

Is Nicene Trinitarianism “In” the Scriptures?

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Tout ce qui demeure cache dans le Nouveau Testament
fait encore partie du Nouveau Testament¹

MY TITLE poses a blunt question, one that is full of ambiguity. But this is just the sort of question that my students are apt to pose when they study the emergence of classic doctrinal formulae, and I emphasize that the controversies that gave them birth are deeply exegetical. The crux of any plausible answer to the question is the bridge that one must construct between the language of the New Testament—where a clear statement of the nature of the godhead is absent—and the language of later Nicene Trinitarian formulation.² My own attempt at spanning what to modern eyes easily seems a significant gap will begin by critiquing another attempt,

¹ Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale: Les Quatre sens de L'Écriture*, vol. 4 (Paris: Aubier, 1964), 111. I admit that I have quoted this same statement at the beginning of another recent piece, one on which I will draw later in this essay: “The Word Answering the Word: Opening the Space of Catholic Biblical Interpretation,” in *Theological Theology: Essays in Honor of John B. Webster*, ed. R. David Nelson, Darren Sarisky, and Justin Stratis (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 37–53.

² A significant question not discussed here is what we might mean by “Nicene” Trinitarianism. The creeds of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381) do not offer a definition of Trinitarian belief with full clarity. But we can be reasonably clear that the latter creed was meant to be interpreted within a wider framework of beliefs that modern scholars term “pro-Nicene” theology. For discussion see: Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 236–40, 273 and onward; Ayres, “On Locating Pro-Nicene Theologies,” in *Varieties of Nicene Theology 360–420*, ed. Mark DelCogliano and Lewis Ayres (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

one that might initially seem to offer all that we need. As I do so it will be clear that I am focused on the texts of the New Testament, but as I begin to set out my answer I will at least hint at how we might also extend this argument to cover Israel's Scriptures.

I

In the first few years of my teaching career, David Yeago's short essay "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma" was frequently referenced as an answer to the question of how one might understand the classical formulae of the Christian faith to be fundamentally in accord with that which is revealed in Scripture.³ The essay offers an approach to the question of my title that appeals to any scholar taken by the post-liberal vision of doctrine as fundamentally regulative, or taken by the concept of the "plain sense" of Scripture as it was articulated by a number of those who were associated with Yale during the 1970s and 1980s.

At the heart of Yeago's argument lies a fairly simple principle: in order to understand the relationship between the Church's Trinitarian teaching and the text of the New Testament we need to look to the *judgments* that the text renders. Yeago writes:

The New Testament does not contain a formally articulated "doctrine of God" of the same kind as the later Nicene dogma. What it does contain is a pattern of implicit and explicit judgements concerning the God of Israel and his relationship to the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth.⁴

Thus, Philippians 2:9 tells us that God has bestowed on Christ "the name which is above every name," and this must be the name of Yhwh. We read this text in the light of the Philippians 1:10–11 insistence that "every knee should bend," and we know the latter to be alluding to Isaiah 45:21–24, which insists that in Yhwh are "saving justice and strength." Hence *the* judgment of the text is that "within the thought-world of Israel's Scriptures, no stronger affirmation of the bond between the risen Jesus and the God of Israel is possible."⁵ Yeago goes on to write:

It is perfectly consistent with this that the early communities came

³ David Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3 (1994): 152–64.

⁴ Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma," 153.

⁵ Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma," 155.

to speak by preference of the God of Israel as Jesus' *Father* and of Jesus as God's unique *Son*, in a relationship definitive for the identity of each.⁶

Yeago's understanding of the judgments that Scripture delivers is quite expansive and yet precise:

The affirmation that *this* God has so radically identified himself with Jesus can rhyme with Israel's confession of the singularity and incom-parability of God *if and only if* their relationship is *eternal*. There is only one God, Yhwh, and relationship to Jesus of Nazareth is somehow intrinsic to this God's identity from everlasting. There is only one God, but the one God is never without his only-begotten Son.⁷

In this quotation Yeago seems to be arguing that the judgments we can attribute to the text include some second-order logical consequences. Thus, he doesn't point to other key texts that one might use to argue for the Son's eternity, but presents belief in the Son's co-eternity as a *necessary* corollary of the text's claim about the supposed identity between Yhwh and Christ.

