




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ‘The Word of God taking up space’: Assessing the christological analogy for scripture

Jonathan M. Platter 

MidAmerica Nazarene University, Olathe, KS, USA  
Email: [jmplatter@gmail.com](mailto:jmplatter@gmail.com)

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## Abstract

This essay provides an assessment of the christological analogy for scripture, particularly for its usefulness in aid of a theological ontology of scripture. This analogy implies that scripture has something like ‘two natures’ – human and divine – like Jesus Christ has two natures. I argue that assessment of the analogy has been impaired by a lack of clarity in its application. On the one hand, the ambiguity relates to a tendency to apply the analogy for the (modernist) purposes of securing epistemic authority. On the other hand, I show that there are in fact three distinct forms of the analogy, each implying different things about the ‘twoness’ of scripture as well as its unity. After outlining the three forms of the analogy, I critically assess the unity they ascribe to scripture by means of the analogy.

**Keywords:** christological analogy; Karl Barth; scripture; spiritual exegesis

A book of law or prophecy is the very Word of God taking up space.  
–Robert W. Jenson<sup>1</sup>

The central affirmation of christology is that the Word of God became flesh, so that when disciples see Jesus, they see God’s own humanity.<sup>2</sup> The christological analogy for scripture invites us to make a connected claim for the church’s book. What and who do we hear when scripture’s words are read for our nourishment, formation, active

<sup>1</sup>Robert W. Jenson, ‘A Space for God’, in *Mary*, in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (eds), *Mother of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2004), p. 55.

<sup>2</sup>A key thesis of Ian McFarland’s ‘Chalcedonianism without reserve’ is that when Jesus is seen, nothing other than human flesh is seen (see his *The Word Made Flesh: A Theology of the Incarnation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2019), p. 6). But this does not deny that the person *whose human flesh* we see is the Second Person of the Trinity. So, riffing on the Johannine account of Jesus’ resurrection (John 12:32), Mike Higton says, ‘the love of God always exceeds its embodiment in any one location, and calls forth other embodiments’, such that ‘Jesus embodies the love of God perfectly not by containing it in one location, but in a life that cannot be contained. Jesus rises from the dead, and draws all people to himself.’ Mike Higton, *The Life of Christian Doctrine* (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), pp. 171, 171n3.

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worship and encounter with God? Human words? Divine words? Truly human words exceeding themselves in the theandric voice of Christ? One of the most commonly invoked versions of the christological analogy is derived from Karl Barth's theology of the word of God. Barth affirms that the Bible is a human book, written by human agents and authors, without denying that the book is also divine, the words of a divine author spoken with and through the human authors.<sup>3</sup> The christological analogy, then, draws a comparison between the human and divine natures in Jesus and human and divine communication in the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

But what is this analogy suggesting about the 'union' of humanity and divinity in the Bible? Is the relation itself somehow analogous across the two cases, as if divine nature and textual nature are *united* in the Person of the Son in a manner similar to that in which divine nature and human nature are united in the incarnation? Or is it the *duality* of natures that is analogous rather than their *unity*; if so, does that leave the matter of their unity irrelevant or secondary? Part of the reason there seem to be such divergent assessments of the analogy is that it is not entirely clear *what* is analogous in the two cases. Several recent monographs on scripture voice criticisms of the analogy, and the criticisms tend to target a narrow form of the analogy connected with strict forms of *sola scriptura*, unqualified inerrancy and accounts of 'meaning' that isolate scripture from its ecclesial context.<sup>5</sup> I am sympathetic with the concerns of these critics, and yet it is not clear that this critique applies to all forms of the analogy.

In this essay, I suggest there are three primary ways the christological analogy is formulated: a *negative* analogy, an *authorial* analogy and a *multi-sense* analogy. I argue that the three versions of the christological analogy depend on or explicitly articulate an ontology of scripture. Darren Sarisky has argued that accounts of 'theological interpretation' are incomplete without an account of 'theological ontology', by which he means 'allowing theology to describe the realities involved in reading ... mainly ... the reader and the text'.<sup>6</sup> His argument rightly alerts us to the fact that 'texts' and 'readers' are not ontologically self-evident realities, and that, without theological specification, unchecked assumptions will likely creep into our claims about exegesis. In this essay, I argue that the christological analogy serves a theological ontology of scripture by articulating something of the intrinsic *unity* of scripture. Consequently, after outlining the three different forms, I raise critical questions about the way(s) each analogy expresses the unity of scripture, concluding that the unity affirmed in the multi-sense analogy avoids some of the key problems of the other two forms.

