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The self-understanding of Jesus: a metaphysical reading of historical Jesus studies

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Abstract

This article argues that the quests for the historical Jesus have largely operated with an understanding of history hindered by a severely constricted range of divine and human possibilities. By outlining human ‘self-understanding’ as a historiographical question, it emphasises the determinative role in historical judgement played by the historian’s assumptions about the range of possibility available to the processes of human thought. Highlighting three particular concerns that historians tend to connect to ‘docetism’, it suggests a couple of ways that metaphysical and theological forms of reasoning could expand the horizon of possibilities available to historical Jesus scholarship in a way that will augment access to the historical figure of Jesus.

Keywords: christology; docetism; historical Jesus; metaphysics; New Testament; self-understanding

The various ‘quests’ for the historical Jesus have largely operated with an understanding of history hindered by a severely constricted range of divine and human possibilities. This is the basic supposition of this article, and while it will no doubt prove controversial to some, there are many – including members of the quests themselves – who will recognise it to be true.¹ This evaluation is not limited to those historians of the so-called ‘old-quest’, whom Albert Schweitzer so convincingly showed to have remade Jesus in

¹See arguments to this effect in e.g. Ben F. Meyer, *The Aims of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1979), p. 58; C. Stephen Evans, ‘Methodological Naturalism in Historical Biblical Scholarship’, in Carey C. Newman (ed.), *Jesus and the Restoration of Israel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), pp. 180–205; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1981 [1974]), pp. 64–76; Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964 [1896]); Richard B. Hays, ‘Knowing Jesus: Story, History and the Question of Truth’, in Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (eds), *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), pp. 41–61; N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* [hereafter JVG], vol. 2 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), p. 18; Samuel V. Adams, *The Reality of God and Historical Method: Apocalyptic Theology in Conversation with N. T. Wright* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015); Paul N. Anderson, *The Fourth Gospel and the Quest for Jesus: Modern Foundations Reconsidered* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 177–9; Heinz Zahrnt, *The Historical Jesus*, trans. J. S. Bowden (London: Collins, 1963), p. 48.

their own image.² Rather, it is my contention that this restricted sphere of possibilities remains intact among much Jesus scholarship today, and that it is detrimental to the historical task. One of the areas where this scotoma is most acutely manifest is the question of Jesus' self-understanding.

Among the hallmarks of historical criticism is the methodological requirement to inquire after motivation and intention in order to illuminate the self-understanding of a historical individual. This is what the philosopher of history R. G. Collingwood (1889–1943) called the 'inside' of history, and it is a vital piece of the historical task.³ If history is to be more than a list of dates or 'external' facts about the past, then we must inquire into the *meaning* of the actions of historical subjects, which requires the investigation of both the outside and the inside of events. History is not a simple chain of cause and effect, nor is the study of history about determining general formulas or natural laws that govern the flow of events through time. This is because, as Collingwood says, historical processes 'are not processes of mere events but processes of actions, which have an inner side, consisting of processes of thought'.⁴ If, therefore, 'all history is the history of thought', then the range of potential historical interpretations will be determined in part by what the historian considers to be the horizon of possibility with regard to processes of human thought.⁵

When this question is applied to Jesus, it provides a particularly clear lens into the range of divine and human possibilities presupposed by the historian. Herman Samuel Reimarus (1694–1786) began by asking this question of Jesus – 'What sort of purpose did Jesus himself see in his teaching and deeds?' – and over the course of two centuries many historical Jesus scholars have followed suit. My purpose in this article is to illuminate the background and methodological context of the question of Jesus' self-understanding and to show that the prevalence of this issue in contemporary historical Jesus scholarship calls for theological analysis. Of particular interest is the way in which the concept of 'docetism' is understood and used by historical Jesus scholars, along with the question of what it means to affirm Jesus as fully human. I will conclude by considering three theological approaches that highlight how metaphysical alterations could impact the historiographical task.

²Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*, 3rd edn., trans. W. Montgomery (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1954 [1906]), p. 4.

³R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (New York: OUP, 1971 [1946]), p. 213. This only plays a notable role in historical Jesus studies for those scholars who believe the sources are such that a significant amount can be known about Jesus, such as R. A. Horsley, M. Borg, H. Boers, J. Charlesworth, M. de Jonge, R. Leivestad, B. Meyer, B. Witherington and N. T. Wright.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 215. Earlier articulation of this idea can be found e.g. in Fustel de Coulanges' classic work, *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, trans. Willard Small (New York: Dover Publications, 2006 [1864]), p. 119: 'History does not study material facts and institutions alone; its true object of study is the human mind.'

⁵Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 215. Collingwood has long been a key resource on the philosophy of history for historical Jesus scholars, and his insights can be seen at work both implicitly and explicitly in the work of numerous members of both the new quest and the third quest. His influence is especially evident in the work of Ben F. Meyer who treats him at length in multiple influential books on hermeneutics and historical method. Meyer has, in turn, influenced a number of other scholars, most notably N. T. Wright. Although many historical Jesus scholars cite Collingwood, some do not follow him as faithfully as others. See discussion in Paul Merkle, 'New Quests for Old: One Historian's Observations on a Bad Bargain', *Canadian Journal of Theology* 16 (1970), pp. 203–18; Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament*, p. 148.

The 'quests' and Jesus' self-understanding

Given the immense scope of the discipline of historical Jesus studies, it is necessary at the outset to place our conversation within the broader narrative of the history of the 'quests'. Standard histories of modern Jesus studies typically divide the discipline into four distinct periods. The 'old quest' is said to have begun in 1778 with the posthumous publication of Reimarus' notorious *Wolfenbüttel Fragments*, and it included notable works by D. F. Strauss, E. Renan, H. J. Holtzmann and J. Weiss. The 'old quest' ended in 1901 with the simultaneous appearance of William Wrede's *Das Messiasgeheimnis in den Evangelien* and Albert Schweitzer's *Das Messianitäts- und Leidensgeheimnis*.⁶ Wrede and Schweitzer offered two alternative approaches to Jesus scholarship: Wrede proposed thoroughgoing scepticism, which assumes the essential unreliability of the gospels and emphasises literary criticism, while Schweitzer opted for thoroughgoing eschatology, wherein Jesus is conceived along apocalyptic lines as an attempt to understand him as he is presented in the Gospels.⁷

Despite the arrival of two proposals for renewed inquiry at the outset of the twentieth century, the subsequent fifty years are generally considered a period of 'no quest'. The reasons for this, it is often said, are three-fold: Martin Kähler's insightful critique of the *historisch* enterprise (in 1896),⁸ Albert Schweitzer's demolition of the portraits of the 'old quest' in his *Quest of the Historical Jesus*⁹ and the theological criticisms of Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann.¹⁰ Despite being an obvious misnomer,¹¹ the term 'no quest' highlights the temporary attenuation of German interest and the fact that the enduring relevance of the work of this period is not widely endorsed.¹² One of the hallmarks of the 'no quest' era is the number of books questioning whether Jesus had even existed.¹³ In 1953 the 'new quest' was inaugurated with Ernst

⁶English translations: William Wrede, *The Messianic Secret* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971 [1901]); Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God: The Secret of Jesus' Messiahship and Passion*, trans. Walter Lowrie (London: A&C Black, 1925 [1901]).

