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HOLY SPIRIT AND HOLY SCRIPTURE

Considerations Concerning the Character
and Function of Scripture in the Framework
of Salvation History*

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Reformed theology has always been intensely occupied with the nature and function of the Bible. This is true of Reformed theology in general and is certainly equally true of theology within the ecclesiastical-theological movement that brought about a revitalization of Calvinism. In the Netherlands, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck were in this respect closely associated with the Americans, Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield, who in their day and situation tried to defend and develop the doctrine of Scripture. They propounded a view that has become known as the 'organic view of Scripture'.¹

Following in the footsteps of these great leaders, we esteem reflection on Scripture as paramount. In this reflection the legacy of Kuyper and Bavinck as well as that of Hodge and Warfield was and is regularly and often mentioned. The question is asked what these men may and may not have meant. Certain interpretations of these men are subjected to criticism and other views placed over against theirs. In brief, we witness a lively reflection on the reflection, which arises from the felt need to remain in the line of the pioneers.² It is particularly in these discussions that we sense how much of a distinctly personal stamp this reflection often has. Their contributions are made with the realization that the issue concerns us all personally.

Indeed, no one can be strictly objective while participating in the discussion of this theme. Everyone's own experiences in connection with this theme make their impact felt when one determines to study the subject more closely. I myself cannot speak purely objectively either. In what follows I will mention aspects of the issue which have become important to me in my study in the Dutch situation. I do hope, however,

* This paper was read at the 1985 Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics. In an earlier version it was presented at the 1984 conference of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod.

1. Cf. my *Revelation and Inspiration*, Amsterdam, 1968. See for Hodge and Warfield, John C. Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture, A Study in Old Princeton and Westminster Theology*, Marlton, NJ, 1978.
2. Cf. R. B. Gaffin, 'Old Amsterdam and Inerrancy', *Westminster Theological Journal* 44 (1982), pp 250-289.

that within the framework of my approach, I will adduce data and perspectives that lend themselves to mutual discussion.

The title and subtitle of this essay indicate the angle from which I wish to deal with Holy Scripture. My aim is to elucidate the relationship between Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture insofar as it has a bearing on the place and function of Holy Scripture in salvation history. Some time ago Herman Ridderbos thoroughly examined the relationship between salvation history and Holy Scripture.³ He showed clearly that the Holy Scripture is not an isolated phenomenon, but finds its origin in the setting of salvation history; furthermore, its nature and purpose is determined by that history. From that perspective, Ridderbos regularly arrives at the relationship, Spirit-Scripture. This is not surprising, for the Spirit bears and shapes salvation history.

The major focus of Ridderbos' exposition, as might be expected, is his own area of specialization, the New Testament. We shall refer to some of his conclusions pertaining to the New Testament. Similar observations can also be made with respect to the Old Testament. I shall mention a few.

First of all, however, it should be noted that the revelation concerning God's Spirit in the Old Testament does not yet exhibit the degree of clarity that is seen in certain parts of the New Testament, which contain clear pointers to the trinitarian confession. As is well known, the Hebrew concept *ruach*, besides meaning breath, also means wind and storm. Accordingly, the Old Testament conception of the Spirit is distinctly dynamic. The *ruach Yahweh* (Spirit of Yahweh) is primarily and basically the mighty power that proceeds from God. This power is directed to people, but is also operative in nature and history.⁴

Particularly significant for our purpose are the data concerning the activity of the Spirit in history. Naturally these are connected particularly to the history of Israel. It is striking that the working of the Spirit manifests itself in persons who occupy an influential role in this history.

The prophets are to be mentioned first. Their ministry and message

3. H. Ridderbos, *Heilsgeschiedenis en Heilige Schrift van het Nieuwe Testament. Het gezag van het Nieuwe Testament*, Kampen, 1955.
4. In the last two decades there has been a voluminous and still growing abundance of literature on pneumatology, including the exegetical aspects. Here I mention only a general reference to the instructive introduction of H. Berkhof, *De leer van de Heilige Geest*, Nijkerk, 1965. For this essay I derived several data from the four exegetical contributions in the valuable symposium of Cl. Heitman and H. Mühlen (Hrsg.), *Erfahrung und Theologie des Heiligen Geistes*, Hamburg-München, 1974. It concerns the following articles: H. H. Schmid, 'Ekstatische und charismatische Geistwirkungen im alten Testamente,' (pp 83-100); W. Schmithals, 'Geisterfahrung als Christuserfahrung,' (pp 101-117); H. Schlier, 'Herkunft, Ankunft, und Wirkungen des Heiligen Geistes im Neuen Testamente' (pp 118-130); F. Hahn, 'Das biblische Verständnis des Heiligen Geistes; Soteriologische Funktion und "Personalität" des Heiligen Geistes,' (pp 131-150).

often gave a decisive turn to the fortunes of the people. Proclaiming their oracles of judgment and grace, of admonition and consolation, the prophets did not speak on their own initiative, but on behalf of their Sender. It was the Spirit of God who drove and inspired them. In a moment we shall return to the prophets.⁵

Besides the prophets, people with a special mandate can be mentioned. We think of the leaders of the exodus and conquest, Moses (Num. 11:17, 25-29), Joshua (Num. 27:18; Deut. 34:9), the judges (Judges 3:10; 6:34; 11:29; 13:25; 14:6; 14:19; 15:14), the kings, Saul (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 11:6; 16:14), and David (1 Sam. 16:13). The fact that the Spirit will rest upon the Messiah-King (Isa. 11:2) and the Servant of the Lord (Isa. 42:1) deserves special consideration.⁶

It is interesting that in certain passages the work of the Spirit is directly linked with the entire people and their history. The Israelites, so it is said, grieved the Holy Spirit which God sent into their midst (Isa. 63:10, 11). This was the same Holy Spirit which gave them rest (Isa. 63:14).⁷ In exile the people longed for a new liberation to be performed by the Spirit. There was the expectation that the Spirit would transform the people and make them dwell safely in their own land. The Spirit was, so to speak, the sign of the glorious future (Isa. 32:15; 44:3; Ex. 37:14; Haggai 2:5; Zech. 4:6).⁸

Thus we see that the Spirit, operating for the most part through the leaders, dealt with the whole nation of Israel in the entire course of its fluctuating history, a history that ultimately led to the messianic age. The Holy spirit directed the history of salvation and brought it to completion.

We shall now take a closer look at how the Word, as Word of the Spirit, functions within that Spirit-guided history. To do that it is necessary to concentrate once again on the prophets. Repeatedly we read that it was the Spirit who came upon the prophets (1 Sam. 10:6, 10; 19:20, 23). It was the Spirit of God who enabled Balaam to receive and proclaim revelation (Num. 24:2-4). Particularly emphatic mention is made of the activity of the Spirit in the prophet Ezekiel (cf. Ezek. 11:5; 11:24; 37:1). In Micah also (3:8) the Spirit manifested himself as the source of the message of the prophet.⁹

5. Cf. in addition to Schmid (see above) also the thorough study of J. H. Scheepers, *Die Gees van God en die Gees van die mens in die Ou Testament*, Kampen, 1960, pp 131-151.
6. Scheepers, *op. cit.*, pp 151-171.
7. Scheepers, *op. cit.*, pp 277-282.
8. Scheepers, *op. cit.*, pp 173ff.
9. Cf. in addition to Schmid and Scheepers also B. J. Oosterhoff, *Israels Profeten*, Baarn, n.d. The authors draw attention to the fact that several, particularly pre-exilic prophets, e.g., Jeremiah, do not mention the Spirit. This circumstance is variously evaluated and explained. It is, however, not a decisive argument for maintaining that the Spirit would not have played a role in the commission and equipment of these prophets.

The Spirit is not only the source from which the prophets derived the strength for their prophetic labors; he is also the source of the prophetic revelation. This important perspective is highlighted in various passages (2 Sam. 23:2; 1 Kings 22:24; Isa. 30:1; 48:16; Zech. 7:12; Neh. 9:30; 1 Chron. 12:19; 2 Chron. 15:1; 20:14; 24:20). I quote one passage, Isaiah 61:1:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.

The Spirit is the One who worked in the prophet, enabling him to articulate the thoughts of Yahweh in his oracle. The Spirit is the ‘mediator’ of the divine message. This is succinctly stated in Zechariah 7:12, which speaks of the words which the Lord of hosts had sent by (or: in) his Spirit through the former prophets (cf. Neh. 9:30). In this way the Spirit is closely linked to the Word. That close relation is expressed in Isaiah 59:21:

And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the Lord: my Spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children’s children, says the Lord, from this time forth and forevermore.

The point of this passage is the promise of blessing to Israel, a promise that will remain effective; that is, will be realized (cf. Isa. 55:11). When Yahweh speaks, his breath (spirit) goes forth. The breath (spirit) of Yahweh accompanies the words, and this breath (spirit) is the living and active power which in course of time will fulfill these words.¹⁰

The prophets received the Word of God and then spoke it. What actually is the relationship between the spoken and the written word? The available data indicate that this question cannot be answered in a simple statement and the following considerations at the least are to be included. In the course of Israel’s history there have been prophets from whom no written words have been preserved. In the case of other prophets there was a considerable interval between the proclamation and its inscription; moreover, not everything that was said was recorded in writing. It should also be borne in mind that certain prophecies were never proclaimed, but were intended to be read and meditated upon. Speaking and writing are thus not completely coextensive.¹¹ This does not alter the

10. Cf. for the Spirit as source of prophetic revelation, Scheepers, *op. cit.*, pp 143-151. See for Is. 59:21, Scheepers, *op. cit.*, pp 272-275; for Is. 61:1 *idem*, pp 275-277, and for Zechariah 7:12 *idem*, pp 218ff. See further for these and other passages mentioned in the index of Scheepers. For the relationship Spirit-Word the statement by Dürr is significant: ‘Das Wort ist göttlicher Hauch mit all seinen Eigenschaften’ [The Word is divine breath with all its characteristics (in Scheepers, p. 192)].

