



The Historian and the Theologian: On the Role of New Testament Studies in the Christologies of McCormack and DeHart

David W. Congdon

Abstract

Two recent works of Christology attempt to bridge the gap between systematic theology and biblical studies by engaging historical research about the Bible in a constructive way: Bruce L. McCormack's *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* and Paul J. DeHart's *Unspeakable Cults: An Essay in Christology*. McCormack seeks to repair Chalcedon by drawing on what he takes to be the correct reading of Paul's Christ Hymn in Philippians. Drawing on recent scholarship from Paula Fredriksen, Paul Holloway, and Matthew Novenson, this article shows that another reading is possible, one that conflicts with McCormack's reparative project. McCormack's effort to avoid speculation fails, since his argument depends on presupposing certain metaphysical claims about the Bible. DeHart's work offers a different model of engaging biblical studies, one that avoids speculation in McCormack's sense but engages in reconstructive historical speculation as a constructive thought experiment. DeHart's project relies, however, on a Catholic ecclesiology, in which the incarnation is an ongoing process of cultural and cultic imagination. The conclusion proposes an alternative approach that builds on McCormack's actualistic ontology and DeHart's embrace of critical historical research without assuming the validity of the Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition.

Key words: Chalcedon, Nicene tradition, Paul within Judaism, divine identity Christology, angelomorphic Christology, great angel tradition, theological ontology, Bruce L. McCormack, Paul J. DeHart, Paula Fredriksen

Sixty years ago, Van Harvey published *The Historian and the Believer*, a landmark book that said out loud what many were grappling with privately—namely, that critical historical scholarship, especially with respect to the Bible, posed a fundamental challenge to faith, not merely in its empirical results but in its very method (Harvey, 1966). The years since Harvey's book have only deepened this challenge. The gap between systematic theology and critical biblical studies has become a veritable chasm over the past half-century, with new research on multiple fronts calling into question longstanding doctrinal traditions. Research on ancient polytheism, the bodily form of the gods, and the Jewish

(not Christian) context of the New Testament are among the areas that have pushed the already strained relationship between these fields to a breaking point (see, e.g., Novenson, 2020b; Marksches, 2019; Stavrakopoulou, 2021; Fredriksen, 2018; Fredriksen, 2024; Novenson, 2024). The tension is perhaps nowhere felt more keenly than in Christology, where the research on the histori-

David W. Congdon is senior editor at the University Press of Kansas and lecturer in religious studies at the University of Kansas. He is the author most recently of *Who Is a True Christian? Contesting Religious Identity in American Culture* (Cambridge, 2024).

cal Jesus and the ancient Mediterranean world has advanced by leaps and bounds, while the dogmas about Christ remain fixed by the conciliar decisions at Nicaea, Constantinople, and Chalcedon.

Two recent works illustrate very different ways of approaching both the theological tradition and the latest biblical scholarship: Bruce L. McCormack's *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon* and Paul J. DeHart's *Unspeakable Cults: An Essay in Christology*. McCormack's monograph represents the culmination of two decades of research and writing on the topic of Christology, divine ontology, and kenoticism (McCormack, 2006). The guiding purpose of this work is, as the subtitle indicates, to "repair" the Chalcedonian Definition's account of the relation between the divinity and humanity of Christ. After a survey of 1500 years of theology, McCormack develops a constructive account of Christ's person—his account of Christ's work will come in the third volume of his planned trilogy—in which he draws heavily on an exegesis of relevant New Testament texts, specifically the letters of Paul, the four Gospels, and Hebrews. Whereas McCormack's project is reparative, DeHart's project is reconstructive; that is to say, McCormack uses resources from previous theologians to repair the tradition, while DeHart keeps the tradition intact but reconstructs it using novel theological concepts.

The focus of this essay is not to assess the merits of the respective Christologies of McCormack and DeHart, which deserve attention in their own right. Instead, the goal is to analyze the way each theologian navigates what Gerhard Ebeling (1954) called "the theological problem of historicity"—the gap between historical sources and normative commitments. My analysis is thus methodological rather than material. In other words, to what extent does each theologian do justice to the historical character of the New Testament texts? Here the distinction between the two works becomes most evident. Each constructive proposal is methodologically the inverse of the other: McCormack's work is theologically innovative, while taking a traditional approach to biblical studies; DeHart's is theologically traditional, while embracing a more radical approach to biblical studies. Each thus wagers his theological proposal on a different level of risk regarding the problem

of historicity. McCormack's proposal assumes that the Bible is theologically normative, and thus he requires the text to make certain claims that lend support to his reparative reading of Chalcedon. In what follows, I test McCormack's argument against the work of the recent scholarship associated with the "Paul within Judaism" school and the latest historical Jesus research, and I find it wanting in certain key respects. DeHart's proposal, by contrast, is theologically immune to the historical gap and is able to accommodate the most critical historical scholarship, but his approach requires commitments that many may find difficult to follow. I conclude by suggesting an alternative approach that may satisfy no one—namely, abandoning the Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition altogether—but which may also open up new theological opportunities by freeing theologians from the constraint of working within dogmatic parameters that have little connection to historical data.

Can Theology Avoid Speculation? McCormack's Reformed Kenoticism

Most of the attention given to McCormack's work will focus on the key terms that characterize his project, including "kenoticism," "ontological receptivity," and "composite hypostasis." These form the essential building blocks of his constructive proposal in Christology. But there is another term that is just as important to the argument, but which is likely to go overlooked by most readers—namely, "biblical." It is not an exaggeration to say that McCormack's attempt to repair Chalcedon is an effort to bring the conciliar tradition in line with the New Testament.

The reference to Chalcedon refers to the so-called Fourth Ecumenical Council held in 451 CE in Chalcedon, at which the gathered bishops of the early church codified the doctrine of Christ's two natures—"without confusion, without change, without division, without separation"—against the teachings of Eutyches and Nestorius. McCormack has long been a critic of the theological presuppositions behind the Chalcedonian Definition, even as he seeks to uphold the basic tenets of the doctrine. The problem with the conciliar tradition, McCormack argues, is its assumption of divine impassibility (i.e., the doctrine that God cannot suffer),

and the problem with impassibility—an “insuperable” problem, he declares at the very start of the book—is that it cannot account for the way “the biblical God suffered in Christ” (McCormack, 2021: 3). Put simply, everyone accepts that Jesus suffered, as clearly attested in the Gospel accounts. If this Jesus is God incarnate, as the tradition wishes to claim, then it naturally ought to affirm that God suffered. But the tradition could not allow this because of a prior metaphysical (i.e., philosophically driven) commitment to impassibility, and thus the Chalcedonian Definition contains a “logical aporia” at its heart (McCormack, 2021: 29). It wants to affirm that the divine Logos is the same acting subject as the man Jesus while preserving God’s pure activity, exclusive of any passivity or receptivity. The way to do so, as McCormack demonstrates in an impressive survey of 1500 years of theology, is by employing various permutations of the classical “two natures” Christology. Some versions engage in linguistic sleight of hand (e.g., the *communicatio idiomatum*), while the most creative of these, the ones that interest McCormack, use the idea of *kenosis* (i.e., divine self-emptying) to divest the Logos of certain attributes.