⁷The terms 'thoroughgoing skepticism' and 'thoroughgoing eschatology' are the ones Schweitzer used to characterise his and Wrede's alternative approaches. See Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 328.

⁸'I regard the entire Life-of-Jesus movement as a blind alley.' Kähler, *Historical Jesus*, p. 46. In 1953 Käsemann noted the enduring need to reckon with Kähler's critique, 'which still, after sixty years, is hardly dated and, in spite of many attacks and many possible reservations, has never really been refuted'. Ernst Käsemann, 'The Problem of the Historical Jesus', in *Essays on New Testament Themes* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 16.

⁹'But it was not only each epoch that found its reflection in Jesus; each individual created Him in accordance with his own character.' Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 4.

¹⁰'I do indeed think that we can know almost nothing concerning the life and personality of Jesus, since the early Christian sources show no interest in either, are moreover fragmentary and often legendary; and other sources about Jesus do not exist.' Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner's, 1958 [1926]), p. 14.

¹¹Walter Weaver has devoted nearly 400 pages to outlining serious contributions to historical Jesus studies during this time period in *The Historical Jesus in the Twentieth Century: 1900–1950* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999). See a bibliography for this period in Craig A. Evans, *Life of Jesus Research: An Annotated Bibliography* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1996), pp. 19–26.

¹²See discussion in Wright, *JVG*, 22–23. Dale Allison maintains that there was sufficient work done between 1906 and 1953 for us to view historical Jesus studies as a continuous venture since its inception. See his 'The Secularizing of the Historical Jesus', *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 27 (2000), pp. 135–51.

¹³See discussion in Weaver, *Historical Jesus*, pp. 49–62.

Käsemann's programmatic address to a gathering of Bultmann's students.¹⁴ The 'new quest' was conceived in part as a necessary corrective to modern docetism, and it tended to follow in Wrede's footsteps methodologically.¹⁵ Notable members of the 'new quest' include G. Bornkamm, J. Jeremias and E. Schillibeeckx, as well as the members of the so-called 'Jesus Seminar'. A little over a decade later the 'third quest' emerged as a movement distinct from the 'new quest' (partially due to its likeness to Schweitzer) and was given its name by N. T. Wright in the 1980s.¹⁶

Histories of the 'quests' abound.¹⁷ Despite the heuristic value of the 'old quest, no quest, new quest, third quest' narrative, many have noted that it often proves simplistic or misleading. Those who champion the enduring relevance and complexity of nineteenth-century Jesus scholarship object to the chronological snobbery and homogeneity implied by the term 'old quest'. Further, although scholars like Wright conceive of the difference between the 'new quest' and the 'third quest' along primarily methodological lines, the nomenclature inaccurately implies a succession or even supersession.¹⁸ It also fails to account for a significant number of scholars who do not fit neatly into either group.¹⁹ The overall impression of linear progress is possibly the most misleading element, for so much of the research has proven repetitive and cyclical.²⁰ Notwithstanding these shortcomings, these designations have become somewhat standard and remain the simplest terminology for discussing historical Jesus studies in broad terms.

Despite vigorous methodological debates among contemporary scholars, deeper discussions of hermeneutics and the philosophy of history are markedly rare in the

¹⁴It is one of the marks of the upheaval in German work on the New Testament in this last generation that the old question about the Jesus of history has receded rather noticeably into the background.' Käsemann, 'Problem of the Historical Jesus', p. 15.

¹⁵...we also cannot do away with the identity between the exalted and the earthly Lord without falling into docetism and depriving ourselves of the possibility of drawing a line between the Easter faith of the community and myth'. Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁶Stephen Neill and N. T. Wright, *The Interpretation of the New Testament 1861–1986*, 2nd edn (New York: OUP, 1988), p. 379. Cf. N. T. Wright, 'Doing Justice to Jesus: A Response to J. D. Crossan: "What Victory? What God?"', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997), p. 345. Note that the 'third quest' is thus the *fourth* stage of the quests. According to some, members of the 'third quest' include B. F. Meyer, A. E. Harvey, E. P. Sanders, N. T. Wright, B. Chilton, R. Horsley and R. Theissen.

¹⁷In addition to those noted above, see e.g. Benjamin I. Simpson, *Recent Research on the Historical Jesus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014); James Carleton Paget, 'Quests for the Historical Jesus', in Markus Bockmuehl (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jesus* (Cambridge: CUP, 2001); W. Barnes Tatum, *In Quest of Jesus: A Guidebook*, revised edn (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999); Gerd Theissen and Annette Merz offer a thorough treatment of the relevant issues in *The Historical Jesus: A Comprehensive Guide*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press, 1998); Clive Marsh offers a nine-fold division of the quests in 'Quests of the Historical Jesus in New Historicist Perspective', *Biblical Interpretation* 5 (1997), pp. 403–37; Colin Brown, 'Historical Jesus, Quest of', in Joel Green, Scot McKnight and I. Howard Marshall (eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 337; Schweitzer provided the classic history of the 'old quest' in *Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

¹⁸See John Dominic Crossan, 'Straining Gnats, Swallowing Camels: A Review of *Who Was Jesus?* by N. T. Wright', *Bible Review* 9 (Aug. 1993), pp. 10–11. For this reason, there are many who simply refer to all contemporary Jesus scholarship as the 'third quest' (see Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, *passim*).

¹⁹Wright, for example, notes that Géza Vermes, Marcus Borg, J. D. Crossan and Richard Horsley all defy this categorisation (*JVG*, p. 83). Even the so-called 'Jesus Seminar' is put in different groups by different scholars: compare Wright, *JVG*, p. 30 with John P. Meier, 'The Present State of the "Third Quest" for the Historical Jesus: Loss and Gain', *Biblica* 80 (1999), p. 459.

²⁰See discussion in Paget, 'Quests', p. 149.

literature.²¹ Historical Jesus scholars tend to conceive of their differences according to issues such as form-critical criteria of authenticity or specific conceptions of Second Temple Jewish apocalypticism.²² And yet, it is evident that one of the most fruitful methods of delineating the quests would be according to their diverse philosophical and hermeneutical positions, since the philosophical foundations upon which the historical method is built, or the hermeneutical context within which the method is utilised, inevitably influence the historiographical outcome.²³ It was something like this recognition that made Schweitzer's *Quest of the Historical Jesus* so formidable; but despite being explored fruitfully by a few others, it has not always been a primary category for the historiography of the quests.²⁴

One category that has tended to receive priority, both in histories of the 'quests' and in the historiographical methods of the historical Jesus scholars, is the question of Jesus' own understanding of his identity and purpose. G. E. Lessing's publication of Reimarus' *Fragments* may not have been quite the epoch-making act that Schweitzer made it out to be, but in the seventh fragment, titled *Von dem Zwecke Jesu und seiner Jünger*, Reimarus managed to raise certain questions so forcefully that they remain alive and well today.²⁵ Assuming the essential reliability of the accounts of Jesus' teaching in the four Gospels ('the integrity of their reports is not to be doubted'), but sceptical of everything else, Reimarus set out to reconstruct Jesus' true intentions.²⁶ For Reimarus, Jesus was a political revolutionary, intent on building up 'a worldly kingdom', who became increasingly radicalised and reckoned too confidently on the approval of the crowds who then abandoned him to his death.²⁷ Jesus' final words on the cross expressed his disillusionment with the God who had failed him. After his death, Jesus' disciples (with motives 'aimed at worldly wealth and power') engineered the

²¹For books that include this level of discussion see Adams, *Reality of God*; Donald L. Denton Jr., *Historiography and Hermeneutics in Jesus Studies: An Examination of the Work of John Dominic Crossan and Ben F. Meyer* (London: T&T Clark International, 2004); B. F. Meyer, *Critical Realism and the New Testament* (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1989); Robert B. Stewart, *The Quest of the Hermeneutical Jesus: The Impact of Hermeneutics on the Jesus Research of John Dominic Crossan and N. T. Wright* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2008).

