but in [his] mind by some unthinkable virtue [*virtus*] of his own majesty and power [*inexcogitabili suae maiestatis virtute ac potentia*] and he comprehended [him] in an image [*effigiem*], which is strong by its own sentience and wisdom; and then he formed his own spirits into angels.⁸⁰

These lines reassert a distinction between Christ and the angels, which is ontologically equivalent to his earlier distinction between God and the demons. The Son alone is the Father’s *maxima potentia*, the *virtus patria maiestatis*. Therein is found Lactantius’s account of the unity between

⁷⁷ Grillmeier (citing Loi) emphasizes the anthropomorphic terms rather than the ontological logic: “This text, with its very anthropomorphic flavor and its parallels, gives us some idea of Lactantius’ notion of the relationship of Father to Son in one God. But it should be noted that he speaks as an apologist and descends to the level of his audience. The anthropomorphisms are comparisons and analogies” (*Christ in the Christian Tradition*, 196).

⁷⁸ Tertullian, *Prax.* 22.13.

⁷⁹ See note 64 above.

⁸⁰ *Inst.* 4.8.8–10.

Father and Son: the Son does not possess just any power. He has the Father's supreme power [*maxima potestas*], the very power that designates the Father's distinctive status as God.⁸¹ Lactantius's later restates this logic. Borrowing an argument from Novatian, he says: "God's power [*virtus dei*] appeared [*apparuit*] from the works [*ex operibus*] he did, human frailty [*fragilitas*] from the passion he endured."⁸² His language of *virtus*, defined by power theology, asserts the traditional logic of pre-Nicene Latin Christianity.

Lactantius does not stop at the simple assertion of Christ's unity with the Father. He shows an awareness of problems in Tertullian's presentation and attempts to forestall its pitfalls. Lactantius takes pains to distinguish the specific identity of the Son. He explains that the Son is the very power of the Father, but in such a way that the Son has an existence proper to himself. Once again, the notion of *power* [*virtus*] anchors both the Son's unity with the Father and the Son's independent existence [*vigeat*]. The above passage continues as follows:

God comprehended a vocal breath [*spiritus*] proceeding from his own mouth, whom he had conceived not in a womb, but in [his] mind by some unthinkable virtue [*virtus*] of his own majesty and power [*inexcogitabili suae maiestatis virtute ac potentia*] to be an

⁸¹ Monat observes that this description of the angels as "breaths" is drawn from Psalms 1–3 (104.4) and the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that Lactantius does give Christ the title *princeps angelorum*, but then proceeding: "The title, which is conferred upon him designates a *function*, and does not pass judgment in any way upon his *nature*" (*Lactance et La Bible*, 174n68). However, the designation of a function in Lactantius's argument entails the distinction of *power* and *nature*.

⁸² *Inst.* 4.13.4. Lactantius seems here to be influenced by Novatian, *De Trinitate* 11.4, which provides a linguistic context for this argument: "As indeed they consider the weakness of [his] humanity, they do not likewise reckon the powers of God [*Dei virtutes*]; they gather the infirmities of the flesh, but they exclude the powers of divinity. But if this proof given on the basis of Christ's infirmities leads to the conclusion that his humanity is shown from his infirmities, proof of the divinity in him drawn from his powers [*virtutibus*] will lead to the conclusion that even God is asserted on the basis of his works [*ex operibus*]. If indeed his passions show the human weakness in him, why do not his works assert the divine power [*divinam potestatem*] in him?" Cf. *Inst.* 1.9.6 and 2.8 and notes 26 and 34 above. Furthermore, Lactantius has already applied these terms—*fragilitas humana*, *infirmitas*—and argument negatively in the polemic against the Roman gods (note 34) and in his definition of God via *creatio ex nihilo* (note 26). This technical discourse is overlooked in previous translation. Bowen and Garnsey, *Divine Institutes*, 244, translate: "The strength of God appears in him in the deeds which he did and the weakness of man in the suffering he endured."

