God’s Word in Time:
The Relationship of Time and History to Revelation and its Significance for Biblical Interpretation

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Christopher Hathaway
School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
Nazarene Theological College
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ABSTRACT

Despite the fundamentally historical nature of the Christian faith the history of biblical interpretation has been marked by periods in which the Bible was read through the lens of faith with little regard for history using the principles of allegory (the late classical and medieval Church), or through the lens of history with little regard for faith using the tools of historical criticism. The following is an argument that this conflict is rooted in the failure to give to historical time an authentically Christian theological purpose. History as a means of revelation was rejected by the Greeks and this prejudice set the stage for how a hellenized Church approached it. Generally it was an ambivalent acceptance of it. A concept of history that justifies it as a faithful hermeneutical tool must be rooted in the Incarnation in order to unite it to divine eternity. By this means Scripture can be seen to be both the eternal word of God and the historically written words of men simultaneously. The Incarnation is here seen as the sole means whereby the Creator can unite with and interact with his creation. And it should be used as a template for interpreting all actions of God in the world, especially revelation. The central premise of such a hermeneutic is that the eternal cannot be known to the created unless it comes in created, therefore spacial and temporal form.

This argument will begin as a historical study of early biblical interpretation to trace the development of the practice of allegory. From there a study of time in the thoughts of two central theologians of the Latin and Greek Church, Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, followed by an examination of the use of history in modern theologians. A more detailed examination of the subject of time and God's relationship to it will be made with a concluding section tracing out the principles of an incarnational hermeneutic.
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Introduction

‘I the LORD do not change,’ it is written in Malachi (3:6). Of all the attributes of God his eternity and immutability is the one most clearly used as a moral contrast to his creation and to mankind in particular. While the heavens and the earth perish God remains the same: ‘your years have no end’ (Ps. 102:25-27). God is more than just the greatest and oldest being in the universe. He is completely different from it, for he created it. Hence it is impossible to describe him adequately merely by superlatives like ‘Ancient of days’, for that could describe the universe itself. So God first gives his name with reference to no other; ‘I am that I am’. He is the absolute other and only he exists in his own right.

This is far superior to the picture of the gods in polytheistic religions which show them as having a beginning. Zeus was not always king and so he has it in his nature to change. Though he may remain on mount Olympus beyond the lives of humans his relationship with individuals has no such promise. Even the gods’ relationship with each other undergoes change, though perhaps of a fairly predictable pattern. Eternally undependable may be a good description of the gods. They are much greater than humans, and immortal, but as fickle as humans, and so undependable and dangerous. But God is perfect, timeless and changeless, thus it is impossible for him to change from good to bad, to change his nature. Because of this his promises are dependable: ‘for he is not a man, that he should regret’ (1 Sam. 15:29) and he ‘does not change like shifting shadows’ (Jas. 1:17, NIV). Though on the cosmic and religious scale the gods seem ever the same, living in a seemingly stable and fixed environment and possessing the same eternity as the stars seem to do, the philosophers realized that true divinity must not even have this limited mutability and so translated the mythic gods to spiritual principles and powers that are utterly changeless; constant, but rather impersonal. The more the gods are involved with human affairs the more human and personal and also the less divinely immutable they become, and vice versa.
This is one factor that makes the Incarnation such foolishness to the Greeks, for human existence is inexorably associated with mutability, the inability to remain constant. Against this objection the NT counters that ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever’ (Heb. 13:8). He is the ‘Alpha and Omega’ through whom all things were made, even time itself. That the eternal creator of time would be identified with one born of a woman must have seemed a virtual contradiction in terms, as it does to many even today. To them the idea of God become man would look like just another example of a god acting like a human, inferior to the Old Testament’s witness to his constancy cited above.

Yet another dominant and absolutely essential quality of God revealed in Scripture is that he interacts with men and engages in their history. The God who is also is the God who does, and who says. The history of Israel is the history of a people who have been formed by God and have heard from him. It is the history of his revelation and salvation of a lost creation. Hence the vast majority of the Old Testament is either a historical account or premised upon historical events, all of which are presented in such a way as to connect the readers to that history. Unlike the great myths or legal codes of other religions the Bible speaks of a long history of events whose importance is predicated on their actually having happened. Leslie Newbigin noted that this historicality was what impressed a ‘learned Hindu friend’ he made in his missionary work in India who ‘f[ou]nd in [the Bible] a quite unique interpretation of universal history and, therefore, a unique understanding of the human person as a responsible actor in history.’

Newbigin makes the point that the meaningfulness of our existence now is dependent upon our being connected to a story, a history, with meaning. This is the supreme biblical witness, for Scripture only tells us who we are as the people of God by what God has done to make us so. The past gives us a future. This is so for the Jews who look foremost to their liberation from slavery in Egypt and their covenant with God at Sinai, and for Christians who look to the death and resurrection of Christ. Because of these events Jews and Christians can both confidently await a messiah because they see that God is one whose property it is to

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be a Redeemer.

Yet if the relevance of history, of what happens here on earth in the affairs of humans, is such a central, if not the crucial feature of Scripture we should expect that any treatment of Scripture that minimizes its historical nature would find little support in the Church. But that is exactly the opposite of what we do find. Allegory, which separates the meaning of a text from any necessary literal or historical understanding, has been practised throughout the Church from the beginning and has been a dominant practice for much, and by some reckoning all of its history. The history of biblical interpretation through the end of the Patristic period can be characterized as the rise and triumph of the allegorical method characteristic of the Alexandrian school against a brief but failed bid for supremacy of the competing literal-historical method of the Antiochian school. Throughout the middle ages it reigned supreme and was only rejected in the West by the Protestant churches at the Reformation. It is still favoured in Catholic churches today. Why would this be? For in none of the churches and with none of the theologians whose faith is even remotely orthodox is it the case that history was disparaged, nor was it intimated that the historical actions of God were not central to the truth revealed in Scripture.

It is a proposition of this paper that, though Scripture testifies to the Creator of the universe interacting with man within the universe in human history, this dual concept goes against the grain of our natural reasoning.² It is only logical that to interact with the mutable is itself a mutable process. Consequently, it is natural to ask how God can be unchanging and yet have a history with us when our only existence is dominated by change. This is as paradoxical as the Trinity, and, like issues regarding the Incarnation, a full understanding of the eternal God acting in time is always in danger of being distorted, or simplified, by the natural Greek³ dichotomy that says it must be one thing or the other. Jesus is either divine or a

² By ‘natural’ is meant fallen, operating without the benefit of an unbroken image of God in our conscience.
³ Like Paul, ‘Greek’ is used here as shorthand for any natural human reasoning without necessarily implying a link to specific philosophies.
creature. God is either mutable or immutable. With regard to the Trinity the Greek either/or was rejected and the biblical witness was triumphant, though expressed in different terminology. It was a wholly non-Greek idea in Greek (and Latin) language. Yet when it came to the secondary issue of epistemology and divine inspiration it will be argued that the Greek dichotomy was less resisted, such that allegory was not only tolerated but widely seen as preferable to a historical approach to biblical interpretation. While it has been clear in doctrine how the Eternal Word of God, the Son of God, is both fully divine and fully human, it has not been so clear in doctrine or theology how the revealed Word and the consequent written word possess both attributes equally. In the age of faith divinity held sway and the Bible was read with more attention to its divinity than to its humanity. When history became significant in the Renaissance the tables were turned, leading to the eventual secular study of Scripture as ‘just another book’.

The problem is that history does present a real difficulty for theology. Not without good reason did Hellenistic thought reject the realm of history as a means for knowing God. History is defined by change, and change can be very troublesome. The Jews are faced with the difficulty of their exile and the silence of God for nearly two thousand years while Christians are faced with the radical break with the past when they left the Mosaic covenant behind them. Even within Christianity there is evidence of change, for the Christological language throughout the New Testament is varied and none of it is precisely what came to be used in the fourth century. If God is unchanging why is it that his people undergo such change and variability? How does his revelation to us reflect his continuity? Or does it only reflect our contingent reality, and if this is so how can we truly call it divine and the Word of God?

One solution to this problem is to reject the historical as divine. Thus all scripture which is contingent upon a mutable historical existence is seen as merely historical and no more. In an age of Enlightenment when men would assume that truth is accessible through the human mind this model would be much more acceptable and appealing. Such is the dominant culture
of the West today. But in an age of faith that looks for divine revelation from without, from the God who is *other* yet involved, and which depends upon the actions of God in history, this approach would be unacceptable. The Church could not abandon Scripture because of its historicality, because the essence of the Gospel proclamation is a historical event. No history, no Jesus. No Jesus, no redemption, and no faith.

Another approach is to practice historical revision; clean up the messiness of history by excluding that which does not clearly conform to the desired faith. This was the method of Marcion who cut out the entire Hebrew canon rather than try to explain its relevance to a Church no longer living under the Law, also severely editing out of the New Testament all elements which conflicted with his theology. This had the limited intellectual virtue of presenting a simplified view of the meaning of history, but it had the supreme vice of not really being fish or fowl. He still held to revelation connected with historical events, but in completely rejecting the Old Testament as the revelation and laws of the false Demiurge he is left with a Gospel which comes out of nowhere, having no history. And he breaks the historical connection between the revelation he accepts as genuine and his own time because he proposes that it had become corrupted by the Church. This is a form of unhistorical history which is quite common among the sects and is also not unknown among modern historical biblical critics who reject traditional accounts in favour of a speculative ‘true’ history.

This flaw of a lack of a coherent connecting history is one of the major critiques of gnosticism made by Irenaeus in what has come to be known as the doctrine of Apostolic Succession, a doctrine which is often taken out of context in order to demonstrate a superior ontological grace connected with the formal office of the historic episcopate when the real purpose to which Irenaeus put it was to ask and answer the question of how to be sure which tradition of interpretation is genuine:

We refer them [the heretics] to that tradition which originates from the apostles, which is preserved by means of the succession of presbyters in the Churches...It is within the power of all, therefore, in every Church, who may wish to see the truth to
contemplate clearly the tradition of the apostles manifested throughout the world; and we are in a position to reckon up those who were by the apostles instituted bishops in the Churches, and the succession of these men to our own times; those who neither taught nor knew of anything like what these rave about.  

For Irenaeus the historic continuity of leadership was a visible sign and veritable proof of continuity of teaching. In the realm of history, of the contingent and changeable, succession is the clearest manifestation of continuity, which is the essential characteristic of truth. This is the basis of Paul’s defence of his teaching in Galatians 1:12 and 1 Corinthians 11:23, ‘For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you’. And Jesus points to a similar succession of truth: having given them the words which the Father had given him (Jn. 17:8) he sends the apostles just as he was sent from the Father (Jn. 20:21). This succession is the historical connectedness that links man to God and the reason why genealogies play such a prominent role in Scripture.

There was no chance that the Church would accept Marcion’s model and cut itself off from its past and from the very writings that identified and transmitted its heritage. If anything Marcion spurred it to clarify what was the proper NT canon. The Hebrew scriptures would continue to be held as the word of God. The only question was what kind of word. Certainly they were not false or flawed. But they were less clear than the apostolic writings. Did God speak differently over time? The issue of the continuity of truth and the immutability of God would point in the negative, yet the texts pointed in the affirmative.

Allegory’s primary virtue was that it could accommodate such variety of revelation by looking past the historical appearance and perceive an inner eternal message. Its vice lay in the legitimate criticism of it made by the Antiochians that allegory was merely reading into the text preconceived ideas, that it could be used as a tool to make the Bible proclaim any philosophy without regard to the faith of the Church, as has been done from Valentinus to Bultmann. Yet such a defect could be mitigated once allegory was brought under the Rule of

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4 *Against the Heresies*, Book III, ch. II.2 and ch. III.1
Faith and given support by orthodox theologians to overcome the bad reputation it enjoyed due to the heterodoxy of its most prominent exponent in the Church, Origen. This domestication of allegory put the defenders of the literal-historical school in a difficult position, even though their method was more in harmony with the Bible and the biblical faith. For even the strongest exponents of allegory did not believe that it was always necessary. Since many like Augustine believed in using both an allegorical and a literal-historical approach it was not a question of either/or. And since allegory was guaranteed to resolve the historical problems more easily than a historical hermeneutic only a demonstration that it was invalid in principle could justify a total prohibition of allegory.

The Antiochian school could not succeed as long as a thorough theological defence of the centrality of history in divine revelation was lacking. It is the thesis of this paper that such an adequate defence of history was never formulated in the Church or elsewhere; that, though history was proclaimed as an important element of revelation, especially in the understanding of sacred history of Augustine, it was never held as an essential element, and so it could be dispensed with or ignored when it conflicted with the faith, just as the faith would later be ignored when it conflicted with history in the modern era.
Chapter 1
The Rise and Triumph of Allegory

I. PRE-CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY

Though Origen might well be considered the father of the allegorical method of biblical interpretation that came to have such prominence in the Patristic period, dominating the medieval Church in both East and West, and which is still greatly favoured in Orthodox and Catholic exegesis today, he was not the first to use allegory on the Old Testament. The earliest example of such an allegorical approach is found in the Jewish community of Alexandria, beginning at least with Aristobulus but coming to full fruition in the biblical interpretation of Philo Judaeus in the early first century. Alexandria, where a large Jewish population lived within a centre of Hellenistic culture and learning, was a natural location for an attempt to bridge the Jewish Scripture with Greek philosophy. It may have been the Alexandrian Jews’ status as sizeable minority in a Hellenistic metropolis that encouraged them to be freer in taking on board foreign ideas than their cousins in the Promised Land. Minority status tends to strengthen cultural identity. Because they could not rule or dominate the Egyptian culture there might have been less external pressure on the Alexandrian Jews to conform to Hellenism and so they would be less drawn to nationalist reactionary tendencies. And whereas the anti-Hellenist forces in Judea, once they had gained control, became wracked by internal squabbling over the priesthood, the Alexandrians were insulated by having their own temple with a high priest in the line of Zadok, as opposed to the Hasmonean line which divided the Judean conservatives. A people with a more secure cultural and religious identity is generally more confident in exploring different expressions. The translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek in the Septuagint already shows a desire to make the text more harmonious with Greek philosophy.⁵ Some of the anthropomorphic metaphors relating to God are translated into what are their perceived true intended

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meanings: ‘such people are a smoke in my nostrils’ (Isa. 65:5) is translated into ‘this is the smoke of my wrath’. Since the Greek θυμός fits one of the legitimate meanings of the Hebrew ‘aph this is not an instance of allegorical interpretation but it makes it a simple step to move past the limits of the lexicon and use reason or philosophy to ‘translate’ the metaphor. Thus the arm of the Lord becomes his strength. Allegory is but a form of expanded metaphor where a passage has another meaning than what at first appears, ἀλληγορία coming from ἄλλος (another) and ἀγορεύω (meaning).

In this the Jewish allegorizers were following the example of the Greek philosophers’ treatment of their own sacred literature in the mythologies of the poets Homer and Hesiod. They had to explain the dissonance between the more abstract ideas of their emerging ‘higher’ philosophy and the anthropomorphic picture of the gods presented by the poets. At first this explanation may have been more in defence of their philosophies, attaching themselves to the authority of Homer, but by the sixth century BC allegorical interpretation was used in defence against criticism from philosophy, from the likes of Xenophanes and Pythagoras who wanted to discard the poets’ mythologies altogether. The most severe example of this criticism came in Plato’s depiction of Socrates’ condemnation of the poets in the Republic. The depiction of the gods in the Iliad and Odyssey are declared unworthy of true theology. They were myths, but most importantly, they were not good myths and could not be redeemed:

The battles of the gods in Homer’s verse are things that we must not admit into our city either wrought in allegory or without allegory. For the young are not able to distinguish what is and what is not allegory.  

Plato is clearly aware of the allegorical interpretation put upon the myths by previous philosophers but he disagrees with the practice. The poets entertain but they do not enlighten and can only be made enlightening by removing their poetic form, after which Plato finds

7 Republic, 377d
8 Ibid, 378d
little left to justify their use. Clear philosophical truth is better than distracting and distorting entertainment. His critique is very similar to the hostility of many conservative evangelicals today toward imaginative fiction or fantasy literature.

Plato’s flat dismissal of an allegorical treatment of Homer et al in order to make them theologically appropriate, or theoprepes, was not followed by other schools. Many Stoics made great use of allegory in a systematic treatment, seeing Homer as philosophizing in verse. The Heracleitean Homeric Questions states that ‘Homer is a painter as it were of human experiences as he clothes allegorically our experience with the names of gods’. The manner of allegorical interpretation varied. The Stoics like Zeno and Chrysippus interpreted Homer as describing the physical and metaphysical universe. Metrodorus held that the ether, sun, earth, air and moon were represented by Agamemnon, Achilles, Helen, Paris and Hector. Elsewhere the gods are identified as parts of the body. Such physical or scientific allegories were rejected by Plutarch as crude allegories. Nevertheless he still thought it was impious to interpret the myths literally, his preference being a moral or ethical allegory along much the same lines as the Jewish allegorizing found in the Letter of Aristeas, which interpreted the animals in the levitical laws as representing moral qualities of men. In the Neoplatonic revival allegory was used to show that Homer was dealing with the spiritual or psychological dimension. His poetry was not about the gods but about the journey of the soul.

Such was the intellectual climate in which Jewish allegorizing developed. Yet in place of Homer Moses was proclaimed to be the allegorical theologian, clothing spiritual truth in symbolic language. At first the allegorizing is limited to eliminating anthropomorphism and explaining the levitical laws. Little is said about the technique of allegory. It is not until Philo that we encounter a Jewish defence of the actual practice of allegory and a complete

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9 Quaestiones Homericae, 37, p. 53, cited by R.P.C. Hanson, Allegory and Event, London: SCM, 1959, p. 58
10 Hanson, Allegory and Event, London: SCM, 1959 p. 56
11 Ibid, pp. 61-2
12 Lamberton, Homer the Theologian, p. 43
Philosophical approach to biblical interpretation.

Philo was a devout Jew who never deviated from a belief in the divine authority of the Hebrew scriptures and of the Mosaic Law, and so much of his exegesis is taken up with defending both its relevance and its equality and even superiority to the great philosophies. He was defending his understanding of the meaning of the scriptures against those fellow Jews who were inclined toward reading them only according to the letter, whether by sheer ignorance or an ideological refusal to look for the ‘deeper meaning’. But his defence was also against those who would reject the scriptures because of their conflict with higher philosophical understanding. Yet he is also a philosophical Jew reading the text according to his own philosophy, one drawn from Greek influences. That he was not from one school exclusively, drawing from Stoicism, Neopythagoreanism and Neoplatonism, and that his Jewish faith influenced what he drew from each is hard to deny. Yet there are ways in which his philosophical leaning clearly influenced his reading of Scripture. He believed that Moses was intent on revealing universal truth and that all the Law is related to that. The elect nature of biblical revelation is downplayed and prophetic and messianic interpretations are absent. For him Jewish religion, properly understood, is but an expression of the same universal truth understood by all true philosophers or ‘men of science’. This is the flip side of the adage that ‘Plato was Moses speaking in Greek’ for it also could mean that Moses was merely Platonizing in Hebrew, that he was revealing essentially the same truth. Moses is a lawgiver like others, only doing so in a superior fashion, not expounding truth, naked and unadorned, nor burying it in fantastic fables, but rather he expresses it in a beautiful and scientific manner so that:

The law corresponds to the world and the world to the law, and that a man who is obedient to the law, being, by so doing, a citizen of the world, arranges his actions with reference to the intention of nature, in harmony with which the whole universal world is regulated.13

As an expositor of Scripture Philo saw his duty being to reveal the truth through the science

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of symbolic interpretation. An approach that stayed within the literal meaning would not
bring out the fullness of the truth God had revealed through Moses and it would be liable to
courage not just anthropomorphic ideas about God but, what was worse, anthropopathic
ideas; that God acted like men.

His rules for when the literal should give way to an allegorical approach were basically
whenever the literal meaning was impossible, nonsensical, unworthy of divine revelation or
mythical. These in themselves are not unique. They would be used by later Christian
allegorists and were not much different from rules employed without allegory. What makes
the difference is the theological/philosophical orientation used to determine when such
criteria are met. An example of unworthiness is the law concerning a neighbour’s garment
taken in pledge (Ex. 22.26) which Philo considers a matter beneath the attention of the
Creator of the universe.\footnote{On Dreams, XVI.1.92-4, The Works of Philo} This is not without parallel in the NT where Paul also considers it
absurd that God would bother giving laws about muzzling oxen; ‘Is it about oxen that God is
concerned? Surely he says this for us’. (1 Cor. 9:8-10) While Paul interpreted the passage
from Deuteronomy with reference to the work of the Gospel Philo would tend toward a
universal truth about the soul, the central concern of Plato.

With Plato Philo held to a strong dualism between body and spirit, or soul, looking at the
body as a distraction or prison of the eternal soul:

When we are alive, the soul is dead, and is buried in the body as in a sepulchre; but if
we should die, the soul lives its own life and is delivered from the body, the pernicious
corpse to which it is bound.\footnote{Allegorical Interpretation I, XXXIII.107-8, The Works of Philo}

Again this echoes Paul in Romans 7:24, but while Paul then points to the action of Christ
Philo looks inward. With such a hostility to the flesh it is little surprising that stories and
histories are less important in the flesh so to speak than as models of psychological
principles. Thus despite admitting the truth of much biblical history Philo turns much of it
into allegory. The temptation in the garden is not surprisingly treated allegorically because of its mythic nature with talking serpents and Eve springing out of Adam’s rib. In that story Adam becomes the mind, Eve the outward sense and the serpent pleasure ‘of itself evil’. Yet the visit of the three angels to Abraham at Mamre is also food for allegory:

And so, going with all speed and eagerness, Abraham bid Sarah, Virtue, to hasten and knead three measures of meal and to make buried-cakes (Gen 18:6), when God was brought in by two of his highest powers, authority and goodness; the One being the middle of the three. (Abraham) produced figures for the soul to see. Each of these measure the whole, though they are in no way measured, for God and his powers are uncircumscribed. Thus, his Goodness is the measure of good things; Authority, the measure of subjects; and the Head himself, the (measure) of everything both corporeal and incorporeal.16

Even the history most sacred for the Jews, found in Exodus, is interpreted out of its historical flesh and applied to the soul in general:

The sacred Word bears abundant witness that the food of the soul is not earthly but heavenly: See, I rain on you bread of heaven, and the people should go out and gather the daily (portion) for a day, that I may test whether they will follow my law or not. (Exod. 16:4). You see? The soul is fed not by earthly and corruptible things but by words which God might shower from the high and pure Nature which has been called Heaven.17

The Alexandrian exegesis demonstrated by Philo did not survive long among the Jews, for the universalist tendencies would naturally be seen after the fall of Jerusalem and the disastrous Bar Kohkba revolt as a threat to the survival of Jewish identity. Hellenized Judaism was no longer an option. Allegorical interpretation would survive only among those Hellenized Jews who became Christian and later by Greek converts bypassing Judaism altogether. The Epistle of Barnabas in the first century AD represents one clear example of the kind of allegorizing practised by Philo and the Letter of Aristeas. While the latter interpret the list of animals forbidden as teaching right morality in order to show the rightness of the levitical laws Barnabas uses the same technique to show that the laws are not meant to be

16 On The Birth of Abel and the Sacrifices Offered by Him and by His Brother Cain, XV.59, The Works of Philo
17 Allegorical Interpretation III, LVI.162, The Works of Philo
obeyed according to the letter. For a Jew who accepted Philo’s principle that the laws are to be symbolically, not literally, understood, it must have been difficult then not to conclude that their literal observance was also unnecessary, if not wrong. In this sense Christianity looks like the natural successor to and heir of Hellenic Jewish interpretation. Yet the full adoption of Philo’s method of philosophical allegorizing would not be immediate. The author of *Barnabas* only allegorizes in that one section, the rest of his epistle being taken up with prophetic and typological interpretation of a type quite unused by Philo. Nor is any type of allegory present in the New Testament but in a few very limited instances. The vast majority of first century Christian exegesis reflects another influence.

**II. PALESTINIAN JUDAISM AND RABBINIC INTERPRETATION**

It cannot be denied that Christianity in its foundation is rooted primarily in Palestinian Judaism. Christ was raised and worked his ministry in Palestine and all the first disciples were from there. Thus the New Testament can logically be seen as a continuation of at least one segment of Palestinian exegesis. Another surviving strand would be Rabbinical Judaism. To argue which is the more authentic representative of first century Palestinian Judaism would be an instance of circular reasoning. Like allegorical exegesis, it depends on what you believe already to be the truth. What is certain is that they are related as descendants of a common source, differing from each other in the elements which they choose to emphasize and those which they de-emphasize or eliminate. An examination of their similarities and differences would help to give us a better idea of how they were related and how they separated.

We know from Josephus and the New Testament that Judaism was diverse both in Palestine and in the diaspora. In Palestine there seem to have been four divisions; Sadducees, Pharisees, Zealots and Essenes. A fifth group might be added especially outside Palestine in the Hellenized Jews already mentioned. Of the Sadducees and Zealots we know little to nothing of their method of interpretation. No school or manuscript has survived. From the
fact that the Sadducees disbelieved in both the resurrection and in the developed idea of angels that the Pharisees had we may deduce that their reading of Scripture was conservative, dismissing extra biblical teaching, as Josephus says:

They say that it is necessary to hold those rules that have been written but it is not (necessary) to observe what is (only) from the fathers’ tradition.  

Yet this tells us nothing about how they interpreted what was actually written. And as far as the zealots they may have had no interest in Scripture altogether, or at least no special interest in expounding its meaning. Of the Essenes we now know much from the Qumran texts, and what this reveals is a group largely focused upon apocalyptic interpretations, but their identity seems to have been too narrow to allow it to survive independent for long. They either died out or were absorbed by larger and stronger interpretive communities. The Hellenized Jews we have already mentioned as surviving only by later adoption into the Church. This leaves the Pharisees to be the base out of which both Rabbinic and Christian or Messianic/Nazarene Judaism emerged. It is understandable that Rabbinic Judaism would seem more naturally the heir of the Pharisees because they identify themselves as such, whereas Christians have a much more ambivalent, if not negative association with the Pharisees, for just as ‘the Jews’ in the NT is used to indicate those Jews who opposed Christ and his Church so is the term of Pharisee used to mark out those teachers of the law who rejected Christ. Yet we know from the NT that there were Pharisees who believed in Jesus, and he himself was recognized as a rabbi, a teacher of the Law, and stated that we must be as righteous as the Pharisees. Paul could still appeal to the Pharisees as fellow believers in the resurrection (Acts 23:6-8). Furthermore we know from Rabbinic teaching that there were at least two schools at the time of Jesus, that of Rabbi Hillel and that of the stricter Shammai. Since Rabbinic Judaism has followed Hillel, and Jesus’ command to ‘do unto others’ shows an affinity more with Hillel’s saying, ‘What is hateful to you, do not unto your neighbour: this is the entire Torah. All the rest is commentary’, we can see at least three lines of thought with regard to the Torah, all of which makes the conflict between Jesus and Pharisees seem an in-house argument, with

Christianity and Judaism appearing as rival branches.\(^{19}\)

Rabbinic interpretation is certainly less philosophical than Alexandrian, focusing upon the physical observance of the Law, rather than philosophical understanding, but it is not much more attentive to a modern understanding of the literal meaning than was Philo. The Rabbis could allegorize as well, if less systematically, as when ‘who lies between my breasts’ (Song 1:13) is interpreted to mean that he sits between God and a cherub,\(^{20}\) or in this example from the *Tosefta*, *Hullin* 2.23:

> For lasting punishment comes on anyone who breaks through a fence of the sages, as it is written: ‘A serpent shall bite him who breaks through a fence’ (Eccles 10:8),

referring to the oral Law which is a fence around the Torah. Hillel’s 7 rules of interpretation do attempt to provide a scientific method of literal exegesis but the problem is in the looseness of the application. Rule #1 *qal va-homer, from less to greater*, is a principle of analogy. It is frequently used by Jesus in much the same way as the Rabbis did:

> If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath. (Mt 12:11-13)

Compare this with:

> Where (is the rationale for this) from: ‘To rescue a soul puts off the Sabbath’? Rabbi Eliezer ben ‘Atzariah said: ‘If circumcision, which concerns one of man’s limbs, puts off the Sabbath, to rescue a soul puts off the Sabbath!’\(^{21}\)

Yet analogy can be stretched quite far, as allegory demonstrates. One use of this ‘proves’ the resurrection against a ‘heretic’, possibly a Sadducee, who disbelieves and cites the verse ‘Thou shalt break them as a potter’s vessel’, meaning that like the pot a soul that dies is destroyed forever. The Rabbi replies that the soul is rather like a glass vessel: ‘If the glass vessel which is made by the blowing of a mortal man can be repaired how much more the

\(^{19}\) It is interesting to see how much of Jesus’ moral interpretation of the OT is reflected in Rabbinic teaching, showing that his lenient application of the law was not what was the cause for division.

\(^{20}\) *Midrash*, Shemoth Rabba 2.8

\(^{21}\) *Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbath 132a
being who is made by the blowing of God?’ This may be a right conclusion without being a sound argument. The principle of context, Hillel’s rule #7, can also be used in ways as inventive as allegory, as when a rabbinic interpretation of the command not to steal in the Decalogue (Ex. 20:15) is that it refers to kidnapping because the surrounding commandments refer to actions against persons not property.

The problem is that Rabbinic exegesis focuses upon the letter in such a way that it separates it from its historical and narrative context. Though Rabbi Ishmael (c 90-130 AD) taught that the Torah ‘speaks in human language’ his contemporary and more influential rival Rabbi Aqiba, who began compiling the Mishna, reflected Philo’s belief that the repetitions and superfluous words call for special interpretation. He believed that Rabbinical teaching in the oral law of the Mishna was the hammer that could bring out the meaning in the text: ‘as a hammer divides fire into many sparks, so every verse of Scripture has many explanations’. When Judah ‘the Prince’ (c. 160-200), who completed the Mishna, declared that ‘He that renders a verse of Scripture as it appears says what is not true’, it is hard to imagine that he holds any great loyalty to what today would be called the literal meaning. The ability to hammer out by rabbinical interpretation the deeper meanings inherent in the text is premised upon the revelatory quality of the Torah, and by extension of the entire Hebrew scriptures.

A philosophical and allegorical approach would see the divinity of the Scripture flowing from the eternal truth of the ideas contained in the text, while a Christological view would see the second person of the Godhead, the eternal living Word, as the true source of Scripture’s divine power. For the Rabbis the divinity of the text is tied to the actual letters, much as is the case with Islam and the Quran. The Torah has an existence which precedes its written history, it precedes salvation history itself. In rabbinical tradition it takes on the same aspects given to the Eternal Son in Christianity:

R. Yudan said: The world was created for the sake of the Torah,

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22 Genesis Rabba 14.7
23 Farrar, History of Interpretation, pp. 73 & 85
The Holy One, blessed be He, spake to the Torah: *Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.* (The Torah) spake before Him: *Sovereign of all the worlds! The man whom Thou wouldst create will be limited in days and full of anger; and he will come into the power of sin. Unless Thou wilt be long-suffering with him it would be well for him not to have come into the world.*

With such a concept as this it is easy to see why the very words themselves, not just the ideas that their arrangement communicated, would have power to reveal divine truth to those who could perceive it. Even the very individual letters were revelatory, and could be made to unlock more truth by rearranging them. This is the foundation of the Kabbala and the practice of Gematria. Such a mystical and almost magical power attributed to the physical text is rare in Christian exegesis, occurring only in writers with strong Jewish connections, as with the author of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, who calculates the 318 servants of Abraham (the number represented in the text by the Greek letters τ and η for 18 and τ for 300) to refer to Jesus’ name by its first two letters, and to the cross, ταυ being in the shape of a cross. Christian spiritual interpretation tended overall to free them from the text, whereas Jewish spiritual reading leads to a greater dependence, yet without the necessity of a corresponding dependence on a historical understanding.

Yet history was important to the Jews. They believed that God was sovereign over it and that history reflected his Providence, therefore it had meaning, and this meaning is reflected in an element of Jewish interpretation. It is the place of this element in Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem that distinguishes them from the Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. In rabbinic exegesis in its most common form, the midrash, scriptural interpretation can be divided into two groups; halakic and haggadic. A halakah is any interpretation that serves to inform how the law must be obeyed:

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24 Gen. Rabba 12.2 and Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer
25 One modern example of this seems to be the recent book *The Bible Code* which proposes that a mathematical analysis of the letters in the Torah reveal prophecy.
26 Halakic and haggadic teaching need not be through only scriptural interpretation. It may make use of extra-canonical material, oral traditions or other sources.
A man should not marry a woman made pregnant by his colleague or one who nurses his colleague's child, as it is said: *Do not take away an ancient landmark and do not go into the field of orphans* (Prov 23:10).

A haggadic interpretation is one that explains why something is so by reference to a story or some other narrative or event as in this midrash from the Siphre ‘al Debra'im:

*Do not speak to me! Ascend to the top of Pisgah!* (Deut 3:26c-27a). From this you have the saying of Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob: ‘One prayer is more pleasing (to God) than a thousand good deeds.’ For with all the deeds of Moses, he was not told: *Ascend!* But with this word (of prayer) he was told: *Ascend!*

Another haggadah is the teaching that the woman must light the Sabbath candle because it was a woman (Eve) who was responsible for extinguishing the light of the world. Haggadah tells our history so we know what must be done. It both presumes and informs a historical consciousness.

It is significant to note that Jesus was in conflict with the Pharisees primarily over their halakic interpretation. His answer to them is never simply to offer his own halakic interpretation. The case of divorce illustrates this clearly. Rabbinic tradition shows the gradual easing of prohibitions against divorce:

The school of Shammai says: ‘A man should not divorce his wife, except where he has found in her a case for scandal, as it is said: *because he has found in her a scandalous thing*’ (Deut. 24:1). But the school of Hillel says: ‘even if she has burned his supper, as it is said: *because he has found in her a scandalous thing.*’ Rabbi Aqiba says: ‘even if he has found another more becoming than she, as it is said: *and if she does not find favour in your eyes.*’

Rather than offer his own halakic interpretation or simply agree with Shammai Jesus applies a haggadic teaching (Mt. 19:4-9). Elsewhere he explicitly attacks their practice of extra biblical oral tradition with a prophetic interpretation (Mt. 15:3-11). They were focusing too much on how to follow the law and how to construct ways around it rather than on why the Law was there and what, or who it was meant to reveal. For Christ the purpose of the

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27 Tosefta, Niddah 2.7
28 Mishna, Gittin 9.10
Scriptures was not to explain how better to fulfil the Law outwardly but how it would be fulfilled inwardly: it was to reveal the Messiah:

You diligently search the Scriptures because you think that by them you have eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me. (Jn. 5:39, also Lk. 24:27)

Since the Law was given to reveal the Messiah, when he came the Law became unnecessary, a burden to be left behind. In place of the ‘yoke of the Torah’\(^29\), which Paul calls a ‘yoke of slavery’ (Gal. 5:1), Jesus offers his yoke, which is light (Mt. 11:29-30). Freed of the need to know how to obey the law in every detail in Christian exegesis is virtually bereft of halakic interpretation. It is the haggadic strain which remains and the principle part of that being prophetic and messianic interpretation, for the whole meaning of history in the biblical witness was what God was doing and what he was going to do.

It is entirely the reverse with Rabbinic Judaism, especially after the fall of Jerusalem, when Judaism regroups under a stronger Pharisaical identity and begins to write down the oral law of the rabbis to form the Mishna. The Mishna is wholly halakic and the major books of biblical interpretation or midrash are predominantly halakic. The secondary status of haggadic interpretation and the place of history as a hermeneutical tool in exegesis is reflected in the major distinction between Christianity and Judaism; the place of the Messiah. While belief in the Messiah remained it was not central to mainstream Jewish life. This may be largely due to the spectacularly failed messianic movements, the bar Kokba revolt and others, which instilled a reticence in being caught up in any further false messiah. This is Steven Bayne’s view:

[The rabbis] were most opposed to messianic movements, for these at best would result in widespread disappointment and at worst would shatter the modus vivendi Jewish leaders had worked out for living in the diaspora, this ‘modus vivendi’ being focusing adherence to the Law through the oral tradition which ‘bound one to the Jewish community’. The Messiah was put on the back burner theologically:

\(^{29}\) Rabbi Ne’honia ben HaQanah said: ‘He who takes the yoke of Torah on himself shall have lifted from him the yoke of kingdom and the yoke of the world’s way. But he who takes the yoke of Torah off himself shall find laid on himself the yoke of kingship and the yoke of the world’s way.’ *Mishna Abot* 3.5
The rabbis believed that the era of redemption was far off in the future and that Jews should concern themselves with the here and now rather than be concerned overly with the far-off future. In addressing messianism, the Talmud cited the view that the messianic era will not differ greatly from the current era.\(^{30}\)

Thus even when the Messiah comes his purpose will be to reveal how more perfectly to fulfil the Torah. The Christ would reveal the Torah rather than, as the Church believes, the Torah reveals the Christ.

For Christians, Jews had reversed the order of things. There is a strong element of suspicion among Christians then that such change was deliberately made in reaction to competition with Christian interpretation. This is reflected in Theodoret of Cyrus’ charge in the *Eranistes* that: ‘the Jews connect prophecies of this kind with Solomon and Zerubbabel, in order to exhibit the groundlessness of the Christian position’, as well as in Origen’s belief that the Jews had altered their scriptures.\(^{31}\) This belief would certainly affect Christian reactions to Jewish interpretation regardless of how much truth was in the charge. What is crucial and undeniable is that Jewish interpretation became more inwardly focused upon their own actions of following the Torah and less upon looking for God’s Messiah, and this was seen by the Church as a radical shift from their past.

Christians saw Rabbinic Judaism as having become virtually agnostic with regard to the Messiah. This is reflected in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* where he records Trypho’s attitude toward the Messiah:

But Christ-if He has indeed been born, and exists anywhere-is unknown, and does not even know Himself, and has no power until Elias come to anoint Him, and make Him manifest to all.\(^{32}\)

To be agnostic about the Messiah was to be agnostic about history, for to the Church the meaning of history was what God was doing, and what God was doing was redeeming the

^{31}\textit{Letter to Africanus}, chapter 4  
^{32}\textit{Ibid}, chapter 8
world through his Messiah, the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The Jews had forsaken their Messiah and so any understanding of what God was doing in history. Their historical focus was entirely in the past. As Ulrich Wilkins puts it:

In the sphere of Rabbinic theology the whole Heilsgeschichtliche (salvation history) tradition of ancient Israel, with its meaning as a creed based on the history of election was profoundly altered…Outside of Creation Rabbinic thought knew of only one activity of God: the giving of the Law on Sinai.\footnote{Ulrich Wilkins, ‘The Understanding of Revelation with the History of Primitive Christianity’, Revelation as History, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Editor, London: MacMillan,1969, p. 61-2}

The only past event that mattered was that God gave Israel the Law, and once received history might as well have stopped. As far as Jewish daily life was concerned, it didn’t matter if God was going to do anything more in history, all that mattered now was the daily obedience. From the Christian perspective Judaism had left the path of history and chosen a ghetto of worldly study with no spiritual purpose. They could not see the forest of historical meaning for the trees. Theirs was a literal knowledge of Scripture but not a truly historical one, if history is understood from the perspective of God’s working in it.

**III. CHRISTIAN PROPHETIC AND TYPOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION**

If historical revelation, meaning not just revelation that occurs over time but which is understood with reference to the passage of time and the place in time of those seeking to understand it, is thus identified as the Messianic stream of biblical interpretation, then the Christian church may legitimately see itself as the best inheritor of a historical hermeneutic, for the Christian faith is more immediately fixed to historical events for its identification and its distinction from other Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew texts. Against the retreat of the Jews from a messianic focus, the non-historical philosophizing of the Hellenic Jews and the failed reclusive apocalypticism of the Essenes, Christianity stands out as a community whose reading of the OT is formed not just by a historical act of God that preceded the texts but by a second divine action which interprets the first and all revelation in between. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and his ascent into heaven to reign at the Father’s right hand,
events which have no revelatory meaning for orthodox Christianity if they are not historical, become, as a history, the unifying hermeneutic for all sacred scripture and scriptural history. The idea that ‘all the prophets testify about [Christ]’ (Acts 10:43, Rom. 3:21) becomes the basis for Christian biblical interpretation.

Thus early Christian exegesis is dominated by prophetic interpretation showing how the words of the prophets are fulfilled in Christ. Such interpretations are not limited to those identified in the NT but rather take those examples as their charter for mining the OT even further, no prophet being excluded from this. The primary focus would naturally be Jesus’ person and his work; the Incarnation and Atonement, but the prophetic application could easily be expanded to seemingly minor elements of the Church, as when Clement of Rome claims that:

Many ages before it was written concerning bishops and deacons. For thus saith the Scripture in a certain place, I will appoint their bishops in righteousness, and their deacons in faith. (Is. 60.17)\textsuperscript{34}

This could be done because, as Christ ‘is the new law...we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ’ are ‘true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham’.\textsuperscript{35} All the prophecies concerning Israel therefore can look for their fulfilment in the history of the continuing people of God in his Church.

Yet prophetic interpretation was not limited to seeing Christ in the words of the prophets. It also looked to historical events related by the prophets. This reflects the understanding that God is not just the Lord of all the prophets, he is the Lord of history as well. As he directs the course of history, either through commands to his people or through his providential sovereignty, history should naturally reflect this unity and purpose. God’s fingerprints can be seen all over it. The prophetic quality of historical events and things resides in their being a type of Christ’s fulfilment of history. As Chrysostom would succinctly define it later:

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\textsuperscript{34} \textit{First Epistle to the Corinthians}, ch. 42. Clement is either using a Greek translation of the Hebrew other than the LXX, which does not have διακονοῦς but ἀρχοντας (rulers), or he is altering it himself.
\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho}, 11.4
\end{flushright}
Prophecy in type is that which takes place in deeds or in historical realities; the other prophecy is one in words.\textsuperscript{36}

Where Jesus is the archetype, all other history before and after (but primarily before) serves as a reflection following the type. The charter for this understanding of Scripture for the Church is found, among others, in \textit{Colossians} 2:17 where Paul says that the Law is ‘a shadow of things to come; the reality, however is found in Christ’. The central thrust of \textit{Hebrews} is to show the typological significance of the tabernacle and priestly sacrifice. The New Testament abounds in seeing types of Christ and of the Church in the Old Testament: The rock in the desert, the bronze serpent, Melchizedeck, and Hagar and Sarah (even though Paul calls this last an allegory he is clearly using it as a type, as the Antiochian exegetes would later point out).

