

White's *The Incarnate Lord*: An Appreciative Interaction

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EVERY FEW YEARS OR SO, I have been fortunate enough to read authors to whom I know I will endlessly return. For me, that list includes the likes of Karl Barth, Douglas Campbell, Jeff McSwain, and Richard Bauckham, to name some of the “likely suspects.” I may now add Thomas Joseph White to that list, for he has encouraged me to rethink some of my inherited theological commitments. Indeed, the learning, eloquence, and cogency of argumentation on display in *The Incarnate Lord*¹ was, for me, like a New Testament baptism in that I felt plunged into deep waters—refreshing waters, I might add, as he kept sight of “first order” theological discussion. Rather than a boring and very well-worn escapade into hermeneutical or reader-centered concerns that some inexplicably still seem to think are cutting edge, here we are treated to the kind of theological analysis that stretches, that seeks to advance. What is more, the scope of White’s volume is impressive. His argument ranges confidently through philosophical subtleties, both ancient and modern. He handles complex, yet important, Christological debates and soteriological discussions in conversation with giants in the field, one of whom alone usually suffices for a lifetime of reading. And this is all done in conversation with important contemporary interlocutors. As a result, the numerous and arguably important observations contained in *The Incarnate Lord* will shape my own questions for years to come. How refreshing to read a work of theology that seeks

¹ Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017).

unapologetically to “peer into the mystery of God himself” (29)! This is all to say that it is an honor to respond to White’s work. It is also a considerable task for this humble *Neutestamentler*.

Consequently, in what follows, I will not outline what I consider to be White’s overarching concerns, except as they are refracted by my own interests, nor place his contributions on the landscape of alternative proposals. Rather, I will alight upon what I consider to be matters most worthy of dissection given my own expertise and interests. To wit, I will first note areas that are significant impulses in my own theological development. This will lead to the most substantial section of this paper, second, where I will ponder White’s engagement with Scripture and in light of Scripture, particularly as presented in his introduction. This will provide a useful springboard into a variety of substantial concerns in White’s volume. Third, I will seek to bring the many debates and discussions to as sharp a formulation as possible, in the hope that it may provoke fruitful dialogue.

Significant Contributions

As stated, this section is not meant to enumerate the various contributions White makes in terms of general systematic theological discussion. This would extend an already overly ambitious review. I would be ill-equipped to make such judgments, either way. This is more personal, relating to an entirely contingent theological biography, and how White’s arguments push me to develop.

First, I note his critical commentary on the Barthian tradition, and its implicit endorsement—without sufficient theological justification—of the Kantian critique of metaphysics. This was an insight made with particular force and cleverly contrasted with the implicit ontological commitments of Chalcedon. As he rightly asks: “What does it mean to say that God personally ‘exists’ as a human being among us? How should we understand the difference between Christ’s human nature and his divine nature?” Or again, how is “nature” attributed “to Christ’s human essence as distinct from his divine essence?” White presses the point: “In seeking to recover Chalcedonian ontology ‘after Kant’ without a commitment to classical metaphysics, the Barthian ‘tradition’ cannot answer these questions adequately” (49). In particular, he then asks whether it is adequate to follow Barth in placing the “site” of the hypostatic union in the identity of God “revealed in a voluntary act of the human Christ.” Barth, thereby, locates central ontological considerations concerning the divine–human unity in “an ‘accidental’ feature of the human being of Christ” (49). As such, this tends toward a

particular understanding of Nestorianism (as worked out in detail in the first chapter). While questions remain for me, these observations must be taken seriously in future discussion. His own question lingers: "Can the ontology of the incarnation be understood rightly without recourse to core elements of the 'pre-Kantian' metaphysical tradition?" (70). I will present my own resolution in what follows, but this is a tentative exploration, provoked by White's own clarity.

This dovetails with two areas of concern I have had with Barthian theological trajectories, and that I think may call for further work—and this despite the fact that I, as a reader of Paul, see more theological affinities between Paul and Barth than Paul and Aquinas. First, there's the matter of discourse in the "public space."² Arguably, revealed theology often lacks the resources Thomism has for creating space to emphasize *common ground*. This is not true, arguably, of T. F. Torrance, so it is not necessarily intrinsic to the Barthian tradition.³ And it may be that a theology of revelation, as Phil Ziegler argues, "might be able to deliver part of what contemporary advocates of natural law seek."⁴ But where common ground is without specifically theological justification, it is surely inevitable that different perspectives will simply shout louder in isolated ghettos, thereby undermining the common good. Without such underpinning, *andere Geister* enter, which insist that all relations be tabulated according to an infantile reduction to two-dimensional power games in the spirit of Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche. These have not been redemptive trends in modern socio-political developments. All strength to White for his sophisticated case against related trends in the final pages of his book.

A second feature of Barthian theology that has problems yet to be sufficiently addressed, to my mind, is the relation between the identity of God and creation, particularly given evil. Of course, White adopts a metaphysical frame for which this is not an (immediate) problem: "There is no real relation between God and creatures" (189; italics suppressed), and there is thus a non-reciprocity between "the similitude attributed to creatures in relation to God and the non-similitude attributed to God in relation to creatures" (188; see also, most forcibly, 200). This arguably produced its own problems, which may not be insignificant, but White

² With more space it would be ideal critically to interact with the provocative work of Theo Hobson, *God Created Humanism: The Christian Basis of Secular Values* (London: SPCK, 2017), to expand and qualify some of these concerns.