²²See the bibliography for 'criteria of authenticity' in Evans, *Jesus Research*, pp. 127–47. For discussions of 'Apocalyptic' see esp. John J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998); N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, vol. 1 of *Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), pp. 280–99; John Dominic Crossan, 'What Victory? What God? A Review Debate with N T Wright on Jesus and the Victory of God', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 50 (1997), pp. 352–3.

²³It can make a difference that Reimarus wrote with certain Enlightenment presuppositions; that Strauss was a Hegelian; that Harnack was a liberal Protestant; that Schweitzer had read Nietzsche ... ; and that members of the Jesus Seminar operate in a country where Christian fundamentalism of an apocalyptic colour is so influential.' Paget, 'Quests', p. 149.

²⁴A couple of examples of this kind of focus include N. T. Wright's 2018 Gifford Lectures and Colin Brown, *Jesus in European Protestant Thought: 1178–1860* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth Press, 1985).

²⁵Schweitzer hailed it as 'one of the greatest events in the history of criticism' (*Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 15). However, see the discussion highlighting Reimarus' indebtedness to Spinoza and English deism in Brown, *Protestant Thought*, pp. 1–55, esp. pp. 50–5.

²⁶H. S. Reimarus, *Reimarus: Fragments*, ed. Charles H. Talbert, trans. Ralph S. Fraser (London: SCM Press, 1970 [1778]), §I.3, p. 65.

²⁷*Ibid.*, §II.8, pp. 148, 150.

narratives of his resurrection and promise to return to establish the messianic kingdom.²⁸ In so doing, they infused Jesus' death with salvific and religious significance.²⁹

Reimarus exhibited a preference for sayings material that, however uncritical, bears some similarity to Wrede's scepticism and to the form-critical approaches of the 'new quest'.³⁰ The rejection of Jesus' divine self-understanding is an *a priori* in Reimarus' project. He began with the assumption that Jesus did not possess a divine identity and designed his investigation to generate an alternative explanation. Both forms of scepticism would spawn parallel, though often overlapping, approaches: on the one hand, scepticism with regard to the authenticity of the Gospel materials would continue to grow, leading first to a rejection of John,³¹ and eventually to a mistrust of all four Gospels following Strauss's concept of mythologisation³² and Wrede's critique of Mark.³³ This trajectory redirected a significant portion of historical Jesus studies away from the study of Jesus himself to focus on the literary forms of the Gospels and the history of the traditions that had supposedly given rise to the Gospel narratives.³⁴ On the other hand, some continued to assume certain elements of historicity in the Gospels and, following Reimarus' *a priori* rejection of Jesus' divine self-understanding, sought to develop alternative explanations for how Jesus understood his identity and purpose.

What Collingwood calls the 'inside' of history played a substantial role in historiography long before he elucidated its explicit methodological function. In historical Jesus studies it was framed primarily in terms of the origin of the christological beliefs of the early church and focused on the 'titles' that Jesus is reported to have used of himself, especially 'Messiah', 'Son of God' and 'Son of Man'.³⁵ Although many in the 'old quest' insisted that Jesus saw himself as the Messiah (in a purely 'political' sense), much historical Jesus scholarship now assumes there is no reliable evidence to confirm that Jesus possessed a messianic self-understanding.³⁶ Closely related to this is the sense

²⁸Ibid., §II.53; pp. 242–3.

²⁹'In a few days they alter their entire doctrine and make of Jesus a suffering savior for all mankind; then they change their facts accordingly.' Ibid., §I.33, p. 134.

³⁰'Uncritical' because, although Reimarus shows a preference for certain material, his judgements are not based on any explicit criteria of authenticity. See him wrestling with a version of the criterion of dissimilarity at the beginning of part two (§II.1, p. 135).

³¹This process began in earnest with D. F. Strauss and became an essentially unassailable position through the work of F. C. Baur. See discussion in Schweitzer, *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, p. 87.

³²Strauss understood the Gospels to be the result of a (partly unconscious) process of mythologisation through which genuine religious convictions became clothed with historical narratives. See David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. George Eliot, *Lives of Jesus Series* (London: SCM Press, 1973 [1835]).

³³Wrede, *Messianic Secret*.

³⁴Wright maintains that 'much of the impetus for form-critical and redaction-critical study came from the presupposition that this or that piece of synoptic material about Jesus *could not* be historical; in other words, that *an historical hypothesis about Jesus could already be presupposed* which demanded a further tradition-historical hypothesis to explain the evidence' (*JVG*, p. 87).

³⁵The question was framed as follows: did the early Christians' belief in the divinity of Christ derive from Jesus own words and actions, or was it something that they developed after his death? The question of self-understanding is a way of examining the continuity between Jesus and Second Temple Judaism on the one hand, and between Jesus and the rise of the early church on the other. As Meyer maintains, 'the-matic Christology either did or did not originate earlier than Easter. Between these contradictory alternatives there can be no middle ground or third position.' Meyer, *Critical Realism*, p. 159.

³⁶In response to this state of scholarship Martin Hengel argued that 'the unmessianic Jesus has almost become a dogma among many New Testament scholars'. Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology*

that Jesus did not attribute any redemptive significance to his own death.³⁷ The same goes for 'Son of God': Reimarus maintained that for Jesus this simply meant 'beloved of God', but many now reject the possibility that Jesus ever referred to himself in this way.³⁸ The title 'Son of Man' has fared the best in terms of its assumed historicity, while eliciting the least agreement as to its origin and meaning.³⁹ In the end, even among those who find in favour of Jesus using these titles of himself, many agree with Sanders' sense that they tell us little about what Jesus thought of his identity and mission because 'there were no hard definitions of "Messiah," "Son of God," or "Son of Man" in the Judaism of Jesus' day'.⁴⁰

Although there is a diversity of opinion regarding Jesus' self-understanding as Messiah, Son of God or Son of Man, there has long remained a broad consensus in this scholarship that Jesus did not know he was God.⁴¹ Consider, for example, the following quotations:

Did [Jesus] call himself the messiah? ... And did he call himself God? Here I want to stake out a clear position: messiah, yes; God, no ... What we can know with relative certainty about Jesus is that his public ministry and proclamation ... were not about his divinity at all.⁴²

Often theologians prefer to study the problem of Jesus' knowledge of his divinity in terms of the question: 'Did Jesus know he was God?' From a biblical viewpoint this question is so badly phrased that it cannot be answered and should not be posed.⁴³

(Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 16; see the discussion in Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Last Supper* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 9–14.