11. Cf. H. Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4th edition, Kempen, 1928, I, p 359.

fact that writing was an integral part of prophetism and possessed the same legitimacy as speaking. The prophets demanded the same authority for the written word as for the spoken word.¹² This, too, has its own profound significance, for the purpose of the written record was to give the prophetic message a wider spread than the circle of the first hearers. Others, as well, also in later generations, had to be able to learn the message. For the correct transmission of the message, oral tradition is eventually insufficient; therefore a fixed text is required. Hence we can state that the fixing of the text and the recording of the spoken word had an 'organic' place within the history of salvation and served to promote the unfolding of that salvation history.¹³

In the New Testament these connections are even more explicit. In his study mentioned above, Herman Ridderbos has given a lucid exposition of these connections. Hence, we can be briefer here than we were with the Old Testament. The citing of a few perspectives mentioned by Ridderbos will suffice.

In Ridderbos' discussion the apostolate is rightly given a central place. It is the authoritative agency that Christ established for the proclamation and transmission of the work of salvation. For all times it serves as the source and criterion for the preaching of the gospel.¹⁴ In the divine dispensation of salvation the apostolate has a unique significance (cf. Acts 1:22, 26). It belongs to the saving work of God (cf. Acts 10:41 and Heb. 2:2-4).¹⁵ The Holy Spirit, who is the author of the apostolate, qualifies the apostles for their task (cf. Matt. 10:18, 20; Mark 13:11; Luke 21:13-15; Acts 1:8, and the promise of the Paraclete in John 14-16).¹⁶ All

12. Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp 359ff. That the prophets were also writers is demonstrated in detail by B. J. Oosterhoff, *Israels Profeten*, pp 140-156.

13. Cf. Bavinck, *ibid.*

14. *Op. cit.*, (see note 3), p 36.

15. *Op. cit.*, p 37.

16. *Op. cit.*, pp 38ff. The scope of this contribution compels me to restrict myself. Therefore we are unable to deal in detail with the relationship Word-Spirit in the New Testament. Only a few remarks must suffice. Schlier (see note 4) basing his view on 1 Cor. 2:10ff., characterizes the Spirit of God as the power of God's inner self-experience. In that Spirit, God also steps outside and reveals himself to people. 'In Him, in whom God experiences Himself, God lets Himself be experienced.' On the basis of a variety of passages, Schlier furthermore characterizes the Spirit as the holy and sanctifying power of God. He is that as the power who makes Jesus present in his truth, *op. cit.*, pp 118-120. This has happened and still happens in the Gospel. From 1 Cor. 2:6ff Schlier deduces that the Spirit articulates in the Gospel what has happened in God's revelation in Jesus Christ, *cf.* also Eph. 3:5. So the Gospel is fruit, form and instrument of the Spirit, who himself is God's word of Power in Jesus Christ, pp 120ff. The description 'fruit, form and instrument' is particularly to the point, and is remarkably precise in expressing the state of affairs in the New Testament. Fruit: the Spirit commissions and gives strength for the proclamation of the Gospel (*cf.*, e.g., Acts 1:8). Form: the real content of the Gospel is the Spirit as the epitome of all the gifts of salvation (*cf.* John 6:63). Instrument: the Gospel is the means in the hand of the Spirit by which salvation is given. *Cf.* for the salvation mediating function of the

these indicate that the proclamation of salvation constitutes an integral part of salvation history.¹⁷

Ridderbos considers in detail the transmission (*paradosis*) mentioned and declared in the New Testament. This transmission was first done orally, but subsequently occurred also in written form. The fixing of the text of the transmission is the form in which the church would be bound to the word of the apostles (cf. Luke 1:1-4; 1 Cor. 15:1).¹⁸ The authority of the written text of the apostolic tradition was linked with that of the Old Testament books. The New Testament writings themselves contain indications that they were to be read in the church even as the books of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Thess. 5:27; Col. 4:16; Rev. 1:3).¹⁹ The Gospel according to John accords a special significance to ‘writing’ and ‘written’ (cf. John 20:30, 31; 21:24).²⁰ The divine authority of the New Testament is nowhere given a greater authority than in the Revelation of John.²¹

So far we have commented in broad outlines on the relationship between Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture, as this relationship received concrete shape in the bedding of the history of salvation. Looking at this salvation history as the setting in which the link between Holy Spirit and Holy Scripture was established, we see a wide perspective unfold before our eyes. God works in this world through his Spirit. In a special manner he is active by his Spirit in his history with his people. Within that nation God used people to proclaim his Word and record that Word in writing. In that written form, the Word of God can become a powerful factor to realize the plan of God with man and the world. Having arisen in the bosom of salvation history, in the period that follows, Scripture causes the history of God’s work of salvation to move on to completion. Considering the substantive continuity of God’s work before, in and after the origin of Scripture, I judge that the continuation of God’s saving work can also be called salvation history, provided one keeps in mind the fundamental importance of the apostolate and the canon. For – thank God – it can be said of our time as well as other times that in the midst of much unbelief and evil – and even in contradiction to it – saving acts of

Gospel, among others, Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 4:15; 1 Pet. 1:23. Precisely because the Gospel is the word of the Spirit, it is not just information about salvation, but gives salvation; it offers participation in salvation. Luther and Calvin were unanimous in this view of the word as a means of grace, cf. C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, Kampen, 1959, pp 215ff. One could say that the Word is the ‘outside’ of the Spirit, but that expression does not make clear enough that the Word can never be detached from the Spirit (insisting on such a separation involves denaturing the Word!). Perhaps it might be better to characterize the Word as the ‘skin’ or the vocal form, and also the written form of the Spirit, cf. the quote from Dürr in note 10.

17. *Op. cit.*, pp 39ff.

18. *Op. cit.*, pp 51ff.

19. *Op. cit.*, pp 54ff.

20. *Op. cit.*, p 55.

21. *Op. cit.*, p 57.

God do happen.

From the perspective of salvation history – first of all in its regular sense of pre-canonical history of salvation, but also as ongoing history of salvation – we can gain a better view of the manner in which God reveals his truth in Scripture to us human beings. As set forth in the much discussed report on Scriptural authority *God With Us*, this happens in a manner which can be characterized as ‘relational’.²² This characterization has received much criticism, which indicates that what it is all about needs further elucidation. It is certainly not the intention of the authors to force a specific theory concerning biblical truth upon the reader of the Bible. Nor does the report suggest that the concept “relational” would exhaust the full meaning of the biblical concept of truth.

What then is the intention? I would say that the concern is to stress that the truth of the Bible from the very beginning is directed at us. This ‘For us,’ *pro nobis*, aspect is not an addition, an appendix to that truth, but a structural element of that truth itself. God does not reveal himself by informing us of a set of ‘divine truths.’ No, he reveals himself, his ‘character,’ his will, in his involvement with the people with whom and to whom he speaks; he does it often through people. As we have seen, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the story of that contact between God and his people was recorded in Holy Scripture. Through that Scripture God speaks to us and wants to have contact with us. Through the story (report) of his oral contact with people of days gone by, God wants to speak and associate with us people of today. Augustine spoke very sensitively of the Bible as a letter from God and Herman Bavinck took over that description.²³ A letter often contains information about all sorts of things and people but it does that in a setting that is geared to the addressee.

The genuinely *pro nobis* nature of biblical truth contains yet another aspect. As we noted, God speaks to and with us through the record of his speaking to and with people of days gone by. Despite differences in culture, environment, etc., these people were essentially like us. Through the illumination of the Spirit we identify with people in that story and in them we recognize ourselves precisely when we discern the multifaceted relationship to God.

This explanation shows that the qualification ‘relational’ should not be misconstrued as ‘relative’ or ‘subjectivistic.’ For the origin of the relational truth lies in God himself, who is the subject of revelation and

22. *God With Us... On the Nature of Scriptural Authority*, Special Kerkinformatie, Number 113, February 1981, Leusden. This report evoked a great deal of written reactions. Included in these reactions is even a separate booklet of 63 pages by W. van Huyssteen and B. du Toit, *Geloof en Skrifgesag. In Analise van die Skrifgesagprobleem na aanleiding van die rapport ‘God met Ons’*, Pretoria, 1982. This booklet contains a fair and competent discussion of the Dutch report.
23. Bavinck, *op. cit.*, p 357. Scripture is the ‘viva vox Dei, epistola Dei omnipotentis ad suam creaturam’.

the initiator of the contact between him and the people. Relational implies that we listen to and accept the promises and commandments given to the people of that time as given to us. We experience them as liberating and direction-giving for our life today.

In saying this I have at the same time sketched a particular position with respect to the question of how Scripture as the book of the Spirit functions today. Sometimes Reformed people hold that God's revelation is limited to the bygone time when Holy Scripture came into being. Scripture as it has come to us in its finished shape is then seen to be the report, the precipitate of that revelation. According to this way of thinking, we are indebted to the past for the objective entity called Holy Scripture. As regards the present, we have to make do with the subjective application of that objective Scripture. This 'application' is the work of the Holy Spirit. He appropriates to us the content of Scripture. He does that by leading us to appropriate to ourselves what is objectively given in Scripture.

In this way of thinking I fully honour certain undeniably correct elements such as the recognition of the once-for-allness of Scripture. Something has happened: the work of Christ; something has been written: Holy Scripture. In the history which God by his Spirit makes and experiences with his people on earth, the work of Christ and Scripture have the nature of something that is definite and closed, something that is and remains totally determinative. One could say that they are completed forms of the Spirit.²⁴ But – I emphasize that here – that 'once-for-all' does not exclude continuity. What was closed in the past is therefore not locked up in the past. In a certain manner it continues in the present. Though historically datable, it remains relevant for all times.