Yeago is also fairly careful about how he understands the relationship between these "judgements" and those made by Nicene Trinitarianism. Three conditions must be satisfied before we can say that they are "identical." First, the logical subjects spoken of in each case must be identical; and here both sets speak of Jesus Christ and the God of Israel. Second, we must ask about the "logical type of the particular predicates affirmed or denied within the conceptual idioms they employ"; in this case both the Philippians hymn and statements of Nicene faith predicate "of these two subjects the most intimate possible bond, using the strongest terms available within the conceptual idiom of each."⁸ And third, one must ask about the point or function of their affirmations or denials; in both cases here, Yeago claims, these statements are articulating principles implicit in Christian proclamation and worship.

Before advancing any critique of Yeago's argument we need to note a key second argument he makes. Yeago strongly criticizes a certain style of historico-critical scholarship for identifying "conceptualities" behind the text and then using those "conceptualities" to determine a text's mean-

⁶ Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma," 155.

⁷ Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma," 157.

⁸ Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma," 160.

ing. He gives an example from one of the great Durham New Testament scholars, James D. G. Dunn. Dunn argues that behind the language of the Philippians “hymn” lies the conceptual structure of an “Adam Christology” and that, hence, pre-existence, which is not part of this scholarly construct, cannot be read into this text.

Yeago makes two strong points about such a reading. The notion of an “Adam Christology” lying behind the text is a scholarly construct, and to accord it a necessary set of features *a priori* and then to use that set as a control for how we can read what Paul actually says, would be a dangerously circular argument. At the same time, we best interpret texts by looking at how they *use* the resources and conceptualities on which they draw, and it would be a mistake to override the judgments in Paul’s expressed words because of a belief about what could and could not be said within a particular conceptuality. I will return to Yeago’s rather blunt point here in a few minutes, but for the moment we should note that he wisely concedes some place to such historical-critical work:

Study of the history of the conceptualities employed in the texts can provide significant material for comparison, so that the distinctive employment of these conceptualities in the rendering of judgements in the biblical texts stands out more sharply.⁹

Yeago’s article constitutes an imaginative attempt to sever a Gordian knot. In the end, however, the sword proves just too blunt for the task or the knot too resilient. Most importantly, what Yeago identifies as *the* implicit judgments of the text turn out to be judgments chosen from a *range* of possible judgments that the texts could quite fairly be taken to offer. Moreover, it took centuries for close readers to identity the judgments of which Yeago speaks, and those judgments are inseparable from quite complex extra-scriptural resources.¹⁰ Indeed, the best way to see why Yeago’s argument fails is to take a look at two examples of rather different readers from the fourth century.

I want to look, first, at the discussion of Philippians 2:9–10 in the first

⁹ Yeago, “The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma,” 163.

¹⁰ I would not deny that Yeago’s criticism of the problems with interpreting texts in the light of scholarly constructs of their supposed backgrounds applies to the work of some New Testament scholars, but his critique does not really work with scholars who are undertaking more piecemeal attempts to look at the contexts and resources with which New Testament writers worked.

of Athanasius’s *Orations Against the Arians*.¹¹ Here Athanasius opposes a reading which focuses on the force of “*therefore* God has highly exalted him.” The status of Christ *changes* because of his exaltation, these opponents argue, and so we have proof that Christ is mutable. Athanasius’s response can be understood only when we see how his *previous* discussions in this text frame what he says *directly* about this verse. Thus, before he comes to this text Athanasius has already discussed the question of whether the Father alone is “unbegotten.”¹² The term “unbegotten,” Athanasius argues, can be taken in a number of ways. Were we to take it as meaning “what is not a work but exists always,” then it certainly describes the Son; if we take it to mean “not generated, nor having any father,” then only the Father is such. In any case the Father’s Word and Son is not “originated,” but is an “offspring.”¹³

