

TRINITY SCHOOL FOR MINISTRY

**CHALCEDONIAN HERMENEUTICS OF THE WORD:
RECONCILING BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES
THROUGH THE INCARNATIONAL ANALOGY**

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BY

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In 1787, Johann Gabler delivered the inaugural address at the University of Altdorf in which he contrasted the bounds of biblical theology versus dogmatic theology.¹ The distinction and eventual bifurcation of these two streams can be detected prior to Gabler, yet however one genealogically traces these two streams, Gabler poignantly describes contemporary divisions. These two streams eventually became autonomous, methodologically insulated “fiduciary frameworks” in their own right.² The question, then, is whether their embedded hermeneutical frameworks are canonically authorized by Scripture, or whether another framework is more faithful. This essay proposes an incarnational analogy drawn from Chalcedonian Christology as a hermeneutical rule for engaging Holy Scripture to reconcile biblical and theological studies.

The Chalcedonian Definition (451) provided dogmatic boundaries demarcating orthodoxy from heresy. Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man in one person, is “to be acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.”³ Analogously, this paper contends that the same is true regarding biblical hermeneutics: the “flesh” of Scripture is “to be acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.”

¹ John Sandys-Wunsch and Laurence Milton Eldredge, “J. P. Gabler and the Distinction between Biblical and Dogmatic Theology: Translation, Commentary, and Discussion of His Originality,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 33 no. 2 (1980): 133–58.

² See below for argumentation of this claim.

³ “Definition of Chalcedon” (451), *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, April 4, 2021: <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/creeds2.iv.i.iii.html>.

HISTORY OF BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL STUDIES

Gabler distinguished biblical and dogmatic theology thus:

There is truly a biblical theology, of historical origin, conveying what the holy writers felt about divine matters; on the other hand there is a dogmatic theology of didactic origin, teaching what each theologian philosophizes rationally about divine things, according to the measure of his ability or of the times, age, place, sect, school, and other similar factors.⁴

Gabler located the task of both biblical and dogmatic theology on a historical plane: biblical theology discerns truth claims in biblical texts within their own historical-cultural provenance, and dogmatic theology articulates divine truth claims for post-biblical times. Further, interpreters “must investigate what in the sayings of the Apostles is truly divine, and what perchance is merely human.”⁵ Gabler apparently conceived of human and divine agency as essentially conflictual.

Humanism and Cartesian philosophy, coupled with early Enlightenment radicalism (notably, the European Reformations), substantially influenced Gabler.⁶ Michael Legaspi argues that the second phase of “progressive Enlightenment”—within which Gabler lived—pursued “two complementary objectives: to create new irenic, non-confessional modes of exegesis and to incorporate the Bible into a burgeoning modern culture.”⁷ Enlightenment academics not only distinguished Bible and theology, but effectively bifurcated them.

Modern scholars, led by new historical and archeological research, attempted to reconstruct past historical-cultural worlds, and to excavate the human authors’ consciousness.

⁴ Sandys-Wunsch and Eldredge, “J. P. Gabler,” 137.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁶ Michael C. Legaspi, “The Term ‘Enlightenment’ and Biblical Interpretation,” pages 73-95 in *A History of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson, vol. 3, *The Enlightenment through the Nineteenth Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans 2017), 73-81.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

Textual meaning became constricted within the world *behind* the text, flattened to past historical referentiality which interpreters could objectively comprehend.⁸

Later modernity, however, deconstructed such “objectivity” and its restriction of meaning to past referentiality as both mythical and hypocritical.⁹ In *Personal Knowledge*, Michael Polanyi asserts that all knowledge requires a “fiduciary framework”:

We must now recognize belief once more as the source of all knowledge. Tacit assent and intellectual passions, the sharing of an idiom and of a cultural heritage, affiliation to a like-minded community: such are the impulses which shape our vision of the nature of things on which we rely for our mastery of things. No intelligence, however critical or original, can operate outside such a fiduciary framework.¹⁰

The interpreter’s community and traditions of belief constitute an ineluctable hermeneutical role.

Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre argues similarly that all rational enquiry is necessarily “tradition-constituted enquiry”¹¹ founded upon prior knowledge: “There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other.”¹² As Mark Mitchell summarizes, “the way to move beyond what [Polanyi and MacIntyre] perceive as the dead end wrought by modernity is a rediscovery of the central role played by tradition.”¹³ The myth of objectivity was unmasked, highlighting the interpreter’s growth in

⁸ On modern hermeneutics, see William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 171-290.