³ Contrast the discussion in Philip G. Ziegler, *Militant Grace: The Apocalyptic Turn and the Future of Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 122–27.

⁴ Ziegler, *Militant Grace*, 136.

again underscores where perhaps more Barthian work needs to be done. Of course, the brilliant Robert Jenson begun such work in earnest as early as his doctoral dissertation on Barth,⁵ yet arguably more work needs to be done for those who work with a consistently Christological approach.⁶ What White does, then, is question aspects of Barthian theology with incisive acumen, presenting alternative solutions and substantial criticisms that require further discussion. Much more could be said about White's commanding reasoning on a host of issues. But it is likely most fruitful in such a context to raise areas for discussion.

Scripture

And so we turn to White's handling of Scripture. The extent to which a theologian commits to grounding their work on Scripture remains one of perennial concern to me. This is not merely because I am a biblical scholar, though that of course plays a part. Pope Francis recently exhorted, in continuity with various papal predecessors,⁷ "a greater emphasis on the study of Scripture in ecclesiastical programmes of training for priests and catechists," and encouraged that "efforts should also be made to provide all the faithful with the resources needed to be able to open the sacred book and draw from it priceless fruits of wisdom, hope and life" (apostolic letter *Scripturae Sacrae Affectus* [2020]). Indeed, at the risk of stating the obvious, the Scriptures have always nourished the Church, not least also for Thomas Aquinas with his various commentaries. Hence, I consider it a matter of principle to judge a theological proposal as follows: the extent that any implied or explicit theology distracts us from the importance of Scripture in the life of theological work and education is the extent to which that theology needs to be reformed. With that in mind, it was encouraging to encounter engagement with Scripture in White's introduction, and Scripture read responsibly together with important biblical scholars.

But two questions emerge, the second of which will dominate this response. First, do White's claims, in light of Scripture, move too quickly?

⁵ See Robert W. Jenson, *Alpha and Omega: A Study in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1963), 52–55.

⁶ I am not persuaded that Jenson's two-volume work on systematics deals with these concerns sufficiently, but see Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 73.

⁷ Pope Leo XIII's *Providentissimus Deus*, Pope Pius XII's *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, the Second Vatican Council's dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum*, and the various published works of Benedict XVI.

And second, has White managed to capture the dynamic of New Testament Christology in its native epistemological and ontological frames?

So first, did some of White's arguments move "too fast," and allow potentially fatal counter-arguments? For example, in defending the New Testament account of Christ's deity he leans on Larry Hurtado's *Lord Jesus Christ*, and particularly the claim that the earliest Christians worshipped Christ in a way "reserved in Second Temple Judaism to God alone" (15). This is then bolstered with reference to Charlie Moule's slightly dated work *The Origin of Christology*, and the claim that the "New Testament theme of incorporation into the Lord manifests clearly the notions of his deity" (15). I wish that more New Testament scholars would remember Moule's contributions—it functioned as inspiration for my own work in this area—but it must immediately be added that Moule used concepts that have long since been undermined in New Testament scholarship.⁸ Furthermore, some may find similar "incorporative" language applied to a figure in 1 Enoch who was not understood therein to be the God of Israel (see 1 En. 49:3). To claim that Moule's focus "manifests clearly the notions of deity" moves too fast—and strikes me as rather vaguely phrased.

Likewise, in tackling the evidence relating to the worship of Christ as cited by White, biblical scholars will refer in response both to the worship of figures other than God—or figures with whom God shared his divinity, if we accept trendy notions of fluid deity⁹—as well as the sparse nature of the evidence in the New Testament for this supposed worship of Christ.¹⁰ Arguably it is better to see worship as part of a wider, relational pattern, which indeed dominates at least Pauline theology, if not the whole New Testament, and this will not be insignificant.¹¹

But that is to rush ahead of my argument. Instead, I will pick up another area that seemed a little "too fast" in terms of the argument. White claims

⁸ See, S. E. Porter, "Two Myths: Corporate Personality and Language/Mentality Determinism," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 43 (1990): 289–307.

⁹ On this, see particularly the work of Crispin H. T. Fletcher-Louis in, e.g., *Luke–Acts: Angels, Christology and Soteriology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997); "The Worship of Divine Humanity as God's Image and the Worship of Jesus," in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism*, ed. C. C. Newman, J. R. Davila, and G. S. Lewis (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 112–28; and *Jesus Monotheism*, vol. 1, *Christological Origins: The Emerging Consensus and Beyond* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Maurice Casey, "Monotheism, Worship and Christological Developments in the Pauline Churches," in Newman, Davila, and Lewis, *Jewish Roots*, 222.

¹¹ See Chris Tillings, *Paul's Divine Christology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), and the application of my method to James in David Michael Wyman, "James's Divine Christology" (master's thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2016).

that “the Son existed personally as God prior to his historical life as man” (9). Some New Testament experts will argue that, contra the scholar White references in his support (Gordon Fee), the preexistence of Christ is best understood as the preexistence of God’s wisdom, rather than Christ himself *per se*. This was developed by J. D. G. Dunn, yet it has appeared elsewhere.¹² White surprisingly references Dunn on this issue, but he does not appear to realize the revisionary nature of Dunn’s proposal. What is more, the *Similitudes of Enoch* presents a character who does not seem to be the God of Israel (who is called the Lord of the Spirits therein), yet is described in terms of preexistence (48:6). So preexistence does not necessarily imply specifically *divine* preexistence. Others will also reference the apparently preexistent Jacob-Israel in the *Prayer of Joseph*.¹³ Fee, upon whom White leans, does not interact with, never mind refute, these problems with his case.