The Epistle to the Hebrews, which so strongly emphasizes the oneness, the *ephapax*, of the appearance of Jesus Christ and of his atoning sacrifice, says at the same time that Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (13:8). The same is true of Holy Scripture. It is the deposit of the revelation in the past but at the same time it is the means of the revelation in the present. It is significant in this connection that in this same Epistle to the Hebrews a word from the Old Testament is repeatedly quoted with the introductory formula 'The Spirit says' (3:7 et al). The Spirit spoke that particular word not only in the past but also now. He takes, as it were, that ancient word again into his mouth so that it in a way becomes a new word, relevant for the present. Thus he makes it clear that this ancient word never becomes antiquated but is permanently relevant.²⁵

Through, in, and in connection with Scripture, God, through his Spirit, also now wants to give himself to us. In that sense one can rightly speak of

24. In this description I go along with the Dutch theologian A. A. van Ruler.

25. Cf. C. Veenhof, *Het Woord Gods in den brief aan de Hebreëen*, Terneuzen, 1946.

an ongoing revelation, a *revelatio continua*, of the Spirit. The Spirit is not only the *applicator* – certainly, he wants to be that too – but also the *revealer*, the One who reveals the past and the present.²⁶

The passages in chapters 14 - 16 of the Gospel according to John mentioned above, shed a surprising light on this ongoing revelational work of the Spirit as Christ's representative. The word of the Spirit is not a substantively new word relative to the word of Christ in the sense that it would be an essentially different word. The Spirit reannounces that once spoken and written word to church and world as a new word, as a word that can be heard and understood to be relevant for the new situation. This surprisingly new speaking of the Spirit has continuity with the word once given and does not deviate from it. At the same time, the Spirit's speaking imparts to that old word a new relevance which saves and gives direction for new times.²⁷

Thus far I have dealt with the rootage of Scripture in the precanonical phase of salvation history and its functioning in the ongoing post-canonical phase. In the issues that came up for discussion we were able to discover some guiding motifs and presuppositions. We have seen that the written fixation of the divine Word may never be regarded as a more or less accidental appendix but is to be characterized as an intrinsic, 'organic' moment in God's redemptive working and speaking by his Spirit. This cuts off every form of devaluation of Scripture as Scripture. We noted, moreover, that the Scripture which came into being under the guidance of the Spirit is until the present being used by the Spirit as his instrument to realize God's saving purposes. In that connection we observed two important perspectives. In the first place we were struck by the fact that in his speaking God associates in a particular manner with man. He establishes and maintains with him a relationship which Reformed theology has for centuries characterized as a covenantal relationship.²⁸ Secondly, the particular relationship of history and relevance struck us. The once-for-allness in the past and the continuation in the present and future are not a competitive contrast but are related to each other and carried together by the revelational work of the Spirit.²⁹

From the perspective of these observations and considerations, I am convinced it is possible to elucidate questions that have caused discussion in our own circles and beyond and still continue to do so. These questions

26. The idea of a continuing revelation was at the time launched by V. Hepp in his lectures in systematic theology at the Free University. On this point I am happy to go along with him.
27. Cf. my *De parakleet*, Kampen, 1977.
28. Making the idea of the covenant a theme in Reformed theology goes back to Zwingli, whose initiative was taken over and carried forward by his successor Bullinger, cf. U. Gähler, *Huldrych Zwingli*, München, 1983, pp 116 and 140.
29. Cf. Bavinck on the relationship of revelation and history; see my study (pp 327-342) referred to in note 1 and his corresponding view on the relevant nature of inspiration, *op. cit.*, pp 436-438.

concern the origin as well as the understanding of Scripture. I think in the first place of the implications and consequences of the generally accepted 'organic' view of Scripture in our midst. One of the motifs that led to the framing of the organic conception was the desire to do greater justice to the human aspect, including the entire historical and cultural background in the origin and the character of Scripture, than was possible in the earlier mechanical view.³⁰ In view of the exegetical problems in Scripture, however, it was not so easy in practice to present a convincing case for this endeavour in the dogmatic reflection and in exegetical practice. Often there could be observed a tendency to detract from the humanity of Scripture in order at all costs to maintain its divine character.³¹ This led to the great danger of reacting against the overemphasis on the divine and then to stress the human factor. Often, quite unawares, both sides had to pay the price for seeing the relationship between God and man as one of competition. The underlying assumption of this approach is that the work of God and that of man belong to the same category, so that what God is doing cannot be done by man, and vice versa.

In order to elucidate the relationship between God and man in the origin of Scripture, the structural relationship between inspiration and the incarnation has been appealed to for support. The effort was made to find a parallel between the unity of the divine and human nature in the person of Jesus Christ and the blending of the divine and human authors in the origin of Scripture. It proved difficult however to give a satisfactory and convincing exposition of this parallel. By way of illustration I refer to the many discussions about the servant form of Holy Scripture, an expression based on what is said in Philippians 2:7 about Jesus Christ. In these discussions it remained unclear what may and may not be regarded as belonging to that servant form. For example, there is a great difference of opinion whether the presence of historical and perhaps other errors in Scripture may or may not be regarded as an aspect of the servant form. There are some who are convinced that this is the case; there are others who are just as sure that such is not the case because it concerns the servant form of the sinless Mediator.³² The problems concerning the servant form are indicative of the inspiration-incarnation parallel. No one can deny that there is a connection but it is much more difficult to point to structural analogies and then to use these in the understanding of the

30. I have discussed this extensively in *Revelatie en Inspiratie*. Cf. also my essay 'Honderd jaar theologie aan de Vrije Universiteit,' in *Wetenschap en Rekenschap. Een eeuw wetenschapsbeoefening en wetenschapsbeschouwing aan de Vrije Universiteit*, Kampen, 1980, pp 44-104.

31. This tendency is clearly noticeable in the publications put out by ecclesiastically Reformed writers after 1926, the year in which Geelkerken and his supporters were condemned.

32. G. C. Berkouwer, *De Heilige Schrift*, ii, Kampen 1967, pp 114-142.

nature of inspiration. Berkouwer asks correctly ‘whether this parallelism, which is concentrated on the union of the divine and human factors, is not a kind of rationalization, not only of the mystery of Holy Scripture, but also of the person of Christ because such a “union” of factors remains far below what the church tried to express in its confession of the “personal union.”’³³

With Berkouwer I am of the opinion that a much more responsible approach is to address the unique nature of Scripture from the pneumatological perspective.³⁴ Taking full account of the fact that Scripture in its contents is the Spirit’s witness to Christ and his salvation will also have consequences for the manner in which we try to describe the relationship between the divine and the human in Scripture. In connection with what the Dutch theologian Van Ruler has said, I would affirm that the divine and the human ‘factors’ in Scripture are not united in the manner in which the two natures of Christ form a union but in the way in which God and man are joined in the ‘indwelling’ of the Spirit. Characteristic of the christological perspective is the category of substitution; with respect to the saving work of Christ we are recipients and any type of synergism is excluded. The pneumatological perspective is different. When the Spirit dwells in a person, that person becomes a fellow-worker of God (cf., e.g., 1 Cor. 3:9). For it is typical of the Spirit that he never suppresses what is human but involves it in what he does and leads it to its full unfolding. Owing to the work of the Spirit, the biblical writers in their full humanity are *sunergoi*, fellow-workers with God, when they recorded his witness.³⁵ If we follow this route we are no longer in the grip of the above-mentioned competition problematic which always assumes that there must be a division of labour between God and man: 50%-50%, 99%-1% (sometimes becoming 100%-0%)! with all the possible variants. That entire competition problematic terminates, however, if we pay due regard to the fact that the Spirit sanctifies a person, makes him a follower of Jesus and so enables and commissions him to devote himself to God’s service with his total humanity. Man may and must work on his own creaturely level. God works for the full 100% on his divine level and man does the same (100%) on his human level.

This fundamental insight into the human activity in the origination of Scripture, not only allowed but created and borne by the Spirit, has a variety of consequences. For example, mention can be made of the

33. *Op. cit.*, p 124.

34. *Op. cit.*, pp 126ff. Cf. for the critique of James Barr on the christological analogy, P. R. Wells, *James Barr and the Bible*, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1980.

35. Ch. H. Jonker, *Theologische Praxis*, Nijkerk, 1983, pp 239ff., who, in the context of his own approach to the questions concerning inspiration and nature of Scripture, in this respect emphatically agrees with Van Ruler. For Van Ruler, see his important study on the structural differences between the christological and pneumatological point of view, *Theologisch Werk*, i, Nijkerk, 1969, pp 175-190.

diversity among the biblical writers as they not only give varying accounts of the same events and matters but also present these accounts from different perspectives. With reference to the evangelists, Herman Ridderbos speaks of the human ‘elbow room’ which is not removed by the God-breathed nature of Scripture. In fact, he believes that it may be better to call this the ‘divine’ elbow room.³⁶ The recognition of this variation does not entail casting doubts on the Scriptures’s substantive reliability and infallibility. On the contrary, Ridderbos firmly maintains these. It does imply, however, ‘that the infallibility of Scripture is in many respects different from what might be demanded by a theoretical inspiration or infallibility concept that is detached from the empirical reality of Scripture. One should also be careful in reasoning what is and what is not possible with the God-breathed character of Scripture. Here, too, the freedom of the Spirit must be respected. What we should want to do first is trace the ways of the Spirit instead of making excessively self-assured pronouncements, however well-intended.’³⁷ According to Ridderbos, the infallibility of Scripture should be given its theological definition in connection with the purpose of Scripture. ‘That means that the reliability of Scripture is not to be understood in a formal and atomistic or purely intellectual sense but with regard to its purpose and message.’³⁸ The purpose of Scripture is that man will understand himself, the world, history and the future in the light of the God and Father of Jesus Christ. Entirely in agreement with what we said about history, Ridderbos observes that Scripture in its entirety and in each of its parts is used by the Spirit to serve this great soteriological aim. On account of this purpose and the nature of Scripture that fits that purpose, Ridderbos judges that there is really no need for the concept of inerrancy (*feilloosheid*) alongside of infallibility (*onfeilbaarheid*).³⁹

In these considerations Ridderbos hands us a guideline that enables us to steer the right course in our own theological reflection, exegetically and systematically, and also in our own daily use of Scripture. This is a right course because it is both unambiguous and free from undue restrictions. It is unambiguous, for example, in that its starting point is that Scripture’s presentation of information as historical is to be understood as such, unless the narrower or wider context should prove the opposite. It is also unambiguous in the recognition that Scripture is a

36. The term is from H. Ridderbos, *cf.* his *Het Woord, het rijk en onze verlegenheid*, Kampen, 1968, p. 67.

37. *Op. cit.*, p 68.

38. *Op. cit.*, p 62.

39. *Op. cit.*, p 75. Cf. in the same spirit F. H. von Meyenfeldt, *In zekere zin, Gedachten over waarheid, Bijbel, geloof en kerk*, Hilversum 1975, pp 114ff. Von Meyenfeldt strongly defends the inspiration of Scripture by the Spirit and the unity of Scripture, but he rejects the demand of inerrancy, the ‘smoothing out of wrinkles and folds in the garment of the Spirit’ (p 117).

basic unity. The concern of Scripture, in all its parts, is the same God, the same man, the same salvation. At the same time it is without undue restrictions because it abandons attempts to harmonize the variations among the biblical writers, and also repudiates the attempt to bring the diverse perspectives in Scripture together into one closed system.

