

One Person, Two Natures, and Four Gospels: Avoiding Nestorian Dangers in the Historical Study of Jesus*

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ABSTRACT

One of the most difficult flashpoints between biblical studies and confessional theology is the study of Jesus—whether we define this as studying the historical Jesus or studying Jesus historically—and the church’s creedal Christology. In this essay, I consider the dangers of Nestorianism in modern studies of Jesus. First, I outline the dangers and tensions between the study of the historical Jesus and the church’s creedal statements about Christ. Second, I discuss the relationship between creeds and Scripture. Third, I consider briefly what we can say about Nestorianism, and how one arguably finds echoes of Nestorianism in modern approaches to the historical Jesus. Fourth, I offer six suggestions for a way forward for those who seek to honor both the church’s creedal traditions and the witness of the New Testament.

Keywords: creeds, historical Jesus, Nestorianism, christology.



Introduction

One of the most difficult flashpoints between biblical studies and confessional theology is the study of Jesus and creedal Christology. Biblical scholars focus largely on the study of ancient texts in their cultural contexts, yet many are also involved in teaching faith communities that embrace the tradition of Christian confessions.

In this essay, I want to consider the challenges and theological conundrums faced by confessional biblical scholars who study the four Gospels and seek to understand Jesus “historically” — especially challenges from the historical Jesus enterprise.¹ I will focus especially on the theological dangers of Nestorianism—an ancient approach to Christology rejected by the Council of Ephesus in AD 431, which posited multiple persons or subjects in Christ. My intended audience is primarily advanced students and professors of the New Testament, along with those who teach on the person of Jesus, particularly those who teach at historically Christian institutions aligned with the great ecumenical creeds of the church.

My outline is as follows. First, I consider some of the tensions between the church’s creedal traditions and the study of the historical Jesus in academic contexts today. Second, I consider the relationship between creeds and Scripture. Third, I consider briefly what we can say about the theological dimensions of Nestorianism. Here I also suggest that following the lead of the modern quests of the historical Jesus has too often leaned in a Nestorian direction. Fourth, I propose a way forward that takes seriously the biblical and historical contexts of Jesus without either dismissing the importance of creedal traditions or kowtowing to misguided principles of the historical Jesus enterprise.

Tensions

It is not an overstatement to say that the church’s creedal traditions and the academic study of the historical Jesus often have very different starting points.

The church’s creedal traditions—specifically the Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, and Chalcedonian Definition—start with the *person* of the eternal Son of God who became incarnate to accomplish salvation. Only after establishing this do they discuss the historical details of Jesus’s life. To be sure, both Christ’s divinity and humanity are important, and we must not neglect either. But the creedal traditions reflect the primacy of the *divine person* of the Son of God who became incarnate. The creeds do not speak of a *human person* from Nazareth who became divine in some sense. The Nicene Creed, for example, speaks of the eternal Son who “for us humans and for our salvation...came down and became incarnate, became human.”² Yet in practice, too much Gospels scholarship seems to assume that we

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1 On the tensions in these, see Scot McKnight, “The Jesus We’ll Never Know,” *Christianity Today* (April 9, 2010), with responses by Darrell Bock, N. T. Wright, and Craig Keener. For the term “historical Jesus enterprise” as I include it here, I consider those who use historical-critical methodology to weigh sources, consider what is more or less likely to have actually occurred in the Gospels, and who eschew starting with the church’s creedal commitments.

2 For the Nicene Creed in Greek and English (and for other standard creeds assumed in this essay), see Norman P. Tanner, ed., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 2 vols. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990).

can know for sure that Jesus was a first-century man, whereas the creeds are dismissed as speculative.³ In contrast to this strand of NT scholarship, in the creeds, the preincarnate existence of the Son is not a speculative theologoumenon up for debate. Creedal tradition assumes the eternal reality of the Son's existence as the presupposition for the historical reality of the incarnation.