What is more, Fee’s claims for the centrality of preexistence in Paul’s Christology are often bolstered by unconvincing exegetical maneuvers, which associate the notion of “preexistence” with a supposed “Son of God Christology” category. But Paul arguably did not think in terms of a discrete “Son of God” Christology, with particular thematic associations. Worse, Fee reads preexistence into texts when it is arguably not even implied. Without wanting to deny a preexistent Christology in Paul—I think it is the logical corollary of what is indeed central in Paul’s theology, namely his relationally divine Christology—the central place Fee gives it appears forced onto the texts.¹⁴ To leap from these exegetically fragile foundations, then, to a particular account of preexistence is arguably moving too fast for many New Testament scholars. This worry may appear compounded when White asserts that, “in the New Testament, or much of it, the pre-existence and divinity of Christ as creator seem to be understood as the precondition for any right form of theological thinking” (11). Few New Testament scholars would be so bold or sweeping in their assessment of the actual textual data. And while on sweeping statements, I would suggest some caution when claiming, as White does, that “generally speaking the Bible is deeply concerned with the ontological structure of reality in its dependence on God” (7). That all depends on what this might mean, and is a matter that we will pick up below.

As it turns out, I am happily one scholar who would argue that Paul,

¹² Famously, see J. D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM, 1980).

¹³ For a summary of these issues, see Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology*, 37.

¹⁴ On this, see Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology*, throughout.

including most of the New Testament texts, explicitly articulates (not merely presupposes) a divine Christology. It is arguably better to speak of Christ's personal preexistence (yes, "personal," contra Dunn) as a logical corollary of this insight, one which was not nearly so often explicitly articulated in the New Testament, though it was occasionally. All of that is enumerated in my works on Pauline Christology elsewhere, so I will not repeat myself. My point, therefore, is not about White's conclusions as much as the speed of his argumentation and reliance on problematic scholarly justification.

Further, I would add that the lack of focus in the New Testament on preexistence is due to the particular ontological dynamics undergirding New Testament theology, which leads to my second question, namely whether White has managed to capture the dynamic of New Testament Christology in its native epistemological and ontological frames with his affirmations. Initially, I was left a little unsure how the argument worked in his account of biblical "ontology." After all, White defines ontology at the start as follows:

In speaking of ontological *Christology*, I am referring not to a subject of philosophy as such, or to a philosophical reflection on Christ (for example, Aristotelian-inspired analysis of the person of Christ). Rather, I am referring to specifically to a biblical mystery: Christ revealed in scripture as a person who truly exists. The *personal being* of Christ is subject to theological investigation. (6)

However, by the end of his summary of Christ's preexistence and divinity, White asserts that "nothing short of a Christology that looks directly into ontological questions" will suffice, and that apart from that "the New Testament itself remains fundamentally unintelligible" (16). But if by ontology, here, White simply means the person Jesus who truly exists, I am not sure what has been achieved in the argument. It would be saying that nothing short of a Christology that looks directly into the Christ who truly exists will suffice, which borders on tautology. Perhaps more weight is being placed on the word "ontology" than the initial disclaimer suggests? Or is it that White thinks preexistence and divinity by themselves justify a particular ontological account, as the developing argument suggests? Greater clarity here would be ideal, though I recognize the limitations may well be in my account of these arguments.

Either way, irrespective of whether the use of Scripture in his arguments can better an adoptionist or Arian who could wield isolated passages such

as Romans 1:4, John 14:28, and 1 Corinthians 15:27–28 just as confidently, I want to press the following: does the move from preexistence, divinity, humanity, and the communication of idioms account sufficiently for the ontological and epistemological frame of these earliest Christian writers? After all, White seeks to present an account of *biblical* ontology. To focus on Paul's letters, I make two points, the first about epistemology and the second about metaphysics. This second issue is broader, so will also need to examine clusters of load-bearing terms.

Pauline Epistemology

So first, I maintain that Paul's theological epistemology is dominated by a revelation-relational framework. This, in turn, also accounts for the fabric of his Christological insights. To begin negatively, too often theologians head quickly—and on pain of being anathematized by the First Vatican Council (cited in 204n2)—to Romans 1:20 as justification of a particular “natural theology,” which Paul is thereby seen to endorse. But these verses will take far more away than they give, unless they are used in arbitrary and isolated fashion. After all, if we take this passage as it stands, we do not simply prove a philosophy of “natural theology” (the rhetoric of 1:20–32 ends up denouncing homosexuality, which is hardly an obvious deduction from the premises). Instead, we end up unleashing at least two further dynamics, the first of which has been called “methodological Arianism,” a serious charge specifically when speaking of *axiomatic* characteristics of God vis-à-vis humanity.¹⁵ The second dynamic is a strong theology of desert, one which is not only argumentatively—vis-à-vis the immediate textual frame—but theologically difficult to square with the unconditional love of God revealed in Christ (Rom 5:8). And both in turn generate further mischief in a host of other ways that I will not enumerate now.¹⁶ Hence, the most theologically alert readers of Romans 1 recognize deep discordance here with Paul's theology everywhere else in his letters.¹⁷

Instead, and now to state things positively, typical of Paul's epistemology

¹⁵ See Chris Tilling, “Campbell's Apocalyptic Gospel and Pauline Athanasianism,” in *Beyond Old and New Perspectives on Paul: Reflections on the Work of Douglas Campbell*, ed. Chris Tilling (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 49–73.

