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JOHN BEHR, *Book Review Editor*

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Editorial and Subscription Offices

575 Scarsdale Road, Crestwood, NY 10707

Tel.: +1.914.961.8313

Email: [svtq@svots.edu](mailto:svtq@svots.edu) & [svtq-subscriptions@svots.edu](mailto:svtq-subscriptions@svots.edu)

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## THE PASCHAL FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

John Behr

The question of the proper starting point, the “first principles,” is one to which theology, and every discipline it encompasses, must continually return. Without being firmly grounded on its proper foundation, the vast body of reflection developed within theology risks collapsing into dust. It is not simply that the first principles are elementary stages, transcended by higher realms of esoteric reflection, but that they also provide the necessary orientation or perspective within which the more abstract discussion takes place and is to be understood. It is clear that the Christian faith is first and foremost faith in the lordship and divinity of the crucified and exalted Christ, yet the implications of this fact for how we understand and construe Christian doctrine are rarely considered. The analysis of this dimension offered in this article might seem unnecessarily laborious and extensive, but the scope and importance of its implications merit such a venture.

### *Trinity and Incarnation—Axes of the Christian Faith?*

The dictum that “conclusions without the arguments that lead to them are at best ambiguous” might seem obvious, but its implications are rarely taken up. An example of this is the way in which Trinitarian theology, debated so vigorously during the fourth century on grounds already prepared during the first three, is often reduced to shorthand formulae, such as the “three hypostases and one ousia” of “the consubstantial Trinity.” The reflection that lies behind such phrases is immense, yet it is often glossed over. Indeed, the very familiarity of such phrases results in their being detached from the debates that resulted in them and divorced from the content that they seek to encapsulate. These “facts of dogma” are

assumed as a given, and so Trinitarian theology concerns itself with reflecting on how the one God can simultaneously be three eternally distinct persons, without the plurality destroying the unity or the unity undermining the reality of the distinctions. In its textbook form, such theology begins with what can be known and said of this God—that he is one, the uncreated origin of all creation, love, goodness and so on; and then proceeds to the analysis how this same God is three—how the persons of the Trinity are related, their different characteristics and relationships.<sup>1</sup> Having explained this “immanent” trinitarian theology, describing the being of such a God as it is in itself, the next step is to relate this Trinity to the activity of revelation, the economy of salvation recorded in Scripture, the “economic” dimension of trinitarian theology. But now, because of the position already established, it is simply assumed, beginning with Augustine, that the theophanies described in the Old Testament were not uniquely manifestations of the Son and Word of God, but of any of the three, or the Trinity itself, the one Lord God, as Augustine put it.<sup>2</sup> Finally it is claimed, first by Peter Lombard, though it is still a common presupposition, that while it was the Son who became man, as Jesus Christ, it was nevertheless possible, and still is, for the Father and the Spirit also to be incarnate.<sup>3</sup> Trinitarian theology is made into realm unto itself, requiring subsequent reflection on “the Incarnation” of one of the three divine persons: Triadology followed by Christology. In this perspective, the Trinity and the Incarnation are taken as being the linchpins of Christian theology—Christian faith is “Trinitarian” and “incarnational.”<sup>4</sup> This has become an unquestioned premise for most twentieth-century theology.

1 The classic critique of such theology is Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. by J. Donceel (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1986 [1967]).

2 Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 3.1.3.

3 Cf. Peter Lombard, *Libri IV Sententiarum*, 3.1.2.

4 Classically expressed in the various essays in *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, ed. C. Gore (London, 1889); for more recent reflection, see K. Rahner, “The Theology of the Incarnation,” in idem. *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, 105–120; R. Williams, “Beginning with the Incarnation,” essay 6 in idem. *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 79–92.

There are a few brief comments which need to be made about this state of affairs. First, it must be recognized that the familiar shorthand formulae did not occur at all frequently in the writings of the fourth-century fathers. Although the “Cappadocian settlement” of Trinitarian theology is often said to be the formula “one ousia, three hypostases,” the phrase occurs in their writings but once—in a passage from St Gregory of Nazianzus.<sup>5</sup> More generally, the Cappadocians use a variety of expressions to designate what is common to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and in what manner they are distinct. More particularly, they all urge great caution in using numbers at all in matters of theology:

When the Lord taught us the doctrine of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, he did not make arithmetic a part of this gift! He did not say, “In the first, the second and the third” or “In one, two and three.” ... There is one God and Father, one only-begotten Son, and one Holy Spirit. We declare each of the hypostases uniquely (*μοναχῶς ἐξαγγέλλομεν*), and if we must use numbers, we will not let an ignorant arithmetic lead us astray into polytheism.<sup>6</sup>

This warning has also been sounded in modern times by Vladimir Lossky, though his words are not always heeded:

In speaking of three hypostases, we are already making an improper abstraction: if we wanted to generalize and make a *concept* of the “divine hypostasis,” we would have to say that the only common definition possible would be the impossibility of any common definition of the three hypostases.<sup>7</sup>

5 *On the Great Athanasius*, 35; this point is noted by J. T. Lienhard, “*Ousia and Hypostasis: The Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of ‘One Hypostasis,’*” in S. T. Davies, D. Kendall, and G. O’Collins eds., *The Trinity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 99–121, esp. 99–103.