McCormack clearly exposes the problems with these past accounts, and his historical survey ought to be mandatory reading for any future effort along these lines. His constructive alternative, however, is another matter. The actual proposal itself is a relatively straightforward fix: instead of following Cyril of Alexandria in viewing the Logos as acting in and through the passive veil of human flesh, McCormack reverses Cyril’s Christology so that Jesus of Nazareth is the active agent under the power of the Holy Spirit and the Logos is eternally ontologically receptive to this human history. This allows McCormack to posit that the Logos, as the second “person” of the trinity in pretemporal eternity, is identical with Jesus even before the incarnation by way of anticipation. The Logos “bears in himself a relation to the Jesus who will come. Thus, the second ‘person’ of the Trinity has and always has had a name. His name is Jesus Christ” (McCormack, 2021: 253).

Others have examined the logic of McCormack’s Christology, which I regard as a novel and commendable attempt to overcome internal problems in the Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition. What interests me here

is the method of arriving at this position. It is theoretically possible to posit such a Christology by way of speculation, but McCormack has always been a consistent opponent of speculative theology. This point is made abundantly clear in this latest work. McCormack defines speculation as any approach to theology in which one’s claims “find their ultimate ground either in cosmology (as with the ancient church) or anthropology (as with a good bit of ‘modern’ theology)” (McCormack, 2021: 2). Such an approach moves “from above to below,” from metaphysical universals to historical particularities (McCormack, 2021: 122). In his appreciative reading of Sergius Bulgakov, McCormack points out that “Bulgakov is massively speculative,” whereas “Barth is allergic to all that he thinks of as speculation” (McCormack, 2021: 140). The Scottish kenoticists, such as Hugh Ross Mackintosh, “resisted speculation,” though their alternatives left a lot to be desired in terms of solving the Chalcedonian problem (McCormack, 2021: 96). In other words, the term speculation, as McCormack uses it, refers to any approach to theology that presupposes what *must* be true prior to investigating what *is* in fact the case on the ground. Speculation supposedly thus limits in advance what the theologian can say. Doctrines like divine impassibility and simplicity are speculative, according to McCormack, since they are *a priori* claims about God, arrived at in advance of empirical analysis.

What, then, is the alternative to speculation? McCormack seeks to reverse the direction of argument by starting with what *is* the case and only then deriving what *must* be true about God. According to McCormack’s opening statement, “What *is* permissible . . . is a quasi-transcendental method that asks, for example, what must God be in God’s Self if it is true that Jesus is Lord?” (McCormack, 2021: 2). Following Barth’s lead, McCormack wants us to ask about “the ontological conditions in God of the possibility that Jesus of Nazareth should rightly have been worshiped as God” (McCormack, 2021: 2). He fleshes this out later in the book in critical conversation with other theologians. Hans Urs von Balthasar, for instance, “engages in speculation,” but “speculation here is at least intended to extend or fill in gaps in what can be established on the basis of Scripture – much as Nicaea did with respect to the Trinity, we might say” (McCormack, 2021: 143–44). McCormack

describes von Balthasar as “using speculation in a cautious way to fill in gaps in the biblical text in ways that do not obviously conflict with what is said in those texts” (McCormack, 2021: 147). McCormack regards this as generally appropriate (McCormack, 2021: 147). By contrast, when he judges that, in the case of Bulgakov, “speculation has overstepped its limits,” it is because of the latter’s claim that eternal generation itself is an act of *kenosis*. McCormack follows this by saying that *kenosis* is applied to “Christ Jesus” alone in Philippians 2 (McCormack, 2021: 141). His stated method, and his proposal for others to follow, is to “[keep] speculation within proper (biblical) limits” (McCormack, 2021: 155).

McCormack clarifies his position further when discussing the post-Barthian theologians: Eberhard Jüngel, Robert Jenson, and Piet Schoonenberg. He regards all three as having gone too far the other way by abandoning talk of a protological, preexistent Logos. Without going into the details of McCormack’s critique, we can skip to his closing plea for a balanced speculation in theology:

I think it is fair to say that the majority of biblical scholars researching New Testament theology would feel that dogmatics had finally come to its senses by *not* engaging in what they (rightly or wrongly) would regard as “speculation” about an independent being of God in pretemporal eternity. Most would be of the view that dogmatics had “come of age” by calling a halt at the door marked “protology.” An initial problem with this inclination to call everything “speculation” that lies beyond the reach of the historian is that it fails to recognize that a speculation that takes as its starting point the narrated history of Jesus in the New Testament does not simply “make stuff up” (a lament I have heard from more than one biblical scholar where dogmatics is concerned). Where it asked: what must God *be* if it is true that “Jesus is Lord”? there is no looking away from the New Testament even though there is a self-conscious attempt to effect a transition from the Bible to dogmatics. That is the only sort of “speculation” that I can regard as justified myself and I do not see that it does damage to the texts biblical scholars care about. (McCormack, 2021: 193)

For McCormack, there is a kind of good speculation—i.e., transcendental argumentation—that constructs models of God based on the biblical texts, and there is bad speculation that does not remain tethered to the Bible. The former asks what *must* be the case given what we see in scripture, while the latter asks what *might* be the case. This all depends, however, on having some clear idea of what we see in the Bible.

McCormack’s work operates under the assumption that the Bible norms, or ought to norm, Christian theology—or at least Protestant Christian theology. As he states in the introduction, “the goal of a genuinely Protestant theology” cannot be to reconcile competing traditions or solve some doctrinal problem, even one as significant as the aporia within Chalcedon. Instead, he goes on to say, “For Protestants, it is exegesis of the Bible that must provide the ground for the claims ultimately made” (McCormack, 2021: 15). Indeed, the Bible as canonical text is an active subject in his work: the Bible “speaks,” “authorizes,” “knows,” and “demands” (McCormack, 2021: 58, 153, 253, 263). In his constructive argument for a Spirit Christology, McCormack says that it has the benefit of opening the door “to reading the Synoptics together with John *dogmatically*, as a single four-fold Gospel” (McCormack, 2021: 268). To some, these claims about the Bible will seem obvious to the point of banality, but it is not obvious at all from a critical-historical perspective on these ancient texts. Seen critically, the Bible does not speak, but rather it is interpreted; it does not authorize, but rather theologians and ministers make use of the Bible to establish their own authority. To the historian, it makes little sense to treat the church-established canon as somehow of unique authority or significance, when these texts are merely part of a vast array of ancient artifacts and materials that illuminate who Jesus was and how he was understood by his followers. Eva Mroczek (2015)’s critique of the “hegemony of the biblical” in the study of Second Temple Judaism is all the more applicable to the discipline of Christian systematic theology.