### Preliminary matters: the ontology of scripture and the christological analogy

In what follows, I am focused on the 'ontology of scripture'. But it is not obvious that the christological analogy is always treated at the ontological level. So before proceeding, I need to distinguish my ontological approach to the analogy from a functional

<sup>3</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [hereafter CD] I/2, eds Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), pp. 473–537.

<sup>4</sup>Brad East, *The Doctrine of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), p. 78.

<sup>5</sup>For example, Daniel Castelo and Robert W. Wall, *The Marks of Scripture: Rethinking the Nature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), pp. 22–33; East, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, pp. 78–83; Kenton L. Sparks, *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2012), pp. 23–9; and Telford Work, *Living and Active: Scripture in the Economy of Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 15–27.

<sup>6</sup>Darren Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically* (Cambridge: CUP, 2019), p. 26, 26n49.

approach. When the analogy is *functional*, it is being used to secure a specific form of divine authority while aiming to acknowledge the human historical contexts involved in the production of scripture. This is a distinctly *modernist* deployment of the analogy, having roots in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Benedict de Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. For Hobbes and Spinoza, identifying *divine* words was connected to true prophetic status and authority; and so correctly demarcating divine words from non-divine was necessary for distinguishing *kinds* of authority within their liberal-democratic visions – that authority rightly exercised by scripture and religious institutions (divine authority) on the one hand, and that exercised by political and public institutions (human authority) on the other. Divine authority is then given a narrowly specified context, restricted to the ethical and private, whereas human authority concerns public and scientific matters.<sup>7</sup> This modernist reorientation seems to persist to the extent that theologians' primary concern in theologies of scripture is its epistemic authority.<sup>8</sup>

The christological analogy is often coupled with extreme views on biblical authority, and especially inerrancy and determinate accounts of meaning.<sup>9</sup> I interpret this as a hybrid functional-ontological use of the analogy. Several critiques of the analogy are directed at such extreme, inerrantist versions, and I am sympathetic with these criticisms, especially when they are motivated by concerns about the modernist, liberal-democratic background for reconceiving scripture as (primarily) an epistemic authority and by the desire for a more significant commitment to the role of the interpretive community in theological reading.<sup>10</sup> In these latter approaches, the text's meaning and authority is bound to ways Christian communities perform the text. Can the christological analogy be re-visited so that it contributes to an ontology of scripture as a performance of the world reconciled in Christ – a performance that the interpretive

<sup>7</sup>Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), chs. 33, 35 and 36; Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, ed. Jonathan Israel, trans. Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel (Cambridge: CUP, 2007), chs. 1–2, 12 and 15. For some philosophical and historical commentary, see Steven Nadler, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza's Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 104–42.

<sup>8</sup>Christopher Ben Simpson also argues that modern articulations of inerrancy – like those expressed by the fundamentalist movement – are responses to a perceived epistemic crisis in a secular age; see his *Modern Christian Theology*, 2nd edn (New York: T&T Clark, 2020), p. 297–300.

<sup>9</sup>For instance, Wayne Grudem relies on an ontological identification of the words of the Bible with God's own utterance: 'Since the words of the Bible are God's words, and since God cannot lie or speak falsely, it is correct to conclude that there is no untruthfulness or error in any part of the words of Scripture' (*Systematic Theology*, 2nd edn [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2020], p. 73). Grudem's conclusion depends on the direct attribution of the words of the Bible to God in the premise. Grudem has adopted, at least implicitly, a form of christological analogy from The International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 'The Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy' (Dallas Theological Seminary Library, 1978), [https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI\\_1.pdf](https://library.dts.edu/Pages/TL/Special/ICBI_1.pdf). For a critical assessment of 'determinate' accounts of meaning, see Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 33–40.