On the other hand, the genesis of the historical Jesus enterprise can be traced in large measure to those who sought to free the academic study of Jesus from the shackles of unempirical, theological claims.⁴ The "Jewish Jesus of the first century" in NT scholarship might be contrasted with the divine Son of God confessed in the creeds: instead of understanding Jesus primarily as a divine person who became incarnate, he is understood primarily as a historical figure from the first century. In the context of the modern academy, the preincarnate existence of Christ is debated, if it is affirmed at all. Too often in such contexts, the humanity of Christ is myopically considered (apart from his divinity). This conflicts with the church's creedal heritage, which requires that given the unity of the person, we cannot understand the humanity of Christ in isolation from his divine personhood. Further, his divine personhood determines the way we should (and should not) understand his humanity.⁵ The academy's quest for Jesus often prioritizes the historical reality of Jesus's life in first-century Palestine; the miracles and claims to divinity are not topics that can be assessed using the assumed tools of historical criticism.

We thus must not sugarcoat the fact that these are competing claims about Jesus. Crucial for my discussion is the identity of the *person* of Jesus. Either Jesus is a divine person who has come from heaven, or Jesus is a human person from the first century whom the church happens to regard as also divine but whose divinity is not necessary or material to understanding who he is as man.⁶ Both cannot be true. (And we must not posit *two persons* in Christ). Creedal Christology will not budge, but neither (it seems) will the historical Jesus enterprise. This presents an apparent impasse.

It, therefore, needs to be emphasized that the historical Jesus enterprise is by no means a "neutral" approach. This is much more commonly recognized today than in some previous generations.⁷ But we need to go further and note that the historical Jesus approach is also not neutral specifically with respect to the ecumenical creeds. To illustrate from a commonly held historical Jesus methodology: if the starting point is to "work our way up from Jesus of Nazareth" to some sort of apotheosis affirmed by Christians in later generations, then we are denying what the creeds (and Scripture) call us to affirm. This reflects a different method. To be sure, some who engage the historical enterprise may affirm the

3 E.g., Geza Vermes, *Jesus the Jew: A Historian's Reading of the Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973), 16–17, 213, 224–25.

4 For further discussion of such approaches, see Robert B. Strimple, *The Modern Search for the Real Jesus: An Introductory Survey to the Modern Roots of Historical Criticism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995). See also the criticism, analogy, correlation methodology of Ernst Troeltsch discussed in, e.g., Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (London: SCM, 1967), esp. 14–35.

5 Thanks to Mark Garcia for this observation.

6 Thanks to Mark Garcia for clarification on this point.

7 This was already appreciated by Martin Kähler, *The So-Called Historical Jesus and the Historic, Biblical Christ*, trans. Carl E. Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964) (originally written in 1896); see also, e.g., Luke Timothy Johnson, *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2000); Dale C. Allison Jr., *The Historical Christ and the Theological Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).

creeds, but this seems to be *despite* (not because of) the historical-critical method employed.⁸ But given our position today—with the benefit of the entire canon and the clarification of the creeds—to avoid embracing the approach of the creeds threatens to reject the approach of the creeds. We cannot simply sidestep the truth of “one person, two natures” and seek to construct a new understanding of Jesus by focusing on his humanity to the neglect of his divinity. This is out of step with the church’s creedal affirmations. Albert Schweitzer himself chillingly observed, “This dogma [i.e., the Two Natures of Chalcedon] had first to be shattered before men could once more go out in quest of the historical Jesus.”⁹ This is a sobering observation, and I fear it has not always been sufficiently addressed. I am certainly not the first to identify these tensions, but Christian theologians from a variety of perspectives have picked up on them; this is not the property only of the Reformed tradition.

For example, among the Thomistic school of thought, Thomas Joseph White argues that we must start with ontological claims about Jesus, and recognize that humanity is an *instrument* of the divine Son of God.¹⁰ He argues that Christology entails “an irreducibly ontological dimension that is essential to” the study of Christ.¹¹ In other words, to understand Jesus, we have to start “from above.” He explicitly points to the dangers of Nestorianism in the study of Jesus.¹²

Similarly, Eastern Orthodox historical theologian John Anthony McGuckin (following closely Cyril of Alexandria) emphasizes that in the incarnation we are dealing with one person; the human nature of Jesus is not a different person than the Son of God. He states, “The widespread distinction in contemporary biblical interpretation between the Jesus of History and the Christ of Faith frequently betrays...an undisclosed christological anthropology that is more like that of Nestorius than it is of Cyril.”¹³

Additionally, Stephen Wellum of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary has warned against a “Christology from below” that employs the historical-critical method, instead of “Christology from above” which begins with the deity of the Son and the authority of Scripture.¹⁴

