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—The—
**THEOLOGICAL
INTERPRETATION
OF SCRIPTURE**

CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY READINGS

—Edited by—
**Stephen
E. Fowl**
Loyola College, Maryland

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The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis

David S. Yeago

Introduction

One of the consequences of the Western Church's two centuries of fumbling with the implications of the historical-critical method is a loss of any sense of the connection between the classical doctrines of the Church and the text of scripture. It is assumed that a truly scholarly interpretation of the scriptural texts methodologically excludes any reference to Christian doctrine as a hermeneutical touchstone, and as a matter of historical fact, though not of logical necessity, the historical-critical enterprise has often been understood as the liberation of rational intelligence and religious experience from the dead hand of dogma. The doctrines, in such a context, come to seem a superstructure overlaid on the texts by theological speculation, at best a time-conditioned expression of spiritual experience somehow distantly responsive to the scriptural witness, at worst the token of the "Hellenized" Church's cultural alienation from that witness.

By contrast, one has only to look at the sermons, commentaries, and treatises of the Fathers, Aquinas, or Luther to see how seriously they took, for example, the Trinitarian and Christological doctrines as analyses of the logic of the scriptural discourse, formal descriptions of the apprehension of God in the texts, which then serve as guides to a faithful and attentive reading of the texts.¹ Where this conviction is no longer intelligible, the classical doctrines come to seem, in one way and another, superfluous to the life of faith and of the believing

community, venerable baggage perhaps invoked from time to time out of respect for the ancients (a commodity in short supply just lately!) but scarcely objects of zealous and painstaking study. No theory of the development of doctrine which attempts to save the classical doctrines without accounting for the unanimous conviction of the Christian tradition that they are *the teaching of scripture* can overcome the marginalization of the doctrines which is so evident in the contemporary Western Church and theology.²

In this essay I shall make a contribution to an argument that the ancient theologians were right to hold that the Nicene *homoousion* is neither imposed on the New Testament texts, nor distantly deduced from the texts, but, rather, describes a pattern of judgements present in the texts, in the texture of scriptural discourse concerning Jesus and the God of Israel. I shall go on to argue on the basis of this example that the exegesis underlying classical Christian doctrines is in certain crucial respects methodologically superior to the "critical" exegesis which has claimed to invalidate it.

Obviously, the exegetical aspect of this discussion could be ramified indefinitely; to substantiate the thesis of this essay fully would require an exegetical-theological study on the scale of Athanasius's *Orations* against the Arians, Gregory of Nyssa's *Against Eunomius*, or Cyril of Alexandria's *Dialogue*. What is offered here is no more than an example in aid of an argument. It will succeed in its purpose if it sends its readers back to the great Patristic treatises prepared to take seriously their claim to be engaged in exegesis of the scriptures.

Jesus and the God of Israel: Paul and Nicæa

The New Testament does not contain a formally articulated "doctrine of God" of the same kind as the later Nicene dogma. What it does contain is a pattern of implicit and explicit judgements concerning the God of Israel and his relationship to the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth. The dogma is the Church's attempt to take account articulately of this more basic state of affairs: in both the preaching and the worship of the Church, according to the witness of the New Testament, God is inescapably *apprehended and identified as the Triune God*. This Trinitarian apprehension of God arises at the juncture of two contexts which are central to the Church's identity, and which were also the primary points of reference for the New Testament writers themselves: the distinctive practices of Christian worship, and the scriptures of Israel.

The God of Israel, the God in whose name Jesus of Nazareth claimed to speak, has raised him from the dead and exalted him as Lord. This is the founding Christian affirmation. The interpretation of this founding affirmation takes place, for the New Testament writers, at the intersection of two authoritative contexts: the worship of the Church in the Spirit, which is the

concrete locus of the Church's present relationship to the risen *kurios*, and the prophetic witness of the scriptures of Israel, also the work of the Spirit who thus "testified in advance to the sufferings destined for Messiah and to the subsequent glory" (1 Pet. 1:11).