<sup>10</sup>On the 'epistemizing' of scripture, see William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology: From the Fathers to Feminism* (New York: Clarendon, 1998), pp. 1–21. On the ecclesial context of reading, see the brief dialogue in Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), pp. 2–5; and Work, *Living and Active*, pp. 19–27 and *passim*. In the latter two cases, the broader ends of theological reading press against an inerrantist construal of biblical authority, especially when the latter presumes a fixed, determinative 'meaning' in scripture to which readers are to submit.

community participates in as it improvises on the text?<sup>11</sup> Reckoning with accounts of the unity of scripture entailed in the three versions of the christological analogies opens up possibilities along these lines.

### Negative analogy

Now, let us consider the three different forms of the christological analogy. First, I present what could be called the ‘negative analogy’. This form can be found in many authors and could also be called a ‘heresiological analogy’, because it is useful for identifying false uses of the ‘word of God’ designation for scripture. Barth, for instance, suggested that some approaches to the Bible could be diagnosed as either docetic or adoptionist.<sup>12</sup> Peter Enns also appears to have this approach in mind, without naming specific heresies. In his view, the christological analogy reminds us that we are dealing with true humanity, which is always historically situated and particular. We should embrace this particularity in the way that we interpret the Bible and resist the assumption that the ‘divine message’ is separable from the human, historical worlds the biblical books depict and in which they were composed. Implicitly, then, Enns invokes the analogy to ward off a docetic approach to the Bible.<sup>13</sup>

What is especially noteworthy about this approach is its negative or ‘apophatic’ use of the analogy. On its own, this use does not directly imply a construal of a *union* between divinity and humanity in scripture, and this form could be used without claiming that there actually *is* an achieved union. Although Enns does not put it this way, one might map the human–divine distinction onto the narrow–broad distinction for exegesis. The narrow sense of biblical exegesis treats biblical interpretation as aimed primarily at the text’s internal, historical *sense*, whereas the broad sense of exegesis includes theological and spiritual *meaning* and *uses* of the text as well.<sup>14</sup> One might say that, as a slogan for interpretation, affirming the text’s humanity licenses narrow exegesis, whereas affirming its divinity licenses broad exegesis. Again, this neither specifies the ontology that underlies the distinction, nor articulates the kind of *unity* that obtains for the humanity and divinity of scripture. Instead, the negative analogy is simply a denial that human words are incompatible with divine speaking, and, inversely, a denial that divine speaking is incompatible with human words.

Although this does not depend on a direct construal of the ‘union’ of human and divine in the Bible, we can still see it as positively rooted in the church’s teaching on Christ, particularly to the extent that christological teaching involves a reassessment of the Creator–creature distinction. If God the Son can become flesh without alteration, abandonment or diminishment of the divine nature and without destroying, competing or confusion with the human nature, then divine transcendence itself is not competitive or contrastive, to put it in Kathryn Tanner’s terms.<sup>15</sup> God’s transcendence is not opposed to creaturely being, as if it were the case that in order to commune with

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Anna Carter Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture: Discovering God’s Word in Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2018).

<sup>12</sup>Barth, *CD I/2*, pp. 520, 526.

<sup>13</sup>Peter Enns, *Inspiration and Incarnation: Evangelicals and the Problem of the Old Testament*, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), pp. 5–6.

<sup>14</sup>See Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically*, pp. 24–6.

<sup>15</sup>Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

creatures, or to be incarnate as a creature, God must overcome or abandon divine transcendence. Although this ontological judgment extends to all our language about God, as well as to the doctrine of creation, it has a christological form: God is compatible with creation, and this is made dramatically explicit in the revelation of God in Christ.<sup>16</sup> In turn, this means that even though the ‘negative analogy’ is more a denial than it is an affirmation of ‘union’, it is still rooted in the christological transformation of our understanding of God’s compatibility with creaturely finitude.<sup>17</sup>