But even as he offers this argument about the nature of unbegottenness, Athanasius also references an even earlier account of the Word’s status. To take just one small but crucial section of that earlier discussion, there Athanasius argues that the Son *is* the Father’s own power; Romans 1:20 speaks of God’s eternal power, 1 Cor 1:24 speaks of Christ as the “Power and Wisdom of God.” But God, the Father, is eternal—Isaiah 40:28 makes this clear—and so must the Father’s power be. It makes no sense, Athanasius argues, that the Father is his own eternal power, as his opponents argue when they speak of the Son as an image of the Father’s power. It is this eternal Power of God through whom all is created, and who is seen in the creation, and to see whom is to see the Father.¹⁴ Note two things. First, Athanasius argues not by placing the entire weight of the argument on

¹¹ I offer further comments on the character of exegesis in the fourth century in “Scripture in the Trinitarian Controversies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Interpretation*, ed. Paul Blowers and Peter Martens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 439–54.

¹² Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos* [*C. Ar.*] 1.30 and onward. For the *Contra Arianos*, I have used the edition of K. Metzler, D. Hansen, and K. Savvidis, *Athanasius Werke*, vol. 1/2, *Die Dogmatischen Schriften: Orationes I et II contra Arianos* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016). The most recent full English translation is by M. Atkinson, revised by A. Robertson, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 4, *Athanasius: Select Works and Letters* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 97–148. Some sections are also translated much more readably in K. Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004).

¹³ Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 1.31.

¹⁴ Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 1.11–12. On the complexities of power language in the fourth century, see Michel René Barnes, *The Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

one text, but by interrelating and linking exegesis of a number of different texts and images. Second, this may well be so because, while each of the texts he considers can certainly bear the weight he puts on them, in each case one could fairly suggest that the text also suggests other possibilities. One could easily dispute, for example, the way Athanasius construes the distinction between “originated” and “offspring,” between “work” and “offspring,” or between the different senses of “Wisdom” or “Power.”

Returning to the direct discussion of Philippians 2:9–10, Athanasius begins by defending the principle that the Son is unchangeable. He offers a catena of texts in support: Hebrews 13:8; Psalm 102:26; Hebrews 1:12; Malachi 3:6. Psalm 102:26 in particular identifies the created order as intrinsically changeable, while the Lord is not. The Son, being “from the Father” must share the Father’s unchangeability. Indeed, how are we to understand this unchangeability? It is not as if the Son were an accident in the Father’s essence; he is from the essence and therefore shares its characteristics.¹⁵ Once again, Athanasius’s account is certainly defensible from the texts that he uses to establish the Son’s existence “from” the Father, and together his picture grows in force, but each *individual* reading is certainly not simply *the* necessary reading.

And thus we come to Philippians 2:9. When the text states that God has exalted the Son, Athanasius insists this refers to his humanity; a position Athanasius supports with another catena of texts suggesting that, “before” the Son became incarnate, he was with the Father, who delighted in him.¹⁶ The name that Christ has received is that of Son and God, and he can be *true* Son only if he shares his Father’s nature and is immutable. Quoting the whole of Philippians 2:5–11, Athanasius then asserts it as obvious that the Son, being God, descended from on high and became a human being.¹⁷

As we have seen, Athanasius draws from texts conclusions that are certainly plausible, but not the only necessary conclusions. He often accomplishes this by adding in interpretive glosses that highlight his own desired meaning—the use of “own,” as in the Father’s “own” Wisdom, being a key example. Moreover, we see him taking terms and investing them with a particular force by paralleling them with broader distinctions he is developing. Being “from” the Father is an excellent example; the term can bear the weight Athanasius places on it only when read as part of his wider assertion of the nature of divine being, the natural consequences of any generation in that context, the complete distinction between creating

¹⁵ Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 1. 36.

¹⁶ Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 1. 36–7.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *C. Ar.* 1. 40.

and generating. We might say that, throughout the *Orations*, Athanasius's theology appears through the intersection of two sets of conceptual resources: those provided by the text of Scripture, such as light and wisdom, and those which reflect his own context both Christian and non-Christian, such as his assumptions about the distinction between Creator and creation, about the nature of eternity, or about the implications of Father and Son language. The logic of the text that Athanasius wishes to draw out, and a variety of broader conceptual building blocks, is complex, and not, I suggest, well grasped by Yeago's rather simple distinction.