As was the case with verbal prophecies the Church did not consider itself restricted in seeing typological prophecy only in those instances where the canonical Scriptures revealed them. Many of them are expansions of biblical examples: where Peter makes the ark a figure of our baptism Justin Martyr expands that to make Noah a figure of Christ because he saves us by water and wood, the ark now being a figure of the cross.\textsuperscript{37} Some were original; Rahab’s scarlet cord representing the blood of Christ.\textsuperscript{38} Nor was it necessary that typological interpretations agree with previous ones. Justin Martyr sees the two goats in Leviticus 16:7-10 reflecting the two advents of Christ:

\begin{quote}
The first, in which the elders of your people, and the priests, having laid hands on Him and put Him to death, sent Him away as the scape [goat]; and His second appearance, because in the same place in Jerusalem you shall recognise Him whom you have dishonoured,\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

whereas Theodoret would later see them revealing his two natures.\textsuperscript{40} Christians believed they were justified in pointing out types wherever the scarlet thread could be identified. There are

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Sixth Sermon on Penance
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Dialogue with Trypho ch. 138
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Clement of Rome, \textit{First Epistle to the Corinthians}, ch. 12
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Ibid, ch. 41
  \item \textsuperscript{40} \textit{Eranistes}, The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series, volume III, p. 226
\end{itemize}
instances when the type is forced, as when a singular item is made typological despite its function within the narrative. An example of this is how the mere appearance of wood reveals the cross, or bread or flour reveals the Eucharist. When Irenaeus sees Lot’s wife turned into salt being a type of the Church, which is the salt of the earth, he is verging on allegory because the connection between type and archetype hinges upon the attribute of salt rather than the function of the type within the narrative, the motive for this interpretation being clearly not a natural application of typology but a desire to make a difficult passage more acceptable.  

By seeing Christ and the Gospel reflected throughout the Old Testament the Church was able to keep within a consistent Christian interpretation not just individual prophetic passages or even whole books but the entire history of Israel and the whole scope of Mosaic Law, for all of its dissonance with the New could be compared to that between an object and its shadow, the original and the copy. Thus Theodoret could say: ‘All of the Old Testament, so to say, is a type of the New’. This relationship between type and archetype is a historical one, the types in the OT preceding the reality in the NT because they are heralds of what God was to do, revealing in their imperfect form the coming perfection:

For the very salvation and reality of the Lord were prefigured in the people, and the decrees of the Gospel were proclaimed in advance by the law. The people then was a model by way of preliminary sketch and the law was the writing of a parable; the Gospel is the recounting and fulfilment of the law and the church is the repository of the reality.  

Thus the history is seen as real history and not spiritualized away. For the essence of typology lies, as Jean Danielou says: ‘in showing that it is history itself which is figurative rather than in replacing history by allegory’.  

In the typology of Irenaeus, despite the bad example cited above, we find a respect for the

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41 Against the Heresies, Book IV, ch. 31.2
42 Eranistes, p. 226.
43 Melito of Sardis, On Pascha 39-40 p.21
44 From Shadows to Reality, Burns & Oats, 1960, p. 52
importance of history that goes beyond the normal use of types. In many allegorical interpretations which were to come, so much in Scripture is portrayed as having happened, if at all, for the purpose of illuminating or revealing a future event or eternal spiritual reality, and most typology shares this attitude, going no further than to affirm the historicity of the type. But when their purpose is only to educate it opens the door to the question of whether their existence as types lies in their historical existence or in the telling of them. Irenaeus certainly affirms the pedagogical nature of the types, claiming that by them God was:

Calling them to the things of primary importance by means of those which were secondary; that is, to things that are real, by means of those that are typical; and by things temporal, to eternal; and by the carnal to the spiritual; and by the earthly to the heavenly; as was also said to Moses, *Thou shalt make all things after the pattern of those things which thou sawest in the mount.*

Yet in his typological interpretation of the Creation and Fall in Genesis 1-3 and his idea of recapitulation he goes beyond seeing in history types of Christ, rather he sees in the types a unified history. There is an integral connection between the historicity of the events in Genesis and their typological function. What makes them properly typological is that these events happened and their prophetic revelation is a consequence of their having happened. It would be accurate to say that Genesis does not foreshadow the work of Christ so much as Christ refers back to Genesis. There is a greater meaning found in the work of Christ by showing its connection to Genesis because a natural symmetry exists between Christ and the Fall of man. They are book-ends of the divine salvation history. As the purpose of Christ’s coming was to accomplish the salvation of man necessitated by his Fall, so in Christ we see God giving his answer in detail to our sinful beginning by taking up not just our human nature but our human history. History is recapitulated in order to correct it. Thus many details in Genesis have their corresponding event in Christ which undoes the Fall and remakes humanity.

Irenaeus follows a pattern of exegesis used by Paul in the fifth chapter of his epistle to the

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45 *Against the Heresies*, bk. IV, ch. 14.3
Romans. The Incarnation, specifically Christ’s virgin birth, is shown to be like the creation of Adam:

As the protoplast himself, Adam, had his substance from untilled and as yet virgin soil, ‘for God had not yet sent rain, and man had not tilled the ground’, and was formed by the hand of God, that is by the Word...so did He who is the Word, recapitulating Adam in Himself, rightly receive a birth, enabling Him to gather up Adam, from Mary, who was yet a virgin.46

The reason why Christ was born of a woman rather than taking human form from dust as with Adam was so that ‘the very same formation’, that is all the race of Adam would be ‘summed up’. This is a theme that Athanasius would continue.

In this instance Mary is seen to be a second earth but later on she is the second Eve who cancels the sin of the first virgin thereby undoing man’s captivity to sin which was begun with Eve’s deception: ‘For what the virgin Eve had bound fast through unbelief, this did the virgin Mary set free through faith’.47 And even in the manner of their disobedience/obedience is there a recapitulation; ‘For just as the former was led astray by the word of an angel, so that she fled from God when she had transgressed His word; so did the latter, by an angelic communication, receive the glad tidings that she should sustain God, being obedient to His word’.48

When Jesus withstands the Devil in the temptation in the wilderness, specifically resisting the pangs of hunger, this typologically reveals the reversal of the corruption of man ‘which occurred in Paradise by both [Adam and Eve] eating’.49 As eating the fruit of a tree became a cause of sin so Christ died on a tree to recapitulate the disobedience done in ‘connection with a tree through the obedience which was upon a tree’.50 Even the day of Christ’s death is given a brilliant typological interpretation, for Friday is the sixth day of the week, the day on which

46 Against the Heresies, bk III ch xxi.10. Earlier, in ch xix.7, he gives a more concise statement of this, repeating Paul’s typology in Rom. 5:19 with the addition of the element of a virgin source.

47 Ibid, bk. III, ch 22.4
48 Ibid, bk. V, ch 19.1
49 Ibid, bk. V, ch 21.2
50 Ibid, bk. V, ch 19.1
man was created, and, assuming that man sinned on the same day, when God said that on that day he should die, this is fulfilled when Christ, who summed up all humanity in Himself, died on the sixth day, and in this Man gains a ‘second creation’.\footnote{Ibid, bk. V, ch. 23.2. Irenaeus also adds the view of others that the day of Adam’s death means a thousand year since ‘a day of the Lord is as a thousand years’ and Adam was not yet a thousand years old when he died.}

The idea that the historical events of Christ are tied in their historicity to the actions of the past as flowing from a singular divine relationship to our history is one that ties our human historicality into the very fabric of Christian theology, linking it to the Incarnation. Irenaeus seems to have something like this in mind when he denies the possibility of allegorizing the types in the OT:

And of this tabernacle Moses received the pattern in the mount; and nothing is capable of being allegorized, but all things are steadfast, and true, and substantial, having been made by God for righteous men's enjoyment. For as it is God truly who raises up man, so also does man truly rise from the dead, and not allegorically, as I have shown repeatedly.\footnote{Ibid, bk. V, ch. 53.2}

If the type is allegorized it endangers the real. Put in contemporary theology; if that which reveals the Incarnation and the resurrection is but a spiritual truth and not historical fact might not the same also be said for the Incarnation and Resurrection? Of course, Irenaeus was directing his attacks against heretics and their allegorizing away Christian doctrine founded upon the text of Scripture. How he would have responded to allegorizing in defence of the faith by orthodox men is another question. But as has been shown from his insistence on the historical verifiability of sound teaching to the reality of the types Irenaeus never saw a need for rising above history.

\section*{IV. ALLEGORY AND THE SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA}

The practice of Christian allegory developed in the school of Alexandria, continuing the practice of Philo. It also represents the growing alliance with Greek philosophy as a handmaid to theology. Such we find in the first leader of the school of Alexandria whose
teachings we possess, Clement, bishop of the church in Alexandria. A disciple of Pantaenus, an educated convert from Stoicism, in a church that Henry Chadwick describes as ‘on the defensive against Greek Philosophy’.53 Clement set out both to defend the faith against philosophical attack and to show how philosophy could be harmonious with the faith. Rather than disregard all philosophy as Tertullian did: ‘what has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’ Clement recognized that even pagan philosophy had some light in it and that it was necessary to examine it to distinguish the good from the bad.54 Since God is the author of all good, and since the Gospel was given for them as well as the Jews, it follows that God must have allowed for the Greeks’ preparation to receive the Gospel, giving them philosophy until they were called:

For this was a schoolmaster (παιδαγωγός) a reference to Gal. 3:24) to bring the Hellenic mind, as the law, the Hebrews, to Christ. Philosophy, therefore, was a preparation, paving the way for him who is perfected in Christ.55

Besides, much of the philosophy was borrowed, or plagiarized from Moses and the Hebrew Scriptures so that an appeal to the Greeks’ philosophy is only recognizing those elements of truth they obtained by whatever method, whether directly by God or indirectly through the Jews. ‘True philosophy’ is that which comes not from men but ultimately from God; it is knowledge of God.

In his use of philosophy Clement sought to counter the distortion of the faith by Gnostic influence and so portrayed the Christian life as that of the true Gnostic, one who goes beyond mere knowledge (γνώσις) to wisdom (σοφία), who seeks truth. The false Gnostics are not really seeking truth when they claim to demonstrate their doctrine out of Scripture because they do violence to the text, ‘not looking to the sense, but making use of the mere words’:

But the truth is not found by changing the meanings (for so people subvert all true teaching), but in the consideration of what perfectly belongs to and becomes God, and in establishing each one of the points demonstrated in the Scriptures again from similar

53 The Early Church, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1967, p. 95
54 Stromata, bk. I, ch. 13
55 Ibid, bk. I, ch. 5
When it came to the proper understanding of Scripture Clement claimed that Paul was not speaking against philosophy in 1 Cor. 2:6 but against those Jews thinking themselves wise. The true philosopher is one who seeks after God’s secret wisdom:

For [Paul] recognizes the spiritual man and the Gnostic as the disciple of the Holy Spirit dispensed by God, which is the mind of Christ.\textsuperscript{57}

Seeking after wisdom is therefore not to be content with the ‘milk’ of the simple reading of Scripture but to search out for the ‘meat’, which is a spiritual understanding, seeing the deeper truth which is hidden in symbolism throughout Scripture:

It were tedious to go over all the Prophets and the Law, specifying what is spoken in enigmas; for almost the whole Scripture gives its utterances in this way.\textsuperscript{58}

Believing that all of Scripture has some deeper truth hidden in it like the treasure hidden in the field, Clement expands Philo’s approach into the New Testament. Sometimes his allegorical interpretations are mere variations of older allegories: animals that ruminate are those people that have the oracles of God while animals with a cloven hoof are those who stand upon the truth about the Father and the Son.\textsuperscript{59} Some are new but with philosophical rather than a uniquely Christian interpretation. He sees Jesus breaking the five loaves and feeding the crowd as indicating the majority of people who live only by their senses, which are five in number. At other times his interpretation is specifically Christian, almost typological, as in this meditation upon the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:37-38):

For the feet anointed with fragrant ointment mean divine instruction travelling with renown to the ends of the earth. \textit{For their sound hath gone forth to the ends of the earth}. And if I seem not to insist too much, the feet of the Lord which were anointed are the apostles, having, according to prophecy, received the fragrant unction of the Holy Ghost. Those, therefore, who travelled over the world and preached the Gospel, are figuratively called the feet of the Lord, of whom also the Holy Spirit foretells in the psalm, \textit{Let us adore at the place where His feet stood}, that is, where the apostles, His feet, arrived; since, preached by them, He came to the ends of the earth. And tears are

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid, bk. VII, ch. 16
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid, bk. V, ch. 4
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid, bk. V, ch. 6
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid, bk. VII, ch. 18
repentance; and the loosened hair proclaimed deliverance from the love of finery, and the affliction in patience which, on account of the Lord, attends preaching, the old vainglory being done away with by reason of the new faith.60

He goes on to make a distinction between oil61 and ointment, ‘which is adulterated oil’, and which therefore means Judas who anoints Jesus’ feet, releasing him from ‘his sojourn in the world’. This is a little like Irenaeus’ use of Lot’s wife turned to salt for Clement is playing on the qualities of elements mentioned in the text without regard for their relationship in the narrative. Clement thus seems to be making the oil and ointment typical of historical events, but events which must first be treated metaphorically in order to make the connection; Judas’ betrayal leads to Christ’s death and his no longer walking on the earth, thus the oil and the feet. History only becomes part of the hermeneutic once it has been translated.

Despite his repeated insistence that it is legitimate to look for a hidden meaning in the text, because, to paraphrase; everybody does it, from Homer to Plato and Pythagoras, Clement does not explain how such a spiritual reading of the Scripture properly works. That would be left for his more brilliant pupil Origen to do.

Origen may be considered the most brilliant of all the early exegetes in the early church for he exhibited extensive knowledge of the texts in the original languages and the variant translations, his Hexapla being a testament to his prowess. When combined with a thorough theological presentation of the faith and commentary on the Scriptures he appears as an early Greek Jerome (who alone comes close to his level of scholarship) and Augustine put together. If he had been more orthodox in his theology it is doubtless he would have ranked at the top of the fathers of the Church. Though his textual knowledge was the least controversial and the most enduring in value it was secondary in his scheme to his allegorical interpretation and so it shall be briefly dealt with first.

60 The Instructor, bk. II, ch. 8
61 The presence of oil is also an allegorical interpretation, calling Jesus oil because from Him comes mercy.
Origen sums up the purpose of his critical study of the texts defending his use of the story of Susanna:

I make it my endeavour not to be ignorant of their various readings, lest in my controversies with the Jews I should quote to them what is not found in their copies, and that I may make some use of what is found there, even although it should not be in our Scriptures.\(^\text{62}\)

Through his studies and contacts with Jews he knew enough details of the language, history and geography, of the texts to establish better than anyone else of his day or millennium the historical meaning of the text. When concerning the play on words in Greek between the trees \textit{prinos} and \textit{schinos} and the words \textit{prisis}, and \textit{schisis},\(^\text{63}\) which Africanus says does not work in Hebrew, he consults some Jews and asks them what they know about the trees mentioned. Finding that they do not even recognize the trees, he concludes that it is possible such a play on words existed in Hebrew with different trees and the author switched trees to maintain the wordplay.\(^\text{64}\) It may not show Susanna to have been translated from Hebrew but it is a good scholarly argument.

Origen’s knowledge of the texts also allows him to acknowledge discrepancies between the LXX and the Hebrew:

Through the whole of Job there are many passages in the Hebrew which are wanting in our copies, generally four or five verses, but sometimes, however, even fourteen, and nineteen, and sixteen.\(^\text{65}\)

This does not cause him any difficulty with the LXX, however, or with any other Greek version used by the Church which may differ from that used by the Jews, because for him the LXX is the inspired text regardless of how it relates to Hebrew copies. Partly this is because he suspects the Jews of tampering with the text, which is why he believes they do not have the story of Susanna or other scriptures found in the LXX, but it is also because his theory of inspiration does not end with the original Hebrew but extends to the translations as well,

\(^{62}\) \textit{Letter to Africanus}, sec. 5
\(^{63}\) Transliterations are the translator's
\(^{64}\) Ibid, secs. 6 & 12
\(^{65}\) Ibid, sec. 4
because God was at work in providing them for the Church:

Are we to suppose that that Providence which in the sacred Scriptures has ministered to the edification of all the Churches of Christ, had no thought for those bought with a price?  

Of course what threatens to make all this scholarship ultimately little more than an academic exercise is the ability to disregard, or at the very least, rise above the historical nature of the text and allegorize it into a harmonious whole. And this was Origen’s great strength, or weakness, depending on the perspective. In his *On First Principles* Origen lays out his theory of the divine inspiration of Scripture and how it should be interpreted. The proof of its divinity is the fulfilment of prophecy concerning Christ and his Church. The deficiencies which the Greeks would point to are not deficiencies in Scripture but in the interpretation of it:

But just as providence is not abolished because of our ignorance, at least for those who have once rightly believed in it, so neither is the divine character of scripture, which extends through all of it, abolished because our weakness cannot discern in every sentence the hidden splendour of its teachings, concealed under a poor and humble style.  

The key to understanding Scripture is to understand that it possesses three senses, corresponding to the division of Man by both Plato and Paul into body, soul, and spirit; the bodily (literal) sense, the soul (moral) sense and the spiritual (allegorical or mystical) sense. This theory of a threefold meaning of Scripture Origen supports by the Septuagint’s translation of Proverb 22:20 as ‘Do thou portray them threefold in counsel and knowledge’.

Each sense of Scripture reveals truth at its own level which is beneficial to individual levels of religious understanding. The simple may be edified by the flesh of scripture, the more advanced by its soul, and the perfect by its spirit. Yet it is the principle aim of Scripture to reveal the spiritual meaning hidden within a historical narrative or behind

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66 Ibid, ch. 4  
67 *On First Principles*, book IV, ch. 1.7  
68 Ibid
statements whose surface reading seems to yield quite different understandings. The reason this is so is that God has arranged for these mystical truths to be hidden from those (the Jews principally) who are unable or unwilling to understand the deeper things, giving them instead a bodily scripture that is edifying or understandable in its own right but that has the spiritual revelation within:

But the most wonderful thing is, that by means of stories of wars and the conquerors and the conquered certain secret truths are revealed to those who are capable of examining these narratives.  

As Christians, if we are attentive to ‘search the scripture’, we are now capable of attaining these secret truths, especially concerning the Old Testament because:

It was after the advent of Jesus that the inspiration of the prophetic words and the spiritual nature of Moses’ law came to light. For before the advent of Christ it was not at all possible to bring forward clear proofs of the divine inspiration of the old scriptures.

Though Origen believed in the historical veracity of much of the scriptures a principle feature of his system is his admission and insistence that quite a few things in their bodily sense are false. Rather than this being an admission of deficiency in divine inspiration, this is for Origen another example of its divine authorship and proof of the spiritual meaning. Scripture has woven into its bodily story some things which did not happen, some which might have but in fact didn’t and some which could not have happened. Thus, while there is always a spiritual meaning, in some instances Scripture has no real bodily or literal meaning. The purpose of these falsities, what Origen terms ‘stumbling blocks, hindrances and impossibilities’ is to point us to the spiritual meaning by making the bodily understanding so impossible that we would not rest content with the literal sense as the Jews have done but search for the greater truth. Failure to accept this fact will, Origen believes, often force the reader to ascribe error or worse to Scripture. The discrepancy between John’s Gospel and the Synoptics is a case in point:

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69 Ibid, IV, ch.14  
70 Ibid, IV, ch.1.6  
71 Ibid, IV, ch.1.15
There are many other points on which the careful student of the Gospels will find that their narratives do not agree. The student staggered at the consideration of these things, will either renounce the attempt to find all the Gospels true…or he will accept the four, and will consider that their truth is not to be sought for in the outward and material letter.\textsuperscript{72}

This idea is much more than the acknowledgement of metaphorical language within the text, which must not be taken hyper-literally. Henri de Lubac, in his defence of Origen’s spiritual exegesis, takes Origen’s examples of reading past simple anthropomorphisms as being more defining and limiting of objections to the literal sense.\textsuperscript{73} Rather, it seems likely that Origen used those examples as the justification for a much broader license to see difficulties in the literal meaning. Even when no difficulty with the bodily sense is cited, Origen still often ignores it in favour of the spiritual. This is clearly evident in Origen’s treatment of the book of Genesis. The actual historical account gets very little attention but selected passages are read to investigate their spiritual significance. Of the Creation narrative he spends one homily on the first chapter of Genesis, skipping over chapters 2 through 5. He has a brief chapter on the flood, focusing principally on the ark, and then proceeds to comment upon portions of the history of the Patriarchs, yet the events in the life of Jacob as well as Joseph are remarkably absent save for two brief moments at the ends of their lives. The fact that large portions are left unattended raises a serious question whether Origen really believed that all passages do indeed have a spiritual meaning, though such an argument from silence is necessarily speculative. It may be that Origen selected only those passages he felt most necessary to be understood. It is a more probable conclusion that he did not consider a historical understanding of the Genesis narratives to be important.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{72} Commentary on the Gospel of John, bk. X, ch.2
\textsuperscript{74} De Lubac is correct to protest the claim that Origen dismissed the importance of the historical, and it is true that Origen claimed that the historical portions outnumbered the purely spiritual. But this exaggerates the criticism against Origen, for no one believed that he denied the historical in a gnostic fashion, and de Lubac puts too much weight upon Origen’s statement that the spiritual depends upon the historical. This may have no more effect than to say that the perfect stands to dependence upon the imperfect as completion stands upon preparation. It doesn’t mean that the historical will have much importance in actual exegesis. It shows de Lubac’s willingness to stretch things to defend Origen’s historical sense when he says, in Vol. 2 of his
At times Origen goes to ridiculous lengths to make the literal sense seem ridiculous and impossible as when he objects to Ex 21:22f. because it is ridiculous to think that a baby born prematurely due to injuries on the mother would be injured in the eye, let alone the teeth.\textsuperscript{75} Or when he objects to ‘if thy right eye offend thee’ (Mt 5:29 KJV):

For, to grant the possibility of one being ‘offended’ by the sense of sight, how, when there are two eyes that see, should blame be laid upon the right eye?\textsuperscript{76}

According to R. Grant, Origen’s objection to the literal sense seems to flow as much from a fear of what simple illiterate people, who cannot understand parable or poetry, might see in it rather than from any attempt to exhaust a clear literal interpretation.\textsuperscript{77}

But it is more than just a concern for the misunderstandings of the ignorant. Origen demonstrates a theological bias against the \textit{merely} historical when he deals with historical episodes of the patriarchs and offers objections to or departs from the literal meaning of the narrative. The covenant that God makes with Abraham involving circumcision is said to involve not mere fleshly circumcision but circumcision of the whole man; his lips, ears and heart, even his flesh, meaning the circumscribing of ourselves and submitting to the will of God, as this is revealed in the New Testament. That God would base his covenant with a righteous man on the cutting of his foreskin Origen sees as unworthy of God:

Does not this circumcision seem to you more worthy with which the covenant of God ought to be established. Compare, if you please, this our account with your Jewish fables and disgusting stories and see whether in those stories of yours or in these which are preached in the Church of Christ circumcision is observed according to God’s command.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Homilies on Exodus}, homily X.2
\textsuperscript{76} \textit{On First Principles}, bk. IV, ch. 1.18
\textsuperscript{77} R. Grant, \textit{A Short History of the Interpretation of the Bible}, London: SCM Press, 1984, p. 59
\textsuperscript{78} \textit{Homilies on Exodus}, homily III.6

\textsuperscript{Medieval Exegesis}, p. 14, ‘On balance, it is probable that the strictly historical part of the Bible for him would be much larger than for us’. This would not be true of most conservative Protestant interpretations. And it hardly seems true of most modern scholarship either if one allows that denying historical veracity or simply literal inerrancy in a text is not the same as stating that its meaning is not in some sense historically intended, even if that history is mythic or fabricated.
When Abraham is said to be standing under a tree when the Lord appears to him Origen claims that ‘we need circumcised ears for narratives of this kind’ because the Holy Spirit must clearly be signifying something beyond what the bare letter signifies:

For what does it help me who have come to hear what the Holy Spirit teaches the human race, if I hear that Abraham was standing under a tree?79

We are to understand, therefore, that the tree signifies Abraham’s spiritual state and that the word Mamre is translated vision so that Abraham was in a state of clear seeing, an appropriate time to be visited by the Lord. In like manner when Sarah is said to be in the tent ‘behind Abraham’ this means that she is in proper submission following her husband as he is ‘standing by God’.

One might conclude that this shows a mere liking only for those historical narratives and interpretations that directly reveal God’s saving action in history. Yet Origen often prefers a non-historical typology even where Scripture has already indicated a connection with a historical event such as the Passion of Christ. After interpreting the ‘squared planks’, which the LXX reads in Gen. 6.14, to be faithful teachers and Apostles because elsewhere trees are representative of rational beings, or men, as when God refers to Pharaoh as a cypress, Ez. 31:1-5, Origen then strangely ventures a possible reading of Dt. 21:23:

Consider if perhaps that also which is written, Everyone who hangs on a tree is accursed of God, ought not to be so understood even as also that which is said elsewhere: Cursed be the man who has hope in man. (Jer 17:5) For we ought to depend on God alone and on no other.80

That Origen offers this interpretation in spite of the Christological interpretation put upon it by St. Paul in Gal 3:13 reveals how his preference is to move beyond history altogether.

He makes this clearer in both his Commentary on the Gospel of John and Treatise on the Passover where he departs from traditional Christian typological understanding of the passover sacrifice and moves it into a Neoplatonic direction. Rather than seeing in the

79 Ibid, homily IV. 3
80 Ibid, homily II.4
passover lamb a prophecy of the sacrifice Christ would make upon the cross Origen sees it as revealing the inward action of the Christian soul:

The passover is not a type of the passion but a type of Christ Himself. For the saviour Himself says: *As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up* in accord with the type of the serpent hung on the wood by Moses, indicating nothing less than the passion of the Saviour hung on the wood—it is obviously in accord with the type of the serpent and not in accord with the type of the passover that one will understand the passion.81

One reason given why the passover cannot be seen as a type of the passion is because:

The lamb is sacrificed by the saints or the Nazerites, while the Saviour is sacrificed by criminals.82

Instead the passover is a type of the spiritual sacrifice the believer makes when he spiritually consumes and is nourished by Christ. This is not merely a eucharistic reference, for Origen seems to read that spiritually as well, but it points to the feeding upon His Word:

If the lamb is Christ and Christ is the Logos, what is the flesh of the divine words if not the divine Scriptures? This is what is to be eaten *neither raw nor cooked with water.*83

The last means that reading Scripture must not be raw, depending upon the mere letter as the Jews do, nor must it be watered down with human understanding, but it must be made fit for consumption by the fire of the Spirit.

That Origen would make such a point in resisting what was a common and natural Christian association of the Passover with Christ’s passion seems strange at first, but it has a definite logic to it. For Origen, if a passage can only be understood with reference to other historical events, then such is its meaning, but such a meaning thus becomes less valuable. However, if it can also be referred to a higher spiritual meaning, then the spiritual becomes not just the superior but the only true intent of the passage, for it is the ultimate purpose of Scripture to reveal the spiritual, to which the historical is only a handmaid, a stepping stone.

At the end of his spiritual analysis in his *Commentary on John* he lays out a concise

81 *Peri Pascha*, 14.24-15.5
82 Ibid, 12.25 and *Commentary on John* bk. X, ch. 13
83 *Peri Pascha*, 26.5-10
definition of his hermeneutical principle regarding typology and history:

For we ought not to suppose that historical things are types of historical things, and material things of material, but that material things are typical of spiritual things, and historical things of intellectual things.84

This is his overriding hermeneutic; the desire to reveal the intellectual truths regarding the soul’s relation to God, for this is the Neoplatonic focus.

Though Origen’s allegorical interpretations are imaginative, sometimes inspiring and, accepting their premise, fairly logical in how they explore and develop the text, yet there is a circularity about them. They do not spring naturally from the text but are applied from the outside by a faith already possessed and upon which they spring back again as an echo. Nor is there a natural harmony between many of the individual allegorical interpretations. Subjects are interpreted in different ways from passage to passage to suit the need of the interpreter. What holds Origen’s thoughts together, then, is not the text itself or a strict methodology but the philosophy and theology used to read it. He makes it clear that Scripture is not his only guide in understanding subjects within Scripture when he comments in On First Principles that ‘it is easy to prove this assertion [that the spirit of the sun and moon was not created simultaneous with their bodies] by inference, but more difficult if we appeal to the witness of the scripture’, and ‘that the soul of the sun is older than the covering which serves it for a body can, I think, be logically shown from a comparison of the sun with man, and after that from the scriptures’.85 The strong role his philosophical ideas and reasoning play in his exegesis cause him to assert that souls are pre-existent of the material creation, falling into bodies through sin, and even to make such absurd statements as he does in On First Principles that, ‘since the infinite is by its nature incomprehensible’, God’s power must be finite, otherwise He could not even understand Himself; ‘He made therefore just as many [intelligent beings] as He could grasp’.86

84 Commentary on John, bk X. ch. 13
85 On First Principles, bk. I, ch. 7.4. Italics added
86 Ibid, bk. II, ch. 9.1 A genuine patristic example of the question whether God could make a stone too heavy for even Him to lift.
Such speculations and interpretations would later cause much of his thought to be condemned as unorthodox, and his method of allegorizing rejected as unsound by adherents to the Antiochian school. Yet Origen believed that searching for the spiritual sense, over and above and even at the expense of the bodily, historical and literal sense, was the best way to preserve the unity and harmony of Scripture. It was the natural end of the trajectory of Christian interpretation away from the dead literalism of the Pharisees toward a spiritual interpretation, beginning with prophetic and then typological. Yet in order to make all scripture harmonize with the pure Christian faith the scriptures are so overshadowed by his philosophical faith that their distinctive nature seems to disappear into it, much as the human nature of Christ disappears into his divine nature in Eutyches’ monophysite Christology. It would be fair to say that in much of his commentaries there is very little real exegesis of Scripture but rather a pure eisogesis in which the text seems to vanish leaving us with the faith which he brought to it. Little new is contributed to our understanding of either God or His plan of salvation. Yet Origen set the standard and laid many of the foundations for a spiritual reading of the Bible, and for the opposition that would rise to counter its influence.

**V. THEORIA AND THE SCHOOL OF ANTIOCH**

A hundred years after Origen’s death the practice of reading Scripture allegorically would be condemned by the school of Antioch, Diodore of Tarsus being its principle founder and his disciple Theodore of Mopsuestia its most radical theologian and exponent. While this school coincided with a movement against Origenism, the two are really not related, for the latter was a condemnation of his unorthodox ideas rather than his hermeneutics. Jerome, when he found out the truth of some of Origen’s thoughts, still praised his biblical commentaries, not making a distinction between his historical scholarship and his allegorical interpretations. If anything, Origen’s use of Jewish sources was more suspicious than his allegories among those who worried about his theology. Nor did the Antiochian school commonly make a connection between his allegory, which they opposed, and his heresy. The letter of
Epiphanius to John of Jerusalem is an exception, but there his critique is simply that Origen allegorizes in order to read in Scripture his own peculiar ideas, a characteristic problem with spiritual reading not limited to any specific theology.

The conflict between the schools of Alexandria and Antioch represent the conflict between two fundamentally different theological and philosophical orientations. While Alexandria was more Greek in its culture and Platonic in its dominant philosophy Antioch was more Semitic and influenced by Aristotelian thought. Thus Alexandria would emphasize the invisible over the visible, the spirit over the flesh, the realm of metaphysics. Antioch, on the other hand, would focus upon the physical realm as a means of understanding truth. In this way the study of history would be found more interesting to Antioch than to Alexandria, and its proximity to large Jewish communities that were not Hellenized led the Syrian Christian community to be aware of and take heed of the Jewish textual evidence and their traditional understandings of the text.

Theologically this divide was over the relative importance of the humanity of Christ, and this was naturally reflected in the importance given to the humanity of Scripture. The tendency of the school of Alexandria to give much greater emphasis to the divinity of Christ led in the extreme to making the humanity seem subsumed by it so that all that was really left was the divine. An anti-historical allegorical approach, like that of Origen, would therefore be a perfect hermeneutical expression of this Monophysite orientation. The school of Antioch, emphasizing the equal importance of the humanity of Christ, thus stressed the equal importance of the historical in Scripture. But as the theological extreme of Antioch lay in so stressing Christ’s human nature that it came to be seen as separate from his divinity, driving an ontological wedge between the two, so did the Antiochian interpretive method in its extreme form lead to a focus on the historical and literal interpretation of Scripture with little

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regard to the unifying Christian themes that were associated with its divine nature.

The central Antiochian argument against allegory is that it undermined the faith by making uncertain the history upon which it is built, as Theodore puts it in his Commentary on Galatians:

If they make history serve their own ends, they will have no history left...if the biblical writings do not preserve the narrative of actual events....then what is the source of their knowledge?89

Epiphanius also shows this concern for biblical history in his letter:

Who can tolerate [Origen]...when he explains allegorically all the trees which are mentioned in Genesis, saying in effect that the trees are angelic potencies, a sense which the true drift of the passage does not admit?...I myself have seen the waters of Gihon, have seen them with my bodily eyes. It is this Gihon to which Jeremiah points when he says, *What hast thou to do in the way of Egypt to drink the muddy water of Gihon?* I have drunk also from the great river Euphrates, not spiritual but actual water, such as you can touch with your hand and imbibe with your mouth.90

The prophecies given to the people of Israel were given with reference to historical realities and so all prophecy is historically grounded. Take away that historical ground and any other historical reality contained in prophecy is in doubt, and this could be applied to the resurrection, as Irenaeus had pointed out. The biblical support for allegory so often cited in Galatians the Antiochians regarded as a misuse of the word. Paul was not using the word in its later sense, they claim, and as was noted earlier the word was not commonly used to distinguish the practice by the Greeks before him. What Paul was engaged in was typology, because he never intended to deny or diminish the historical fact of the existence of Hagar and Sarah.

The Antiochians were not slaves to the bare letter, however. They allowed for figurative readings and, more significantly, prophetic interpretations. Sometimes the text was merely historical but other times it pointed beyond its history. Yet in place of *allegoria*, which

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89 Cited by Christopher Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, InterVarsity Press, 1998, p. 165
90 Letters of Jerome, L1.2, *Epiphanius’ letter to John of Jerusalem*
dissolved history, they used the term *theoria* which was dependent on it:

We do not forbid the higher interpretation and *theoria*, for the historical narrative does not exclude it, but is on the contrary the basis and substructure of loftier insights.91

This word indicated the principle of seeing history with prophetic insight whereby the prophet is able to see the connection between his own history, or that which he is relating, and events in other times, whether they be past or future. He is commenting upon a situation known to him and his audience, but using hyperbolic language which in its literal sense cannot be fully realized in his own history but which, prophetically seen, find a fuller realization in other times. Theodore says that ‘what was said by the blessed David hyperbolically concerning the people of the Israelites has been seen, in the truth of the matter, to refer to Christ the Lord.’92 By this Antiochian interpretation he was able to see Christological revelation within the historical narrative.

Yet while the concept of *theoria* allowed a Christological and typological use of the Old Testament the extreme end of Antiochian exegesis tended to reduce its use. This is especially true of Theodore, who only admitted to four psalms as being truly messianic. Psalm 22, ironically, is not one of them despite its clear use by Jesus on the cross. One reason for this may be that Scripture does not then add that in that act that psalm was then fulfilled. Theodore does not deny that the psalm illuminates Christ’s passion, but this is only because there is a similarity between David’s suffering and his, and this may be why Christ thought to quote it when he did. It was Christ’s commentary more than David’s prophecy. Because Theodore is more restrictive in his allowance for prophecy in the OT he sees the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah as merely that, history, and so he excludes them from the canon (thus confirming that he agrees with Origen and the Greeks on the ultimate value of mere history). The book of Job also is excluded because Theodore sees pagan elements in it. And most remarkably, alone among Christians of his era, and even Jews, he refuses to see the

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92 Commentary on Zechariah, cited by Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers*, p. 168
Song of Solomon as anything more than an erotic poem. The more moderate Theodoret of Cyrus must have had Theodore in mind when he said that he felt it his duty to avoid the two extremes of allegorical and merely historical interpretation:

All that is relevant to ancient history ought to be recognized. But predictions of Christ our Savior, the church of the nations, the expansion of the gospel, the preaching of the Apostles ought not to be diverted from their proper sense and applied to other things, as if they had been fulfilled by the Jews.93

It was not only his limiting of the canon or the number of messianic psalms or other typologies that would have caused concern in the broader church about his method of exegesis. Theodore also limited his reading of deeper Christian theology into the OT where he believed it could not reasonably have been known at the time. This is an application of a principle that both Theodoret and Chrysostom held; that God inspired the prophets according to their time. As Theodoret puts it: ‘The Loving Lord accommodates his revelation to the capacity of them that see Him’94 For Theodore this means that the Holy Spirit could not have been understood as a person in the OT.

While the last may be a valid idea for any serious view of progressive revelation it must certainly have seemed distressing to a Church desiring to prove the equal divinity of the Holy Spirit from Scripture. And while he clearly believed that God was foretelling his work in Christ in his revelation to the Jews Theodore’s restrictive identification of prophecy and limited use of typology even in instances that were otherwise universal among Christians must have given real credence to the fears about Antiochian historical exegesis. As Wallace-Hadrill says: ‘the Antiochene Church itself was seen by the rest of the Christian Church as lying too close to Judaism for comfort.’95 Thus the literal historical method, even with a strong emphasis on typology, would suffer due to the extremes of its exponents.

93 Comm. On the Psalms
VI. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

One moderate Antiochian who merits a closer look is John Chrysostom, as one principle of his exegesis, of divine incomprehensibility and condescension, will be examined in the end. In him we have a literal exegete less theologically and philosophically sophisticated than his colleagues but delightfully clear in expressing his hermeneutical principles with a practicality and simplicity based upon a strong belief that the Scriptures can be understood if studied with attention and devotion. Though Chrysostom himself was largely ignorant of Hebrew, and as such accepted as divinely intended the errors of translation of the LXX, yet he willingly used what understandings of Hebrew he could get from others to aid him in examining the Old Testament texts, as when he refers to ‘those with a precise knowledge of [Hebrew] [who] tell us that among the Hebrews the word “heaven” is used in the plural, and those who know the language of the Syrians confirm this’. 96

There is often a rather legalistic attention to details of the language in his exegesis, which is natural since he assumed that God inspired those words and arranged them in such an order for a definite purpose and so great attention must be paid in order to understand the significance of each passage. Yet despite his desire to get all the truth that he can out of the text Chrysostom warns against speculations on the meaning of all things found there:

Now what would you say this means, the firmament? Water that has congealed, or some air that has been compressed, or some other substance? No sensible person would be rash enough to make a decision on it. Instead it is better to be quite grateful and ready to accept what is told us and not reach beyond the limits of our own nature by meddling in matters beyond us, but rather to know the simple fact and keep it within us. 97

This practical caution flows from a concern that we humbly submit to the teachings of the Word of God and not try to read into it other things than it allows, as the allegorists so often did. This does not mean that he too does not make leaps of logic concerning certain passages that seem wholly unwarranted by the text alone, as when he concludes that Adam had prophetic insight when he called Eve ‘flesh of my flesh’ because he was asleep when she was

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96 Homilies on Genesis, homily IV.10
97 Homilies on Genesis, homily 4.7
taken from his side, or that Adam was of great intelligence because he knew the names of all the animals, rather than arbitrarily naming them. Yet these speculations are not unique to Chrysostom and are rather small in the light of his general faithfulness to the text. They are likely motivated by a belief that the character of the biblical personages in these stories can be rightly assessed so that we can understand the nature of their moral actions. For this is Chrysostom’s general use of the narratives, such as that of the patriarchs; as the histories of righteous or unrighteous people and of the deeds they did, deeds which serve as moral lessons. This is even true in the story of the Fall. It is the first example of sin, but it is analogous to the sins with which we are familiar.

Chrysostom does allow metaphorical analysis of the text, for he believed that in His considerateness, or accommodation to our limitation, God tailored his revelation towards concepts which his hearers could understand:

Since He addresses human beings He uses also human illustration, which are indeed insufficient to represent the thing spoken of, and cannot exhibit the full proportions of the matter, yet suffice for the infirmity of the hearers.98

This meant that though some things sound crude and incredible that is only because God could not have expressed it any other way if we were to understand. This is really a simple appreciation for the use of metaphor and poetic imagery in language which any serious examination of a text must entail. Thus Chrysostom is able to avoid crude anthropological conceptions of God, which he abhorred just as Origen did, as in the case of God ‘strolling in the garden’, without abandoning a historical sense to the words. In all such passages we should ‘understand everything in the sense befitting God’.99 When it comes to seeing a deeper level of figurative expression in the text Chrysostom does not forbid it as long as it is indicated and controlled by the text and not springing from the reader’s fancy. His rule may be summed up best in the following:

Let us follow the direction of Sacred Scripture in the interpretation it gives, provided

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99 *Homilies on Genesis*, homily XVIII.4
we don’t get completely absorbed in the concreteness of the words.\textsuperscript{100}

Another aspect of the humanity of the text which should not absorb us concerns the minor historical or chronological details of Scripture. Like Theodore, Chrysostom allows the element of human authorship to control details which are not important, as in the discrepancies in the Gospel accounts, and attributes this to the different authors’ perspectives and choices of which elements of the story to emphasize:

But if there be anything touching times or places, which they have related differently, this nothing injures the truth of what they have said.\textsuperscript{101}

This is possible because there is no disagreement on those matters which are important.

Not only is God considerate in his revelation to a finite humanity he is also considerate to the levels of understanding within history. Chrysostom sees in the history of the Old Testament the education of the human race so that it is perfectly natural that God’s revelation there would seem cruder and simpler than that found in the New Testament:

When Moses in the beginning took on the instruction of the human race, he taught his listeners the elements, whereas Paul and John, taking over from Moses, could at that late stage transmit more developed notions.\textsuperscript{102}

Such a grammatical and historical approach could easily account for the development of religious ideas and terminology within the history of Israel. This is an education given to Moses by God which Chrysostom sees as doctrinal in nature. It is not for the sake of their understanding of the physical universe alone that God reveals the manner of its creation but that they would understand properly who created it and what is their relationship to him and to the rest of his creation: ‘He led them along for the time being from visible realities to the creator of all things.’\textsuperscript{103} God is correcting and preventing erroneous views and idolatry, and attention to this fact is the main focus of Chrysostom’s exegesis.