If I were to give a brief summary of what I have said so far, I would say that the Bible demands respect and obedience as *theopneustē graphē* (Scripture), but it is wrong to treat it as *gramma*, letter, the letter of a law code, even if it is of divine origin.

This thesis with which I conclude my brief exposition of the origin of Scripture is at the same time a good starting point for a brief discussion of a number of questions pertaining to the understanding of Scripture. The greater our awareness that books of the Bible were written in far-off or remote phases of salvation history, the greater our awareness of the need for reflection on the conditions required for its proper understanding. Already concerning the translation of a passage, regardless of whether it comes from an earlier period or is contemporary, it is true that it is a ‘transposition,’ namely from the one lingual culture to the other. The Latin word *traducere* and its cognate terms in the modern languages are a clear indication. For our ‘understanding’ of the text the same holds true. The comprehension of a passage from the past – the biblical texts belong to that category – involves the transposition of that text into my situation. It is important that I listen to that text from within my context. Very often this happens unconsciously, for no one has really timeless ears and no one can listen purely historically, ‘archaeologically.’ But it is useful and necessary that what in the concrete situation usually happens unconsciously and intuitively be made the object of conscious reflection. In all sorts of serious investigations, both philosophical and theological, it has been shown that genuine understanding implies that within our own epistemological horizon we allow what was written then and there to penetrate our minds.⁴⁰

There is thus a genuine understanding of such texts when we relate them to our own life including the entire social and cultural context in which we live. This rule holds true for the understanding of all texts, whatever their nature and content. Of course, the question presents itself: What precisely constitutes that uniqueness that is found in the understanding implied in the act of believing? My answer would be: Truly understanding the biblical texts means that through these texts I come in contact with the living God himself. That goes further and is deeper than what could be called ‘religious congeniality.’ Certainly, congeniality with

40. Cf. H. M. Vroom, *Naar letter en geest. Over het beroep op de Bijbel*, Kampen, 1981, pp 93-108. Basic for the analysis of the nature and conditions of understanding are the expositions of the philosopher Gadamer; cf. about him L. D. Derkzen, *On Universal Hermeneutics, A study in the Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (diss. Free University), Amsterdam, 1983.

the receptivity to the religious utterances of people, as these also reach us by way of the biblical writings, is very important. But true understanding goes beyond and is deeper than such congeniality. For the core of that understanding is the surprising, often shocking, and in any case always radical discovery that the text is concerned with the God who has me in mind, who wants to enter into fellowship with me and who wants to put me on his path. Ebeling likes to put it this way: We begin with explaining the text, but then suddenly it happens that the text explains us.⁴¹

It is precisely here that I would want to pinpoint what is unique in one's understanding by faith as this is produced by the Holy Spirit. Repeatedly and correctly it has been maintained in our own tradition that we may not hold to a deistic conception of the inspiration of Scripture. It is not so that the Holy Spirit, after having produced the Bible through human instrumentality, now leaves us unattended with that Scripture.⁴² We have noted already that fortunately that is not so. For as I pointed out the illumination of the Spirit in reading the Scripture produces a 'recognition.' In his continuous revelational activity, the Spirit, as it were, 'opens' the Scripture to us and 'opens' us to the Scripture. This tremendous pneumatic event can also be described in other words: In Scripture the Spirit causes us to discover God, so that he makes a saving claim on us, and at the same time induces us to accept that claim. So the Spirit, who is the Establisher of relations par excellence, establishes the bond between God and us. In God's Word he makes us see the heart of God, whose deepest feelings and motives have become manifest in Jesus Christ.⁴³ It is clear that this work of the Spirit includes more than the removal of the historical distance. 'Opening me' also means that psychical (powerlessness) and existential barriers (unwillingness) are removed.

On the basis of the promise (John 14:16) and also our life experience we may believe that the Spirit is at work and continues to work in us. In the course of our life we encounter all kinds of changing situations in which we gain diverse experiences. It is wonderful that in these regularly varying situations and experiences, we may become aware of new aspects in familiar texts that earlier also 'spoke' to us. The old begins to speak to us in a new way. Though advanced in age, Scripture does not age; it remains new and will renew us (cf. Ps. 103:5). So the understanding of Scripture is never completed for the Bible is literally inexhaustible. It is a fountain from which we can always draw afresh, for it is the Word of the God who himself is new every moment.⁴⁴

41. Vroom, *op. cit.*, p 107.
42. Cf. Bavinck, *op. cit.*, pp 356ff. Cf. also my reproduction of Bavinck's view on the relevant character of inspiration in *Revelatie en Inspiratie*, pp 436-438.
43. Cf. on the Spirit as the Establisher of relationships my article 'Pontifex Maximus' *Gereformeerd Theologisch Tijdschrift* 78 (1978), pp 4-15.
44. I think here of the title of the book of Huub Oosterhuis and Piet Hoogeveen, *God is ieder ogenblik nieuw. Gesprekken met Edward Schillebeeckx*, Baarn, 1982.

In conclusion, a word about the implications which this has for the use of Scripture in ethics, the reflection on the Christian's conduct in various situations. It seems to me that all of us experience a measure of confusion and sometimes also a painful feeling of powerlessness when we reflect on this in the light of the tremendous problems with which we are confronted in political, social and personal ethics. The cause of those problems is not in the least the advance of science and technology, which makes much more of an impact on our thinking as Reformed Christians than we sometimes think. It is my conviction that little is gained by looking for and recommending commandments and prohibitions which in their literal form would seem to be applicable to certain contexts and situations. How perilous an undertaking this would be is shown by the fact that not even the most radical fundamentalist can be fully consistent in the use of this approach. Everyone makes exceptions, even the one who is not aware of it and in fact refuses to acknowledge it. In this connection it is useful to be reminded that Calvin and later Reformed theologians, particularly in their discussion of the Old Testament laws, always spoke variedly, and consciously, and distinguished carefully between what was and what was not to be regarded as permanently valid for later times, including our own. Moreover, relative to what was regarded as of abiding validity, they also offered an application that reckoned with the fulfillment of the Old Testament dispensation in Jesus Christ. Further, it was attuned to the newer situation. An example is the application of the sabbath commandment to the celebration of Sunday.⁴⁵

Scripture is not a recipe book for ethical questions. Its significance for ethics is to be sought elsewhere. The Spirit as the great Establisher of relationships wants to unite us with Christ and our fellow human beings. The dual love commandment aims at bringing about, strengthening and fructifying that relationship. This dual love commandment is the expression of God's will and God's very being, whose love was manifested in the coming of Christ (1 John 4:7-9). That love is the great theme which is given concrete expression in the New Testament in numerous specific ethical practices. That love does not imply the

45. Cf. for this R. Schippers, *De gereformeerde zede*, Kampen, 1955. R. Bijlsma correctly points out that the appeal to Scripture must keep in mind three accents concerning authority, those of salvation, of history, and of the regulations. These are 'hierarchically' linked in the sense that the first has priority relative to the second and third, and that both the first and second have priority relative to the third, see R. Bijlsma, *Schriftuurlijk Schriftgezag*, Nijkerk, 1959, pp 422-431. In a summarizing statement Bijlsma writes: 'In every new time and situation the historical accent in the salvation authority of Scripture indicates in what way the specific regulations are relevant' (p 426). Bijlsma also uses the illustration of the centre with concentric circles around it. 'That centre is the divine salvation which we have in Jesus Christ. Around that salvation are found the historical events in the Bible. They pull our own history inside the glow of God's light. And in a wider circle that same centre is surrounded by commands and regulations,' (pp 430ff).

'abolition' of all kinds of commandments, for example in the Old Testament. It does, however, provide the criterion for their selection, interpretation and application. Furthermore, in the endeavour to give concrete expression to this love commandment, we may use as models the actions and conduct of our brothers and sisters of earlier times, as Scripture records their responses to the Word that came to them. It may be possible to find in those responses guidelines that can help us find our way in answering the questions with which we are confronted. Essential in finding such answers is the guidance of the Spirit. He is the One who in liaison with the biblical word can disclose to us the will of the Lord. Important in that connection are the deliberations of Christians among themselves. The Spirit also wants to use this communal counsel in his illumining, witnessing, comforting and admonishing work in our midst. Guided by the Spirit we may personally and jointly experience that in a certain situation a particular word or datum from Scripture speaks directly to us so that we can only say: Thus says the Lord!⁴⁶

I have to conclude. We are still on the way, and that is often a difficult experience. But we are not alone, left to fend for ourselves. The Spirit guides and accompanies us, also through Scripture, which as the book of the Spirit is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (Ps. 119:105). The way leads to the great eschatological goal. All the activities of the Spirit are directed to that goal. Scripture also is directed to that goal. So, in our meditation and handling of Scripture let us not lose sight of that eschatological dimension articulated by Peter when he said: 'And we have the prophetic word made more sure. You will do well to pay attention to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your heart' (2 Pet. 1:19).⁴⁷

46. Cf. my *De parakleet*, pp 24ff. In the phraseology of the text I bear in mind the points of view which in the reflection on the use of and the appeal to Scripture have surfaced in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands. Participants in that discussion are especially H. M. Kuitert, A. Dekkor and H. M. Vroom.
47. Cf. the considerations of Bijlsma, *op. cit.*, pp 367-377, on Scripture in eschatological perspective. Bijlsma correctly observes that the use of Scripture must be in harmony with this eschatological perspective: 'In the application, beside the point of departure, also the point of arrival is important.' The phenomenon called Scripture 'has its roots somewhere in a historical situation and has spoken there on behalf of God... But in the ongoing work of fulfillment that phenomenon also aims at a specific situation,' (pp 376ff).

JESUS AS MIRACLE WORKER*

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Introduction

Jesus did miracles and told parables. Many a Sunday School syllabus is based on such a division, and even University courses at lower levels. If we were to be a little more precise, we would want to add a third: miracles, parables, and other teaching material (eg., ethical instruction and eschatological discourse).