6 St Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, 44. Cf. St Gregory of Nyssa, *To Ablabius*.

7 V. Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1974), 113. The problem is exacerbated by the translation of the term “hypostasis” as “person,” with the extended significance that term carries in modern English. As Rahner points out (*Trinity*, 108), “While formerly “person” meant directly (*in recto*) only the distinct subsistence, and co-signified the rational nature only indirectly (*in obliquo*)—according to the thing-like way of thinking of the Greeks—the ‘anthropocentric turn’ of modern times requires that the spiritual-subjective element in the

The same point can be made about the shorthand manner of referring to the “consubstantial Trinity.” It was a key point for St Athanasius, following the Nicene Creed, that the Son is consubstantial with the Father; but, for Athanasius, this relationship cannot be reversed, nor can they be said to be consubstantial together, for the simple reason that the Son is begotten *from* the Father: this is an intrinsically asymmetrical relationship.<sup>8</sup> A few decades later, St Basil the Great is happy to say of the Father and Son that “they are called consubstantial,” though he specifies that this relationship necessitates that one is derived from the other; according to Basil, one would not call “consubstantial” things which both derive from the same source, for they are “brothers.”<sup>9</sup> If we now, for the sake of brevity, speak of “the consubstantial Trinity,” we must similarly bear in mind the asymmetry of the relationship, based in the monarchy of the Father, the one God. The point of this brief observation is to make clear that we cannot allow detached shorthand formulae to become unconscious presuppositions shaping our theological reflections.

The second point to note is the way in which presupposing the results of the debates, as self-subsisting dogmatic formulae, effectively separates the reflection of the authors of the New Testament from that of the fathers, that is, those who continued in the tradition established by the apostles. The patristic period then is itself divided into distinct controversies—Trinitarian followed by Christological—establishing the already known dogmas of Christianity, in which the writings of Scripture are only used in an ad hoc, proof-text manner. This perception of a disjunction between the authors of the New Testament and the fathers parallels (and is probably due to) the parting of the ways, in modern times, between, on the one hand, scriptural studies, which attempt to establish the original authorship, redaction, context, and perhaps meaning of their texts, or the original history of “the Jesus movement,”

concept of person be first understood.” It is essential that this point be taken into account, lest theology “anthropomorphize” the Father and the Holy Spirit.

8 Cf. esp. C. Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 260–66.

9 St Basil, *Epistle* 52.

and, on the other hand, patristic studies which trace the development of already known dogmatic positions. Serious engagement with Scripture, let alone scriptural scholarship, is generally absent from patristic studies, “neo-patristic syntheses,” and dogmatic works—especially by the Orthodox—during the twentieth century, and likewise the fathers are consulted usually to confirm what is already believed. On the other hand, it is perhaps not surprising that when scholars, trained in the historical-critical methodologies of scriptural studies, have attempted to come to terms with the dogmas articulated in patristic theology, they have tended to speak in terms of “the myth of God Incarnate.”<sup>10</sup> Dogma is, as Harnack put it, the work of the Greek spirit on the soil of the Gospel—if only because it has been forced into this mould by Harnack himself and those who have followed him.<sup>11</sup>

The final and most important comment that needs to be made regarding the orientation of much modern theology (including Orthodox) is that, construed in terms of the gradual development of a dogmatic edifice, the reflection of the fathers has effectively been divorced from the given revelation of God in Christ, and been made to retell that revelation in a different manner, so that the Word of God is no longer the locus of God’s self-expression (for it is now held that any of the three appeared in the Old Testament theophanies), and the Incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, is not so much “the exact imprint of the very being” of the Father (Heb 1:3), but is rather the incarnation of a divine person which could have been otherwise if so desired. This, to be blunt, is nothing short of the distortion of the Gospel itself. Rather than establishing that what is seen in Christ, as proclaimed by the Gospel, truly is what it is to be God, that he is divine with the same divinity as his Father, a recog-

10 Most notoriously in the collection of essays by that title, edited by J. Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1977).

11 A. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. from 3rd German edn. by N. Buchanan, (London and Edinburgh: Williams & Norgate, 1894), 1.17, 21–22. A. McGrath points out, “From its beginnings, the history of dogma has been written about by those concerned with its elimination.” (*The Genesis of Doctrine: A Study in the Foundation of Doctrinal Criticism* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997], 138).

niton only possible in the Spirit (who alone enables us to recognize Christ as Lord, the bearer of the Divine Name, cf. 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:8–9), Trinitarian theology, in the style outlined above, concerns itself with the heavenly existence of three divine persons; and their interrelationship, as persons in communion, is then taken as the constitutive element of our own existence in the image of God, so marginalizing even further Christ—for, according to the New Testament, it is Christ alone who is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), in whose pattern Adam was already molded (Rom 5:14), and to whose image we are conformed (Rom 8:29) when we are crucified with him (Gal 2:20, etc.).