### Authorial analogy

Karl Barth is the main advocate of the second use of the analogy, which I am calling the ‘authorial analogy’. While Barth also invokes christology to identify and reject false extremes, he goes beyond the negative analogy to think about the union of human and divine. The most extensive discussion occurs in the second part-volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, where Barth develops the doctrine of revelation as God’s triune self-disclosure.<sup>18</sup> We could imagine that Barth’s christological analogy for scripture adopts a ‘from below’ posture while aiming to avoid an adoptionist conclusion. Starting from the true and irreducible *humanity* of the authors of scripture, Barth raises the question of how these human words can nonetheless be *revelation*. ‘Witness’ is the determinative concept.<sup>19</sup> The Bible, as truly human words of truly human authors, bears *witness* to Christ and to revelation in and through Christ. By bearing witness to revelation, the Bible *is* revelation. God is both the subject and the object of revelation – that is, revelation is not only *about* God (as the object) but is also the exclusive *act of* God (as the subject). This means that insofar as scripture is revelatory, it is revelatory *both* as human words of witness to revelation (God as the object of revelation) *and* as God’s word of self-revelation (God as the subject of revelation).<sup>20</sup> Barth uses the analogy to express the unity of scripture itself by means of the unity of God as the one subject and object of revelation in and through scripture’s witness.<sup>21</sup>

There is no doubt that this analogy has much in common with the negative analogy and seems to be compatible with Enns’ broad use. Going beyond the negative analogy, however, Barth’s use of ‘witness’ specifies how the human and divine are ordered to each other in their unity. The human authors in their particularity and diversity *bear active witness to revelation*; whereas the divine author of scripture *is* the revelation, which is only spoken through scripture insofar as God is the one speaking. The full force of this analogy, then, especially if, as Barth desires, it is to avoid adoptionism (i.e. the idea that God only after the fact takes up these human words and then uses them for divine purposes), requires an actualistic ontology. Barth puts it this way:

<sup>16</sup>See Ian A. McFarland, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2014); Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010); and Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018).

<sup>17</sup>I use ‘compatibility’ here in partial debt to Katherine Sonderegger, *The Doctrine of God*, vol. 1 of *Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2015), although I have reservations about her non-christological articulation of God’s compatibility.

<sup>18</sup>Barth, *CD I/2*, pp. 457–537.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 457–72, 541.

<sup>20</sup>Cf. John Webster, *Barth* (New York: Continuum, 2000), p. 55.

<sup>21</sup>This can be seen in part in the way that Barth articulates the singular ‘subject’ of scripture in its freedom and distinctiveness over-against other subjects; cf. Barth, *CD I/2*, pp. 673–85; also Robert W. Jenson, *Canon and Creed* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), pp. 81–2.

as the sign of the revelation which has taken place and does take place, and indeed, as we saw, as the sign posited in and with revelation itself, as the witness of witnesses directly called in and with revelation itself, Scripture, too, stands in that indirect identity of human existence with God Himself, which is conditioned neither by the nature of God nor that of man, but *brought about by the decision and act of God*. It too can and must – not as though it were Jesus Christ, but in the same serious sense as Jesus Christ – be called the Word of God.<sup>22</sup>

That is, the christological analogy of scripture depends for its coherence on the unity of history and eternity in the concrete decision of God to be this human Jesus, as the eternal decision by which God is creation's triune Lord.<sup>23</sup> This divine decision holds the concrete particulars of history within God's providential act. The words of scripture, in Barth's analogy, are truly taken up by God as God's revelatory speech, but this is actualised in the divine decision to be *this* God for *these* people, and not as a retroactive acceptance of human words performed independently of that decision. The unity that the authorial analogy affirms in scripture is first and foremost the unity given by God's gracious decision to be Jesus Christ, in whom the human witness to revelation and the divine act of revelation unite.

### Multi-sense analogy

The third analogy, the 'multi-sense analogy', is the oldest, and it relies on the patristic and medieval conviction that scripture has multiple senses: the literal or plain sense and the spiritual senses. The number of senses varies throughout history, but the typical line up in contemporary expressions consists of the literal, allegorical, tropological (moral) and anagogical (eschatological). The latter three, the allegorical, tropological and the anagogical, are the spiritual senses of scripture and are distinct from the literal.<sup>24</sup> In the early and medieval church, both the literal and the spiritual senses were invoked for exegesis, preaching and prayerful engagement with scripture, though the number

<sup>22</sup>Barth, *CD I/2*, p. 500 (emphasis added).