8 Compare, e.g., James D. G. Dunn, *Neither Jew Nor Greek: A Contested Identity*, Christianity in the Making 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 822, who found the creeds as confusing as they are definitive, and suggested they have inappropriately sought to define the undefinable. He preferred returning to a simpler affirmation, such as “God is invisible, but Jesus has made visible the invisible God” (822). Such an approach requires one to ignore the significant theological challenges and errors the creeds were often designed to address. Further, it is best not to understand the creeds as seeking to define the undefinable, but as preserving mysteries. So, e.g., R. B. Jamieson, *The Paradox of Sonship: Christology in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Studies in Christian Doctrine and Scripture (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2021), 152–53.

9 Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, trans. W. Montgomery (New York: Collier, 1968), 3. This view is noted in B. B. Warfield, “The ‘Two Natures’ and Recent Christological Speculation,” in *The Person and Work of Christ*, ed. Samuel G. Craig (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950), 212–13.

10 Thomas Joseph White, OP, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015), 83–84, 220; on the charges of Nestorianism, see esp. 78–84. See also Matthew Levering, *Reconfiguring Thomistic Christology*, Current Issues in Theology (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

11 White, *Incarnate Lord*, 5.

12 White, *Incarnate Lord*, 73–125. See p. 76: “The argument I will develop below is that there exists a tendency in modern Christology that is of a decidedly Nestorian character, and that this tendency derives from the mature Christological thinking of Karl Rahner.” Whereas White focuses more on *theologians*, I focus more on biblical studies.

13 John Anthony McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria: The Christological Controversy. Its History, Theology, and Texts* (repr., Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 190.

14 Stephen J. Wellum, *God the Son Incarnate: The Doctrine of Christ*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 86–92; idem, *The Person of Christ: An Introduction*, Short Studies in Systematic Theology (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 21–22, 183.

A similar sentiment has also been sounded by Reformed authors (such as Herman Bavinck), who have often noted the dangers in modern Christology of non-creedal views of Jesus—including the dangers of Nestorianism.¹⁵

Surely more examples could be added. Taken together, these voices from various theological traditions that caution against multiple “persons” in Jesus are thus warning against the dangers of Nestorianism.

On Creeds and Scripture

Lest it be thought that my interest is in the creeds *rather than* the Scriptures, it will be helpful to clarify the relationship between the two. Simply stated, for any creed to be binding it must conform to Scripture and be drawn from the contents and emphases of Scripture itself.¹⁶ This is true already of the *regula fidei* (“rule of faith”) in the early church, as Irenaeus noted. The rule of faith, which bears a trinitarian shape, reflects the hypothesis of Scripture and points to the work of Christ in recapitulation.¹⁷ Irenaeus bemoaned those who rearranged Scripture’s contents, resulting in a mangled picture of a dog rather than Scripture’s mosaic of a beautiful king (*Haer.* 1.8.1). To read the Scripture in a way that does not accord with the rule of faith misunderstands and misconstrues the Scriptures themselves. Similarly, Origen identified the rule of faith as coming from the apostles, deriving ultimately from the teaching of Jesus himself (*Princ.* pref. 2–4; 4.2.2). Later, the Chalcedonian Definition (AD 451) speaks of its Christological doctrine as coming from Christ and handed down as the creed of the Fathers.

Thus, properly understood and articulated, the creeds of the church come from Scripture and reflect the contents of Scripture itself. Indeed, we find creedal statements—even trinitarian statements—already within Scripture (e.g., Deut 6:4–5; 1 Cor 8:5–6; Eph 4:4–6; 1 Tim 3:16; al.).¹⁸ Faithful creeds articulate faithfully what the Scriptures truly teach. Re-organizing and re-presenting scriptural truth is not illegitimate; virtually any explanation of Scripture must reorganize and restate Scripture in order to explain what Scripture means. Further, creeds are often necessary to guard the right reading of Scripture against misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Scripture itself. Creedal theology, done well, communicates accurately the meaning of biblical texts. Even so, creedal statements must be tested by the Scriptures.

¹⁵ E.g., Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8), 3:259–60, and esp. 3:265–74. Bavinck writes of some modern theologians: “For all of them consider themselves compelled by the natural and historical sciences of modern times to make a distinction between the historical Jesus and the Christ of dogmatics” (*RD*, 3:266).