### *The Canon and Tradition of the Gospel According to Scripture*

Christian theology quite simply is not based upon the supposed two axes of Trinity and Incarnation, and some of the problems which arise when it is treated as if it does have been indicated. Rather, theological reflection, beginning with the original apostles and continuing with all those who follow in their tradition, develops as a response to the marvellous work of God in Jesus Christ, the crucified and exalted Lord. More specifically, and significantly, it develops by reflecting through the medium of Scripture—the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets: Christ died according to Scripture and he rose according to Scripture, as Paul puts it (1 Cor 15:3–4), in a phrase which reappears in practically every later creed. That Christian theology is a response to the Passion of the Savior, and reflects on the work of God through this prism, reveals not only the unity of all theology in the paschal faith, but also allows us to see the unity of the theological endeavor in both the work of the apostles and that of the fathers, and also the unity of aspects of the Christian faith, and even the supposed schools of Christian theology, often held apart.

Before turning to consider the paschal dimensions of “Incarnation,” a few more words need to be said about the dynamics of Christian theological reflection. The writers of Israel had always used their Scriptures, the images and descriptions of earlier events

and figures which they contain, to understand, illustrate, and explain their own situation. Paul and the evangelists continued this redeployment of Scripture. Yet the Gospel of Christ also claims itself to be definitive, not only in the sense of ultimate or final, but also as singular—the Passion of Christ is once for all (ἐφάπαξ, Rom 6:10; Heb 7:27). This singularity, in reverse, provides the diverse books of Scripture with a unity and a coherence: “The eschatological *apokalypsis* of the cross,” as Richard Hays puts it, provides a hermeneutical lens through which Scripture is refracted with “a profound new symbolic coherence.”<sup>12</sup> This sense of the unity of Scripture—the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets—is vividly captured by St Irenaeus in his comparison of “the order and the connection of the Scriptures” to a mosaic of a king, which his Gnostic opponents were rearranging into a picture of a dog.<sup>13</sup> These Gnostics, he claimed, were not working from the “hypothesis” which the prophets preached, the Lord taught, and the apostles handed down (“traditioned”), but rather from their own myths and fabrications. However, he continues, those who know the “canon of truth”—that there is one God the Father, one Son Jesus Christ, and one Holy Spirit who spoke of Christ through the prophets<sup>14</sup>—such are able to restore the passages to their proper order so that the image of the King may once again be seen (AH 1.9–10). In this way, the coherence and unity of Scripture when viewed from the perspective of the cross, the matrix within which the Gospel was preached from the beginning, is intimately connected to the dynamics of canon and tradition.

It is by this canon that the “canonical” books of the New Testament are marked out. It needs to be pointed out that “canon” does

12 Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 169.

13 *Against the Heresies* [=AH] 1.8

14 It is noteworthy that in the earliest forms of the canon of truth, such as that given by Irenaeus (AH 1.10.1), all the economies of Christ, recounted in the Gospels, are presented under the article on the Holy Spirit, who preached these things through the prophets—Scripture when read according to the Spirit, as speaking of Christ—rather than under the second article, as in the later declaratory creeds, where what the Spirit “spoke through the prophets” is left unspecified.

not and cannot refer to a “list,” “catalogue,” or “collection,” and was never used that way until 1768; to speak of “the canon of Scripture” is a confusion of terms and categories.<sup>15</sup> The canonical Gospels are, of course, centered on the Passion. Origen suggests (in a passage incorporated by Sts Basil and Gregory into their *Philokalia*) that while Christ is presented in many different ways in the Gospels, this refers to “anything he did before the Passion and whatever happened after his Resurrection from the dead,”<sup>16</sup> that is, the unchanging identity of the Word of God is revealed through the cross, and everything else is patterned upon this. Each episode within the narratives of the canonical Gospels proclaims, in varying ways, *the Gospel*, while the unchanging center remains the Passion and exaltation, for this *is* the revelation of the Word of God.<sup>17</sup> While Paul had declared that the death and resurrection of Christ are “according to Scripture,” the details of this are explored, in the canonical Gospels, by the evangelists’ description of Christ and his activity. So, the Gospel of Jesus Christ begins, in Mark, with a passage from Isaiah; the narrative of Matthew is structured in terms of prophecy-fulfillment; in Luke, the risen Christ enlightens his disciples by showing how the Scriptures speak of him (Lk 24:27); while in John, Christ asserts categorically that “Moses spoke of me” (Jn 5:46). In contrast, a non-canonical text, such as the *Gospel according to Thomas*, even if it preserves authentic sayings of the “historical Jesus,” does not attempt to understand and present Christ through the medium of Scripture, nor, at least in the *Gospel according to Thomas*, is there a Passion.

15 Cf. J. Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (New York: SVS, 2001), 13, fn 4.

16 *Contra Celsum*, 6.77 = *Philokalia*, 15.20.

17 John Barton (*Holy Writings, Sacred Text: The Canon in Early Christianity* [Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1997] 128) makes the following pertinent observation: “In Catholic and Orthodox liturgy, the reading of the Gospel is attended with special ceremonies that emphasize the holiness of the ‘message’ it communicates, and ‘the gospel’ is felt to be proclaimed through the chosen pericope whatever it may be, even if (to take the extreme case) it happens to be from the genealogies in Matthew or Luke. . . . in Anglican liturgy one begins the reading, ‘The holy gospel is written in the Gospel according to Saint X, in the nth chapter’—emphasizing, that is, that the whole gospel is present in any given portion; and that one does not say, ‘Here endeth the gospel,’ whereas one does (or did) say, ‘Here endeth the epistle,’ because the gospel has no end.”