³⁷See the discussion in Scot McKnight, *Jesus and his Death: Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), pp. 47–75; Peter Balla, 'What Did Jesus Think about His Approaching Death?', in M. Labahn and A. Schmidt (eds), *Jesus, Mark and Q: The Teaching of Jesus and its Earliest Records* (London: T&T Clark, 2001), pp. 239–58; V. Howard, 'Did Jesus Speak about His Own Death?', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 39 (1997), pp. 515–27.

³⁸Reimarus, *Fragments*, §I.10–13, pp. 76–88.

³⁹Boring describes research in this area as 'a veritable mine field'. M. Eugene Boring, *Sayings of the Risen Jesus: Christian Prophecy in the Synoptic Tradition* (Cambridge: CUP, 1982), p. 239. Evans (*Life of Jesus Research*, pp. 195–210) lists over forty books and articles published in the past fifty years written specifically about the title 'son of man'. See the discussion in Delbert Burkett, *The Son of Man Debate: A History and Evaluation* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999).

⁴⁰E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), p. 248.

⁴¹There are a few scholars who stand out from this consensus, including J. C. O'Neill, who concludes that 'Jesus did in fact hold that he was the eternal Son of God'. J. C. O'Neill, *Who Did Jesus Think He Was?* (Leiden: Brill, 1995), p. 189. Cf. François Dreyfus, *Did Jesus Know He Was God?*, trans. Michael J. Wren (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1984), p. 128: the real Jesus of Nazareth was 'Son of Man and Son of God, God himself, knowing that he was and saying it'.

⁴²Bart D. Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperOne, 2014).

⁴³Raymond E. Brown, *Jesus God and Man: Modern Biblical Reflections* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1968), p. 86. Brown goes on in a later article to say: 'Yet, if I judge unsatisfactorily obscure the question, "Did Jesus know he was God?", I am more disconcerted when Christians give the answer "No". Some who give that answer think they are being alert to the historical problem; in my judgment their denial is more false to the historical evidence of Jesus' self-awareness than the response "Yes".' Raymond E. Brown, 'Did Jesus Know He Was God?', *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 15 (April 1985), p. 78.

But if we are to submit our speculations to the text and build our theology only with the bricks provided by careful exegesis we cannot say with any confidence that Jesus knew himself to be divine, the pre-existent Son of God.⁴⁴

Jesus did not, in other words, 'know that he was God' in the same way that one knows one is male or female, hungry or thirsty, or that one ate an orange an hour ago. His 'knowledge' was of a more risky, but perhaps more significant, sort: like knowing one is loved. One cannot 'prove' it except by living it.⁴⁵

It would interfere with all human treatment of the subject and Christ would be a completely ghostly figure if we were to ascribe to him either the recollection of a consciousness of a prehuman state of being ... or a parallel awareness of his divinity and his humanity.⁴⁶

We can, strictly speaking, know nothing of the personality of Jesus.⁴⁷

[First], in all likelihood, the pre-Easter Jesus did not think of himself as the Messiah or *in any exalted terms in which he is spoken of*. Second, we can say with almost complete certainty that he did not see his own mission or purpose as dying for the sins of the world. Third and finally, again with almost complete certainty, we can say that his message was not about himself or the importance of believing in him.⁴⁸

As these quotations show, there are, broadly speaking, four approaches. For some, the question is out of bounds altogether, as is seen most clearly in Bultmann.⁴⁹ Others want to affirm the possibility of divine self-understanding in some sense, but not in a straightforward way, and certainly not in the theological terms of the Christian tradition (e.g. Brown, Witherington, etc.). Others, such as N. T. Wright, answer in the negative and argue that we know Jesus did not think of himself as God.⁵⁰ The final group (e.g. Marcus Borg) provides an even stronger negative answer: we know that Jesus *knew he was not God*.

⁴⁴Dunn, *Christianity in the Making*, p. 33.

⁴⁵Wright, *JVG*, p. 653. Elsewhere Wright unpacks this further, suggesting that Jesus did not sit back and say 'Well I never! I'm the second person of the Trinity!' but that 'as a part of his human vocation, grasped in faith, sustained in prayer, tested in confrontation, agonized over in further prayer and doubt, and implemented in action, he believed that he had to do and be, for Israel and the world, that which according to Scripture only YHWH himself could do and be'. N. T. Wright, 'Jesus and the Identity of God', *Ex auditu* 14 (1998), p. 54.

⁴⁶Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Life of Jesus*, ed. Jack C. Verheyden, trans. S. Maclean Gilmour (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 269.

⁴⁷Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word*, p. 8.

⁴⁸Marcus J. Borg, 'Portraits of Jesus', in Hershel Shanks (ed.), *The Search for Jesus: Modern Scholarship Looks at the Gospels* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 1994), p. 87 (emphasis added). See also Sanders, *Historical Figure*, p. 248: 'Jesus seems to have been quite reluctant to adopt a title for himself. I think that even "king" is not precisely correct, since Jesus regarded God as king. My own favorite term for his conception of himself is "viceroys." God was king, but Jesus represented him ...'

⁴⁹That is not to say they find the question uninteresting or irrelevant, just that they believe the nature of the sources are such that they provide us no data from which to determine an answer. See the discussion in John A. T. Robinson, 'The Last Taboo? The Self-Consciousness of Jesus', in James D. G. Dunn and Scott McKnight (eds), *The Historical Jesus in Recent Research* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2005), pp. 553–66.

⁵⁰See Wright, 'Jesus and the Identity of God'.

Christological assumptions and anthropological norms

N. T. Wright has argued that ‘the “Quest” began as an explicitly anti-theological, anti-Christian, anti-dogmatic movement. Its initial agenda was *not* to find a Jesus upon whom Christian faith might be based, but to show that the faith of the church (as it was then conceived) could not in fact be based on the real Jesus of Nazareth.’⁵¹ This is as true of some contemporary scholars as it was of Reimarus, Paulus and Strauss. However, it is not universally the case, and there are a number of scholars who understand the ‘quest’ to be a vital task for theology, aimed at connecting the Christian faith to its historical roots. For these historians, the task is frequently perceived as an antidote to docetism.

In the lecture which inaugurated the ‘new quest’, Käsemann argued that losing the link between the faith of the kerygma and the historical Jesus (what he calls ‘the identity between the exalted and the humiliated Lord’) would result in docetism.⁵² Wright interprets Käsemann’s warning as the insistence that ‘if Jesus was not earthed in history then he might be pulled in any direction, might be made the hero of any theological or political programme’.⁵³ Wright, therefore, uses the term docetism to refer to any christology insufficiently grounded in the historical Jesus.⁵⁴ Witherington concurs, writing that ‘a faith that does not ground the Christ of personal experience in the Jesus of history is a form of docetic or gnostic heresy’; and numerous others, including Meier, Borg, Crossan and Dunn, have advanced similar arguments.⁵⁵

As various scholars have noted, ‘docetism’ in this context is evidently not being used in quite the same way as in classical christological discourse.⁵⁶ In the patristic era, ‘docetism’ – the idea that Christ only appeared (*dokein*) to live in the flesh – emerged as a tendency, not a concrete set of doctrines, having to do with a sense that Christ was

⁵¹Wright, *JVG*, p. 17.