¹⁶ But see Douglas A. Campbell, *Pauline Dogmatics: The Triumph of God's Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019).

¹⁷ See, e.g., J. C. O'Neill, Francis Watson, and E. P. Sanders, among others, as they seek to square a circle, all as canvassed and analyzed in this respect in Douglas A. Campbell, *The Deliverance of God: An Apocalyptic Rereading of Justification in Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009).

is 1 Corinthians 8:1–3, which sets up important contrasts for his unfolding argument about idol food. Paul's "necessary knowing" (8:3) is a knowledge of God understood in relational and love-for-God orientated terms. As such it is not a possession, contra the claim of the Corinthian "knowledgeable," but God's knowledge of his people. In other words, theological knowledge, for Paul, is not the possession of humans but remains, we could say, the property of the self-disclosure of God in Christ, and is hence derivative of participation in the reality of Christ risen. So, in Galatians 4:9, Paul corrects himself when speaking of our knowledge of God, as this might problematically imply, as Martinus de Boer puts it, "the language of the religious quest for a proper relationship with God." He changes track: "Rather, we have become known by God." Paul's Gospel, de Boer continues, "is not an instance of the religious quest for God . . . but the expression of God's apocalyptic self-disclosure in Christ."¹⁸ Similarly, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 8:1–3, undermines the claimed possession of knowledge. Even stating true propositions (as cited in 8:4) does not demonstrate "necessary knowing" for Paul, when separated from this relationality and giftedness, but merely shows that the Corinthians were "puffed up." For Paul, knowledge of God is given in revelation (Gal 1:15–16; 1 Cor 1:21–2:16). It is eschatologically determined and Christologically permeated. The knowledge of God is not grounded nor mastered in mere formula, but is part of that subject's life and interpersonal relations.¹⁹

So much for Paul's epistemology. The point, now, is to emphasize that Paul's theology is couched in a particular epistemological frame that likewise corresponds—as we shall see—with his account of the ontology of Christ's divinity. It is revealed, given, and relational. Any suggestion that there should be a "minimal distinction between natural and supernatural modes of knowledge" (208), as White maintains, may need to negotiate such Pauline distinctions.

Before moving on from epistemological matters, permit me one minor

¹⁸ Martinus C. de Boer, *Galatians: A Commentary*, The New Testament Library (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 273. See also J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 33A (London: Doubleday, 1997), for the most expansive and theologically alert account of Paul's language.

¹⁹ This is to rather vainly cite a number of conclusions of one of my own essays, where I further analyze these realizations with respect to the question of how one best defines "abstraction" and the necessary utility of propositions in light of Paul. See Chris Till-ing, "Knowledge Puffs Up, But Love Builds Up: The Apostle Paul and the Task of Dogmatics," in *The Task of Dogmatics: Explorations in Theological Method*, ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Fred Sanders (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 87–107.

related point. In note 40 on 229, White suggests that Barth may have overlooked dangers when rejecting the *analogia entis*. One is the “‘alienation’ of the God of Jesus Christ from the world of human understanding, rendering him a ‘mere abstraction’ or gnostic deity.” Of course, it depends on what one means by “the world of human understanding,” and I will return to that below in my subsection on the “human cluster.” But it could also be noted that at least a revelational account comes with the promises of God in Paul, and elsewhere in the New Testament (John 1:18; Matt 11:27). Could the same be said for the particular metaphysical structures mobilized by White?

Pauline Metaphysics

THE ONTOLOGY OF PAUL’S THEOLOGICAL CHRISTOLOGY

Now to Paul’s ontology. For Paul, as I have argued elsewhere at length, God’s unique Godness is expressed in both (what I call) the God and Christ relations,²⁰ and these relations as actualized by the activity of the Holy Spirit. These insights should not be overlooked when attempting to present “biblical ontology.” For this relationality is part of how Paul, as a Second Temple Jew, would have defined the Godness of God. The *Shema*, crucial in thinking about Jewish “monotheism,” emphasizes love for God in the same sentence of mention of the *’ehād*. Oneness is not just theological fact, for Paul, which is indeed how the Corinthian knowledgeable may have misunderstood the matter. Indeed, the correct understanding of God’s oneness is about loving relationality in terms of God and others. Anything else is a knowledge that “puffs up.” Hence, as Nathan MacDonald argues, in light of the Deuteronomic *Shema*, that “monotheism” is not simply “a truth to be comprehended”; it is “a relationship in which to be committed.”²¹ Likewise with Paul, his ontology of divine Christology *is* the Christ-relation, conclusions which of course dovetail with his epistemology.

In this light, I worry that White moves quickly to an ontology involving substance and accidents, oneness and unity and such like. I do not want to argue here that Aristotelian notions cannot help clarify and even deepen the Church’s meditation on the person of Christ within certain metaphysical frames, but it should do so by paying primary attention to

²⁰ My apologies for the clumsy terminology in this sentence. I have toyed with “transcendent uniqueness,” but a colleague has persuaded me to recant.