exact copy [*in effigiem*], which waxes strong [*vigeat*] with a wisdom and sentence proper to itself [*proprio sapientia et sensu*]; then he fashioned [*figuravit*] his other breaths [*suos spiritus*] into angels.⁸³

With this point, Lactantius corrects a weakness of Tertullian's theology in *Adversus Praxeam* 11–16. Tertullian tends to describe the Son and Spirit as properties of the Father, and thus collapse the persons, as Barnes and Joseph Moingt both explain.⁸⁴ Lactantius's description of Christ as a "copy"

⁸³ *Inst.* 4.8.9–10. Cf. *Inst.* 1.3.4, where the same adjective, *propria*, describes the One Power: "Moreover, God, who is eternal mind [*mens aeterna*], is in each and every part of perfect and consummate *virtus*. And if this is true, it is necessary that he be One. For absolute *potestas* or rather *virtus* holds its own integrity [*firmitatem*]." On this passage, Paul [John A.] McGuckin, "Spirit Christology: Lactantius and His Sources," *Heythrop Journal* (1983): 144–45, characterized "the inarticulate state of Lactantius's pneumatology" and noted that it "has frequently been explained on the basis of theological incompetence." M. Barnes, commenting on Tertullian's use of Psalm 33:6, Proverbs 8, and John 1:3 in connection with *Prax.* 26–27, explains the invention by Tertullian and Origen of a new theology of the Holy Spirit in response to Spirit-Monarchianism: "The creative activity of the 'Spirit' in such LXX passages is read through the interpretive lens of John 1:3 [e.g., *Inst.* 4.9]: the Word or Spirit created all things. (This argument is expanded by the identification of the Word/Spirit with Wisdom: LXX testimonies to Wisdom's role in creation are taken to restate the doctrine announced in Psalm 33:6 and John 1:3). . . . The key passages are now understood to refer to the pre-existent Son in support of a theology of his distinct and personal existence [e.g., *Inst.* 4.6.1–3, 8–10] before and during His incarnation" ("Beginning and End of Early Christian Pneumatology," 181). These remarks are an excellent description of what is happening in Lactantius. Monat rejected Loi's identification of John 1:3 in this passage (Monat, *Lactance et La Bible*, 174; see Loi, *Lattanzio*, 161), but no one disputes Lactantius's use of John 1:3 at *Inst.* 4.9, which adopts Tertullian's argument (*Prax.*, 5.2–3; *Apologeticus* 21.10; *Min. Fel.* 19.10) wholesale. See Monat, *Lactance et La Bible*, 174n66. Where then scholarship has seen a merely archaic theology, it seems better to say that Lactantius reflects the third-century development of an anti-Monarchian exegesis in Tertullian and Origen. That emphasis reflects his keen awareness of third-century heresies (see *Inst.* 4.30) which he intends to forestall even through this admittedly apologetic narrative. Lactantius's use of Hebrews 1 invites a search for sources outside the Latin tradition.

⁸⁴ M. Barnes, *Power of God*, 105–106: "Part of the difficulty with following Tertullian's thought here is that he collapses the distinction between product and property, or rather, Tertullian understands Power, Wisdom, and Word to be a certain class of products that exist in their producer as properties, and conversely, as properties that exist as products. The relationship between God (the Father) and the second Person can only be described in the play between such categories (as property and product). The Son is a product of the divine substance, but that generation is of the kind that the identity of the product

or "image" attempts to avoid the problem by emphasizing that identifying the Son as the Father's *virtus maxima* does not undermine the Son's real and independent existence. Such a concern reflects a later stage of the pre-Nicene doctrinal conversation.⁸⁵

is 'to stand in relation to the substance,' to exist because of what the substance is. Tertullian is expressing a 'genetic' understanding of an *X* from *X* causality as finely as he can: the Son is what the Father is but not as the Father is (and so, not the Father)." See also Moingt, *Théologie Trinitaire de Tertulien*, 345–50: "The *Word* seems to have been placed at the rank of the intellectual attributes; it is to God what the intellect is to the Soul, an operative function, an *ingenium* [that is, an inward capacity]."