The Trinitarian faith was embraced in the *practice* of the Church already in the very earliest days of the Christian movement, when Christians, and Jewish Christians at that, began to *call on the name of Jesus in worship* – an astonishing thing for any group of Jews to do. There is every reason to believe that the earliest Christians were vigorous Jewish monotheists determined to worship no God but YHWH. Nevertheless, they began to focus their worship of the God of Israel on the figure of Jesus from a very early date – indeed, so far as anyone can tell, from the very beginning.³ They solemnly invoked Jesus' name, addressed praise and petition and acclamation to him, and appealed to him as *marah* or *kurios*, thus associating him with the holy name of YHWH.⁴

According to the message of the apostles, reflected in the worship practices of the early communities, in the resurrection and exaltation, the God of Israel has identified himself with the particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth. God has not, in exalting Jesus as Lord, merely affirmed that he was right, nor only identified himself with Jesus' "cause" or teaching. In his exaltation, Jesus' *person*, Jesus himself, has been definitively identified with God. The particular human being Jesus is thus addressed as one who sits at God's "right hand" and rules with God's own authority. And so the Church likewise awaits the appearance of this same Jesus to judge the world on YHWH's behalf.

So, for example, as Paul says in Philippians 2:9, possibly citing early Christian liturgy, the exaltation means that Jesus has been given "the name that is above every name."⁵ There can be little doubt what name *that* is, in the context of any communal life nurtured on the Psalms. The "name above every name" is the majestic name, the name in which the oppressed take refuge, and to which the people of God make music, the name of YHWH.⁶

Paul (or his source) continues: this name has been bestowed "so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 1:10–11). This is, of course, a direct allusion to Isaiah 45:21–24:

There is no other god except me,
no saving God, no Saviour except me!
Turn to me and you will be saved,
all you ends of the earth,
for I am God, and there is no other.
By my own self I swear it;
what comes from my mouth is saving justice,
it is an irrevocable word:

all shall bend the knee to me,
by me every tongue shall swear,
saying, "In YHWH alone
are saving justice and strength,"
until all who used to rage at him
come to him in shame.

The text from Philippians identifies the prophesied turning of all the earth to YHWH as the only God with the universal acclamation of Jesus as Lord; that Jesus is acclaimed as *kurios* "to the glory of God the Father" implies that YHWH comes to his rightful, exclusive sovereignty over the whole creation, proclaimed in Isaiah, precisely through creation's acknowledgement of the lordship of the particular person Jesus. Within the thought-world of Israel's scriptures, no stronger affirmation of the bond between the risen Jesus and the God of Israel is possible.

This remarkable identification reflects the inner logic of the worship of the Church in the Spirit. Whether the text from Philippians is an actual fragment of early Christian liturgy, or a free composition of Paul, its background is clearly the liturgical acclamation of Jesus (cf. Rom. 10:9-13; 1 Cor. 12:1-3). In the resurrection, as the Church confesses it in worship, God has so utterly identified himself with Jesus, and Jesus has been so inextricably associated with God, that it is not possible to turn to the God of Israel without at the same time turning to Jesus. In the Church's celebration of the resurrection and exaltation of Jesus, the God of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth are apprehended as united inseparably in a unique relationship which definitively identifies and characterizes them both.

It is perfectly consistent with this that the early communities came to speak by preference of the God of Israel as Jesus' Father and of Jesus as God's unique Son, in a relationship definitive for the identity of each.⁷ The point of this language (as St Athanasius saw) is that each title asserts an identity to which relationship is intrinsic. One can be "Father" only by virtue of a relationship to another, to some particular offspring. One can likewise be "Son" only by virtue of a relationship to another, to some particular progenitor. When YHWH and Jesus are identified as Father and Son, then their mutual relationship is inscribed constitutively into the identity of each. The language of Father and Son precisely articulates the apprehension of the relation of YHWH and Jesus implicit in the worship of the *ekklesia*.

But the invocation of Isaiah 45 in Philippians 2:10-11 also brings us up against the New Testament's other normative reference point, the scriptures of Israel. And it is the intersection of this context with the context of early Christian worship that generates the New Testament's Trinitarian apprehension of God.

The text from Isaiah proclaims the coming vindication precisely of the unique

and incomparable deity of YHWH: "I am God, and there is no other." And in so doing it reiterates the deepest theme of Israel's faith: only YHWH, the particular one who brought the people out of Israel, is *elohim*, "god."⁸ What is so profoundly odd about Philippians 2:10-11 is that it identifies the prophesied universal acknowledgement of the unique deity of YHWH with the universal cultic acclamation of an apparent "other," Jesus of Nazareth. The difficulty is palpable: if "there is no other" how can the bending of knees and the loosing of tongues at the name of some other be compatible, much less identified, with the recognition of the "glory" of the God of Israel?