¹⁶ On which see Scott R. Swain, “A Ruled Reading Reformed: The Role of the Church’s Confession in Biblical Interpretation,” *IJST* 14 (2012): 177–93.

¹⁷ See Joseph Trigg, “The Apostolic Fathers and Apologists,” in *The Ancient Period*, vol. 1 of *The History of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Alan J. Hauser and Duane F. Watson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 330; John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, vol. 1 of *Formation of Christian Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 32, 36–37. These are noted in Brandon D. Crowe, “Have You Never Read? Biblical Theology in a World of Wolves, Foxes, and Griffins,” *WTJ* 83 (2021): 2n4.

¹⁸ See Swain, “Ruled Reading,” 187–88.

Addressing Nestorianism¹⁹

What Can be Said about Nestorianism?

To speak of “Nestorianism” is to kick a hornet’s nest. For it is not entirely clear what Nestorius himself actually believed. I will give here the most basic of summaries, recognizing that others may wish to nuance matters differently.

Historically, the flashpoint of Nestorianism came when Nestorius denied that it was proper to call Mary “God-bearer.” Instead, Nestorius argued she should be called “Christ-bearer” (Χριστοτόκος). For Nestorius, “God cannot have a mother...and no creature could have engendered the Godhead; Mary bore a man, the vehicle of divinity, but not God.”²⁰

Though Nestorius’s theology is hard to pin down these many centuries later, he appears effectively to have denied one “subject” (or, the *proper* “subject”) in Christ, and emphasized “the abiding distinctive relationship of the two fully enduring spheres of reality (or ‘natures’) in the incarnate Lord.”²¹ Nestorius apparently thought that Cyril of Alexandria so stressed the unity of Christ, that he veered into Apollinarianism by denying a human mind in Christ.²² Nestorius instead taught that there was a conjunction (rather than a *union*) of natures in Christ, which resulted in a new “person” (πρόσωπον) that was identical neither with the Word nor with humanity.²³ Instead, “the man’...was the temple in which ‘the God’ dwelt.”²⁴ Thus, for Nestorius: “The πρόσωπον of union, not the Logos or Word, was thought to be the subject of the incarnate Christ.”²⁵

This also means that Nestorius did not employ the *communicatio idiomatum* (“communication of properties”), which states that both divine and human properties could be attributed to the single subject of Christology—not that the natures are confused, but that what is proper to each nature can be attributed to the person of the Son.²⁶ But in Nestorius’s account, both divine and human characteristics could be attributed “indifferently” to the πρόσωπον of Christ in the incarnation.²⁷

In sum, Nestorius seems to have denied the unity of the person of Christ.

Cyril of Alexandria, for his part, emphasized the unity of the person of Christ.²⁸ For Cyril, the Word of God (that is, the Logos) “appropriates” human nature in the incarnation.²⁹

19 This section of the essay is adapted from Crowe, *Lord Jesus Christ*, and follows very closely my discussion from chapter 7 (“Creedal, Conciliar, and Modern Christology: From Nicaea to the Twenty-First Century”), especially pp. 185–88. Further discussion of these issues can be found there.

20 J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Prince, 2007), 311. Here I also draw from Nestorius, *Second Letter to Cyril*, available in Tanner, *Decrees*, 1:40–*44.

21 McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 131; see also St. Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. John Anthony McGuckin (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2000).

22 Noted by McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 131–32.

23 See Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 314–15; Leo Donald Davis, SJ, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325–787): Their History and Theology*, *Theology and Life* 21 (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1987), 146–47; Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 492; Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 90.

24 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 314, noting Nestorius’s comments on John 2:19. For Nestorius’s own words, see his *Second Letter to Cyril* in Richard A. Norris, *The Christological Controversy, Sources of Early Christian Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 135–40. See also Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 vols. (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1885–1910), 3:718–19.

25 Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 492.

26 See McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 153.

27 Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 316; see also McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 155; Cyril, *On the Unity of Christ*.

28 See, e.g., his *Second Letter to Nestorius* and *Third Letters to Nestorius*. Also important is his commentary on John, which has been produced in a modern English translation: Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, trans. David R. Maxwell, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, 2 vols., ACT (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013–15).