None of this necessarily invalidates McCormack’s procedure, but it might require certain concessions. For instance, his insistence that good speculation begins by examining what *must* be the case based on the New Testament may need to be softened. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that McCormack’s transcendental approach starts from the New Testament *as delimited by the theological and hermeneutical boundaries of the Reformed tradition*. As he says in the passage quoted above, he is starting from “the narrated history of Jesus in the New Testament,” language that signals a certain ontology of the Bible (e.g., what does it mean to call the Gospels a “narrated history”?) and an assumed way of

understanding its meaning. This would not be exegesis of the New Testament *as such* but a theologically informed reading of the text—and thus an interpretation normed by a priori assumptions *about* the text. In that case, the separation between good and bad speculation has been narrowed considerably, if not eliminated altogether, for McCormack too is starting from abstract ontological preconditions—not about the cosmos or human existence, but instead about the Bible itself. To suggest that theological assumptions about the Bible are “good,” while theological assumptions about the cosmos are “bad,” is to make a decidedly circular (not to mention distinctively Protestant) argument. Moreover, these metaphysical assumptions about the Bible also arguably entail ontological claims about cosmology and anthropology, so it may be the case that there is no meaningful distinction between good and bad speculation.

To his credit, McCormack subjects theology to the test of biblical exegesis in a more thoroughgoing way than most systematic theologians working today. The second part of his three-part monograph is a “return to scripture” that lays the biblical foundation for his constructive repair of Chalcedon. He acknowledges that he is not attempting a “New Testament Christology” (McCormack, 2021: 199), and instead he focuses on tracing two Christological themes in Philippians, Hebrews, and the four Gospels: (1) the relation between Jesus and the God of Israel (chapter 5) and (2) the relation between Jesus and the Holy Spirit (chapter 6). He says the goal of this section is “to find biblical resources for repairing Chalcedon” and to develop “a biblically funded picture of the Self-humiliating God,” and he defends his approach by appealing to “a fair number of New Testament scholars” (McCormack, 2021: 199). Rather than examine each exegetical claim, I will place his chosen set of scholars (primarily Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado) in conversation with a different set (Paula Fredriksen, Paul Holloway, and those associated with the Paul within Judaism school). If, as I will argue, the latter scholars present a compelling alternative perspective on the New Testament—one that conflicts with the dogmatic tradition in which McCormack is working—it raises broader questions about whether, and under which conditions, it is even possible to “repair Chalcedon” by returning to the scriptures.

A Second Look at the Christ Hymn: Placing Paul in His Historical Context

At the start of his fifth chapter, which focuses on the so-called “Christ Hymn” of Philippians 2, McCormack identifies the questions guiding his exegesis:

First, what does the “Christ hymn” *require* us to say as dogmatic theologians? What does it make necessary? Second, does it rule anything out? Does it establish boundaries for Christological reflection whose transgression would mean loss of contact with Pauline Christology? What steps are we forbidden to take, if any? And, third, what does it *permit* us to say? (McCormack, 2021: 200)

While it is not a mere semantic quibble to say, in response, that the Bible does not have the power to do anything that we do not first give it, I want instead to linger over these questions in more detail. McCormack, I argue, has only asked these questions under a set of assumptions that limits what the New Testament is able to say with respect to Christology. What happens dogmatically if we do not start with these assumptions? What boundaries does the New Testament set for theology in *that* case?

Because his larger argument depends on being able to say, on exegetical grounds, that the Logos *is* Jesus Christ, McCormack begins his exegetical material by establishing a very high—indeed, Nicaea-level high—Christology in Paul. To do so, he wades into a hotly contested field of New Testament studies: the early high Christology hypothesis. As Matthew V. Novenson recounts, the “Early High Christology Club” (EHCC) originated in the “long 1990s,” which saw many scholars produce works arguing against the older *religions-geschichtliche Schule*’s claim that there was initially a “low” Christology in the Jewish context of the Jesus movement that then transitioned into a “high” Christology as the movement spread into gentile Hellenistic society. After Martin Hengel (1969) demolished Wilhelm Bousset (1913)’s divide between Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity, subsequent scholars—most notably, Larry Hurtado (1988; 2003), David Capes (1992), Carey Newman (1992), and Richard Bauckham (1999)—began to argue that high Christology could be found in the “Judaism of Jesus and the apostles,” though it marked a break with ancestral Jewish beliefs and practices (Novenson,

2020a: 1–2). According to this group, early Jesus followers worshipped Jesus the way they worship YHWH, and they incorporated Jesus into YHWH’s divine identity, using the name of Jesus in places where one would normally use the tetragrammaton. Following this development, a later group of scholars, including Charles A. Gieschen (2007: 238–249), James A. Waddell (2011), and Crispin Fletcher-Louis (2015), attempted to “narrow the gap” between “Judaism” and “Christianity” by finding the bestowal of the divine name in the Enochic literature, which paved the way for the use of this same strategy with respect to Jesus in the emergence of Christianity—though this rested on a mistranslation of the text, as Theron Clay Mock III (2022: 145) has demonstrated. Most recently, scholars associated with the Paul within Judaism *Schule*—particularly those connected with the Paul within Paganism subset—have challenged the entire basis for the divine identity hypothesis of the EHCC by arguing that there was no monotheism in the first century, at least in the way we use the term today.

One would hardly know there is even a debate about the early high Christology hypothesis from McCormack’s book. He mentions that divine identity Christology is “controversial” without indicating why or referring to any of the literature. He then says it is “more easily defended than is ‘preexistence’” (McCormack, 2021: 230), and because he goes on to argue for preexistence, it is left to the reader to assume the defense of divine identity has been successful. In the chapter on Paul, McCormack cites scholars associated with the early work of the EHCC—specifically Bauckham, Hurtado, and Gordon Fee. Bauckham’s presence looms large over both exegetical chapters. According to McCormack, “No one has done more to illuminate the source of the early Christian conviction that Jesus of Nazareth is included in the eternal identity of the God of Israel than has Richard Bauckham” (230). The only alternative to this school of thought that appears in the citations is a single reference to J. R. Daniel Kirk (2016)’s argument for a “high human Christology,” but McCormack follows that by citing Bauckham’s “critical response” to Kirk (McCormack, 2021: 230n18; Bauckham, 2020). All of these works still operate under the assumption of Jewish monotheism. What is missing entirely is the scholarly research that has called this assumption into

question.