⁵²Käsemann, ‘The Problem of the Historical Jesus’, p. 34. Note that this is an argument on at least two fronts: against Bultmann, it is a belief that Jesus *as he actually was* is theologically relevant (not just the faith of the kerygma); against those who decry historical inquiry, it is a belief that Jesus *as he can be reconstructed by historians* is necessary for theology.

⁵³Wright, *JVG*, p. 23. He notes the un-Jewish Jesus of the Nazis as a particularly pertinent example.

⁵⁴See e.g. Wright, *JVG*, pp. 653, 661; Wright, ‘A Biblical Portrait of God’, in *The Changing Face of God: Lincoln Lectures in Theology* (Lincoln: Lincoln Cathedral Publications, 1996), pp. 27–8; Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus was and is* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2015), p. 121.

⁵⁵Witherington, *The Jesus Quest*, p. 11; John P. Meier, *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, vol. 1 of *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (London: ABRL Doubleday, 1991), p. 199; Meyer, *Critical Realism*, p. 148; Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, p. 196; Paul Meyer, ‘Faith and History Revisited’, *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 10 (1989), p. 82; John Dominic Crossan, ‘Jesus at 2000 Debate’, <http://www.markgoodacre.org/xtalk/debate.html>, accessed 12 Apr., 2018; James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered, Christianity in the Making* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 102; E. Schweizer, ‘Die Frage Nach dem Historischen Jesus’, *Evangelische Theologie* 24 (1964), pp. 403–19; E. Schillebeeckx, *Jesus in Our Western Culture: Mysticism, Ethics and Politics* (London: SCM, 1987), p. 13. Cf. the discussion in Luke Timothy Johnson, ‘The Humanity of Jesus: What’s at Stake in the Quest for the Historical Jesus?’, in *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 15–16; Eberhard Jüngel, ‘The Dogmatic Significance of the Question of the Historical Jesus’, in *Theological Essays II* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2014), pp. 82–119; A. K. M. Adam, ‘Why Historical Criticism Can’t Protect Christological Orthodoxy: Reflections on Docetism, Käsemann, and Christology’, in *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), pp. 37–56; Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), pp. 307–64.

⁵⁶See esp. Adam, ‘Historical Criticism’, pp. 37–56; Johnson, ‘Humanity of Jesus’, pp. 3–28.

not what he seemed to be.⁵⁷ This problem was typically understood on an ontological level, and docetic heresies met opposition for the way they undermined or cheapened the full human consubstantiality of Christ. In other words, docetism characteristically stemmed from a gnostic denial or depreciation of the physical. On this ontological register, it is doubtful that historical criticism has much to offer as a dogmatic corrective. As Adam has argued:

Historical reason can tell us nothing of the character of Christ's divinity ... What would constitute historical evidence regarding whether Christ was divine on Chalcedonian terms or simply a divine being inhabiting a human appearance? Or whether Christ had a *physical* or *spiritual* body? Here historical critics lack the sorts of evidence and arguments that permit them to draw the conclusions that would, presumably, help confound Docetism.⁵⁸

While historical Jesus scholars may indeed be concerned by the classical problem of docetism, they most often use the term to refer instead to high christologies which they deem incompatible with historical methodology. There are three issues in particular that Käsemann and others appear to connect with 'docetism' in this way.⁵⁹

The first issue arises from a sense that an insistence on Jesus' 'divinity' undermines historians' access to the 'inside' of history. If history is not only about events and data, but about intentionality, perspective and meaning, then part of the historical task is to discern the thoughts to which historical actions give expression. For Collingwood, there is only one way for the historian to discover these thoughts and that is 'by re-thinking them in his own mind'.⁶⁰ To do so, historians rely on concepts of similarity and analogy.⁶¹ We must assume that any historical character thinks in a way that is, in principle, intelligible to us. This is the reason that historians and judicial systems alike have such difficulty with people who suffer from insanity: it removes the possibility of establishing intention or motive. Furthermore, we can only reconstruct a plausible hypothesis regarding a historical figure's aims and intentions by comparing them with other related scenarios and by drawing on a predetermined range of possible explanations. If Jesus did not possess human intentions and motivations like we do, then the possibility of historical analogy is undermined, and Jesus is excluded from the purview of historical reconstruction.

The second, closely related issue, comes from a recognition that some conceptions of Jesus undercut the historical emphasis on context.⁶² Historians insist that the consciousness and experience of a historical figure must stand in significant continuity with their cultural and historical setting. Therefore, Jesus must be contextualised with

⁵⁷See Michael Slusser, 'Docetism: A Historical Definition', *Second Century* 1 (1981), pp. 163–72; Norbert Brox, "'Doketismus": Eine Problemanzeige', *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 95 (1984), pp. 301–14.

⁵⁸Adam, 'Historical Criticism', p. 43.

⁵⁹Thus, while the following issues may cause problems for historical studies of Jesus, they are not for that reason necessarily 'docetic'. Some of them may, in fact, be inevitable aspects of an orthodox high christology.

⁶⁰Collingwood, 'History', p. 215.

⁶¹This was the second of Earnst Troeltsch's (1865–1923) three 'principles of critical history'. See Earnst Troeltsch, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1913), II, pp. 729–53.

⁶²For a christological engagement with this issue, see Thomas Joseph White, 'The Infused Science of Christ', *Nova et Vetera* (English edn) 16 (2018), pp. 617–41.

reference to the language and concepts of Second Temple Judaism.⁶³ Wright gives this particularly detailed expression, arguing that Jesus must have possessed a ‘mindset’ that was a basic variation on the broader first-century Jewish ‘worldview’, which, like all mindsets, was confined to the limitations of a critical realist epistemology.⁶⁴ This focus on historical particularity opposes the universalising tendency of christology, insisting that Jesus must have experienced the same limited, historical perspective as all other humans if we are to understand him as a first-century Jew.

Another facet of this second issue can be understood in terms of what historians typically see as the cardinal sin against their discipline: anachronism.⁶⁵ Raymond Brown refuses to approach the issue of Jesus’ self-understanding in terms of the question ‘Did Jesus know he was God?’ because he believes that without a developed trinitarian framework the idea is nonsensical. ‘When we ask whether during his ministry Jesus, a Palestinian Jew, knew that he was God, we are asking whether he identified himself and the Father – and, of course, he did not.’⁶⁶ The question of self-understanding is complicated by the fact that we are attempting to locate a judgement in the mind of a historical figure, even though we understand that judgement in conceptual terms that are foreign to that figure’s historical milieu.⁶⁷ It would be anachronistic to suggest that the content of Jesus’ self-understanding would have been structured in terms of our own Nicene expressions of trinitarian theology. In this sense, a ‘docetic’ insistence that Jesus knew he was the second person of the triune God undermines the prime imperative of historiography.