<sup>23</sup>For the classic presentation of Barth's 'actualism', see Bruce L. McCormack, 'Grace and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 92–110. For an alternative account, but which (as far as I can tell) still fits with the summary presentation given here, see George Hunsinger, *Reading Barth with Charity: A Hermeneutical Proposal* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), pp. 133–5, 178–80.

<sup>24</sup>In present-day usage, the word 'literal' seems to imply both univocity of meaning and strict facticity (usually vaguely identified by opposition to what is 'fictional' or 'poetic'). By contrast, patristic and medieval exegetes worked with a more flexible notion of the literal as '*according to the letter*' and focused on how 'the letter' conveys deeds and events (*littera gesta docet*). The literal sense in premodern usage, then, could equally be called the 'overt' or 'surface' sense. This meaning of 'literal' is not defined by contrast with fiction or poetry, both of which can also be read 'literally' (viz., read 'as the letters go', in part for their overt display of deeds and events). Or, to put it in the language of speech-act theory: for premodern exegesis, the literal sense can apply to any illocutionary force *as discernible at the locutionary level*; in modern usage, the literal sense is granted *for only some kinds of illocutionary force* (e.g. J. L. Austin's 'constative'). The speech-act analogy shows that, for premodern exegesis, spiritual senses are often at the level of perlocutionary force, especially insofar as that exceeds the illocutionary (i.e. the perlocutionary force is not reducible to authorial intent). Because modern interpreters are likely to think of 'literal' as one kind of illocutionary force, they are likely to oppose the literal to the spiritual, because the latter is understood as a different kind of illocutionary force rather than ways the perlocutionary force might exceed the illocutionary.

and distinction amongst the spiritual senses were only codified in the medieval church.<sup>25</sup> Origen invokes a christological analogy for scripture to affirm the unity of the literal and the spiritual senses:

the Word of God, which was clothed with the flesh of Mary, proceeded into this world. What was seen in him was one thing; what was understood was something else. For the sight of his flesh was open for all to see, but the knowledge of his divinity was given to the few, even the elect. So also when the Word of God was brought to humans through the Prophets and the Lawgiver, it was not brought without proper clothing. For just as there it was covered with the veil of flesh, so here with the veil of the letter, so that indeed the letter is seen as flesh but the spiritual sense hiding within is perceived as divinity.<sup>26</sup>

We might notice that here too the ‘negative analogy’ is not absent. The first point that Origen is making is that the Word is visible by virtue of his humanity, and this visibility can be encountered without recognising the hidden divinity. Just as seeing humanity without ‘understanding’ the divinity is an incomplete vision of the Word, so is it a false or diminished vision of the words of the Prophets and Lawgivers to see the letter without also understanding the hidden spiritual sense. In his reading of the Levitical codes, the subject of the homily quoted above, Origen affirms that according to the literal sense, scripture commands sacrifice from the people of God. But if those who are in Christ stop there, they have failed to appreciate the spiritual sense, which may change the way they should hear and receive the scripture as it is directed now also to them.

The multi-sense analogy is designed to avoid reading scripture merely as plain or literal words, for to do so would be to neglect the spiritual message(s) of scripture. The analogy, however, could also be said to have a positive affirmation of real unity between the literal and spiritual senses. Frances Young expresses this positive meaning by contrasting Origen’s ‘Alexandrian’ approach with Gnostic spiritual exegesis. The Gnostics used allegory to split the literal/material world from the spiritual world, producing an *anti-literal* allegorical reading. This divides scripture itself into two worlds sitting in tension and competition with each other (rooted, in turn, in a dualistic cosmology). Young concludes:

the two worlds apparently implied in the Alexandrian allegorical tradition should never have been divorced. The spiritual ‘meaning’ is ‘incarnate’ in the text rather than belonging to an entirely different order of being, and so the performance of the text involves performance in the whole of life. ... The ‘Two Natures’ coinhere. The ancients recognized that ... the Logos moves the hearer to response ... It is because the whole is meshed together as God’s whole creation that two apparently distinct mimetic worlds never really worked, even for the Fathers. Music ‘represented’ the deep reality of the cosmic order, not a different world. Likewise whatever scripture ‘represents’, it is not a different world, but our world understood as

<sup>25</sup>See Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. Marc Sebanc, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 15–74.