⁹ Cf., most notably, Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (Seabury: Sheed & Ward, 1975).

¹⁰ Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Toward a Post-Critical Philosophy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 266.

¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); esp. “The Rationality of Traditions,” 349-70.

¹² *Ibid.*, 350.

¹³ Mark T. Mitchell, “Michael Polanyi, Alasdair MacIntyre, and the Role of Tradition,” *Humanitas*, 19 no. 1 and 2 (2006): 98 [97-125].

creativity and knowledge precisely by submitting within a particular tradition and cultivating that tradition's virtues.

TRADITION-CONSTITUTED ENQUIRY AND BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

A non-theological interpretive framework is logically absurd, since all knowledge arises via “fiduciary frameworks.” The question is not *whether* theological interpretations of Scripture are helpful or unhelpful, but whether or not they are canonically authorized and align with God's Christo-Pneumatological creational and redemptive intentions. This paper contends that biblical and theological studies can be reconciled by reappropriating the *conceptual* framework of Chalcedonian Christology as hermeneutical presuppositions, though different theological *judgments* may undergird Christ and Scripture, respectively.¹⁴

This incarnational analogy between the Living Word and the enscriptured Word is not original, as premodern theologians regularly reasoned similarly. St. Ignatius of Antioch said, “I flee to the Scriptures [lit. Gospel] as to the flesh of Christ.”¹⁵ St. Augustine exhorted Christians: “place yourself before the Scripture of God as if it were the face of God.”¹⁶ Origen argued, “[y]ou are, therefore, to understand the Scriptures in this way: as the one, perfect body of the

¹⁴ David Yeago distinguishes between theological “judgements” and “concepts” in his study of New Testament and Nicene Christology: “We cannot concretely perform an act of judgement without employing some particular, contingent verbal and conceptual resources; judgment-making *is* an operation performed with words and concepts. At the same time, however, the same judgement can be rendered in a variety of conceptual terms, all of which may be informative about a particular judgement's force and implications.” Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis.” *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 2 (Spr. 1994): 159 [152–64]. This paper argues (inversely) that the same theological *concepts* can be applied to Christ and Scripture, though different *judgements* may undergird these.

¹⁵ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Philadelphians*, 5.1; quoted in Mary Healy, “Inspiration and Incarnation: The Christological Analogy and the Hermeneutics of Faith,” in *Letter & Spirit* 2 (2006): 29 [27-41]; parenthetical notation mine.

¹⁶ *The Works of St. Augustine* 3: *Sermons*, 2 vols., trans. Edmund Hill (New York: New York City, 1990), vol. 1, 41-48; cited in Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, “(Mis)Reading the Face of God: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 513 [513-528].

Word.”¹⁷ Therefore, a *Christian* hermeneutical “fiduciary framework” must interact with the incarnational analogy. The following sections consider objections to the analogy, then demonstrate the positive contributions of a Chalcedonian hermeneutic of Scripture.

OBJECTIONS TO THE INCARNATIONAL ANALOGY WITH HOLY SCRIPTURE

Several objections are raised to the analogy between Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture. These may be summarized thus: (1) the analogy conflates Scripture with Jesus Christ; (2) therefore, the analogy denigrates the preeminence of the Living Word; (3) further, the analogy reduces “the incarnation” to a mere principle that can justify endless numbers of actions or approaches; (4) some object to the analogy’s *use* to buttress particular hermeneutical methodologies.¹⁸

To be clear: this essay’s proposal does not conflate Holy Scripture with Jesus Christ. This appears to be John Webster’s primary concern:

Like any extension of the notion of incarnation (in ecclesiology or ethics, for example), the result [of the analogy between Christ’s incarnation and Holy Scripture] can be Christologically disastrous, in that it may threaten the uniqueness of the Word’s becoming flesh by making “incarnation” a general principle or characteristic of divine action in, through or under creaturely reality. But the Word made flesh and the scriptural word are in no way equivalent realities. Moreover, the application of an analogy from the hypostatic union can scarcely avoid divinising the Bible by claiming some sort of ontological identity within the biblical texts and the self-communication of God.¹⁹

It is crucial, to Webster’s point, to differentiate the personal, *hypostatic* union of Jesus Christ from the union of human and divine within Scripture, and to nuance how scriptural words “incarnate” God. Jesus Christ—as the eternal, consubstantial second person of the

¹⁷ Origen of Alexandria, in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen: Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 88.

¹⁸ Cf. Stephen Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 2-8.