The eagerness of many modern scholars to distance the New Testament as much as possible from the later development of dogma has needlessly obscured the simple fact that the conceptual possibilities in the face of this question are not infinite. N. T. Wright has summed them up concisely:

For consider: if the God who will not share his glory with another has now shared it with Jesus (the position asserted in 2:9ff), then there are only three possible conclusions that can be drawn. It might be the case that there are now two Gods. Or Jesus - who up until then had been a man and nothing but a man - might now have been totally absorbed into the one God without remainder (so to speak). Or there might be a sense - requiring fuller investigation, exploration, and clarification, no doubt - in which Jesus, in being exalted to the rank described in 2:9ff, is receiving no more than that which was always, from before the beginning of time, his by right.⁹

That is to say, either Philippians 2:9ff is proclaiming the mythical divinization of the human being Jesus, in what would then have to be read as a rather violent subversion and repudiation of Isaiah 45:21-24, or else it must be confessed that Jesus is not "other" than YHWH in the relevant sense. The relationship between YHWH and Jesus which the Church hymns in her worship must always have been intrinsic to YHWH's identity.

It is, of course, easy enough to admit that the resurrection is not the beginning of the relationship between Jesus and the God of Israel. It is, rather, the vindication, the victorious assertion, of a relationship which already existed, but was denied and unrecognized. Here the Church's confession of the resurrection and her memory of Jesus interpreted each other. Already before the resurrection, Jesus had claimed unique intimacy with the God of Israel. Already before the resurrection, Jesus had spoken of the God of Israel as uniquely his Father. Already before the resurrection, Jesus had implicitly claimed God's authority in a way that provoked hostility and rejection. The resurrection is the vindication and verification of an already existing relationship between Jesus and YHWH. With the resurrection, that relationship enters into a new phase, begins to be lived out in a new mode, but it did not come into being at that moment.

But the logic of the theological situation we are considering requires a further

step. If relationship to Jesus of Nazareth is *intrinsic* to the identity of YHWH, if Jesus is not "other" than YHWH in the sense of Isaiah 45, then it is impossible to fix any moment as the moment when that relationship began. For that moment would then be the moment when the creature Jesus became divine. If "there was when he was not" (Arianism) or if any moment can be identified as the beginning of his relationship with YHWH (Adoptionism), then his association with YHWH would amount to the enthronement of a "second god" alongside the Lord God of Israel. And we are forbidden to think *that* by the deepest logic of Israel's faith: there is only one God, YHWH, incomparable and unique.

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

The Church's acclamation of Jesus and the witness of the scriptures of Israel can therefore be rhymed only if the exaltation of Jesus implies, not that the one God shares his glory with another, but that the glory of the one God is *manifested* in the exaltation of his Son, who belongs intrinsically to the reality of the one God. The exaltation of Jesus does not *add* to God's being; it vindicates and manifests the glory of God's being, to which relationship to Jesus of Nazareth is essential. Only if the exaltation manifests a relationship intrinsic to God's being from everlasting, does the exaltation not imply that there are now two gods, Jesus and YHWH, but, rather, makes known that Jesus was always included in the glory of the one God, even before the foundations of the world were laid (John 17).

This step has already been taken in Philippians 2: according to verse 6 the one who has been exalted and given the name above every name began his way in the "form of God" and as "equal" to God. The force of these predicates is that the one who humbled himself and was exalted was full sharer in whatever reality is ascribed to YHWH.¹⁰ The affirmation of the text is that one who shared fully in the singular reality of the God of Israel has *chosen* to share in the reality of human beings.