<sup>26</sup>Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus 1–16*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), Homily 1.29.

God's. In that sense the 'Two Natures' coinhere, and the 'spiritual meaning' is inseparable from the letter.<sup>27</sup>

The multi-sense analogy affirms the unity and integrity of the world itself and affirms that the truest speech and action in the world is that which finds its context in the world-joined-to-the-Word. The Christ-healed world is the only world, though this way of seeing the world requires transformed vision, vision conformed to the historical revelation of God in Christ.

### The christological analogy and the unity of scripture

I have now presented three distinct forms of the christological analogy, and in each case, I reflected on the extent to which each form uses the analogy to articulate the unity of scripture. The negative analogy does not itself directly affirm any unity, except *perhaps* the material unity of the Bible itself in its canonical form(s). This may, in fact, be an attractive feature of this form of the analogy, since it requires minimal ontological commitments. However, it also makes the exegetical relevance of the analogy vague. For instance, if we distinguish, as I speculated above, between narrow exegesis (interpretation of the text's *historical sense*) and broad exegesis (interpretation of the text's *theological and spiritual meaning*), then the negative analogy permits both, but it cannot specify any intrinsic relationship between the two. If some kind of unifying relationship were assumed, it is hard to see how it would not involve something like one of the other two forms of the analogy – i.e. either that the theological meaning is the substance of revelation whereas the historical sense is that which witnesses to revelation (Barth), or that the theological meaning is discernible in and through the historical sense (Origen). The negative analogy, then, seems insufficient for an ontology of scripture and too vague to sustain its interpretive function.

What then of Barth's authorial analogy? In this case, there is a kind of unity affirmed, a unity between the human witness to revelation and the divine act of revelation. This suggests an *agential* unity: the unity of scripture is found in the unity of the divine Word's communicative action.<sup>28</sup> The difficulty with Barth's authorial analogy turns on the relation of authorial agency in the communicative act(s) of scripture. Barth's actualism, at least as it is deployed in his theology of scripture, seems designed to avoid construing scripture's authorial agency in either docetic or adoptionist terms. But if the unity of scripture as a communicative act is grounded in the Word's agency, then what kind of agency do the human authors have? Has their agency been usurped by the Word's, resulting in a docetic human 'appearance' of scripture? Or has their agency been accepted for the Word's own use, resulting in an adoptionist affirmation of human persons' communicative acts? John Webster, building on Barth's views, argues that 'The being of the canonical texts is determined by their *divine use*', reinforcing the ontological judgment that scripture's unity is rooted (exclusively?) in divine agency.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Kevin Vanhoozer, implicitly working with Barth's category of

<sup>27</sup>Frances Young, *Virtuoso Theology: The Bible and Interpretation* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim, 1993), pp. 155, 158–9.

<sup>28</sup>See Francis Watson, 'The Bible', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), pp. 59–61.

<sup>29</sup>John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Church Dogmatics* (New York: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 31 (emphasis added).



'witness', attempts to affirm the agency of human authors alongside Christ's by suggesting that scripture is 'Christ's own witness to himself via the *commissioned agency* of the prophets and apostles who authored it'.<sup>30</sup> As an ontological identification of the being and unity of scripture, however, this sits uncomfortably with a christological analogy insofar as it seems to presume an ontological *incompatibility* between creaturely agency and divine agency and then must identify the *real* agency, for which the only eligible candidate (when revelation is at stake) is God.<sup>31</sup> Webster's attempt is explicit on this front, since he is rejecting ecclesial construals of scripture by exclusively identifying scripture with divine agency.<sup>32</sup> And it is hard to see how Barth's view can successfully avoid this competitive construal. This is because the focus on agency and personal communicative action inclines toward applying the analogy as if the christological unity of scripture is a *hypostatic union* – that is, as though scripture is taken on as something like the 'textual nature' of the person of the Son. For Barth (if he were to go this far, and I am not convinced he would), this could only really happen in an occasionalist sense and not as a metaphysical fact about the textual reality of scripture. Rather, in the event of revelation and proclamation it *happens* that the Bible may be the 'textual nature' of God the Son, a created reality assumed by Christ to enact revelation.<sup>33</sup> This act both prioritises the agency of the Son over-against the agency of any human authors and grounds the communicative power of scripture purely in the *freedom of God*, in every occasion of revelatory through scripture. The freedom of God in this act seems to undercut any abiding judgment that scripture is God's word, since its status as such is dependent on an act of God which is otherwise *veiled* by creaturely media.<sup>34</sup>