\textsuperscript{100}Homilies on Genesis, homily III.9
\textsuperscript{101}Homilies on the Gospel According to St. Matthew, homily 1.6
\textsuperscript{102} Homilies on Genesis, homily II.9
\textsuperscript{103}Homilies on Genesis, homily II.7
Despite his emphasis on God’s pedagogical purpose and accommodation in his revelation to us, about which more will be said in the final chapter, his exegesis does not portray as great a focus on history as would be expected for he often seems to lose sight of the overall nature of history. Chrysostom is concerned, it seems, only with the immediate significance of the historical stories, and their moral significance primarily. He makes little connection to future events. We see a series of saints and sinners but not how they are related to each other except by sequence. There is in Chrysostom a sense of not seeing the forest for the trees, a phenomenon all too common among modern Biblical studies, whereas Origen is constantly jumping forward to the big picture, giving the sense of finding Christ involved somehow in all of Scripture. Origen gives us the big picture but it has nothing necessarily to do with the Old Testament. Chrysostom gives us pictures about the Old Testament but as snapshots, able to stand on their own, without any revelation about how they all fit together or of what the thrust of the history of them is all about.

Chrysostom was first and foremost a preacher and pastor. This is what shaped his use of the Bible. He is less interested with philosophical theory and science than with practical results; how it will help in the moral and spiritual education of his flock. This is what makes his exegesis appealing throughout the ages, whether in a church dominated by allegory or historical interpretation. And it may be one reason why his work was not successful in advancing the Antiochian method, for in his practical pastoral concern he was in step with the Church. The principle question that would underlie attitudes toward biblical interpretation was not which method was more logical and philosophically coherent but which served the Church the best in its needs. What was desired of Scriptural interpretation was twofold: to defend it against the heretics’ misuse and make it proclaim the orthodox faith, and to make all of it useful for Christian understanding. Since this was allegory’s great strength, the demonstration that it could be used by men of unimpeachable orthodoxy did much to advance its case. Men like Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzen in the East and Ambrose, Jerome and Augustine in the West proved that it could be a tool in defence of the faith.
without leading into Apollinarianism or Monophysitism. Furthermore, the combination of orthodox allegory and a strong focus upon the literal meaning of the text as well took the wind out of the Antiochian sail. In Augustine especially all the virtues of the Antiochian school were adopted and used alongside allegory, thereby countering the Antiochian use of the historical and literal to deny the validity of the allegorical, for he reaffirmed and expanded Origen’s defence of allegory.

VII. AUGUSTINE AS LITERAL AND SPIRITUAL EXEGETE

Augustine believed in the spiritual reading of Scripture because it was through it that much of the Old Testament was redeemed for him from the scoffing of the philosophers, when Ambrose, a fine allegorizer himself, expounded on the verse ‘The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life’ (2 Cor. 3:6). The fruitful reading of scripture meant reading it through the Spirit of God who directs the heart to its true meaning, which may include something more than the sense of the outer expressions of the words. However he was also strongly committed to a literal understanding of it because in its plain sense he discovered the Grace of God.\textsuperscript{104} He so believed that a literal meaning was important that, not content only to interpret Genesis allegorically as he had done against the Manichaeans, he twice attempted a literal interpretation. While what he eventually produced may fall short of what would today be called a literal attempt, yet it still looks at the narrative as referring to a historical event.

Because he believed that the literal meaning was the base upon which further meanings would be developed he strongly supported the technical study of Scripture and the knowledge of the original languages which were a ‘great remedy for ignorance of proper signs’. Thus the reader of Scripture ‘may have recourse to the original texts if the endless diversity of the Latin translators throw them into doubt’.\textsuperscript{105} While at first sceptical of Jerome’s use of the Hebrew text for his translation, as opposed to Greek translations used in the Church,

\textsuperscript{104} \textit{Confessions}, bk. VI, ch. 4/6 and bk. VIII, ch. 12/2n
\textsuperscript{105} \textit{On Christian Doctrine}, bk. II, ch. 11/16
especially the beloved LXX, he was finally convinced that the Hebrew was accurate and best reflected the original revelation given to the prophets. Notwithstanding, this did not cause him to reject the LXX where it diverged from the Hebrew, as it did Jerome, for like Origen Augustine believed divine truth was revealed to the translators of the LXX:

    We must believe that the divine Spirit prompted them to varying version, not in their function of translators, but in the liberty of prophesying.106

This stands in marked contrast to the attitude of Theodore who also accepted the LXX but on the idea that it was an accurate translation of the original Hebrew. Through Jerome Augustine knew better than that radical Antiochian his understanding of inspiration allowed that such knowledge would not ultimately control his use of Scripture.

    In this Augustine was in harmony with the Alexandrian school, as was his early inclination to see significance in every part of scriptural narrative, whether understood literally or allegorically. In his Literal Interpretation of Genesis he says regarding Adam’s naming of the beasts:

    Now what is the reason for all this if there was not a plan to signify something which would be able to foreshadow the future?...since it cannot be foolish it must have a mystical meaning.107

Yet later when he came to write his City of God he was less intent on seeing meaning everywhere. He developed a more nuanced understanding of the way the structure of narrative and speech directs the form the text is to take:

    We are not to suppose that all that is recorded has some signification; but those things which have no signification of their own are interwoven for the sake of the things which are significant. It is only the ploughshare that cleaves the soil; but to effect this, other parts of the plough are requisite. ...So in this prophetic history some things are narrated which have no significance, but are, as it were, the framework to which the significant things are attached.108

However, such a statement still sounds very similar to Origen’s concept of the spiritual truth

106 City of God, bk XV. ch. 14
107 Literal Interpretation Of Genesis, bk. IX, ch.12. 20 and 22
108 City of God, bk. XVI, ch. 2
woven throughout with false historical matter.

Yet there is in Augustine an estimation of the worth of the historical and of the limits of allegory. Allegory is not to be used as an alternative to the literal, spiritualizing away the history on which the faith of the Church is built. Augustine many times speaks like a disciple of the Antiochian school:

On this account some allegorize all that concerns Paradise itself...As if there could not be a real terrestrial Paradise! As if there never existed these two women, Sarah and Hagar, nor the two sons who were born to Abraham, the one of the bond woman, the other of the free, because the apostle says that in them the two covenants were prefigured...No one, then, denies that Paradise may signify the life of the blessed; its four rivers, the four virtues, prudence, fortitude, temperance, and justice;...These and similar allegorical interpretations may be suitably put upon Paradise without giving offence to any one, while yet we believe the strict truth of the history, confirmed by its circumstantial narrative of facts.\textsuperscript{109}

Furthermore, while Origen believed that all Scripture had a spiritual sense, and so could be allegorized, but that not all had a literal meaning, Augustine believed that Scripture sometimes had a legitimate literal and historical meaning without having a necessary spiritual one. For him Scripture fell into three categories. Building on his idea of the two cities Scripture could be speaking of one or the other, or of both:

Prophetic utterances of three kinds are to be found; forasmuch as there are some relating to the earthly Jerusalem, some to the heavenly, and some to both.\textsuperscript{110}

In this he is very much like the moderate Antiochian Theodoret except that his spiritual or prophetic interpretation included an allegorical one rather than being limited to typology.

One of the important functions of the literal is that it is a hedge against the dangers of unrestrained allegory. This is a concept completely absent in Origen. Though Augustine’s rule for identifying when Scripture may be allegorized is much the same as Origen’s:

Whatever there is in the word of God that cannot, when taken literally, be referred either

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid, bk XIII, ch. 21
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid, bk. XVII, ch. 3
to purity of life or soundness of doctrine, you may set down as figurative.\(^{111}\)

he is clearly aware of the problem when it is abused and is quick then to point out that care
must be taken ‘not to take a literal form of speech as if it were figurative’. This is because of
men’s sinful nature and tendency to think their own customs right despite the witness of
Scripture, so that ‘if an erroneous opinion has taken possession of the mind, men think that
whatever Scripture asserts contrary to this must be figurative’.\(^{112}\) The bounds of allegory are
therefore to be kept within the Rule of Faith:

Although different explanations are given, yet they must all agree with the one
harmonious catholic faith.\(^{113}\)

If the literal meaning is in agreement with that faith then it is not to be read figuratively in
order to dismiss it, but only to get additional insight, a deeper yet complementary message.
Thus Scripture’s ability to speak a word of correction to those thinking or behaving outside
the faith is ensured. This assumes that the faith is understood before an allegorical
interpretation is given which means that the faith must be received other than through
allegory. For Augustine the true faith which identifies the bounds of legitimate allegory is
found in the literal meaning of the text:

For among the things that are plainly laid down in Scripture are to be found all matters
that concern faith and the manner of life,—to wit, hope and love, of which I have spoken
in the previous book. After this, when we have made ourselves to a certain extent
familiar with the language of Scripture, we may proceed to open up and investigate the
obscure passages, and in doing so draw examples from the plainer expressions to throw
light upon the more obscure, and use the evidence of passages about which there is no
doubt to remove all hesitation in regard to the doubtful passages.\(^{114}\)

What would happen if a church accustomed to allegorize became confused about what
constituted sound doctrine is a question that he doesn’t answer. It probably was an idea that
he never entertained as a possibility. It would wait a millennium for that to be addressed
seriously in the Church.

\(^{111}\) On Christian Doctrine, bk III, ch. 10/13
\(^{112}\) Ibid, bk. III, ch. 10/14-15
\(^{113}\) City of God, bk. XV, ch. 26
\(^{114}\) On Christian Doctrine, bk. II, ch. 9/14
Augustine’s ability to marry the practice of allegory to a concern to know the literal meaning of Scripture mirrors his marriage of Christian faith with Neoplatonic philosophy, for the two are related. Just as he didn’t think that Scripture had to be read either literally or spiritually, as both were true, so he didn’t think that the choice was either to be a Christian or a philosopher. Like Clement he believed that such a marriage of faith and philosophy was possible as long as philosophy was tamed, and it was desirable for the good of the Church, which was fighting on philosophical territory, combating the philosophically inspired heresies of Arianism and Docetism. Greek philosophy was the lingua franca of the age, whether in an Aristotelian, a Stoic or a Neoplatonic form. It was recognized as dangerous to the faith unless brought under theology and purged of non-Christian elements.

Yet one of those non-Christian elements was the philosophical hostility to history as a vehicle of divine revelation. But this was not an area in which there was a strong doctrinal or biblical witness. Scripture speaks more about who Christ is than how God speaks in history. Absent of any creedal or biblical witness to be defended it would be harder to resist the influence of anti-historicism except by taming it to make it seem to conform to the historicality of the Christian faith, just as allegory was tamed and wedded, no matter how unnaturally, to an appreciation for literal interpretation. The resulting ‘moderate’ view of history and revelation would no longer be that history cannot be a mode of revelation (and so a means, therefore, of understanding the revelation). Now it would be that history can be such, as well as the spirit. Both are means whereby revelation is received and understood. The truly opposite view from the Greek would be that history is the only mode of revelation, but the Antiochian school was never able to offer a theological basis for such a position. It is arguable that this was so because they were operating under Aristotelian influence and so likewise hampered by the Greek mindset in this regards. Failing to demonstrate why this philosophical prejudice was instinctively illegitimate, perhaps because they didn’t understand it themselves, the school of Antioch lost the debate and the result was a hybrid, a hermeneutic
both Christian and philosophical; history and an anti-historical spirit held together as equals.

But this was really a triumph of a radical Monophysite view of revelation, for in neither Greek nor Christian thought would the Spirit and history be seen as equals when put side by side. God communicating by the Spirit outside the limits of history would easily be seen as superior to doing so limited by history. And if the better is possible why should it not be preferable, and so the dominant method? The Greek paradigm became the camel's nose under the tent, soon taking over and making history a revelatory means in name only. Like a bastard child a true historical hermeneutic would be shunted aside while the favoured son of the allegorical and spiritual interpretation was received into the bosom of the Church and united with its developing philosophical theology. What would happen when the historical came to demand its own? Would it turn not just against the favoured son of allegory but against the father as well, the Church which had made allegory its own? Thus was the stage set for the modern era. The next chapter will show how even the best examples of patristic theology dealing with history and time failed to compensate for this philosophical bias against history.
Chapter 2
Time and History in the thoughts of Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa

A crucial problem with the Antiochene school’s literal method was what modern scholarship would consider its primary strength; its neutrality toward the Faith. The question in the mind of those seeking to guard the faith was how this method could be used consistently without causing Scripture to assist either Arian or Jewish beliefs. How important was history anyway such that the risk could be justified? Though the Christian faith was unhesitatingly historically based, rooted in the events surrounding Jesus Christ and what he has done, and just as the faith of Israel had always been inseparable from the history of God’s relationship with them, could that understanding translate into a clear theology of revelation that would maintain the divine authority of Scripture and its effective use as a defence and proof of orthodoxy, especially in a time when the theological controversies were being fought on territory long dominated by Greek Philosophy? How a historically focused literal method of scriptural interpretation would fare depended on how the realm of history was understood to relate to the process of imparting and receiving divine revelation. Did the historical context affect or in any way control the way God revealed his truth to mankind? The answer to this question was determined by the conceptions of Time and History developed by Christians which would stand apart from the decidedly negative position that history had in the intellectual climate of Hellenic thought in the fourth and fifth centuries. In looking at the ideas of Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, principal theologians in the West and East, we find two distinctly Christian understandings of time, yet which can be demonstrated to fall short of providing a sufficient theological foundation for the strength of the literal historical method.

I. THE PHILOSOPHIC ENVIRONMENT
   A. The Greek Influence

Hellenic thought was profoundly negative toward history as a source of philosophical or
theological truth. This is because history belongs to the realm of the changeable, the visible sensible world. In this world of the senses things are constantly coming to be and ceasing to be, and all matter is in a state of flux. It is a realm only of Becoming. Things in this realm cannot be truly known, for their existence is unstable and impermanent, unlike the eternal changeless and spiritual realm of Being where things truly exist, never coming to be out of a state of Non-being nor ceasing to be. This eternal realm was for Plato the world of the Ideas or Forms, of which those things which exist in the sensible and visible world are but copies. The Forms of Plato are those things which can be truly known. Plato drew a distinction between knowledge and opinion or belief. Mathematics represents something which can be known, for it is not a contingent reality but is eternally true and is knowable through the intellect. Objects that are perceived through sensory experience can provide a basis for opinion or belief, but not true knowledge:

That knowledge only which is of Being and of the unseen can make the soul look upwards, and whether a man gapes at the heavens or blinks on the ground, seeking to learn some particular sense, I would deny that he can learn, for nothing of that sort is matter of science; his soul is looking downwards, not upwards.115

Thus history is consigned to be the object of opinion based upon our sense experience, not something intellectually perceived and so truly known. Aristotle similarly did not consider history to be a profitable study for it is just the collection of facts rather than the investigation of truth based upon those facts, which is the activity of the poets. History only describes ‘the thing which has been’, poetry describing the ‘kind of thing that might be’:

Hence Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulars.116

Though Aristotle, sharing the belief in the division between the Visible and Invisible, Being and Becoming, was so dismissive of the work of historians and specifically named Herodotus’ work as an example, he was more optimistic about the ability of sensible experience to provide real knowledge about the principles that govern this world. Thus his

115 Republic, 529b
116 Poetics 1451b
philosophy was more congenial to the rise of the historical literal school of Antioch and, as Patterson makes clear, both Herodotus and Thucydides went beyond the mere cataloguing of human events in order to achieve an understanding, a philosophical awareness of the meaning of those events. They were doing what Aristotle believed was a proper study of the natural world, identifying universal patterns and truths, even if he did not think it possible with *historia* (a word that, before Herodotus began using it, simply meant an inquiry such as engaged in by philosophers). Markus reckons that their work represents ‘the beginnings of a genuine intellectual discipline, that of history’ and defends Thucydides against charges of bad historical methodology by remarking that it is surprising that their discipline wasn’t less like our modern concept of history and more like philosophy given ‘the anti-historical outlook of Greek philosophic consciousness’.

Yet this should not be taken to mean that they were working against the grain of Hellenic thought. As was noted they were conforming to Aristotelian forms of scientific inquiry, seeking to identify the principles and laws that govern human activity in the world. Nor did their discipline prohibit the cyclic view of time that was common to Greek philosophy, for progress was possible *within* the cycles. Such progress could be achieved but was ultimately meaningless since it couldn’t last past the end of the cycle. The Stoics believed that every cycle of history would end in a great conflagration whereupon the world would then start all over again just as it had countless times before. Aristotle concluded that it is then possible to say that the Trojan war is just as much in the future as it is in the past, for it all comes round again.

Greek time has no beginning or end but moves in a circle. Plato described it as the moving image of eternity. It is a copy which imitates eternity by moving in a constantly repeating

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119 Ibid, p. 120
measured movement created by the Craftsman who created the visible universe in order to ‘make the copy [the universe] still more like the original’ [the eternal Forms]:

When he set in order the heaven, he made this image eternal but moving according to number while eternity itself rests in unity.

It is in this constant regular movement through numbered measurement of time that it is an image of Eternity, for Number is a quality which exists in Eternity, and the circle is the most perfect form of ordered motion. Aristotle also adheres to this though he identifies Time, not with motion itself, but with the measurement of motion and so with Soul, for motion can exist without Soul whereas Time cannot because ‘nothing but soul, or in soul reason, is qualified to count’. This identification makes the life of Soul reflect the circular movement of Time, ‘human affairs form a circle’. The cyclical quality of Time is so fundamental that it is present in all the realm of Becoming, in all things that move and have beginnings and endings.

The low value given to the ultimate value of history in Hellenic philosophy was exacerbated when the optimistic Aristotelianism that provided a platform for at least a partial historical inquiry was succeeded by a revival of Plato’s thought, which ‘more than any other identified reality with the order rather than disorder in the cosmos’, this time with an even more negative direction in the Neoplatonism of Plotinus. Whereas Plato believed that the universe was good (though inferior to the eternal) and necessary as a receptacle to our souls so that that image of the eternal things might exist, Plotinus saw matter itself as a source of evil. Furthermore, Time, which for Plato led us towards Eternity, for Plotinus led the soul away for it was created by Soul as it sought a different existence from Eternity in the

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120 Whether Aristotle and the majority of later Platonists are right in believing that Plato is speaking metaphorically when he says that the universe and time were created makes little difference to the practical understanding of time, for once created it is eternal in that it never ends. It would be hard to reconcile time as a true image of Eternity if it stopped.

121 Timaeus 37DE
122 Physics 4.14.15
123 Ibid
124 Patterson, God and History in Early Christian Thought, p.15
The purpose of the human soul is to go in the opposite direction of Time and return to its original existence, an eternal timeless state of pure being. Thus even contemplation of the cycles within Time is a distraction to the soul. This philosophy could do nothing but discourage interest in finding ultimate, or perhaps even penultimate meaning in the flow of events in this world.

In contrast to the growing pessimism of Hellenic ideas about time and the meaning of history stood the Latin, Roman, view which was much more open to seeing a linear progressivity in the scheme of history, a purpose or destiny which the Republic and later the Augustan Empire were to fulfil. The science of historia was adopted with some vigour in the West just as the Greeks were losing confidence in it. Vergil is one of the last great exponents of this vision, and Guite credits him for being foundational to the distinctively more historical orientation of the Latin Fathers who ‘had him built into the structure of their minds and could only dislodge him by doing themselves psychic injury’, especially through his *Aeneid*, which breaks away from any earlier cyclist orientation. Yet this Latin historicism was fading by the third century. The intellectual class were losing confidence in the destiny of Rome, nor did such a confidence ever rise to the level of religious truth. It was a destiny for this world. The only philosophies to give coherence and meaning to the souls of men came from the Greeks. The Greek thought that faced Christianity from the third century onward was Stoicism and Aristotelianism on one side, which affirmed an interest in this world but little interest or belief in eternal life and which held such a strong cyclic view of time that history became ultimately meaningless, and on the other side was Neoplatonism and various forms of Gnosticism which denigrated the material existence and any significance to courses of events within it.

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126 Patterson, *God and History in Early Christian Thought*, p. 20
127 H. Guite, ‘Common Elements in Virgilian and Patristic Philosophies of History’, *SP XVIII* /2, p. 93
128 This arrangement is only to highlight certain distinctive characteristics. It does not imply any real division among its adherents, for certainly the philosophies were a mixed lot. Neoplatonism was itself a combination of Plato, Stoicism and Aristotelian categories.
B. The Christian Counterpoint

It is a generally undisputed fact that Christian thinking opposed the cyclical view of time in favour of a linear scheme, because Christians knew that the world was created, and so had a beginning in time, and that history would be completed in the final judgement of God and his salvation of his people. Christian time was time with a meaningful purpose, not an ultimately meaningless cycle of events that yield nothing of permanence. In worldly time God chose his people and worked his plan of salvation, entering into the world in Jesus Christ; the eternal broke into the temporal. Salvation is inseparable from history, and history, if it has any meaning, is all about salvation, as Cullmann says: ‘Redemptive history is bound to the upward sloping time line’. Such a baseline understanding created a strong opposition to philosophy early on in Christianity’s development. Yet if Guite is right concerning Vergil and the Latin Fathers it is even more true to say that Hellenism was hard wired into the minds of the pagan world during this period. And it did not develop in a hermetically, let alone a hermeneutically, sealed environment. After the first century the theologians of the Church came not from Jewish enclaves but from the Gentiles, most with some form of Gentile (Hellenic) education. It required more than the simple affirmation of the significance of historical events for the Faith, and a stated rejection of pagan thinking, to overcome the Greek prejudice against history. As will be shown, that task was not fully achieved, as evidenced by the thoughts of Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa.

II. AUGUSTINE

129 Von Balthasar is an exception in believing that the linear quality of Christianity is overstated, for he holds that it is cyclical as well in that mankind moves in a vertical circle from God in Paradise down into sin and then through Christ back to God in the new Jerusalem. Thus it is a full circle return, not a complete straight line moving away from the beginning. Yet for this to really have merit the end should be identical with the beginning, whereas most Christian thought is that we are destined for a greater existence than that which Adam and Eve enjoyed before Sin. Thus the end is a progressive advance upon the beginning. And even among those who conceived salvation as a return to our former existence this was a one time cycle, not to be repeated, Origen’s idea of the transmigration of souls being the exception to the rule, yet even he allowed that this had an ultimately teleological purpose.

Augustine’s theology of history is most fully and clearly expounded in his perhaps most famous work, *The City of God*, though a few important related points are better discussed in some of his other works. In *The City of God* he lays out an interpretive matrix for understanding the course of all human history. Yet its principal focus is naturally on sacred history. Augustine was not much more optimistic about understanding the meaning of events within *secular* history, that of the nations outside the history of God’s people, than were the Greeks. He echoes Plato’s distinctions concerning knowledge when he says that history belongs to ‘those things which always are believed and never understood’. It is to secular history that he is referring when he speaks of it negatively, much as Aristotle did. Yet is in the context of the history of God’s dealing with mankind, to which the Scriptures are the testimony, that Augustine believes history can be explained. This is the only history it is profitable to study, as he says:

> When Porphyry says that no universal way for liberation of the souls has yet come to his knowledge by the study of history we must point out that nothing can be more obvious than this story.\(^{133}\)

Like Herodotus he sees the deeper meaning behind the events in Scripture. The key to this understanding is achieved through faith in Christ who has fulfilled the Law and completed the plan of salvation. Scripture is part of a history of revelation from God leading up to Christ. His life, death and resurrection are the realized meaning of the prophecies and actions of God within prophetic history. There are still some prophecies that await a fulfilment in the final judgement and end of the world, but the majority have been fulfilled and were written in anticipation of Christ. All this so far is basic Christian thinking. It is Augustine’s identification of the creation of the Church in the world and the coming of the kingdom of God as the fundamental key to understanding all sacred history that is his major contribution. Since the Church is the work of God and the body of Christ, who as the Son of God was with God from the beginning before the world was created, it is obvious to Augustine that this is

\(^{131}\) *83 Different Questions*, #48. Math and other reasonable science are ‘those things which are understood as soon as they are believed’. Matters of faith are ‘those things which are first believed and afterwards understood’.

\(^{132}\) *City of God*, bk. II, ch 18

\(^{133}\) Ibid, bk. X, ch.32
no novel event. It is only now more clearly revealed. Christ’s Church has been present from the beginning of human history and has been growing in its manifestation and dominance, the true spiritual destiny of the redeemed to which the earthly kingdom of man stands as a pale imitation and counterfeit. The opposition between the two realities will continue until the destruction of the carnal and the triumph of the spiritual.

The Church, or kingdom, he likens to a city, to contrast it with the image of Rome and its empire as the pinnacle of human aspiration. This is not to equate Rome or any visible city with the City of man, for the latter is as indistinguishable in boundaries as the City of God. All cities and civilizations will contain citizens of both. The image of a city was chosen more for the purpose of refuting arguments, in the wake of the barbarians’ sack of Rome, that Christianity must be blamed because evil had befallen the greatest civilization of man. Augustine is merely saying that nothing great has been lost, that the truly greatest has become possible only because of Christ but that that greatness is one seen only by Faith. Apart from this apologetic purpose there is little significance in the use of a city as an image for the kingdom of God, nor is it the only image used.

A better image that Augustine uses is his likening the history of humanity to the growth of an individual, though it was not an original idea with him or with Christianity. In this image mankind is seen to pass through stages of development: infancy, childhood, etc. He divides them into six in accord with philosophical ideas about numbers and also the model of creation in Genesis 1. The last stage, old age, is our present age, the age of the Church, begun with the advent of Jesus. This is an age of wisdom, for that is how Augustine views old age, infancy and childhood being for him something to be gratefully left behind, with all its ignorance and helplessness, a significant difference from the Hellenic thought with all its ideas of a past golden age. Though he does, in dealing with question 44 of his 83 Questions, consider Christ to have come in the period of mankind’s youth as a teacher, assuming ‘humanity at mankind’s opportune age in order that the whole of mankind might become
wise’.

He consistently afterwards thinks of this as the sixth age, for after retreating from an earlier optimistic belief in the reign of a Christian Empire as a new *tempora christiana* he no longer saw the age of the Church as having any divisions. Thus this is the last age before the seventh wherein we rest in Christ, who is our Sabbath.

The importance of this image is that it is used not of humanity in general but specifically of the history of those who received the revelation of God. They are referenced using the language of development which has important implications for interpretation for it puts the difficulties of many parts of the Old Testament and its moral and spiritual discontinuities with the New into a historical perspective. It means that revelation itself is to be understood as progressive because the people who received it were progressing. One application of this principle deals with problems of the description of events and situations that on their face seem incredible: anthropomorphic language and fantastic or unsophisticated understandings of the universe. Augustine brings into play the idea of God's condescension, a concept also held by Chrysostom, among others. It meant that God lowered the form of his communication in Scripture to conform to the ability of the people to understand. This was especially obvious in the case of Genesis where sacred Scripture ‘in its customary style is speaking with limitations of human language in addressing men of limited understanding’.

For God to communicate at all with man requires a condescension, for language is based upon common experience, and even the limited experience of men in those days was coloured by ignorance compounded by Sin. God was intent only on correcting that ignorance which touched upon salvation and the City of God. Thus he condescended to use crude anthropomorphic language, perhaps even appearing to men in the way the languages described, and revealed divine truths they could not or would not otherwise know, allowing them to keep primitive misconceptions about the nature of other mundane things, misconceptions which they would eventually correct themselves through human learning, this being the purpose of philosophy.

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134 In his *Retractationes* he explains the image of youth as referring to the inner quality, the strength and vibrancy which the Church possesses, whereas the sixth age refers to mankind’s chronological age.
136 *Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, bk. V, ch. 6.19
A second application of this understanding of progressive revelation deals with those things credible in the accounting but uncommendable to Christian faith. Instances of less than ideal morality exercised by God’s people, seemingly with his approval (or at least without his explicit condemnation), are explained as God making allowances for the limited moral capacity of the people of Israel, allowing them to execute those parts of his divine will which would be inappropriate for possessors of a higher morality. They weren’t capable of loving their enemy, therefore they were allowed to kill those who deserved such punishment from God, just as Nebuchadnezzar was allowed to destroy Jerusalem. God still executes such judgement upon the world but Christians, by virtue of their higher moral understanding, are not allowed to do that task. Moral virtue and ethics are relative to the times and the moral understanding.

The same is true for the nature of revealed truth. ‘God’s Law’, he says, ‘was promulgated gradually in step with historical development’. Thus the form of revelation given to God’s people was conditioned by their stage in historical growth, which then accounts for seeming change in spiritual truth. The specific problem of how God could require blood sacrifices and ritual purity observance, when salvation is through faith, is addressed with the same reference to the capability of the people of Israel to receive higher truth. They were given the Law to be observed in its literal sense because they were incapable of learning the deeper spiritual truths and had to be educated like children. He writes in *On Christian Doctrine*, III. 10:

In those actual temporal and carnal signs and votive offerings, although they were unaware of how they were meant to be understood spiritually, they had at least learned that only the one eternal God was to be honoured.

Such education, when the spiritual meaning was openly proclaimed with the coming of Christ, made those who were willing to advance able to recognize and embrace it. Those who refused to recognize the signs as signs rejected Christ. Augustine shows little inclination to

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137 *83 Different Questions*, #53
138 *City of God*, bk. X, ch.15
view, as Justin Martyr had, the pedagogy of the Jews as being equivalent to that of the Gentiles. The Jews were in a better condition, being trained to eventually understand the spiritual things by lessons revealed to them. In contrast, the Greeks were educating themselves, ‘philosophis[ing] without the Mediator’ because they rejected the idea that truth would come from the Prophets.\footnote{On the Trinity, bk. XIII, ch. 19.24} By themselves the truth of the Gospel was unknowable. It was foolishness, because it was part of the changeable ‘fabric of temporal history’.\footnote{Ibid, bk. IV, ch. 16.21} Thus they were constantly led astray by their own ‘human surmises’. This negative assessment of philosophy’s capability was something that grew stronger through the years with Augustine.\footnote{Markus, Saeculum, p.9}

What keeps this progressive historical view from diminishing the divine authorship of the Old Testament, as did Marcion with all of it and Theodore with a few books, is his sense of the providence of God over all of history, but specifically over the history of revelation. God made sure that despite the limitations of men the truth he wished to reveal was written down. Truth is not defined by what the Jews understood but by what was revealed to them. In this way Augustine can accept the Septuagint as having divine authority despite the obvious changes in it from the original Hebrew. Both are inspired by the same Spirit, the changes being a form of additional revelation, a clarification of the inner meaning of the original.\footnote{City of God, bk. XV, ch. 11 and bk. XVIII, ch. 43}

Augustine’s understanding of history as the stage on which the development of the City of God unfolds is thoroughly Christian. It allows him to show God at work within every part of the historical process in a way that Hellenism could not contemplate and which is supremely relevant to the interpretation of Scripture, for the history of God’s plan of salvation is part of the very content of God’s revelation. Furthermore, his understanding of the nuances of manners of speech and the use of symbolism as well as the contextualization of the expression of God’s revelation in accord with the limited capacity of the recipients to understand, all allowed him to provide a deeper meaning and orthodox interpretation without
descending into allegory. Yet there is still an aspect of Neoplatonism to it. Augustine still
brings in an element of the superior and unchanging eternal to his reading of Scripture. This
is seen more clearly in his statements about the way in which revelation is received.

As has already been noted, Augustine freely makes reference in many instances to God’s
tailoring his message to the limitations of the recipients. The important distinction to make is
that Augustine’s comments in this area are applicable to both God and the individual prophet
through whom God is delivering his message. The two are practically identical in voice and
intent. To understand that Moses says a certain thing in Scripture is to know that God is
saying this too. What can be attributed to the human author, in his capacity as author, can also
be attributed to the divine author, and vice versa. Thus if it is true that God accommodated
his revelation to the Jews it can also be said that Moses or David, or any other canonical
author involved, was doing this as well, knowingly and intentionally. That they themselves
were intending what God was intending in their writings is part of Augustine’s beliefs about
prophecy and revelation. Though Markus says that ‘a “theory of inspiration”, in our modern
sense, [Augustine] never took the trouble to work out’,\textsuperscript{143} yet unless by ‘our modern sense’ is
meant something which will not offend a modernist ideology it cannot be said that Augustine
had no clear theory of how inspiration occurred.

There were in Hellenism two ways that truth came to individuals. One was the ecstatic
form of prophecy associated with the oracles. In this instance the priestess or seer would
receive a communication direct from heaven (or from where ever) in which the recipient’s
body would be controlled, the mind effectively by-passed, and the human ‘author’ acting as a
mere mouthpiece or puppet for the divine message. This is a concept that seems to be
expressed by quite a few patristic writers with reference to biblical inspiration. The other way
of ‘receiving’ truth was that of the philosophers. They achieved knowledge through the
elevation of their mind and its purification from error and all that would distract or distort the

\textsuperscript{143} Markus, \textit{Saeculum}, p. 12
understanding. In this instance the will and conscious mind are active, and the character of the philosopher is crucial. Whereas a seer could receive ecstatic utterances regardless of his moral character, not so the philosopher. Moral and ethical progression was integral to intellectual understanding.

It is in this latter category that Augustine puts biblical revelation. The biblical authors are prophets who receive insights from God. They are not simple mouthpieces but are understanding of the full implications of what they have received. Thus Habakkuk is said to be aware of the prophetic implications of his words. His prophecy was a reaction and commentary to the divine insight given him. David, to whom is attributed all 150 psalms, gave various titles to them, even giving other names as authors, as a conscious act of prophecy. What makes them prophets is not only their receiving a communication from God but that they are given a prophetic understanding. Augustine makes this qualification clear in the twelfth chapter of his *Literal Interpretation of Genesis*. There he distinguishes the one who receives a vision, as in the case of Pharaoh in Gen. 41, from the one who, like Joseph, received the understanding of the vision. Pharaoh only saw the vision with his spirit, as one notices with the mind what the eyes are seeing, or as one sees in the mind something only remembered or imagined. Joseph ‘saw’ with his intellect the meaning of what Pharaoh only saw in the common sense:

In the one there was the production of the images of things; in the other, the interpretation of the images produced.

Daniel was an even greater prophet than Joseph because he received both the vision and its interpretation. However, it is clear that it is the interpretation alone that is the deciding characteristic for a prophet. This interpretation is not simply of what will be but also what is the meaning of what has already occurred. Thus Augustine moves away from his earlier distinction between *historia* and *prophetia*. Biblical historians become prophets because

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144 *City of God*, bk. XVIII ch. 32
145 *Literal Interpretation of Genesis*, bk. XII, ch. 9
they do not just report events but interpret them. Their reporting contains insight as to what is significant and how it fits in the general scheme of God’s working in history.

Moreover, such understanding is given to these prophets because they have so prepared their mind and soul to receive them. They have become divine philosophers, attaining wisdom and true insight by leading a virtuous and pious life, by being ‘pure of heart’. Abraham is credited with prophetic understanding because of his faith, a faith which he received only ‘as soon as he was liberated from the superstitions of the Chaldeans’, and educated himself with a true understanding of God. And, whereas the pagans were incapable of seeing what God would do in the future, nor were ‘worthy of having these things announced to them by the holy angels’, the Patriarchs and Prophets did receive such prophetic knowledge because they were ‘endowed with true piety’.

For Augustine, to be a prophet is to have true understanding of God and of salvation, an understanding that is the fruit of a mind so devoted to God’s illumination that, rather than receiving just one particular insight as a special grace from God, it is in such an attitude toward God that it is enabled to perceive the truth that God reveals upon any subject it seeks to understand. Such an understanding is mediated directly by faith through the Holy Spirit. It is limited only by the quality of that faith, not by any historical circumstance. Though the people of Israel might not have been capable of fully understanding the spiritual significance of the Law, that was not true with regard to Moses, nor with any of the Prophets. It is assumed that their understanding then was equal to that of the Apostles. Nor was such true spiritual understanding limited to the authors of the Scriptures. ‘Not only among those who are called prophets, but in Old Testament history itself, one infers that prophecy does not keep silent for those who seek devoutly and are aided by God in investigating these things’.

146 Markus, Saeculum, p. 190
147 83 Questions, #48
148 City of God, bk. X, ch. 32
149 On the Trinity, bk. IV, ch. 17.23
150 83 Questions, #58.2
There were children in Israel ‘fully understanding [the] force and significance’ of the signs and symbols in the Law who were therefore ‘spiritual and free even during the time of slavery’, just as are those now who are not enslaved by the letter but read the Scriptures in their spiritual intent and meaning.

This is the crucial factor which makes Augustine’s approach to revelation within the temporal world function non-temporally. The prophet’s understanding is elevated above the changing historical limitations to the true understanding which is eternal and unchanging. We today are capable of just this same transcendence of understanding if we approach with faith and attend to the spiritual meaning. Thus for any two believers of equal devotion to understanding, no matter the separation in time, they can be expected to attain an equal perception of the meaning of Scripture. The distance created by time is transcended. What we witness in the progression of spiritual understanding within Israel, and even now within the Church, is the progression of understanding among the masses, a growing percentage of people who are freed from misunderstanding and the decreasing in quality and quantity of misunderstanding amongst those who still are limited in their knowledge of spiritual realities. It is the growth of the City of God with reference to the illumination of the mind. But as at every point in time the City of God has existed so have there been true citizens who could represent it fully. Thus all, let us say, adult citizens of the City of God have access to, and should be expected to exercise, an equal level of ‘prophetic judgement’. It is true that, as in the case with Joseph and Daniel, Augustine makes a distinction between the one who receives this prophetic understanding of things reported or perceived in the normal way from the one who ‘sees’ something through divine assistance. Vision of future events are instances of the latter. Nor can we assume that illuminated understanding will give the Christian this type of prophecy. It is a special gift given to few. Yet what is important is that Augustine clearly operates under the belief that the latter form was given to all biblical authors with regard to the content of their writings. And if the lesser common form of prophetic judgement

151 On Christian Doctrine, bk. III, ch. 13
152 Markus, Saeculum, p. 195
is given to all mature Christians then there is no insight into the meaning of Scripture knowable to us now that we can not assume the authors themselves understood. And, as the purpose of Scripture throughout is to proclaim the truth about Christ and his kingdom, it is a reasonable conclusion that every writer of sacred scripture would have an understanding of the essential truths regarding these things.

In this way all prophets attain a common level of understanding in which none can be corrected or improved by another. Paul is not greater than Moses nor is Moses greater than Jeremiah. Their writings, however, are not equal in that some writings contain more of the truth than others and some are expressed more clearly. This is the primary difference between the Old and New Testaments. But the fact that the New is fuller and clearer than the Old, proclaiming more openly what was before hidden in symbols that only the wise could understand, bears no poor reflection on the understanding of the old prophets. Had it been required of them to reveal the Gospel as distinctly as the Apostles they could have done so. They were simply teaching the lesson appropriate to their role in the scheme of the history of God’s people, just as an algebra teacher lays down only the basics to his students, preparing them for another teacher to continue with more advanced mathematics, of which the first teacher is not ignorant.

That the biblical authors are teachers is a common thought with Augustine. Yet this concept withdraws them from the realm of historical process in that, though they are part of the sacred history and the tools of God’s education of humanity, they are not part of those who are to be educated, for they have already been educated so that they could become prophets. Once they attain that status, for such is the only way that they can speak to us the Word of God, they are elevated above the humanity which must progress gradually in its understanding. They are now become the teachers while the rest are still the students. And it is the students who progress in understanding, not the teachers. That Augustine should understand the historical context of revelation and yet not regard those human mediators of
that revelation, and any other similar holy individuals, to be as limited by that historical context as were the rest is not altogether unreasonable, given that it is assumed that it was the Holy Spirit, who is above time, who enlightened and trained these teachers. Surely God could have chosen to grant this complete understanding to those who truly sought his wisdom. Yet what likely caused Augustine to view this as not merely a possible occurrence but a most probable, if not necessary one, was how he conceived the relationship of time to the eternal soul. Otis identifies this with his failure to reach ‘a positive estimate of creation and time’.

In the eleventh book of his *Confessions* Augustine wrestles with the concept of time. What exactly is it? Does it exist, and if so, how? For it is something that we think we understand until we try to explain it. By thinking through it as we experience it he discovers that we cannot say that the past and the future really exist, for the past has ceased to exist and the future has yet to exist. That is what makes them past and future. Otherwise they would really be present. Furthermore, the present only exists in an instant, of no measurable duration, for every length of time that we can conceive can be divided into one portion that is past and one that is still to come while the present remains a point that suddenly comes to be and immediately ceases to be. Understood this way, it is easy to see why anything ‘existing’ in time would be viewed as something which never fully exists. Yet we seem to notice different lengths of time. Since it is impossible that we are measuring lengths of time that exist independently it must be that we are measuring its movement in our soul. Time is, Augustine concludes, a distension of the soul. It is an experience created by the soul in order to measure motion. The past exists as memory, the present as awareness and the future as expectation.

Augustine has here worked out a good existential understanding of time but he never seems to be clear as to why it exists. Why are we created in a temporal world that requires a distension of the soul? It is almost as if it is something secondary to our existence, something

153 B. Otis. ‘Gregory of Nyssa and the Cappadocian Concept of Time’, *SP XIV*, Berlin: Elizabeth A. Livingstone, Editor, Akademie-Verlag, 1976, p. 353
154 Augustine is drawing on Aristotle's critique of time as being a collection of intervals, numbers of time. Each moment, each “now” is like a point on a line. *Physics*, 220a
which we will overcome when we are at last fully united with God in Christ at the end of
time. In this it is inferior to the thinking of Gregory of Nyssa, though it too falls short of a full
emancipation from Greek anti-historicism.