That the primary points of reference for the confession of Jesus' equality with God are the Church's worship of the exalted Jesus and the Old Testament's proclamation of the singularity of God was quite clear, it should be noted, to the Fathers who formulated the church-doctrine of the Trinity in the fourth century. Thus, for example, St Gregory of Nyssa:

God commands us by the prophet not to regard as God any new god, nor to worship any alien god (Ps. 81:9; Exod. 34:13). Now it is clear that what is not

from eternity is called "new" and, on the contrary, that which is not new is called "eternal." Thus whoever does not believe that the Only-begotten God is from the Father eternally does not deny that he is new, for that which is not eternal is necessarily new. Now anything which is new is not God, as scripture says, "There shall be no new god among you." Therefore whoever says that the Son "once was not" denies his deity. Again, when God says, "You shall not worship an alien god" (Exod. 20:3), he forbids us to worship an alien god; and an "alien god" is so called in contradistinction to our own God. Who, then, is our own God? Clearly, the true God. And who is the alien god? Necessarily, one who is alien from the nature of the true God. So if our own God is the true God, and if, as the heretics say, the only-begotten God is not of the nature of the true God, then he is an alien god, and not our God. . . . Then what will they do, who say that he is a creature? Do they worship that same creature as God, or not? If they do not worship him, they follow the Jews in denying the worship of Christ: and if they do worship him, they are idolaters, for they worship one alien to the true God. Now, it is equally ungodly not to worship the Son, and to worship an alien god. Therefore it is necessary to call him the true Son of the true Father, so that we may both worship him, and avoid being condemned as worshippers of an alien god.¹¹

Judgements and Concepts: The Logic of Theological Exegesis

To suggest so immediate a relationship between the Nicene theology of Gregory of Nyssa and the theology of Paul runs afoul of a great chorus of biblical scholars which has insisted for two centuries that Paul's "equality with God" is "not the same" as the *homoousion* of Nicæa. But those who press this point rarely seem to have any clear notion of what it means for two assertions to be "the same."

It is essential, in this context, to distinguish between *judgements* and the *conceptual terms* in which those judgements are rendered. We cannot concretely perform an act of judgement without employing some particular, contingent verbal and conceptual resources; judgement-making is an operation performed with words and concepts. At the same time, however, the same judgement can be rendered in variety of conceptual terms, all of which may be informative about a particular judgement's force and implications. The possibility of valid alternative verbal/conceptual renderings of the identical judgement accounts for the fact that we ourselves often do not realize the full implications of the judgements we pass: only *some* of their implications are ever unpacked in the particular renderings we have given them.¹²

This point is especially important when we ask about the relationship between the New Testament and later Church teaching. Unity in teaching must

be sought at the level of judgements and not at the level of concepts, for as it passes and urges judgements. An inquiry which remains at the level of concepts, cataloging and tracing the history of the diverse conceptual resources employed in the New Testament texts and the theology of the Fathers, will never succeed even in properly raising the question of the relation between New Testament and later Church teaching.

Information about the history of the concepts is helpful only if we are attentive to the particular ways in which the concepts are employed in affirmation and denial within a body of discourse. When we compare judgements, we must ask (1) about the logical subjects of which predicates are affirmed and denied, (2) about the logical type of the particular predicates affirmed or denied within the conceptual idioms they employ, and (3) about the point or function of their affirmations or denials within their respective contexts of discourse.

Thus if one concluded that one's psychiatrist friend and one's elderly relative were indeed talking about the same individual, that the clinical description offered by the former and the latter's "a most disturbing young man" were predicates of the same type within their respective idioms, and that the point of both statements was to give warning, one would say that both of them had "said the same thing" about the person in question. Nor would we be inclined to revise this conclusion on the basis of a learned account of the Freudian background of the terms used by the psychiatrist, accompanied by an exhaustive demonstration that one's uncle had never studied Freud.

When the question is considered in these terms, a strong, and in my view conclusive, case can be made that the judgement about Jesus and God made in the Nicene Creed – the judgement that they are "of one substance" or "one reality" – is indeed "the same," in a basically ordinary and unmysterious way, as that made in a New Testament text such as Philippians 2:6ff:

- 1 The logical subjects in each case are identical: the crucified and exalted *kurios* Jesus of Nazareth and the God of Israel. The Creed employs narrative markers to secure the identity of the "Jesus" it talks about with the one to whom the New Testament bears witness, and likewise makes clear that it is the specific God of Israel to which it makes reference; no other putative deity could be meant by "one God . . . ruler of all, maker of heaven and earth."
- 2 Each text predicates of these two subjects the most intimate possible bond, using the strongest terms available within the conceptual idiom of each. *Homoousion* to *Patri* and the complex of terms employed in the Philippians text – *en morphê theou*, "equal to God," "name above every name," and the whole set of associations arising from the evocation of Isaiah 45 – are in this

respect logically equivalent, playing the same role within their respective contexts, and to that extent of the same type, despite their differences in historical background.