29 McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 184–85.

Cyril's Christological argument in the Nestorian controversy can be summarized:

The human nature is...not conceived as an independently acting dynamic ...but as the manner of action of an independent and omnipotent power—that of the Logos: and to the Logos alone can be attributed the authorship of, and responsibility for, all [the human nature's] actions...There can only be one creative subject, one personal reality, in the incarnate Lord; and that subject is the divine Logos who has made a human nature his own.³⁰

If one follows Cyril and rejects the claims of Nestorius (insofar as the claims of Nestorius can be reconstructed), it will have significant implications for one's study of Jesus. We cannot isolate the human nature of Jesus from his divine personhood as a subject of inquiry or analysis. In contrast to Nestorius, the *communicatio idiomatum* was important for Cyril, and in many ways summed up his theology of the incarnation: "human nature is appropriated by God."³¹ Cyril insists that the Son of God must not be divided. The human and divine expressions in Scripture refer to the same person.³² And that person is "the hypostasis of God in the flesh."³³ Yet Cyril also argues that because the divine Son of God is now God-in-flesh, no incarnate action is either solely divine or solely human—every incarnate action is the action of the God-man.³⁴

To be sure, Cyril himself can be a complicated figure. But Cyril's views were affirmed in the Council of Ephesus (AD 431)³⁵ and Chalcedon (AD 451).

Nestorianism in Historical Jesus Studies?

Admittedly, Nestorius was not engaged in anything like the historical Jesus enterprise of today. Even so, the church's response to Nestorius's teaching remains relevant for responding to some similar misunderstandings in NT scholarship today.

I turn now to potential Nestorian tendencies in NT scholarship that pursues the study of historical Jesus. One may debate what to call such tendencies—perhaps "implicit methodological Nestorianism" would be a more nuanced way of describing it rather than Nestorianism simply stated.³⁶ Whatever term one prefers, and though such approaches may not often be called by the name "Nestorianism," several features of the historical Jesus enterprise seem to bear similarities to Nestorianism.

One important caveat is needed here: my goal is not to label anyone a "Nestorian," but instead my goal is to foster consistency with the church's creedal traditions and contemporary study of the four Gospels. I am concerned that too often studies of Jesus—even by those who may affirm the church's teaching about Jesus—are inconsistent with (or at least fit awkwardly with) the church's core Christological affirmations, especially the

30 McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 186.

31 McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 192.

32 See Cyril of Alexandria, *Third Letter to Nestorius* in Tanner, *Decrees*, 1:50–*61.

33 See McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 149–50. McGuckin says more here about "hypostasis," including 149n.37.

34 McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 200.

35 This phrasing papers over the complexities and competing events surrounding the Council of Ephesus. For discussions see McGuckin, *St. Cyril*, 53–107; Davis, *First Seven Ecumenical Councils*, 153–60; Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions*, 89–95. Thus, Nestorianism is not just a "bad idea" or something to "agree to disagree" about. It is an error of the highest order.

36 Credit for this phrasing goes to Blake Franze.

affirmation that there is only one personal subject in Christ. I aim therefore to highlight what the creeds teach and encourage consistency with those creeds in the study of Jesus. This is why I have suggested this approach might be considered “*implicit methodological Nestorianism*,” since no doubt some inconsistencies in a scholar’s approach do not necessarily reveal a commitment to Nestorian Christology.

Even so, we must avoid Nestorian tendencies, which may include the following:

(1) First, to deny that the Gospels present Jesus as a divine person may reflect a Nestorian approach to Christology. It is therefore unhelpful to find discussions of the “person” Jesus of Nazareth in historical Jesus literature that do not identify the person of Jesus strictly with the eternal Son of God.³⁷ To deny that the person is the eternal Son is to miss the proper, single subject of Christology according to creeds (and indeed, according to Scripture itself). It is quite consistent with the creeds to speak of the person of Jesus of Nazareth—so long as one maintains a strict identity between the person of Jesus and the eternal Son of God. There is only one person in Christ, and the human nature of Jesus is not personal in itself.³⁸ We therefore must not speak of the humanity of Jesus in a way that abstracts his humanity from his divine personhood.³⁹ To do so leans in a Nestorian direction.