To understand the force of the Paul within Judaism research, I first need to briefly summarize McCormack’s argument regarding Philippians. Drawing extensively on Fee (who himself draws on Hurtado; Fee, 1995: 225n238) and Bauckham, McCormack interprets Paul’s statement that “God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name” (Phil 2:9) as “the founding act of Christian faith and community” (McCormack, 2021: 204). The logic goes like this. Philippians 2:9–11 is an intertextual allusion to Isaiah 45:22–23, in which Second Isaiah has YHWH saying about himself, “To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.” Why does Paul quote this passage and apply it to Jesus? McCormack’s answer is that “it can only be because the one God to whom alone honor and worship are due is now seen to include in himself, as proper to him, the man Jesus” (McCormack, 2021: 204). Here we see McCormack alluding to Bauckham’s thesis about Jesus being included in the unique identity of God. McCormack claims that Philippians 2:9 is a “repetition” of God’s self-naming in Exodus 3:14; the name in question is “the revealed name . . . that alone makes concretely present the Reality that God is” (McCormack, 2021: 204–5).

To justify McCormack’s claim that this is the “only” way to read this passage, it would be necessary to weigh evidence to the contrary and make a case for this being the best available interpretation. Since that is missing from McCormack’s work, I will briefly examine some countervailing claims and explore their significance for his Christological thesis. My point in surveying these alternative, historical-critical interpretations is not to suggest they are the only valid way of reading these texts. It is sufficient merely to see that McCormack’s argument only holds together so long as these alternatives are ignored. Theologians who wish to use the New Testament to support their dogmatic claims need to be forthright about the presuppositions they bring to the hermeneutical task.

Whether framed in terms of Israel’s worship of the one God being directed toward Jesus (Hurtado), the application of YHWH texts in the Hebrew scriptures to Jesus via the use of *kyrios* (Capes), or the assignment of divine attributes to Jesus within a strict creator-crea-

ture dichotomy (Bauckham), each version of what we might broadly call divine identity Christology—or what Fredriksen calls “Big Bang Christology”—depends on the notion that ancient Jews held strictly to a “purely Jewish” (i.e., untouched by paganism) monotheism (Fredriksen, 2020: 293, 303). This “purely Jewish monotheism” is premised on the idea that ancient Jews only recognized and worshiped one God—a God who is ontologically other than creation according to a strict binary—such that any ascription of divine attributes or worship to Jesus can only mean that Jesus is divine *in the exact same way* that YHWH is divine.

The problem, as Fredriksen wryly observes, is that purely Jewish monotheism “never existed” (Fredriksen, 2020: 304). Indeed, quite the opposite. The ancient world was understood to be populated by supernatural powers and deities, such that “*all* ancient ‘monotheists’—be they pagan, Jewish, or, eventually, Christian—were, by modern measure, ‘polytheists’” (Fredriksen, 2022: 29). Even scholars who defend the use of the term monotheism with respect to ancient Israel acknowledge that if this term is taken to mean “the belief that one God exists and that no deities exist other than this one God,” then the Hebrew Bible—and the ancient Mediterranean world more generally—is not monotheistic (Sommer, 2009: 146). Benjamin Sommer (2009: 150, 159) points out that focusing our attention strictly on the biblical anthology actually makes it harder, because there is arguably more evidence of polytheistic worship in ancient Israel within the Hebrew Bible than in the archaeological record. “Jewish scriptures teem with other gods,” according to Fredriksen (2020: 299), so much so that she advocates retiring the word monotheism altogether (see Fredriksen, 2006).

Drawing on Robert Parker’s work, Matthew Novenson (2020c) suggests that ancient Jews likely held to what Parker (2017) calls “the universal polytheism,” according to which there was a single pantheon of deities throughout the ancient world, and individual nations had their own distinctive names for these gods. The widespread practice of *interpretatio* allowed the ancients to identify a foreign god with their native god through a process of translation. As Collin Cornell (2024: 714) puts it, *interpretatio* “relativizes certain divine features in order to silhouette a divine world that multiple tra-

ditions share in common.” While this is a well-attested feature in Greco-Roman society, Novenson argues that we see this among ancient Jews as well. Not only was YHWH “pretty seamlessly identified with Canaanite El via *interpretatio*, and further with Elyon”—as well as, at times, Baal (Hosea 2:16)—but YHWH was also Zeus or Dionysius, depending on the occasion (Novenson, 2020c: 39–45). But it was not only the High God who was subject to translation. Gentile gods were at times interpreted as angels, daemons, divine humans, or simply gods. Isis became Eve, Atlas became Enoch, Hermes became Moses, and the gods of the nations became the High God’s divine council. “Jewish writers promiscuously translated gentile gods into their own terms,” and thus Novenson suggests “we are better off abandoning altogether the notion of ‘false gods’ with reference to biblical and ancient Jewish sources” (Novenson, 2020c: 58). At best, monotheism in the first century could refer to the elevation of one god above the others as deserving of special respect and ritual worship (i.e., henotheism), but it would not support the kind of claims made by those championing divine identity Christology.

The recognition of ancient Jewish polytheism alters McCormack’s reading of the Philippians Christ Hymn in multiple ways. For starters, it would require acknowledging the polytheism on display in the Christ Hymn itself. McCormack reads the “every knee should bend” line as referring to the eschatological promise that “on that day, every nation, every person, will acknowledge that YHWH alone is God” (McCormack, 2021: 204). But as Fredriksen and others have pointed out, Paul is here referring to the gentile gods—to the universal pantheon: “These lower cosmic powers whom the nations worship through cultic acts performed before idols will themselves acknowledge the superior authority of the god of Israel once Christ returns to defeat them and to establish his father’s kingdom (1 Cor. 15:24–27). They too will bend their knees to Jesus (Phil. 2:10)” (Fredriksen, 2006: 242). Fredriksen reiterates this point: “Prayer in Paul’s communities seems to have occurred in Jesus’ name; but the prayers themselves are offered to God, not to Jesus. And when, at his parousia, the knees of superhumans bend and tongues confess that *kyrios Iêsous Christos*, it is God, not Jesus, who is glorified” (Fredriksen, 2020: 306).

The confusion is partly a matter of translation. The NRSV translates the key phrase in Philippians 2:10b as “in heaven [*epouraniōn*] and on earth [*epigeiōn*] and under the earth [*katachthoniōn*],” implying that the Greek words here are merely geographic markers and masking that they are genitive substantive adjectives referring to heavenly, earthly, and subterranean agencies (Long & Giffin, 2018: 245–46). Against the common view that these terms refer to the heavenly angels, people on earth, and the souls in Hades—or to evil spirits in the three realms—Fredrick J. Long and Ryan Kristopher Giffin demonstrate, based on extensive textual sources, that we should understand these terms as referring to heavenly, terrestrial, and subterranean gods. When seen in light of “the deification of deceased Caesars” and other ancient heroes, Paul’s statement takes on a distinctly anti-imperial tone (Long & Giffin, 2018: 255–274). This becomes especially clear when Philippians 2:9–11 is seen in connection with Romans 14:12 (where Paul quotes Isaiah 45:23 as a divine judgment of gentile gods) and Revelation 5:3 (where Jesus is enthroned over the heavenly, terrestrial, and subterranean gods). The point of emphasizing the human form of Jesus in this passage is thus to portray him as one of the many divinized emperors, but one who reigns victorious over all the gods and heavenly beings: “Jesus is the ultimate human hero” (Long & Giffin, 2018: 276, 280). The Christ Hymn is thus not a text about the uniquely divine identity of Jesus, but rather a text declaring Christ’s eschatological victory over pagan deities.