The clearest way of showing that Athanasius is not simply identifying the one possible logic of the text is to look at an alternative. And so, allow me to turn for a few moments to another of the great figures of the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea. Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical Theology* is a polemic against Marcellus of Ancyra, who taught that the Word of God came forth as a distinct entity for creation. Eusebius presents the faith of the Church in these terms:

The monad is invisible, confessing one source, the one God who is unbegotten and without source, but also confessing the only-begotten Son who is born from him, truly existing and living and subsisting as Savior, though he is neither without source nor unbegotten.¹⁸

Earlier Eusebius describes the Son as the eternally existing "image" of God through whom all things are made. He piles up titles to describe Christ as rock, light, life, and radiance, among others. Amid this account there is a reading of key elements of the Philippians hymn. To understand what it means for Christ to be "in the form of God," we must read this title alongside his designation as mediator (Gal 3:19–20), and as image, radiance, and Son. He is clearly distinct, and yet as "radiance" he is a unique offspring, not generated as are mortal animals.¹⁹ Now, as we know from Deuteronomy 4:35, there is one God, but the Son of God may also be termed God

¹⁸ Eusebius of Caesarea, *De ecclesiastica theologia* [*Eccl. theol.*] 2.6.1. The translation is (slightly adapted) from Eusebius of Caesarea, *Against Marcellus and Ecclesiastical Theology*, trans Kelley McCarthy Spoerl and Markus Vinzent, Fathers of the Church 135 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 225–26. The edition I have used is *Eusebius Werke*, vol. 4, *Gegen Marcell, Über die kirchliche Theologie, Die Fragmente Marcells*, ed. Erich Klostermann and Günther Christian, *Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte* 14, 3rd ed. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989).

¹⁹ Eusebius, *Eccl. theol.* 1.13.67–71.

“because of the form of the Father that is in him as in an image.”²⁰ Eusebius draws on rather different resonances of key terms. Placing emphasis on “image,” and interpreting that as implying the Son’s secondary possession of the Father’s “form,” allows him to cast terms such as “radiance” in a rather different light. Insistence on the uniqueness of the divine, understood as God and Father, also casts the term “Son” rather differently.

In these arguments Eusebius is unfairly described by the blunt term “subordinationist.” His intent is to set out the second *hypostasis* as an eternal, distinct reality who can be described as “God” and yet who does not impinge on the unique deity of the one unbegotten. He also relies on investing the term “begotten” with a unique significance, but within a rather different sense of what is and is not possible if God is one. The two thinkers operate with a rather different sense of how one may conceive the “grammar” of divinity. Athanasius is moving toward an account in which, if an entity is God, then, *a priori*, that entity is one with the one God and possesses all the attributes of divinity, while Eusebius exhibits a more gradated conception of the divine within which the ontologically lesser entity, the Son or Word, receives or participates in some of the Father’s characteristics. There is no one text that can *a priori* decide between these two readings of what it means for the Son to be “in the form of God” or possess “equality.”

Both Athanasius and Eusebius were good readers of scriptural texts, adept at constellating texts and interpreting scriptural metaphors to support their positions, adept at investing texts with particular meaning and treating them as hermeneutical keys, adept at drawing out conclusions from the possibilities offered by the plain sense, adept at subtly weaving into their readings of texts principles that they took to be key markers of the Church’s faith—and scriptural teaching. Both authors draws on what we can best describe as a *field* of judgments that scriptural texts offer.

While neither would be willing to recognize that the other was making a fair claim on the possibilities of the text, I think we should. However, recognizing that this is so does not mean that the possibility of normative judgments has been taken from us. We can say *both* that the Nicene dogma offers judgments that are compatible with scriptural discussion of relevant topics, that are certainly warranted and driven by the scriptural text, *and* that other construals of those texts are possible that do not simply do obvious violence to their phrasing. The possibilities that any individual text offers are shaped both by the words of the text and by the resources of other parallel texts that one might draw in as support, and then the possi-

²⁰ Eusebius, *Eccl. theol.* 1.14.74.

bilities are limited by a field of other texts whose plain sense presses against many readings one might offer of some texts in isolation. Speaking in these terms should offer some sense of how I would face questions concerning the manner in which we set bounds to possible readings.