However, the multi-sense analogy offers a different construal of the unity of scripture's humanity and divinity. It suggests that the ordinary and historical level of meaning or 'sense' of scripture is united to a spiritual sense – a unity that corresponds to the cosmic/metaphysical unity of the spiritual and the physical world and that follows from, but is not identical to, the Christ's theandric unity. That is to say, it does not propose a *hypostatic union*, now with a textual nature, but proposes instead a *metaphysical union*.<sup>35</sup> In a multi-sense, metaphysical union, the biblical text is not joined *to the person* of the Son; on the contrary, the focus is on the ordinary historical communication of these written words. If these words were directly attributed to the Son's *person*, it would be hard to see how these words would have their ordinary historical *sense*, a sense rooted in an economy of multi-voiced human communication and consisting

<sup>30</sup>Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Scripture and Tradition', in Kevin J. Vanhoozer (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Cambridge: CUP, 2003), p. 165 (emphasis added).

<sup>31</sup>Objects which in and of themselves serve only and precisely to *veil God* (for they are, in themselves, not God) are taken up into a relationship with God where their natural capacities are wholly transcended and where they are rendered transparent with respect to God.' Trevor Hart, 'Revelation', in John Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth* (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 46.

<sup>32</sup>For more thorough development of this concern, see Brad East, *The Church's Book: Theology of Scripture in Ecclesial Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2022), pp. 258–62.

<sup>33</sup>Barth, *CD I/2*, p. 530: 'we cannot regard the presence of God's Word in the Bible as an attribute inhering once for all in this book as such ... But in this presence [of the book as such] something takes place in and with the book, for which the book as such does indeed give the possibility, but the reality of which cannot be anticipated or replaced by the existence of the book. A free divine decision is made. It then comes about that the Bible, the Bible *in concreto*, ... is taken and used as an instrument in the hand of God'.

<sup>34</sup>See again, Hart, 'Revelation'.

<sup>35</sup>It could also be called a 'hermeneutical union', since it involves a christomorphic *interpretation* of reality.

of internal tensions at that historical level. There must be an ordinary historical sense in order for that historical sense to be united with spiritual senses, and yet this ordinary historical sense is precisely what would be compromised if the union between text and Christ were *hypostatic*. For in that case, the personhood of the historical authors would sit in tension with the single-subject identity expressed in the hypostatic union. Rather, the multi-sense analogy involves first and foremost a theological judgment about the reconciliation of *reality* in and through Christ's union of divinity and humanity. The spiritual senses of scripture are rooted in the capacity of ordinary things to signify spiritual meanings, so that an 'allegorical' reading of scripture does not entail *rejecting* its literal sense but entails a multi-vocal way of viewing the historical realities about which the literal sense speaks.<sup>36</sup> In Origen's hands, this even allows for the meaning of scripture to shift as it is brought into contact with the world after Christ.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps we cannot repeat wholesale the premodern articulation of a fourfold sense, but a modest acknowledgement of multiple senses seems both possible and necessary for theological interpretation.<sup>38</sup> Reading theologically relies on a deepening and fulfilling of meaning that culminates in the eschatological consummation of the particular speech of God's people as it is taken up into the triune life. This is the first manner in which scripture is 'christological': its sense is not reducible to a singular meaning or plain reading, rather it is bound to the ongoing formation of God's people in anticipation of the eschatological fulfilment of speech (including scripture's) in the one Word through whom all words are spoken.<sup>39</sup> And yet in scripture's unique display of the unity of the literal sense and eschatological fulfilment, it anticipates Christ's drawing of all things into his own triune relation to the Father (i.e. adoption). In this way, something of Barth's authorial analogy might be integrated into a multi-sense analogy that emphasises the christological unity of the literal sense with the eschatological sense, where the literal sense's role is, in part, to communicate human authors' 'witness' to revelation as that which will ultimately be fulfilled in eschatological reconciliation to Christ. It is not scripture itself – certainly not 'scripture alone' – that transforms the world. This is why the christological analogy need not obsess about epistemic authority or with locating God's agency *inside scripture*. Christ himself is redeemer of the world, so the world can be viewed as God's stage for the drama of the divine economy, which includes the church's ongoing work of bringing scripture 'constantly into contact with the