Another relevant text on this point is 1QH^a, known as the Hodayot (Thanksgiving Psalms), likely written in 31–30 BCE. Columns 24–25 tell of the High God’s judgment of the “heavenly beings” (24.12), including “[the h]ost of heaven,” “the inhabitants of the earth,” and those “[in Sheo]l below” (25.13–14). On the other hand, in Column 26, God divinizes the human speaker so that he can boast: “my station is with the divine beings.” The speaker praises God for lifting up “the poor one from the dust to the eternal height, and to the clouds,” so that “(he is) with [the divine beings in the congregation of the community]” (26.7, 27–28) (Schuller & Newsom, 2012: 72–79).

McCormack rightly highlights Christ’s role “in establishing God’s eschatological rule,” but he assumes this

is only possible if Jesus is “‘intrinsic’ to God’s ‘identity’” (McCormack, 2021: 206). He takes the eschatological bestowal of the “name above every name” as confirmation of this identity. McCormack’s exegetical sources miss that Paul is operating within what Paul Holloway calls “the great angel tradition, in which an exalted angel not only sits on Yahweh’s throne and executes judgment on Yahweh’s behalf, but bears Yahweh’s name as well” (Holloway, 2022: 278). In other words, McCormack is correct to say that the “name above every name” is YHWH, but wrong to assume only one divine being is able to bear this name. Holloway (2017: 114), in fact, argues that Phil 2:9b should be translated as “the Name that is above every other name,” with the direct article, which “correctly reflects Paul’s less developed Christology that Jesus acquired the divine name ‘Lord’ (YHWH) when he returned to his angelic form.” Holloway points to the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 10 and the Talmudic text *b. Sanhedrin* 38b. In the former, the angel Yahoel—a name that “clearly combines YAH and EL”—has the “ineffable Name” dwelling in him and acts according to YHWH’s command (Holloway, 2017: 48n385). The latter text says that the high angel Metatron, who is called the “lesser YHWH” in 3 Enoch (Orlov, 2005: 136–143), and “whose name is like the name of his Master.” Gershom Scholem (1960: 41) has argued that the two angels are in fact one and the same: “Jewish speculation about Metatron as the highest angel who bears, in a way, the name of God . . . was preceded by an earlier stage in which this Angel of High was not called Metatron, but Jahoel.”

In addition to the great angel tradition, McCormack does not acknowledge what Holloway calls the metamorphic tradition, according to which ancient deities and angels temporarily changed their form. As one example, Holloway (2022: 281) points to the *Life of Adam and Eve*, known in Greek as the *Apocalypse of Moses*, where Satan takes the form of an angel—a story Paul seems to refer to in 2 Corinthians 11:14. Likewise, the *Apocalypse of Job* has Satan transforming into a pauper and then a king, while the Enochic literature has the Watchers metamorphose into men to seduce women (Holloway, 2017: 48–49). This naturally has a direct bearing on the topic of *kenosis*. According to Holloway (2022: 282), the trope of a divine being who “sets aside his or her divine

splendor before assuming a lesser form was a common *topos* in the metamorphic tradition." Holloway gives examples from, among other texts, Moschus's *Europa*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and the *Testament of Abraham* (Holloway, 2017: 48–52, 121–23).

Another relevant work that Holloway does not mention here is the *Ascension of Isaiah*, a text that David Frankfurter (2021) describes as "a narrative version of the hymn in Paul's Philippian letter." Jonathan Knight (2012: 70–71) argues that the first-person ascension narrative of this work (chapters 7–11) dates from the late first century (70–80 CE), thus a decade or two after Philippians, though it was finally compiled with the opening chapters in the early second century. The text describes Isaiah's ascension through the seven heavens that constitute the cosmic geography. In each heaven, the narrator encounters angels that are ever higher in the divine hierarchy, until he reaches the seventh heaven where the transformed righteous reside, including Adam, Abel, and Enoch. Above the righteous are the Holy Spirit and the preincarnate Christ (also called the Beloved One), who sit, respectively, to the left and the right of the Most High God, who remains visible only to the transformed righteous (*Ascen. Isa.* 9.37–38). While the Most High, Beloved One, and Holy Spirit exist at the pinnacle of the hierarchy, they are clearly separate beings arranged in an ontological hierarchy. The climax of the narrative occurs when the Most High commands the Beloved One to "descend through all the heavens" until he reaches Sheol and to "make your form like that of the angels of the firmament" (*Ascen. Isa.* 10.8–10) (Charlesworth, 1983: 156–176). Isaiah then watches Christ metamorphose and take on a humble form, becoming unrecognizable to the angels of the lower heavens and adopting the name of Jesus. The text then recounts a version of the virgin birth narrative (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.2–17), after which Jesus grows up and performs wonders, leading to his crucifixion on a tree (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.20). After this point he begins his ascension back through each of the seven heavens, remaining in his transformed appearance, until he sits down "at the right hand of that Great Glory, whose glory I told you I could not behold" (*Ascen. Isa.* 11.32). We see in this text what scholars call an "angelomorphic Christology" (Stuckenbruck, 1995; Gieschen, 1998). The *Ascension of Isaiah* displays a number of the

themes I have raised: the cosmic divine hierarchy, the heavenly pantheon, the great angel tradition, and the metamorphic tradition as the context for a concept of *kenosis*. All of this, taken together, makes plain that McCormack's opening dilemma—how to reconcile conciliar Christology with the suffering of Jesus in the New Testament—is entirely alien to the first century. Jesus is not YHWH incarnate, and his suffering has no implications whatsoever for the question of impassibility.

We can summarize this review of the historical literature by referring again to Holloway's response to Gerald O'Collins. O'Collins (2022: 273) complains that Holloway has ignored "Richard Bauckham and Larry Hurtado, and N. T. Wright," along with other "conservative commentators" who combine theological commitments with historical judgments. But as Holloway observes, "There is none of O'Collins's centuries-later Nicene trinitarianism in Paul's Isaiah reference," and the kind of theological reading of Philippians that O'Collins prefers only ends up "do[ing] violence to its historical meaning" (Holloway, 2022: 278, 282).

As with any historical judgment, the interpretations described above are not unimpeachable, but they do arguably represent the "state of the art" in the field. They pose a direct challenge to McCormack's argument that, by returning to the New Testament, theologians across the different traditions can find a constructive path toward repairing the conciliar tradition. The data recounted here suggest that such repair is only possible by speculatively assuming theological and philosophical commitments about the Bible and its interpretive limits that neutralize the insights of critical historical research.