²¹ Nathan MacDonald, *Deuteronomy and the Meaning of “Monotheism”* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), 97.

the scriptural witness. It needs constantly to ensure that these themes lead us toward, rather than away from, Scripture. So, when White claims that "we find in the New Testament itself the seeds of ontological reflection concerning Christ" (8; see also 16), I worry that this underestimates the ontological movements already in place in the New Testament when pondering the person of Christ. Classical metaphysics is not the only option, of course. Indeed, for the Church it was perhaps the first major *revisionary* metaphysics. So when White claims that attempts to understand the "New Testament claims about Christ non-ontologically is in the end a non-biblical exercise" (117), we can agree, but with the footnote that we cannot assume that the contours of that ontology and metaphysics are the same thing as classical metaphysics. At least some work needs to be done to show how it can correspond with Pauline metaphysics.

It should be obvious that I am not, therefore, seeking to offer a refutation of White's central thesis in dialogue with the Apostle Paul. I merely want to question the way in which "biblical ontology" has been presented. Of course, this *may* have wider ramifications, but that remains to be seen. At least the following can be said: when an ontology, which distinguishes between substance and accidents for example, is brought into discussion with the biblical witness, it needs to do at least two things. First, it needs to admit that the ontological framework being deployed is *etic*, rather than *emic*, to use the terminology deployed by anthropologists. It is a framework imposed from without (it is revisionary), rather than one that emerges from within. This is not to falsify it, of course. Second, the nature of such metaphysics, including, for example, the analogical relation between the accidental (relational) and substantial, must be demonstrated to be appropriate to biblical metaphysical intuitions, and thereby show why it facilitates rather than hinders engagement with the Scriptures.

White argues that the biblical texts concerning Christology should prompt us to metaphysical reflection (e.g., 17). Indeed so, but rather than merely "metaphysical reflection *on* scripture" (17; italics mine), I suggest we not underestimate the metaphysical framework of Scripture itself, and thus urge "metaphysical reflection *with* scripture." This may then lead to a different kind of interaction with the theologically load-bearing distinctions White presses, with other Thomists, such as between primary and secondary actuality, and more generally those between substantial and accidental or "properties," between natural and supernatural and historical and eternal, and so on.

"TIME" CLUSTER

Naturally, an account of Pauline metaphysics must go further, and to do so we will examine two clusters of terms. The first involves the words "time," "history," and "eternity."²² We need to interrogate these load-bearing terms as carefully as possible if we wish to present biblical metaphysics. So divine mysteries occur, White states, "in and through *historical time*" (24; italics mine). The terms are of course found in his polemic against the "*historicized* portrait of the deity of God" in the theologies of Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel, and Jenson (48–50; italics mine). He argues that there are "perennial characteristics of the human being *through time*" (25; italics mine), and will speak of the Son who "took upon himself a human nature *within the horizon of human history*" (75; italics mine). In other words, these terms are load bearing in discrete arguments for White. So, what does the biblical witness add to the metaphysics of these terms?

The initial impression is that Paul may complicate matters, for he handles "time" in such a manner that destabilizes notions that are linear and one-dimensional, especially when he talks of Christ who is, clearly, his primary obsession. For Paul, time appears as a creature rethought *around* Christ. Paul, like other Second Temple Jews, thought flexibly about time. But Paul goes further. The whole scope of time seems to be contained in the story of Jesus Christ, from creation (Col 1:16–17; 1 Cor 8:6), through to the resurrection. Christ's death is the death of *all*—yours and mine (2 Cor 5:14)—and our resurrection is "*with Jesus*" (2 Cor 4:14), not only *like* his resurrection. We exist, in other words, in the time of Jesus Christ—as Barth saw clearly—an insight that undermines unimaginative accounts of time as a sliding scale with past–preset–future, onto which we must map theological complexities, together with supposed problems relating to ugly ditches.²³ The "common history that we share with Pontius Pilate" (221) is thus, for Paul, the time of Jesus. To use it otherwise would need careful justification by the theologian.²⁴

²² There is no space to meditate upon the latter in this paper.

²³ On this, see Chris Tilling, "Paul, Christ, and Narrative Time," in *Christ and the Created Order: Perspectives from Theology, Philosophy, and Science*, ed. Andrew B. Torrance and Thomas H. McCall (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 151–66, and Seth Heringer, *Uniting History and Theology: A Theological Critique of the Historical Method* (London: Fortress Academic, 2018).

²⁴ On this, see Lincoln Harvey, *Jesus in the Trinity: A Beginner's Guide to the Theology of Robert Jenson* (London: SCM, 2020), 195. It is also well known that "eternal" is often a debatable translation of αἰώνιος (See, e.g., Ilaria Ramelli and David Konstan, *Terms for Eternity: Aionios and Aidios in Classical and Christian Texts* [Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2007]), and this is apart from whether one ought to think of eternity as itself

I would, therefore, suggest an alternative emphasis when speaking of “history” and “historical-critical.” White asks: “What are the historical-critical conditions for a *theological* rather than merely apologetic discussion of these events as revelatory of Christ” (33). But a potential danger is that this assumes a metaphysics of “historical,” which Paul may challenge on the grounds noted above. He may insist we turn the question around and think about the theological conditions of historical criticism. White further opines that “the historical-critical method can be employed profitably to identify rationally the enduring *theological* significance of the historical figure of Jesus” (36). But this raises further questions that we will pick up below, namely whether historical criticism, working within methodologically naturalistic presuppositions, can offer truly *theological* input in a way Paul might recognize as *theological*. We will be in a place to extend some of these reflections after the next subsection.