The third issue has to do with the veracity of certain historical sources that, by presenting Jesus as somehow ‘divine’, subvert the accepted forms of narrative discourse. In his seminal book *The Testament of Jesus*, Käsemann characterised the christology of the Gospel of John as ‘naïve Docetism,’ and argued that the church had misjudged it by declaring it to be orthodox.⁶⁸ Kasper Bro Larsen has suggested that what Käsemann took issue with was the ‘touch of “irreality”’ that John’s depiction of Jesus throws onto the narrative world of the Fourth Gospel.⁶⁹ Relying on Greimas’ theory of narrative discourse,⁷⁰ Larsen highlights what happens when omniscience is applied to one of the participating actors in a narrative. Jesus’ extraordinary knowledge of himself and others results in him being ‘elevated into a sphere of his own’, which makes him a kind of

⁶³This has been the particular emphasis of scholars such as Géza Vermes, E. P. Sanders, John P. Meier, Jacob Neusner and James H. Charlesworth.

⁶⁴See Wright, *JVG*, pp. 137–44; Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, pp. 31–77.

⁶⁵See discussion in Constantin Fasolt, *The Limits of History* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), esp. pp. 3–45.

⁶⁶Brown, *Jesus God and Man*, p. 87. See similar arguments in e.g. Anthony E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History: The Bampton Lectures 1980* (London: Duckworth, 1982), pp. 154–73; Géza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian’s Reading of the Gospels* (London: Collins, 1973); Vermes, *The Religion of Jesus the Jew* (London: SCM, 1993).

⁶⁷See discussion of concepts and judgements in David S. Yeago, ‘The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis’, *Pro Ecclesia* 3/2 (1994), pp. 152–64.

⁶⁸Ernst Käsemann, *The Testament of Jesus: A Study of the Gospel of John in the Light of Chapter 17* (London: SCM, 1968), pp. 26, 76.

⁶⁹Kasper Bro Larsen, ‘Narrative Docetism: Christology and Storytelling in the Gospel of John’, in Richard Bauckham and Carl Mosser (eds), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 354.

⁷⁰See Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés, ‘The Cognitive Dimension of Narrative Discourse’, *New Literary History* 7 (1976), pp. 433–47.

stranger in the narrative world.⁷¹ Elevated thus, Jesus is never really in danger from his antagonists: even their treachery serves Jesus' purposes (see John 10:17–18, 13:27, 18:4–9). Narrative tension is typically dependent on the limited knowledge and perspective of the characters. By including a character with neither limitation, John reaches beyond the perimeters of narrative convention in unexpected ways.⁷² In this sense, 'narrative docetism' is understood as a literary phenomenon in which the significance of pragmatic narrative functions is subordinated when cognitive processes are in focus. 'Narrative docetism' causes unique problems for historians for whom pragmatic narrative functions are a priority.⁷³

In response to Käsemann's critique of John's Gospel, Marianne Meye Thompson rightly argues that not only in docetic christologies, but in any christology with roots in orthodoxy, Jesus transcends the limits of typical humanity so that in addition to his likeness to us, his *unlikeness* is fundamental to his identity as Christ.⁷⁴ Although these issues may pose a threat to contemporary historical methodology, it remains to be seen if they are a 'docetic' threat to christology. At the same time, they invite a similar question in the opposite direction: is the historical Jesus scholars' alternative to docetism simply a form of Ebionitism?⁷⁵ For Jesus to be *fully* human, must he be *merely* or *typically* human? Wright describes docetism as a sense that Jesus was 'so "divine" that he only seemed to be human but wasn't really so',⁷⁶ and Meier maintains that a non-docetic Jesus must be understood to be 'as truly and fully human – with all the galling limitations that involves – as any other human being'.⁷⁷ One gets the impression from such statements that a dichotomy is being assumed wherein two mutually exclusive natures (human and divine) are in competition, such that Jesus is located squarely either on the side of humanity (resulting in Ebionitism) or on the side of divinity (resulting in docetism), or he is judiciously placed along a spectrum between the two (resulting in Eutychianism).⁷⁸ This differs quite radically from the Chalcedonian tradition, which

⁷¹Larsen, 'Narrative Docetism', p. 352.

⁷²Larsen suggests that a similar thing happens in *film noir* and concludes that John 'shaped a high Christology within the literary frame of elaborate narrative' ('Narrative Docetism', pp. 354–5). The narrative tension, he avers, comes through instead on the level of doubt confronting faith within the reader.

⁷³In his inaugural lecture at Knox Theological Hall, Dunedin, T. E. Pollard picked up on this tension between a preference for external details and a methodological focus on internal motivations. He maintains that 'the Synoptists see Jesus and his words and actions from the outside through the eyes of the disciples: John "enters sympathetically into the mind" of Jesus, or "puts himself into the shoes" of Jesus. [Therefore,] on Collingwood's definition of the real task of the historian, it could well be argued that John is a better historian than the Synoptists.' Quoted in Robinson, 'The Last Tabu?', p. 560.

⁷⁴Marianne Meye Thompson, *The Incarnate Word: Perspectives on Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), pp. 7–8, 117–28.

⁷⁵In line with the usage thus far of 'docetism', I am using 'Ebionitism' in a synchronic or ahistorical manner. Recognising the difficulties surrounding historical appellations of heresy to particular groups of Christians, this is nonetheless the widely accepted terminology to refer to the christological tendency to downplay or reject the divine nature of Christ. Adams (*Reality of God*, p. 211) uses the term 'methodological Arianism' for this same phenomenon among historical Jesus scholars, but it seems to me Ebionitism is more precise. Below I use Eutychianism in a similar fashion, to denote the christological tendency to combine or confuse the divine and human natures, thereby positing a *tertium quid*, which is neither.

⁷⁶Wright, *Challenge*, p. 3.

⁷⁷Meier, *Marginal Jew*, vol. 1, p. 199.

⁷⁸Another way of construing this would be to say that even if the divine nature is not explicitly denied (i.e. Ebionitism), the natures are conceived of as discrete subjects open to different modes of analysis

confesses that Jesus is both *fully* divine and *fully* human. In that context, docetism is understood to result not from Jesus being too divine (one cannot be more than *fully* divine), but from a denial of his humanity.

Historical Jesus studies, as with historical biblical scholarship more broadly, tends to operate with Kantian or post-Kantian anti-metaphysical assumptions, such that for the most part scholars engaging in the 'quest' intentionally limit their investigation to the realm of the 'phenomenal'. The result, however, is not that metaphysical suppositions are removed from the inquiry. They continue to play a role but avoid critical investigation or justification. Wright argues that 'rigorous history ... and rigorous theology ... belong together, and never more so than in discussion of Jesus. If this means that we end up needing a new metaphysic, so be it'.⁷⁹ The problem is that this 'new metaphysic' is never worked out in detail, it is simply assumed, and although it is difficult to pin down with much precision, it appears to include a commitment to the mutual exclusivity (or a quantitative delineation) of the finite and the infinite, along with a restricted understanding of divine transcendence.⁸⁰ Only if we posit a competitive relationship between humanity and divinity, or suppose a truncated view of the human capacity for union with God do we end up with the christological alternatives (docetism, Ebionitism, or Eutychianism) noted above. Fortunately, we have good philosophical and theological reasons to question these assumptions and doing so will help to free the historians from the metaphysical restrictions that so often hamper their investigations.