The teaching material in the Gospels is well known and probably fairly well understood by the Christian. As a good deal of modern scholarship has been devoted to just such material. The names of C. H. Dodd, A. M. Hunter and perhaps above all J. Jeremias come to mind.¹

The miracle material of the Gospels is also well-known, and probably frequently read and taught in the church. But it is, I suspect, less well understood. Theologically and historically the miracles have often been an embarrassment (probably more so to the theologian than the person in the pew), for they smack of magic and pagan practices; and why did Jesus do them anyway? One answer is that he did not! The most radical of critics would excise them from the Gospel record, and attributed them to the creative minds of the evangelists and the early church rather than to the ministry of the historical Jesus. And perhaps many Christians would be happier, or at any rate quite happy, with a Gospel containing no miracle tradition.

This is, however, an impossible approach. More recent work on the Gospels and comparisons with similar extra-biblical material, even by critical scholars, has concluded that the Gospel miracles are an integral part of the ministry of the historical Jesus. Even a scholar like Jeremias, once he has removed the material he considers inauthentic, concludes that there remains a core of material which is original.²

Miracles in modern study

What, however, are we to make of that core – or indeed of the whole miracle tradition, accepting as authentic material which critics would dismiss as secondary? Why did Jesus do miracles? That is a question to which many might find it difficult to give a satisfactory answer. Before the

* A version of this paper was read at the 1984 conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society. I am grateful for comments made on that occasion.

1. C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, London, 1936; A. M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables*, London, 1960; J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (revised ed.), London, 1963.
2. J. Jeremias, *New Testament Theology*, London, 1971.

era of modern scholarship, it was customary to view the miracles as proofs of Jesus' divinity or messiahship: these were the signs that Jesus was the divine Son of God, and God's Anointed One. But, more recently, this view has fallen out of favour, for two reasons. First, it is said that the gospels do not actually say so; and secondly because so much more is now known about the background to the New Testament, particularly its Jewish background including messianic expectation and the existence of contemporary miracle workers. Before discussing this in more detail, however, mention must be made of two books which reflect the rise of modern scepticism and the beginning of the influence of parallel material on the study of the miracles among English writers, along the lines of the approach already made in Germany by Bultmann. They are Alan Richardson, *The Miracle-Stories of the Gospels* (1941), and Reginald H. Fuller, *Interpreting the Miracles* (1963). Richardson attempted to use the insights of scholarship to discuss what the miracles meant. He does not reject them all as unhistorical, but nor can he vouch for the historicity of any particular one. He uses critical methods very sparingly, and does not refer to parallel material. Fuller, however, is much more free in his use of critical methods like source and form criticism. He cannot accept *a priori* the historicity of miracle material, the miracles are not seen by him as messianic proofs, and he does refer to Jewish and Hellenistic parallel material in his discussion.

The work of Fuller prepared the way for the last two decades' scholarship on the miracles. It is characterised by two main things – increased use of critical methods on the N.T. material itself, and an increased awareness of the parallel material with resulting implications for our understanding of Jesus. Before outlining the contribution of this recent work to our understanding of Jesus as a miracle worker, and commenting on what lessons we can learn from it, we will first outline the Jewish and Hellenistic parallel material which is relevant to the discussion.

Miracle in the ancient world

We must first of all realise that the ancient world was generally less incredulous of miracle than we are today. It would be wrong, however, to think that miracles were accepted without question in every case by all, and by whomsoever they were performed. Even the biographer of a famous Hellenistic miracle worker was not uncritical of some of the wonders attributed to his hero.³ The same caution also applies to the Jewish world. That is not to say that early Judaism did not believe in miracle, for of course it did; but it was at the same time suspicious of anything magical, and also held to the supremacy of *torah* and *halakhah* as the guiding principles of life, and not even miracle could overrule that.

3. See below, n. 29.

But it is true that, generally, miracles were accepted as both possible and actual.

We may divide the extra-biblical parallel material into two, for convenience – Jewish and Hellenistic. Perhaps this is rather an artificial division, for of course Hellenistic (diaspora) Judaism was a very important phenomenon, and even Palestinian Judaism had been greatly influenced by Hellenistic thought and practices.⁴ For practical purposes, however, this is a useful distinction.

Jewish miracle workers

Within Judaism, there are two miracle workers of prime importance mentioned in rabbinic sources, as well as a more diverse group of persons in the works of Josephus.

The first, chronologically, was Honi the Circle-Drawer. Little is known about him, mainly one incident when he prayed for rain. This story is recorded in the Mishnah, and expanded in the Talmud.⁵ He lived in the first century B.C., was from either Judea or Galilee, and although not openly critical, the Jewish sources do not give the impression of showing wholehearted approval of his actions. The epithet ‘circle-drawer’ may even hint at magic. The Midrash does praise him, comparing him in stature with Elijah, but this may simply be because both were rain-bringers.⁶ He is also mentioned by Josephus, who records his death.⁷ It is interesting that Josephus is more sympathetic to him – he is ‘a frightened man and dear to God’, and also that he was stoned to death by Jews (whom Josephus calls wicked!) for refusing to become involved in a plot against the king. The similarities to Jesus are obvious: a man, perhaps from Galilee, who performs miracles and is a holy man; it is hoped he would use his powers to help overthrow the government, and when he refuses he is killed; his own people were suspicious of him, but he gained greater approval from others in the wider, Hellenistic world.

The other individual in Jewish sources is Hanina ben Dosa. More is known about him. He is a more important figure and a closer contemporary of Jesus, having lived in the first century A.D. He came from Galilee, and was a disciple of Yohanan ben Zakkai. Like Honi, he is mentioned in the Mishnah and Talmud, was a holy man and man of prayer, and worked miracles. He is able to pray for the sick, and they recover. His great piety is illustrated by the story that once, while in prayer, a poisonous snake bit him. Unharmed, he continued in prayer, but the snake died, after which the saying went round, ‘Woe to the man

4. As shown by Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism*, London, 1974.

5. *Ta'anith* 3:8. *bTa'anith* 23a, which explains the circle as that in which Habakkuk stood while waiting for his revelation (Hab. 2:1). This may be an attempt to legitimise a magical technique.

6. *Genesis Rabbah* 13:7.

7. *Antiquities* 14:22-24.

bitten by a snake, but woe to the snake which bites R. Hanina ben Dosa'.⁸

Several other miracles are attributed to him, including the healing of the sons of Gamaliel and of Yohanah ben Zakkai. There are similarities to the miracles of Jesus. For example, Gamaliel's son is healed from a distance with the words 'go home, the fever has left him'⁹ – compare the centurion's son (Matt.8:5-13) and the Canaanite woman's daughter (Matt.15:21-28). Apart from these similarities, however, there is another important element in the Hanina tradition (which does not appear in that of Honi), namely the theme of wisdom. As well as being a miracle worker, Hanina is depicted as a wise man. So, for example, his saying about wisdom and the fear of sin is recorded in the Mishnah.¹⁰ This combination of miracle worker and wise man is an important one, which also appears in the Hellenistic example of Apollonius (see below), and also in the case of Jesus. It is probably for his reputation as a wise (and devout) man that Hanina is praised in the Talmud.¹¹ It is his reputation as a man of wisdom – a sage – which gives him respectability in the rabbinic sources and not his miracles alone for, as Neusner has said, 'none of the stories about him is quintessentially pharisaic'.¹²

These two figures, Honi and Hanina, show certain similarities to Jesus: their Galilean connections (possible, or certain), unorthodoxy, miracle working, wise sayings (Hanina), the suspicion of their contemporaries leading to death (Honi). It seems that the miracle worker was a threat to the orderliness of torah and its halakhic interpretation. Occasionally these two things came into direct conflict, as when Rabbi Eliezer was involved in a dispute about a point of interpretation. He tried to prove his case by miracles, including making a stream flow backwards, but was immediately ruled out of order by his companions, who declared that miracles cannot settle matters of interpretation of the law.¹³ The Talmud also asks, as a sort of retrospect on the days of miracles, why they happened in the past but no longer (a sentiment which might be familiar to many modern Christians!).¹⁴

The Jewish miracle worker tradition, then, shows similarities to Jesus. But whereas in Judaism the miracle worker was an object of suspicion,

8. *Tosefta Ber.* 2:20, expanded in *bBer.* 33a.
9. *bBer.* 34b.
10. *Aboth* 3:10-11, 'He whose fear of sin comes before his wisdom, his wisdom endures; but he whose wisdom comes before his fear of sin, his wisdom does not endure'. Translation by H. Danby, Oxford. 1933.
11. *bTa'anith* 24b, 'The whole world draws its sustenance because [of the merit] of Hanina my son.' Translation from Soncino Press, ed. I. Epstein. Also in this section he is able to make rain cease or begin.
12. J. Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70*(Part 1), Leiden, 1971, p 396.
13. *bBaba Mezi'a* 59b.
14. *bBer* 20a, 'R. Papa said to Abaye "How is it that for the former generations miracles were performed and for us miracles are not performed?"'

and ultimately discredited (possibly as a reaction to Christian claims about Jesus), miracle was, and remained, an essential element of the gospel.

Josephus

A number of individuals mentioned by Josephus, either in his *Jewish War* or *Antiquities of the Jews* (and some, in both), are relevant for this discussion. Although unrelated to each other, they are often treated together as a group since they promised to give signs, led popular movements, and awaited an intervention of God on behalf of his people. Different modern writers call them by different names such as ‘messianic prophets’ or ‘sign prophets’, and even differ in the lists of these which they consider.¹⁵

They are to be dated in the first century A.D. (c. 40-70), and two of them are mentioned in the Gamaliel speech in Acts 5:36f. although it seems the ‘Theudas’ referred to there is not the same one in Josephus, or there would be a problem of chronology.¹⁶ Also, in Acts 21:38 Paul is mistaken by the Roman commander for another of them, ‘the Egyptian’.

Without discussing these ‘sign prophets’ individually, which would take too long, let us simply comment on their significance. Josephus does not in fact call them ‘messiahs’. Indeed he refers to Theudas as a deceiver of charlatan (*goēs*). It seems probable, however, that they were messianic pretenders, as their mention in the Gamaliel speech may suggest. If this is so, then their promising to perform a sign as well as their expectation of God’s intervention is interesting, and again the parallels with Jesus are apparent. More comment will be made later on the significance of these examples, but the final examples of parallel miracle material come from the Hellenistic world.