- 3 The point of the two affirmations is substantially the same: to articulate the judgements implicit in distinctive Christian proclamation and practices of worship (as well as the Christian mission to the nations).

Thus Philippians 2:6ff and the Nicene *homoousion* meet all our ordinary criteria of "sameness": despite the conventional wisdom of the critics, it is not at all odd or naive to claim that they "say the same thing" about Jesus and the Father.¹³

The results of ignoring the distinction between judgements and concepts can be seen in James D. G. Dunn's *Christology in the Making*,¹⁴ a disappointing book by an immensely learned and deservedly influential exegete which exemplifies the logical confusion in which a great deal of contemporary biblical scholarship is mired.

Although Dunn's study is subtitled "A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation," his real subject matter is not a doctrine at all, that is, a teaching which urges certain judgements, but, rather, the concept of incarnation. Indeed, Dunn uses the terms "doctrine" and "concept" more or less interchangeably. That is to say, Dunn believes that he can account for the Christology of the New Testament simply by recounting the history of its conceptualities; the question of the judgements which the texts make concerning Jesus of Nazareth is never clearly posed.

The outcome, in Dunn's case, is that in practice he identifies "the doctrine of the incarnation" in a rather wooden fashion with the conceptual apparatus of the Johannine prologue: a text contains a "doctrine of the incarnation" if and only if its conceptual idiom is identical with that of the first 14 verses of John. Thus his inquiry devolves into a long and surely unnecessary demonstration that the prologue to John is conceptually singular within the New Testament canon.

Moreover, not only his overall strategy, but also his exegesis of particular texts, is vitiated by his assumption that one understands the "doctrine" of a text, not by attending to what it says and implies, but by speculating about its conceptual and terminological background. This enables him to pursue a curiously perverse policy of minimizing the content of the non-Johannine Christological traditions in the New Testament often in clear contradiction of what the old exegetes called the *circumstantia litterarum*, "the way the words go."¹⁵

Thus, for example, he argues that because Philippians 2:6ff reflects the conceptual background of an "Adam-Christology," it is wrong to find in it any affirmation of the pre-existence of Christ, despite what seems its obvious sense,

because "pre-existence" is not part of the "Adam-Christology."¹⁶ We may pass by the point that the "Adam-Christology" is a scholarly construct, so that Dunn is in effect overriding the "way the words go" in Philippians 2:6ff by reference to a fictional entity. Even if we had available for reference a copy of a first-century textbook, *Principles of the Adam-Christology*, with Paul's name on the flyleaf, Dunn's procedure would be confused, because it does not respect the distinction, and therefore the proper ordering, of judgements and concepts.

In general, judgements are not instrumental to concepts but concepts to judgements; we cannot infer in any but the most general and open-ended way from the structure of a concept, or the history of its previous employment, the range of possible uses to which it may yet be put in the rendering of judgements. The only way to uncover the judgements made in a text is to pay close attention to what is said and implied, to the specific, contingent ways in which its conceptual resources are deployed: to attend, in short, to the *circumstantia litterarum*.¹⁷ Thus the most precise and detailed history of the "Adam-Christology" would not, by itself, settle any questions whatsoever about what is asserted or implied in Philippians 2:6ff.

The reasons for the long dominance of this sort of confusion in modern biblical study would have to be sought in the historic coupling of historical criticism with a "project of enlightenment" aimed at liberating mind and heart from the shackles of ecclesiastical tradition. In the modern context, claims to "enlightenment" must be backed up with the claim to have achieved a proper *method*, capable of producing real knowledge to replace the pre-critical confusion and arbitrariness of tradition. To this must be added the pervasive contempt for logic which Humanism, some streams of the Reformation, and Pietism bequeathed to both theology and the humanities in modern times.¹⁸

All these factors have coalesced in a firmly institutionalized self-image of the discipline of biblical criticism which affects the work even of scholars who are not personally hostile to traditional doctrine. The notion that the task of biblical exegesis is to get at the true meaning of the biblical texts through historical research seems too obvious to be questioned.