Stated differently, even if someone affirms the divinity of the Son, to treat the Synoptics in practice as though they have very little (if anything) to say about the divinity of Jesus threatens to work with a functionally Nestorian Christology, which erroneously seeks to bifurcate between human and divine *persons* in Christ. It may also manifest an unhealthy dichotomization between those NT books that speak of Christ’s divinity and those that do not. This is unworkable. The Synoptics speak of Jesus as the supernatural Son of God, who does what only God can do, has divine attributes, and receives worship (compare WLC 11)—thus names, attributes, works, and worship reveal divinity.

In terms of names, Mark 1:1 opens with a reference to Jesus as the Son of God, which is a supernatural confession. This seems to be confirmed by the demonic knowledge and fear of who Jesus is as the Son of God (Mark 1:24; 3:11; 5:10, 12). Further, in Mark 1:2–3, Jesus is portrayed as the LORD from Isa 40:3—high Christology indeed! In terms of attributes, Jesus is omniscient, knowing the thoughts of others (Mark 2:8). In terms of divine works, Jesus forgives sins (2:5–7) and raises the dead in Mark (5:41–42; compare Deut

37 See, e.g., John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, Part 1: *The Roots of the Problem and the Person*, ABRL (New York: Doubleday, 1991). Meier warns against downplaying the humanity of Jesus in favor of a “crypto-monophysitism” that over-emphasizes Jesus’s divinity (p. 199). Yet in part 2 of Meier’s volume (“Roots of the Person”) he discusses Jesus’s origins entirely from an earthly perspective (pp. 205–30). Meier’s use of “person” from a historical-critical perspective in part 2 seems to refer strictly to the *human* Jesus. Although Meier acknowledges that the historical Jesus is not the object of Christian faith and suggests ways to integrate the historical Jesus with contemporary Christian theology (198–99), his approach is at the very least confusing in light of the unity of the *person* affirmed in creedal Christology.

38 This point is not clear in the unfortunate attempt by Andrew T. Lincoln to deny the virginal conception of Jesus (*Born of a Virgin? Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013]). Though on the one hand he recognizes the language of the Chalcedonian Definition (277, 280), on the other hand he does not view it as binding (280) and seems to speak of the human Jesus as a human *person* whom the divine Logos indwelt. It is at the very least confusing when Lincoln writes, “It is the fully human personal body, Jesus of Nazareth, and not a hybrid or semi-divine figure, in whom the divine Word is incarnate” (279). He also states that “the humanity assumed in the incarnation is just such a personal body” (278). Though he seeks to nuance his view, if I read such statements correctly, they are vulnerable to a Nestorian danger that he does not address. For indeed, the virginal conception reflects the unity of Christ and the reality that the person of Christ is the person of the eternal Son; the human nature has no personal existence apart from the hypostatic union. Were Jesus to have been born by ordinary generation, then it is difficult to avoid the erroneous Nestorian implication that we are dealing with two *persons* in the incarnation. (On this point see Sinclair B. Ferguson, *Child in the Manger: The True Meaning of Christmas* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2015], 125). More broadly, Lincoln’s argument denying the virginal conception is quite unconvincing.

39 I discuss the concepts of *anhypostasia* and *enhyposstasia* below.

32:39).⁴⁰ Worship is attributed to Jesus in Matt 14:33; 28:17, and these actions are portrayed positively (see also Matt. 2:2, 8), and not as violations of the exhortation to worship God only (Matt 4:10, quoting Deut 6:13).⁴¹

(2) A second possible example of Nestorian tendencies is to posit a strict dichotomy between the “Jesus of history” and “Christ of faith.” It will depend on what one subsumes under these categories. But if by “Jesus of history” one means a strictly *human person* from Nazareth, this stands in tension with the creeds that strictly identify Jesus with the eternal Son of God.⁴² Put differently: insisting strictly on a Christology “from below” in a way that prioritizes the humanity of Christ to the neglect of his divinity is consistent with Nestorianism. Instead, the church’s creeds start “from above” with the divine Son. In creedal tradition, the divinity and humanity of Christ, while both are affirmed, are not entirely symmetrical: for whereas the Son is eternally the Son, he only takes on a human nature “in the fullness of time.”⁴³

Six Proposals Moving Forward

I believe the discussion thus far observes a significant tension between the church’s creedal traditions and the study of Jesus. I am aware that not all who study Jesus adhere to the church’s creedal traditions, but in this essay, I am specifically addressing those that are committed to them. It needs to be recognized that much of the historical Jesus enterprise does not cohere with those traditions, but the quest of the historical Jesus often directly conflicts with creedal Christology.