As may be obvious, by putting the matter in these terms I am also drawing on aspects of the very same school that lies behind Yeago's own argument. But interest in the "plain sense" of the text is here modified in two ways. First, I assume that "the way the words run" often permits a *variety* of readings. Second, whereas Yeago effects a strong separation between the judgments of the text and the conceptual schemes behind it, I would suggest a more complex arrangement, in which texts and their interpreters draw on and adapt a variety of conceptual resources. There will of course be dispute about what resources we should assume are behind a particular text or interpreter, and dispute about how those resources are used, but attending to these questions is an important part of understanding the possibilities of meaning that any text offers, or the nature of any reading of texts.

II

If my critique is correct, we are faced with an obvious need. If the *necessary* link between the readings of Nicene Trinitarianism and the text of the New Testament is severed, to be replaced with a real link, but one that is not the only possible, then we need to find a way of talking theologically as well as philosophically about the process by which the resources of the text are explored and drawn out into the Church's doctrinal formulae. As the first step in this process, allow me to summarize and reflect on an argument I offered recently in a *Festschrift* for the late John Webster.²¹ There I pursued an argument offered by the young Father Joseph Ratzinger in the debates about Scripture and Tradition that raged around the Second Vatican Council.²² At the core of Ratzinger's argument lies the link between the layers of reinterpretation that he sees as structuring the Scriptures and the character of the Church's dogma as itself an interpretation. Without rehearsing his argument again, it is perhaps enough to note the formal parallel he draws between the reading of Israel's history that we find in the earliest texts incorporated into the New Testament and the re-reading of

²¹ "The Word Answering the Word" (see note 1 above).

²² Joseph Ratzinger, "The Question of the Concept of Tradition: A Provisional Response," in *God's Word: Scripture, Tradition, Office*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 41–89 (originally published in 1965 in *Quaestiones Disputatae* 25).

the very earliest Christian community that we find reported in such later texts as Acts. In the former case, we see both a close reading that finds itself constantly engaged with the imagery that the text offers and the judgments that it has traditionally suggested and, yet, a reading that also surprises in its unexpected newness.

This newness is, in the first place, a newness because of the action of Christ's Spirit within the community and, in the second place, always a newness *in interpretation*; it is not a newness that abrogates the centrality of the Scriptures. Thus, for example, in 2 Corinthians 3 Paul speaks of the veil over the books of Moses being removed when one turns to the Lord and receives the Spirit of the Lord that is freedom (*eleutheria*). Similarly, in Acts 15, Barnabas and Paul narrate the signs and wonders that God has done, and it is this that prompts James to treat Amos 9 as a warrant for imposing few restrictions on gentile converts. For Ratzinger, this freedom in interpretation that comes from the active presence of Christ is both central to the very structure of Scripture and shown to us in Scripture as a constant of the Christian community. And so, on this foundation, the young Ratzinger points to the Church's dogmatic Tradition as an authoritative interpretation of Scripture driven by the work of the Lord's Spirit in the Church

This argument is of considerable use for this paper. Although it was not Ratzinger's original concern—and he shows little interest in the malleability of scriptural texts—his account allows us to open a space within which we can understand how the text could have been read multiple ways over time, its judgments and imaginative resources explored in a variety of contexts. Thus, while we can investigate how the text may have been heard by those who encountered it first, we may also explore how the text was read in different contexts over following centuries until dogmatic definition bounds ever more closely the possibilities for appropriate reading.