¹⁹ John B. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 22-23. Questions concerning Scripture’s ontology, while pertinent, will not be addressed in this essay.

Trinity—*personally* unites human and divine natures, enacting a bi-directional mediation in a way that Scripture does not. Nonetheless, Webster’s fears do not necessarily disprove a proper use of incarnational analogy.

Lewis Ayres and Stephen Fowl critique the usage of the incarnational analogy within *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.²⁰ They argue that, while the analogy has a long-standing hermeneutical tradition, *Interpretation*’s appropriation of the analogy to bolster the historical-critical methodologies “is logically incoherent.”²¹ They contest the notion that the literal sense is restricted to the “precise meaning of texts as produced by their authors,” countering that since God is Scripture’s author “the spiritual senses are in some ways contained within the literal sense.”²² The Christological analogy cannot bolster exclusivist scriptural hermeneutics, since divine Word defies attempts at human mastery.

The following brief responses may be offered to these critiques. Firstly, the analogy in this paper is just that: an analogy drawn *from Christ Jesus, the Living Word*, and extended *to Holy Scripture, the written Word*. Positively: Jesus Christ—as the eternal Word, Logos, Wisdom, and Beginning of the Father—is the One after Whom all of creation is patterned and in Whom it culminates and coheres (Gen. 1:1; Prov. 8:22-31; John 1, 19:5; Col. 1:13-20). Therefore, one ought to expect “echoes” or figures of Christ throughout His creation, especially in Scripture where He deigns to speak, act, and disclose Himself. Scripture admittedly does not have *natures* as living persons do. Nonetheless, the analogy underscores the non-competitive human and

²⁰ Lewis Ayres and Stephen E. Fowl, “(Mis)Reading the Face of God: The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church,” *Theological Studies* 60 (1999): 513-528. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Biblical Commission’s Document, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church: Text and Commentary*, Subsidia Biblica 18 (Rome: Biblical Inst. Pr., 1995); hereafter *Interpretation*.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 515.

²² *Ibid.*, 518-19.

divine agency within the “flesh” of Scripture. Secondly, the relationship between God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ versus in Scripture and creation is theologically complex. Israel’s Scriptures are temporally prior to God’s assumption of humanity in Jesus Christ, yet Jesus Christ is theologically “prior” as the *Logos* after Whom creation is patterned.²³ Speech-act theory demonstrates that words are not ephemeral concepts, but *enact* reality in the world. Scripture’s words *are* Christ *clothing* Himself prior to His *assumption* of human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth.²⁴ St. Maximus the Confessor provocatively confesses a multiplicity of the Word’s “incarnation” in *creation, the Scriptures*, and, supremely, *Jesus of Nazareth*.²⁵ Scripture figurally discloses Christ and the meaning of creation itself. Finally, this raises the question of temporality itself, and God’s relationship to creatures *bound by time* while remaining *unbound by time*.²⁶

The incarnational analogy, like all good things, can be abused. Nonetheless, a Chalcedonian hermeneutic of Scripture coheres with God’s salvific intentions more closely than modern academic hermeneutics embraced by biblical and theological guilds.

PROSPECTS OF A CHALCEDONIAN HERMENEUTIC OF SCRIPTURE

This paper can only offer a brief prolepsis for reconciling Bible and theology through a Chalcedonian hermeneutics, in three respects: (1) the proper *ecclesial* context for biblical-theological study, (2) the proper *embedded* relationship between the literal and

²³ Cf. Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Readings of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), esp. “Figural Speech and Incarnational Synecdoche,” 163-201.

²⁴ Don Collett distinguishes Christ “clothing” Himself in creation and Scripture, versus “assuming” human nature. “The Christomorphic Shaping of Time in Radner’s *Time and the Word*,” *Pro Ecclesia* 27 no. 3 (2018): 288 [276-288].

²⁵ *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George C. Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 159-163. Cf. Paul M. Blowers, *Maximus the Confessor: Jesus Christ and the Transfiguration of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 82-86 on “The Transfiguring Word in Scripture and Creation.”

²⁶ Cf. Radner on “Divine presentism,” *Time and the Word*, 85; “Imagining Figural Time,” 83-110.

theological senses of Scripture, and (3) the proper ground of all biblical-theological studies: in *Jesus Christ of Nazareth*.