III. GREGORY OF NYSSA

Gregory developed his philosophy of time in the battle with Arianism as he reworked his
anthropology and soteriology in the light of the divinity of the Only-begotten Son of God.
This is evidenced in his works against Eunomius, but in earlier works, *On the Making of
Man*, *On the Soul and the Resurrection* and *Homilies on Ecclesiastes* specifically, we see his
thought beginning to move away from a typically Hellenic framework toward something
more distinctively Christian. This period may be looked upon as a mid-point transition. His
estimate of our present temporal existence was still thought of as a second best option, a
concession to sin. There is a strong element of Origenism in this idea, for Gregory at this
stage saw this life as an educative process wherein sinful man learns the futility of choosing
the sensible over the spiritual. However, Gregory does not go as far as to affirm any prior
existence for our intelligible nature, as Origen did, so that this life became a secondary
existence in the experience of our created souls who were sentenced to live in bodies until
they learn and return. Gregory is explicit that souls never existed without bodies.\(^\text{155}\) Nor is sin
directly caused by the body for it occurred in the soul first; ‘disobedience is a sin, not of the
body, but of the will’.\(^\text{156}\) Mankind was created possessing both body and intellect. The mind
does not exist apart from the senses but uses the body as its instrument.\(^\text{157}\) Our possession of
a sensible nature is not an inferior existence if it is in proper relation to our rational nature.
Yet what is a departure from the original design is this present temporal existence. Part of that
includes all the corruption that accompanies this sinful corporeal life; the punishment of
death (the ‘coats of skins’\(^\text{158}\) God clothed us with after sin), the dominion of sensual desires

\(^{155}\) *De Hominis Opificio*, XXVIII

\(^{156}\) *Contra Eunomium*, II.13

\(^{157}\) *De Hominis Opificio*, IX-X

\(^{158}\) Gregory may not have fully moved from his early understanding of the meaning of the garments of skin
from Gen. 3.21 to that which in his Catechetical Oration, VIII, associates them with mortality. In his *De
and our bodily limitation to hunger and sleep, and all our infirmities and such that make our nature a ‘dung-heap’.\footnote{Homilies on Ecclesiastes, Homily 6, 388} All of this was a temporal change that resulted from man’s first sin.

What sin is for Gregory in this context is the rational soul serving the irrational senses rather than ruling over them. In his homilies on Ecclesiastes he calls this ‘futility’, for the things of this world which pass away cannot be suitable objects of desire because they do not have real, i.e. permanent existence. Thus the desire for these things is futile. It is the soul turning away from true being to pursue what does not exist, making non-being the rule of the soul. The shameful nature of our present existence is a consequence of this turning away. It is what happens when our soul is ruled by the body which is inferior to it and by the nothingness of evil, for evil is only the turning away from the good. But it is also a discipline to teach us to desire what is real, the spiritual things of God. Yet from all this we will be released in the Resurrection\footnote{Unless otherwise indicated, resurrection for Gregory in this context means the general resurrection at the end of time.} which ‘promises us nothing else than the restoration of the fallen to their ancient state’\footnote{De Hominis, XVII.2}.

In addition to the change that resulted from sin Gregory seems to be identifying the very temporality of humanity as secondary to our creation in God’s image. This is in one instance linked to our sexual nature as male and female, which was added to our single creation by God in his foreknowledge that, due to our ‘bias toward evil’, we would sin and fall down from our high status and ‘acquire a fellowship with the lower nature’\footnote{Ibid, XXII.4} (the previously mentioned dung-heap). This meant that we could not multiply as the angels must have done and so, to make up the required number of humanity (a very Origenist concept), God provided that we would do so like the animals. This necessitated a dimension of time in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Mortuis} his conception is a heavily Origenist one which held them to signify our very materiality or corporeality. This still seems to be part of his conception in \textit{De Anima et Resurrectione}, though it is clear that he has by then rejected the Origenist belief in an original non-corporeal creation of man.
\end{itemize}
which to achieve this multiplication, after which, ‘when the generation of men is completed, time should cease altogether with its completion’.\textsuperscript{163} This obviously seems to imply the Resurrection, which will return humanity to its original state, an existence without this temporality.

Gregory makes another linkage of time and its end determined by the Resurrection to the development of evil. Since good is infinite, movement in that direction can never be exhausted. But this is not the case with evil, which has a limit to its existence and so to any movement in it.\textsuperscript{164} It follows for Gregory that for the soul moving toward evil/non-being/futility, once it has come to the end it will have nowhere else to go but back. Gregory likens it to the shadow of the earth blocking the sun’s light. When one begins passing into it he will be in darkness until he passes through the other side. So with evil, its ultimate end is a return to the good. Gregory wanted by this understanding to defend the logic of the Resurrection, yet this makes it a natural consequence of our existence, rather than the intervention of God. As Mosshammer says; ‘As for salvation, that is the work of time, not of Christ’.\textsuperscript{165} And though this may make time a good for our salvation it does little to show how God is involved with time, nor really how man individually has a positive experience of time. This is not yet the positive estimation of time as a part of our created nature toward which Gregory moved in \textit{Contra Eunomium}.

In his work against Eunomius Gregory was wrestling with the primary place held by the division between the intelligible and sensible within Platonism as the principal distinction between all being, and he found it inadequate to defend the unity of the Father and Son as being both God while distinguishing them from one another. This distinction in Hellenic thought made the intelligible eternal and superior to the sensible and by nature ungenerate; only the visible sensible world having the characteristic of becoming and ceasing to be. As

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{163} Ibid, XXII.5
  \item \textsuperscript{164} Ibid, XXI.2
  \item \textsuperscript{165} Alden Mosshammer, ‘Historical Time and the Apokastasis according to Gregory of Nyssa’, \textit{SP XXVII}, Oxford: A.E. Livingstone, Editor, Peeters Publishing, 1993, p. 82
\end{itemize}
Christian belief maintained that God created all things, including the angels and other spiritual or intelligible beings it made God the only thing that could be described as ungenerate. All other created things could not be ungenerate and so were inferior to the eternal ungenerate Divinity. Yet the Father is ungenerate, ἀγεννητός,166 whereas the Son is called generate by being begotten of the Father. This would clearly seem to put Christ among the angels and other intelligible creatures.

This was the argument Eunomius used against the Catholics, identifying the agenetic with the essence of God. Realizing that Eunomius’ argument had demonstrated the crucial flaw in the classical Hellenic understanding of the intelligible world of Becoming, rather than abandon it entirely Gregory’s solution was to modify it, to divide the intelligible further into the created and uncreated.167 The true characteristic of God is not that he is ungenerate but that he is uncreated and infinite.168 This is a shift he was already beginning to make in On the Making of Man when he identifies the uncreated as immutable, a quality characteristic of the intelligible in Hellenic thought. Now all created nature he identified as mutable, using the same reasoning which Platonism used to label the sensible as mutable and deficient in Being:

The created nature cannot exist without change; for its very passage from non-existence to existence is a certain motion and change of the non-existent transmuted by divine purpose into being.169

What Gregory does in his response to Eunomius is to develop this distinction further, making

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166 Moore, in a note in his translation (Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, vol. 5, p. 100) remarks that the distinction between γεννητός, by which the orthodox meant ‘begotten’ or ‘generate’, and γενητός, by which they meant ‘made’ was a distinction unused in philosophy.

167 Contra Eunomium, I.22

168 Ibid, IX.3

169 De Hominis, XVI.12. Gregory is not completely consistent in his use of the category of mutable and immutable. One is forced to choose what seems most consistent with the development of his thought. Even in his work against Eunomius, as Mosshammer notes (‘Gregory of Nyssa and Christian Hellenism’, SP XXXII, Oxford: E.A Livingstone, Editor, Peeters Publishing, 1996, p. 187), he still seems tied to the Hellenic distinction when he makes the uncreated and created a subdivision of the intelligible, but never the converse, making the intelligible and sensible a subdivision of the created. His difficulty, like that of Augustine and other Christians trained in Neoplatonism, is that he was, like Mosshammer states, ‘Searching for a Grand Unified Theory that would explain both his Hellenic world view and his Christian optimism and show their relationship to one another.’ Ibid, p. 172.
time the receptacle of all creation.

Gregory saw that all created things are finite in being, limited by boundaries, a circumscribed existence which makes it impossible for them ever to comprehend the infinite nature of God. The difference between the intelligible and sensible is that the latter is circumscribed by space whereas the intelligibles are not so limited but exist outside any spatial dimension. But all created things, sensible and intelligible, exist in time and are measured by their existence in time. They exist in an ‘interval’ (διάστημα) in which they move. Movement in time in the intelligible order is intended to indicate the souls and angels ever seeking to contemplate and trying to understand the infinity of God, moving constantly in its directions, their own perfection ever advancing towards a goal which, since God is incomprehensible because he is infinite, can never be fully achieved. God, who is perfect in infinity, has no need to increase his perfection or goodness, for that is without limit. He is motionless in time, outside of time, unlimited and without measure. ‘The divine nature is without extension’. Time is identified with measurement for it ‘differentiates the beginning from the end by the interval between them.’

Christ shares this infinite nature but in a genetic, a begotten capacity, which does not include a temporal beginning or any limiting boundaries:

He who is with the Father in some inconceivable category, before the ages admits not of a ‘sometime’. He exists by generation indeed, but nevertheless he never begins to exist. His life is neither in time, nor in place.

Thus there never was a time when the Son was not, for time is a dimension created through Christ who exists ‘prior’ to time. All but God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, have a beginning and so are bounded by time. The intelligible are bounded only with a beginning but no end, though their eternal future existence is still contingent upon God. The sensible,

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170 Contra Eunomium, IX.3 Gregory was already making this connection of time with measure, a very Aristotelian idea, in his Homilies on Ecclesiastes.

171 Gregory is here making the point that the Son ‘is’ in the sense that he possesses true being, which is not contingent upon a temporal cause.

172 Contra Eunomium, I.39
however, are bounded by both a beginning and an end. This is human historical time.

Gregory is still seeing the Resurrection as an end to time but only one type of time. A spiritual or angelic time will still exist, for we will still be within the created διάστημα. The divine infinite nature is one that created nature can never know, for even in salvation we do not cross the division between created and uncreated. We will always be creatures. Thus we will always exist in a διάστημα of time. What our salvation will achieve is to restore us to an unlimited forward progression in a temporal existence possessed even by the angels, from which we fell when we sinned.

This fall Gregory now no longer conceived in any sense as a fall from non-corporeal to corporeal. Because he had detached the mutability of time from sin and made it part of the intended creation, Gregory could do the same with our irrational physical nature. In his *Catechetical Oration* he states that our twofold nature as an intellectual and physical creature was a single creation with the purpose of bridging together and uniting into one the intelligible and sensible worlds. The fact that we are created as sensible beings does not diminish our intelligible soul where the image of God is located. Nor is our intelligible soul above the mutability of time. For time as the receptacle of all created things means change for the good:

> Whatever by the uncreated being is brought into existence out of what was non-existent, from the very first moment that it begins to be, is ever passing through change, and if it acts according to its nature the change is ever to the better.\(^{174}\)

Our nature was created to progress forever in pursuit of the good. Perfection, for humanity, is an endless process, not an achieved state.\(^{175}\) For God’s infinite nature makes the progress limitless, endless time measured by endless change to the better. Yet as rational beings this change is a product of our freedom. Free will is critical to Gregory’s understanding. We

\(^{173}\) Otis, ‘Gregory of Nyssa and the Cappadocian Concept of Time’ p. 348, note 1

\(^{174}\) *Catechetical Oration*, VIII

\(^{175}\) *Vita Moysis*, I.10
choose the good. But we can also choose the opposite, and time is necessary for us to exercise that choice. Time is therefore the arena, the ‘space’ in which we move toward the good, or not. When we chose to sin we mixed evil into our nature and began moving in the wrong direction. We lost the capacity, which the angels possess, to progress without hindrance toward the good, toward our perfection. This is the death of the soul. The death of the body is, it seems, added so that the proper relationship between the soul and body may be restored. When Christ took on both body and soul he severed the union in death in order to bind it together again more perfectly.  

This Christ did at the apex of evil. Yet this is conceived differently than it was in Making of Man, for the return to good is not stated as a natural or inevitable process. Christ is perceived as stepping into time in order to arrest the descent into evil. He waited until it had developed to its greatest extent:

When, then, wickedness had reached its utmost height, and there was no form of wickedness which men had not dared to do, to the end that the healing remedy might pervade the whole of the diseased system, He, accordingly, ministers to the disease; not at its beginning but when it had completely developed.  

The image of a disease indicates a subtle shift from the end of a journey through evil to a rescue from it. It seems implied that unless Christ intervened humanity could not have returned to a progression toward the good but would have remained a slave to the non-being of evil. It is also significant that the focus is here on the coming of Christ rather than on our future resurrection. As evil has progressed in time so will the cure, just as a deathblow to a serpent may not immediately stop the tail from moving but eventually the tail will fall still. Between the Incarnation and the parousia is a period in which our goodward progress is restored but in which we must grow in our ability to choose rightly. Evil can still be chosen though its inevitable downward pull has been broken. When we are finally raised in glory, after our sojourn in this human terrestrial διαστηµα, which now is seen positively as created

176 Contra Eunomium, II.13
177 Catechetical Oration, XXIX
178 Ibid, XXX
for our salvation, we will receive back our restored human nature unmixed with any evil, our free will enabled to progress without difficulty just like the angels.

The nature of unlimited progression Gregory explains better in his *Life of Moses*. There Moses’ desire to see God is granted by only a view of his back as he passes. Gregory sees this as the need to follow God who is always ahead of us. The soul can never be satisfied in its desire to see God:

One must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied.\footnote{Vita Moysis, II.239}

This vertical movement is made possible because the soul stands on the rock of Christ, giving a sure footing for the ascent. Without Christ we are like a man trying to climb a hill of sand, always slipping, ‘so that, although there is much motion, no progress results from it’.\footnote{Ibid, II.244} This image of futile motion without real progress is how Gregory conceives human time. It is like the Greek cyclical idea of time. Gregory recognizes that there is a cyclical nature to life but the futile cycle is to be replaced by linear progress. The distinction for Gregory is between the ‘circles of the ungodly’ and the ‘direct path’ of the spiritual life.\footnote{Homilies on Ecclesiastes, Homily VI, 379} Mosshammer explains these two types as movement along a vertical and horizontal axis. At the intersection of the two axes is where Christ intervened in the horizontal movement in history and restored to us the possibility to rise vertically toward God.\footnote{Mosshammer, ‘Historical Time and the Apokatastasis’, SP XXVII, p. 90}

As a Christian defence of time and progress Gregory’s is the best of all the Fathers and shows none of the philosophical ambivalence about the purpose of time that Augustine betrays. Yet for all that it has the typical abstractness common to Greek philosophic thought which distances it from more concrete experiences of our temporal existence. As Otis
observes, Gregory does not have ‘a deep sense of the historical character of sin, of its educative function’, and of the subsequent need for revelation to correct that miseducation, a correction that occurs in a ‘long dialogue’. This is Augustine’s strength; he sees human history in the terms of a common human and social experience. Gregory tends to look at man in an ideal capacity. This causes him to have an overly optimistic view of human freedom, and it also means that he tends toward a very individualistic treatment of man. He is reluctant to see mankind in its corporate nature, as a collection of individuals bound together in space and time through patterns of human relationships and societies. He does not seem to speak of corporate humanity at all except to explain sexual reproduction. The historical progression of evil should and does involve humanity, but Gregory’s focus in this area is on evil as a unit, as a disease, rather than on its relationship to human society. It is too abstract to justify historical interest. Even the concept of time as the medium for progression toward God can be separated from the history of humanity in general and used to explain individual salvation and perfection. And this seems to be Gregory’s primary focus in *Life of Moses*. His interest is the individual’s spiritual growth. But if the idea of growth is limited to individuals there need be no difference in the actual progression between the saints of diverse historical periods. He does not apply the idea of necessary growth to revelation as a historical concept, nor does he show any desire to explain historical differences within Scripture, as does Augustine, while at the same time he shares the habit of looking at the Prophets as divine philosophers, above the limitations of normal humanity. As much as Augustine Gregory saw the biblical authors as men whose superior faith made them unlimited in their understanding of the revelation given to them.

There is nothing unique in this last point, as it was common to all the Fathers, yet it demonstrates an inability or unwillingness to see divine revelation as fully connected to the historical process. The problem with this is that if it is so that the biblical authors were raised completely above their historical situation then it is possible that divine truth can be received

183 Otis, ‘Gregory of Nyssa and the Cappadocian Concept of Time’. p. 352
184 *Vita Moysis*, I.136
and recorded without being limited by the historical process. Therefore the interpretation of Scripture and the explanation of its seeming discontinuities need not be dependent upon a historical interpretation, but rather we may assume that the truth in its perfect form can somehow be contained within Scripture despite its appearances. As this would be a superior method of communicating divine truth it must be actual if it is possible. The only justification for disallowing a non-historical method of interpretation would be the belief that revelation is given and received within the historical context in a way that does not completely eliminate, even given the existence of supernatural illumination through visions and prophetic knowledge, the limitations of that historical situation.

Both Augustine and Gregory came close to a theology of history that works in this category, yet both in different ways fall short. Perhaps if their thoughts had been able to complement and challenge each other Augustine’s understanding of the education of humanity and Gregory’s belief in the essential diastemic progression of all created beings would have led to a better historical view of the process of revelation. But Gregory died before Augustine developed his mature ideas and there is no evidence that Augustine was aware of Gregory’s thought in this area. Thus their theologies did not develop past one that encouraged hermeneutics in which the historical literal approach can be useful and illuminating, but never essential, and thus always secondary to the more dependable method of allegory, if not neglected altogether. The Hellenic suspicion of history had maintained a toehold within the theory of revelation.
Chapter 3
History and Revelation in Modern Conception

While the previous chapters showed that the Greek bias against the revelatory character of history made its way into even the most historically conscious theologies of the patristic period and perpetuated a dichotomy between the Bible as a historical book and as a source of divine truth, a dichotomy that is even stronger today in biblical criticism and in the debates over literal inerrancy, we have now to consider whether modern theology has developed a better conception of revelation in time. The purpose of this chapter will be to examine and evaluate the approaches to historical revelation or revelatory history that have been presented in the modern era when history, rather than faith, dominates. It may be helpful to first give a brief overview of the rebirth of the historical literal method and its perpetuation of the problem with history found in the patristic period.

I. THE REVIVAL AND DOMINANCE OF THE HISTORICAL

The modern appreciation for history and the primacy of the literal meaning began with the Scholastic period and the revival of Aristotle whose contention was that knowledge begins with the senses and then proceeds to the higher, rather than working its way down from an innate knowledge of forms and archetypes. This was picked up by the Scholastics like Aquinas who applied this principle to the study of Scripture:

Now it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from sense. Hence in Holy Writ, spiritual truths are fittingly taught under the likeness of material things.185

This attention to the literal sense, combined with the awakening of a historical perspective which was a hallmark of the Renaissance gave rise to the Reformation and a rebellion against the mystical reading of Scripture in favour of the plain reading of the text based upon its literal and historical understanding.

185 Summa Thelogica, I.I. 9, also Summa Contra Gentiles, I. 4
Yet the modern era of historical critical study really begins after this, flowing out of both the success and the failure of the Reformation. For, while the reformers could be judged as successful in breaking the study of the Bible away from the control of an allegorical interpretation at the service of questionable church doctrine, they were also unsuccessful in presenting a unified alternative. Disagreements between various schools of reformers who all claimed to be adhering to the ‘plain sense’ of the text resulted in a virtual loss of faith in an appeal to Scripture alone, even if Sola Scriptura was still an established doctrine. Camps began hardening, the old dissenters becoming the new establishment. The spirit dominant in the Reformation to let the Bible speak for itself even against the Church would then naturally fall upon the shoulders of those outside the authority structure, who, as a consequence of the wars of religion, were sceptical of any ecclesiastical or doctrinally based reading of Scripture being fruitful.

In the new age of Science, human Reason, independent of church doctrine, seemed the perfect candidate to achieve a universal understanding of the meaning of the texts. The Bible would be read scientifically and doctrine would be left to the Church, thus reviving the old dichotomy between history and divine truth. As Lessing put it: ‘the accidental truths of history can never prove the necessary truths of reason’. This time the Scriptures would be on the other side of the divide than where they stood when allegory reigned. But the divide itself would not be seriously challenged, for John Henry Newman was in basic agreement with Lessing’s statement when he said that the orthodox faith of the Church would stand or fall with the mystical interpretation of Scripture.\textsuperscript{186} He wrote this as the modern historical critical method was gaining dominance in the field of biblical interpretation in the nineteenth century. And this method has lost little of the ground it has won since then.

would write as Newman did. A scientific approach to treat the Bible ‘like any other book’ replaces faith in the veracity of the Scriptures with doubt. The first purpose naturally became, not what the texts mean, but whether what they represent is historically accurate. The primacy of doubt when applied to the study of Scripture resulted in less, not more knowledge regarding the Word of God. The confidence or ‘faith’ of the historical scholars, and of their defenders within the Church, that this method would make the Bible more meaningful in an age dominated by a historical consciousness can in retrospect be seen as rather naïve with regard to the consequence of scepticism upon faith, well articulated in the poem of Thomas Hardy:

Since Reverend doctors now declare/That clerks and people must prepare
To doubt if Adam ever were;/To hold the flood a local scare;
-Since thus they hint, nor turn a hair,/ All churchgoing will I forswear,
And sit on Sundays in my chair,/ And read that moderate man Voltaire.\(^{187}\)

The challenge of the historical sciences affects even conservative attempts to shield the Bible from the effects of higher criticism once the basic evidence of the textual sciences are admitted. As we have no uniform \textit{textus receptus} those who wish a literally inerrant text have been forced to locate inerrancy in the so-called autographs, the actual parchments written by the apostles and prophets. Yet such a solution is problematic. As Francis Watson puts it: ‘It is not much comfort to be told that there was once a stable text with a stable meaning.’\(^{188}\) The value of declaring the Scriptures inerrant lies in the desire to have a trustworthy source of revelation from God. To claim it for the autographs may justify a belief in God’s ability to inspire without error but this belief has little practical application if all we possess are less dependable copies. If God can inspire the authors inerrantly would he not also inspire the translators and copiers throughout history? To allow otherwise is to encourage a real ambivalence about the relevance of history.

There has been some hope that an appreciation of the historical witness of Scripture as a


whole, rather than as mere parts scattered throughout history, would revitalize the place of Scripture as the Word of God in the Church. Yet a narrative approach to Scripture like that of Hans Frei or Gerhard von Rad, while it may seek to read the Scriptures as a totality beyond the individual historical authors, still is unclear whether it is intent on reading them as divine scriptures. When von Rad says of the Deuteronomic history:

> For our historical and critical understanding, stories such as these have from the very start only an indirect relationship with historical reality, while their relation to what was believed by Israel is more direct.\(^{189}\)

it is legitimate to ask whether he believes such an interpretation to be true. Did God really reveal himself and act in their history? This is the Jews’ story. But seeing it merely in its narrative context does not tell us whether we should choose to accept the meaning for ourselves. The reason for doing that can only be from a source outside the text. Thus Francis Watson criticizes Hans Frei for having ‘no conceptuality available for making [the] assertion’ that the resurrection narrative has an inherent truthfulness, for Frei has been treating the Gospel as a realistic *story*, not real *history*.\(^{190}\)

Seeing Scripture only as the religious understanding of a people raises the question who that people are and who they need to be. Thus the fragmentation of biblical criticism is extended to the Church and its theology. In much the same way as critical scholarship and source and redaction criticism has given us not just Pauline, Petrine and Johannine theology but the theology of Q, M, L, Deutero-Isaiah, Trito Isaiah, J, E, D, P, and much more, so has modern theology given us an expanding plethora of personal theologies: Liberation theology, Black theology, Feminist theology, and nowadays Queer theology. Volume 56 2002 of the Union Seminary Quarterly Review has articles arranged under the subheading *Encountering Texts, Encountering Communities: A Symposium on African and Asian American Engagements with the Bible*. When everyone gets to tell his or her story it invites the question why anyone else would need to or want to listen.

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189 Ibid, p. 110
Yet what in many ways represents the postmodern collapse of faith in the existence of anything like a universal reason, or in finding a scientific or historical meaning in scriptural texts, may also signal the beginning of a turnaround. Now that it is recognized more and more that all history is agenda driven, the myth of the pure objectivity of critical historical scholarship may be crumbling. The willingness of biblical scholars like N. T. Wright and Francis Watson to breach the wall of separation between biblical scholarship and theology represents such a trend and an implicit acknowledgement that modern criticism has reached the end of its very finite well and come up dry.

The modern era has excelled in showing the historical nature of the scriptural texts. Yet it has been able to show little else. What is glaringly missing is what God is saying in these texts, rather than what people in history have thought about him. This requires not an advance in the tools of historical science but a theological defence of how God is seen, despite the dictum of Lessing, through such a historical medium, as Scripture clearly is understood to be. What is the meaning and theological purpose of history?

II. HISTORICAL THOUGHT IN THE MODERN ERA

While the hallmark of the Renaissance and the consequent Reformation was an awakening of historical consciousness the ideas concerning the meaning of history were little developed from the time of Augustine’s *City of God*. It was not until the last couple of centuries that serious philosophical thought was given to the subject of history itself. The nineteenth century was especially vibrant in this regard. Concepts of history and historical development were articulated and imbued with evolutionary dynamism, whether it was the evolution of religious feeling proposed by Schleiermacher or Hegel’s dialectical evolution of the world spirit. The ideas about history being explored were perfectly in step with the spirit of the age, the spirit of progressive evolution, canonized by Darwin’s theories of biological evolution. Yet, as C.S. Lewis pointed out, Darwinism was not the cause of these evolutionary
philosophies, as they existed long before any scientific theories.\textsuperscript{191} It is arguable whether Darwin’s theory would have gained wide acceptance, given what even he recognized as the deficiency of physical evidence, were it not for the general belief in organic progressive development first articulated in philosophy and theology. This relationship in which philosophy affects the direction of science would soon be reversed to the detriment of those early philosophies of progress. The methodologies of the physical sciences revealed the flaws in any attempt to find meaning and purpose in history, for much nineteenth century thought on history was still working on Christian foundations. Schleiermacher and Hegel were essentially continuing amillennial views of progress shorn of orthodox doctrine, views driven not by science but by their theological preconceptions.

Theologies which presupposed purpose and direction as theirs did were at odds with the methodology of evolutionary science. For, despite the way evolution is broadly sold to the wider public with talk of Nature ‘doing’ this or that or of life ‘finding a way’ (language which better captivates the minds of people still working with nineteenth century semi-Christian mind sets), and despite the personal beliefs of many of those who first accepted Darwinism (perhaps including the personal beliefs of Darwin himself), the science of evolutionary biology does not allow for such meanings to be drawn. The meta-narrative of Evolution holds to a non-teleological process of change and is uncontrolled by the past; there is no design and therefore no direction or limits to the process, at least none that can be observed, by definition. All that the science can do is observe the process and describe how it happens. That is its methodology, and once that science, which appears now as the queen of all sciences by virtue of its seeming ability to answer questions previously answered by philosophy and theology, broke free from any lingering teleological interpretations and clearly established the dominance of its non-teleological methodology, this methodology began to be the norm for all unbiased scientific study, hiding its own preconception that a methodology for one line of study is applicable to all. The science of history, it was assumed,

in order to be truly scientific, must follow the same rules of evidence and avoid imposing conclusions from outside and reading into the study of history meanings independently held, as the search for the historical Jesus was seen to be guilty of doing by imposing the historian’s modern sensibility upon the text’s representation of Jesus.

III. SETTING THE STAGE: TROELTSCH

A formative example of so-called ‘modern historical thinking’ is that of Ernst Troeltsch, who tried to move beyond both the orthodox view of history and revelation and also the Enlightenment view upon which the Romantic concepts of Schleiermacher and Hegel were dependent. Though the latter embraced the historico-critical approach to Scripture without which no truly scientific understanding could supposedly be achieved, they still interpreted historical data through a false unity and rationality making it, especially in the case of Hegel, an apologetic for their theology.\(^{192}\) In Troeltsch’s view:

> The modern idea of history...knows no concept of a universal principle that embodies a law governing the successive generation of individual historical realities. It knows no basis which would allow all phenomena to be grasped immanently by means of an all-inclusive principle.\(^{193}\)

Troeltsch believed that the study of history must be freed not only from doctrine but from all attempts to derive absolute meaning from it. He then proceeded to defend the absoluteness of Christianity by redefining the absolute into a relative absolute.

Troeltsch identified three marks of the modern historical method; Criticism, Analogy and Correlation.\(^{194}\) The three are interrelated and interdependent. Criticism meant more than that the historian utilized historical criticism to study scripture as well as biblical and ecclesiastical tradition. It meant that he was open to whatever conclusions resulted from that study. There was to be no loyalty to received interpretations, no canonical understandings, no

\(^{192}\) The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religion, London: S.C.M. Press, 1972, p. 49
\(^{193}\) Ibid, p. 64
sacred texts. The claim of criticism was absolute, yet historical study through such criticism could never claim to reach absolute certainty. Only relative certainty could be expected. Thus all dogmatic purposes were ruled out of modern history. As the Bible was to be studied like any other book so Christianity was to be treated like any other historical and religious phenomenon. This is the correlative nature of history; all historical data are related in a continuum of causal relationships. Thus Christianity is explained by its relationship to those religions which preceded it and the forces surrounding it. Moreover, as there is one common humanity, an "essential uniformity of human nature", any one religion is but one manifestation of the history of human religion and so can and must be compared to other religions.

The central premise upon which all of Troeltsch’s modern historical method rests and which governs its direction is his second mark, that of analogy. This posits that all historical phenomena must be analogous to what we see happening before us. Here Troeltsch is following the direction of David Hume, ruling out *a priori* any supernatural or miraculous events. A historical event is one that can be established as reasonably having happened. Miracles involving supernatural causation allow for no way to establish credibility and create dual realms of history, one which allows for miracles (religion) and one which does not (secular history). This duality flows from a conception of a duality within God whereby he is not only ‘part of the nexus of interrelated forces continually affecting one another’ but ‘is also capable of extraordinary activities which break through and abrogate the ordinary operation of the system’. Such conceptual dualities are essential for the dogmatic method and have no place in modern history according to Troeltsch.

Given his essentially deistic criteria for historical knowledge Troeltsch can give an assessment of Christianity only as an example of religious philosophy. In the study of the history of religions all religions are equal in being attempts to reach what he calls ‘the perfect

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195 Ibid, p. 25
196 Ibid, p. 23
self-comprehension of the idea that strives for complete clarity, the self-realization of God in the human consciousness. Christianity can be judged to have a relative absoluteness because when compared with all other known religions it best attains this divine self-realization.

Though Jesus often clearly goes beyond any relativity in his absolute claim to authority over the truth Troeltsch says that this is a natural factor in the beginning of religious movements. The founder of a religion he believes to be possessed by a naïve absoluteness which is a natural expression of the religious idea given the primitive milieu in which that religion comes into being. The essence of the religion is the religious idea and the attitude of the founder which expresses it. In this Troeltsch is very close to Schleiermacher’s evaluation of Jesus’ function and also anticipates Bultmann’s kerygmatic theology. Only when the followers or the founder himself begins to compare his message with other religions is the naïve absoluteness identified with specific events or doctrines to make it absolute. This is the point in which the religion becomes as much or more about the messenger than about the pure message. What becomes important is not just the religious idea but the specific way it is told, specifically identifying the absoluteness of the truth of Christianity with the person of Jesus himself (including a specific understanding of his person) as well as with miraculous events which must be believed. Troeltsch calls this type of absoluteness artificial because it is dependent on belief in things which are neither immediately experienced by the believer, as is the case with naïve or natural absoluteness, nor can be demonstrated by scientific method. It is the purpose of the science of modern history to strip away the artificial claims to absolute truth to reveal the essential religious expressions and not to try to replace the artificial dogmatic claims to absolute truth with evolutionary philosophical claims which pretend to see the full meaning of all historical experience.

197 The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religion, p. 55
198 Troeltsch does not deny the possibility that Christianity might have been surpassed in a distant past or that it might be surpassed in the future.
199 The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religion, pp. 145-6
200 Ibid, p. 158
In considering how Troeltsch’s radical historicism deals with the problem of the relationship of divine revelation to human history we see that the problem disappears for Troeltsch because he does not allow for divine revelation at all, at least in any special sense. For him all revelation is general and universal and what we call special revelation is simply various examples of human inspiration according to the secular understanding whereby poets and philosophers are ‘inspired’. There is no need to be concerned with continuity of truth respecting the Old and New Testaments and the various Christological expressions in the New for all religious thought is continuous in its inter-connectivity with all human history. No greater continuity is to be expected or desired. History in Troeltsch’s hands, and in the practice of the modern historical method as he succinctly describes it, becomes exactly what the Greek philosophers perceived it to be; a study of interest to some but with no bearing upon ultimate truth. The Greeks sought Truth elsewhere, in philosophy, and in the Christian era in the Church, in the Faith. In a way, Troeltsch is the very opposite of the allegorizing Origen while at the same time sharing his estimation of the truth that can be gotten from history. While for Origen allegory was the necessary tool when history seemed to get in the way or to distract from the faith, for Troeltsch history is all there is; both philosophy and dogmatic faith are the distractions. His relatively atheistic historicism is the very apotheosis of what the Fathers feared about the Antiochene historical literal method; it dissolved doctrine from Scripture and was an enemy of the Faith, something Troeltsch readily admitted.201

IV. BULTMANN'S EXISTENSIAL, NON-HISTORICAL KERYGMA

One who is a prime example of a modern twin to Origen is Rudolf Bultmann. He opposed mere historicism, concerned only with historical process, and instead moved back in the direction of the earlier philosophical explanation of Christianity’s absoluteness in its message. Yet he is also in many ways a continuation of Troeltsch’s radical historical criticism,

201 ‘On Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology’, p. 16
applying it in a comprehensive hermeneutic. Bultmann accepts in practice Troeltsch’s basic rules for deciding what is historical fact. He accepts the indispensability of historical criticism; ‘a given with modern thinking as it has come to us through our history’, and he clearly and emphatically rejects any beliefs posited upon the introduction of the supernatural. Whatever cannot be established by historical method is not to be believed by the modern man. This anti-supernaturalism, especially as put forward in his essay on Demythologizing, is as dogmatic in the self-evidence of its superiority as the most chauvinistic religious tract:

Experience and control of the world have developed to such an extent through science and technology that no one can or does seriously maintain the New Testament world picture.

In are electricity and radios, out are angels and miracles. It is on the basis of this that all supernatural elements, called myths, must be eliminated from the interpretation of the texts. To do this without merely denying the validity of the individual texts he employs existential philosophy to reinterpret them. But it is clear that his philosophy does not drive his rejection of the supernatural, for he offers no argument why an existential theology cannot believe in something that conflicts with the modern world view. The closest he comes to this is to say that belief in such a thing, the supernatural, must not be required because the myth would obscure the true nature of the call to decision, which is the true message, or Kerygma, of the New Testament. Yet this would not account for a different treatment of the two events of the crucifixion and the resurrection; the first of which is called a historical event while the second an unhistorical myth. It is his critical historical world view which rejects the literal resurrection while it is his existentialism that either requires or simply allows him to reinterpret it as true non-historically and non-factual.

As a disciple of the critical method Bultmann is a modern historian critically examining

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203 Ibid. A crucial flaw in Bultmann’s thesis here is that he does not seem to know what people are really like. He assumes no one can utilize thoughts from one system while operating under the influence of another contrary system. Yet people are much more complex, and yet simple, than he understands. We can and usually do maintain language of the earth and stars based upon a Ptolemaic conception, because that is how things simply appear and it is more comfortable, even while we firmly hold to the Copernican understanding.
Scripture for evidence of its composition and evolution, dividing the message of Jesus from Johannine, Petrine and Pauline theology. While he does emphasize that Christianity is a historical religion in that it is founded upon the historical person of Jesus, and that the Church, which was established by faith in Jesus as God’s salvation for the world, is a historical body, yet as a theologian Bultmann is not interested in history, nor does he think the message of the New Testament is so interested either. History in itself is not about meaning:

Today we cannot claim to know the end and the goal of history. Therefore the question of meaning in history has become meaningless.\textsuperscript{204}

The “meaning” of the New Testament must be beyond history. It is about what is timelessly present to us; the call of God to be saved. What was once identified with specific historical events, the historical life and death of Jesus, can now be separated from them because we cannot experience these events as the first Christians did.\textsuperscript{205} What we experience is not the history of Jesus but the message of Jesus. But it doesn’t even really matter if Jesus truly preached it:

By the tradition Jesus is named as the bearer of the message; according to overwhelming probability he really was. Should it prove otherwise, that does not change in any way what is said in the record. Whoever prefers to put the name of ‘Jesus’ always in quotation marks and let it stand as an abbreviation for the historical phenomenon with which we are concerned, is free to do so.\textsuperscript{206}

What is important is not what really happened in the sense of what an eye witness to an event would see. Rather it is what God reveals to us through the account of the event. For the early Church that account was mythologically dressed, but as this dressing no longer fits us we may dispense with all dressing and hear the pure existential message. When Bultmann speaks of the event of salvation he is not thinking of anything that happened two thousand years ago in Palestine. The event of salvation is whenever we hear the message. It is an event that is historical, because we receive it in our present time, the NOW of decision. But it is also eternal and eschatological: ‘God’s act in Christ continues to take place’\textsuperscript{207} and:

\textsuperscript{204} \textit{History and Eschatology}, Edinburgh: The University Press, 1957, p. 120
\textsuperscript{205} \textit{The New Testament & Mythology}, p. 36
\textsuperscript{206} \textit{Jesus and the Word}, London: Collins, 1958, p. 14
\textsuperscript{207} \textit{The New Testament & Mythology} p. 54
Jesus Christ is the eschatological event not as established fact of past time but as repeatedly present, as addressing you and me here and now in preaching.\textsuperscript{208}

Breaking from a historical message for an atemporal one also means breaking from the Old Testament. It is the rootedness of the Old Testament to the history of Israel that makes it unsuitable for an existential demythologizing interpretation. Critical science requires that it be read according to its original intention, which cannot include prophecy of the New.\textsuperscript{209} Though much of the prophetic writings may be akin to the New Testament message their context is all related to the history of one people who do not include us. And it is a history of a different salvation than that which is proclaimed in Christ. Thus, it is not a history of revelation for us. For Bultmann the New Testament marks a radical break where ‘history has come to an end’ and the Old Testament is ‘a closed chapter’ for the Church.\textsuperscript{210} The Old stands as Law against the Grace of the New. The relevance the Old Testament has for Christianity is in its historical connection, part of our cultural heritage, different from Gentile histories in degree only, not in kind: ‘Jerusalem is not a holier city for us than Athens or Rome’.\textsuperscript{211} The Old Testament is but one pre-understanding of the Gospel which:

Can emerge just as well within other historical embodiments of the divine Law. Indeed, it is found wherever a man knows himself to be bound and limited by the concrete or general moral demands arising out of his relationship to his fellow man which he must acknowledge to his conscience.\textsuperscript{212}

We can make use of it to see indirectly God’s Word because it contains the ‘correlation of Law and Gospel’ which can prepare us to hear the radical call to obedience of the New testament, if we need it. But Bultmann makes clear that it is not necessary.

Though Bultmann dismisses the idea of allegory to harmonize The Old Testament with the New, it seems he does this more because he has already decided against the Old Testament

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\textsuperscript{208} History and Eschatology, Edinburgh: The University Press, 1957, pp. 151-2
\textsuperscript{210} Ibid, p. 31
\textsuperscript{211} Ibid, p. 32
\textsuperscript{212} Ibid, p. 17
\end{flushright}
rather than because of any philosophical aversion to allegory, for there is little to distinguish allegory from his practice of demythologizing. Both ignore the plain literal sense of the text in favour of a meaning driven by a philosophy imposed upon it. Neither are interested in an interpretation that points to historical events but rather look for meanings directed toward the individual and his inner spiritual life. Origen allegorized to see beyond silly anthropomorphisms and meaningless historical details while Bultmann demythologized to see beyond tales of miracles and claims of the authority of historical events. Bultmann is essentially a modern anti-supernaturalist allegorizer. He is reading his existentialism into the text no less than Origen is reading in his Christian Neoplatonism. Origen’s identifying the three jars of water at the wedding in Cana with the three-fold meaning in Scripture is no more forced and no less credible than Bultmann’s claim that John intended verse, 20:29, of his Gospel to be a warning ‘against taking the Easter-stories for more than they are able to be: signs and pictures of the Easter faith—or, perhaps still better, confessions of faith in it’. In fact Origen’s is perhaps more credible because such allegorical symbolism was used by people when Scripture was written whereas there is little evidence that anyone in that period told stories the way Bultmann proposes that they did.

Another similarity that Bultmann shares with Origen is the forced nature of the meanings he rejects in the texts. He proposes strawmen interpretations involving a strained literalism displayed by no educated Patristic or Reformation writer, all of who would have believed the so-called mythology of the New Testament. Moreover, he exaggerates contradictions and discontinuity by polarizing differences in expressions and perspectives. Is it really a contradiction to say that the Law came from God and also through angels? How on earth (literally) does Bultmann imagine that the God who is not part of creation would interact with creation except through mediating agents, something primitive philosophers well understood? Bultmann rigidly links the supernatural with the specific physical world views with which an event is first reported; if we can’t believe in a three tiered universe then he

214 The New Testament & Mythology, p. 11
assumes we can’t believe the Ascension at all. There is no desire to look for any essential harmony or consistency because he has in mind a harmony based upon a naturalistic existential philosophy, just as Origen was at times uninterested in defending the literal historical sense because he could achieve greater unity through allegory.

However, there are two important differences between Origen’s allegorizing and Bultmann’s demythologizing. Firstly, Origen presumes that the spiritual sense revealed through allegory was intended by the authors but hidden from the Jews and others too ‘fleshly’ in their understanding. The literal historical element existed in order to hide truths from the unspiritual, or at least to give them something useful for their state until they were more enlightened. Bultmann’s concept of myth presumes that the mythical dressing of the New Testament kerygma was an unintentional or unconscious act of the biblical writers because that is how they perceived things, but there was no distinction between spiritual and unspiritual when it came to understanding the message. The biblical writers wrote in a mythic medium, and those who also lived with that world view would understand and be able to see through to the inner reality of the myths, in just the same way as someone wearing red coloured spectacles filters out the redness of a red-hued picture. There was no intent of the authors to hide the meaning. Mythology was part of their psychological language. But we no longer speak that language. We are like those red-spectacle wearers who have now taken them off; the picture ‘looks’ too red now and must have the red hue removed to see the true picture. Bultmann takes for granted the universality of historical development whereas Origen is much more limited in his application of development to the nature or purpose of the Scriptures.

The second important distinction is that, while Origen allegorizes freely through his faith, he maintains a core historical element in his faith which is consistent with the Church’s historical faith: the virgin birth, miraculous ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The Christian philosophy which Origen reads into the text through allegory is one
formed by a historical faith centred on key historical events understood as having happened just as the Church proclaims them in its creeds. Bultmann, on the other hand, reads into the text his existential philosophy of the faith which bears very little resemblance to the Church’s ancient proclamation of the Christian message. While Origen would never deny the reality of the resurrection and while even his eternal spiritual realities are dependent on certain historical events actually having occurred, this is not so with Bultmann. He has imported as a lens upon the New Testament a philosophy which is independent of every point of the Church’s affirmation of our salvation enacted in history. What Bultmann claims can be done with the Old Testament, using it as a mirror for our faith, he is in fact also doing with the New. It is impossible to see where in Scripture or in the preaching of the first sixteen centuries of the Church Bultmann got his idea of Christian faith. He is more like a gnostic allegorizing from pure heresy than he is like Origen who, despite his idea of the pre-existence of souls and other unorthodox elements, is still clearly Christian. The first difference reveals Bultmann’s greater attention to history than Origen, the second reveals his lesser interest in historical Christianity.