“HUMAN” CLUSTER

The second cluster of terms involve “humans” and “nature.” Once again, we are brought back to matters of definition, and Paul’s theology offers resources that may help. After all, human nature, for Paul, is radically reconstituted in the death and resurrection of Christ. It dies and is raised as it participates in Christ’s death and resurrection. So, Paul exclaims, “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20), and “you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). Anthropology seen in this light is more difficult, it seems to me, to square with hermeneutical categories and distinctions that speak of “intrinsic” and “natural,” as if that is something prior to and apart from the life of Christ as articulated in the Gospel (see, e.g., 226–28).

As Luther observed I think in a Pauline key, there seems to be a sense in which “reason receives life from faith. It is killed by faith and brought back to life by faith.”²⁵ This is why, for Paul, those in Christ do not go through mere reformation, but death and resurrection. As this participatory and

an analogous concept. But I say this only in passing as I would otherwise stray from my primary purpose to interact tangentially with Paul. Jenson maintains that a difference in accounts of eternity is “the key epistemological difference between his [namely, Aquinas] and my own thought” (*Systematic Theology*, 1:55n87).

²⁵ Martin Luther, “Die Sammlung von Konrad Cordatus (Schluß),” in *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesammtausgabe*, 127 vols. (Weimar: H. Böhlau, 1883–2009), vol. *WATR* 3 (*Tischreden aus den dreißiger Jahren*, vol. 3 of “Table Talks” [*Tischreden*]), no. 2938a (p. 104, lines 27–29). See also Todd R. Hains, *Martin Luther and the Rule of Faith: Reading God’s Word for God’s People* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022).

Christological anthropology is a deep Pauline insight (see, e.g., Rom 6; 2 Cor 5), I hesitate when White opines that “grace is a great and perhaps even necessary aid for the right exercise of any natural human knowledge of God” (205). For Paul, that nature dies in the death of Christ so grace is no “perhaps.” Or again, when he states that, “if there were in our fallen condition no persisting capacity for natural knowledge of God (if we are not capable in principle of a so-called natural theology), then human beings would be radically and irremediably incapable of receiving knowledge of Christ by grace alone *under any form whatsoever*” (207; italics his; see also 208, 225, 228, 232). For Paul, at least, anthropological continuity with the “old” or natural man is not his concern. As it has *died* with Christ (2 Cor 5:14) the solution is not to plaster a bit of (possibly) necessary grace. The solution is life from death: resurrection! In other words, citing Matthew’s Gospel at this point does not seem entirely inappropriate: “For humans this is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (19:26).

However, we can perhaps go further and suggest ways in which White’s basic thesis at this point stands, albeit on an adjusted metaphysical basis, one in which the new humanity is foregrounded. This new creation, which is the work of the resurrection of Christ (Eph 2:15; 2 Cor 5:17), is achieved for all (Rom 5:18; 6:10; 11:32; 1 Cor 15:22; 2 Cor 5:14–15, etc.), and thereby establishes a theological anthropological ground which is “Christ in us” (Col 1:27) by the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:9). This would mean adjusting what is meant by “natural,” perhaps, placing it not next to but within what is revealed in the Gospel. And it may reverse the order of logic White wants to secure.²⁶ The claim on 202, that “*because* we can know something of God by our ordinary, natural powers, *therefore* we can receive knowledge of him by grace that is not wholly alien to our ordinary form of knowing,” could be read in Pauline terms differently as: “Because we have died and are reconstituted in Christ as a new creation by and act of divine intervention and grace, therefore the knowledge of God that is in Christ is not alien to our ontological constitution, which is hid with Christ in God.” Put bluntly, when talking about humans and their relation to Christ as their life, one may find some elements of classical metaphysics ill-equipped to aid the

²⁶ See, e.g., Colin E. Gunton, *A Brief Theology of Revelation* (London: T&T Clark, 1995), 40–63, and the distinction between natural theology and a “theology of nature.” Thanks to Lincoln Harvey for drawing me back to Gunton’s account.

reader of Scripture,²⁷ for it will refuse to consider creaturely knowledge and understanding “in abstraction from the work of the Spirit.”²⁸

We are perhaps now best placed to discuss wider matters that emerge from these observations. First: a further remark on White's clever argument for a natural capacity to think about God as the necessary condition for knowledge of God. Cannot one, following the Torrances, suppose that “epistemological extrinsicism” need not render that knowledge “utterly distinct from the world”? (208). For revelational theology, it can be understood as more about procedure and starting points, *in light of which* judgments may be made retrospectively and analogically. So, Barth too can say of the world of religion, that though it be *Unglaube* it still relates to the revelation of God. He writes of “Gottes Offenbarung als Aufhebung der Religion” and implies not simply religion's abolition, but its “sublimation,” as Garrett Green most recently translates the word.²⁹ Barth insists on the freedom of revelation over against religion, yes, but without denying the religious nature of revelation.³⁰ To be religious is more or less a universal feature of humans,³¹ he argues, and cannot simply be negated by God's revelation. This is to say that “the judgment of divine revelation does not sweep aside or destroy the world of religion. On the contrary, ‘In his revelation God is present in the world of human religion.’”³² Barth thus advocates a posture of humility, and implies an expectation that Christ can and will speak in unexpected spheres in what Barth calls “parables of the kingdom.”³³

It follows from this that Barth's approach could offer a more positive

²⁷ For a particularly insightful and exegetically fruitful treatment of biblical anthropology, see now Jeff McSwain, *Simul Sanctification: Barth's Hidden Vision for Human Transformation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018).