<sup>36</sup>See Hans Boersma, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), pp. 12, 189.

<sup>37</sup>For Origen, scripture's demand for sacrifice from God's people could now be read as demanding a different kind of sacrifice than the literal sense seems to require. See his *Homilies on Leviticus 1–16*, Homily 1.29; see also Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 30–1.

<sup>38</sup>See Bryan C. Hollon, *Everything is Sacred: Spiritual Exegesis in the Political Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), p. 4n4, who suggests that even de Lubac did not advocate a simple 'return to the days of pre-critical exegesis'. One possible reconfiguration of spiritual exegesis is 'theodramatic' exegesis, in von Balthasar's sense. See for instance, Matthew W. Bates' treatment of prosopological exegesis as 'theodramatic' in his *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: OUP, 2015), pp. 5, 32–6, 85–114, 190–202.

<sup>39</sup>We might frame this in terms of double agency, so that human authors are material, efficient and formal causes of scripture (the agents 'behind the speech') and the Son is the final cause (the agent 'ahead of the speech'). The union would be non-competitive in this framework, because the 'agencies' of human authors and the divine author would be operative at different ontological levels. For some ways of articulating such double agency in scripture, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse: Philosophical Reflections on the Claim that God Speaks* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995).

world'.<sup>40</sup> The multi-sense analogy, then, roots the unity of scripture in the concentric spheres of Christ's human–divine unity (innermost sphere), the eschatological unity of the church with Christ and the current Christ-sustained unity of the spiritual and physical world (outermost sphere), all of which provides the context for the intelligibility of the unity of the literal sense (narrow exegesis) and spiritual senses (broad exegesis). That is, the unity of the literal and spiritual senses of scripture is bound to the church's vocation in the world of 'generative' faithfulness to the eschatological work of Christ through the Spirit.<sup>41</sup>

## Conclusion

When we think, then, of the ontology of scripture through the lens of the christological analogy, I suggest that we are imagining the Bible to have a particular role in God's eschatological activity in the world, an activity we participate in as our vision is transformed by the unity achieved in Jesus' person. If this is the world within which the Bible exists, we ought to reject, in line with the negative analogy, extremes that mirror christological heresies of docetism and adoptionism. And even further, we might see scripture itself as an instrument of Christ's healing of the world, though this does not require locating divine agency *within* scripture. When the multi-sense analogy is at the fore, the christological analogy of scripture is an ontological claim about the mediation of this divine–human unity through the church's performance of scripture: in engaging with scripture, the church is working out its unity and identify before God and in the world. This formulation avoids deploying the christological analogy for securing epistemic authority, especially as a reactive strategy to shore up authority in face of 'secular' authorities. Rather, it affirms that scripture is a gift of God to the church in and through which the church continues to work out its vocation in the world, often in unpredictable improvisatory directions.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>40</sup>Hollon, *Everything is Sacred*, p. 124, summarising Rowan Williams.

<sup>41</sup>Williams, *On Christian Theology*, pp. 30–1.

<sup>42</sup>An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Wesleyan Theological Society in March 2022. I am thankful for the discussion in that session, which helped me to clarify the argument and aims of the essay; special thanks to Mark Gorman, Justus Hunter, Jerome Van Kuiken, and Robert Wall. Additionally, my argument benefited greatly from conversations with Scott Dermer and Renee Dutter Miller.