Arguing in this manner is not simply to relativize the meaning of the text for two reasons. First, and as I indicated briefly above, the text itself shapes and bounds possible readings in all sorts of ways. Readings which offer little consonance with "the way the words run" or are easily contradicted by another text will not prosper. But second, and essentially, Catholic Christians celebrate the emergence of defined readings as the work of the Spirit. Of course, when I say "defined readings," it is rarely the case that we are talking specifically about dogmatically defined readings of specific texts. There are some examples of this, but more frequently dogmatic definitions articulate positions which have significance for the interpretation of multiple texts. Indeed, one of the functions of dogma I would suggest is precisely to canonize, under the Spirit's aegis, particular

frames for the reading of Scripture in part and as a whole. Beyond formal acts of dogmatic definition, the Church's long Tradition of magisterial teaching similarly frames and guides the reading of texts. This process is of course extremely complex: the magisterial promotion of particular schools of thought or particular models of exegetical competence pushes exegesis down particular paths and into particular controversies. None of these complex ways in which scriptural exegesis is bounded prevents modern reconstructions of how texts would have been heard by their authors, redactors, or first audiences from exercising a deep influence over our readings today, but it is an understatement to say that there is much more here to be discussed about how we might train theologians to undertake exegesis that puts front and center the unfolding of interpretation within the life of the Church, *as well as* the possible meanings of a text at the times of its composition or final editing.

If something like this is true, then the core of an answer to the question in my title has emerged. The doctrine of the Trinity is most certainly "in" the New Testament, but we can speak about what we mean by "in" the New Testament only on the basis of clarity about the multiple possibilities of the text and the process by which the formed doctrine of the Trinity was discovered hidden therein. The emergence and development of this doctrine may be read as a drawing out by the dual agency of human beings and the divine of that which lies hidden within the written Word. I confess my statement here draws heavily on Henri de Lubac, who offers us the wonderful aphorism that "everything which remains hidden within the New Testament is still part of the New Testament."

Somewhat gnomically de Lubac then observes:

While the *historia* which made up the ancient Scripture [the Old Testament] guided the reader to an *allegoria* by prefiguring a reality which was other, ulterior and superior, namely the very mystery of Christ which is the New Testament, the Mystery of Christ does nothing else but spread forth its own intrinsic dimensions before the eyes of the believer who studies it.²³

For Catholic theologians it is not only those readings of a text for which a good case can be made that they would have been likely for readers in the late first or early second centuries, that may be said to be "in" the text. Readings may be said to be "in" the Scriptures—part of the "intrinsic

²³ De Lubac, *Exégèse Médiévale*, vol 4, 111; cf. Henri de Lubac, *The Sources of Revelation*, trans. Luke O'Neill, (New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), 200.

dimensions” of the Scriptures—because plausible cases can be made that they are consonant with the possible judgments of the text, and because they seem consonant with the Church’s faith. Of course, if those readings do not have the force of magisterial definition, then we exist always within the realms of relative plausibility. In many cases, of course, we will deal with readings that have been hallowed by dint of long reflection through the Tradition and we would be wise to think long and hard before we turn aside from them; in other cases Tradition itself offers a plurality of readings that serve only to stimulate more. Modern styles of historical-critical exegesis certainly should push us in new directions and cause us to think again about some long cherished readings, but they cannot foreclose on the complex of possibilities that texts still offer to us. Certainty will come only at the End.

To understand my answer a little more deeply, allow me to draw attention to another insight of de Lubac’s. In a famous essay on the “development of doctrine” in 1948 he argues against any vision that sees a clearly defined core of faith gradually accruing further definition as we gradually conquer and subdue the mysterious fringe of the undefined. Whether such a picture takes the form of a logical deduction model of development *or* of a model of historical unfolding, de Lubac argues that, rather, the mystery of Jesus Christ remains always *mystery* at the heart and center of our faith; dogma draws only on what he terms the “definable fringe” of that mystery. We might push this a little further and describe the Scriptures as providing us with the *speakable* fringe of the mystery.