But if "biblical exegesis," in its fullest dimensions, is taken to be an inquiry into the content and unity of biblical teaching, and not simply a historical examination of the terms and concepts employed in the biblical texts, then there is and can be no *distinctively* "historical critical" discipline of "biblical exegesis." The only possible way of investigating the content and unity of biblical teaching is to inquire attentively into what the texts say and how they say it, in search of unifying common judgements which may be rendered in very diverse ways, attempting to redescribe or re-render those judgements so as to do justice to the significance of their various articulations across the range of the canon.

This is not to say that historical research contributes nothing to the enterprise

of Biblical exegesis so defined. Study of the history of the conceptualities employed in the texts can provide significant material for comparison, so that the distinctive employment of these conceptualities in the rendering of judgements in the biblical texts stands out more sharply.¹⁹ Another extremely important service of historical research is to bring to light the context of communal *practices* presupposed in the biblical writings, for practices are a crucial clue to judgements, as our discussion of the significance of early Christian worship for the New Testament apprehension of God suggests.²⁰

But in all this, historical research is propaedeutic to the real theological-exegetical task. If "biblical theology" is anything coherent at all, it is just "theology," an engagement with the biblical texts no different in principle from that undertaken in the theological exegesis of St Athanasius, St Basil, St Thomas, Martin Luther, and Karl Barth, and it will not fare well if it is not pursued by the means proper to theological reflection. Those means are chiefly those of close reading and conceptual analysis, attention (in St Athanasius's terms) to the *skopos* and *akolouthia*, the tenor and coherence of the judgements rendered in the texts.

The Prospects for Theological Exegesis

A final word needs to be said about the prospects for a renewal of theological exegesis. Such a project presupposes that we have reasons to *care* about the judgements rendered in the biblical writings. The Fathers, scholastics, and reformers had such reasons: they believed that when we conform our thinking to the pattern of judgements imbedded in the prophetic and apostolic scriptures, our understanding is illumined by a divine light (Ps. 36:9) and so we come to share the *nous Christou*, the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:16).²¹

It is not at all clear that much of contemporary Western Christianity shares any longer in this motivation. Mainline theology has failed to replace the untenable early-modern doctrines of propositional revelation and verbal inspiration with any account of scripture's role in the purposes of God which provides reasons for a passionate and attentive engagement with the texts. Indeed, such engagement would only hinder many contemporary theological and ecclesiastical projects; institutional interests of all sorts are best served by an instinctive polemical tarring of any attempt to commend a posture of deference towards the scriptural texts with the dreaded fundamentalist brush. Anti-fundamentalism has become a powerful ideological tool in the mainline Western Churches which almost guarantees the marginalization of any call to "biblical seriousness," however clear its actual differences from fundamentalism.

In such a situation, subversion is perhaps a more hopeful strategy than frontal attack. That is to say, the future of theological exegesis may depend on those who quietly go about learning how to do theological exegesis from the tradition and the clearest-headed contemporary sources, and then actually let the voice of the texts be heard in their preaching and theologizing. And this may simply mean that we are forced back into a posture which is itself biblically normative, modeled for the Church in the self-presentation of the Apostle Paul:

My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God (1 Cor. 2:4).

Notes

- 1 Cf. the fine description of this in the review by J. A. DiNoia, O.P., of John Meier's *A Marginal Jew, Pro Ecclesia* II/1, 122–125. DiNoia's discussion of historical criticism is also relevant to this essay.
- 2 And perhaps especially evident in contemporary theological education.
- 3 "The hymn to Christ grew out of the early services of the community after Easter, i.e., it is as old as the community itself." Martin Hengel, "Hymns and Christology," in *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest History of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), p. 93.
- 4 On all this, see the excellent historical study by Larry Hurtado, *One God, One Lord: Early Christian Devotion and Ancient Christian Monotheism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). On *march*, cf. p. 107. Notice how Paul equates "calling on the Name of the Lord" and confessing Jesus in Romans 10:9–13.
- 5 In what follows, I am much indebted to N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress 1991), chap. 4.
- 6 Cf. Pss. 8:1; 54:1; 113:1–3; 130:1–4.
- 7 I leave to one side for the moment the question of the extent to which this language originates in Jesus' own self-presentation.
- 8 Israel's faith appropriates the general concept of *elohim* or "god" to the particular one identified by the story of the Patriarchs and the Exodus. Only *this* one is rightly and properly referred to as *elohim*. Where the term *elohim* is not so conclusively appropriated to YHWH as to be used as a proper name, it seems to mean something like, "a higher power which must be reckoned with," as in Exodus 7:2: "Look, I have made you as a god for Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron is to be your prophet." The scriptures of Israel are not at every stage *theoretically* monotheistic, but they do insist that whatever powers may exist, only YHWH has the right to be considered *elohim*; even if there are other "gods," other "higher powers," YHWH is nonetheless the god with whom the gods themselves must reckon. On the logic of "YHWH is God," cf. Gregory of Nyssa's discussion of the logical status of the predicate *theos* in "On the Holy Trinity, and of the Godhead of the Holy Spirit, to Eustathius," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series