Thus, in the material which comes to be collected together as the canonical New Testament, reflection on Christ is an exegetical enterprise. But, it is very important to note that it is Christ who is being explained through the medium of Scripture, not Scripture itself that is being exegeted.<sup>18</sup> The object is not to understand the “original meaning” of an ancient text, as in modern historical-critical scholarship, but to understand Christ himself, who, by being explained “according to the Scriptures” becomes the sole subject of Scripture throughout—he is the Word of God. Seen in this retrospect, reflecting on Scripture in the light of God’s action in the crucified and glorified Messiah, Scripture becomes a thesaurus or treasury from which are drawn the images and terms used to proclaim the Gospel.

To ensure that the same image of Christ is preserved, according to the canon and tradition of the Gospel according to Scripture, the fathers, faced with various distortions, reflected further on the hypothesis of Scripture, the canon of truth. This resulted, of course, in an increasingly abstract theological discussion, which paid ever greater attention to particularly important or disputed passages of Scripture, cited in the manner of proof-texts, for the concern was not to exegete Scripture itself, but to clarify its hypothesis and the canon by which it speaks of Jesus Christ. But the point of such on-going reflection is not to describe ultimate structures of “reality,” to elaborate a fundamental ontology, whether of “Being” or “communion” (or both), which then tends to function as if it constitutes the content of the revelation itself. Rather, the aim of such theological reflection was to articulate as precisely as possible, in the face of perceived aberrations, the canon of truth, so as to preserve the undistorted image of Christ, constantly returning, as St Polycarp urged his readers, to “the Word delivered in the beginning.”<sup>19</sup>

18 Note especially the comments of James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 89.

19 Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians*, 7.2.

### *Passion and "Incarnation"*

Viewing theological reflection as responding to Passion in this way, is a much more satisfactory perspective, not only for studying particular fathers—examining how they respond to the Gospel in the context in which they lived, rather than as anticipations of the major conciliar definitions yet to come—but also for understanding the dogmas resulting from the various controversies. The implications of this change in perspective for Trinitarian theology were briefly explored above. The Paschal perspective also considerably illumines what is involved in what is referred to, in shorthand, as “the Incarnation.”

The presentation of Christ by the apostles and evangelists “according to Scripture,” that is, with the terms and images contained in the thesaurus of Scripture, in turn establishes types and prophecies of Christ in Scripture, so making the crucified and exalted Jesus Christ the subject throughout Scripture—he is “the same today, yesterday and forever” (Heb 13:8). And it is this Jesus Christ, present throughout the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets, who is revealed *by the cross*. Irenaeus explains this mystery through the imagery given by Christ in Matthew 13, in a lengthy passage which deserves to be quoted in full:

If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures this way, he will find in them the Word concerning Christ and a foreshadowing of the new calling. For Christ is the “treasure which was hidden in the field” [Mt 13:44], that is, in this world—for “the field is the world” [Mt 13:38]—[a treasure] hidden in the Scriptures, for he was indicated by means of types and parables which could not be understood by men prior to the consummation of those things which had been predicted, that is, the advent of the Lord. And therefore it was said to Daniel the prophet, “Shut up the words and seal the book until the time of the consummation, until many learn and knowledge abounds. For when the dispersion shall be accomplished they shall know all these things” [Dan 12:4, 7]. And Jeremiah also says, “In the last days they shall understand these things” [Jer 23:20]. For every prophecy, before its fulfillment, is

nothing but an enigma and ambiguity to men; but when the time has arrived and the prediction has come to pass then it has an exact exposition (ἐξήγησις). And for this reason, when at this present time the Law is read by the Jews, it is like a myth, for they do not possess the explanation (ἐξήγησις) of all things which pertain to the human advent of the Son of God; but when it is read by Christians, it is a treasure, hid in a field but brought to light by the cross of Christ, and explained, both enriching the understanding of men and showing forth the wisdom of God and making known his dispensations with regard to man and prefiguring the kingdom of Christ and preaching in anticipation the good news of the inheritance of the holy Jerusalem and proclaiming beforehand that the man who loves God shall advance so far as even to see God and hear his Word and be glorified from hearing his speech to such an extent that others will not be able to behold his glorious countenance [cf. 2 Cor 3:7], as was said by Daniel, “Those who understand shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and many of the righteous as the stars for ever and ever” [Dan 12:3]. In this manner, then, I have shown it to be, if anyone read the Scriptures. (AH 4.26.1)

The image given by Christ, of treasure hidden in the field, or the world, is used by Irenaeus to refer to Christ himself: prior to the cross, Christ is hidden as a treasure in Scripture. Christ is hidden in Scripture in prophecies and types, in the words and events of the patriarchs and prophets, which prefigure what was to happen in and through Christ in his human advent as preached by the apostles. However, they are only prophecies and types; what they indicate is not yet known. And so, for those who read Scripture without the explanation of what it is that they foreshadow, the Word they contain and the Gospel they anticipate, Scripture remains only myths and fables. It is through the cross, the Passion of Christ, that light is shed on these writings, revealing what they in fact mean and how they announce the Word of God. The crucified and exalted Jesus Christ was present prior to the Passion as the veiled content of Scripture, the Word of God hidden in the words of Scripture,

being revealed through the cross, in the *kerygma*, the proclamation of the Gospel.