Hellenistic parallels

Magic and miracle were not uncommon in the Hellenistic world: indeed, it has a magical tradition all of its own.¹⁷ We will concentrate on the most relevant example for the New Testament. There are also other examples of individuals and cults, such as the healing cult of Asclepius,¹⁸ but the best literary parallel is Philostratus’ biography *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. Apollonius is the best documented example of a

15. Compare D. Hill, ‘Jesus and Josephus’ “messianic prophets”, in E. Best & R. McL. Wilson, eds, *Text and Interpretation*, Cambridge, 1979, pp 143-154, with P. W. Barnett, ‘The Jewish Sign Prophets – A.D. 40-70. Their Intentions and Origin’, *New Testament Studies* 27, 1980/1, pp 679-697.
16. See the balanced treatments by F. F. Bruce, *The Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1951, p. 147 and I. H. Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles*, Leicester, 1980, *ad. loc.*
17. See J. M. Hull, *Hellenistic Magic and the Synoptic Tradition*, London, 1974.
18. For a useful summary, see Howard Clark Kee, *Miracle in the Early Christian World*, New Haven & London, 1983. pp 78-104.

Hellenistic miracle worker, and has often been seen as the example *par excellence* of the ‘divine man’ (*theios anēr*), although this category has now been discredited. Philostratus’ biography is a remarkable work, drawing on at least two, and possibly three, written sources, as well as Apollonius’ own letters, and such oral tradition as could be gathered. It was published not before 217 A.D. and was probably intended largely as a defence of Apollonius against charges of being a wizard. It may have had some success in this respect, since Eusebius later wrote a treatise against the *Life* accusing Apollonius of that very thing.

Apollonius was an itinerant sage who visited parts of the world famed for their wisdom – India, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Philosophically he was a Pythagorean. Living in the first century A.D. he was contemporary with Jesus, and is thus not too remote either geographically or chronologically to be a relevant parallel. It is his activity as a miracle worker which is most interesting for our purpose. There is no record of such activity before he visited the Brahman sages in India, where he witnessed several healings. He himself took no part in these but, it seems, learned the secret of how such cures were effected. He spent four months there, ‘and he acquired all sorts of lore both profane and mysterious’.¹⁹ Only after this did his own miracles begin.

Once begun, we see similarities with the gospel miracles. For example, he cures a demon-possessed young man;²⁰ he raised a dead girl to life from her funeral bier²¹ (compare Jairus’ daughter, or the widow of Nain’s son²²). He was also able to free his leg miraculously from its shackles while in prison²³ (compare Paul and Silas in Philippi²⁴). These are just a small selection of the numerous comparisons which might be made with his miracles. There are also other aspects of his life which bear comparison. He had supernatural insight into people (compare Jesus, who ‘knew what was in a man’, John 2:25), predicted future events, purified a man who had committed a crime (Jesus forgave sins); and his attitude to religion and morals was one of reformation, trying to recover first principles (Jesus ‘cleansed’ the Temple). The examples could be multiplied, but let us finally note his conflict with the authorities, and death. The emperor Domitian considered him a threat, brought him to trial, and although acquitted he made an exit from the courtroom by disappearing – much to the consternation of Domitian! After this he inexplicably appeared elsewhere in a manner perhaps reminiscent of the

19. Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F. C. Conybeare, London, 1912, III, 50.
20. *Ibid.*, IV, 20.
21. *Ibid.*, IV, 45.
22. Matt. 9:18-26; Mk 5:21-43; Lk. 8:40-56, and Lk. 7:11-17.
23. Philostratus, *Life*, VII, 38.
24. Acts 16:26.

comment that 'Philip was found at Azotus' (Acts 8:40).²⁵ To make the comparison with Jesus complete, one account of his death was that he was miraculously taken up to heaven, after which he appeared to others, particularly sceptics, to convince them that his soul was immortal.²⁶

Apollonius worked miracles. But he was also a wise man (a sage, *sophos*). This theme in the *Life* is a strong one, even more so than in the accounts of Hanina ben Dosa. In places, Philostratus' biography resembles a natural history lesson on the areas visited by Apollonius. This resembles some aspects of the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament, such as the account of Solomon, 'who spoke of trees, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows on the wall; he spoke also of animals and birds and creeping things and fish' (1 Kings 4:34). This particular aspect of wisdom is not prominent in the gospels' portrayal of Jesus. There is another description, however, which is common. Apollonius is 'divine' (*theios*), and even 'a god' (*theos*).²⁷

Assessment

What are we to make of all this parallel material? It has been mentioned in some detail, because it is the most relevant material chronologically, sociologically and geographically to the gospel material. But what bearing does it have on the question posed: why did Jesus perform miracles? We will discuss briefly what answers several scholars have recently given to this question. First, however, one point must be borne in mind.

In the parallel material mentioned, we have a diversity of miraculous experience, but all recorded from different standpoints: those of Honi and Hanina in the Mishnah and Talmud are somewhat sceptical of their orthodoxy, and indeed the Talmud tries to shape Hanina into more of an orthodox rabbinic figure. The Josephus account of Honi is from a different perspective – he is a just man, dear to God, who was killed by some worthless Jews. The point to be noted is the point of view, or even open bias of the document. This will be determined both by the attitude of the writer and that of his intended readership. The same point holds for the 'sign prophets' in Josephus: just because he calls Theudas a deceiver does not mean that the man was one. Likewise, because he refers to none of that group as 'messiahs' does not mean that they did not consider themselves as such. So too with Philostratus, whose *Life of Apollonius* is heavily biased in his favour. This does not mean that the biographer was totally uncritical, for he was aware of his sources, and even deliberately avoids using one.²⁸ Nor is he uncritical of the miracles, as in the case of the

25. Philostratus, *Life*, VIII, 10.

26. *Ibid.*, VIII, 31; cf. John 20:24-29.

27. *Ibid.* II, 17; III, 18; VIII, 6.

28. *Ibid.*, I, 4.

girl apparently brought back to life, where Philostratus comments that he does not know whether she was really dead or in a coma.²⁹ Generally, however, Apollonius is presented in a very positive way. Nor can we rule out the possibility that the *Life* was written, at least in part, in response to Christian claims about Jesus and the apostles. Although Conybeare, in the introduction to his translation, rejects this,³⁰ the similarities are too great for this not to be a factor. The issue is not whether or not Apollonius actually performed such deeds, as Conybeare suggests, but rather hinges on their manner of presentation in the *Life*.

Recent views of the miracles of Jesus

In order to give a brief account and assessment of the scholarly work on the gospel miracles from the last two decades, and especially the last few years, we will select four major scholars who have different views.

1. G. Vermes The view of Geza Vermes is contained in his book *Jesus the Jew*,³¹ as well as in more detailed articles. He sees Jesus as a Galilean charismatic, similar to other holy men like Honi and Hanina. A comparison with these other figures helps to explain Jesus' activities, as does the connection with Galilee. It was an area of more unorthodox Judaism, where (unlike Judea) the miraculous was expected much more as a part of everyday religious experience.

The similarities between Jesus and these other Jewish figures cannot be denied, as we have seen (above), nor can Vermes' detailed knowledge and skilled handling of the Jewish material. His view is not, however, a totally satisfactory explanation of Jesus, for it does not explain his conflict with the authorities and his death. Performing miracles was not in itself an outlawed activity, and certainly Hanina did not forfeit his life because of his miraculous activity (quite to the contrary). Yet Jesus was killed, and the charge against him was not unconnected with his claim to do a sign (Mk 14:58; Matt. 26:61). The Talmud also makes the connection: 'Yeshua . . . is going forth to be stoned because he has practised sorcery and enticed Israel to apostasy'.³² It seems that Jesus' miracles touched Judaism at its most sensitive points – the law and the Temple – and so Jesus was considered a political threat, and (like John the Baptist) removed for political expediency.

Ellis Rivkin³³ also sees Jesus as a Jewish charismatic, but unlike Vermes he sees this as the very cause of his death. Charismatics were considered dangerous, and Jesus, whom Rivkin calls a 'charismatic of charismatics,' lost his life for this reason. Again, however, this does not

29. *Ibid.*, IV, 45.

30. Note 19 (above) for full reference, p XIII.

31. G. Vermes, *Jesus the Jew*, London, 1973.

32. *bSanh* 43a.

33. E. Rivkin, *What Crucified Jesus?* Nashville, 1984.

fully explain Jesus, for in the parallel material we not only have examples of miracle workers who were *not* killed (such as Hanina), but also of prophetic figures or leaders of popular movements who did *not* perform miracles, yet *were* killed (such as John the Baptist, who ‘did no sign’, John 10:41). The connection is not a simple one.

Viewing Jesus simply as a Jewish charismatic is not therefore an adequate explanation of his total life and ministry, including his death.

2. A. E. Harvey In chapter five of his book *Jesus and the Constraints of History*,³⁴ Anthony E. Harvey discusses ‘the intelligibility of miracle’. He takes account of the parallel material we have mentioned, but considers that the key to understanding Jesus’ miracles is to be found in the eight examples involving the healing of deaf, dumb, blind or lame. These, he says, were without precedent in Jewish culture and therefore represent the unique part of Jesus’ miraculous ministry, at least in his own culture. They are to be understood as eschatological miracles, such as those described in Isaiah 35:5f. Jesus, in performing these healings, was attacking human limitations which constrain man and prevent his moving forward to a better world.

The main point in favour of Harvey’s approach is that he interprets the miracles in terms of the Old Testament and not simply in terms of the parallels. Yet, at the same time, he allows the Jewish parallels to disqualify most of the gospel miracles from his consideration: any type of miracle of Jesus which was also known in the Jewish world cannot be used to help us understand the meaning of Jesus’ miracles! The significant ones are thereby reduced to eight, but even those eight, as Harvey says, have parallels elsewhere, such as the shrines of Asclepius at Corinth and Epidaurus. We may agree that not all of Jesus’ miracles were done to ‘show’ something: healings could have been performed simply because he was asked. But even so, the fact that he complied with such requests must be significant. By this approach, Harvey fails to explain the significance of most of the miracles (over thirty others in the gospels of which we have some detail), including the so-called ‘nature’ miracles. No statistician would be happy with a conclusion based on such a small and unrepresentative sample.