Troeltsch and Bultmann represent the twin dangers of modern thinking on history and religious truth, Troeltsch holding history supreme and making concepts of truth relatively meaningless and Bultmann likewise separating truth from history, making history and historic faith irrelevant. We have yet to see a modern attempt to maintain the relevance of history together with loyalty to the faith historically received and to the essential unity of the two Testaments.

**V. BARTH’S HISTORICAL WORD**

If one identifying mark of both Bultmann and Troeltsch is an Enlightenment bias against special divine revelation based upon a scepticism regarding whether God really speaks in human history, quite the opposite is characteristic of Karl Barth. For him nothing is more important than the recognition that God *has* spoken in history and that his Word is
encountered in Scripture. Though he does not identify Scripture itself as the Word of God, it is the authoritative witness to God’s speaking in history. Historicality is part of the essential message of Scripture. It proclaims the ‘God who acts and who reveals Himself in history’. This revelation must be in historical form because it points to events outside ourselves. This is a result of Barth’s great ‘Nein!’ against culture revealing to us anything about God, which is a specific repudiation of the authority or value of general revelation. If revelation is not historical then it would be a revelation received as part of humanity’s self-reflection, as is the case with all philosophy. But only God can reveal God, according to Barth, and God’s revelation of himself must be received as something from outside, and this will be in historical or temporal form which is the natural and only form of human existence:

According to Scripture there are no timeless truths, but all truths according to Scripture are specific acts of God in which he reveals Himself; acts which as such have an eternal character embracing all times, but also a concretely temporal character.

The characterizing of much of the biblical witness as myth, as Bultmann does, Barth completely rejects. He does not reject the distinction between historical and unhistorical, but this is only a distinction between types of events, not between events and non-events. Secular history can only be concerned with actions between men, not between God and men. History in this secular sense might be akin to a photographic record of an event. It will not convey the sound, which would not mean that sounds were not part of the event. It is a matter of having the capacity to observe them and report on them. As human beings we are reasonably able to give account for actions that human beings do, and to judge their probability. But to give an account for the actions of God with us would require abilities and a perspective that only God possesses. It is natural therefore that accounts such as these would differ somewhat from accounts in which the players are only human, and this difference would be especially great when the events are naturally beyond human remembrance or on a level above our natural comprehension. Prophetic dreams, eschatological visions and the Creation account fall clearly into this category. Barth separates them from pure historical accounts by calling them

215 Church Dogmatics, III.1, p. 49
216 Ibid, p. 60
legends or sagas, but never myths. Myth for Barth is different from legend and saga in that the latter ‘at least mean history’ whereas myth:

Means the exposition—brought forward in narrative form, but claiming to be true in itself irrespective of human time and place—of certain basic relationships of human existence, which always exist everywhere, in connections with their own origins and conditions in the natural and historical cosmos, or in the Godhead, reduced to narrative form on the supposition that man has knowledge of all these things and can expound them one way or the other, that he controls them, that in the last resort they are his own things.217

To relegate any biblical account to myth would mean that it was an example of man interpreting his own existence and/or relationship with God and the universe, and it would no longer be revelation, God’s truth, but philosophy, human wisdom. Even if it presumed to be a primitive myth ingrained deep in our consciousness so that it emerges as a form of Platonic anamnesis it would still only be the knowledge attainable to a creature. It could not bridge the gap to tell us anything of the Creator. For Barth, guarding the historicity of Scripture is linked to guarding its divinity: ‘The Bible lays such extraordinary weight upon the historicity of the revelation it recounts, because it does not mean a creation of man’.218

The historicity of the Bible lies in its claim to have received revelation from God, revelation given to specific people at specific times in history: the vision of God received by Isaiah ‘during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah’ (Is. 1:1) or that received by John ‘on the island of Patmos’ (Rev. 1:9) or simply the witness of those who saw the full revelation of God in the Incarnation of the Word, Jesus. The authority of prophets and apostles is their claim as witnesses to God’s revelation. Even the choice of Matthias to succeed Judas was not on the basis of his belief in the Resurrection but on his having been a witness to Christ on earth. As such the biblical witnesses are rooted in their historicality conforming the character of their witness to the historical context. Thus it is true historicity, not a pretence as Origen’s allegorizing would make it. Yet as the written witness to God’s revelation Scripture in one way rises above the limitations of man’s history, for the revelation

217 Church Dogmatics, I.1, p. 376
218 Ibid, p. 378
given in one time and place has authority over all time. As the Word written it comes as close as anything can in this world to the eternal character of God’s Word because the written Word is less subject to the vicissitudes of history and sin. For Barth this was necessary if it was to be a living witness to and over the Church:

It is upon the written nature of the canon, upon its character as *scriptura sacra*, that its autonomy and independence hang, and therefore its free power towards the Church, and therefore the living nature of the succession.\(^{219}\)

Though Scripture is part of the Church’s apostolic tradition it stands apart from all other tradition and confronts the Church’s interpretation, reinterpretation and even misinterpretation with its otherness and independence as an unchanging text. It reminds the Church that she is not the Lord and does not speak for him on her own authority. Unwritten tradition is incapable of this task because in it ‘the Church is not addressed, but is engaged in a dialogue with herself’.\(^{220}\) As the purpose of Scripture’s historicity was to assure the Church that it was God speaking and not merely humanity’s self-reflection, so neither could Scripture be reduced to its mere historicity for that would make it not the subject which is *heard* by the Church but an object, albeit a historical one, which is *studied* by the Church. The authority of Scripture as the Word of God must always, for Barth, be in what it says, never in what the Church understands it to mean:

All exegesis may become predominantly an imposition instead of an exposition and to that extant deteriorate into a dialogue of the Church with herself. And we shall not banish this danger, but only really begin to conjure it up and render it acute, by making right exposition depend upon the verdict of an ultimately decisive Church teaching office, or on the verdict of a historical and critical science, comporting itself with an equal authority.\(^{221}\)

It is clear that for Barth Scripture is something that comes *through* history but is not describable solely *by* history. His firm rejection of any ability of culture to speak of God on its own ability means that nothing that is merely historical in nature (including not just secular culture and science but the Church as well) can be invested with autonomous

\(^{219}\) Ibid, p. 117  
\(^{220}\) Ibid, p. 118  
\(^{221}\) Ibid, p. 119
authority to speak for God. Scripture surpasses all human authorities and all historical limitations because it is historical and also more than historical:

The distinction between Head and body and His superiority to her is correctly expressed in the fact that over against proclamation in the Church there stands an entity extremely like it as a phenomenon, temporal like it, yet different from it, and in order superior to it. This entity is Holy Scripture. It is the concrete form of the reason why the recollection upon the basis of which we expect God’s revelation cannot be recollection of a timeless essence of the Church herself. It is a bolt here actually thrust against the Platonic anamnesis. ²²²

The fact that in what is outwardly a set of historical writings written by various men throughout a certain period of time we are confronted by the Word of the eternal God addressing us directly means that Scripture cannot be subordinated to any other temporal and historical institution or science. No merely historical hermeneutic can adequately comprehend the Word of God in Scripture. Yet neither can any hermeneutic that rises beyond and dispenses with history. Barth will not take Scripture out of history and make it a purely divine instrument like the tablets given to Moses, written by the hand of God, or like the Quran which, though believed to have been dictated to Muhammad in a specific time and place by the Archangel Gabriel, is essentially thought to issue directly from the mind of Allah and be almost as eternal as he. There is no denying the historical nature, ‘no point in ignoring the writtenness of Holy Writ for the sake of its holiness, its humanity for the sake of its divinity’. ²²³

The two natures are not in conflict but are interdependent and symbiotic; the human/historical depending upon the divine for its identity as God’s Word and the divine depending upon the human/historical for its existence in the created order. It is in the human and historical word that we encounter the divine Word and nowhere else. The model for this is the Incarnation. As Christ is both God and man, and could not be our Saviour if he were only one and not the other, so is Scripture both human and divine:

In its own way and degree it is very God and very man, i.e., a witness of revelation

²²² Ibid, p. 113
²²³ Church Dogmatics, I. 2, p. 463
which itself belongs to revelation, and historically a very human literary document.224

This runs counter to natural philosophical ideas just as does Chalcedonian Christology. Whereas Arianism and Docetism both hold that God cannot become man without diminishing his divinity, so that Jesus must then be something less than God, so does the corresponding philosophical attitude toward history and revelation engender the belief that the Word of God cannot enter history in the form of human thought and language without diluting the purity of the Word’s divinity and truth. The Greek historians held equally with Troeltsch that truth received through history can have only a relative absoluteness. As orthodox Christology claims that Christ’s true manhood does not in any way diminish his divinity so also Barth claims this is the case with Scripture:

And that divine self-Word does not cease to be itself because it lets itself be served by human language. But because it permits this service on its part, It is itself this human language, and because this human language serves It, It is itself the divine self-Word.225

Yet the analogy of Christology is also useful in illuminating a weakness in Barth’s doctrine of Scripture and his use for history. While he is adamant that the human limitations of biblical authors must not be ignored ‘if we are not to be guilty of Docetism’, it is legitimate to ask whether he has not slipped too much toward a Monophysite view of Scripture in the same way that he has, in the opinion of some, operated with a practically Monophysite Christology. As he can often seem so focused on the divine Christ that he shows little interest in the historic Jesus, so he often shows little interest in the value of the historical written word in Scripture once it has done its duty and brought us to the divine Word.

Moreover, the link between reading the written word and encountering the divine Word seems explicitly independent of historically developed processes and reasoning. Though we encounter God’s revelation in Scripture alone, that encounter is:

A miracle which we cannot presuppose. We can remember it. We can wait for it. But we cannot set it up like one chessman with others, which we can ‘move’ at the right

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224 Ibid, p. 501
225 Church Dogmatics, I.1, p. 57
Scripture is not itself, as human writing, the Word of God, but it becomes the Word of God ‘as an event’ when we encounter God’s revelation in it. This encounter is controlled, not by us, but by God. Barth’s great nein against the culture knowing anything of God is so strong that he will not admit created human reason, temporal and fallible, to have any control in recognizing God’s Word, even if it is only the ability to grasp and retain knowledge given by God and so to build an objective understanding which can then be applied to Scripture. Such propositional revelation he rejects as it would draw attention away from Christ and dissuade us from waiting for God’s Word to break into our understanding, which is the true act of revelation. Scripture is only a witness to the reality of that revelation:

If it tries to be more than witness, to be direct impartation, will it not keep us from the best, the one real thing, which God intends to tell us and give us and which we ourselves need?\textsuperscript{227}

If the ‘best’ is understood to be our encounter with revelatory power of the divine Word within Scripture Barth seems to be saying that a desire to find truth in the objective meaning of written words would be a distraction from this best. This is an example of making the best the enemy of the good. The revelatory nature of the human element of Scripture need not be opposed to its divine nature. By doing so Barth is letting the humanity be swallowed up or overshadowed by the divinity of Scripture in a Monophysite fashion, and his argument is ironically very much like Bultmann’s rejection of a focus on supernatural events in Scripture because that would distract us from the challenge of the Kerygma. When Barth writes:

\begin{quote}
The men whom we hear as witnesses speak as fallible, erring men like ourselves. What they say, and what we read as their word, can of itself lay claim to be the Word of God, but never sustain that claim.\textsuperscript{228}
\end{quote}

he is clearly making the point that it is an act of faith to recognize the writings of the Apostles as sacred scripture, as no voice from the clouds demands that we believe when we open the Bible. Yet it is legitimate to ask whether he does not make this act of faith so personal and

\begin{footnotes}
\item[226] \textit{Church Dogmatics}, I. 2, p. 507
\item[227] Ibid
\item[228] Ibid
\end{footnotes}
immanent that it divorces the believer from the Church, and so crucial to any understanding that it makes natural human reason functionally useless, even after it accepts as true what is written, for it is ‘naturally’ incapable of understanding what it means.

Barth’s criticism of modern biblical criticism is not that it treats the canonical writings as fallible, like all other human literature, but that historical and literary criticism seek the truth of God not within Scripture but in a scientific examination of it as a source:

If we imagine that we shall find the Word of God in a history which can be studied on historico-literary lines, the sources of which we believe we have in the Bible, we escape the Docetism of our forefathers, who tried to close their eyes to the humanity of the Bible, only to fall the more heavily into a complementary Ebionitism.²²⁹

Such an ‘Ebionite’ attitude toward Scripture focusing only on its human origins denies its divine nature. For Barth, the focus must be on what God is saying through Scripture, but without denying the human limitations of the texts and the authors who wrote them: ‘Not only part but all that they say is historically related and conditioned’.²³⁰ Such historical conditioning means that a ‘capacity for error’ is part of Scripture’s humanity, it’s ‘vulnerability’. Yet so insistent is Barth that the humanity of Scripture be recognized that he does not limit its capacity for error to peripheral mundane matters of human history and science:

For within certain limits and therefore relatively they are all vulnerable and therefore capable of error even in respect of religion and theology.²³¹

What these limits are Barth does not make clear, though it is probably a dogmatic rather than a secular, scientific or literary, standard by which they are judged. Based upon the recognition of these human limitations he claims that:

Many parts, especially of the Old Testament cannot be accepted as religious and theological literature, but only as documents of secular legislation and history and practical wisdom and poetry, although the Synagogue and later the Church claimed to find in them witness of revelation.²³²

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²²⁹ Ibid, p. 526
²³⁰ Ibid, p. 509
²³¹ Ibid, p. 510
²³² Ibid, p. 509
Such human fallibility does not for Barth affect the divine infallibility of the Word of God because he has conceived a theological fire wall, in a Nestorian fashion, between the divinity and the humanity of Scripture. They are united only in the will of God and not according to anything in the human and historical nature of Scripture. Though God reveals his truth in historical witnesses, he does not do so in conformity to the process of history, that is; the historical and fallibly human writings can tell us nothing about how and when God’s revelation is encountered in human words. Revelation must be such a completely sovereign act of God that it cannot be limited or controlled by natural processes. Like other aspects of Reformed theology, such as the Justice of God which ultimately does not truly correspond to human concepts of justice, so Barth’s conception of the interrelatedness of the divine and human natures of God’s Word, his conception of its historicality, does not really correspond to the causal relationship of all things in our temporal existence. Thus the humanity of the Word begins to appear a phantom or ephemeral thing. God’s revelation enters into human history without ever becoming a permanent part of it. It is as if the Word’s humanity were like clothes that could be put on and put off again, and changed for other clothes, rather than like the true flesh, bone and blood that becomes a very part of the Word’s being.

The ambivalence of Barth towards the continuing historical relevance of the human origin of Scripture is illuminated in his treatment of the Canon. In deference to the divinity of Scripture he rejects the practice of Luther who ‘parted the robe of Christ’ by setting one part of Scripture against another and of even rejecting some parts, notably James:

The failure to recognize the unity of Scripture involved sooner or later, and inevitable later, a failure to recognize that it is Holy Scripture. For when we have such arbitrary preferences, we do not read even the parts we prefer as Holy Scripture.\textsuperscript{233}

Such a loyalty to the form of Scripture as we have received it in the Canon must proceed from a belief that God has intended that it take the form it has, for the other possible justification, a reliance upon the singular authority of the Church, is one which Barth would

\textsuperscript{233} Ibid, p. 485
not espouse. Yet this affirmation of Providence in the history of the Canon’s formation is at odds with his refusal elsewhere to consider the Canon closed, wherein he lists as one possibility for its expansion the hypothetical discovery of lost epistles of Paul or sayings of Jesus “awaiting us in the sands of Egypt”.  

But such a concession to the Canon’s expansion ignores the criteria by which the various books were accepted or rejected by the Church and which is part of the historical process of the Canon’s formation and so creates a distinct separation of Scripture, and thus Word of God in Scripture, from the People of God to whom and through whom it was given. To include a book found by archaeologists after so many centuries lost to the Church would be as much a revelation coming out of the blue as if it had come direct from heaven itself, unwritten by human hand, for it would be unmediated by human history.

Barth’s historical Word makes history part of the message of revelation, affirming the historical reality of the events and the real humanity of the biblical authors in order to assure that God speaks in our temporal existence to real people like us. Yet because it resists a focus on history as the medium of the message it lacks a stable understanding of the meaningfulness of history with the consequence that the study of it, of Scripture’s human and historical nature, risks either undermining credibility in the divine infallibility and trustworthiness of Scripture or driving the faithful to a flight from the humanity of the Word, mediated by our corporate history, and to cling solely upon its divinity through a largely non-historical existential encounter with the Word now. As Augustine held that we escape Time and enter into God’s Eternity so does Barth seem to hold that God enters into history to reveal himself to us only that we then escape the bonds of history in receiving his revelation. Though he means to affirm God’s freedom from human limitations he does so by freeing us

234 Ibid, p. 478
235 This is akin to the practice of Historical Criticism which, while quite the opposite of ignoring the role of the religious community, instead imagines a people both mendacious and gullible as to create and accept religious forgeries without noting the difference, the ’creation’ of the book of Deuteronomy in the time of Ezra being an example, something very hard if not impossible to reconcile with the actual attitudes of both the Jews and early Church toward the Holy Scriptures and the requirements for inclusion.
from the limitations, or guides, of history in our reception of revelation, and it makes us more prone to subjectivity in our reading of Scripture, a noted characteristic of anti-historical allegorizing.

VI. PANNENBERG’S REVELATION OF HISTORY

Like Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg locates revelation within history and makes historicality essential to the message, but whereas Barth made it but one part of the message Pannenberg makes History the very message itself; the medium becomes the message. Pannenberg claims that as God is revealing himself within history and through history it is only as history that God’s revelation can be understood. History is not a necessary but ultimately transcendable characteristic of divine revelation. For Barth it is the doorway which must be acknowledged and traversed but which is not the true destination, which is instead the room beyond. For Pannenberg history is the room itself. Revelation is historical and can only be truly comprehended in its historical process:

All theological questions and answers are meaningful only in the framework of the history which God has with humanity, and through humanity with his whole creation—the history moving toward a future still hidden from the world but already revealed in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{236}

History is not given its meaning by an existential encounter or an act of faith which transcends or bypasses historical awareness:

The events in which God demonstrates his deity are self-evident as they stand within the framework of their own history. It does not require any kind of inspired interpretation to make those events recognizable as revelation.\textsuperscript{237}

Thus the theologian must be also a historian and the historian becomes the true theologian once one accepts the thesis which Pannenberg holds unavoidable that ‘revelation is contained in a historical event of the past and there is no other mode of access to a past event than historical research’.\textsuperscript{238} The events must be such as could be investigated historically because

\textsuperscript{236} Basic Questions in Theology, London: S.C.M. Press, 1971, p. 15
\textsuperscript{237} Revelation as History, London: MacMillan, 1969, p. 155
\textsuperscript{238} Basic Questions, p. 66
only then can certainty of any truth derived from them be achieved:

The proclamation [of the gospel] must assert that the facts are reliable and that you can therefore place your faith, life, and future on them.  

Pannenberg affirms Troeltsch’s claim that no conclusions of absolute meaning or a revelation of universal truth about God can be derived from history until all the data is in and history is finished, stating in his second thesis of his essay, ‘The Doctrine of Revelation’, published in Revelation as History; ‘Revelation is not comprehended completely in the beginning, but at the end of the revealing history’. Pannenberg rejects a concept of revelation that is propositional whereby God reveals individual truths understandable in themselves. God’s revelation is ‘mediated by his action...whether it be God’s action in creation, his historical action as it was intimated in the prophetic word, or the action in Jesus of Nazareth’. Moreover, revelation is a unitary event that ‘can stand only at the end of a sequence of revelatory events’ in which God reveals himself. The full self-revelation of God can thus only be understood at the end of all revelatory history, which is the end of history itself. However, in Jesus the totality of revelation is foreshadowed before the end of history because ‘the end of all events is anticipated in his fate’ (thesis 4). This is so because Jesus fulfils what Pannenberg considers the final and highest religious hopes of the Jews, their apocalyptic anticipation of the day when God’s righteousness and justice will reign on earth. This is a future hope and yet in Jesus we see it proclaimed in his death and resurrection as a present reality as well. Yet the revelatory significance of Jesus cannot be viewed by itself but it is inseparable from the history of Israel. This is a rejection of Schleiermacher’s focus on the religious example of Christ and of Bultmann’s kerygmatic emphasis. For Pannenberg the revelation of Christ is contained in the events of his life and death and events can only be understood in the context of their historical interrelations and correlations. This is again an affirmation of Troeltsch’s principles of modern history.

239 Revelation as History, p. 138
241 Ibid, p. 245
242 Basic Questions, p. 67
Yet that Jesus fully reveals the God of Israel does not yet make him an ultimate revelation of God for all humanity. This occurs when the early faith in Christ as the Jewish messiah incorporates and adapts itself to the universalism of Gentile philosophy. In this way the event of Jesus becomes the historical point where Jewish and Gentile religions achieve their final expressions and merge, thus uniting their histories and creating a universal history. Only from this perspective of universal history ‘could the universal claim of the God of Israel attain binding validity for non-Jews’ and the history of God’s revelation of himself be understood.

At first glance Pannenberg’s claim to see in the events of history, ‘as the historian portrays [them]’, the self-revelation of God seems to have bridged the chasm of the Greeks who would study history to understand many things of mankind and his world but nothing of God or the spiritual realm. Without turning historical events into metaphistorical or prehistorical authoritative stories which fall outside the domain of scientific historical investigation Pannenberg claims to discern in their historical interrelation the history of God’s revelation to the world. In a perfect Chalcedonian fashion divine revelation and human history would be united without conflict or diminution of either side. His insistence that revelation must be based solely upon what God has visibly and demonstratively done is an important corrective to the opposing tendency to link it with personal mystical insight, ecstatic experiences or existential encounters, which Barth’s Word of God theology seems prone to do. This makes revelation less susceptible to the whims of individual fancy, making it open to the rules of evidence and argumentation, and thus democratizing it to an extent but also allowing for authoritative judgements. Yet in many key aspects Pannenberg’s theology of historical revelation is inadequate as an understanding of genuine revelation, and it certainly does little to explain or even defend the revelatory nature of Scripture. Nor, it may be said, is his historical analysis of the ‘acts of God’ really good history from the purely scientific viewpoint that he espouses.

243 Ibid, p. 68
Pannenberg is far too sanguine about the meaning that can be drawn from history when all authoritative interpretations and perspectives are abandoned and only scientific historical study is allowed. The contemporary results of modern historians shows too clearly that the practice is a preference for less meaning and absolutes and more diversity of perspectives. Given the division of opinion regarding the truth of relatively recent world events such as the fall of Communism and source of anti-Western anger in the Islamic world it is hard to conceive that there would be a single historical judgement on the meaning of universal history even if all data were available. Nor is modern history inclined to make judgements about what God is doing in history. That has always been the territory of religious history, and even that discipline has become reticent about coming to any conclusions on divine activity outside that revealed in Scripture, perhaps due to the influence of secular historical methods.

Pannenberg’s universal history seems to be but one perspective of what constitutes world history, and this perspective is as much influenced by a Scriptural world view as it is by any neutral science of history. One clear instance of this is his insistence that the incorporation of Hellenism made the God of Jesus universal. The division of humanity into Jew and Gentile, whereby Hellenism or the Greeks may stand for all non-Jews, is one that fits the Biblical world view and one that makes sense from the perspective of late Greco-Roman civilization, but from a more modern perspective that includes the religious thought of the Chinese, Africans, Aztecs, etc., a universalism limited to the cultures of the Mediterranean basin must be judged to be at the least parochial in its outlook. At its best Pannenberg’s revelation of history may be but one possible, yet rather subjective, evaluation of select historical data. This falls far short of the needs of the historian seeking ‘objective’ history.

Far more significant is the consequence of making the historian the judge of what can be known for the concept of Divine revelation and of any of God’s actions in the world. When Pannenberg claims that ‘in no way is theology... in the position of being able to say what was
actually the case regarding contents which remain opaque to the historian". He limits the category of historical events to those accepted by the historian. It raises the question whether the historian is himself open to seeing God acting in history or whether God’s actions are opaque to him not by their nature but by his decision. As much of the physical sciences today are dominated by a belief that questions of God must be excluded from any consideration of ultimate causation so secular historians are inclined to narrow their focus to those facts fitting their common and natural experience, excluding the supernatural and all concepts of what God might have ‘done’, in accordance with Troeltsch’s rule. How then can any revelation of God be discerned in a science which does not readily, if at all, admit his overt actions? Pannenberg does so by reading historical events as ‘actions’ of God. He clearly believes that that is exactly what the Jews were doing in their faith in God:

The prophets could call Israel to faith in Jahweh’s promises and proclaim his prophecy because Israel had experienced the dependability of their God in the course of a long history.

However, it is logically only possible to see the actions of God in history if you can also see where he does not act, so as to know the difference. If God can be seen in everything to an equal degree then for all intents and purposes he cannot be seen in anything. Somewhere, sometime, Israel had to receive revelation through a unique event and an authoritative interpretation, a prophetic word corresponding with the event that told them that that event was from God in a way unlike all other events, and upon that basis it is then possible to conceive that future normal historical events would be interpreted in the light of that primary revelatory event. Otherwise Israel would be choosing herself which events she wanted to see as actions of God, which is the modernist reading of religious history. Yet Pannenberg does not seem to admit the necessity of such unique and clearly discernible interventions by God into human history. He mentions the exodus, which would naturally be the best example of a foundational revelatory event, but this is in the context of an event which fulfils a promise, that given to the patriarchs, and the exodus is not the singular event of deliverance from

244 Basic Questions, p. 50
245 Revelation as History, p. 138
Egypt but the extended conquest of Palestine as well.246 Thus God’s involvement becomes a matter of interpreting one series of events in light of another event (the promise to the Patriarchs), inaccessible to the historian, nor experienced by those claiming to see God in their exodus. Pannenberg does not anywhere seem to affirm an event as having been understood as an act of God in its own right. Rather, the active relationship of God with the world and his supposed self-revelation become simply a subjective interpretation of the significance of otherwise normal human history. It has no greater assurance of truth or significance than the assumption of the man who wins the lottery that God approves of gambling. Pannenberg was himself aware of the difficulty of excluding authoritative interpretations:

The more the spirit of the present age has shucked off the outgrown husks of an authority bound Christianity, the more has this problem [bridging the gap between acts of history and necessary truths of reason] proven to be the central hermeneutical problem of theology.247

When it comes to the central event of Christ’s life, his resurrection, Pannenberg’s option for history as the historian perceives it, and not as it is proclaimed in Scripture and by the Church, means that he cannot say clearly what really happened:

Evidently something had happened to the witnesses of the appearances of the Risen One for which their language had no other word than that used to characterize the eschatological expectation, i.e. resurrection of the dead. This expression is a metaphor. It suggests the idea of being awakened and rising from sleep.248

This is very close to Bultmann’s explanation of the Resurrection. Yet for him it is the message that the Church proclaimed through that metaphor that is important. For Pannenberg it is the event behind the message, the event that *creates* the message, or more specifically, it is the event *of* the message which is crucial. The revelatory significance is not so much in what God has actually done (for we do not really know what that is) but in the fact that through that event his people came to see that their apocalyptic eschatological hope had

246 Systematic Theology, p. 245
247 Basic Questions, p. 142
become a present reality. The real revelation of God is the transformation of religious understanding.

The same can be seen in Pannenberg’s thoughts on the Incarnation. When he writes that, ‘the concept of the incarnation expresses the development of the process of God’s revelation and its coming to fruition in the one man Jesus of Nazareth’, 249 he is not expanding the orthodox Christological formula to apply it to an understanding of God’s overall relation to his creation and revelation to it (a very important expansion as will be explained later). Rather he is using this expanded sense as the preferred understanding:

It belongs to the full meaning of the Incarnation that God’s redemptive deed took place within the universal correlative connections of human history. 250

If Pannenberg is here preferring one understanding to another then he is eliminating the central truth of the Incarnation and replacing it with a dependent supporting theological concept, thereby robbing even that of its true significance. This seems to be a metaphor for the failure of Pannenberg’s revelation as history. A theory of revelation that depends upon a solely human interpretation of historical events will result in neither an affirmation of genuine divine revelation nor in a true understanding of history.

With respect to the Incarnation as a model for the divinity and humanity of Scripture Pannenberg clearly comes down on the side of its humanity to the exclusion of its divinity. Scripture is merely a product of historical development and differences within it reveal the progress of religious understanding. There is a unity portrayed in this but it is a historical and chronological unity, not a spiritual and theological one. He is not ultimately favourable toward typology because it ‘tends rather to undermine the important intention of discovering the connection between [the Testaments] in historical facts’ by emphasizing a ‘finally unhistorical, purely structural similarity of the Old Testament to its New Testament

249 Revelation as History, p. 151
250 Basic Questions, p. 41 (italics added)
counterpart’. The purely historical connection that Pannenberg prefers, however, does not maintain a sense of unifying continuity that would retain the Old testament as in some way normative theologically:

It is difficult to see why the Old Testament types should still be relevant for Christians after the New Testament prototype itself has appeared.\textsuperscript{252}

History may connect the Old and New by showing the historical correlativeity but it also severs the connection by highlighting the differences. Even between the New Testamental period and ours an insuperable barrier is raised by the gulf of history:

It is no longer possible for a present-day interpreter naively to identify himself with the primitive Christian texts - unless by means of a self-deception.\textsuperscript{253}

For Pannenberg this represents a liberation to discover what he considers the true continuity of revelation which is found in ‘ever new forms of its interpretation’. It also represents the loss of Scripture as a means of theological and historical continuity. All scripture, both Old and New Testaments, become but artefacts of past history awaiting the relevance given them by contemporary historians in telling the history of revelation.

\textbf{VII. CULLMANN AND SALVATION HISTORY}

Another crucial characteristic of Pannenberg’s approach is his rejection of the division between sacred and secular history, and this is a principal difference between his theology and that of Oscar Cullmann, yet it is a difference that makes Cullmann’s far superior in preserving the theological continuity of a historically mediated revelation. Pannenberg rejects sacred history or salvation history as a ghetto\textsuperscript{254} in preference to a universal history:

It is the horizon of world history which first makes it possible to appreciate the full significance of an individual event.\textsuperscript{255}

Cullmann, however, sees salvation history, which is a selected strata of historical events

\textsuperscript{251} Ibid, p. 29
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid, p. 145
\textsuperscript{254} Ibid, p. 41
\textsuperscript{255} Ibid, p. 69
presented through divine revelation in Holy Scripture, as the only basis for giving meaning to
a world history, for salvation history has within it a perspective of time that includes the
beginning and end of all things. Though it is selective it is comprehensive and allows for the
incorporation of other strands of history. It is a crucial flaw in Pannenberg’s dismissal of the
salvation history of Scripture that he does not see that by connecting the history of Israel with
the creation of the world and the early history of man Scripture is intending to provide a
world historical perspective greater than that of any secular history.256

What characterizes salvation history, *Heilsgeschichte*, for Cullmann is not just selectivity
of events reported but an accompanying interpretation which gives the significance of what
otherwise might seem historically insignificant events.257 This interpretation is the prophetic
element of revelation and because of it Cullmann is more favourable to typology than is
Pannenberg, for typology presupposes that events can be prophetic in nature because God is
the Lord of history and from his lordship over history the prophetic understanding of history
also is derived. Typology is not the same as salvation history though they are not mutually
exclusive:

All typology...presupposes a salvation-historical background, namely, the relationship
between the Old and New Testaments understood from a salvation-historical point of
view.258

Yet his endorsement is not unqualified, for typology can slip into allegory, which destroys the
salvation-historical meaning of Scripture, when:

The parallelism [of typology], loosened from the events, is regarded as the essential
thing—as soon as a parallelism of texts and not a parallelism of events is involved.259

It is important that it remains the event which is prophetic rather than the telling of the event,

256 In the secular sciences histories are attempted involving the origin of mankind, and even of the universe.
But these are produced by physicists and evolutionists. Carl Sagan’s *Cosmos* and Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief
History of Time* are examples. These works deal with world history on such a massive scale that the meaning
of specific historical events fades to insignificance. Historical studies which attempt to put human events in
perspective do not seek to bridge the gap and connect them to the larger scope of cosmic history.

257 *Christ and Time*, SCM. Press Ltd, 1951, pp. 19ff

258 Ibid, p. 133

259 Ibid
for in the case of the latter the place of the event within history fades away and we no longer are dealing with sacred history but sacred allegories and parables. The connection and continuity with past and future events in the sacred history would be broken.

The presence of prophetic interpretation does allow salvation history to include mythic events interpreted with historical significance. This would certainly include the supra-historical events of creation and the Fall. In calling these portions myth Cullmann takes a somewhat mediating position between Barth and Bultmann. He does not hesitate to call them myths rather than legends or sagas and is ready to admit that their origin may be as myths as Bultmann understands the term, but like Barth he asserts that their function in Scripture is not mythical but historical. That myths are generally not historical in intention is separate from their meaning within Scripture now. Whereas Bultmann made all Scripture myth because of the presence of some mythic elements Cullmann says that Salvation history makes all that is in it historical. In their selection as part of salvation history in Scripture myths become historical ‘as a consequence of their close connection with the historical central portion of the biblical narrative’. They are in fact demythologized by being historicized:

Thus within the Bible they are already disrobed of what constitutes the deeper meaning of myth...The Old Testament historicized myths by firmly attaching them to Israel’s history.

Their function is exegetical in revealing ‘the connection created by God between the various historical events by being inserted into the narration of these events’, a connection which is opaque to history and the unenlightened historian. The mythic element of Scripture is the telling of events and their meaning from a perspective that only is possible when God reveals it to his prophets and apostles. The creation of the world and its consummation are ‘events’ presented as myths which the philosophers would read as expressing eternal realities but which God shows us, by putting them in historical perspective, to be ‘events’ which by their very nature defy human experience and so can only be known in such form. Outside of that...

261 Ibid, p. 139
262 Ibid, p. 140
divine revelatory process we could not be sure there was any true event behind myths, nor could we know how in the ‘historically verifiable’ events God was saving mankind.

For Cullmann salvation history is a linear process that is divided in the middle by Christ who is the culmination of God’s saving acts and his revelation of them to us. Like Pannenberg, Cullmann sees Christ’s death and resurrection as an ‘eschatological event which has already occurred’ but its revelatory significance is first as the high-point of past revelation of salvation history: ‘This past, together with its high-point, indicates the movement of all salvation history’. All that has been revealed to have gone on before is now made clear by the light of this high-point. This is what makes it possible to close the canon and make it comprehensible to us, for until it is closed and no further revelations are expected there cannot be any final certainty of the meaning of God’s revelation as a whole. With Jesus all the facts are in, and Scripture, in which salvation history is revealed, can be treated as a unit, though divided into Old and New Testaments, the New being the final prophetic interpretation of God’s salvation of mankind in light of Christ’s first coming into the world.

Though Scripture may be regarded as complete, this does not correspond to a completion of salvation history for we have not come to the end yet. History still continues and so does the process of our race’s salvation. Cullmann believes that it is a mistake to interpret the eschatological events foreseen in Scripture as being only or primarily a present reality in the life of each believer. The Eschaton is a temporal event. It is still a future reality that we await, as Cullmann sees implicit in Paul’s understanding of the transformation of our bodies (I Cor. 15:51):

[Paul’s] whole eschatological expectation would be unintelligible if we were to think that the dead who now sleep and are with Christ already possess their spiritual bodies. Perhaps they do find themselves closer now to Christ than during the time when they were yet bound to the [flesh], but they still exist in time, they still wait for the time when their bodies will be awakened by the living power of the Spirit.  

263 Ibid, p. 267
264 Ibid, p. 268
This is not to dispute the existential encounter with God that we each must make, which both Barth and Bultmann would emphasize. But the response we make to God’s eternal pursuit of us is only eternal from his side. We are still very much bound to the movement of time, which is the medium of our existence. We do not slip out of time into eternity or even live in it spiritually as Augustine was inclined to think. We remain in time and in salvation history because neither is finished. Our salvation, individually and corporately, is temporally unfinished. Though it was and is finished on the cross, and Pannenberg is correct to see this as an eschatological event, it would be more accurate to say that Jesus was speaking not from a human temporal perspective but from a divine one when he proclaimed this. Our experience of what was accomplished on the cross and in the tomb is still being lived out in the history of this age. We now live in the continuation of that eschatological event. This age which begins with Christ and continues through the life of the apostles and to the present until the end is characterized by the already and the not yet.

Yet whereas Pannenberg would have ‘normal’ history resume, to be interpreted by the eschatological event of Christ in the same way as the ‘normal’ history which preceded it, Cullmann understands that the coming of Christ has changed everything; the salvation history focused upon Israel has now broadened to include strands from secular history and become visibly universal. Ultimately all history will be consumed by salvation history, but for now secular history continues, though as a counter point to that of God’s new work in the Church in the final period of salvation history between the Resurrection and the Parousia in which all is being finished. Yet in this age we can have no certain understanding of the meaning of historical events and of how secular history and salvation history interact, if they can even be distinguished. This is because the final interpretive event has yet to happen. Thus we will always be better able to see what God was doing in Israel than what he is doing now in the Church. But because Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the end of things who has come in the middle, we can be a little more certain of the shape and direction of things in this age and

265 Ibid, p. 166
what will be the ultimate event, Christ’s second coming that will illuminate all history, than were the prophets before Christ’s first coming. However, the perennial apocalyptic interpretations notwithstanding, it may not be a great deal more. Furthermore, the canon of the Bible serves us because it is the record of the witnesses of the saving acts of God and so is the best ‘salvation-historical norm for all interpretation of the present’ that is possible in this age.266

By stressing the continuity of salvation history Cullmann opposes Protestant and Catholic trends which make a break in salvation history. He sees Protestantism doing so by associating salvation history only with the events witnessed in Scripture, thus leaping from the apostles’ time to the end time, leaving our present situation in this age as a bubble of historical irrelevance. In this God is not seen as doing anything of significance in furtherance of a historical plan as far as the believer in this period is concerned. Nor does the Bible serve to reveal the place of the present Church in the stream of salvation history unless it is presumed that these are the last days in which the apocalyptic events revealed in Scripture take place. Such sporadic interactions of God with human history could undermine the continuity of history for the purposes of revelation and threaten the relevance of much historically bound portions of Scripture unless their historic connectedness to an ancient history not our own can be minimized.

Catholicism tends to interrupt salvation history in quite a different manner. Though it maintains continuity of God’s work in history the prophetic interpretation necessary to give salvation history meaning now is conceived as being contained in a singular teaching office credited with final understanding of historic events that was only possible before when the end of a phase of history occurred. By claiming infallibility in the Magisterium the Catholic Church has introduced ‘an authority of revelation alien to the process found in the Bible’ and moved itself out of the not yet and firmly into the already of this eschatological age.

266 Ibid, p. 303
Cullmann asks:

Does not a static element thereby enter into our interpretation, an element foreign to the salvation-historical character of our time?\footnote{267 Ibid, p. 303}

The real significance of Cullmann’s points here against both Catholics and Protestants is that the manner of God’s revelation to his people and their understanding of it must be fundamentally consistent and continuous through the ages. God may act more decisively or clearly in one period than in another but the way in which his people are enabled to understand these actions must not differ in such a degree that they seem categorically different from age to age, nor may differences be proposed that are unmediated by their historical connections. We have come back to Troeltsch’s principles of analogy and correlation, but here with the critical distinction that God’s action in history and his communication to us as revealed in Scripture are included as part of our human experience.

One problem with Cullmann’s approach is his consideration that modern scholarship and science are the best aids to bridge the gap between the Church today and the biblical witnesses. As he sees it:

\begin{flushleft}
If we wish to share the faith of the first Christians...we must submit ourselves to the constant control of these scholarly aids and be ready to give up ideas and associations that seem important to us whenever such things do not stand up under this control.\footnote{268 Ibid, p. 328}
\end{flushleft}

It is one thing to submit to the necessary and truly neutral rules of grammar and the lexicon for the purpose of translation, but it is quite a different matter, as was seen with Pannenberg, to give control to a science that may have no inclination to see signs of God working, rather the reverse. This is to risk reducing the divine content of the biblical witness. Moreover, Cullmann’s dependence upon scholarship to confront us with the event witnessed in Scripture undermines his insistence that salvation history is \textit{event} coupled with \textit{prophetic interpretation}. Is not Scripture’s interpretation of the event enough to confront us with its reality? Yet Cullmann sees an element of salvation history in that:
When there are no longer eyewitnesses to the decisive events, these aids are granted to us which, at least within the confines of human knowledge, place us before these events.\textsuperscript{269}

This suggests rather clearly that modern scholarship is nearly as fundamental to our knowledge of the meaning of salvation history as the prophetic interpretation in Scripture itself. Yet this raises a serious question about Cullmann’s conception of Providence when it is considered that for many centuries there were no living witnesses and no active scholarship. Can it be that salvation history skipped those centuries of the Church’s existence? Cullmann seems to be using arguments to justify the need for scholarship which he rejects earlier.

His weakness here stems from a typically Protestant depreciation of the role of Tradition.\textsuperscript{270} While it is a necessary task to defend Scripture against its misinterpretation by the Roman Catholic or any other Church, yet it seems foolish to deny the historically mediating role of the Church to serve as an interpretive community bridging the temporal distance between the time of Biblical history and our own. It would be a valuable corrective to Cullmann’s theology and to Protestantism in general to recognize that the continuing witness of the community which received, preserved and proclaims the written witness of salvation history is an indispensable aid in itself.

\textbf{VIII. NEWMAN AND THE DANGERS OF THE PRIMACY OF TRADITION}

However, it is true that a too strong dependence upon catholic tradition which makes it the sole hermeneutic, though it is perfectly able to provide a connection between the New Testament and the present, has inherent dangers that threaten both the historical meaning of the Bible and the Biblical meaning of history. This is evident in the theology of John Henry Newman in regard to the development of doctrine.