So, for Irenaeus the revelation of the Word of God does not occur simply with the birth of Jesus from Mary; rather the revelation occurs in an interpretative context—"if anyone reads the Scriptures in this way" they will encounter the Word, Jesus Christ, as he is revealed by the cross. Many people saw Jesus during his life, and his death on the cross, but not all understood who he is; to understand this requires reflection and an interpretative engagement with the Scriptures. But Irenaeus also goes one step further, in a tremendously dynamic manner: if anyone reads Scripture in this way, focusing on Christ and understanding him by engaging with the Scriptures as illuminated by the cross, they are, in turn, themselves interpreted, as it were, by the Word of God, in such a manner that they also become transfigured to such a point that others will not be able to behold their glorious countenance. Concerning themselves with Christ, in this engagement with Scripture seen through the cross, they put on Christ's own identity.

Irenaeus further unpacks the mystery of the Scriptures being opened by the cross, by combining John 1:14 with the apocalyptic imagery of the book of Revelation, when he points out that, as Christ has been given all things by his Father (Mt 11:27), Christ alone, as the judge of the living and the dead, has the key of David, and so he alone opens and shuts (Rev 3:7). Using the imagery of Revelation 5, Irenaeus continues:

"No one, either in heaven or on earth, or under the earth, was able to open the book" of the Father, "nor to look into it," with the exception of "the Lamb who was slain and who redeemed us with his own blood," receiving from the same God, who made all things by the Word and adorned them by [his] Wisdom, power over all things when "the Word became flesh" [Jn 1:14]. (AH 4.20.2)

Only the slain Lamb has received all power, wealth, wisdom and might (Rev 5:12), and so he alone is able to open the book, and this, Irenaeus specifies, is the book of the Father. The revelation of

the content, the Word, of the paternal book by the slain Lamb, is associated by Irenaeus, with the Word becoming flesh, for it is the enfleshed, revealed, Word who alone makes known or exegetes (ἐξηγήσατο) the Father, as the Prologue of John concludes (Jn 1:18). Just as the Gospel alone unlocks the treasures of Scripture, so also it is only in the Son, as preached in the Gospel, that the invisible and immeasurable God becomes visible and comprehensible, as Irenaeus repeatedly insists. It is in the Gospel, proclaiming the crucified and exalted Christ through Scripture, that we encounter the Incarnate Word.

The central and determinative significance of the Passion for the revelation of the Word, the crucified and exalted Christ proclaimed in the matrix of the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets, is clear from other writers. For example, Hippolytus, in his treatise *On Christ and the Antichrist*, explains how the Word became flesh by reference to scriptural fabric of the Gospel, spun upon the cross:

For the Word of God, being fleshless, put on the holy flesh from the holy virgin, as a bridegroom a garment, having woven it for himself in the sufferings of the cross, so that having mixed our mortal body with his own power, and having mingled the corruptible into the incorruptible, and the weak with the strong, he might save perishing man.

The web-beam, therefore, is the passion of the Lord upon the cross, and the warp on it is the power of the Holy Spirit, and the woof is the holy flesh woven by the Spirit, and the thread is the grace which by the love of Christ binds and unites the two in one, and the rods are the Word; and the workers are the patriarchs and prophets who weave the fair, long, perfect tunic for Christ; and the Word passing through these, like the combs (or rods), completes through them that which his Father wills.<sup>20</sup>

The flesh of the Word, received from the Virgin and “woven in the sufferings of the cross,” is woven by the patriarchs and prophets,

20 *On Christ and the Antichrist*, 4; see also the extended metaphor in *Antichrist*, 59.

whose actions and words proclaim the manner in which the Word became present and manifest. It is in the preaching of Jesus Christ, the proclamation of the one who died on the cross, interpreted and understood in the matrix, the womb, of Scripture, that the Word receives flesh from the virgin. The virgin in this case, Hippolytus later affirms following Revelation 12, is the Church, who will never cease “bearing from her heart the Word that is persecuted by the unbelieving in the world,” while the male child she bears is Christ, God and man, announced by the prophets, “whom the Church continually bears as she teaches all nations.”<sup>21</sup>

As a final example, the connection between the cross and the revelation of the Word of God, now specifically referred to as “the Incarnation,” is addressed most directly by St Athanasius, in his classic work, *On the Incarnation*. This treatise is usually read, anachronistically, as an exposition of how and why the second person of the Trinity became man—so that we might become God. But to do this overlooks completely Athanasius’ own stated purpose in the opening words of the work:

Well then, my friend, let us next with pious reverence tell of the incarnation of the Word and expound his divine manifestation to us, which the Jews slander and the Greeks mock, but which we ourselves adore, so that from the apparent degradation of the Word you may have ever greater and stronger piety towards him. For the more he is mocked by unbelievers, the greater witness he provides of his divinity, because what men cannot understand as impossible, he shows to be possible, and what men mock as unsuitable by his goodness he renders suitable, and what men explain away and mock as human by his power he shows to be divine, overthrowing the illusion of idols by his apparent degradation through the cross, and persuading those who mock and do not believe to recognise his divinity and power.<sup>22</sup>

That is, the work which Athanasius calls *On the Incarnation* (just as the previous treatise, to which he here refers, *Against the Heathen*),

21 *Antichrist*, 61: ... ὃν ἀεὶ τίκουσα ἡ ἐκκλησία διδάσκει πάντα τὰ ἔθνη.