Although my focus so far has been on the texts of the New Testament, these themes from the young Ratzinger and de Lubac enable us to see how we might apply the same arguments to the Scriptures as a whole. Although this is really the subject for another paper, I will offer a couple of sentences. Simply put, if we are right to see Nicene Trinitarian theology as an appropriate drawing out and exploration of that which is revealed to us in the New Testament, and if we are right to see the texts of the New Testament as a revealing of that which lies hidden in the texts of Israel’s Scriptures, then we can say nothing other than that in Israel’s Scriptures we find a field of judgments about the nature of God, and a field of metaphorical resources that not only were the resources that our earliest Christian writers drew on and which they transformed, but also are there for us, as resources that we can and should read through the lens of the New Testament and Nicene Trinitarian theology. Understanding the history and transformation of those resources within the history of Israel is an obvious part of understanding the use and transformation of those resources by early Christians and within the later Christian community. But there is a

continuum that needs to be ours if we are to move forward fruitfully.

III

The picture I have offered so far is insufficient insofar as it has concentrated mostly on the path from the readings of the late first or early second centuries to the readings possible in the light of formed Trinitarian doctrine. In the last section of the paper I would like to think in broader terms about the activity of the theologian as scriptural interpreter, using an analogy drawn from a perhaps surprising quarter. This analogy, I hope, will help us to think in a little more depth about the inevitable plurality in interpretation that has been a significant concern throughout my argument.

In a lecture entitled "On Fairy-Stories" first delivered in 1938, J. R. R. Tolkien reflects on the act he terms "sub-creation." The writer of fantasy intends the creation of a world with sufficient density, sufficient "inner consistency," to convince the reader that the events of the story take place in a world one might inhabit. Without such a sense of reality, the reader will not experience the catching of breath or the lifting of the heart that occurs when ill or good befalls the central characters. And yet, Tolkien argues, "every sub-creator, wishes in some measure to be a real maker, or hopes that he is drawing on reality."²⁴ Indeed, Tolkien writes, when we feel joy at the end of the successful fairy-story, this may even be "a far-off gleam or echo of *evangelium* in the real world." The Gospels contain "a fairy-story . . . which embraces all the essence of fairy-stories. . . . [They are] 'mythical' in their perfect self-contained significance. . . . But this story has entered History and the primary world; the desire and aspiration of sub-creation has been raised to the fulfillment of Creation." The fairy-story, then hints at truth, and truth is known in the Gospel, which is history and yet is so without "losing the mythical or allegorical significance that it had possessed."

Tolkien also notes the continued *necessity* of fairy-stories:

In God's kingdom the presence of the greatest does not depress the small. . . . Story, fantasy, still go on, and should go on. The *Evangelium* has not abrogated legends; it has hallowed them. . . . The Christian still has work to do, with mind as well as body, to suffer, hope, and die; but he may now perceive that all his bents and faculties have a purpose, which can be redeemed. So great is the bounty with which he has been treated that he may now, perhaps, fairly dare

²⁴ J. R. R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," in *Tree and Leaf* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964), 11–70, at 61.

to guess that in Fantasy he may actually assist in the effoliation and multiple enrichment of creation. All tales may come true; and yet, at the last, redeemed, they may be as like and as unlike the forms that we give them as Man, finally redeemed, will be like and unlike the fallen that we know.²⁵

“Effoliation” is a good word. Tolkien recovered a noun from a long unused verb signifying the unfurling of buds in the springtime. In this term readers of his works should hear echoes of Tolkien’s fascination with the creation and cultivation of Middle Earth in the long faded first age, and with the subcreative activity given to the Eldar and the other elves. At the same time, the word is a striking testimony to the power in Tolkien’s mind of fairy-story also to *re-foliate* the world in the light of the Gospel, to unfurl the buds of narrative and reason that have grown even in the dark years before the Gospel.

We may glean a little more from Tolkien’s letters, where we find him commenting on his own writing not as allegory but as “exemplification.” Exemplification is the creation of a story that is no conscious allegory, each event or character intentionally representing an aspect of another more primal story, but a story in which many aspects of the one true story, or aspects of true virtue are simply exemplified. But, importantly, this act of exemplification Tolkien sees as, at its best, an act of homage which directs our attention toward the true myth that is the Gospel.²⁶ In fact, it is not quite right to present sub-creation as entirely an act of the human author’s creation; it is also an act of discovery that occurs in response to the manner in which the truth *presents itself* to the mind.