²⁸ John Webster, *Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 136.

²⁹ Garrett Green, “Religion,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Karl Barth*, ed. Richard E. Burnett (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 180–81, translating from *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2, no. 7. See also J. M. Fritzman, *Hegel*, Classic Thinkers Series (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 48.

³⁰ See J. A. Di Noia, “Religion and the Religions,” in *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 246, where Di Noia cites Garrett Green.

³¹ Di Noia, “Religion and the Religions,” 246.

³² He refers at this point to Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/2, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, part 2 (London: T&T Clark, 1969), 297 (Di Noia, “Religion and the Religions,” 250).

³³ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. IV/3, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, part 3 (London: T&T Clark, 1988), 117–18.

account than White suggests for how we might reconcile “the biblical portrait of Christ and modern historical studies of Jesus” (70). It could encourage, at least in theory, a retrospective account of historical work that takes seriously the task of “taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). For White argues that Barth neutralizes the “theological importance of the historical-critical life of Jesus studies” (39; italics suppressed). I can see why this conclusion might be drawn. But I am not persuaded that this is a *necessary* corollary of his Christological focus, as Seth Heringer’s thesis shows.³⁴ With Heringer, it may be argued that “historical-critical” will never be critical enough unless it is assessed in terms of Christ. And what is offered by historians of any stripe can be assessed retrospectively, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. But it has a Christological basis, a plumb-line if you will, for critical assessment—undertaken in oscillating hermeneutical fashion.

And this is key, as “historical work” is not univocal. It may denote that work that work sheds light on *particularity*, but this is not the same work that offers grand reconstructions of the “historical Jesus,” alternative to the Gospels. Do both have the same independent theological worth?³⁵ How might we judge that? Further, in Pauline studies I think it is fair to say that it is Barth-inspired scholars who have worked hardest to offer the thickest accounts of Paul’s historical contingency.³⁶ And this is no mere accident, as a revelational account helps determine a particular account of what is “reasonable” and what counts as the “raw data,” whether it be the Virgin Birth or Jesus walking on the water. And as far as historical-Jesus scholarship is concerned, the debates are still raging as to what should be considered appropriately “probabilistic and conjectural” (59).³⁷ Moreover, as John Webster argued:

[Christ] is, and therefore he is present, and therefore he is known.
There is a negative inference to be drawn here, namely that this given

³⁴ See Heringer, *Uniting History and Theology*.

³⁵ On this, see also Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSan-Francisco, 1996), and Richard J. Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006); see also helpful distinctions in Michael Wolter, “Which Jesus is the Real Jesus?” in *The Quest for the Real Jesus*, ed. Jan Van Der Watt (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 1–18.

³⁶ See, e.g., Martyn, *Galatians*, and Douglas A. Campbell, *Framing Paul* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

³⁷ See also *Jesus, Criteria, and the Demise of Authenticity*, ed. Chris Keith and Anthony Le Donne (London: T&T Clark International, 2012).

presence of Christ excludes ways of approaching the task of Christology in which there lurks the assumption that Jesus Christ is not, or may not, or cannot be present to us. . . . He cannot be approached as if he were an elusive figure, absent from us, locked in transcendence or buried in the past, and only to be discovered through the exercise of human ingenuity. . . . All such strategies, whether in biblical scholarship or philosophical and dogmatic theology, are in the end methodologically sophisticated forms of infidelity.³⁸

This is not to negate historical work *in toto*, far less human knowledge and study. It negates, rather, grand historical reconstructing of the life of Jesus that assumes what is false from the start. For these reasons, among others, should an undefined "historical Jesus studies" function as "in some real sense *foundational* for the discernment of what constitutes (or does not constitute) properly theological knowledge of Christ"? (37). It depends how the metaphor of "foundation" is pressed, as well as what is meant by the nature of the historical work in question. So as it stands, Barth's *Nein!* wants to rush to my keyboard!

This is why it is, I think, an oversimplification to state that "historical reconstructions," for the Barthian, must "stand outside of the proper object of Christology" (39). It depends on what is meant by the words used. Speech concerning God is only made possible Christologically for Barth (46), true, but this does not negate the retrospective negotiation of truth claims *in light of* what is given in Christ, which is why there is so much historically informed exegesis in the *Church Dogmatics*. Christology, here, is about the right ordering of God-talk and its reframing rather than the principled exclusion of historical work.

Three things follow from these arguments. First, I do not see a compelling reason why a Barthian could not happily commend Chalcedonian metaphysics as a retrospective judgment on a particular set of terminological, ontological, and epistemological coordinates. I return to this point at the end. And this is also why I do not think it is "ironic" (50) that Barth's strategy involves the application of human categories.