22 *On the Incarnation*, 1.

is meant as an apology for the cross.<sup>23</sup> The “Incarnation of the Word” and his apparent degradation are through the cross, which is mocked and slandered by Jews and Greeks; although this very mockery and slander, the apparent degradation, in fact, demonstrates his divinity. Human conceptions of what befits divinity, human idols, are overthrown by the “apparent degradation” of the Word on the cross—“apparent” because for those who understand this properly, that is, “according to the Scriptures,”<sup>24</sup> this is nothing less than “the divine manifestation to us” of the Word, which Athanasius sets himself to expound. In this way, Athanasius shows that it is not “irrational” (*alogos*) to “confess that he who ascended the cross is the Word (*logos*) of God and saviour of the universe.”<sup>25</sup> And so Athanasius concludes his treatise *On the Incarnation* with an exhortation to study Scripture, “written by God through men versed in theology,” so that we might learn of “his second glorious and truly divine manifestation to us,” and so participate in “the fruit of his own cross.”<sup>26</sup>

For all the fathers considered, and examples could be multiplied easily, the Incarnation of the Word is not located in the birth of Jesus from Mary as a distinct event from the Passion and exaltation. In some ways, such a position results from assuming the shorthand formulae as “dogmatic facts,” and then conflating John 1:14, which does not speak of a birth, with the infancy narratives, which do not speak of an incarnation of a heavenly, previously existing being. That Jesus was indeed born from Mary—a specific, temporal, historical event—was indeed assumed as a given. But, it is essential to note, to describe this event as “the Incarnation of the Word” can only be done by reflecting on Christ in the light of the cross through the medium of Scripture. When this is done, when the Passion, the crucifixion, and exaltation, is taken as the central

23 For this, see K. Anatolios, *Athanasius: The Coherence of His Thought* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 28–29, 84.

24 Note especially the different explanations of the Passion of Christ Athanasius provides for those “outside” and “inside” the Church, *On the Incarnation*, 21–26.

25 *Against the Heathen*, 1.

26 *On the Incarnation*, 56.

axis of theological reflection, then, as we saw from Origen earlier, this becomes determinative for contemplating the identity of Christ, and everything else is understood through this prism and in this pattern. Thus, the infancy narratives are not an attempt to preserve accurate historical information regarding the birth of Christ, but are, as Raymond Brown has so clearly pointed out, a retelling of the basic *kerygma* in a mode appropriate for the occasion.<sup>27</sup> This point is equally evident from iconography, which depicts the Christ not in a stable, but wrapped in swaddling clothes and lain in a cave, the shape of which mirrors the posture of the virgin, just as he was lain in the virgin cave owned by the other Joseph to emerge as the exalted Lord. The same point is made even more dramatically in the hymnography for the pre-feast of the Nativity, which consciously uses the same imagery and phrases as the material for Holy Week, which itself culminates in the Paschal reading of the Prologue of John.

Many other examples from the tradition of the Church could be brought in to exemplify the point. For instance, one hymn which is particularly interesting when viewed in this perspective is the “Only-begotten Son” attributed to Justinian. Although it is easily heard (especially in English) in the theological perspective outlined earlier, that is, as Trinitarian theology—“Only begotten Son and Word of God”—followed by “Incarnation” and Christology—“who accepted to become flesh for our salvation”—nevertheless, the subject, the addressee, of the whole hymn is in fact “Christ God” (given in the vocative), who is positioned between being crucified and trampling down death by death (*σταυρωθείς τε, Χριστέ ὁ θεός, θανάτῳ θάνατον πατήσας*), culminating in the acknowledgement that he is one of the Trinity and to be glorified with the Father and the Spirit. Rather than being read as a chronological narrative, which would ultimately temporalize God, the whole hymn is a reflection on the crucified and exalted Christ: it is confessional, rather than mythological. The same point is equally

27 Cf. R. E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Doubleday, 1993) and, more briefly, *An Adult Christ at Christmas* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988).

evident, though often overlooked, in the creeds and dogmatic definitions of the Councils. For instance, the Chalcedonian definition specifies that it is one and the same Jesus Christ who is both God and man, one hypostasis in two natures, and that it is he who is Lord, God, Son and Logos—in other words, “logos” is a title of Jesus Christ, rather than being the name of the eternal second person of the Trinity who “subsequently” (as if God is subject to time) becomes the man Jesus Christ. It is one and the same Jesus Christ, as St Cyril of Alexandria affirms so emphatically, who is from the Father as the Word of God and from the line of David as man—two births but one and the same subject, Jesus Christ.<sup>28</sup>