\textsuperscript{269} Ibid
\textsuperscript{270} This characteristic was not so great in the Reformation as Luther, Calvin and the English Reformers all appealed to what they considered the authentic Tradition to confirm their reading of Scripture.
Newman’s thoughts are perfectly in keeping with the rise of historical and evolutionary sciences of the nineteenth century. He proposes that the historical changes and seeming contradictions in Scripture and ecclesiastical history are both evidence of organic growth and development from seed to fruition, from implicit to explicit. As the Christian faith is seen to be proclaimed implicitly, though imperfectly, in type and shadow, in the Old Testament only to be made clearly visible in the coming of Christ, so Newman claims that the present practice and doctrine of the Roman Catholic Church is but a development in time of what was present in a more primitive and undeveloped form in the New Testament. The difference between the first and the second case is that the change from Old to New Testament is one of received revelation whereas the change in the Church is one of the working out and application of the revelation now received. The nature of the expression of the Christian faith in doctrine and practice is naturally different in the beginning of the Church’s life than it is when the Church has grown and is facing much different problems and opportunities. According to Newman, it is ‘the influence of circumstances’ which prevent the full truth of the Faith from being expressed more clearly in the beginning and which liberate it to become more manifest later on:

Christians were not likely to...determine the place of the Blessed Mary in our reverence, before they had secured, in the affections of the faithful, the supreme glory and worship of God Incarnate, her Eternal Lord and Son...Nor would a Pope arise, but in proportion as the Church consolidated. Nor would monasticism be needed, while martyrdom were in progress.\footnote{Essay on The Development of Christian Doctrine, pp. 118-9}

To identify changes as organic adaptations to historical situations has great strength, for it is clear that the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity was brought about through the conflict with philosophical ‘solutions’ to the mystery of the Incarnation. It is usually, if not always, the presence of heresy which gives rise to specific expressions of orthodoxy. Yet Newman uses this model to explain too much, often going well beyond the natural sense of both Scripture and history. It becomes a too flexible tool, like allegory, and he relies upon it beyond need or justification. As Origen would magnify anthropomorphisms in the Bible in

\footnote{Essay on The Development of Christian Doctrine, pp. 118-9}
order to dismiss the literal meaning and justify his allegorizing, so Newman, it seems, avoids defending later doctrines by Scripture, when that would be possible, in preference for a defence based upon a supposed historical circumstance. He credits the fatalism of paganism with the delay of formalizing a doctrine of Original Sin, just as pagan idolatry is supposed to have delayed the acceptance of images in the Church. Yet the New Testament witness in favour of Original Sin is too strong to justify seeing a fear of giving support to pagan fatalism. That he would choose such a weak argument when Original Sin could be defended much as the Trinity is, as a later developed expression of implicit truth, seems only to have the purpose of defending the idea that the early Church would suppress a clearer expression of a truth it understood at the time. This could justify a multitude of developments but it is a poor use of Scripture and history.

In other instances he can ignore the historical context completely, as when he justifies saint worship by claiming that, because the Patriarchs, in seeing a manifestation of God through a created being, worshipped God through the mediated form, such an act was identical to worshipping God through the saints. Yet the critical point is that they did not know that it was a mediation. They assumed in their primitive understanding that it was God himself. If we take into account our advanced understanding it would change the proper imitation of the Patriarchs’ actions, just as Paul says that differences in knowledge about meat sacrificed to idols changes an action from faithful to sinful.(1 Cor. 8:1-8)

These may be but poor applications of an otherwise sound theory but Newman himself gives credence to the idea that he is less concerned with historical evidence than with reading a desired meaning into both Scripture and Church history when he claims that, as a spiritual reading of the Old Testament is justified and necessary for orthodoxy, so is a like spiritual reading of the early Church. And he attacks those who complain of his reading into the writings of the Fathers what their words do not clearly say:

272 Ibid, p. 127
The grudging and jealous temper, which refuses to enlarge the sacred text for the fulfilment of prophecy, is the very same that will occupy itself in carping at the Ante-Nicene testimonies for Nicene or Medieval doctrines and usages.\textsuperscript{273}

But what justified a prophetic re-understanding of the Old Testament was the event of Christ. Because Jesus was raised from the dead, on top of all the other remarkable signs he performed in his ministry on earth, he is seen as the definitive revelation of God that redefines everything, not just as another link in a continuous chain of evolving revelation. It is really only the latter that Newman offers; an ecclesiastical office which has the capability day to day to reinterpret its past without demonstrating by miraculous signs or other decisive visible events what authority it has to do this. This has the result of breaking the Church free from the controlling rule of the past and making the future indeterminable, at least as far as we can perceive them. We cannot know what the Church will be like based upon its past because, whatever it becomes in the future, it will understand its past in a way to fit its new reality; a more developed understanding of the faith that will be as potentially different from the present as the present is different from the less developed understanding of the past. Newman’s development of doctrine becomes much like modern conceptions of Evolution; it is seemingly boundless in its mutability with no fixed teleology.

Though there is a great harmony in Catholic practice, and much of it seems consistent through the centuries, Newman claims this harmony and consistency to be absolute, not on the basis of outward evidence but on sheer \textit{a priori} assertion backed by spiritual interpretations of Scripture and of Patristic citations. Though he makes an argument that modern Catholicism has all the “marks” of harmonious development, these marks are too subjectively defined and identified with that which he proposes to prove by them. All Catholic doctrine and practice are simply declared to be part of an integral whole\textsuperscript{274} and on the basis of that harmony the ‘natural’ development is proved, much as the commonly understood Darwinian proposition of the ‘survival of the fittest’ becomes nothing more than a tautology.

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid, p. 106
\textsuperscript{274} Ibid, p. 107
as what *survives* is declared by definition *the fittest*. The historical development of doctrine establishes that doctrine must develop and the natural development of doctrine is identified by the present state into which it has developed.

What undergirds all of Newman’s thinking on this, and what may be fairly judged as the natural result of a primary reliance upon a ‘developing’ tradition, is an absolute trust in the sole authority of the Church. This is a trust greater than that which could be reasonably accorded to Scripture, for *it* still requires some tradition to identify it as Scripture and to provide a basis of reading and applying it. An infallible Church declares itself and provides its own interpretation and can adapt to any circumstance. It is not practically dependent upon Scripture when it is the sole authority for interpreting it and there can be no objective criteria by which Scripture could be made to oppose or correct the Church. Study of the literal meaning of Scripture or of history becomes irrelevant and meaningless as the Church needs no exterior tools to understand God’s truth; its understanding is already ‘relatively’ absolute.

Such an infallibility is, as Cullmann notes, unlike anything in biblical history. It takes the Church out of the realm of history as it has been experienced before and as we commonly experience it every day. This is much more than claiming that in the contingency of history God reveals his unchanging truth, ‘we have this treasure in jars of clay’ (1 Cor. 4:7). It is rather as if the jar itself, though seeming to be clay (as the Church by all outward historical evidence seems fallible like all humanity), is really made of gold. This is an epistemological form of transubstantiation whereby an institution’s outward imperfect appearance is declared to be simply that; an appearance. The imperfect quality of the Church, it’s *not yet* nature, which would need guidance from something, as Barth says, that is a separate voice, is thus dissolved away and the *already*, what the Church is in Christ, is proclaimed as the total reality. Thus the Church is *in* time as a temporal creation and develops *in* history, just as it is in the world, but as it is not *of* the world so its development is not controlled by time but by the Church’s own inner nature. Its temporal connection with the world does not and cannot
allow the world and secular history to corrupt or distort in any way the purity, the correctness of its development.

In this way Newman seems to become the flip side of Troeltsch with a similar divorce of history and divine truth. For Troeltsch there is only history and no absolute truth can be achieved within it until the end. For Newman, despite his defence of historical change, there is only divine truth proclaimed by the Church. The study of history and of the natural, literal and historical sense of Scripture are ultimately meaningless in determining the truthfulness of the Church’s understanding. Troeltsch lacks any recognition of the certain intervention of God and his interaction with human history. Newman lacks any real esteem for the strength of the human side of that interaction. For all its historical origin the Church’s understanding might as well proceed directly from the mind of God, as the philosophers would prefer.

In all the theological approaches to revelation in history surveyed here there is still a divide between the humanity and divinity in which God’s revelation to his creation is not fully and indissolubly united to the realm of historical time which he has created as the medium for his creatures. Having looked at time from the human side to see what God is doing there it will now serve to look at it from the other side and examine what time is for God.
Chapter 4

God and Time

If we are to begin to understand the meaning of the historical in holy scripture and in divine revelation as a general process, we must wrestle with the question of time itself. What is time, and how does God relate to it? Is time real for him or only for us? A study of the nature of time should begin at the beginning of all things and be rooted in the understanding of creation itself.

I. CREATION AND TIME

A. The Biblical Doctrine of Creation:

The fundamental Christian doctrine of the creation of the universe, both visible and invisible, is that it was created *ex nihilo*. God is not a demiurge taking pre-existing material and forming it into new creations. Such concepts were held by polytheistic religions but the portrayal of God in the Bible is not one of a craftsman but of a Creator speaking things into being, ‘For he spoke and it came to be’ (Psalm 39:9). As T. F. Torrance says:

The creation of the universe out of nothing does not mean the creation out of something that is nothing, but out of nothing at all.

Scripture recognizes no thing as existing independent of God's creation. He created ‘all things’ (Col.1:16), and the word used for ‘create’ in Genesis 1:1, ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and earth’, is *bāra*, a word that signifies bringing something new into existence. Further, the term ‘heavens and earth’, *shāmāyim ʾēres*, includes the entire universe, seen and unseen. It does not allow for any other category of being beside God. He is utterly transcendent over all else that exists, alone existing in his own right. His existence is not dependent upon anything else beside himself. In contrast, all of creation from the angelic

275 Though it has been more common to dispute this doctrine in recent times it has not proven its case with reference to the biblical witness.
realm to the subatomic particles of the perceptible universe derives its entire existence from God's creative act and from his continual preservation of it. If there were a substance from which it was fashioned which God did not create then the universe would exist as eternal as God himself.

When Scripture says that God created everything ‘in the beginning’ it lays the foundation for understanding the universe as situated in time and with a beginning in time. The universe did not always exist, for then there would be no such thing as a beginning. This beginning affirms the arrow nature of time. It is a process in which the universe moves from past to future, or in which the future moves by us and becomes past. Whatever time may be for God the fact that the universe begins in time, a beginning that lies now in the past and which must be remembered, establishes our experience of time as a moving reality. Creation is described as having stages which exist in a necessary temporal order. Until the seas are created they cannot bring forth life, and so on.

After establishing the movement of time two questions arise: Did time itself have a beginning, and was there a time before the creation of the universe? If time had no beginning but has ‘always’ existed then there should be an infinite expanse of time extending into the past regardless of whether it continues into the future. But if time is also experienced as an arrow, always moving us into the future, a paradox is raised, for an infinite past time could never be traversed. This is the argument Kant made:

Granted that the world has no beginning in time; up to every given moment of time, an eternity must have elapsed, and therewith passed away an infinite series of successive conditions or states of things in the world. Now the infinity of a series consists in the fact that it never can be completed by means of a successive synthesis. It follows that an infinite series already elapsed is impossible and that, consequently, a beginning of the world is a necessary condition of its existence.278

278 The First Antinomy, of space and time, from Critique of Pure Reason, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn, Pennsylvania State University: Electronic Classics Series Publication, 2010, p. 263 Aquinas claimed that such an argument an infinite past was not logically compelling, Summa. Part 1, XLVI.2. He did so by postulating that past traversals must start from a fixed point in the past, which would stand at a finite distance from the present. But this argument effectually treats each imagined past point as if it were separable from
But if it would be impossible to arrive temporally at that or any point this would drive us to consider the movement of time itself and the entire concept of causality an illusion, as causality implies movement from *cause* to *caused*. No possibility of movement means no meaningful concept of causation. Yet this stands in stark contrast with the witness of the creation narrative as well as with all human experience. We experience the movement of time. We react to the world on the basis of cause and effect. If our experience in this regard is to be seen as at all real for us then we must conclude that time is not infinite in its past extension.\(^{279}\)

Scripture and our experience of temporal existence thus force us to conclude that time as we know it had a beginning. It is therefore a created thing which came into being. Such language naturally brings up an image of a ‘time’ before time’s beginning, when it did not yet exist, but this is the problem with language rooted in a temporal existence. The same problem was faced in the Christological debate of the fourth century when it came to the Son’s existence as begotten of the Father. The Cappadocian solution was to see his generation as an eternal one. In a similar way time's beginning can only make sense as a non-temporal event, having no temporal causality or chronological sequence leading up to it. When God created time he did so *outside* time. But was time created at the same time as the heaven and earth? Logically the universe could not be created before time, for without time there could be no ‘before’. But conversely, while it is not theologically impossible that time preceded the rest of creation, the idea that God was experiencing in himself a duration of time before he created the world is logically implausible for any time that might exist before that would be indistinguishable from no time at all, and logically purposeless for any human or created understanding. As Augustine noted, what is time without anything to measure it or anything to dwell in it?\(^{280}\) Such a conception of God experiencing time before creation lies behind the

\(^{279}\) This does not demand a future end of time for the arrow nature of time treats the future as substantially different from the past. Time may never cease from moving and still infinity will never be achieved.

\(^{280}\) *Confessions*, bk. XI, ch. 14
impious question, ‘what was he doing before creation?’, which Augustine answered saying that he was creating hell for those who asked such questions. But of course this answer was not meant to be taken seriously for no creation could take place before the Beginning.

B. The Nature of Time

The Christian understanding of the nature of time's existence and its relationship with the rest of creation, especially as it has developed in the West and influenced, and been influenced by, the rise of modern physics, begins largely with Augustine. He followed Plato in holding that time was created and not eternal. Plato held that the demiurge created time as an image of eternity so that the universe could be made more like the world of the eternal gods of which it is a copy. Augustine agreed that time's existence is dependent upon the universe: ‘Time...begins rather from creation, than creation from time, but both are from God’. Yet like Aristotle he wonders how time can exist at all if it is conceived as past and future separated by an instant ‘now’, for the past has ceased to be and the future is not yet, while the present has no duration at all and so can hardly be said even to exist: ‘What then is time? If no one asks of me, I know; if I wish to explain to him who asks, I know not’. Augustine thus considers that time is ephemeral, as are all things existing in time, and that it exists itself only as an extension of the mind. It is the mind that conceives of time through remembering what was, perceiving what is and anticipating what will be. This brings him back to his Neoplatonist principles. Time, being ephemeral and created, is finite and will cease to be.

Conceptions of time within such a Platonic philosophy did not encourage greater speculation into the nature of time within the Church. It was not until the revival of Aristotelian thought in the Scholastic period and its influence on the birth of the modern

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281 As has already been shown, Gregory of Nyssa's thought in this regard was in many ways superior to Augustine's, and predated him by several decades. Yet it did not greatly influence the course of western thinking about time.
282 Timaeus 37c-38b
283 Literal Interpretation of Genesis, bk. V, ch. 5
284 Confessions, bk XI, ch. 14
scientific understanding of the universe in the Renaissance that time began to emerge as a focus of real interest, for time became essential for the study of the nature of the physical universe. Augustine's view of time as dependent upon the universe, which is itself dependent on God's creation of it, gave way to Aristotle's view of time as the absolute measure of the heavens. This Newton incorporated into his new physics when he wrote in his *Principia*, 'Absolute, true and mathematical time, of itself and from its own nature flows equably without relation to anything external'. Thus time, in the Newtonian world, came to be seen more like the infinite nature of God than of his finite creations. Both space and time were seen as receptacles for what God created in them and they extended infinitely. Stephen Hawking explains this scientific world-view that dominated until it was undermined by Einstein's theory of relativity:

> Before 1915, space and time were thought of as a fixed arena in which events took place, but which was not affected by what happened in it...It was natural to think that space and time went on forever... in general relativity it became meaningless to talk about space and time outside the limits of the universe.\(^{285}\)

Einstein proclaimed the essential unity of time and universe by seeing it as one ‘creation’ of space-time. This universe could be viewed as a single block of four-dimensional space-time in which time was static, for the mathematics worked either way. He once tried to ‘console’ the family of a deceased friend by saying that, ‘for us physicists believe the separation between past, present, and future is only an illusion, although a convincing one’.

The finite nature of time has been reinforced by the concept of the Big Bang showing that the universe, and thus time itself, can be traced back to a great cosmic beginning. There has been some resistance to this in the scientific world. Quantum Mechanics has also taken issue with how static time is on the small scale. But there is also a push against the absolutely finite nature of time that the Big Bang initially affirmed. Hawking indicated that it is not due to the evidence but that:

> Many people do not like the idea that time has a beginning, probably because it smacks

of divine intervention...There were therefore a number of attempts to avoid the conclusion that there had been a big bang.\textsuperscript{286}

Since writing that, Hawking himself has also joined the resistance, offering theories of how the quantum vacuum could account for the sudden origin of the universe and all its physical laws, as well as postulating that the universe could descend back into a Big Crunch and re-emerge again as it did billions of years ago. To the educated layman these theories may sound like sophisticated philosophy dressed up in the language of modern physics, perhaps only proving how right Hawking was the first time.

But regardless of these internal squabbles, the scientific view seems set now against the Newtonian view of absolute time. However, with the general public the situation is different. Though people may be aware of these arguments and many theologians understand and accept them\textsuperscript{287} the Newtonian view still holds sway in the popular world-view and influences the theologies that flow from it or that seek to become relevant to it. Its strength lies in the fact that it easily conforms to the way the universe is perceived. It seems real. As Einstein said, it is a convincing illusion. So a battle still is waged over which scientist's view of time will be reflected in theology, Newton or Einstein. Put simply, does God dwell in an eternally existing time or does he dwell outside time?

\textbf{II. GOD'S TIME}

\textbf{A. God outside Time}

What is now called the \textit{classical} view of God with respect to time is the view that God is timeless, that he neither dwells in time nor experiences it for as the Creator of time God cannot be subject to any created element including time. Augustine was not the first Christian to express God's timelessness. Ignatius of Antioch affirmed it two centuries earlier in his

\textsuperscript{286} Ibid, pp. 46-7
\textsuperscript{287} Iain W. Provain writes, ‘It turns out, then, that the Newtonian scientific model is an inadequate account of reality even in terms of the natural world and of human inquiry into that world’, ‘Knowing and Believing’, “\textit{Behind the Text}”, \textit{History and Biblical Interpretation}, Craig Bartholomew, C. Stephen Evans, Mary Healy, Murray Rae, Editors, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003, p. 238
letter to Polycarp: ‘Be on the alert for him who is above time, the Timeless, the Unseen, the One who became visible for our sakes’. And Augustine was essentially following Philo, who wrote that God's ‘life is not a time but eternity which is the archetype of time; and in eternity there is no past nor future, but only present existence’. For Augustine God's eternity lies in all of time being one to God:

Thy today yields not to tomorrow and does not follow yesterday. Thy today is eternity. Therefore, thou didst generate the Coeternal, to whom thou didst say, ‘This day I have begotten thee’. Thou madest all time and before all times thou art, and there was never a time when there was no time.

God is not merely older than all creation. He cannot be measured by time. He is infinite, not by virtue of surpassing the ability to measure. He is not in the realm in which things can be measured.

Throughout the history of the Church the vast majority of Christian thinkers maintained this position of God's timelessness. A century after Augustine Boethius wrote of God's timelessness as a way of negating the harsher elements of determinism that Augustine embraced. For Boethius eternity was the ‘complete possession of an endless life enjoyed as one simultaneous whole’. Since God is perfect he must lack nothing. All his life must be equally accessible to him, unlike us created beings who dwell in time and possess only our present moment. The rest of our life, as Augustine noted, lies outside our grasp as memory or anticipation. But God has all of his life. Nothing to him is past or future. Therefore every relation he has with creation throughout time is accessible to him as direct experience. Anselm would later make clear that all things in time exist simultaneously in eternity as well as in their own times. The point for Boethius was that it is in this context we should see all prophecies of the future:

If you will weigh the foresight with which God discerns all things, you will rightly esteem it to be the knowledge of a never fading instant rather than a foreknowledge of the future. It should therefore rather be called provision than prevision because, placed

288 *On the Unchangeableness of God*, 32
289 *Confessions*, bk. XI ch. 13
290 *The Consolation of Philosophy*, bk. V ch. 6
high above all lowly things, it looks out over all as from the loftiest mountain top. Boethius’ image here is perfectly in line with the concept of a block universe proposed by Einstein. God is not one decreeing in the distant past what will be in the future. He sees it as it happens all at once. The arrow of time is not a controlling factor for him. For Boethius this means that God can truly see the future but it makes us no less free because he sees us as we freely act:

Without doubt, then, all things which God foreknows do come to pass, but certain of them proceed from free will.

Aquinas, however, rejected Boethius’ anti-determinist conclusion while still accepting God as timeless. If God sees it happen then it must happen, he reasons. There is no choice:

This is a true conditional proposition, If God knew that this thing will be, it will be, for knowledge of God is only of true things. Therefore, whatever God knows, is necessary; and so the knowledge of God is not of contingent things.

A second aspect of God's timelessness besides God's knowledge is how it conforms to God's perfection. To be limited by time or space would not fit the most perfect Being. The Infinite cannot be purely contained in any finite vessel. Anselm believed that God is not a creature that he should be limited as creatures are:

How is it not a mark of shameless ignorance to say that space delimits the greatness or that time measures the duration of the Supreme Truth, which does not at all undergo increase or decrease of spatial or temporal extension?

The dominance of Augustine’s thought in the Reformation caused God's timelessness to be broadly accepted among early Protestants and it has become dominant in Reformed theology due to Calvin's clear teaching on it. Calvin seems to encapsulate facets of every previous proponent of divine timelessness. Like Augustine and Aquinas he holds to a strong conception of God's sovereignty over the temporal course of events rooted in his mastery of

291 Ibid
292 Ibid
293 Summa, I, 14,13, Obj. 2
294 It will be shown how the Incarnation has implications on this idea.
295 Monologion
time. With Anselm and Augustine he located timelessness in God's uncreated nature and perfection: ‘God is here contrasted with created beings, who...are subject to continual change’. And with Boethius he held that all times exists as present realities directly perceptible to God.

The theory of time involved in the classical view is often referred to as the stasis theory of time, or the ‘B’ series. This is opposed to the ‘A’ series, the process view of time in which time as we experience is real but only exists as we experience; the present is privileged above the non-existence of the past and future. Time in the ‘B’ series exists as a static fourth dimension, past, present and future (as we perceive them) each having equally real existence and being related to each other not by succession but by sequence, like numbers. There is no reality to the concept of tensed existence: it was, it is, or it will be. These things are but our perception of things because our perception is part of the sequence. God exists in this reality in an eternal now, outside the realm of space and time and outside the categories of temporality. God has no past and awaits no future. He does not change from one time to another. He is ‘always’ the same, yet without experiencing a real duration of time.

This concept has the advantage of being philosophically consistent with God's nature as both the Creator of time and as being immutable. It also ensures his mastery over history. But there are several obvious objections. Some have to do with whether such a timeless existence can really bear the important properties of God relating to person-hood, life and love. How can a being that experiences no time at all possess person-hood or life, or express love? How can it have a will for anything of complexity? But such objections generally wind up begging the question because they assume that the meaning of these terms is rightly framed from our temporal experience of them. But since we have no way of knowing what life or love or person-hood would be like outside time we also have no way of being certain that these

297 Institutes, 3.20.5
298 There is some disagreement between Paul Helm and others, like Brian Leftow, over whether any form of temporal property is attributable to God in his existence in an eternal present.
Another philosophical objection touches on God's omniscience. Can a timeless God know all truth? This is asked with respect to tensed facts. Does God know what time it is? Does he know that it is now 2012? We know what the date is now and we can know the truthfulness of claims about what time it is and when things happened relative to the present. “I am now 50 years old” is a truth that I can know now since I have passed my 50th birthday. I could not have known it sooner. Such a statement would not be true before my 50th. But a timeless God, it is argued, cannot know this. All he can know is that on March 25th 2012 Christopher Hathaway is 50 years old. But he knows this equally with the fact that on March 25th 1992 I “am” 30 years old. The fact that I was 30 years old 20 years ago is a fact closed to him for it is a state of temporal reality related to now, a temporal existence God does not share. For God, in his timelessness, the fall of Constantinople, the landing on the moon and the Summer Olympics of 2016 are all equally ‘present’ moments. God knows what order they come in but not which is most recent or closest to the present, so it is concluded. Thus it is also concluded, as does William Hasker: ‘There are facts that are well known to human beings of which the eternal God knows nothing’.299

The answers to this objection are twofold. First, God's omniscience has never included existential knowledge of realities that he is by definition incapable of experiencing. No one would think that God knows, existentially, what it is like to be a sinner. Nor does such ‘knowledge’ provide any new data for the knower. There is simply nothing to be known. Hasker, however, proposes exactly the opposite:

The facts that temporal facts are ‘invisible’ from a timeless perspective in no way calls into question the genuineness of such facts; rather, it reveals an inherent limitation of that perspective.300

Yet to say that such tensed facts are facts is to privilege the temporal reality that creatures

300 Ibid, p. 202
inhabit over the reality of the Creator. On Monday the statement, ‘today is Monday’ is a true fact, but only then and only within the temporal universe where such statements make sense. In eternity the statement has no logical reference and so cannot be considered a fact at all, true or otherwise. Only by an a priori commitment to the reality of the process ‘A’ series of time can such tensed facts be considered as real facts in their tensed sense. If the ‘B’ series is presumed true, and the ‘A’ series therefore false, then there is no logical conflict between a reasonable understanding of divine omniscience and divine timelessness.

Yet for Christian theology the most obvious objection is not one of philosophical logic but of biblical witness. A timeless being is not how God is presented to us in Scripture. The language and imagery of God in Scripture is overwhelmingly temporal. He is constantly presented as one dwelling in time and relating to us temporally. God ‘remembers’ his people. He reacts to obedience or disobedience, giving it blessings or curses. His response to Abraham’s near-sacrifice of Isaac, ‘Now I see that you have not withheld your son’, speaks of a God engaged with us in our own time. Paul Helm, one of the foremost contemporary defenders of God's timelessness, responds to this objection by pointing out that the biblical writers also seemed to assume a geocentric universe.³⁰¹ But that is not to say that they held it or intended to teach it, much less that God intended to communicate it. Oscar Cullmann responds to this concept claiming:

Primitive Christianity knows nothing of a timeless God. The ‘eternal' God’ is he who was in the beginning, is now and will be in all the future, ‘who is, who was, and who will be’.³⁰²

Cullmann saw timelessness as a Greek corruption of the original Hebrew view of God. Yet this is no barrier if such a temporal God is seen in the same light as the many anthropomorphisms and other examples of a primitive cosmology as part of a progressive revelation. Like the Trinity, the eternal timelessness of God could be something that develops as God’s people develop their understanding. The term homoousios is not Biblical, per se,

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³⁰² Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, p. 63
and yet it is accepted as being a necessary formulation in light of the Biblical witness. The question for Helm is:

Even if it is granted that the idea of timelessness is a pure Greek invention what matters is whether the thought that God is timeless is a necessary truth-condition of all else that Christians want to say of God, which is certainly not a Greek invention.³⁰³

Another related objection to timelessness is the witness of our experience of time itself and of our relationship to God in time. We experience past, present and future, and we experience God in those times. We pray to him NOW so that he may do things for us in the FUTURE, and we do so based on the knowledge of what he has done in the PAST. If God is beyond time how can he relate to us in time? The answer given from the eternalist perspective is that just as God orders the heavens he also orders all of what happens in time, and does so from a timeless moment. Helm argues:

It may be that how a timeless being produces events in time is by timelessly producing the whole temporal order.³⁰⁴

When God creates time he orders all the movements of the temporal universe and all of his ‘actions’ within that universe. We perceive God's history with us as following a chronological process. We pray and he answers. In reality, in God's reality, he has set up everything ‘in advance’. God may seem to change his demeanour toward us, calling us to repentance one moment and then encouraging us with his spirit when we repent, and so on, but his mercies and judgements, his inspiration to the prophets and answers to prayer, are all part of one singular act of relating to his creation. His sovereign and eternal will may be infinitely complex but it is still a single event in eternity.

This answer makes philosophical sense, but from a Christian perspective it is perhaps the least satisfying, for it widens the distance between God and man such that we have no way of really relating to such a God. He is so unlike us. It also calls into question what contact we are really having with him. Is our relationship real or merely a created illusion? The ‘history’

³⁰³ Helm, Eternal God, p. 22
³⁰⁴ Ibid, p. 70
of God’s working in the world, of his salvation of his people looks from the eternalist perspective like a one-way show, rather like how our freedom appears under shadow of God’s Sovereignty. It is no accident that a purely timeless God generally goes hand in hand these days with rigid determinism, despite Boethius’ attempt to avoid it.

Furthermore, how are we seeing or hearing, or simply experiencing God, when our experience is in a medium he doesn’t share? Jesus said that if we have seen him we have seen the Father. But if our temporal reality is essentially an illusion, or rather a product of our created psychology, then isn't the Jesus who dwells in time an inadequate means of seeing God, little better as an image of him than the Archangel Michael? How can we have confidence that we are really knowing God rather than just his actions in the world? Helm offers little assurance in this regard. He claims that, though ‘it is logically impossible that human beings should decide what [God’s] nature is’, it is nevertheless ‘perfectly possible that they should come to know what it is’. Yet this is mere assertion, for no good means is provided. The most that Helms can state is:

It is possible to refer to God by his ‘empirical manifestations’ while not being committed to the view that the set of such manifestations provides the meaning of ‘God’. This is thin gruel indeed unless more is offered.

B. God within Time

The alternative to the classical Christian view of a timeless God is one of a God who dwells in time of some form or fashion with us. This view is often represented by a position known as Open Theology, because it proposes that the future does not exist yet even for God, any more than it does for us, and that therefore it is still to some extent an open question to him. He cannot know what will happen because it hasn't happened yet. It is propounded by Nicolas Woltersdorff, William Hasker, among others, and especially by the late Clark

305 Ibid, p. 211
306 Ibid, p. 214
In the open view the flow of time is real and God is a part of it. The block universe with its static view of time is rejected in favour of the process view of time, or the ‘A’ series. Our existential experience of time is true reality. Only the present has any real existence, for the past is no more and the future not yet. We are all in the stream of time, even God. His eternity lies not in being timeless but in everlasting. Pinnock says that this means that ‘there never has been and never will be a time when God does not exist’. He surpasses not time itself but the time of all his creation. God has always been and will always be. His life cannot be measured because it never ends and never begins, but it can be measured in portions, though not by the same measuring that human time is measured by. And though he lives in time he is not mastered by it.

God’s experience of time includes the necessary temporal nature of having a before and after; ‘the God of scripture is One of whom a narrative can be told’. He ‘knows’ what is happening now and everything that has happened before. Every event in the universe is part of his history, for he is the creator and sustainer of it, every atom and quark of the universe is numbered and known to him. And he forgets nothing, he misses nothing: God transcends our experience of time, is immune from the ravages of time, is free from our inability to remember, and so forth.

God experiences the change of the universe he relates to and he reacts to it accordingly. He is in real dialogue with it. Yet his character does not change. He is constant, the way a perfected man would be. It is to this quality of God's unchanging character that defenders of this view attribute passages that are alleged to speak of God's timeless immutability:

Every thing about God must be changeless for the traditional view, whereas the open view sees God as both changeless and changeable.

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307 ‘Systematic Theology’, *The Openness of God*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994, p. 120
309 Pinnock, ‘Systematic Theology’, p. 120
In dealing with scriptural descriptions of God the open view has an the easier time of it than the traditional timeless one, for the passages showing God surprised and delighted, or angry and sorrowful, can be taken at face value. God really didn’t know whether Abraham would obey the command to sacrifice Isaac until he did it.\(^\text{311}\) But when it comes to prophecies of the future it is a different situation. There the tables are turned and the open view must explain how what appears to be true knowledge of the future is not exactly so. The first answer to this problem is to point out how inexact many prophecies are:

Long range forecasts are often symbolic and vague in matters of detail (e.g. Daniel and Revelation). Few biblical prophecies allow us to assume exhaustive foreknowledge.\(^\text{312}\) God, having supreme knowledge of the universe and all the intentions of human being, can identify inevitable trends in human history the way that an astronomer can predict eclipses of the sun centuries in advance. Furthermore, God is also a participant in history and can reasonably be sure that he can make certain events happen. He is simply the biggest player on the board.

Yet there are examples of prophetic knowledge which go beyond the general game plan God has for history and the events he can predict based upon present knowledge. Jesus’ prediction of Judas’ betrayal and of Peter’s denial are very exact. Richard Rice asserts that ‘It is logically possible that they represent conditional prophecies’.\(^\text{313}\) Jesus saw the way their hearts were set on a course of action and he made his predictions based upon the conditions. Yet the details of Peter’s denial contain specifics unnecessary for such a prediction and unrelated to the spiritual orientation of his heart. How could Jesus know the details of the cock crowing? Rice’s answer is that God may control some events:

It may be true that God occasionally acts by fiat and directly causes something to happen. Yet even if he determines one event, it does not necessarily follow that he

\(^{311}\) Pinnock, ‘Systematic Theology’, p. 122  
\(^{312}\) Most Moved Mover, Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2001, pp. 51-2  
\(^{313}\) Rice, ‘Biblical Support for a New Perspective’, p. 55
determines all events.\textsuperscript{314}

This would make sense with the instances of miracles, but to control the timing of Peter’s denial with the crowing of the cock raises the question of why God would do that. Why add those details at all? Occam’s Razor would say that the simplest answer is that Jesus added these details to make it plain that he \textit{knew}.

When it comes to the more problematic doctrinal matter of God’s predestination of the elect the answer becomes simpler: ‘It applies to groups rather than individuals’ and ‘on the individual level...God’s plans are often thwarted’.\textsuperscript{315} So God has the intention to save a people but he cannot know who in that people will be saved, even if he has a known person in mind. But whomever will be saved, God has set a plan in motion for how that salvation shall be ensured.

It is this aspect of God’s openness to the future resulting in his lack of firm knowledge of it that is the most controversial and disturbing to classic theists. But this is not a defect in the open view according to its proponents. It is rather its chief virtue. Standing against divine determinism, it leaves space for man’s freedom and for a real and genuine relationship with God which ‘total foreknowledge would jeopardize’.\textsuperscript{316} In order for man actually to engage with God, God must engage with man allowing man to have a role:

God is a superior power who does not cling to his right to dominate and control but who voluntarily gives creatures room to flourish.\textsuperscript{317}

Open theology seeks to carve a middle path between determinism and the chaos of human freedom. It proposes that God limits his omnipotence and accepts the risk of his creatures’ free choices. God chooses \textit{not} to be in control. Yet this does not make God weaker, it is claimed, even though he is ‘not now totally in control’,\textsuperscript{318} for the challenge of working with

\textsuperscript{314} Ibid, p. 56
\textsuperscript{315} Ibid, pp. 56 and 55.
\textsuperscript{316} Pinnock, ‘Systematic Theology’, p.122
\textsuperscript{317} Ibid, p. 113
\textsuperscript{318} Most Moved Mover, p. 36
free creatures:

does not contradict God’s omnipotence but requires it. Only omnipotence has the requisite degree and quality of power to undertake such a project...We must not define omnipotence as the power to determine everything but rather as the power that enables God to deal with any situation that arises.319

One might rename this divine attribute Omni-adaptability.

While such a scheme of a temporal God has the advantage of making God more personal and our relationship more engaging, yet it also makes our relationship more perilous, for we are dealing with a God who is deliberately less in control of things than he has traditionally been portrayed to be. A God who ‘risks’ implies a God who can fail, and this is not what a common sense reading of Scripture implies. Moreover, by placing God so completely in the flow of time that he cannot see beyond it, that the future really is closed to him, it endangers his position as the uncreated Creator of time who is wholly separate from his creation. This may indeed be not entirely off the mark of the intention of Pinnock, for as he argued that divine God’s absolute unchangeableness is a ‘pagan dogma’ he then goes on to add:

In Hellenistic thinking God is essentially what the world is not. Divine reality begins where the world leaves off and is defined in terms of opposition.320

Yet is it not also an essential biblical view that God is not part of this world? He created it out of nothing, not out of his own nature, so there must be an essential otherness to God that separates him from the world, that makes him radically distinct in kind, not just in degree. While a timeless God may be too remote to truly reveal God to temporal man, the open view may bring him down too far so that it isn't fully the God of Scripture who is revealed.

There is a position that holds God as temporal without being ‘open’ to the future. This position, exemplified by David Hunt proposes Simple Foreknowledge; God just knows the future. The problem with this view is that it gives no explanation for how God can know the future is it hasn't happened yet. Hunt is admittedly unsure about this:

319 ‘Systematic Theology’, pp. 113 and 114
320 Most Moved Mover, p. 72
The fact is that I'm not at all sure how God knows the future, and I don't want my defense of [God's foreknowledge] to be hostage to or dependent on a particular view on this subject. So my 'official' position on the mechanism of divine foreknowledge will be agnostic. What I am committed to defending...is the view that God simply knows the future (leaving open the question of how he does it).321

Hunt addresses William Hasker’s claim that foreknowledge could not be of any use to God with relation to divine Providence, for it could not effect his actions. As Hasker is quoted:

In the logical order of dependence of events, one might say, by the ‘time’ God knows something will happen it is ‘too late’ either to bring about its happening or to prevent it from happening.322

Yet Hunt’s solution to this dilemma is to posit an example demonstrating the possibility of knowing the future in a way that is useful for present action. But his example is little more than knowing the winning lottery numbers. While such knowledge would indeed be advantageous to any normal person who had it, this is not the type of knowledge that God is credited with having. For it to be an fitting example the knowledge of the winning numbers would need to be accompanied with knowledge of whether one played those numbers or not, and all actions causally connected to the winning or losing of the lottery. If that is done then the trap of a locked-in future Hasker outlines comes back into play. Otherwise one would have to imagine that God possesses selective future knowledge. But how would such knowledge be achieved? Could God choose to know only certain bits of the future and leave other parts open? How would he make the choice? Would it not be necessary to know which knowledge was useful, and how? It seems that a comprehensive knowledge of what the future knowledge entailed would be necessary before he selected bits to know and to not know, which undermines the entire proposition. And so we are back to square one.

C. Possible Mediating Positions

1. Padgett's Relative Timelessness

Alan Padgett recognizes the inadequacies of both the timeless view and the everlasting view

(God as temporal). The everlasting view is ‘theologically inadequate’, even one that allows God to know the future somehow.

Space-time has a beginning—but God does not...Thus God must be beyond time as we know it, in some sense.\textsuperscript{323}

But the problem with the timeless view is that it rests upon a fundamental flaw, the stasis view of time. Padgett dismisses this view as false primarily due to our experience of time as a real process rather than to philosophical principles:

Temporal passage cannot be known either through classical physics or symbolic logic. These symbol systems are abstractions that are intended to avoid the passage of time. But when we walk with our daily experience, our common sense or “wisdom”, this avenue leads straight to a process view.\textsuperscript{324}

Despite what Einstein says, claims Padgett, if time feels real it \textit{is} real.

In place of a timeless eternity on the one side and created time on the other Padgett proposes that God dwells in his own time, a time which is superior to and incorporating of human time.

This means first that God is the Creator of our time (space-time universe). Our time takes place within (and only because of the prior existence of) God's own time.\textsuperscript{325}

It is in God’s time that our time was created and continues to exist. And God’s time is a real form of time with a real succession in which God experiences a before and after. This must be so because God changes. He changes through creating the world and sustaining it. God becomes the Creator of the World and ultimately he becomes Incarnate in it. ‘If God becomes, then of logical necessity succession applies to him’.\textsuperscript{326} So God is, in the minimal sense, temporal because he has the nature of becoming which requires time. Yet his time being so much greater than ours, he is, relative to our temporal experience, practically timeless as our time cannot measure him at all or give any frame of reference.

\textsuperscript{323} ‘Eternity as Relative Timelessness’, \textit{God & Time: Four Views}, p. 93
\textsuperscript{324} Ibid, pp. 102-3
\textsuperscript{325} Ibid, p. 107
This seems to incorporate both aspects of God that are important in a biblical framework, allowing him to be both Creator of the temporal world and Redeemer of the world in time. Yet there are questions that reveal some significant shortcomings.

If the stasis view of time is false then how can God’s time fully incorporate our time? It seems in practice that the relationship of the two times is not of one being wholly inside the other, for only a finite thing can be contained by another, but rather as two separate times on similar tracks with different speeds. They are both moving forward so that our future is still some distance into God’s future. Padgett’s objection to Boethius’ image is illustrative:

There is a picture of God high and lifted up, seeing all of time at once, in the way an observer on a hill can see the whole of a road at once. The problem here is that only one step of the road exists, even for the observer.\(^{327}\)

So, despite saying that God is not limited to time, time’s successive nature still prevents God from knowing the future before it happens. He cannot see it all at once but must ‘wait for the present to occur’.\(^{328}\)

Another question to be asked is whether God’s time is created as well. If it was not created then we seem to have an eternal reality, either being distinct from God (even if dependent upon him) or being a part of God. Either way there are theological problems involved potentially endangering the concept of God as Creator of all things or the absolute distinction of creation from God. If it was created then we have to ask what is God’s nature ‘before’ the creation of his time. Also, was the Son begotten from the Father in this eternity of relative timelessness or in an eternity prior to it? If he was begotten in a time which entails succession than we owe Arius an apology. All the problems involved in thinking of a time before the creation of our time come back with a vengeance. Rather than solving the dilemma Padgett seems in this regard to have kicked the problem down the road.

\(^{327}\) ‘Eternity as Relative Timelessness’, p. 99
\(^{328}\) Ibid, p. 98
2. Craig’s Omnitemporality

William Lane Craig offers up what seems a simple solution to avoiding the problems of pure timelessness and pure temporality; God is both: ‘God is simply timeless without creation and temporal subsequent to creation’. In creation God exists temporally in order to fully engage with his creatures, existing at all times, so omnitemporally. But this is only one part of his existence. Without, or ‘sans creation’ God exists timelessly as the Creator of time. God ‘creates or sustains the whole spatio-temporal block timelessly, with all the events at their appointed times’. Yet, though Craig is clear to explain that God does not ‘exist temporally before creation’, his timelessness does relate to his temporality ‘as earlier and later’. His tensed language regarding these two phases contradicts this qualification. The term ‘temporal subsequent to creation’ is not an unfortunate inability to find words to express atemporal existence. It represents a consistent description of God’s timelessness as God’s first phase of existence which changes into a temporal one. Craig describes the transition from Timelessness to temporality in a discussion with Hugh Ross:

Q: But what I would say to you is, something must be lost then, in that transition from being timeless to being temporal, because if God becomes temporal after creation or during creation, then he must no longer remember the timelessness that he had before. He can't remember it because he's no longer timeless.