(1) *Church and Academy*. Gabler illustrates the modern project of professionalizing both biblical and theological study as distinct *academic* (rather than *ecclesial*) disciplines.²⁷ A Chalcedonian scriptural hermeneutic intentionally relocates biblical-theological vocation within the church's living tradition. If all learning is necessarily via "fiduciary frameworks," then it behoves the church to embrace biblical-theological reflection as a resolutely *ecclesial* vocation.

This ecclesial relocation furnishes the church with historical critical tools precisely as *tools* within a larger *fiduciary framework*, rather than (woefully misleading) faith frameworks in themselves. The best insights of historical-critical research—which analyzes Scripture's historical elements—may be subjected to ecclesial faith commitments and employed to the increase of faith, hope, and love—the *participatory* elements of Scripture derived from the divine author, Who simultaneously is creatively omnipotent over every moment and particularity of His creation.²⁸

(2) *Literal and Theological Senses*. The relationship between Scripture's literal sense and theological senses—tropological, allegorical, and anagogical—is a central hermeneutical issue. Modern scholars generally conclude that the early church's usage of the theological senses was not grounded in the literal sense (examples of ungrounded allegory abound to illustrate the point). Therefore, modern exegesis constrained the literal sense primarily, or exclusively, to human authors' consciousness; yet this weighty presupposition cannot be scripturally validated.

²⁷ Stephen E. Fowl, "Introduction," in *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, ed. Stephen E. Fowl (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997), xiv.

²⁸ Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University, 2008); alternatively, on "divine creative omnipotence," Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word*, "Creative Omnipotence and the Figures of Scripture," 111-162.

Premodern interpreters spoke of God as Scripture's primary author, since it is "God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). St. Thomas Aquinas argues in his *Summa Theologiae*: "[t]here can also be more than one literal meaning of a scriptural text: for literal meaning is meaning intended by the author, and the author of Scripture is God whose mind grasps all things at once."²⁹ Human authors penned the books of Holy Scripture in space and time—and therefore historical data *may* help in interpretation—yet *God* is the author who breathed it *all as a whole*.

Since the divine author's purpose is to reveal Christ Jesus—that humankind may have eternal life in Him: through faith, hope, and love—the theological senses are *intrinsic* to the literal sense.³⁰ God clothes Himself in scriptural "flesh" to draw humankind into Triune life. The interpreter not only interprets Scripture, but is more significantly *exegeted* by the same Spirit through scriptural engagement. The church's vocation is to faithfully enact the Scriptures as God's disclosed ordering of the world, precisely by *being enscripturated* in the Spirit.³¹ A Chalcedonian hermeneutic indissolubly binds the literal and theological senses, permitting (or, rather, demanding) multifaceted figural readings to illuminate the real profundities of creation, Scripture, and Christ Jesus.

(3) *Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture*. The force of the analogy presses both biblical and theological students to their only common ground: the person and work of the Living Word, Who speaks, creates, and reveals Himself "according to the Scriptures." Contemporary biblical and theological scholarship is threatened with apostasy in despising the flesh of God's self-revelation, the Body of the Word. Mary Healy argues that interpretive "heresies" thus arise:

²⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1, q.1, a.10. *Summa Theologiae: A Concise Translation*, ed. Timothy McDermott (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1989), 4.

³⁰ C.f. Mary Healy, "Inspiration and Incarnation," 39.

³¹ I am indebted to David Ney, "Enscripturation in the History of Biblical Interpretation," Spring 2021, Course at Trinity School for Ministry, Ambridge, PA.

“Docetism” which neglects the true humanity of Scripture; “Arianism” that denies its divinity;³² and “Nestorianism” which analyzes its “parts” as *either* human *or* divine, with no essential unity. Holy Scripture, like Jesus of Nazareth, is a theandric mystery, purposed by God to draw its hearers into the divine life.

CONCLUSION

The church is graciously called to delight in the Holy Trinity through the Word. Epistemologically, the church’s access to Trinitarian mysteries is precisely through the *flesh* of Scripture, which figurally discloses the meaning of both Christ Jesus and all human history. A Chalcedonian hermeneutic of the Word faithfully safeguards worship of the Living Word, and can safeguard faithful interpretation of the written Word. The eternal Word of God works harmoniously: the written Word testifying to the Living, and the Incarnate Word acting and offering self-attestation through the written. One’s response to Scripture *is* one’s response to the Living Logos. The flesh of Scripture and Jesus of Nazareth alike must be discerned through eyes of faith: “acknowledged in two natures, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.” Only through the beautifying gaze of faith in the Word can biblical and theological studies ever be reconciled.

³² Healy, *ibid.*, 39.

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