On the Use of Reconstructive Speculation: DeHart's Cultic Christology

McCormack has ventured a Christology that seeks to be responsive to what he thinks is "required" by the New Testament. As I have shown, however, the text does not require the kind of revised Chalcedonianism that he constructs and indeed seems to lead in quite a different direction altogether. Despite aiming at a theology without speculation, I have shown that McCormack's project requires speculation about the biblical canon in order to pull off his argument. His approach is not the only

way to do justice to these historical texts. The recent Christological proposal of Paul DeHart shows a very different path. Whereas McCormack engages in a theological reading of the New Testament that obscures the historical context, DeHart assesses the Jesus traditions from a critical historical perspective. His goal is “to develop an orthodox Christological hypothesis that nonetheless aims at maximal compatibility with historical consciousness” (DeHart, 2021: 95).

DeHart begins by taking a second look at David Friedrich Strauss’s scandalous *Life of Jesus*, where the latter posited an irresolvable tension between the historical “fact” of Jesus, the “appearance” or “image” of Jesus in the church community, and the metaphysical “truth” of Jesus by which both fact and appearance are understood (DeHart, 2021: 48). Strauss, according to DeHart, established an opposition between the contingent fact of Jesus and the appearance of Jesus “as a transcendent, divine, or more-than-human savior” (DeHart, 2021: 51), and the latter he further contrasted to “the metaphysical ‘truth’ that all historical entities are merely relative” (DeHart, 2021: 14). DeHart sets out to address this double problem, first by constructing a plausible historical account by which the community continues Jesus’s self-understanding, and second by constructing a noncompetitive theology that reconciles contingent historical realities with ultimate divine significance. DeHart aims to show that orthodox Christian doctrine is capacious enough to account for the historical actuality of Jesus, understood in the most critical way possible.

To address the first problem, DeHart draws on the work of two Smiths: the critical biblical scholar Morton Smith and the critical scholar of religion Jonathan Z. Smith. Here DeHart (2021: 14, 89, 96) acknowledges his use of another kind of speculation: what he calls “reconstructive” or “historical” speculation about the ancient world. This is a very different use of the term, referring not to theological claims about what *must* be the case, but rather to historical claims about what *might* be the case, given the available evidence. If Fredriksen and Holloway present a Paul within paganism, Morton Smith’s *Jesus the Magician* (1978) presents Jesus within paganism—a first-century Greco-Roman world suffused with magical practices and esoteric teachings. Smith interprets Jesus as a wonder-working magician,

a “Galilean thaumaturge” (DeHart, 2021: 80), whose “heterodox” practices promised “to grant Jesus’ followers a share in his personal access to the divine realm, the heavenly sphere where the divine presence reigns” (DeHart, 2021: 73–74). DeHart (2021: 84–85) then draws on the work of Jonathan Z. Smith to historicize Jesus’s magical ministry and to explain how the cultural innovations of the “Jesus cult” can be understood as the continuation of the “fact” of Jesus, his own self-conception. DeHart (2021: 89) sees Jesus and the Jesus cult as a “single event” that he calls the “collective Christ-event.”

With this historical analysis in hand, DeHart addresses the second, metaphysical problem in the rest of the book. Here he is keen to avoid a second kind of speculation, namely, the “speculative Christ” posited by Strauss as the way out of the dialectical bind posed by the choice between “either an absolute Christ or an historical Jesus, but not both” (DeHart, 2021: 129). Strauss’s alternative was a Hegelian account of Christ as the “ultimate unity-through-diremption of finite and infinite spirit” worked out in history as the actualization of this eternal rational principle (DeHart, 2021: 130). DeHart takes Strauss’s criticism of Friedrich Schleiermacher (and the entire dogmatic tradition) with utmost seriousness. DeHart, too, seeks to avoid invoking any miraculous divine intervention in history. He then draws on Thomas Aquinas and a robust theology of the Spirit to develop a “noninterventionist” account of incarnation and a “pneumatology of culture” that sees “human cultural transactions as the vehicle of the Word’s advent” (DeHart, 2021: 15).

In a creative reinterpretation of the Nicene tradition’s doctrine of the assumption of flesh (*assumptio carnis*), DeHart (2021: 173) argues that “humanity is history,” a “process” of sociohistorical relations, such that the flesh God assumes “is not just biological or even psychological but cultural flesh.” Against any notion of the Christ-event being confined to the first three decades of the Common Era, DeHart (2021: 107) proposes understanding the incarnation as “constitutively unfinished. As long as history lasts, so does the actualization of incarnation.” Put in more dogmatic terms, the “total process of incarnation” involves splitting the Christ-event into “dual divine missions, one in the individual Jesus himself and another in the communities worshipping

him. Jesus 'rises,' historically speaking, as the cultic presence of the original wonder-worker is received and processed through the imaginative labor of cultic recognition" (DeHart, 2021: 182). DeHart has constructed a historicized version of the old Catholic doctrine of the *incarnatus prolongatus*—the notion that the church is the prolongation of the incarnation. *Unspeakable Cults* radicalizes this idea by understanding the historical actuality of Jesus as something ultimately "unspeakable" (DeHart, 2021: 49, 88) that the church, in a sense, speaks into existence in its ongoing practices of naming him, so that "Jesus keeps assuming new forms" through the church's "cultural process of never-ending recognition" (DeHart, 2021: 235, 237).

DeHart's strategy in *Unspeakable Cults* is a clever one. By fully embracing the "problem of historicity," he forces himself—and his readers—to see that there is no Christ without the church. It is fitting that DeHart presents his proposal as, in part, a response to Rudolf Bultmann. Whereas Bultmann famously argued that Jesus "rises" in the kerygmatic emergence of faith in him as the Christ, DeHart (2021: 102–3) argues that Jesus "rises" as the community of faith imaginatively constructs and names him as the Christ in the process of cultural history. In a way, his book is an extended gloss on Bultmann's statement that was written in response to the so-called "new" or "second" quest for the historical Jesus: "There is no faith in Christ which would not be at the same time faith in the church as the bearer of the kerygma, that is, in dogmatic terminology: faith in the Holy Spirit" (Bultmann, 1960: 26). DeHart does not quote this line, but he engages in an ongoing dialogue with Bultmann and other theologically minded historical critics. For Bultmann, this "faith in the church" is minimalist and by no means a faith in the dogmatic, conciliar tradition. His approach is to understand the original event in a capacious way, so that the Christ-event in a sense stretches, by way of what tradition calls the "Holy Spirit," to include those who believe in him. Thus he says "the tradition belongs to the event itself" (Bultmann, 1933: 160). The church becomes an almost transparent veil to the kerygma that speaks here and now. In this sense, Bultmann speaks more theologically than historically, with greater confidence in God as an active subject in the present. DeHart, by contrast, sees

the church as the more active subject; it is the cultural and historical institution that brings Jesus to speech as the Christ. DeHart has an ecclesiology that is virtually as high as his Christology, and less sympathetic Protestants might contend—unfairly I would say—that he has dissolved the line of distinction between Christology and ecclesiology altogether. For both theological and political reasons, Bultmann maintains a sharp distinction between the two, wanting to maintain the freedom of God from (and for) every human institution, ecclesial or otherwise.