3. Morton Smith The title of Morton Smith’s book *Jesus the Magician*³⁵ leaves nothing to the imagination! Drawing widely on background material, particularly the Greek magical papyri, he tries to show that the activity of Jesus was similar to that of other magicians in the ancient world. The gospels are seen as suppressing the magical practices of Jesus (a view also expressed by J. M. Hull³⁶).

We cannot deny that some of the activities and methods employed by

34. London, 1982.

35. New York, 1978.

36. See above, n. 17.

Jesus were similar to other miracle workers, and even magicians; to deny this would be to alienate Jesus from his own cultural environment (a position which would be detrimental to any view of the historical Jesus). Generally, however, the gospel portrait is extremely restrained in such things. And as far as such accusations from other sources are concerned (such as in the Talmud, see note 32 above), the explanation is quite simple: the easiest way to discredit an opponent is to accuse them of magic. The Beelzebul controversy in the gospels is eloquent testimon to that, but it does not mean that there is any truth in the charge.

Smith is a renowned scholar, and this book is based on a great deal of research. Like some of his other opinions, however, it must be seen as an example of the fringes of scholarly opinion.

4. E. P. Sanders ‘Miracles and crowds’ is the title of a chapter in E. P. Sanders’ book, *Jesus and Judaism*.³⁷ In this, the most recent of the books we will discuss, he refers to the parallel material as well as the work of previous scholars. He is cautious about assigning Jesus to any particular religious category, but does say that he was more like Theudas than Honi or the Hellenistic magicians. The miracles of Jesus show that he cannot be considered simply as a teacher, but are compatible with viewing him as an eschatological prophet.

Sanders’ work is well documented. Its major shortcoming, however, is that the conclusions are based on the form critical approach, and particularly the criteria for authenticity. The result of this is that much gospel material is rejected as having nothing to tell us about the historical Jesus, including the reply to John (Matt. 11:5f; Lk. 7:22f) and the saying about casting out demons (Matt. 12:28; Lk. 11:20). The whole thesis of the book, in fact, is based on such judgements, to the extent that he is able to reduce the ‘almost indisputable’ facts about Jesus to a few brief points.³⁸ It seems that this goes against the general trend in recent scholarship, which suggests that we can know a good deal about the historical Jesus.

At the same time, however, Sanders will not allow any conclusions which are unwarranted or without evidence, which is commendable. In this case, though, it means that his answer to the question of why Jesus performed miracles is rather inconclusive. Jesus may (or may not – it cannot be proved) have seen his exorcisms and healings as a sign of the arrival of the kingdom.³⁹ ‘The miracles constitute a fact about Jesus’ career, but they do not tell as much as could have been desired.’⁴⁰

Conclusion

What has been attempted in this paper is to sketch the background to

37. London, 1985.

38. *Ibid.*, p 11.

39. *Ibid.*, pp 157f.

40. *Ibid.*, p 172.

the gospel miracles in terms of the main Jewish and Hellenistic parallels, and to see what recent writers have made of this in terms of understanding Jesus. In conclusion, let us now outline some of the lessons to be learned from such a survey, as we try to do full justice to the gospels as well as the parallel material.

First, recent work on the miracles should warn us against the danger of unwarranted assumptions, for example that miracles in Judaism were regarded as proofs of messiahship. Messianic expectation in Judaism was not directly linked with miracle,⁴¹ and we have examples of a diversity of miracle workers with differing messianic pretensions (or none). One not yet mentioned is Simon bar Kochba, who was hailed (at least by Rabbi Akiba⁴²) as messiah, yet performed no miracles. For an authentication of Jesus' messiahship, the miracles themselves are not sufficient. That is not to say that they demonstrate nothing, for they do: in the words of Nicodemus, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no-one can do these signs you do unless God is with him' (John 3:2). It is interesting that, in Jesus' ministry, miracles are seen to authenticate his teaching, both stemming from the same 'authority' (Mk 1:27). Such a definite connection is not made in the Jewish material.

Secondly, there is the danger of categorisation. Should Jesus be regarded as a sign prophet, a charismatic, an eschatological prophet, a magician, or a preacher and teacher, or in some other category? Although such descriptions may help us to understand aspects of Jesus' ministry, they are not always helpful for they are only part of the larger mosaic, and fail to explain adequately the totality of his ministry. Socio-religious factors can influence how a person behaves, but at the same time it would be a mistake to imagine that people necessarily act in a particular way because they are conscious of falling into such-and-such a category. In any case, Jesus defies such attempts at categorisation. At times, for example, he refuses to give a sign when asked,⁴³ and his ministry shows a unique combination of miracle worker, teacher and wise man. Indeed, this is how Josephus describes him: 'a wise man . . . a doer of wonderful works . . . a teacher.'⁴⁴ This description is confirmed by the gospel record, and makes Jesus distinct from his contemporaries.

Thirdly, we must note the shortcomings of conclusions which are based on the 'criteria of authenticity'. Any such method will produce a picture of Jesus which is quite eccentric,⁴⁵ and will alienate him from his Jewish background. In studying Jesus, we must be aware of what he had in

41. See G. F. Moore, *Judaism*, Cambridge, 1927, II, p 349.

42. *yTa'anith* 68d.

43. Mk 8:12; Matt. 12:39, 16:4; Lk. 11:29.

44. *Antiquities* 18:63. Whatever opinion is held on the rest of the 'Testimonium Flavianum', with its description of Jesus as the messiah, there is no reason to doubt this part.

45. See D. Hill, *op. cit.*, p 144.

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common with his background, as well as the differences.⁴⁶ Nor can we separate the activity and sayings of Jesus from those of the early church to the degree which some scholars would like.

Finally, on a more positive note, comparison of the gospel material with the parallels helps us to see Jesus in his own day, and how background information (Jewish and Hellenistic) can help us to understand him.

46. Such as in the study by J. Riches, *Jesus and the Transformation of Judaism*, London, 1980.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PENTECOST IN THE HISTORY OF SALVATION*

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The subject of this paper is at once limited and extensive. The drama of redemption in Scripture focusses the reader's attention on certain great historical events and their meaning. Events like the call of Abraham, the Exodus from Egypt, the cross and the resurrection, although belonging each to a particular period of history, are regarded by the Bible writers as shedding considerable light on God's dealings with men throughout history. They constantly look back to them and draw from them more and more light on the saving purposes of God. Pentecost is an event of the same order.

It is true that only one N.T. writer records the events of the day of Pentecost. G. W. H. Lampe, writing of Luke/Acts, calls Pentecost, 'the great turning-point in the story, the hinge, as it were, of the two-volume narrative'¹. Its importance for Luke is difficult to exaggerate. It is also true that if he had not recorded the event we should have had to presuppose something like it. The New Testament writers assume that the Holy Spirit has now been given in a way which differs qualitatively in important ways from his operations among men previously. The Christian era is distinctively the age of the Spirit.

The Element of Continuity

The obvious uniqueness of the day of Pentecost should not blind us to the fact that in many ways the experience of the Spirit which the disciples had then was continuous with what had been before.

Lines of connection can be drawn both with the Old Testament and perhaps with their own experience during the ministry of the Lord Jesus, although there is very little reference to the latter in the gospels².

Many of the terms used of Pentecost are employed also in the Old Testament. The Spirit's coming was a clothing with power (Luke 24:49; cf. Judges 6:34; 1 Chron. 12:18; 2 Chron. 24:20), a filling with the Spirit (Acts 2:4; cf. Exodus 28:3; Deut. 34:9; Micah 3:8). As Peter himself

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1. 'The Holy Spirit in the Writings of St. Luke', (G. W. Grogan) in D. E. Nineham, ed., *Studies in the Gospels*, Oxford, 1957, p 192.
2. Explicitly only John 14:17, although passages such as Matthew 10:20 and Luke 11:13 might be thought to apply during the ministry as well as beyond Pentecost.

points out, the experience of Cornelius and his friends at Caesarea has much in common with the day of Pentecost, and the Spirit was said to 'fall upon' these Gentiles (Acts 10:44; 11:15; cf. Judges 14:6,19; 1 Samuel 11:6; Ezek. 11:5). All this language can be paralleled in the Old Testament. Even the language of baptism (Acts 1:5; 11:16) is based on the analogy of water, so often employed in the Old Testament in promises of a future work of the Spirit of God (Isaiah 32:15; Ezek. 39:29; Joel 2:28,29).

At Pentecost the disciples received power for the service of God (Acts 1:8; cf. 4:31,33). The phenomenon of glossolalia has no exact parallel in the Old Testament but examples of supernatural phenomena resulting from his activity are not wanting³. The use of human channels for the communication of a divine message by the Spirit of God is extremely frequent in the Old Testament.

The Element of Reversal

It seems probable that Luke intends us to see Pentecost as a reversal of Babel. There does not appear to be any studied use of allusive language, but the comparisons and contrasts are too evident to be missed. At Babel men gathered together for a sinful purpose but were scattered by the act of God. At Pentecost, 'devout men' who, although largely Jews, were 'from every nation under heaven' were brought together by the act of God. At Babel God confused the language of men so that they did not understand each other. At Pentecost men were bewildered because they *did* understand each other! At Babel there was a dispersion of the nations which anticipated the dispersion of Israel. At Pentecost this judgement was reversed in an act of grace which brought men into unity in the Spirit. At Babel men determined to make a name for themselves. At Pentecost God exalted the name of Jesus. The whole history of man since Babel has been marked by the disunity brought by sin. Only in Christ by the Spirit is this disunity truly overcome.

The Element of Fulfilment

a) *The Old Testament Feast of Pentecost* This was the second of the three great pilgrim feasts. The regulations for all three connect them with the land and they present a kind of harvest festival in three stages. Pentecost took place at the close of the barley harvest and was called 'the feast of harvest' (Exodus 23:16), 'the day of the first fruits' (Numbers 28:26), and 'the feast of weeks' (Exodus 34:22). The regulations for its observance are given in Exodus 34; Lev. 23; Numbers 28; Deut. 16; Deut. 26.

The term 'feast of weeks' is of special significance. The date of Pentecost was reckoned by counting seven weeks from the offering of the

3. E.g. 1 Kings 18:12; 2 Kings 2:16.

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first fruits of the barley harvest, which was itself bound closely to the observance of the Passover⁴.