The tensions, therefore, I perceive to be real, but there do not seem to be any easy answers for the guild of biblical studies, especially given the suspicions of many biblical scholars about the illegitimacy of imposing the church’s creeds on the biblical texts. Even so, here I venture some suggestions, particularly for biblical specialists who are indeed bound by creedal traditions, and yet seek to engage broader scholarship on the study of Jesus.

(1) *First, we must affirm the need to study the historical contexts of the New Testament texts, including Jesus in his historical context.* I am not advocating a watered-down Docetism, or a downplaying the true humanity of Jesus. As Schweitzer himself showed so clearly in his critique of the historical Jesus over a hundred years ago, we need to avoid the danger of decontextualized studies of Jesus. As a NT professor, I teach the value of studying the Gospels in their historical contexts. Yet I think it is more prudent to call this studying Jesus *historically* rather than studying *the historical Jesus*—which communicates a particular method and enterprise. Indeed, taking historical contexts seriously coheres robustly with affirming the importance of the Incarnation.

⁴⁰ Compare also, e.g., Timothy J. Geddert, “The Implied Yhwh Christology of Mark’s Gospel: Mark’s Challenge to the Reader to ‘Connect the Dots,’” *BBR* 25 (2015): 325–40.

⁴¹ See, e.g., Richard Bauckham, “Worship of Jesus,” *ABD* 3:813; idem, *God Crucified: Monotheism and Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 34–35.

⁴² See again Apostles’ Creed, Nicene Creed, Chalcedonian Definition.

⁴³ Though having assumed the nature, he retains that nature forever.

(2) *Second, those studying Jesus need to investigate questions of epistemology and prolegomena both for ourselves, and for those whose research we employ.* Far from being peripheral, questions of prolegomena are foundational.

For ourselves, we need to wrestle with the inherent problems of working with what has been called a “canon within the canon.” More precisely for this essay, we need to recognize the inherent problems of a “Gospels within the Gospels” approach. We must not speak of some portions as more historically reliable or plausible than other portions. Neither a canon-within-the-canon nor a Gospels-within-the-Gospels approach is compelling or stable. Such an approach is inconsistent with the creedal tradition’s commitment to the full authority of Scripture. This approach also, in the end, “devours itself,” as Dale Allison suggests since extreme skepticism leaves nothing that we can know about Jesus for certain.⁴⁴ By wanting to have it both ways—that is, by wanting to use portions of the Gospels to disprove other portions of the Gospels—this approach is left with nothing stable or certain.

Further, when engaging others’ research, we need to consider whether these portraits of Jesus cohere with creedal traditions, or whether they are inconsistent with creedal (and therefore *biblical*) teaching. This does not answer every difficulty, but it is a necessary step nonetheless, given the potentially Nestorian tendencies of some historical Jesus studies.

(3) *Third, a robust, theological consideration of the Gospels need not cause us to dismiss or downplay the realities of the humanity of Jesus—something many NT scholars rightly see as a danger to be avoided.* The worry in the academy is often that if we embrace Nicaea or Chalcedon, we will downplay the human experience of Jesus. However, this danger of downplaying Jesus’s humanity is not entailed in a robustly creedal Christology. For the reality of the incarnation must embrace the reality of the humanity of Jesus. However, what we must caution against from a theologically confessional perspective is saying that the *person* of Jesus of Nazareth is different from the person of the eternal Son. The personal subject is the divine Son of God, though in the incarnation we must understand the Son of God as God-in-flesh and all that entails—all that it means to be fully human.⁴⁵ In the words of B. B. Warfield, “all that man as man is, that Christ is to eternity.”⁴⁶

The doctrines of *anhypostasia* and *enhypostasia* also underscore the historical significance of the incarnation.⁴⁷ *Anhypostasia* means that Christ’s human nature has no personal existence apart from the incarnation. *Enhypostasia* states that in the incarnation, the human nature of Jesus has personal existence. Fred Sanders summarizes, “The human nature of Christ ... is both anhypostatic (not personal in itself) and enhypostatic (personalized by union with the eternal person of the Son).”⁴⁸ The human nature of Jesus is only person-

44 Dale C. Allison, Jr., “How to Marginalize the Traditional Criteria of Authenticity,” in vol. 1 of *Handbook for the Study of the Historical Jesus*, ed. Tom Holmén and Stanley E. Porter (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 21.