DeHart (2021: 89) makes it clear that his goal in using the work of Morton Smith and Jonathan Z. Smith "has not been to commend their picture of Jesus and Christianity as the true and adequate one." He could have used different scholars to fashion a different picture of Jesus and the Jesus cult. The key point, however, was to make sure that the scholars had no apologetic interest in defending the church's dogmatic tradition. As he clarifies at the outset of his study, his aim is to show that "an orthodox or catholic theology of the incarnation or hypostatic union" need not "clash with modern historical consciousness (for which all temporal events are essentially finite and relative)" (DeHart, 2021: 2). To make this argument, he intentionally uses historical scholarship that makes no recourse to exceptional occurrences that could be exploited by apologists arguing for divine intervention. The "invocation of miracle" and "postmodern" perspectivalism are "dangerous expedients" that Christians use at their peril (DeHart, 2021: 3). DeHart's way out of the dialectical dilemma posed by Strauss is to posit a Christology that includes the reception of Jesus by the church in the construction of his divine identity. If the church is always involved in the process of actualizing Christ's identity, then theology is effectively able to accommodate any degree of historical criticism.

For some, DeHart's creative reconciliation of critical historical research and orthodox dogma might offer an exciting way forward for theology that does not rely on tendentious claims and apologetic strategies regarding the ancient past. For others, especially Protestants, this approach might be a theological nonstarter that requires elevating the church to a level of divine authority that has always been a hallmark of the Roman communion.

In the conclusion, I propose an alternative.

Toward a Protestant Christology Without Speculation

Can theology proceed without speculation? The examples of McCormack and DeHart give two very different answers to this question. If, following McCormack, we define speculation as the *a priori* acceptance of dogmatic claims that constrain from the outset what we are able to say about God, then McCormack's own position has to be regarded as speculative. He may reject the kind of speculation found in traditional conciliar theology, which presupposes certain claims about the divine nature that remain immune to historical data, but he engages in another type of speculation with respect to the nature of the Bible and its normative role in Christian theology. To be clear, there is nothing wrong with engaging in such speculation if one is honest about the method, but McCormack wishes to draw on the work of expert biblical scholars to support a reading of the New Testament that at times he presents as being textually self-evident—something that imposes itself upon the honest reader, something that the reader cannot deny unless one is loyal instead to foreign metaphysical claims.

As my above review of the historical literature regarding Paul and Philippians has demonstrated, however, there is no direct line from the New Testament to Nicaea—much less to the revisionist ontology that McCormack wishes to propose as a solution to the Chalcedonian Definition. The New Testament does not “require” anything of us theologically, and it certainly does not provide textual proof for anything remotely like a two-natures Christology within a trinitarian metaphysics. That does not make McCormack's proposal theologically illegitimate; it is, rather, a creative and thought-provoking position that demands consideration. But its persuasiveness will not come from its grounding in scripture. The ancients, for all their speculation, were superior in this regard: their spiritual exegetical methods exhibited a far freer approach to the Bible that allowed them to say what made sense to them in their context. For his part, DeHart understands that the Bible does not and cannot give the church its Christology and so wisely avoids the matter entirely. But his alternative

requires that readers accept what may be regarded as a “Catholic” doctrine of the church as the prolongation of the incarnation.

While McCormack and DeHart both assume that Christianity's creedal tradition ought to remain normative, they each ground this normativity in fundamentally different ways. As a Reformed Protestant, McCormack grounds the tradition's normativity in the canonical anthology of scripture as an authoritative text that teaches and prescribes certain theological claims over others. As a Catholic theologian, DeHart grounds the tradition's normativity in the church itself; the church, as the body of Christ and the vehicle of the Holy Spirit, is on this view a divinely grounded institution whose activity is, in effect, God's ongoing revelation unfolding in history. Of the two, DeHart is in the more enviable position, since his ecclesiology gives him a way out of most historical conundrums. McCormack, however, finds himself in a bind, for the reasons noted above. To be sure, it is entirely possible to use these texts to support the Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition: theologians have been doing so for many centuries. But that is analogous to conservative legal scholars in the United States claiming that the Second Amendment authorizes individuals today to own automatic rifles. Sure, the literal text can support such an interpretation, but only if we ignore the historical context and presuppose the conclusion we already want to reach.

The difference between McCormack and DeHart is ultimately not hermeneutical or even ecclesiological, but rather soteriological: each has a very different understanding of what makes the Christ-event salvific, and the ecclesiological and hermeneutical differences follow accordingly. McCormack presupposes a strong theology of human sinfulness that pervades every human institution, including the church, thus demanding a sovereign divine act of deliverance actualized in the person of Jesus Christ as the only means by which to receive grace. This necessitates the “Christological objectivism” that McCormack finds (and applauds) in Barth, according to which “God's work of reconciliation and redemption is fully accomplished and already effective ‘for’ all human beings even before an awakening to faith makes it effective ‘in’ any particular one of them” (McCormack, 2021: 104). DeHart says little about soteriology, but ac-

According to his introduction he regards Erik Peterson, another Catholic convert, as a "kindred spirit." Peterson, he says, came to the conviction "that Protestantism's late medieval/early modern systematic centralization of a saving but quasi-extraneous transaction between God and the individual soul (*sola fide*, imputation) is unwarranted by the collective witness of the New Testament, and tends toward a serious impoverishment of the full meaning of salvation in Christ, diminishing or even abandoning its incorporative, communal, and eschatological dimensions" (DeHart, 2021: 7). DeHart does not say so directly, but the rest of the book would seem to suggest he agrees with Peterson.

To simplify matters, we can frame the state of theological reflection on Christology in terms of a decision over which of the following three qualities to prioritize:

- A. Critical historical research
- B. Soteriological distinction between Christ and church
- C. Traditional Nicene-Chalcedonian dogma

If the works of McCormack and DeHart are any indication—and if we acknowledge that the New Testament texts, understood in their historical situation, are not harmonizable with Nicene dogma—only two of the three qualities can be fully affirmed. McCormack embraces B and C (albeit with some modifications of Chalcedon designed to repair its flaws), whereas DeHart embraces A and C.