- ⁸⁵ Although definitive proof is lacking, this passage may reflect a substantial influence of Origen, one that comes by the medium of a specific text. *Inst.* 4.6.1–3 and 4.8.6–10 through 4.9.1–3 should be read alongside *De Principiis* 1.2.7–9. Several things suggest this conclusion. The first item of note is Lactantius's exegetical basis. According to M. Barnes: "Origen's use of *power* . . . is based upon an exegesis of 1 Cor 1:24, Heb 1:3, and Wisdom 7:25. His unique contribution to trinitarian theology is to develop a new 'Wisdom' account of the Godhead based on these texts. . . . The use of these three scriptural texts together in mutual support of a common exegesis of *power* becomes an indication of the influence of Origen on all sides in the trinitarian controversies" (*Power of God*, 111). Lactantius does not quote Wis 7:25, but the preceding two texts are both influential in his Wisdom-theology of the Son. As Kendeffy has shown, 1 Corinthians 1:18–24 is fundamental to his critique and his larger presentation of Christ as Wisdom (see "*Velamentum Stultitiae*"; *Biblia Patristica* finds allusions to 1 Corinthians 1:24 at *Inst.* 4.9.1 and 4.16.2, as well as *Epitome* 37.2 and 44.1). Furthermore, Lactantius's use of Hebrews is not accounted for by any of his undisputed sources. As Paul [John] McGuckin explained, "All Lactantius' references to Hebrews are clearly independent of the *Ad Quirinum* which does not reproduce a single text from that source (Paul McGuckin, "The Non-Cyprianic Scripture Texts in Lactantius's Divine Institutes," *Vigiliae Christianae* 36, no. 2 [1982]: 147). This absence prompts the search for a source (Antonie Wlosok, "Zur Bedeutung der nicht-Cyprianischen Bibelzitate bei Laktanz," *Studia Patristica* 4, no. 79 [1961]: 234–50). At *De Principiis* 1.2.1, Origen introduces the Son by drawing on the same text of Proverbs 8 that Lactantius uses above (*Inst.* 6.1–3; see note 43). Origen uses the title "Wisdom" and concludes the paragraph by quoting 1 Corinthians 1:24 (*De Principiis* 1.2.1.8.15) in order to call the Son God's *power*, much as Lactantius begins (*Inst.* 6.1–3) with Wisdom-theology and then calls the Son the *virtus patria maxima*. Origen soon uses Hebrews 1:3 to distinguish the Son's unique existence from the Father. Prompted by the phrase *figura expressa eius substantiae* [Heb 1:3], he elaborates using the image of "a statue [*statuta*]" exactly like that which it portrays, except that the statue can be comprehended because it is not so immense as the original. Origen says the Son is "in appearance and material totally similar [*per omnia similis*], but far from the immensity of [his] magnitude [*absque magnitudinis immensitate*]" (*De Principiis* 1.2.8). In a foundational text for later accounts of the Son in terms of *power theology* (see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its*

Lactantius's Analogies Reconsidered

The preceding sections have established the technical content of Lactantius's account of the divine nature and the ontology his language of *virtus* conveys. The judgment that *virtus* conveys a power theology invites us to reconsider Lactantius's later explanation of the Son's unity with the Father, especially because previous analyses judged his terms unsubstantial.⁸⁶ Modern scholarship regarded the later passage as evidence of Lactantius's incomplete theological formulation and explained his analogy as a mark of Roman orientation toward rhetoric and law.⁸⁷ However, Lactantius's later metaphors presuppose the ontological content of the preceding discussion and reflect the traditional idiom of pre-Nicene Latin Christianity.