45 See further McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 186.

46 Warfield, “The Human Development of Jesus,” in *Selected Shorter Writings*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1970–73), 1:162.

47 On these topics see Crowe, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 221–22 for further discussion and documentation.

48 Fred Sanders, “Introduction to Christology: Chalcedonian Categories for the Gospel Narrative,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Introductory Christology*, ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 30–32.

alized in the hypostatic union. It is this real incarnation that we come face to face with in the Gospels: the eternal Son who now has a human nature.

This also means that we need not dismiss the evidence of the Gospels when thinking through Christological issues. The church's Christological confessions derive in no small measure from the Gospels themselves. This has sometimes been easy to miss, since "high Christology" has often been downplayed or denied, especially in the Synoptic Gospels. But in addition to the true humanity of Jesus in the Gospels, we also find that divine names, attributes, works, and worship are predicated of Christ in these texts.

(4) *Fourth, let us lean into the helpfulness of reception history.* This is a growing field today for NT scholarship, and there is much help here for reading texts both *theologically* and *contextually* given how close some of the early interpreters were to the apostolic era.⁴⁹ This also means, though it is perhaps not intuitive in all circles, that we should also consider the ecumenical creeds themselves as comprising biblical reception history, for indeed they do mark significant benchmarks in the history of reception of the biblical texts.

(5) *Fifth, biblical scholars can be greatly helped by the work of historical and systematic theologians.* It is also true that systematic theologians can be greatly helped by biblical scholars. Some of the questions biblical specialists encounter about Jesus in the Gospels are, frankly, quite difficult. Is it any surprise that biblical scholars do not always have all the expertise necessary to deal with some of the more philosophically and theologically complicated questions?

For example, while the human knowledge of Jesus was limited (i.e., his humanity is not omniscient as such), we must not so limit the knowledge of the Son in the incarnation that we deny his omniscience as the divine Son. To deal with these complexities seems to require us to deal with various types of knowledge in the incarnation, and with nuanced understandings of the relationship of the two natures in the incarnation. Here biblical scholars can be greatly helped by historic and contemporary discussions of these issues from a more systematic perspective. This also works the other way: biblical scholars have a tremendous opportunity to serve systematic theology as well.

(6) *Sixth let us not miss that however important the academy is, for those who serve communities of faith, the Bible will remain a book for the church.* The proper context for the Scriptures is primarily the church, not primarily the academy. The Bible is the church's book.

Conclusion

Certainly, these proposals do not solve all the issues. But for those who teach at confessional institutions, they may offer some suggestions for a path forward that allows the study of Jesus to be done in broader community, hopefully allowing for greater clarity, particularly with matters of exegesis.

Seeking to lay aside one's confessional commitments when studying the Gospels is not a neutral approach. Instead, it may well lead to a conclusion (if not starting place!)

49 E.g., Ignatius, Polycarp, Justin, Irenaeus, *Didache*, ps.-Barnabas, et al. I discuss these and others in *The Lord Jesus Christ*, 147–77.

that contradicts the creeds. The dangers of Nestorian tendencies (at least) appear crouched and ready to pounce on the academy today. Those who teach in confessionally aligned schools must know something about the creeds on which their institutions are founded and embrace a method of NT inquiry that is consistent with those creedal traditions.⁵⁰ We must take care to refine our approaches to Scripture, lest we unwittingly fall into Christological errors that have been long since identified and rejected by the church, on largely exegetical grounds.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ See recently the example of R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022).

⁵¹ See, e.g., the lengthy discussions from Athanasius interacting with the Arians on specific texts in *C. Ar.* 2.31–82 (*NPNF*² 4:357–93). For a critical edition of orations 1–3, see Karin Metzler, ed., *Athanasius Werke*, vol. 1, part 1, issues 2–3 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998–2000). See also Cyril's *Commentary on John*, §6.1 (2:51): "There are now some who think they are Christians who do not understand accurately the point of the *oikonomia* with the flesh. They dare to separate from the Word of God that temple that was assumed for us from the woman, and they divide the one true Son into two sons just because he became a human being" (trans. Maxwell).

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