Admittedly, I have framed this dilemma in a distinctively Protestant way. DeHart would no doubt argue that he upholds B, but to adjudicate that would require a lengthy excursus on the way Catholics and Protestants understand the role of the church in salvation. Suffice it for now to say that B here is a placeholder for a generally Protestant objection to the notion that the incarnation is an ongoing historical process that involves the church's imaginative work rather than a singular event in the life of Jesus. Those on McCormack's side may likewise argue that they uphold A, but that would involve a high degree of selectivity. Often such rejoinders skirt the issue by claiming that historical critics are just as "theological" (i.e., just as committed to their dogmas) as the theologians, and therefore one is permitted to ignore them. Such a position easily allows a person to pick and choose the scholars who already support one's posi-

tion, while neatly avoiding those who do not. Are there perhaps ways to uphold all three qualities? Possibly so, but the purpose here is not to argue for that route but to explore an alternative path that theologians have typically disregarded.

The alternative possibility I want to suggest by way of conclusion is a theology that operates with A and B and abandons the Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition. There are strong ecumenical reasons for not taking this path, and I am not suggesting it as the only or even preferable approach for most theologians. But it should be on the table—a live option for those who want to do full justice to the historical research without adopting a Catholic ecclesiology.

What this might look like is hard to say. Some may choose to theorize within the ancient mythical framework of these texts, thereby drawing out the metaphysical and soteriological implications of an angelomorphic Christology. Holloway (2017: 28–29, 45–48), for instance, points out the centrality of this Christology to Paul's entire soteriology. The resurrection of Jesus, according to the apostle, involves the transformation of Christ's fleshly body into a body of *pneuma* or spirit (1 Cor 15:44–45), the astral substance of the angelic hosts (Burnett, 2015: 231–32). Christ does not *have* the spirit but *is* spirit, which explains why Paul can use the phrases "in Christ" and "in the spirit" interchangeably (Holloway, 2017: 65–66). The spirit here is not a third agent alongside YHWH and the Christ angel, though it transitions into that over time. Salvation for followers of Jesus involves the reception of this pneumatic substance into one's body in the ritual of baptism. Salvation, in other words, is an act of spirit possession—one's possession by the *pneuma* or astral-angelic substance of Christ. The resurrected spirit-Christ "possesses all who believe in him," so that Holloway (2017: 28, 66) can describe early Christian communities as "spirit-possession cults," referencing Romans 8:9 ("if anyone does not have the spirit of Christ that one is not his") as a relevant text. Such possession, moreover, inaugurates an ongoing process of becoming ever more angelic, to be completed in the general resurrection. For Paul, "Christ-believers are not only *possessed* by Christ . . . but that as a result of this possession they can be progressively *transformed* into his image" (Holloway, 2017: 168).

There are many theological possibilities here for Christological exploration. Doubtless, this would be an easier sell among more charismatic branches of the Christian church. That being said, a deliteralized, demythologized version of this could be meaningful to Christians who find the concept of trinity meaningless but might be attracted to the idea of being possessed—not by some mysterious cosmic substance but instead by a spirit (in the modern sense) of love and liberation. Such an approach would eschew speculation by not restricting in advance what the text can say, nor determining what the text (or the author) must say. This would be an exercise in speculation in the broader sense of thinking imaginatively.

A Christology along these lines might usefully draw upon McCormack's other writings, most notably his work on what he calls Barth's "actualistic theological ontology." Barth (1955: 116–17) famously stated that "we have 'actualized' the old doctrine of incarnation," by which he meant that the traditional concepts associated with a two-natures Christology were redefined as historical descriptions of "a single *event*." According to McCormack, "actualism" in Barth's theology does not refer to a general metaphysical theory of being but is a way of talking about "the concreteness of Jesus' lived existence in its history" (McCormack, 2016: 181). McCormack's own work aims to be actualistic in this sense, and he seeks to accomplish this by developing a theological ontology based on the narrated history of Jesus in the canonical Gospels. There is much to commend about this approach, but as I have argued, it is incompatible with the aim to repair Chalcedon.

Theologians who want to incorporate critical historical research constructively into Christology will likely have to make a decision: They can either modify the dogmatic tradition, or they can work with what we are actually given in the ancient texts of the New Testament. Both McCormack and DeHart choose the former. DeHart does so by allowing the "Jesus cult" to imaginatively construct the person of Christ. McCormack does so by imposing later theological claims back on to the New Testament. Here I want to suggest that theologians follow McCormack's intention of developing a theological ontology on the basis of the concrete historical existence of Jesus. Christology in this sense might still be

"high," since Jesus is understood as a divine messenger (angelic in the full sense of the term), an eschatological prophet and messianic leader whose life and teachings embody the High God's purposes for humankind—though it would not be the kind of high Christology that "Big Bang Christology" claims to find.

Taking this approach might also enable theologians to reconcile Christology and Jewish messianology. Novenson (2017: 187–262) has argued that the Jewish messiah and Christian messiah distinction is not supported by the ancient texts and that Jewish messianic discourse continues to exert an influence in early Christian theology, though later theologians tended to forget these aspects. As Novenson (2017: 236) points out, in texts like the First Epistle of John and the demiurgical *Gospel of Truth*, we see the "convention of connecting the anointing of Christ with the anointing of Christians." Both of these texts translate the anointing into figurative terms. The Johannine epistle tells its readers that "you have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge" (1 John 2:20), while the *Gospel of Truth* says that with the coming of the "anointed one"—i.e., Christ or messiah—"he will anoint [those who are being saved] with ointment. The ointment is the mercy of the father, who will be merciful to them; and those whom he has anointed are the perfected" (*Gospel of Truth* 36; Layton & Brakke, 2021: 324; Novenson, 2017: 237). We might thereby theorize both the person and work of Jesus in messianic terms: Jesus is the one who is anointed by God Most High for the messianic purpose of inaugurating God's reign by anointing others—with knowledge, mercy, new life, and other heavenly qualities. Whether one takes a more esoteric or liberationist approach, the point is that Jesus is understood to be divine precisely in fulfilling his messianic-prophetic role. His divinity is not a nature, nor does it involve his "identification" with YHWH; he is a divine agent in his human existence as the one who metaphorically anoints others with the truth of God's mercy and love. The salvific character of the Christ-event is not some once-for-all act that has metaphysical consequences for the world, but it rather consists in the disclosure of the truth of God's mercy and the eschatological promise of eternal repose in the source of being that awaits all creatures. Such a Christology would be closer to the position of the post-Bar-

thians that McCormack rejects—minus their retroactive ontology and their trinitarian metaphysics—and, given the emphasis on Jesus as messenger, it would also provide a fresh interpretation of Barth’s notion that “revelation is materially identical with reconciliation” (Barth, 1982: 344).

To be sure, this is by no means the only possible Christology. The point is simply that abandoning the creedal tradition may open up theological opportunities worth exploring. There is no approach that will do away with the problem of historicity; the tension between the historian and the theologian will always remain. But perhaps this tension could be a productive source of constructive theological reflection, rather than a scandal that requires the deployment of apologetic strategies to avoid the challenge of history.

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