At *Inst.* 4.29, Lactantius expresses the unity between the Father and Son in a series of metaphors. The most famous is one drawn from Roman law, which has appeared to scholars as crude, to say the least. However, the legal metaphor appears only at the end of a substantial series of metaphors grounded in the notion of *virtus*. Lactantius opens by invoking language clearly derivative of Tertullian and the broad pre-Nicene Latin tradition:

Since therefore the Father makes the Son, and the Son the Father, each is one mind, one spirit, one substance [*substantia*]: but one a sort of gushing fountain, the other as a river flowing out of it [*defluens ex eo rivus*]; one as the Sun, the other as [*quasi*] a ray of light extended out of the sun.⁸⁸

Legacy, 24), Origen uses Hebrews 1:3 along with the image of *statuta*, a term that is effectively equivalent to Lactantius's *effigies* above. Compared with *De Principiis* 1.2.9, Lactantius's discussion at *Inst.* 4.8.8–10 looks remarkably derivative. Not only does the narrative progression follow *De Principiis* 1.2.7–9, but Lactantius uses a theological argument that is indistinguishable and an exegesis for which previous scholarship has located no clear source. The combined elements suggest that Lactantius has corrected a weakness of Tertullian's theology through a debt to Origen.

⁸⁶ See notes 2–4 above.

⁸⁷ E.g., Grillmeier, *Christ in the Christian Tradition*, 194: "It has an advantage over the strong stress of the moral interpretation of the unity of Father and Son in pointing to the unity of substance in God, however, incomplete the ideas associated with it may have been. When Lactantius uses the analogy of the *paterfamilias* in God, he is probably betraying his Roman connections." See also note 56 above.

⁸⁸ *Inst.* 4.29.4–5. Cf. Tertullian, *Apologeticus* 21.13: "And as the ray is stretched forth from the sun, a portion from the highest [*portio ex summa*]; but the sun remains in the ray, because a ray of the sun is not separated in its substance but extended [from the sun]." Cf. also Novatian, *De Trinitate* 31, and Hippolytus, *Contra Noetum* 11.1. See Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 23.

These terms reflect the predominant language of the pre-Nicene Latin tradition. They emphasize the singularity of *substantia*, but also interpret the notions of *mens* and *spiritus* in terms of *virtus*. In this respect, the above lines repeat the definition: "God, moreover, who is eternal mind [*mens aeterna*], is in every part [a being] of perfect and consummate *virtus* [*virtutis*]." ⁸⁹

The prior notion of *power* shapes the moral element of this presentation. Lactantius presents the unity of the Father and Son as demonstrated in the *virtus* of *fides*. The presumption that shared action denotes shared nature informs his references to the Son's fidelity and the Father's love for the Son. Unanimity of action indicates unity of substance:

Since he is faithful and dear to the Highest Father, he is not separated, just as a river is not separated from its source nor a ray from the sun, because the water of a source is in the river and the light of the sun in the ray; in the same way, the voice cannot be divided from the tongue nor power [*virtus*] from the hand or body. Since therefore the prophets call him the hand, power [*virtus*], and Word [*sermo*] of God, so there is no distinction, because the tongue, which is the minister of speech, and the hand in which is power [*virtus*] are individual parts of the body. ⁹⁰

By emphasizing this element of fidelity, Lactantius forestalls the accusation of self-contradiction. His early polemic maintained that a plurality of gods would produce a disunity of mind, and therefore conflict. On that basis, Lactantius asserted that God must be of a single *mens* and *virtus* (*Inst.* 1.3–24). Lactantius's emphasis upon Christ's fidelity responds to that early claim. ⁹¹ At the same time, this portrait of Christ's *fides* responds to Lactan-

⁸⁹ *Inst.* 1.3.2–4.

⁹⁰ *Inst.* 4.29.5. Cf. Cyprian, *Quir.* 2.4: "That Christ is the very hand and might arm of God [*manus et brachium dei*]." See also Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit*, 105–20, on the "hands of God" theme in sources known to Lactantius. Briggman suggests that Novatian appropriated Irenaeus's hands tradition, despite Novatian's stated opposition to anthropomorphisms (313).

⁹¹ See *Inst.* 1.3.6–9 and note 16 above. See also *Inst.* 4.29.9: "Since both the Son is in the Father, because the Father loves the Son, and the Father is in the Son, because he is faithfully subject [*paret*] to the will of the Father and never does or would act, unless the Father either has willed or commanded." It is the same argument as when Tertullian says that "Per opera ergo erit Pater in Filio et Filius in patre. Et ita per opera intellegimus unum esse Patrem 'et Filium'" (*Prax.* 22.13). Loi acknowledges the phrase "una mens, unus spiritus, una substantia" but then

tius's own critique of the traditional gods. Just as the gods' lack of virtue betrayed their humanity, Christ's virtue of *fides* bespeaks his divinity. The same logic operates at both stages of the discourse.