As we have seen, philosophical and theological assumptions about what it means for Jesus to be *fully* human play a seminal role from the outset. This is made especially clear when Dale Allison, Jr., Marcus Borg and others argue explicitly that a fully human Jesus could not possess a divine self-understanding.⁸¹ There is no doubt that this *theological* judgement impacts the historiographical outcome. At the same time, it is no wonder that, when restricted to these terms, those who do want to affirm that Jesus possessed some sort of divine identity find themselves grasping for conceptual tools and coming up empty.⁸² The influence of these scholars' suppositions regarding theological anthropology, christology and the nature of divine and human knowledge and consciousness is significant enough to warrant explicit theological appraisal. It is my contention that the classical Chalcedonian christological tradition contains the conceptual tools to expand the horizon of possibilities available to historical Jesus scholarship in a way that will augment their access to the historical figure of Jesus.

(resulting in Nestorianism). Thus, the divine nature is at least bracketed out and the human nature is treated on its own. Cf. Aaron Riches, *Ecce Homo: On the Divine Unity of Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016).

⁷⁹Wright, *JVG*, p. 8.

⁸⁰An explicit example of a quantitative delineation of divinity and humanity can be found in Bart Ehrman's work. He argues that the Gospels should be read against a background in which humanity and divinity were not thought of as qualitatively distinct, but as existing along two 'overlapping' continuums. See Ehrman, *How Jesus Became God*, p. 4.

⁸¹Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2009), p. 89; Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus a New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1987), pp. 4–8; Wright, 'A Biblical Portrait of God', p. 27; Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, p. 3.

⁸²At the end of Witherington's book-length study on Jesus' self-understanding, he concludes somewhat vaguely that 'I think [Jesus] implied that he should be seen not merely as a greater king than David but in a higher and more transcendent category' (*The Christology of Jesus*, p. 276). This reveals quite clearly the need for richer language and terminology around this issue.

Three theological alternatives

Although there is not space here to develop a positive proposal of the ways in which the philosophical and theological tools of the Chalcedonian tradition can instruct and supplement the task of historical Jesus studies, it is worth concluding with an example of what I have in mind. To do so, it will be fruitful to place three explicitly theological approaches to Jesus side by side. While the first two approaches – kenotic and historicising christologies – share many of the same metaphysical assumptions held by historical Jesus scholars and thereby exhibit similar shortcomings, the third approach represents a promising alternative.

There exists a widespread misconception that, even if Jesus was ‘divine’ in some sense, he could have been truly human only if his divinity was evacuated of its divine properties in the manner of so-called kenotic christology.⁸³ There are various kenotic approaches, but one of the most influential is that associated with P. T. Forsyth and H. R. Mackintosh.⁸⁴ Building upon a particular reading of the words *ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν* in the so-called ‘Christ hymn’ of Philippians 2:6–11, they conceive of God divesting himself of his divine properties in order to live and act humanly: God literally becomes the subject of a human life, his divine nature becoming subject to all of the ‘galling’ limitations of typical human existence.⁸⁵ This is often worked out in terms of a version of the *communicatio idiomatum* in which, rather than ascribing the attributes of each nature to the one person of Christ, the properties of each nature are cross-attributed to each other. By ascribing the attributes of Christ’s humanity to his divinity (the so-called *genus tapeinoticum*), the ‘divinity’ of the Word essentially becomes a human nature through the incarnation.⁸⁶ Viewing divine transcendence as incompatible with the incarnation, kenotic theologians insist that God must give up elements of his divinity in order to become human. This view is often used as theological justification for the idea that Jesus could have been ‘divine’ in some sense without necessarily possessing extraordinary knowledge, or even a divine self-understanding.

The majority of both Reformed and Catholic theologians reject kenotic christology.⁸⁷ That is not to say that they ignore Philippians 2, which has always been a central christological text. Rather, kenosis has typically been understood as ‘taking (*λαμβάνω*) the form (*μορφὴν*) of a slave, being born in human likeness (*ὁμοιώματι*)’ (Phil 2:7),

⁸³For an example of this assumption at work among biblical scholars, see O’Neill, *Who Did Jesus Think He Was?*, pp. 189ff.

⁸⁴P. T. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ* (London: Independent Press, 1909); H. R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1912). See the discussion in Bruce L. McCormack, ‘Kenoticism in Modern Christology’, in Francesca Aran Murphy and Troy A. Stefano (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Christology* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 444–57.

⁸⁵Note how this abandons a two-natures approach altogether. See discussion in S. W. Sykes, ‘The Strange Persistence of Kenotic Christology’, in Alistair Kee and Eugene T. Long (eds), *Being and Truth: Essays in Honour of John Macquarrie* (London: SCM, 1986), pp. 349–75; cf. C. Stephen Evans (ed.), *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God* (Oxford: OUP, 2006).

⁸⁶Sykes, ‘Strange Persistence’, pp. 354–6. Sykes calls the ideas behind the nineteenth-century development of *kenosis* ‘grotesquely anthropomorphic’. He continues, ‘It is surely odd that they were not perceived as such at the time, and that they have not been consistently, and by every thoughtful theologian similarly perceived’ (p. 357).

⁸⁷See e.g. Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, trans. James W. Leitch (London: SCM, 1962 [1947]), pp. 60–4; Pope Pius XII, ‘Sempiternus Rex Christus’, 8 Sept. 1951, §29, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091951_sempiternus-rex-christus.html, accessed May 2018.

which is how Paul explains it in context.⁸⁸ The kenosis of the divine Son involves the addition of a human nature – he ‘emptied’ himself by *taking up* (λαβών) the form of a slave – not the diminution of his divinity. In fact, the very possibility of the divine Word taking on flesh to experience the limitations of finite human existence depends on the infinitude of his divine nature. Otherwise we are forced into the absurd task of interpreting the incarnation as the union of two finite natures within the one person of Christ. As Austin Farrer argued, ‘the finite excludes another finite of incompatible *kenotic* nature’.⁸⁹ Transforming the divine agency into a finite activity would result in two comparable (univocal) natures ‘jostling for space’ within the incarnate Christ.⁹⁰ It is my contention that the impulse toward a strong kenotic christology derives from a misunderstanding of divine transcendence and of the radically non-competitive relationship that exists between the finite and the infinite. To borrow a phrase from Kähler, I regard kenotic christology as a blind alley.⁹¹

Recognizing kenotic christology as a failure to grasp the relationship between transcendence and immanence leads us quite naturally to a second theological approach, which finds its roots in the thought of G. F. W. Hegel. The historicising christologies of twentieth-century theologians such as Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann and Robert Jenson attempt to resolve the presumed tension between humanity and divinity by defining God in terms of key characteristics of human existence, including temporality and suffering.⁹² As Kathryn Tanner explains, for these theologians ‘God becomes Godself in and through our history’.⁹³ Similar to proponents of kenotic christologies, these theologians consider transcendence, as classically conceived, to be incompatible with the incarnation. The difference is that, rather than suggesting that God gave up aspects of his divinity to become human, they instead redefine divinity in historical terms.⁹⁴ There is a particular affinity between historicising christologies and historical Jesus studies insofar as theologically minded practitioners of the latter have sometimes attempted to adapt the doctrine of God to fit with the human characteristics of the life of Christ.⁹⁵ The result is an erosion of the difference between divinity and humanity through the incarnation: God is still approached as a being among beings who exists in a competitive relationship with created reality.