Craig: Yes—well, that's right!...what this model would require us to say is that God's omniscience in his timeless state would involve knowledge of exclusively tenseless truths...At the moment of creation, all of a sudden there would be a vast number of tensed propositions which would switch their truth value from being false to being true.

It seems clear Craig was in agreement with the temporal nature of Ross’ final sentence, for in another interview, with Robert Lawrence Kuhn on PBS’s ‘Closer to Truth’, Craig said this about God’s becoming temporal:

It is part of the condescension of God...that God, out of his love for us and his desire to relate to us, would quit this state of eternal timeless perfection that he enjoyed.

329 ‘Timelessness & Omnitemporality’, God & Time: Four Views, p. 159
330 ‘God, Time, and Eternity’, What God Knows, p. 92
Elsewhere in the same interview he would speculate why God could not return to his previous timelessness by destroying time, reasoning that destroying time later would change the fact that time, in the past, was. But this logical analysis would still also apply to the beginning of time. By claiming that God ‘was’ timeless outside time but ‘quit’ it to become temporal with creation, Craig is implying a temporal end to timelessness, that God ceased to be timeless. But a thing that can cease to be is by definition bounded by time in some sense. If God exists timelessly in any true sense then he must always exist that way. Such existence cannot change by ceasing to be. Timelessness cannot change into temporality. Craig’s concept of a prior timelessness is not an infinite existence, so it could not be truly timeless. His conception fits better to a proto-temporal existence, a divine time in which God creates our time. In this way his solution is little better than Padgett’s.

III. THE INCARNATION AND GOD’S TIMELESSNESS: GOD BOTH IN AND OUT OF TIME

A. Time and Eternity through the Chalcedonian Formula

It should not be surprising that a question of God’s relationship to time boils down to two logically irreconcilable positions of an eternal God outside time or an everlasting God inside time. As many have said, he must be one or the other, but neither alternative seems to be sufficient. This impasse is not surprising if we approach this matter only from elementary logic, for logic can only get us to what is knowable from our experience, and we only experience what our created senses can perceive. By its very nature the uncreated realm is closed to us and to our knowledge of it. If we are created beings then logic impels us to understand our Creator as substantially unlike us and so naturally imperceptible to us. But beyond this elementary philosophical fact we are bound to apophatic silence. We can say nothing about the nature of his existence as God. Yet the central Christian truth is that a bridge has been made between the created realm and the uncreated by which the creature can actually know the Creator; this is the function of the Incarnation. Outside of that reality it would be futile to speak of God in any positive form. All our God-talk would be mere
speculation and simplistic misleading anthropomorphisms.

It is the Incarnation of God in the man Jesus Christ that makes it possible to claim real knowledge of God that transcends mere anthropomorphisms because it reveals them to be real and true. In Jesus, God and man are united, the divine and human, and thus also the eternal and temporal:

As both God of God and Man of man Jesus Christ is the actual Mediator between God and man and man and God in all things, even in regard to space-time relations. He constitutes in Himself the rational and personal Medium in whom God meets man in his creaturely reality and brings man without.\textsuperscript{332}

The Creator enters into his creation and becomes part of it and thus perceptible and knowable to his creatures. This is not a \textit{tertium quid}, some third plane of being, but an intersection of the two. Every aspect of the uncreated divine nature is made one with the created nature. Such a union is spelled out in the Chalcedonian formula and this formula can be used to reconcile time and eternity in Christ.

As Jesus is both fully divine and fully human without confusion or diminishing of the natures so also the eternal nature of his divinity is present to him every bit as much as is the temporal nature of his humanity. One can no more think of him as having ‘left’ eternity to ‘become’ temporal (such a concept is self-contradictory) any more than we are allowed to think of him leaving his divinity to become a man. Christ cannot be treated as just a man or as solely God, or even mostly a man or mostly God. He is both God and man equally and simultaneously even if we cannot understand how it works. In the same way we must approach the matter of time. Torrance writes that:

\begin{quote}
We must learn to ask questions in two opposite directions at the same time, developing a relational and differential understanding of space and time in accordance with the nature and acts of God and in accordance with the nature and acts of man.\textsuperscript{333}
\end{quote}

What this means is that we cannot treat time as strictly one way or the other, as stasis or as

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{333} Ibid, p. 71
\end{flushright}
process. God, who is the ground of whatever reality exists, not least that of time, exists as God the Son in both the eternal timelessness of his divinity and in the temporal time-bound nature of his humanity. Because of this both the process ‘A’ series of time as well as the stasis ‘B’ series are true. It can and must be said that, on the one hand, the past and future do not exist but also that, on the other hand, they do exist. This seeming contradiction is bound up in the hypostatic union of the two natures in Christ. In him eternal Creator and temporal creature are united:

The eternity of the creator and the time of the creature meet in the incarnation where in human time the ground of human time appears and its end is anticipated. Thus we are not here simply dealing with two perspectives, the divine and human, but with two interrelated realms of being which bring with them two complementary perspectives.\textsuperscript{334}

The Incarnation requires us to affirm both natures equally, yet it has been too easy for the Church to slight the human side of the equation:

With few exceptions...Western theology has for the most part failed to develop adequate conceptual equipment to ensure due prominence to Christ's full humanity...a firm hold on the material humanity of the incarnate Son is a prerequisite for a doctrine of the Trinity that does not float off into abstraction from the concrete history of salvation.\textsuperscript{335}

Christ must be seen in his natures to be both the timeless Son of God through whom time was created and the temporal Son of Man who reveals himself in history. As Stump and Kretzman have said:

The doctrine of dual natures provides prima facie grounds for denying the incompatibility of God's eternality and God's becoming man.\textsuperscript{336}

In his divinity as God the Son, eternally begotten of the Father, Christ exists outside time. Or rather, he possesses an existence outside time. In this existence he is not bound or limited by the created nature which was made through him. For him all times are equally NOW, time being perceptible to him as a finite created thing. He is not measured by time nor changed within it. Whatever can be said about God in his eternal nature is true for Christ. Yet at the

\textsuperscript{335} The Promise of Trinitarian Theology, London: T&T. Clark, 2003, p. 34
same time Christ also exists as the son of Mary, born into history, growing and changing as men do. He experiences only the present as NOW, the past being remembered and the future anticipated:

If we say Jesus Christ, we also assert a human and therefore temporal presence. Every moment of the event of Jesus Christ is also a temporal moment, i.e., a present with a past behind it and a future in front of it, like the temporal moments in the sequence of which we exist ourselves. ‘The Word became flesh’ also means ‘the Word became time.’

Time itself becomes part of the nature of God as his self-revelation to creation ‘does not merely meet [time] at a point, but it enters time; nay, it assumes time; nay, it creates time for itself’. In creating time God has created his own temporal nature so that he could dwell in that time:

Time was in fact willed and created in order that there might take place His dealings in the covenant with man, which finds its counterpart in the relationship between man and his fellows. It is for this reason and in this sense that time is the form of our existence.

God created the world so that he could create his own historicity within it, his own history.

Yet this history does not begin, in temporal terms, with the birth of Christ or even with the Annunciation. For the Incarnation is not just the ultimate and fullest manner in which God relates and reveals himself to us. It is the very means by which he does this at all times. Since the Incarnation is the means by which God is known to man it follows that all of his actions by which he is known would come through the Incarnation. It is the means whereby God is enabled to interact with his creation, the ‘chosen path of God’s rationality in which He interacts with the world’, an extension of the uncreated and timeless into the created and temporal. God creates an intersection between the infinite and the finite whereby he can enter space and time and have a reciprocal relationship with his embodied children dwelling in

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337 Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, p. 50
338 Ibid
339 *Church Dogmatics* III/2, p. 527
340 Gunton, *The Triune Creator*, p. 67
time. Through the reality of the Incarnation God could speak to Adam in one moment before the Fall and question him later after the Fall. He could call Abram, argue with him over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah and hear the cries of Israel in Egypt. The sequence of these events would be as real for him as they were for his people because God has made himself part of the temporal process. His history with us is not merely an illusion created by our memory of his actions in time. It is part of his nature ‘now’. Without ceasing to be uncreated and timeless he has taken created time into himself. Thus he could truthfully reveal himself to Israel as the God who rescued them and who will bless them in the future if they kept his covenant.

The concept that the Incarnation represents a reality that pre-dates the historical life of Jesus and is present from the very beginning of time is buttressed when looking at the Incarnation from the divine and eternally timeless side of the equation. Since in God’s timeless nature there is no change or temporal sequence there cannot be a time when that timeless nature was not temporally incarnate just as there cannot be a time when the Son was not begotten of the Father. These actions taking place within the divine realm must partake of the divine nature. They must be timeless actions. The Son is always ‘born of the Father’ and he is always related to creation through union with it, which is the ground and essence of the Incarnation.

But there is also a model for this concept within the commonly understood beginning of the Incarnation as it is defended in the Catholic faith. The chronologically determined point in which God took flesh can be related to his visible entry into the world in his birth in Bethlehem. But the orthodox faith understands this visible entry to be merely that, a visible one. Before that moment, within the womb, God was already Incarnate, though not made fully manifest. This point was driven home in the Nestorian controversy. By analogy we can thus understand all ‘pre-incarnational’ manifestations of God to be like his existence within the womb, fully incarnate but not fully manifest. The incarnation is eternally present, but its
manifestation is temporally received and comprehended.

B. The Hypostatic Union of Eternity and Time.

The hypostatic union of Christ’s nature means that he does not alternate between natures but works in and through them simultaneously, each nature functioning according to its properties. It was not through Christ’s divinity that he died on the cross but through his humanity, just as it was not through his humanity that he was one with the Father’s but through his divinity. Yet each nature partook of the benefits of the other through union in the one person of Christ so that we can say that it is the man Jesus that is one with the Father and that it was the Son of God who died and was raised. Christ is always united in both, but his various works will be understood better through one nature or the other. This means that while some of his works will not be fully understandable from the perspective of his humanity, or alternatively of his divinity, yet every moment of Jesus’ existence will be perceptible as fully human or as fully divine.

In the same way each facet of God’s relationship to time is real from the perspective of either of the two natures. To us, dwelling in a linear temporal process, God’s actions change as history is ‘unfolded’. From our perspective we can see the Incarnation as beginning in history circa 6 BC. But in God’s timeless nature 6 BC is not experienced later than 5,000 BC or earlier than 2010 AD. All days are experienced as one. In such a timeless relationship with created time no chronological causality or sequence can exist. But just as the two natures in Christ do not cancel each other out so both the chronological sequence of time and its simultaneity in eternity exist alongside each other in Christ, and this coexistence would be true for every experience he has of time.

Our temporal understanding of Christ’s actions with and in the world occurs as a series of definite events following one after the other. The broad scheme can be boiled down to three events or phases. Creation, Incarnation, and Parousia. In this the Incarnation is seen as the
middle point of time, what has been called the ‘hinge’ of history. All time since the Creation was leading up to it, and since its occurrence it has become the foundation for the new age that is to come in the Parousia. But seen only from this temporal perspective the historical event that began with the Annunciation seems like a secondary development, temporally speaking, to the act of Creation. It may be a natural development, planned from the beginning, a perfection or culmination of Creation, but it is still secondary in chronology and thus stands in dependence upon what comes before as preparation. To then speak of Incarnation as an operative principle behind all of God’s relationship with creation, behind even the event of Creation itself, would make the historical event we encounter in the Gospel as but one instance, even if the supreme instance, of such an incarnational property in God. Seen only this way, the birth of Christ would seem to diminish in importance. How could we really claim or believe that God did something new when he was really doing it all along?

But if we turn the hypostatic union around and examine the same event from the side of God’s eternity a different relationship emerges between Christ’s taking flesh in Mary’s womb and every other action of Christ in space and time. Here all instances of God's interactions in the world through the medium of Incarnation, including being born of a virgin, can be seen as a single event. Even Creation and the end of the world followed by the new creation are wrapped up in this one timeless event. Their ordering in time follows the flow of time, but in eternity they are ordered by no temporal movement. Causality follows a logical rather than chronological pattern. Just as the Son is logically, not chronologically, dependent upon the Father for his being, so all instances of God’s incarnational relating to creation stand in logical dependence upon that which establishes the reality of Incarnation.

The birth of Jesus whereby God became man can be described as the culmination of the Incarnation which began in Creation. Since Jesus said that those who had seen him had seen the Father we can assume that no greater union of God to man will come but only the removal of fleshly barriers to see this union. Jesus the God-man is thus the end of the
Incarnation. A matter’s end, chronologically speaking, stands dependent upon its beginning, but understood as purpose the ‘end’ is what all others are logically dependent upon for existence. Thus from the eternal perspective all incarnational acts of God are dependent upon his taking flesh 2000 years ago. Creation itself is logically dependent upon this ‘later’ historical event. Paul uses a similar non-chronological reasoning when he says that if there is no resurrection of the dead then Christ is not raised. Since the universe that God created is one in which he would be a part, this universe must necessarily have been created with that in mind. The reality of the Incarnation the logical ground, the logos, upon which the universe and time itself were created. In this way a fuller understanding of ‘The world was made through him’ becomes clear. The distinction between the Father and Son in which the world is made by the Father but through the Son lies in the Son's Incarnation being the operative premise of creation and the template through which it is made.

Just as creation’s beginning is dependent upon the Incarnation of God in Christ so is every moment of its existence in time, as all are alike simultaneous in eternity in the ‘moment’ of creation. The timeless aspect of creation makes every day a part of the ‘day of creation’. This would align perfectly with Jonathan Edwards’ concept of God’s continuous creation of the world by constantly willing it into existence:

God’s upholding created substance, or causing its existence in each successive moment, is altogether equivalent to an immediate production out of nothing, at each moment, because its existence at this moment is not merely in part from God, but wholly from him; and not in any part, or degree, from its antecedent existence.341

But rather than seeing them as a series of separate acts of willing, as Edwards does, they should be seen as constituting a single act in eternity. Every moment in time is willed into being through God’s one act of creation. The very nature of time, whereby things in time change from moment to moment, being different now than they were before, is but a facet of God’s willing into being what was not, his creation of the very nature of Becoming. The existence of the universe is expressed through this nature and is only possible because the

341 Original Sin, Part IV, Ch. iii, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 1, Edward Hickman, Editor, Edinburg: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974, p. 221
nature of becoming exists in Christ in his eternally willing to become, to become part of the universe and human as we are: ‘Human life means to have been, to be, and to be about to be. Human life means to be temporal’. 342

This nature of becoming provides us with a bright dividing line between the eternal creation of the universe and the eternal begetting of the Son from the Father. This line is necessary if we are to preserve the essence of God's transcendence over creation. Both the creation of the world and the begetting of the Son originate from God in a timeless moment such that we cannot claim any moment when they did not exist. Thus there is no period of time when Christ was begotten of the Father. But likewise we cannot say there was any time when the world was not created. This makes it hard to perceive the distinction between the Son and creation. If they both derive their being from another, and in an eternal manner, how are they different? The difference lies in the difference between Becoming and Being. The nature of Becoming, which defines creation, is different from Being in that what becomes, what comes to be, also has the possibility of ceasing to be. The divine essence, which the Son has from the Father, gives the Son the power to be in himself. As Scripture says, he has life in himself. The Son cannot cease to be. The universe, on the other hand, has it in its nature to fall out of existence unless it is sustained by the Son. All that exists through coming into being exists in and only in Christ who is the author of its becoming. Outside of him there can be no existence of anything that was created.

Since the purpose of the Incarnation is to reveal in human flesh and in human history the God who created both flesh and history we must conclude that such media are the only natural means by which the infinite divinity of God can be supremely revealed in the world. Time is as necessary as flesh to make God manifest. Jesus, born of a woman in a specific time and place, is the natural embodiment of God. He was born in the moment in time that was created for him, for God's creation of time included not just the process of time’s

342 Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/2*, p. 522
succession but all the times that would occur within that process. Time was created as a unit. This block of time, or space-time, as Einstein saw it, is, like the man Jesus, the natural expression of its divine counterpart. It is eternity made flesh. And when eternity takes ‘flesh’ it naturally does so as history.

One consequence of this view of time’s creation from eternity is that for God the future is set because it already exists in God’s eternity even if it has not yet come into being in time. Our future and past exist equally with the present for God in his divine nature. All times share this simultaneous existence in eternity, while retaining their chronological sequential nature outside eternity within created time. In time the future is not set because it does not exist. What we do now effects what it will be. The present creates the future, but only from a chronological perspective where causality works only forward. But in God’s eternity there is no chronological causality but rather a theological one, a causality which binds all times together and allows the future to be as much a creative force of the past as the past is of the future. But such theological causality only functions because all times are united in Christ, through whom they came into being. Thus any backward causality of the future upon the past reflected in prophetic knowledge of the future only occurs through the mediation of the Incarnation, not through any process natural to the created realm. Real knowledge of the future is possible because the Incarnate Lord who reveals it in the past is the same one who exists in Eternity where the future already is. Specific instances of future knowledge throughout time are interwoven in the same act of creation as all times were when they were created. The creation of time paradoxes, killing one’s own grandfather before one was born, is eliminated because the future that is created is the one that will be accomplished even with knowledge of it interwoven into the past through the nexus of eternity. Such paradoxes can only be imagined by privileging a specific time stream. This privilege belongs only to God’s time.

343 ‘From the temporal standpoint, the present is ET-simultaneous [referring to eternal-temporal simultaneity] with the whole infinite extent of an eternal entity's life. From the standpoint of eternity, every time is present, co-occurent with the whole of infinite atemporal duration.’ Stump and Kretzman, ‘Eternity’, p. 440
C. The Monophysite Question: Does History End in Eternal Timelessness?

So far the question has involved the beginning of time and how its progress relates to God's timelessness. But another question looms that the Chalcedonian formula will help illuminate: Does time come to an end? We are left with two choices: either time ceases to be, terminating in a mirror image of its beginning, or it continues on forever.

There is a strong Christian tradition dating at least as far back as Augustine that time will cease at the end of the age when we are resurrected and fully united with God in all his glory. History will be over and our eternity will begin, so to speak. Certainly Scripture speaks volumes of history leading toward a final consummation. Heaven and earth will pass away and history as we know it will cease to be. Our entry into divine timelessness becomes the necessary escape from the natural end of things. Modern physics also give us a similar apocalyptic forecast of an end to the universe, and with its end the end of time. While there is a debate about whether the universe will continue to expand until all its matter evaporates into simple radiation following the second law of thermodynamics, or whether gravity will finally stop its expansion and reverse it until it ends in another singularity, a Big Crunch, both of these theories have the same end result: no universe, no time.344 On the philosophical side it is easier to contrast the infinite nature of God with the finite nature of creation and define that finiteness by its being finite on the end as well as at the beginning. This removes the difficult question of how God could comprehend a creation if it is also infinite. Can one infinity be greater than another? It is easier to conceptualize how God can see all of time if the sum of all times is still finite. But this is the problem with conceptualizing the infinite alongside the finite. The one is naturally imagined as larger, itself a facet of finite dimensionality, but it is larger in an infinite, ever expanding manner such that the finite shrinks into nothing.

344 Some speculate whether the Big Crunch would result in another Big Bang, but the nature of singularities like that mean that there is no continuity to the other side. Actual causation between what comes before”and after a singularity is impossible.
This was the same problem that the Monophysite Eutyches had. His heresy proposed that Jesus’ divinity consumed his humanity once he returned into heaven, for the uncreated divinity is infinitely greater than created humanity. This made his humanity a passing thing of little eternal importance. The orthodox response was to say that his humanity remained as critical with him on the throne as on the cross, for it was not just our redemption at stake but our union with God. If Jesus was no longer fully man he no longer could be our bridge to God. Monophysitism exalted the divine at the expense of the human but ignored the fact that we are and remain human and so need the human nature to remain in Christ for us to be connected to God through him.

The same critique, mutatis mutandis, can be made against the idea of time ending, for this idea rests upon the superiority of eternity as a mode of existence. It presupposes that eternity is the genuine reality and time a passing phase, practically an illusion because it lacks true being, having it only for what will effectively be of infinitely short duration. This is again the trap of comparing immeasurable timelessness with measurable time. But therein lies the proof against a radical Monophysite view of time, for we cannot help but imagine eternity as infinite time because we are created for time, and time for us. Temporality is not just our nature now. It is our nature forever, for it is the nature of all created things. Yet if time is a facet of the nature of creation, which all created things bear, then only by ceasing to be created can we escape existing in some form of time. But we will never and can never cease to be created beings, no matter what change we undergo or how close we get to God. What is created can never become uncreated. Only the never-created can be uncreated. There is also the added self-contradiction of imaging, as was seen in Craig’s comment about God being imagined to return back to timelessness. How can a timeless thing have a temporal past. We are created temporal. If we are to have a temporal nature we cannot, by definition, achieve it in the future. We must have it now and always. We must have it eternally. But then we would be like God and not creatures. So only God, the eternal and uncreated, can be timeless.
The doctrine of the Resurrection is proof enough that our existence after the end of this age will be analogous to our present embodied state. Even if we are embodied with spiritual bodies substantially different from our mere ‘carnal’ bodies now, still they will be bodies nonetheless, even if they are spiritual bodies. So likewise we will still then be bound to time as well. Whatever time is like in the new heaven and earth it will still be temporal. Time will not end as long as we exist. But the nature of our experience of time may change.

From the beginning we have experienced time as a two-edged sword. It is the arena of growth but also of decay. This has made time seem to the philosophers such an inferior mode of existence. Where there is time there is the potential for change, so any state of perfection would be unstable. It is the cessation of such negative change, the cessation of instability and the final achievement of perfection that is believed and anticipated in the ‘End of time’. But this need not entail a cessation of all forms of change unless the definition of perfection is a state that cannot be improved. But this is a finite form of perfection. If perfection is defined simply as the absence of corruption or anything disharmonious with a state of goodness then it is easy to conceive of an eternity, or everlastingness of growing from perfection to perfection. This is Gregory of Nyssa’s image of time in the angelic realm, constantly growing in the understanding of God's infinite goodness and glory.

What the Parousia and Resurrection mark is the end of a specific dispensation of time which has existed since Creation. In this era we live as sinners fallen from Grace and redeemed back into it. We wrestle against Sin, the World and the Devil, and God's kingdom is expanded. It is an age of battle of good and evil. But that battle will end, and with it an age, and we will have achieved the perfection we will then possess in the everlasting eternity. In the beginning the creation of man was good. Yet it was a form of perfection that was awaiting increase, ‘be fruitful and multiply’. Like the angels we will never fall away from God again but will continue to grow in glory. That our bodies will be ‘spiritual’ may signify that, just as
Christ after the Resurrection was still embodied, yet without being limited by that embodiment as we are now (he could pass through walls and disappear into the heavens), so, along with this new corporeal existence, we might find our temporal existence expanded or ‘perfected’. We might call this form of temporality Resurrection time. Akin to what others, like Barth, have called Divine time; it would be the nature of temporal existence that God had created us to have from the beginning. As the Incarnation has always been understood to be the divine affirmation of the goodness of our corporeal existence, reaffirmed by our resurrection into new flesh, a fact sadly forgotten in much of our contemporary gnostic visions of heaven, so it also should be seen as God’s affirmation of time. God chose to dwell in time. Thus time is good, and in the Resurrection we will finally be perfected enough to experience it properly.
Chapter 5
An Incarnational Hermeneutic

Following upon the idea that in the Incarnation divine eternity and created time are united without either changing its essential nature, and that the Incarnation is the supreme revelation of God in space and time, the role of Scripture in this equation, and how we approach its historicity and divine origin, ought to fall naturally into place within a Chalcedonian framework. The false dichotomy, wherein Scripture is treated either as an historical document, which is then applied to eternal spiritual questions, or as a body of eternal truths that are hidden in an historical façade, can be resolved in the same way the seemingly irreconcilable natures of Christ are reconciled. The Incarnation should be seen to hold the key to binding together the two historic strands of biblical hermeneutics and preserving them from their natural distortions when they are held in isolation.

I. SCRIPTURE AS A FACET OF GOD'S SELF-REVELATION

Though the Incarnation can be argued to have ‘begun’ before the creation of the world it still possesses a hierarchy of interactions within creation in its process of chronological time such that the birth of the Son of God to Mary of Nazareth is seen to mark the end and height of the self-revelation of God. Divine self-revelation can be understood to have different levels of reality. If the very presence of God in the world is seen as the base level, the ground of God's incarnational self-revelation, and the full manifestation of God’s incarnate reality in Jesus is placed at the other end of a spectrum, we can place in the centre of that spectrum the Word of God given to the prophets, with all the historical flesh that goes with it. As T.H.L Parker says: ‘Revelation...[is] the verbum Dei which is the temporal form of the Sapientia Dei or aeternus Sermo Dei’.345 God’s purposeful self-revelation to a people in time, and created for the time of that revelation, is the created temporal context that provides his

345 T.H.L. Parker, The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Study in the Theology of John Calvin, Oliver & Boyd, 1952, p. 64
creatures the means for understanding the full revelation. This self-revelation is a single event from the divine perspective yet unfolding in time through a series of events that is called ‘sacred history’.

A. The Word Written Related to the Word Incarnate

Within Scripture Jesus is identified as the Word of God, (Jn. 1:1). This is along the same sense in which ‘the word’ is used in the Old Testament to indicate God's communication to a prophet or patriarch; ‘the word of the Lord came to Abram’ (Gen. 15:1). Every event of communication from God shares the nature of the One who is the fullest revelation. Yet the Word of God is more than just the event of revelation, for within history the events have been transformed into artefacts, those historical creations that bridge the gap between the times of the prophets and the times of those who read their prophecies. The Word given has become transferred into text and received by God's people as the Word written, so that Cranmer could call it God’s Word in the introduction to the Prayer Book and Jonathan Edwards could say, ‘the Bible therefore is the Word of God’. Scripture, concrete and temporal in nature, for it was historically created and historically received, points the Church both to the history of God’s people and to the eternal Lord who reveals himself to them, and through them to the world.

Scripture as a tangible witness to God’s revelation bears the distinctive marks of both human time and divine eternity. As an historical artefact it is simultaneously a creature of time while yet seeming to transcend time. On the one hand it points to the distance of time and to its own historical origins. The books of Moses, the chronicles of kings, the wisdom of Solomon, the Gospels and the letters to the various churches, all point to the historical development and changes experienced by the people of God spread out through time and space, a witness to chronos, the created dimension of change. Yet on the other hand, having been set to written form, Scripture achieves a form of permanence, fixed like the stars. And as the stars have been seen as a moving image of eternity so the written word can be seen as a
visible form of the eternal unchanging truth of God. Thus in Scripture time and eternity sit side by side.

This is not to identify the words of men with the eternal Word of God, which Barth was firm to assert:

It is quite impossible that there should be a direct identity between the human word of Holy Scripture and the Word of God, and therefore between the creaturely reality in itself and as such and the reality of the Creator. It is impossible that there should have been a transmutation of the one into the other or an admixture of the one with the other. That is not the case even in the person of Christ. 346

As a living artefact and facet of God’s self-revelation in time, Scripture is a type of the Incarnate Word. Brevard S. Childs likens it specifically in this way, saying of Scripture:

The divine and human dimension remains inseparably intertwined, but in a highly profound, theological manner. Its ontological relation finds its closest analogy in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, truly man and truly God. 347

Like Christ it possesses two natures, yet without confusion. Scripture is both fully divine and eternal in its essence, ‘God breathed’, while being fully human and historical in origin. The two are not in conflict. As Jesus in his created nature is the very manifestation of the uncreated God so the history of God in the world is the temporal manifestation of his timeless eternity. This eternal/temporal union in the written word must follow the same lines that the Incarnation of the living Word has established. Each nature must be understood individually in its own essence, but the full meaning of scripture, like the full significance of Christ, can only be had when the two natures are understood together.

B. The Two Natures of Scripture

As Christ possesses a divine nature so does the word which speaks of him. As Peter Enns puts it: ‘As Christ is both God and human, so is the Bible. In other words, we are to think of

346 Barth, CD I/2, 499
the Bible in the same way that Christians think about Jesus’. The written word of God is divine because its ultimate source, pressed back beyond its merely historical origin, is the Spirit of God and is used by God as an instrument of his revelation. Scripture does not point merely to the prophet and the prophecy he received in that time and place. Scripture points through it to God. It is ‘breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness’ (2 Tim. 3:16). And it is ‘living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart’ (Heb. 4:12). This divine nature makes Scripture not merely a tool for use by the Church and the individual believer. The word of God is a connection to God himself, a veritable extension of the Holy Spirit, the Divine Breath which breathed out the texts and which guides us in understanding them. Though it is known to us in its historical particularities, in its divinity it transcends the limits of the historical.

This divine nature is one understood by the Church for centuries. It naturally imparted to the canon a unity and infallibility. As God is one, so is Scripture one. As he is good, omniscient and the bearer of all truth, so Scripture bears these qualities. As God is unchanging and eternal, so the truth of scripture reveals the eternal and unchangeable Truth. Through it, in the Holy Spirit, the faithful reader enters into the mind of God, not by his own finite understanding alone but in the full power of God. In Scripture the finite reader encounters the infinite.

The modern age has generally dismissed this divine dimension of scripture, preferring to subordinate any concept of divinity to the historical reality of the texts, in much the same way as Jesus has had his divinity reduced to that of an enlightened man. But this is no reproach against a focus on Scripture’s historicity, for any orthodox approach to Scripture must embrace this aspect of its nature, for this is its created ‘human’ nature. Along the lines of the

Chalcedonian formula, we must reject the tendency to sublimate the historical and human dimension of the Word out of a fear of falling into an Arian or Ebionite conception. Nor can we reduce in any way the manner in which it operates as historical texts indexed to the time and place of the varied human authors. In its human dimension Scripture is very much a creature of this world and of history. It was not received by the Church as something utterly alien or inhuman. It ‘belonged in the ancient worlds that produced it. It was not an abstract, otherworldly book, dropped out of heaven. It was connected to and therefore spoke to those ancient cultures’.  

To the eye of man Jesus would have looked like any other man. So to the eye of the historian Scripture must look like ‘simply’ a piece of ancient literature, or rather, multiple pieces. It is the eye of faith that sees more than that, yet without denying what the faithless eyes see.

**II. TWO PRINCIPLES OF THE UNION OF THE DIVINE AND HUMAN IN SCRIPTURE**

A. The Spirit is Known through the Flesh

An inherent dualism that pits mind against matter and has ridden on the back of Neoplatonism into the Church and into western thinking. But this dualism, like that which rejects the world as the evil creation of a demiurge, must be rejected. We cannot imitate Buddha and escape the world in order to find enlightenment, for in the world is where God will meet us, the world of flesh and senses. No flight into the mind and away from the sensible world will reveal God to us, for our bodies are not obstacles to knowing him but the divinely appointed ways of knowing. God made the world and it was good. He made our senses good as well. The fullness of God's being is not made manifest to us through the contemplation of abstract ideas unless those ideas are first embodied in tangible realities. Plato quoted Socrates as saying: ‘Then when is it that the soul attains to truth? When it tries

349 *Ibid.* p. 17

350 ‘A sharp dualism between body and mind, or between body and soul, however, so perversely permeated Western traditions from Plato to Kant that from the very first some Christian writers defended “our psychosomatic unity as a basic principle of Christian anthropology”, while others allowed their thought to be dominated by the Platonic tradition.’ Anthony Thiselton, ‘Time and Grand Narrative?’, *Thiselton on Hermeneutics: Collected Works with New Essays*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006, p. 728
to investigate anything with the help of the body, it is obviously led astray’.

Yet the Christian faith proclaims that there can be no knowledge of God that does not first come in the flesh, in the form of a man who walks the earth and appears as one of us. To know God we must encounter him as he makes himself known, in the flesh. The very fact of the Incarnation affirms the worth and importance of the created realm. T.F. Torrance notes that through the hypostatic union ‘God has become man, has taken on a human image, so that we may know God, and understand his revelation in terms of the image, likeness and analogies of man’. And Jesus’ resurrection with an actual, though transformed, bodily nature tells us that this was no momentary affirmation. God is showing us that he chooses to be known in flesh and in time. As Murray Rae observed:

In the incarnate life of Jesus Christ, the Word of God and Second Person of the Trinity graces our history with his own presence. He thus confirms history's goodness and shows it to be the medium through which God's loving purpose is worked out.

1. Divine Condescension

For God to make himself known to us in the flesh involves an act of becoming. God, who is beyond the created world, becomes part of the created world. This involves a necessary element of translation: God must show himself in a form different from what he is in his divine nature. This act itself is an act of divine accommodation. God does not require us to ascend to his level. Rather, he descends to ours. The concept of divine accommodation can be found early in Christian theology in Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, though it is first given a proper theological justification by Origen who attributed it to the necessity of the interaction of God’s divine nature us:

But when divine providence is involved in human affairs, God assumes human intelligence, manners and language.

351 *Phaedo*, 65B
Yet the theologian of the early Church most associated with this idea is Chrysostom who uses the term accommodation, or condescension more than any other Patristic writer. His book *On the Incomprehensibility of God* is devoted to this concept and gives it the fullest theological treatment. Chrysostom held that God must condescend even to be seen by us, let alone for us to understand what he would say to us. This is not because we are sinners but because we are not God. Even the angels must receive this condescension, this accommodation to their weakness. As created beings they cannot see their uncreated Creator, they can only see his glory, and so it is with us. God must make a way for us to see or hear him:

> God condescends whenever he is not seen as he is, but in the way one incapable of beholding him is able to look upon him.\(^{356}\) 
> That no one of those prophets saw God’s essence in its pure state is clear from the fact that each one saw him in a different way.\(^{357}\)

But for Chrysostom God’s condescension is also due to the temporal limitations of the people, for he takes account of what truths they are able to receive in their stage of learning. God accommodates his message to the limited, even deceived, knowledge of his people: to the magi he spoke through a star not a prophet or apostle, and to Saul through a medium because Saul believed in her:

> He permitted opinions erroneous and unworthy of himself, to prevail, as that he was a body formerly, and that he was visible...And he utters words at variance with his declarations of himself.\(^{358}\)

The point for Chrysostom is that God must hold off deeper truths until the simpler are received, and this means allowing inconsequential false ideas about God to remain uncorrected until the time is right. This temporal and temporary limitation is made worse by the Fall so that we have a tendency to misunderstand what should be naturally comprehensible to us. God has to build our understanding up from a fallen state. But to do that he must meet us in our fallen ignorance and communicate to us in terms we are able to

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355 *On The Incomprehensibility of God*, hom. 1, p. 66
356 Ibid, hom. 3.15, p. 101
357 Ibid, hom. 4.19, p. 122
358 Titus, hom. 3, 1:12
receive.

This concept is echoed by Calvin, the theologian next to Chrysostom most associated with Divine accommodation. Calvin saw that no finite ‘feeble mind’ could possibly comprehend the infinite Lord, who himself cannot be contained by the ‘heaven of heavens’. 359 And God himself was communicating this fact: ‘all the signs he ever employed...gave plain intimation of his incomprehensible essence’. 360 There is some evidence that Calvin was thinking of Chrysostom’s writings on this, for his statement that God ‘lisps with us as nurses are wont to do’ 361 reads like a close retelling of Chrysostom’s example of ‘a father [who] considers not his own dignity, but talks lispingly with his children’. 362 But Calvin puts less emphasis on the ontological gulf between Creator and creature than Chrysostom. Often he claims that God’s accommodation was necessary to shield the people from the effects of God’s undiluted glory, seemingly implying that it would both be conceivably possible for God to reveal his true essence and that what is shown to the people is not so much a translation from one nature to another but a radically reduced quantity of the divine essence. Yet Calvin is clear, like Chrysostom, that the epistemic distance between God and man is not a result of the fall but of creation:

Even if man had remained free from all stain, his condition would have been too lowly for him to reach God without a Mediator. 363

This is important, for rooting divine accommodation to our limited ontological realities reduces the offence of the ‘imperfections’ of God’s early revelations of himself utilizing primitive conceptions. Rather than being a regrettable limitation of God’s self-revelation because of sin or ignorance, such accommodations are what makes revelation possible in the first place, for saints and sinners alike.

360 Institutes, I.xi.3
361 Ibid, I.xiii.1
362 Homilies on Titus, hom. 3, I:12
363 Institutes, II. xii.1
Divine condescension of the kind Calvin and Chrysostom conceived was not unique to them even if they made the most explicit use of it in their theology. It is bound up in the very concept that God speaks to us in our own language, as Rabbi Aqiba affirmed. We are not equipped for divine language so all communication must come in the simple form of human languages and concepts. As we creatures of God are embodied souls, so divine revelation is embodied communication, the ‘flesh’ of which are human words. This connection cannot be broken; we can no more communicate without words than we can live apart from the body.\textsuperscript{364} There can be no thought of \textit{grokking} God, to use a term from Robert Heinlein’s \textit{Stranger in a Strange Land}.\textsuperscript{365} Such intuitive knowledge is beyond out nature.

The need to speak to us in our own language means that God cannot communicate to us without words. He is bound \textit{literally}. It is true that he communicates to us also in dreams and visions but these are meaningless until words are put to them, and these words must be chosen by God, or by the prophet inspired by God. Whatever John saw while on Patmos, until he put his vision into words the truth in them was inaccessible to the Church. ‘Dragon’, ‘four horsemen’ and ‘bowls of wrath’ were the words that best expressed the essence of what he saw. It is impossible to move beyond these simple images unless new words are chosen to describe more complex interpretations. So even in the attempt to avoid a strictly literal interpretation letters are still indispensable. And these letters must be concrete in that they clearly point to understood terms and realities. It could be argued that any theology or philosophy, or most any intellectual endeavour outside pure mathematics, that becomes

\textsuperscript{364} While Scripture attests to the possible temporary experience of some outside the body it is not a freedom from the body’s limitations. Those whose bodies are in the grave are in fact presented as destitute of full life, with the exception of those who are with Christ. But the fact that Christ still has a body would work against any idea that a disembodied existence is either superior or desired.

\textsuperscript{365} As described in the novel: ‘Grok means to understand so thoroughly that the observer becomes a part of the observed—to merge, blend, intermarry, lose identity in group experience.’ This and other modern Science Fiction fantasies of telepathy are, alongside the scientific dream of Artificial Intelligence, modern manifestations of the Neoplatonic belief in the superiority of the spirit, or mind, to the flesh. Hubert Dreyfus, in his work, \textit{What Computers Can’t Do: The Limits of Artificial Intelligence}, and \textit{What Computers Still Can’t Do: A Critique of Artificial Reason}, links the failure of the artificial intelligence movement to have much success to the refusal to accept the crucial importance of bodily existence for the development of basic rational foundations.
dominated by largely abstract terminology has moved from clarity to obscurity. God has shown a propensity for communicating in vivid and simple terms.

But at the same time that we are bound to the use of clear words to impart meaning, we also must acknowledge that their literal meaning is not as literal as many modern critics would allege. Symbolism and metaphor are as indispensable to words as words are indispensable to communication. All human language involves the use of varying degrees of metaphorical meaning. All communication partakes of this quality of metaphor: ‘this is like that’ or ‘I am like this’. Colin Gunton explains how this metaphorical communication is the essence of all forms of knowing things beyond ourselves:

The key to the relation between language and the world is…its indirectness. The world can be known only indirectly, and therefore metaphor, being indirect, is the most appropriate form that a duly humble and listening language should take. In all this, there is a combination of openness and mystery, speech and silence, which makes the clarity and distinction aimed at by the rationalist tradition positively hostile to the truth. Thus the tables are turned: metaphor, rather than being the Cinderella of cognitive language, becomes the most, rather than the least, appropriate means of expressing the truth.\(^\text{366}\)

It is the necessary analogical nature of language that Lewis points to when he suggests that exegetes avoid interpreting images literally and to take them in their simplest and least abstract meaning:

For our abstract thinking is itself a tissue of analogies: a continual modelling of spiritual reality in legal or chemical or mechanical terms.\(^\text{367}\)

The desire to get beyond metaphor stems from the belief that there can be words whose ‘literal’ meaning corresponds exactly to the thing intended with no ambiguity possible, as if there could be only one use of the word. But such words are only understandable because what they communicate is already known, and these words were chosen (arbitrarily?) to be identified with such known things. To communicate what is not yet known, words which already have another meaning must be chosen to do double duty.


\(^{367}\) Letters to Malcolm Chiefly on Prayer, Bles, 1964, p. 74
But a metaphor can only work if the original ‘literal’ meaning is known. Once that meaning is known it serves as a guide to understanding an expanded concept. Metaphors and all symbolic meaning are thus indexed to the meanings and interworkings of the original simple terms which are used to communicate them. The move back toward an appreciation for the importance of the literal meaning of the texts in the Scholastic period, setting the stage for the revival of an historical interpretation in the Renaissance and the Reformation, was this understanding that the allegorical interpretation was governed by the literal meaning. For a spiritual interpretation to be rational it had to follow the guidelines laid down by the bodily meaning of the words.

But these guidelines are not established through a purely rational deduction or observation. There is no exact rule for metaphorical usage. Metaphors are by their nature inexact. They are invented and passed down, not discovered. It is their establishment in the human convention of language that gives them their communicative power, and this power is increased by the multiplication of these imperfect images. The Latin word for muscle, *musculus*, is the same for the word for mouse, because the image of the muscle moving beneath the skin can appear like a mouse moving beneath a cloth. But now the word muscle can be used to communicate force or coercion because such actions traditionally required great muscles. The image of a weak and tiny mouse has mutated into an image of power and dominance. Thus words and their meanings organically expand and grow, but such expansion was made possible by the simplest communications, many which may long since have been forgotten.

We are meant to grow in our capacity to express in language just as we are meant to grow in our capacity to understand, for the two are inextricably related. Yet the greater understanding, which is the desired end, is, as the term ‘end’ signifies, never our initial experience in learning. It is the humbler lessons that we encounter first.

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368 Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement*, p. 37
When it comes to the greatest communication; God’s self-revelation in his Son, it is this very humility that we encounter first, before we appreciate the glory. Men did not first see Jesus as the Son of God. He came to them as a man, born of a woman and with no divine light shining from his face, ‘he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him’ (Is. 53:2). It is a very human Jesus that we see in the Gospels. We could see no other unless we saw that first. It is only when putting together all the things that this man did and said, and connecting it to the context of all sacred history, that we see him as more than just a man. Behind the human raiment the eye of faith begins to see that this man is the very face of the uncreated Creator. But just as no one comes to the Father except through the Son, so no one comes to know the Son of God truly except by knowing him as the Son of Man. To know the spirit we must look at the flesh it inhabits.