Lactantius's illustration of the Son's unity through the analogy of Roman law appears only within the context of the preceding ontological claims. His metaphor refashions Tertullian's analogy from monarchy, but locates it in a domestic context.⁹² Lactantius introduces the metaphor as an illustration of the ontology he holds:

Let me use a more fitting illustration [*propiore exemplo*]: When someone has a son whom he loves uniquely, who nevertheless is in the home and the hand of his father, although he allows [the son] the name and power of a master, still under the civil law the household remains one and designates one master. Likewise, this world is the one household of God, both Father and Son, who single-mindedly [*unanimis*] oversee the world, one God, because one is as [*tamquam*] two and two as One.⁹³

Lactantius thus sets his analogy among a series of metaphors designed to illustrate his otherwise traditional *power theology*. The problem Lactantius deals with by this juxtaposition of ontological and legal notions is the same problem he attempts to navigate by the notion of Christ as a three-dimensional image (*effigies*). In both cases, he maintains the unity in distinction of the persons. Within the context of his larger discussion, these metaphors locate his account of the unity within the same substantial tradition that characterizes the theologies of Tertullian, Cyprian, and Novatian. Lactantius has formulated a traditional presentation of Christian doctrine, but tailored his discussion to the context at hand. His account responds to traditional "pagan" theologies, but avoids the errors of third-century heresies.

negates its force by reading the reference to Christ's *fides* and the Father's love (*carus*) against the line: "But this assertion is overridden in the theological value [he places] on the explanation given shortly thereafter, according to which the unity has a moral character, in that it is guaranteed by the fidelity and the love of the Son for the Father; and thus, Lactantius finds his best argument in the analogy with the unity between the *pater familias* and his own only begotten son in Roman law." However, the significance of this *fides* and *amor* lies in their expressions of the perfect *potestas* and *virtus* which, as *opera* they express. In short, misunderstanding of the underlying notion of *virtus* perpetuates this notion that Lactantius conceived of a merely moral unity.

⁹² Tertullian, *Prax.* 3.

⁹³ *Inst.* 4.29.7.

Conclusion

Modern theological scholarship has generally appreciated Lactantius as a witness to the interaction between Greco-Roman culture and the emergent Christianity of the Constantinian period. Although his historical writings proved to be a major source of information on Roman politics in the era of Diocletian and Constantine, a great deal of scholarly investigation operated with the assumption of Lactantius's intellectual remove from the pre-Nicene theological conversation. Lactantius's use of power theology indicates that his position was more consistent with pre-Nicene Latin theology than scholars have previously appreciated. His presentation of the divine nature in terms of *virtus* fits neatly among the works of theologians who took their cues from Tertullian, while his account of the unity between the Father and Son shows his sensitivity to later third-century controversies. Lactantius himself claimed to represent a "Catholic" position (*Inst.* 4.30) and explicitly rejected the major heresies of the previous generation. He therefore reasserts dominant trajectories of pre-Nicene Latin theology, while addressing the apologetic exigencies of the Great Persecution. By extension, such an evaluation invites scholars to reconsider larger questions about the role of Lactantius and his theology in the Constantinian era, especially because he represented a traditional pre-Nicene Latin position during a pivotal time in the social and political history of the Roman Empire.⁹⁴

N.V

⁹⁴ Lactantius has a role in major historical and theological discussions of Christianity in the Constantinian period. See, e.g., Peter J. Leithart, *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 28; Charles Odahl, *Constantine and the Christian Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 42–65; Digeser, *Lactantius and Rome*; J. Alexander Sider, "Constantine and Myths of the Fall of the Church: An Anabaptist View," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 85 (2011): 631–42; John D. Roth, *Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013). Behind these stands, John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), which does not consider Lactantius, but doing so might have adjusted his position.