Theological talk of “Incarnation” thus operates at an interpretative level, based on the paschal faith—it is the Crucified One who is the Incarnate Word. But one must also go further, as already indicated by Irenaeus and Hippolytus. If it is from the perspective of the cross that we speak of the Word becoming flesh, fashioning a body from the virgin to be the temple in which he dwells, as Athanasius puts it, then this body cannot be separated from the bodies of Christians in whom the Word now dwells. So, in Athanasius’ work *On the Incarnation*, there is very little about Jesus’ actual birth or his life before the Passion: the treatise is mainly concerned with what the Word has worked through the body, by dying in the body and so granting his disciples life in his body, and consequently the bulk of Athanasius’ demonstration of the divinity of Christ argues from the divine works the Word effects in Christians now. The various levels in all of this reflection are summed up concisely in the second century *Letter to Diognetus*: “He was from the beginning, appeared new yet was found to be old, and is ever new [or “young”] being born in the hearts of the saints.”<sup>29</sup>

28 *That Christ is One* (740A): “We say that one and the same Jesus Christ is from God the Father as God the Word and also of the line of godly David according to the flesh.”

29 *Epistle to Diognetus*, 11.4: οὗτος ὁ ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, ὁ καινὸς φανεῖς καὶ παλαιὸς εὐρεθεῖς καὶ πάντοτε νέος ἐν ἀγίῳ καρδίας γεννώμενος.

*“Christology” and the “Schools” of Alexandria and Antioch*

It is also worth noting briefly how seeing theological reflection as primarily reflection upon the Passion results in a very different picture not only in the way that we construe Christian doctrine, but also with regard to the “schools” of theology that are often postulated in modern textbooks. Focusing on Incarnation as “birth” results in a very distorted picture of Christology, one which tends to concern itself with enumerating the “parts” of Jesus Christ, taking him as Word and flesh (supposedly “Alexandrian”) or as Word and man (where “man” is taken as flesh together with soul—supposedly “Antiochene”)—as if “the Word” could be reckoned as a “part” of a composite entity!<sup>30</sup> Such enquiries have tended to dominate patristic studies in the twentieth century, with their postulated schools of Alexandrian and Antiochene Christology. The understanding of Christ here has become totally separated from the Passion, even though Athanasius specifies that this is the very locus of reflection on the “Incarnation.” However, this identification of Jesus Christ with the Word of God *made through the cross* is something maintained by theologians who fall either side of the opposition set up in modern scholarship between “Alexandria” and “Antioch.”

For instance, Origen, the dominant figure in Alexandria, who set the paradigm for much theology thereafter, points out that while the various miracles performed by Christ can be passed by in silence, “it is necessary to the proclamation of Jesus as Christ that he should be proclaimed as crucified.”<sup>31</sup> He also employs the imagery of Philippians 2 in a surprising manner to claim that by dying on the cross “the goodness of Christ appeared greater and more divine and truly in accordance with the image of the Father,” than if he had remained “equal to God” and had not become a servant for the salvation of the world.<sup>32</sup> It is therefore by the “economy” of

30 For criticism of the materialistic overtones of such reflection, see K. Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 79–80; *idem*. “‘The Body as Instrument’: A Reevaluation of Athanasius’ Logos-Sarx Christology,” *Coptic Church Review*, 18 (1997) 78–84.

31 *Commentary on Matthew*, 12.19.

the Passion that Christ reveals the Father.<sup>33</sup> It is also by reference to Philippians 2—that all knees bow at the name of Jesus—that Origen establishes the omnipotence of God and Christ: “it is undoubtedly Jesus to whom all things have been subjected, and it is he who wields dominion over all things, and all things have been subjected to the Father through him.”<sup>34</sup> Most directly, Origen states in his *Commentary on John* that “the high exaltation of the Son of Man which occurred when he glorified God in his own death consisted in the fact that he was no longer any different from the Word, but was the same with it.”<sup>35</sup> The identity between Jesus and the Word of God turns upon the Passion, for it is as the crucified and risen one that he opens up the hidden sense of Scripture, the Word of God embodied in the Gospel. This identity hangs upon the cross, for the revelation of the Word of God occurs through the saving death of Christ as proclaimed in the Gospel.

Theodore of Mopsuestia, on the other hand, representing the so-called “Antiochene” tradition, maintains a similar point, though with more attention to the Gospel narrative of Christ. Christ, he argues, was united with the Word from his very conception, so that all things he is described as doing are done in reference to the Word, the Word which strengthened him for the perfect fulfillment of all righteousness, after which he cannot be separated from the Word.

So also the Lord, although at a later stage he had the Word working within him and throughout him in a perfect way, so as to be inseparable from the Word in his every motion, even before this [He, the Lord] had as much as was needed for accomplishing in himself the mighty things required. Before his crucifixion, because it was needful, he was permitted to

32 *Commentary on John*, 1.231. Cf. *Commentary on John*, 10.25. In *On First Principles*, 1.2.8 the revelation of the Father by the Son’s abasement is used to explain how Christ is the “express image” of God’s being (cf. Heb 1:3).

33 *Commentary on John*, 32.359.

34 *On First Principles*, 1.2.10. If the omnipotence of God is expressed in his crucified Son, then this results in a very different picture of the “eternal creation” often ascribed to Origen.