2. Realities of bodily existence:

   a. temporal development is necessary

   There are two things that we should notice about the flesh of Christ that should guide us in understanding the flesh of the Scriptures. They are both obvious, and sometimes ignored because they are so obvious. The first is that Jesus grew in time. Saint Luke says that Christ grew ‘in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man’. This was of a piece with his physical growth. It is part of his temporal nature that he developed in time. He did not spring, like Athena, fully formed into the world. While some great men may appear to spring suddenly upon the world stage everyone knows that they were not born with that obvious greatness. They all came into the world babbling and spitting up. Mother Theresa and Genghis Khan were not so dissimilar at birth. No one would have looked at them and described saint or conqueror. Whether it was in their nature to become what they were or whether they were formed by the accidents of history or the Providence of God, it took time for them to develop into what they became. Biographies exist for the very purpose of tracing those developments.
Jesus began, to the sensible world, *in utero* and then appeared as a baby, and from then he grew as a child does into a man. It was an organic process natural to created life. While aspects of his holiness might have been apparent in the cradle we would not expect anything as profound or obvious as were his later teaching in the temple at twelve, and those also would naturally be surpassed by his preaching of the kingdom, his miracles, and finally his freely offered death on the cross. This was not a change from one thing into something else but rather the sprouting and flowering of the incipient life from the beginning. An acorn is no less an oak for being a seed, but it is the full tree that shows its purpose. Jesus was no less the Incarnate Son of God in the cradle or in the womb than he was in the Temple or on the cross. But he came into the world not to lie in a manger but to save the world. Every day of his life was a step that led him naturally to Jerusalem.

When we look at Scripture as an organic process like any other creation, then we are not surprised at its stages of development. We should expect it to be lowly and humble in form in the beginning compared to its fuller maturity. Revelation must be progressive for its outer form, the vessel which contains it, must be created. This vessel of revelation will have its infancy period in which it seems weak and imperfect. Crude anthropomorphisms will surround the deeper wisdom within. Primitive understandings of morality will be displayed by those who are growing in their understandings of God and creation. Even the prophets will be relatively limited to their *Sitz im Leben*, being part of the same organic development. Abraham was a model of faith in his or any generation, and he knew enough about God to argue with him concerning the fate of Sodom. But when God asked him to sacrifice his own son on a mountain he did not argue, showing that he did not fully know what we all know now: that God would never desire such a thing. Being a man born in a time when children were sacrificed to countless gods it clearly appeared to him as a distinct possibility that God was serious. Despite what mockers of faith may suppose, pious men today would surely not hesitate to ask God if he was testing them if he made a similar request. That is not because we are smarter or better than Abraham. It is merely because we have learned from the lessons
that Abraham's experience of revelation was writing.

Those who reject the ‘imperfect’ articulations of divine truth found in revelation’s early phases fail to see the common marks of its unique identity in all ages, marks that reveal it to be the Word of God no less, even if imperfectly, than the fuller revelation. This failure is as foolish as despising a cathedral’s crypt because it is not as glorious as the bell tower. The crypt is where the foundation is laid without which the bell tower would fall. In a play the third act is where all action is leading and where resolution will be found. The first act ‘merely’ sets the stage, but for this it is indispensable. One cannot read the Gospel of John, or Paul’s Letter to the Romans and understand them properly without knowing Genesis. The answers may not be as clearly laid out in Genesis, but the questions often are. Just so, if Christ is the fulfilment of the Law how can anyone understand what that means while remaining ignorant of what the Law says?

So John cannot be read divorced from Genesis. But even more so Genesis cannot be read apart from John, even though for centuries it existed without John, for it was given to lead to John. John, and all the rest of the New Testament writings reveal the purpose of the imperfect shadows within the Old Testament. Because revealed truth is a temporal process moving unidirectionally from past to present the meanings of the earliest become clearer through the later revelations, the new interpreting the old. The New Testament cannot be seen as standing in opposition to the Old or vice versa without denying their common origin in the one eternal act of revelation. The Gospel proclaimed in its clarity is the key to seeing it implicit in the Law. It reveals what was always there but hidden to us because of its undeveloped status.

Moreover, the transition from undeveloped to developed can be quite sudden. A child may suddenly start to speak, but it was for months living in an environment in which its parents talked to it and each other. Language was in the air, waiting for connections to be made in its brain. When Hellen Keller finally learned to communicate she had already learned many
words without understanding their meaning. She could go through the physical motions of them, but it was not until she connected one with its intended meaning that illumination hit her and she began to connect many words with the outside world that had been opaque to her until then. She was like the Jews who suddenly understood the meaning of the texts they had read since childhood when Jesus revealed their purpose.

b. not all parts of the body are equal.

The second feature of Jesus’ bodily nature is that it is composed of many parts of unequal worth or function. As fully man, Jesus had all the parts of the body that are required to be a man, yet not all of these parts were of equal use in the actions of his ministry. His hands healed, his eyes beheld the multitude, his mouth spoke words of wisdom and warning and his feet took him from town to town. All have their use. ‘The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”, nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you’” (1 Cor. 12:21). Yet there is a hierarchy of importance to the various parts; the foot serves to enable the hands and mouth to do their work in various locations by taking Jesus there, but the hands and mouth do not serve to enable the feet in the same way. Moreover, some parts are kept hidden. His inner organs, though critical in enabling him to live as a man, were not meant to be seen, and some body parts were meant to be covered and whose function are never discussed. We know that Jesus ate, so his digestive system was functioning, but the other natural functions of that system are ignored by the Gospel writers. No sensible Christian would say that Jesus’ divinity would preclude his urination or defecation, but there is little purpose in speaking of these things if it only makes the foolish laugh. There are also bodily features that are entirely incidental. All normal men have faces, but their facial features vary. They have eyes and hair, the colour of which can vary from person to person. Jesus was of Jewish descent, being born of a Jewish woman, but that is only because God chose the Jews to be his people and the vehicle of Incarnation. God could have chosen any tribe with any genetic make-up, and the same goes for his choice of a girl within the people of Israel to be the mother of the Son’s Incarnate form. No importance need be placed upon these particular genetic variations.
Like the human body, the flesh of Scripture has various parts. It is composed of prophetic interpretations of history and promises of God’s plans for the future, legal prescriptions and proscriptions, various histories and narrative episodes of the people of God, and their spiritual and theological reflections or questions. As with the physical body not all of these parts are treated with equal importance. Many aspects of the histories seem to be just history, with little spiritual illumination, a mundane quality which has led many commentators to dismiss them as unworthy of revelation or to allegorize them. But they serve as the connecting temporal flesh in a body that spans millennia. This is especially true of the genealogies. They are a testimony to the fact that the people of Israel are no phantom creation of God but a real people with real history, a history in which God has been active and which connects us to God's actions in the past.

If genealogies and lists of battle fatalities are the feet or legs of divine revelation's temporal body, doing the grunt work needed by the higher elements, then the episodes of sinning patriarchs and unenlightened reasoning could be its lower intestines, doing work that would not be needed if we were angels and that necessitates dealing with a lot of refuse. For some philosophers and religions the messiness of the human body is a scandal. It is little wonder that the messiness of human history reflected in sacred scripture would be equally scandalous to some. Yet the ‘accidents’ of genetics are more acceptable to many than the idea that such freedom might be reflected in Scripture, that there might be elements of a passage that have little to no revelatory consequence. Few believers in divine determinism would perhaps propose that a person's eye colour was ordained by God for a particular purpose, but there are many who hold the idea that every stroke of the pen of the biblical authors was guided by the Holy Spirit to impart some necessary element of divine truth.

Yet such a strong concept of divine intentionality is beyond the power of any mere human being to be a conscious participant in it. It is an inhuman characteristic being imparted into
the human authorship. Only by presuming that the Holy Spirit effectively used the divine authors as willing puppets could they be supposed to have produced writings without the least sign of human imperfection or limitation. But then we would be approaching a form of Docetism\textsuperscript{369} in which the scriptures only seem to be human. For us to truly recognize the human nature of Scripture we must be willing to see that fundamental aspect of human nature that Jesus exhibited: frailty. Jesus grew weary, both physically and emotionally. He became hungry and thirsty. He knew fear. These aspects of human weakness and limitation were essential to him being like us in all things.\textsuperscript{370} Yet in spite of his human weakness Christ accomplished all that his Father wanted. His human weakness did not impede his divine purpose. So we should be able to expect the same of Scripture. We could see its human frailty in details that have no purpose or that even are erroneous on an inconsequential level; all the while the divine purpose of Scripture is never lessened.

The belief that Scripture is inerrant, rather than infallible, finds its justification in Paul’s description of ‘every scripture’ as God breathed useful for correction. Can it serve as correction if it contains errors, no matter how small? A little leaven leavens the whole batch, it will be said. But as a counter to this is the sovereignty of God over all things. He allows evil to grow even among the people of God and uses it to work his will. Surely if he can use the treachery of Joseph’s brothers to bring Jacob and his family to Egypt he can use scriptures with minor errors in them to still correct the faithful reader. Moreover, the divine nature of the text lies not in the words themselves as such, any more than Jesus’ divinity was in his humanity. His divinity was in his person, a person that we see in his humanity. Scripture is divine, and thus truthful and infallible in its divinity, not in every jot and tittle of its flesh.

\textsuperscript{369} Kent Sparks says ‘to make the human authors of Scripture inerrant is Docetism’, ‘The Sun Also Rises’, \textit{Evangelicals & Scripture}, Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez and Dennis L. Okholm, Editors, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004, p. 31

\textsuperscript{370} The possibility that it is Jesus’ resurrected flesh that could be our model for Scripture’s humanity is dismissed because his new spiritual body was obtained with the death of his ‘mortal’ body, and such an experience is closed to us until we likewise pass through death. In this world our flesh is weak, as was the flesh of all the prophets and apostles. We should expect the humanity of Scripture that flowed from them to echo their humanity as they actually experienced it.
Literal inerrancy actually has the effect of minimizing the flesh of scripture by flattening it out and ignoring the variety of its writings. It ignores the integrity of the body because it allows the body to be sliced up into tiny fragments. This was done by the rationalist critics of Scripture in order to reduce it to a level where it could be dispensed with piecemeal. Yet the Inerrantists have accepted the inevitability if this deconstruction and have countered by investing every one of those fragments with equal revelatory power and veracity. It shares with allegory the desire to elevate all texts to the same spiritual level, just as the rationalist critics lower everything to the same level. Yet the attempt to invest the weaker parts of the body of scripture with more meaning than they are meant to bear is an error almost equal to those who would throw out of the canon those texts they did not understand or find valuable.

The idea of holding to the spiritual integrity of the Bible while acknowledging weaker inconsequential elements is not a concept wholly at odds with an infallible or even inerrant Scripture. Charles Hodge, the theologian closely associated with the concept of literal inerrancy, still could see within the unified inerrant text specks of irrelevant imperfection:

No sane man would deny that the Parthenon was built of marble, even if here and there a speck of sandstone should be detected in the structure.\footnote{Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, Hendrickson Publisher, 1999, 1:170}

The ability to see the infallibility or inerrancy of the Scriptures is a spiritual perception which itself allows the reader to distinguish the mere fleshly specks from the spiritual unity. For Barth this spiritual perception is part of what makes the texts the Word of God, and it does so regardless of any flaws in the text:

They [biblical authors] can be at fault in any word, and have been at fault in every word, and yet according to the same Scriptural witness, being justified and sanctified by grace alone, they have still spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word.\footnote{Barth, Church Dogmatics I/2, 529-30}

B. The Purpose of the Flesh is Spirit.
The purpose of the Incarnation is to unite man to God by God becoming man. We meet Christ first in the flesh, not in the spirit. But we are intended to move on to the spirit, to perceive his divinity. As we look on the face of the Carpenter, metaphorically for most Christians who must ‘see’ him as depicted in the Gospels, we see the face of the Father. Encountering the flesh of Scripture is intended to bring us into its divine nature. By reading the words of men inspired by God we are confronted with the living word of God and by this we enter into the mind of God. Never denying the marks of its humanity, we must now confess the marks of its divinity.

1. *Scripture interprets scripture*

Whereas the marks of Scripture’s humanity, its historical nature, are its particularity and diversity in time and space, the mark of its divinity is its essential unity across all spatial and temporal divisions. The words of men are varied, but the word of God is one. It has a common purpose and identity and therefore can be treated as a single book with a single author rather than only as a collection of many books by many different authors. Where the human dimension of the texts will distinguish Paul from Isaiah, the divine nature of the texts links them together as part of a single canon. By doing this the canonical reader is able to let Genesis reflect on Daniel, and let Peter shed light on Paul. No text can be read in complete isolation from, let alone against, another. As God is One, we must acknowledge that his communication through the prophets and apostles is united in purpose. It speaks with one voice, through the many historical voices.

The spiritual unity Scripture possesses is an entity in itself, not just a declaration of connectedness. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. There is, in modern biblical scholarship, an attention to the parts of scripture that can ignore the reality that binds them together, as if, should one choose to seek the witness of Scripture as a whole, all that would be necessary would be to take the understanding of each separate section and, Frankenstein-like, artificially attach them together. Yet in the realm of the body there is the soul that gives
it life, that is a part of its life. It is this soul that speaks and acts through the parts of the body. When Barth says that the Bible is not the Word of God in its humanness until it becomes such by the Word of God he is pointing to the need of the flesh to be animated by the spirit. That spiritual animation pervades the entire body of Scripture and it is the Spirit that is speaking through the texts, as well as the individual authors. The superiority of this essential unity is perhaps the greatest challenge to contemporary Biblical scholarship.

2. Biblical Theology is the necessary handmaid of Dogmatic Theology.

Every biblical scholar seeks to put the text he studies in its proper historical context. This involves judgements about what are the natural contexts to be considered. The canonical approach claims that the natural context must also include the context of the text's divine nature. As Brevard Childs, a leading proponent of the canonical approach, puts it:

The appeal to the canon understands Scripture as a vehicle of a divine reality, which encountered an ancient people in the historical past, but which continues to confront the church through the pages of Scripture.  

If a text comes from God then it is illogical not to consider what God might mean by this and what the nature of his overall communication has been. If Scripture is the word of God, if it is alive and used by the Spirit to lead us into all truth, then to deny this reality by intellectually carving it into pieces is to grossly misunderstand it and do damage to its usefulness. A non-canonical approach to scripture is as useful to the Church for understanding its scripture as is a formal autopsy for understanding the life of the man whose body is being dissected. The reality of the flesh is important, but it is an inhabited flesh that concerns us in knowing another person. So it is the inhabited and unified body of Scripture that concerns the Church primarily. Biblical Theology must be attentive and submit to the spiritual unity and the unified purpose of the Bible if it is to understand Scripture as the word of God.

But to make biblical theology a handmaid to the canonical understanding is not to rob it of purpose or integrity. It is actually to restore both its purpose and its essential integrity as a

373 Childs, Biblical Theology in Crisis, Westminster Press, 1970, p. 100
Christian discipline. Dogmatic theology needs to have the vibrant study of the literal and historical meaning of the texts assisting it, for in its task of applying the sense of the canon to a host of theological questions it needs the evidence of its senses. Biblical theology provides that sensory evidence. It is first and foremost the defender of the literal sense of the text and of its historical context. The Church needs this to serve as a check against enthusiastic and often indulgent spiritual applications of the text which stretch the link between the spirit and the letter almost to the breaking point. It reminds systematic theologians to pause their dreaming speculations and open their eyes to what the word of God actually says before they dive headlong into dispositions on what it means. Biblical theologians are like exegetical bookkeepers, keeping the Church’s theology in the black. They are the loyal critics of contemporary theology. But this task is impossible if the biblical theologian is not loyal to the scriptures as Scripture. He is not meant to be an advocate for the world’s understanding of Scripture to the Church, treating it ‘like any other book’. Rather, when dealing with the world’s understanding of the texts, he is meant to defend Scripture to the world, as an advocate and apologist explaining its meaning when old words and concepts no longer are understood. He also serves to counter sceptical ‘historical’ arguments against the divinity or veracity of Scripture, pointing out the false assumptions often disguised as mere historical analysis and the misquotes of what the text actually says. He is the faithful guardian of the text.

This is necessarily a conservative task. Biblical exegesis should not seek to discover what was never seen before, or to pierce the veil of the text to discern the mind of the author, who cannot speak for himself more than in the words he has left on the page. To try to do this is effectively to claim a mantle of prophetic insight and even of authority, as if in studying the words of a prophet one could give him new and better words to express the inner truth partially hidden in the text. A biblical theologian cannot rewrite or overwrite the scripture. His task is to remind the Church, ‘This is what the text says. This is what these words naturally mean’, anchored not in speculations or historical guesses but in the concrete tools of
III. THE PEOPLE OF GOD AS THE TEMPORAL INCARNATION OF THE RECEPTION OF REVELATION

A. The Church is the Result of a Divine Pedagogy

While one aspect of God’s revelation to his creatures in time is his tailoring that revelation to their ability to receive it, another aspect involves the creation in time of those same people who receive his self-communication. God temporally creates both the message and the recipient of that message. The people of God, Israel and the Church, are the products of the divine temporal pedagogy. The progressive nature of God’s revelation is in step with his people’s growth in their ability to understand for they are flip sides of the same coin. The revelation is made for them to understand and they are made by that revelation so that they can further understand it.

Because this is a dynamic of the Creator/creature relationship no strict separation can be made between the people as a whole and those specific individuals chosen to receive the revelation to pass on to the people. These prophets and apostles are rather the first of the people to take part in this divine pedagogy. They are the advanced class, but students nonetheless. In contrast to the dominant idea from the patristic age to the Reformers that the divine authors were ‘colluding partners in accommodation’ the affirmation of even the prophets’ created nature must force us to agree with Kent Sparks that:

Although the texts that they wrote are God’s inspired Word, the authors were nonetheless subject, like all of us, to their own finite and fallen interpretive horizons.

The prophets do not stand in isolation from one another but within the continuum of history such that Moses could not have received what he did had not Abraham first conversed with God. And there could be no Daniel without a Moses beforehand, and no apostles to see the fulfilment of the OT prophecies in Jesus had they not come centuries before. All are different.

374 Sparks, ‘The Sun Also Rises’, p. 129
375 Ibid. p. 126
and each fit into that place in time that formed them.

The process that makes God’s people capable recipients is that the Word does not enter time and space just at creation but also after creation, and continuously. The Word becomes a distinct part of creation, tangibly manifesting itself within time and space. God creates for himself a history within time in which his actions within it are distinct from other flows of events. God is now in the world, and his being in the world means that he is locatable in space-time. And the corollary to that is that there are places and times he can be found as well as places and times he cannot be found. This is a facet of the dimensionality of creation. The eternal Word entering time and space must do so by being received in definable times and spaces. Time is divided into moments distinct from one another which we define by dates or eras. Space is divided up into areas. If God is in heaven, then in some way he is not on earth. Otherwise we would have no ability to perceive his transcendence. If God speaks a new word on Sunday it means that he does not speak the same exact new word on Monday. He may repeat the word, but its nature would be as a repetition and not as something new.

This embodiedness is part of the scandal of particularity that is the essence of both special revelation and the Incarnation. Those who reject the one will reject the other, and vice versa. This can be seen in the Rationalists’ philosophical repudiation of the orthodox faith in favour of a universal and general revelation not indexed to any time or place. D.F. Strauss’ statement below is a perfect summation of that:

Is not the idea of the unity of the divine and human nature a real one in a far higher sense, when I regard the whole race of mankind as its realization, than when I single out one man as such a realization? Is not an incarnation of God from eternity, a truer one than an incarnation limited to a particular point in time?376

This is a mere fleshing out of Lessing’s objection to the accidents of history being the means of knowing philosophical truth. Though an incarnation from eternity is the premise of this paper, it is one not in conflict with its particular and supreme expression in Jesus of Nazareth

376 David F. Strauss, The Life of Jesus, New York: Calvin Blanchard, 1860, §151
2,000 years ago. The Nicene faith holds this paradox together, while a ‘rational’ faith erases one side in preference to the other. Rationalism sees general revelation as a superior form of revelation, ignoring the need of creatures to have concrete, and thus particular, instruction, which is given to them by a perceptible instructor whom they can distinguish from the false messengers. In reality, the rationalist concept of revelation looks like a man surfing the internet in the belief that the truth is out there, yet with no guide to distinguish the quality of the content he finds. With no external guide, external in being separate from the receiver of revelation, and thus acting as a distinct player in the scheme of history, no divine lesson can be discerned apart from the subjective reasoning within. Special revelation is what allows for the distinction in principle between our thoughts and God’s thoughts. In the same way that it would be impossible to see God anywhere if he were ubiquitous, existing everywhere equally. It must be perceptible and thus it must take specific shape, both in location temporally and spatially, in its form. There are no generic recipients of revelation and thus there can be no generic form of revelation. It will come to a certain people and speak to them in their specific mode of understanding; ‘The Word of God in order to be incarnate must assume a concrete, specific language’.

The first effect of revelation being received into the world is its division of the world into those who receive it and those who do not. God speaking to Abram while he was in Haran means that he did not speak that word to him elsewhere and at another time. His speaking was an event locatable in time and space. Abram’s reception of that calling thus separates him from the rest of creation who were not so called. Those who followed in that historical stream become a distinct strand separate from the world, a distinct people made so by being at the source of that revelation. They will be a light to the world, and perhaps the only one. Through them will come the revelation that began with Abram. The revelation that is given to them

377 This is distinct from the understanding that God is omnipresent in his divine nature and as Lord of creation. Jesus may be everywhere in spirit, but physically he remains in heaven and even in the eucharist is present by those defined forms.
379 Of course Abram is not the true beginning, as the historical stream goes back to the very beginning of human existence.
is thus inseparable from them. It was made for them to understand and their understanding is made possible by their being formed by that revelation.

Though there is a clear distinction between God’s people and the rest of the world, this should not be construed to mean an absolute separation, for God has been active among the Gentiles as well, forming them as both the foil for his children and preparing them for the wider dissemination of the revelation given to his Church. This is part of the great providential control God has over all of history. The relationship of God to the prophets, the prophets to the people of God, and the people of God to the world is one of a dynamic hierarchy. God forms a people from the Patriarchs he chose and out of that people selects prophets to whom he gives revelation which is meant for his people, that they might grow to know him and become a light to the world.

B. The Church is the Divine Historian

Being formed by special revelation from God, this people's understanding of themselves is also inseparable from the meaning of the texts which they created in response to the revelation, and it is indispensable for their understanding of Salvation History. They, in their remembrance of who they are and what God has said and done, and in their contemplations of the texts, are the historical context which shapes both the questions and the answers which Scripture gives to them. One can not approach Scripture apart from the people who are part of its history. They are the people ‘of the book’. Paul Achtemeier says that the book is less significant without them:

[The] major significance of the Bible is not that it is a book, but rather that it reflects the life of the community of Israel and the primitive church, as those communities sought to come to terms with the reality that God was present with them in ways that regularly outran their ability to understand or cope.380

So Scripture, in its incarnational nature, maintains this dual role as both the history of God’s speaking and the history of his people’s understanding. They are not in conflict but essentially

related and bound within the one ontological reality that we confront when we open the book and examine any text. This is what sets it apart from other ‘inspirations’ and other records of history:

[The Bible's] uniqueness is not seen in holding human cultures at arms length, but in the belief that Scripture is the only book in which God speaks incarnately. As it is with Christ, so it is with the Bible-the “coming together” of the divine and human sets it apart from all others.  

And, in being set apart from all others, Scripture makes the people who belong to it also set apart. They are a unique people for a unique revelation. It is both God’s story and theirs, for God has made them to have a story that is defined by being in relation to his revelation to the world.

Scripture cannot be approached apart from them, for they are on every page. But more than being on every page, they also confront the reader as being a present reality forming a historical connection to the very inception of God’s communication and to every point in between. Scripture is no mere historical artefact found in the sands, a relic of a lost time. It is born by a people with a continuous memory. This memory privileges them as the supreme interpreter of this historical revelation. The people of the book are God’s divine historian, a living witness.

Modern biblical study has been severely handicapped by a prejudice against the Church as being a reliable witness because of its bias, its religious commitment to and use of the texts. A neutral indifferent historical witness is given preference. But it is only this people who understand the revelation, because it was given to them, and they themselves are the ones properly motivated to preserve and perpetuate it. The indifference that modern scholarship has come to value in non-religious sources, to inform it on the historical context of the religious texts, is itself the very quality which works against it having any great knowledge of

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381 Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation*, p. 168
382 The archaeological discovery of manuscripts are of historical and exegetical interest but they are not what created the Canon nor what introduced us to it.
the texts or of the events revealed within them. Such lesser knowledge that is gleaned from ‘neutral’ sources is seen as preferable because it comes free from ideological attachments. It is independent, as the ‘true’ biblical scholar is seen to be. According to the modern scheme of historical scholarship:

To depend upon testimony is to give up one's intellectual autonomy as a scientist – to give up “the condition of being one's own authority, making statements or taking action on one's own initiative and not because those statements or actions are authorized or prescribed by anyone else.”

Free from the restrictions of any interpretive guide via testimony or tradition modern scholars see themselves as forensic scientists piecing together the objective historical data into an unbiased picture of the past.

There are two problems with this when it comes to the interpretation of the meaning of ancient texts like Scripture. The first is that such a conceit overlooks the bias inherent in the scientists themselves. Postmodernism has already created great cracks in the modern concept of ‘objective’ history. In an area as subjective as history, ‘facts’ rarely speak for themselves. As Iain Provain says, this is true even in the harder subject of Archaeology:

Archaeological remains (when this phase is taken to exclude written testimony from the past) are of themselves mute. They do not speak for themselves: they have no story to tell, and no truth to communicate. It is archaeologists who speak about them testifying to what it is they have found and placing the finds within an interpretive framework that bestows upon them meaning and significance.

This raises the question where the archaeologists gets their interpretive frameworks. Such a matrix of understanding is indispensable for any endeavour. Yet modern scholars are prone to obscure the source of their matrices, while historians who accept the legitimacy of human testimony can be more critically aware of the sources of their historical understandings. It is the more traditional historians who can recognize that human witnesses cannot be avoided.

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384 Provain, ‘Knowing and Believing’, pp. 247-6
385 ‘Trusting testimony is not an irrational act of faith that leaves critical rationality aside. It is also a rather neglected fact that all history, like all knowledge, relies on testimony.’ Richard Baukham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006, p. 5
The second problem with the modern bias against testimony is that it is completely different from the thinking of those who created and preserved the texts. Richard Bauckham has clearly revealed the extent to which the early Christians were dependent upon eyewitnesses as the authoritative source of the history of Jesus. It was the testimony of the witnesses that gave the texts of the New Testament their authority. Absent any connection to an eyewitness, the texts would not have been revered and received as apostolic witnesses. They were received precisely because they were seen to be in conformity to the eyewitness accounts already present among them and existing in an oral tradition:

The world of the early Christian communities was not a purely oral one, but a predominantly oral society in which written text had a place that was closely related to orality. The texts served to preserve the oral tradition linking them to the witnesses of the actions of God. Without this link they would lose their historical connection and anchor, something of great importance to the early Church. The texts have their authority not because they reflect what the community believes but rather because they correspond to what the community has heard from the personal witnesses to the life of Jesus. This is a direct blow to the validity of form criticism which assumes that the texts of the NT, and of the OT, are the result of an editing process to conform to the community’s identity:

Nowhere in early Christian literature do we find traditions attributed to the community as their source or transmitter, only as the recipient.

The Scriptures belong to the community not because it wrote them but because it received them from those it recognized as valid sources.

If it is presumed that a text has its form due to the editing process of a community with no personal identity then the personal eyewitness link to Jesus is lost. The Church claims to know who Jesus is, not because he is spiritually perceptible to the contemporary Christian in a way that can be verified, but because certain people, people with names and histories, saw

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386 Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*, p. 248
387 Ibid, p. 297
and heard him and wrote down what he said. Their witness is not like some internet rumour that comes without sourcing. We know what is the truth of our faith because there is a train of witnesses all the way back. Our faith is footnoted. This concept is the foundation of Irenaeus’ principle of apostolic succession. The bishops of the churches represented the succession of witness and teaching between Irenaeus’ day and the apostles. Unlike the Gnostics, Irenaeus could show where his Gospel came from by listing the names of the bishops of Rome and Ephesus.

C. The Growth of the Church’s Understanding

The coming of Christ marks a transition point in the development of God's people. They are now ready to be entrusted with the fullness of God’s revelation and the continual guidance of the Holy Spirit. They are, in a sense, bar mitzvahed and ready to leave childhood. But this does not mean their development is over. The Church must still grow into perfection in time just as Jesus grew from an infant. The Church has not reached perfection and many erroneous ideas will take time to work out, though it will need no instruction from outside. God has brought it to the point where it possesses all the tools needed to grow in wisdom. The world will enlighten the Church only as it serves as a laboratory in which the Church can test its understanding and see how things work. The world will provide stimuli for deeper questions, such as how the Son and the Father relate in the Godhead, continuing the role of foil that was played by Egypt, the Philistines and Babylon. Yet the Church need not look to outside wisdom to provide positive illumination, but only reflection. Like all human beings the Church learns by doing, and often by stumbling. The practical understanding of Jesus’ teaching on the dangers of lording authority may take a millennium to fully understand, as the Church wrestles with the legacy of uniting with the power of Constantine’s empire, but the Church will learn on the way and its history on this matter will be instructive for future generations.

In this organic development of its spiritual understanding the Church can forget things,
some of which are important, but none of which impede its ability to remember and correct itself. The Reformation can be seen as one such instance. The Reformers did not see themselves as being outside the Church, and their appeal for reform was based upon the sources of truth which the Church recognized. If the Church should ever so forget itself that it must be reformed from the outside then this would mean that the organic history of the Church as a single people had failed, that God had let it die. But then there would be no Church. The only alternative would be to conceive of the entire world as the ‘Church’, a contradiction to its nature as *ekklesia*.

In this conception of the Church’s role as the interpreter of the revelation given to it, does this mean that there is no room for historical scholarship? By no means, as long as that scholarship is obedient to the same lord who created and guides the Church. But the claim of secular scholarship, that it can reveal the true contexts of sacred Scripture and provide its accurate interpretation better than the historical witness of the Church, can only hold as valid if the witness of the Church as its custodian is invalidated and its understanding of the texts emptied of all authority. Then the academy can and will fill in the void with its scraps of speculative theories.

D. Necessary Principles of Faithful Interpretation

There are two basic, and formerly obvious, principles that must be accepted by Biblical scholar if they are to interpret Scripture as a part of, and on behalf of, the Church. Without such acceptance the scholar, no matter how sound the study, cannot but become the voice of an outside observer claiming the mantle of the Church’s prophetic insight into its own history.

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388 This does not mean that there are not incidental and unimportant details of Scripture that have been misunderstood for ages which have been corrected through outside research. Kenneth Bailey’s work in Mideast oral history is one such instance. His discovery that Joseph and Mary would have actually been inside a house rather than a barn in Bethlehem overturns a long held and cherished image, but one with no doctrinal importance. Nor does the truth reveal any new spiritual principles. Kenneth Bailey, ‘The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7’, *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology* Vol. 2, No. 2, 1979, pp. 33–44
1. God reveals himself to the world.

Before the modern age it was axiomatic that God was revealing himself to his people and that the scriptures reflected the truths he was revealing and not just the reflections of pious, and some not-so-pious, men. But since the Enlightenment the Church has often been on the defensive in justifying its claim that these words are not just the words of men. Atheistic or simply deistic principles have infected the world of Biblical scholarship such that belief in miraculous events became an embarrassment to the Church, and today scholars in all but the most secluded enclaves of Fundamentalism feel the constant pressure to soften or even ignore the element of divine activity in the narratives of Scripture and in the history of its formation.

This modern criticism lies in the claim that such things are not observed in nature. This criticism overlooks the obvious fact that an account of a miracle involves an action of God. Miracles happen not because of the nature of the world. It is not the world that is miraculous and enabling miracles, the way that Faerie land is magical. It is the nature of the world to be unmagical and ummiraculous. But God is not wholly ‘natural’. He transcends Nature. His interactions with the physical world cannot, by definition, fit any observable rules of physics. They are not regular because nothing in this world rules him. God's actions are, to use a term from physics, singularities. This does not mean that there are no rules, but such rules as govern his actions in creation are rules flowing from his uncreated nature and his economic plan for creation. As God is the creator of the physical world, and thus of the rules of physics, those rules are ‘naturally’ bent around his will when he is in the world, perhaps likes space is bent around large masses.

While it is relatively easy for faithful scholars to resist this pressure when it comes to portrayals of miracles, especially those upon which the Gospel is founded, it is harder in the subject of divine inspiration. The tendency to sit as critic over not just the proper form of the text among the various extant copies, but also over the ideas expressed in the text once the authentic form is discerned, is natural for the critic who has no commitment to the authority
of Scripture as God’s Word, but it is also sadly common among many of the faithful. This happens when the divine wisdom given to Biblical authors is not assumed to be greater than that of the scholar reading their words. In our modern academic environment, elevating scholars as enlightened authorities of their science, even the devout interpreters of the Bible can be tempted to see some minor, or not so minor, erroneous idea expressed by a prophet or apostle, which sound scholarship can, absent any guidance of the wider Church’s witness, correct by supplementing its own ‘superior’ wisdom. By little tweaks here and there to the ‘limited perspective’ of the biblical authors Scripture can be gradually trained to be the voice of the scholar, and emptied of its divine authority. To resist this temptation requires a truly humble approach, and such humility is best maintained when Biblical scholars do not perceive themselves as independent of the Church, let alone smarter.

2. These texts are God's Word

This is a principle that reminds us what we are studying, and what we are not. It is not the scholar’s job to edit the text or criticize the canon. This stands against the modern attempt to open the canon and include various ‘discovered’ or long rejected writings that are thought to have value in supplementing what the canon is perceived to lack. Such a move again places the scholar as the supplanter of the Church’s prophetic witness to what its own scriptures are. However interesting the Gospel of Thomas is for historical purpose in understanding the disparity of voices during the early days of the Church it has nothing to tell us about God that we cannot learn from what God has guided the Church to preserve. Books can neither be added nor subtracted by the interpreter’s own authority. Luther’s disdain for James must be rejected as much as any appeal to the Gospel of Mary. It is not the Bible as we think it should be but the Bible as God has given us that is the object of study. As Brevard Childs states:

It is only in the final form of the biblical text in which the normative history has reached an end that the full effect of this revelatory history can be perceived.\textsuperscript{389}

Against the more conservative side, the authority of the canon warns against any attempt

\textsuperscript{389} Childs, \textit{Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture}, Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1979, p. 76
to look beyond the text. This applies to what Stephen Chapman calls ‘a defensive action taken mostly for rationalistic reasons’ to see divine revelation supremely in the ‘original autographs’, texts which are lost to time. But with their proclamation of this idea the inerrantists have left themselves no guide to identify how the texts we do have vary from the originals. We are left with an unsure Bible due to God’s providential guidance of the Church having taken a break after inspiring the original authors. This is analogous to the belief that Jesus is less fully human after the Ascension. That heresy challenged our understanding of our full unity with God through Christ’s continuing human nature. Such a theory calls into question what God has been doing with regard to the Church’s care of the Bible and whether we can really be sure of anything in the text.

A third common practice that a canonical approach should help to eliminate is the attempt to get behind the text into the mind of the author. The attempt to better understand what Paul’s intention was for writing his epistle to the Romans may be well meaning, but it is also an invitation to speculation and the inserting of supposed ‘contexts’ to ‘clarify’ his words. Moreover, the modern liberal and evangelical focus on the author faces a serious problem when it comes to Scripture, for the texts themselves show much less concern for that subject. The author of John’s Gospel clearly wanted us to know that he was a witness so that we could have faith in what he was recounting. But he also did not seem to think that our knowledge of his identity was crucial for that task. It could be countered that the Church made sure that authorship was passed down in the Church alongside the canon, but this may be a canonization of later opinions that were not so evident in the early decades after John had died. The fact that authorship of Revelation and Hebrews remained disputed or unknown shows that specific authorship, if it ever was common knowledge in the Church, was not held to be as important as the texts themselves. Apostolic authorship was, at least in the case of Hebrews, more loosely defined as being apostolic in content and having its source in apostolic teaching and the apostolic community. That it was of some apostolic hand, or under

390 Stephen Chapman, ‘Reclaiming Inspiration for the Bible’, *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, p. 171
the inspiration of one, was sufficient. When attention is turned to the Old Testament the situation of Biblical authorship is even more uncertain. Leaving aside arguments of the Pentateuch and portions of Isaiah, there are many books for which no author is identified nor even referenced. 1 Chronicles 29:29-30 may identify authors of the earlier the books of 1st and 2nd Samuel, but we are left to extra-biblical traditions to identify the authors of many other books, and Job is completely anonymous. Even without touching the disputed Documentary Hypothesis or the issue of whether Paul and others wrote all the letters attributed to them one is forced to confront the existence of unidentified authors and editors. These cannot be known, and the texts themselves show little concern that we should know them, and this fact did not greatly concern those who read them.

We are not given the authors to interrogate them about what they meant or how they might say things differently. All we have are their words, words which we trust that, through whatever theory of inspiration is held, God has judged to be good enough to express what was on his mind, which is after all the primary focus of Biblical interpretation.

IV. THE HERMENEUTIC IN PRACTICE: PROBLEM TEXTS FOR A FAITHFUL HISTORICAL READING

The purpose of this section is not to explain in any great detail the meaning of any texts but rather to show how the application of the hermeneutic sketched above may give guidance to the approach to texts that have often been allegorized above historical referents or historically deconstructed so as to detach it from divine truth. What can be said about these texts from an incarnational perspective that encourages the interpreter to see divine purpose in them without spiritualizing them?

A. Texts Showing Primitive Cosmologies or Moral Understanding

The creation narrative, especially the second chapter of Genesis, and the vow of Jephthah, are good examples of the kind of texts that have embarrassed Christians and caused them to
spiritually reinterpret them or to dismiss the divine usefulness of the texts. What can an incarnational hermeneutic say about such instances? Must we believe that water was placed beyond the stars in the firmament? Or are we bound to accept that a man's sacrifice of his daughter because he made a foolish vow to God is an acceptable practice?

No sane man would judge the intelligence of his child by his understandings of complex mathematics. The child is judged according to the knowledge that is normal to his age. It is important to remember in these texts that God approaches us as we are and does not wait for our understanding of the universe or our knowledge of what is ethically right and required to be perfect before he uses us. God did not need to correct Moses’ cosmology, or see that Moses corrected the cosmologies of the people of Israel, before central theological truths could be imparted. God did not do so with the author of Joshua when it came to the sun’s ‘movement’ being stopped to lengthen the day. What was important to communicate was not an instruction in a heliocentric universe but God’s sovereignty over it. Nor did God need a Judge who was perfect in every way. None of us are as perfect as we will be when we see God face to face, so we are accustomed to cutting ourselves slack over minor errors. We must remember that our definition of what is minor and major develops over time. And there is a hierarchy of ethics which may look different depending on the base moral state of the time. In a day when fathers regularly sacrificed their children to false gods, doing so to honour a vow made to the true God may be seen as better than breaking a vow once made to him. What stands out today is the child sacrifice. In Jephthah’s day what would stand out was the strength of the vow he had made.

B. Texts of Imperceptible Spiritual Content: Genealogies, Numbers.

The principle of the Incarnation is that God's revelation does not spring directly into our head. It must be made flesh so that we can see it. God requires the medium of flesh, but we are not to focus solely on that medium, like the dog that sniffs the finger of his master who is pointing to food in his bowl. Lists of births and life spans, of peoples and cities that are now
lost to the mist of time, these are all part of the flesh of a historical people that is tangible. Like Jesus reassuring the disciples that he was no ghost, no phantom resurrection, the seemingly irrelevant details that make some conclude the passages are without merit are themselves the very proof that the scriptures are part of the history of a real people and that their history connects us to the acts of God in the past. When we come across a graveyard and see the names on the stones, and recognize some of those names, we are seeing more than just a collection of bodies in the ground. We are seeing the reality of their history. The human need to make connection with the past is a strong and natural one. It is the little details that show that the connection we see in Scripture is not just an ethereal one. It is real, involving real people who lived and died like real human beings, and they left traces of their existence in their histories.

C. Conflicting Historical Accounts: Resurrection Narratives

The reality of having a body is that it comes with a limited perspective. We do not have a God's eye view of any situation, no matter how good our perception. A diversity of angles is required, yet each angle will provide a slightly different picture of the same event. For vision God gave most of us two eyes which do not merely duplicate each other. They provide depth. It would be a subversion of the witnesses’ bodily realities if God gave to them the same perspective on the same events as if they were all the same person. The comparison of their varying accounts sheds light on the similarities, not just the dissimilarities. Furthermore, memory is often not like a recording which plays back verbatim what was spoken. Often human memory is a reconstruction in which important details loom larger than the unimportant ones. It is also important to remember that, like cosmologies and ethics, concepts of accuracy vary with the times. The need to get all the details right is more keenly felt in our scientific age where mathematics has replaced theology or philosophy as the highest science.
Conclusion

While the hermeneutic that has been sketched out here, especially in its insistence on the Church's role as interpreter, may seem tailored for a Roman Catholic audience, in fact it is the opposite. Rome has, in its Magisterium an insulation from the disastrous effects of unstable hermeneutical practices. Protestantism, on the other hand, has no pope to declare conclusions of scholarship right or wrong. The principle of *sola scriptura* is what keeps most of Protestantism from disintegration. For those Protestant churches that have abandoned in practice even that bedrock standard no hermeneutic will help them. But it is hoped that this concept of an incarnational hermeneutic, rooted in the eternal union of time and space with God in his eternity, will help those churches, which seek to maintain a stable historical connection with the universal Church in time as well as space, to avoid the dangers of a despiritualizing materialistic historicism or of rigid literalism anchored in fantasies of scientific exactitude.

The Bible is the word of God written in the words of men, men inspired by the creator of time. Unless those human words are read through the understanding that they are part of one single act of revelation unfolding in organic unity through a natural temporal history they will be atomized as all things in history tend to be, reassembled only under the genius of various theories. It is not the presumption of this paper that this hermeneutic will reveal new truths unknown before, or that without it Scripture could not be properly understood. Rather, like many theological propositions, it is offered as a defence against other false ideas: the idea that history cannot be the realm of God's fullest self-revelation or that it is only of passing use. It is hoped that it will help to combat the twin dangers of hermeneutical docetism and ebionitism.
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