Second, the same judgments can be applied to Barth's appropriation of Kant. I do not agree that either Barth or Barthians "tend to import *wholesale* Kantian philosophical presuppositions into their theology without sufficient justification," as White charges (194; italics mine; see also 234–35). Rather, is there principled reason why some of Kant's insights

³⁸ Webster, *Confessing God*, 136–38.

could not be sifted and deployed retrospectively, much as with historical work? After all, a case could be made on theological grounds by working backward from the unconditionality of revelation in Christ (Rom 5:8). Suspicions about the human capacity to speculate accurately about God apart from revelation could also be drawn through a longer tradition than Kant, stretching through Luther to Augustine and ultimately to Paul.³⁹ After all, “the mind of the flesh is enmity to God, for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be” (Rom 8:7).

Third, a Christological focus, which maps neatly onto Paul’s epistemology, helps set a bar by which to judge key issues. White draws on Aquinas to show how we might know God “through the formal medium of revelation *and* through the distinct formal medium of philosophical speculation simultaneously” (53). But how could we judge if they do not conflict? Does this not require another ground to adjudicate the coherence of the relationship? And how might that, in turn, be justified (enter the problem of infinite regress)? If revealed theological truths are considered to be the final backstop, as White’s phrases such as “in that light” and “after the fact” (56–57) suggest, there may be encouraging grounds for more of an ecumenical rapprochement.

Bringing It to the Point

So much more could be said about White’s case for natural theology and the *analogia entis* or his account of the likeness of the human and divine natures, and much more besides, but space is limited. So I want to bring it to a sharp point. As far as I see it, we can suggest at least the following, though it is admittedly reductionist:

- (A) Given a commitment to classical metaphysics,
 - (A1): which functions both as a necessary presupposition for Chalcedonian orthodoxy, and enjoys a long history of worshipful and precise Christian reflection, especially rigorous in the Thomist tradition(s),
 - (A2): thereby justifying its contemporary theological deployment
- (B): White ably demonstrates that Thomism, so understood, offers important insights and correctives for modern Christological and soteriological discussion.

³⁹ See the discussion in John M. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 100–102.

The key question that I, as a biblical scholar, must ask, is whether—or rather, in what way—(A) is foundational for contemporary theological reflection.⁴⁰ Surely (A1) and (A2) cannot be breezily ignored in the name of some kind of ahistorical biblicism. But a fundamental decision needs to be made about (A), and this will determine the extent to which much, even if not all, of White's theses can be accepted (B).

My hesitation's about accepting (A) as uniquely authoritative have been introduced above. But an alternative way of framing matters could be presented as follows, and thereby open up appropriate and scripturally justified space between (A1) and (A2).

On the one hand, the gap between (A1) and (A2) can be maximalized, and this not simply in a "let's make stuff up as we go along and drink deep from whatever contemporary sensibility happens to flutter past" liberalism sense. Instead, as Brian Daley recently argued, Chalcedon should be seen "a mid-fifth-century way station" and "a brilliant but largely unsuccessful attempt to reconcile competing traditions," rather than "a final resolution of difficulties, or a foundation for lasting ecumenical agreement."⁴¹ My difficulties with this position will not busy me now, except to say that I think it provides a useful coordinate against which to plot White's position.

So, and on the other hand, for White the articulation of the Incarnation has become equated with its expression and metaphysical frame in Chalcedon, so that, "if we believe in the incarnation, we need to be committed to the retrieval of some form of classical metaphysics" (66). My concerns with this brilliantly articulated position have been outlined above. But it boils down to a concern that we not underestimate *biblical* metaphysics, and thereby be better positioned to understand and critically negotiate classical metaphysics as the revisionary work it was. After all, the Apostle Paul was not so philosophically committed, yet his theology—and here I would agree with White—is all about the fullness of deity dwelling in bodily form (Col 2:9).

These observations may encourage, then, a middle path between a Daley and a White. Namely, it asks whether Chalcedon and beyond can be seen

⁴⁰ I did not obtain a copy of Keith Johnson's helpful article until after I had drafted this review. It is clear that my own reflection, at this point, overlaps with his earlier remarks; see Johnson, "When Nature Presupposes Grace: A Response to Thomas Joseph White, O.P.," *Pro Ecclesia* 20, no. 3 (2011): 264–82. It would have been useful had White responded to some of Johnson's concerns in the monograph. Perhaps he can attempt that in our discussion?

⁴¹ Brian E. Daley, S.J., *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 200.

as establishing the correct set of coordinates and authoritative decisions vis-à-vis Christology *given those particular metaphysical presuppositions*. To establish what counts as heresy, then, would not simply insist that contemporary theology subscribe to the same metaphysical framework. Rather, it would map the considerations and decisions made within a different set of wider metaphysical coordinates to apply to decisions made in new epistemological and metaphysical frames. In other words, Chalcedon would still function in authoritative terms, but in such a way that would also facilitate the wise negotiation of continuity in discontinuity and discontinuity in continuity. In other words, it would indeed be deployed as foundational, but with due consideration to its own historical particularity, and this, too, negotiated via a Christologically governed *reading of Scripture* that plumbs its own metaphysical and Trinitarian depths.⁴² N.V

⁴² See, Chris Tilling, “Paul the Trinitarian,” in *Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Lincoln Harvey (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 36–62.