- 2, vol. 7, 328–9; cf. also K. H. Miskotte, *When the Gods Are Silent*, trans. by J. W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Row, 1967).
- 9 Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant*, p. 94. Strictly speaking, however, the second option is *not* a real possibility, at least as an interpretation of Philippians 2:9ff, for in that case, there would be no referent left for the "name of Jesus." I will therefore disregard it in the subsequent discussion.
- 10 Denials that this is in fact what is affirmed here can, in my judgement, only be carried out by hermeneutical sleight-of-hand. Cf. Wright, *ibid.*, pp. 90–8.
- 11 Gregory of Nyssa, "On the Faith, to Simplicius," my trans. Cf. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 2, vol. V, p. 337.
- 12 So when we are trying to get someone to see the implications of his or her judgements, we often restate them in other terms which bring out the relevant consequences: "Aren't you really saying such and such? And doesn't that imply this?"
- 13 In a full-dress hermeneutical discussion, which cannot be offered here, it would be important to consider also the significance of the fact that the scriptural texts do nonetheless render such judgements *differently* from later dogmatic statements, and the consequent possibility of always returning *from* the dogmas *to* the scriptures to be instructed anew.
- 14 Westminster, 1980.
- 15 On this notion, cf. Bruce Marshall, "Absorbing the World: Christianity and the Universe of Truths," in Marshall, ed., *Theology and Dialogue: Essays in Conversation with George Lindbeck* (Notre Dame, 1990), pp. 69–102; esp. 90–7.
- 16 See *Christology in the Making*, pp. 114–21. "Phil 2.6–11 certainly seems on the face of it to be a straightforward statement contrasting Christ's pre-existent glory and post-crucifixion exaltation with his earthly humiliation" (p. 114). The discussion that follows is an extended attempt to do an end-run around this acknowledged character of the *circumstantia litterarum*.
- 17 In this respect, I suspect that the importance of St Athanasius in the history of biblical hermeneutics has been underestimated. His achievement, one might suggest, was to have worked out for the first time the principles of a "doctrinal" exegesis of scripture, as distinguished from (but not necessarily opposed to) the "edifying" or "spiritual" exegesis most common in the earlier tradition. One might say that he first gave attention in its own right to the hermeneutics of the "literal sense," which was rather taken for granted by the earlier tradition. Cf. Thomas Torrance, "The Logic and Analogic of Biblical and Theological Statements in the Greek Fathers," *Theology in Reconstruction* (SCM, 1965), for some suggestive reflections on Patristic theological exegesis.
- 18 The scholastic "logic-chopping" of which early moderns complained was in fact the most sophisticated logical organon ever developed; prior to the work of Frege, classical modernity was dependent on logical resources which were *primitive* in comparison to those available in the middle ages. On this, cf. Graham White, "Luther and Logic," *Modern Theology* 4 (1987): 17–34.
- 19 It was a weakness of the "biblical theology" movement that it often sought the distinctiveness of biblical faith in distinctive concepts (a claim that could not stand under historical analysis) rather than in the distinctive ways in which concepts are employed in the biblical witness.
- 20 Much of the work of Martin Hengel acquires its acute theological relevance in this way.

The degree to which Patristic exegesis profits from being located in a communal continuum of practice with the New Testament communities should not be underestimated, as the text cited from Gregory of Nyssa suggests.

- 21 To be sure, conformity of the intellect to the judgements embedded in the texts was not all that the Christian tradition aimed at in its engagement with scripture. There was also a formation of the imagination and the affections which was likewise understood as issuing in conformity to God.

PART



Theological Interpretations of Select Biblical Texts