⁸⁸Thus, ‘kenosis’ refers to ‘the quality of the love of God in becoming a human person for the sake of humanity ... In this sense the word has no technical Christological connotation.’ Sykes, ‘Strange Persistence’, p. 356.

⁸⁹Austin Farrer, *Scripture, Metaphysics, and Poetry: Austin Farrer’s The Glass of Vision with Critical Commentary*, ed. Robert MacSwain (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2013 [1948]), p. 35.

⁹⁰This helpful imagery of natures ‘jostling for space’ comes from Rowan Williams’ 2016 Hulsean Lectures: <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/events/the-hulsean-lectures-2016-christ-and-the-logic-of-creation>, accessed May 2018.

⁹¹See a similar argument in Thomas G. Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), esp. pp. 8–11.

⁹²See e.g. Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 327ff.; Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993 [1973]), pp. 187ff., 227ff.; Robert Jenson, *God After God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 123ff.

⁹³Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 10.

⁹⁴The dependence of the deity of the Father upon the course of events in the world of creation was first worked out by Jüngel and then by Moltmann, who illustrated it by the crucifixion of Jesus. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, p. 329. Cf. Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

⁹⁵See, for example, the comments in Wright, ‘Jesus and the Identity of God’, pp. 44, 54–5.

An alternative approach, which is representative of the Chalcedonian tradition and avoids these shortcomings, is that of the scholastic theologian Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–74).⁹⁶ One of the metaphysical principles that informs the way that Aquinas thinks theologically about the knowledge of Jesus is stated as follows: ‘the received is in the receiver according to the mode of the receiver’.⁹⁷ The clearest illustration of this principle comes from the sphere of sense perception. Aquinas, commenting on Aristotle, explains that, in the case of some physical changes, the form of one material object is received into the matter of another by means of a physical agent (e.g. when air is heated and thereby receives, in a material mode, the form of fire).⁹⁸ However, in the case of perception, the form of a material object is received into the senses *immaterially*. In this way, the form comes to exist in a new mode (*esse intentionale et spirituale*) according to the power that received it (i.e. the senses).⁹⁹ Although the case of sense perception is one of the clearest illustrations of this principle, Aquinas applies it far more broadly. It is, in fact, one of the primary ways he elucidates the qualitative distinction between God and creatures: God is self-subsisting being itself, while creatures receive being by participation ‘according to a certain determinate mode of being’.¹⁰⁰ God and creatures are not two kinds of beings, for God is being according to a *modum universalem*, while creatures receive their being from another according to a *modum creaturae*. Aquinas argues that, as ground and source of the existence of all things, God cannot be reduced to one cause among many in the world; he does not exist in a competitive relationship to creatures in the way that proponents of kenotic and historicising christologies suppose.¹⁰¹

This principle also helps us to reflect on the horizon of possibility with regard to processes of human thought. As we have seen, one of the underlying assumptions governing many historical treatments of Jesus is the idea that any instance of extraordinary knowing is thereby not human (thus the charge of docetism and the problems various scholars have with John’s Gospel). However, if Jesus actually was a prophet (in Thomist terms: if he possessed ‘infused species’), he would know things that have their source in God but are nonetheless discursively patterned to his human mind.¹⁰² These things will have been ‘received in the mode of the receiver’. Divine knowledge possessed in a

⁹⁶For two recent works that relate closely to what follows, see Simon Francis Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015); and Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017).

⁹⁷*Receptum est in recipiente per modum recipientis*. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter *ST*], Leonine edn, vols. 4–12, [1888–1906], 1.84.1. See the discussion in John Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp. 113–22.

⁹⁸Thomas Aquinas, *Sententia super De anima*, Leonine edn, vol. 45 (1984), bk II, c. 12, §551.

⁹⁹*Et ideo forma recipitur in patiente sine materia, inquantum patiens assimilatur agenti secundum formam, et non secundum materiam*. Thomas Aquinas, *De anima*, bk II, c.12. This is how Aquinas distinguishes knowers from non-knowers: a knower is capable of receiving immaterially the forms of other things (see *ST* 1.14.1).

¹⁰⁰*Secundum quemdam determinatum essendi modum*. Thomas Aquinas, *De substantiis separatis*, Leonine edn, vol. 40 (1968), §43.

¹⁰¹For an excellent recent treatment of this theme, see Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

¹⁰²*ST* 3.9.3. For Aquinas, Jesus’ human knowledge also consisted of acquired knowledge and the beatific vision (see *ST* 3.9–12). Aquinas emphasises the integrity of the specifically human ways of knowing that Jesus must have had if he was truly human. Thus, his belief that Jesus possessed the beatific vision coincided with the belief that the beatific vision is the telos of all human intellects. See Gaine, *Did the Savior See the Father?*

human way in the human mind of Christ is not the same thing as simple ‘divine knowledge’, which, as these scholars rightly sense, cannot be possessed by a human mind (because it is identical with the divine essence). This brings us to a second metaphysical principle in Aquinas: ‘grace does not destroy nature but perfects it’.¹⁰³ It is a work of grace (a work of the Holy Spirit, Aquinas says, by virtue of the hypostatic union) that perfects the human nature of Jesus by infusing his human mind with knowledge of divine things.¹⁰⁴ Far from making him less human, this grace makes him *more* human. To put this argument another way, the Christian confession that Jesus is fully human is not the same as an insistence that Jesus must be conformed to a reductive post-Enlightenment philosophical anthropology.

The point is not that a Christian historian will possess only naïve credulity when it comes to studying Jesus. Rather, hard-won, nuanced and clearly expressed philosophical and theological understandings of the world should be brought to bear on all areas of knowledge, especially in the field of history. One need not agree with Aquinas on these points in order to recognise that the metaphysical questions have an impact on the perceived horizon of possibility when it comes to cognition, and thus historiography. To introduce a metaphysical grammar into this discussion is not to de-historicise it, but to recognise that it is *already inherently metaphysical*, only confusedly so.¹⁰⁵ By undertaking the task of clarifying and correcting these assumptions – thereby rendering them coherent and intelligible – we stand only to gain increased access to the historical figure of Jesus.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³*Gratia non tollit naturam, sed perficit. ST 1.1.8.*

¹⁰⁴*ST 3.11.1.*

¹⁰⁵*Contra* Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. N. Buchanan, 4 vols. (New York: Dover Publications, 1961 [1886–9]).

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