35 *Commentary on John*, 32.325.

fulfill by his own purposes a righteousness which was for our sake, and even in this undertaking he was urged on by the Word, and strengthened for the perfect fulfilment of what was fitting, for he had union with the Word straightway from the beginning when he was formed in his mothers womb.

... [Then] after the resurrection and ascension into heaven, when he had shown himself worthy of the union by his own will (having received the union even before this in his very fashioning, by the good pleasure of the Lord), he also unmistakably furnished for ever after the proof of the union, since he had nothing to separate and cut him off from the working of God the Word, but had God the Word accomplishing everything in him through the Union.<sup>36</sup>

Again, the total union or coincidence of the Word and Jesus occurs only through the Passion. Rather than seeing the various episodes of the Gospels as a spectrum resulting from the prism of the cross, as Origen tends to do, Theodore pays greater attention to the narrative dimension of the Gospels and so emphasizes that the Passion depends upon Christ's fulfillment of righteousness *by his own purposes*, an important aspect, the truth of which is developed later by St Maximus.

### *Recapitulation*

If it is the Crucified One who is the "Incarnate Word," then the "Incarnation" must be understood in a broader context than simply a divine person becoming flesh. Theological discourse of "incarnation" operates in an interpretative dimension. The relationship between Scripture and Gospel, established by the preaching of the crucified and exalted Christ, which is at the heart of this interpretative engagement, is described by Irenaeus with the term "recapitulation." According to Quintilian, recapitulation is the re-statement of the case or story in brief, bringing together the whole argument in one conspectus, so that, even if the details given made little impression, the cumulative effect might be more forceful.<sup>37</sup> In

36 Fragment 3 from the lost work *On the Incarnation* (Swete, 296–97).

37 Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.1

other words, recapitulation provides a résumé, which, because shorter, is clearer and therefore more effective. So Irenaeus points out that when the Word recapitulates all things in himself, “the invisible becomes visible, the incomprehensible becomes comprehensible, the impassible becomes passible, and the Word becomes man” (AH 3.16.6) Moreover, Irenaeus adds a little later, when the Word becomes flesh in this way, in “the last times,” he provides us with a résumé:

We have shown that the Son of God did not then begin to exist, being with the Father from the beginning; but when he became incarnate and was made man, he recapitulated in himself the long history of human beings, furnishing us, in résumé (*in compendio*), with salvation, so that what we lost in Adam—to be according to the image and likeness of God—that we might recover in Christ Jesus. (AH 3.18.1)

The Word becoming flesh, itself an “eschatological” event, the *parousia* “in the last times,” is not, therefore an absolute beginning, but a recapitulation, a résumé in clear brevity, of the continual presence and activity of the same Word. Against Marcion, on the one hand, Irenaeus can maintain that there is nothing new in the Gospel, what he is preached as having done, in the Gospel, is what he has done in directing the economy from the beginning. What is new is that Christ himself, who previously had only been announced, has arrived—the concise Word, the Gospel, is clearly proclaimed. On the other hand, with the eschatological character of the Gospel reflecting the divine perfection of Christ, he can also maintain, against the Gnostics, that there is nothing more to be added to it. Recapitulating this history in himself, Jesus Christ furnishes us with salvation through a résumé, which, as an epitome, provides the guidelines for the correct reading of the same Word throughout the long history written in Scripture.

The apostolic proclamation of the crucified and exalted Lord, the Gospel, is made up of the texture of the Scripture—the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets—no longer proclaimed in the obscurity of types and prophecies, but refracted through the cross, and

proclaimed clearly and concisely in a résumé. When Irenaeus says that the Son becoming flesh recapitulates the long narrative of the economy, this is a recapitulation made by God through the apostles and their concise word: the same Word of God, obscurely written at length in Scripture, is preached concisely and clearly, enfleshed, by the apostles in their Gospel proclaiming the human sojourn of the Word of God. The unique revelation of God in Jesus Christ, the Word become flesh, is located specifically in the apostolic preaching of him, the Gospel which refracts Scripture through the cross, and in which the Word hidden in Scripture becomes visible and comprehensible—becomes flesh. The affirmation that Jesus Christ is the Word of God become flesh is thus not based upon a historicizing conflation of John 1:14 with the infancy narratives, which would effectively turn theology into mythology. Rather, the confession that Jesus Christ is the Word of God is based in the literary dynamics of this relationship between Scripture and the Gospel, a relationship which turns specifically upon the axis of the Paschal faith, the lordship of the crucified and exalted Christ, as proclaimed by the apostles “according to the Scriptures,” and as continually reflected on thereafter by those who followed in their tradition. In this way, the confession that Christ is the Word of God directs our own attention back to Scripture, to reflect yet further on the identity of Christ, and this is an engagement to which all Christians are called, so coming to understand themselves in the light of Christ and eventually to come to the fullness of his stature (Eph 4:13). To overlook this dimension in which such theological affirmations take flesh, are embodied, in preference for the already familiar shorthand formulae and the theological edifices built from them, turns theology from confession to a mixture of metaphysics and mythology, and bypasses the perennial challenge of Christ’s question “Who do you say I am?” (Mt 16:15).