This may seem to have taken us far from questions of the relationship between the text of Scripture and the Church’s formed doctrine. But not so. Consider this question: in what ways have theologians and theological schools been sub-creators, imitating and paying homage to the Scriptures

²⁵ Tolkien, “Fairy-Stories,” 63.

²⁶ *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1981): letter 131 (likely 1951, to Milton Waldman [pp. 145–46]); letter 153 (September 1954, to Peter Hastings: sub-creation is “a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety” [p. 188; see also pp. 192 and 194–95 in the same letter]); letter 181 (likely January or February 1956, to Michael Straight [pp. 232–37], on representation and sub-creation). I am particularly grateful to Prof. Paige Hochschild for sending me to Tolkien’s letters. Of particular interest is her talk “Hobbits and Humility: Catholicism, Christology and the Lord of the Ring” (soundcloud.com/thomisticinstitute/hobbits-humility-catholicism-christology-and-the-lord-of-the-rings-paige-hochschild).

in their theological formulations? In what ways have they undertaken a task of exploring and effoliating the revealed word, unfolding its depths? Allow me to explore two differences between Tolkien's sub-creator and the theologian.

I will begin with an obvious difference: theologians seek to tell the *same* story, or at least to tell their stories in such a way that we are drawn back toward the one story. But their telling of stories may still be understood as an exercise in exemplification. My talk of theologians "telling stories" needs a little unpacking. I use the language because of the analogy; more precisely I refer to the ways in which theologians create particular paths through the symbolic universe of Scripture. The brief discussions of Athanasius and Eusebius that I offered earlier exemplify this creation of paths well. Both theologians are attempting to set out what Scripture teaches; both create particular paths, or modify traditional paths through the scriptural universe. But I could easily illustrate the phenomenon by considering quite different but certainly orthodox Nicene theologians; exegetical exemplification often produces a plurality of readings and paths through the scriptural universe, even when an identical teaching is being articulated and explored. Such theologians are both giving us "what Scripture teaches" *and* exemplifying the story that Scripture tells. They are "sub-creating," "effoliating" Christian thought under scriptural ordinance.

So far, however, one might think I have identified only an inevitable hermeneutical action; in the attempt to work out what a text means, newness inevitably occurs. But here we find the second difference between Tolkien's sub-creator and the Christian exegete. His sub-creator is able to work *because* the Gospel has licensed and hallowed her enrichment of creation; the theologian's work is, however, part of the life of the body of Christ, it is an activity drawn out by the Spirit as we are led toward the Father. We most easily speak of the work of the Spirit when we reference the emergence of the credal and magisterial traditions that should guide our acts of sub-creation. But we need also to recognize the far less perspicacious role of the Spirit in generating the theological work within which that defining Tradition emerges. The theological sub-creator should know that her work may be part of intended unfolding of revelation's meaning; certainty would of course here be inappropriate and impossible, but belief that the theological Tradition is so ordained reveals the necessity and centrality of the commitments that should be central to theological work. The effoliation of thinking through the exploration of the definable and the speakable fringe of the mystery, accessed through the reading of Scripture, is a work given us in the event of revelation.

IV

I hope my analogy has done enough to suggest a line of argument, even if there remains much to be drawn out. It is time for me to bring this paper to a close. In sum then, Nicene Trinitarianism is, thus, “in” the Scriptures not only in the sense that its judgments are consonant with the judgments that scriptural texts offer—even if those judgments are not the only ones that the texts allow—but also in the sense that the Scriptures offer a field of images that, in various different constellations, have founded a broad variety of Trinitarian theologies. The hiddenness of these theological themes, and the work that was required for the Church to draw them out, should not make us doubt, or fear that there is no connection between doctrine and text; it should make us reconsider and celebrate the work of effoliation, of unfurling the buds of revelation that is itself part of what has been gifted to us. The drawing out of the written Word’s meaning under the guidance of the incarnate Word’s presence in his body is itself a fundamental part of the divine work in Christ. N.V