Whatever be our approach to the problem of the chronology of the last week in the life of Jesus, it is clear that he was crucified at the Passover season. At least two of the New Testament writers saw great significance in this fact. He was the antitype of the passover lamb of the Old Testament (John 19:36; 1 Cor. 5:6-8). Luke's statement that the day of Pentecost had fully come (Acts 2:1) perhaps lays stress upon the interval of time from the Passover. The verb συνπλήρωσθαι is used in the LXX and the New Testament for the completion of a specific period of time. The cross made possible the great harvest of souls which took place on the day of Pentecost. The Christian Pentecost could not have taken place apart from the Christian Passover. The feasts of Passover and Tabernacles also possessed historical significance, for they were connected with the Exodus and the wilderness wanderings respectively. The Old Testament does not relate Pentecost to the history of Israel. This was done, however, by the Jews of the intertestamental period, who commemorated the giving of the law at Sinai at this time⁵.

The passages employed in the Jewish lectionary system for synagogue reading are of considerable interest. The influence of the lectionary upon the N.T. is a matter of debate⁶, of course, but we are probably justified in making cautious use of it as a possible background to some of the language of the N.T. The passages for the day of Pentecost were as follows: Exodus 19, Psalm 29, Psalm 68, Ezekiel 1 and Habbakuk 3.⁷ The use of Exodus 19 stems from the connection between Pentecost and Sinai. It appears to have established the atmosphere for the whole series of passages. As N. H. Snaith points out, 'all . . . involve a display of the overwhelming power of God. All the phenomena of his coming are found also in Acts 2, except the earthquake, and that appears in Acts 4:31. The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is not gentle as a dove but tempestuous and all – powerful.'⁸ So the power and glory of God, which were so signally disclosed at Sinai and were illustrated in these other O.T. passages, found further historical expression at Pentecost.

C. S. C. Williams suggests that Psalm 29:7 finds an echo in Acts 2:3.⁹ Psalm 29:11 contains the promise of strength for the people of God, and Pentecost fulfilled our Lord's promise of power. Psalm 68:18 is expressly applied by Paul to the gift and gifts of the Spirit in Ephesians 4:7ff. In view

4. Leviticus 23:15,16.

5. Book of Jubilees 1:1; 6:17.

6. For an evangelical assessment, see L. Morris, *The New Testament and the Jewish Lectoraries*, London, 1964.

7. See N. H. Snaith, 'The Spirit of God in Jewish Thought', in *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Headingley Lectures), p 3.

8. *Op. cit.*, p 4.

9. C. S. C. Williams, *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, London, 1957, *in loc.*

of this, the expression ‘power from on high’ (Luke 24:49) may well show the influence of the same verse. The reference to the prophesying of women in Joel 2 (Acts 2:17f) may be paralleled by the women who bear the tidings in Psalm 68:11. In this psalm also God is said to ‘give power and strength to his people’ (verse 35). Ezekiel 1 is a great vision granted to the prophet when ‘the hand of the Lord’ (which phrase for him is the equivalent of ‘the Spirit of the Lord’) was upon him. The Joel prophecy quoted by Peter declares that young men shall see visions and old men dream dreams as a result of the effusion of the Spirit, and so they will prophesy (Acts 2:17f). Habbakuk recognises that God the Lord is his strength (Habbakuk 3:19), and declares that although the harvest may be a failure (and so perhaps Pentecost would seem a time of sadness and not rejoicing) yet he would rejoice in the God of his salvation (Habbakuk 3:17,18). It may be possible also to see a fulfilment of Exodus 19 on the day of Pentecost, if the latter be regarded also as a fulfilment of Ezekiel 36:24ff, for in this passage God promises to put his spirit within the people and to write his statutes upon their hearts.

b) *Prophecies concerning the Spirit in the O.T.* The Old Testament prophets looked forward to a time when the Spirit would be manifested in a much fuller way than hitherto. The most characteristic expression they employ is ‘to pour out’ (Isaiah 32:15; 44:3; Ezekiel 39:29; Joel 2:28f; Zechariah 12:10). This language, based on the symbolism of water, is never employed of the Spirit in the Old Testament except in eschatological passages. The same kind of analogy is employed in other passages which promise moral cleansing and regeneration by the Spirit (Ezekiel 36:24ff; cf. 11:18ff; 18:30f). In these prophecies of the future we find language suggesting a work of the Spirit which is now couched in external terms (‘pour out upon’), now in internal (‘put my spirit within’). An examination of the passages concerned reveals the use of a certain amount of agricultural language in the context. This is especially noticeable in the harvest language of Joel 2:18-27 which immediately precedes the passage quoted in Acts 2.

c) *John the Baptist’s Predictions* John the Baptist represents the final expression of Old Covenant prophecy. He baptised with water but declared the coming of one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8) and with fire (Mt.3:11f,Lk.3:18f).

What is the significance of the words ‘with fire’ which the answers in Matthew and Luke add to the briefer statement in Mark? A number of theories have been put forward, most of them speculative, and the reader can find these noted in the commentaries. Perhaps the best suggestion, in the light of our findings so far, is that of Lampe (and others). Lampe says, ‘The faithful remnant, according to Isaiah, will be cleansed of moral

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defilement by “the Spirit of judgement and the Spirit of burning”, a prophecy which may well have been in the Baptist’s mind as he looked forward to a coming baptism of Spirit and of fire.¹⁰

The prediction as recorded in John 1:29-34 has three distinctive features. Here alone Jesus is referred to not only as the one baptising with the Spirit but also as the one who takes away the world’s sin. Perhaps the two facts are not unconnected. John is told to look for one upon whom the Spirit would descend and remain, which suggests that this one’s experience of the Spirit would be constant, not intermittent or temporary. Only here is the present tense (*ho baptizōn*) used of this baptism. Some have seen significance in this as pointing to an abiding quality of our Lord’s work rather than to the one historical act of Pentecost.¹¹ However, it is worth noting that the present is also used in verse 29 of his sin-bearing (*ho airōn*), which was in fact accomplished in the historic act of Calvary. Note the reference to John’s prediction in our Lord’s words in Acts 1:5 (implying fulfilment at Pentecost) and the further references in Acts 11:15ff and Acts 19:1-7.

d) *Christ’s teaching concerning the Holy Spirit* When we turn to the Synoptic accounts of the teaching of Jesus and study his sayings about the Holy Spirit we are immediately struck by the infrequency of the references and the fact that Luke has more than either Matthew or Mark. The latter is easily explained in terms of the special interests of Luke. He is to write a second volume in which the Holy Spirit will feature prominently. What should be more natural than that he should record more of the sayings of Jesus about the Spirit than do the other two Synoptists?

We will concentrate upon the Lukan passages, for the Matthaean and Markan passages are paralleled in substance in Luke. Luke 11:18, with its reference to the Holy Spirit as given to those who ask the heavenly Father, may perhaps point to the essential inwardness of the Christian faith, the good things of Matthew 7:11 (the Matthaean parallel) being seen as summed up in the Holy Spirit over against the outward gifts, such as fish and eggs, which men can give to their children but which are unable to satisfy their deepest needs.

Luke 18:11f seems to look to the future and it gives a most assuring promise but little glimpse of the great riches which were to be unfolded later concerning the work of the Spirit in the church of Christ. Only Lk. 24:49 clearly refers to come such event as Pentecost. The reader who has only the third gospel, however, might well wonder what this gift is to which reference is being made. Acts 1:4f, however, makes it clear that the promise of the Father is in fact the baptism of the Spirit.

10. *Op. cit.*, p 162.

11. See J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, London, 1970, p 171.

Our study of Luke enables us to appreciate the point made by W. F. Lofthouse¹² that the first half of Acts requires the Johannine tradition of teaching concerning the Spirit for its understanding. He maintains that the disciples would have been utterly unprepared for Pentecost had they possessed only the Synoptic teaching of Jesus and he argues cogently for the substantial veracity of the teaching of Jesus which has come to us in the Johannine tradition on this ground. The chief passages in John from the lips of Jesus which look to Pentecost and beyond are those in chapters 14-16. Most of the material here concerns the Spirit as a teacher of truth and a witness to Jesus. Indeed much that is given here may well apply to the Spirit as the source of apostolic inspiration as he was also of prophetic inspiration. He will be sent by the Father or by Christ from the Father. He is no stranger to them for already he is with them, but then he shall be in them (Jn. 14:17). It should be noted that *para* here does not denote a merely fluctuating or external relationship, for the same preposition is employed in 14:23 of the abiding of the Father and the Son in them. It is doubtful if our Lord intended a contrast at this point. It is more likely that he desired to assure them that the one of whom he spoke was no stranger to them. He was going to indwell them in a new way, but this does not mean that he had not been present with them in a real sense already.

However, the important thing to note is that our Lord does contemplate here some event which was of capital importance and which yet lay before the disciples. We will consider John 7:37-39 and John 20:22 a little later.

The Element of Uniqueness

It is clear enough from the New Testament that the incarnation, death and resurrection of our Lord were viewed as events of quite special significance. They were unique. This is true even though an event like the resurrection of Jesus also constituted him, as Paul says, 'the first fruits of them that sleep'. Was there such a uniqueness about Pentecost? The Johannine tradition clearly suggests this. It could perhaps be argued that the references to the Spirit in the Upper Room discourse need not imply that he would come in a special way in one historical event. This is not altogether true, however. The departure of Jesus was manifestly an historical event, and it is often spoken of here as an event parallel to the coming of the Spirit. For example, in John 16:7f Jesus says, 'It is to your advantage that I go away for if I go not away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world of sin and of righteousness and of judgement.' John 7:39 suggests that the glorification of Jesus can be paralleled by the gift of the Spirit.

Was the insufflation (John 20:22) John's equivalent of Pentecost? This

12. W. F. Lofthouse, *The Father and the Son*, London, 1934, pp 175-178.

can be plausibly argued,¹³ but John and Luke can be brought into line if we see John 20 as an acted prophecy, after O.T. models, rather than an actual there-and-then endowment with the Spirit. Such an interpretation is consistent with the fact that the Gospel of John contains a great deal of symbolism. It is important in this connection to notice the link between Pentecost and the cross and exaltation of Jesus. The only place in the Synoptics where it can be found is Luke 24:49, where it is the *risen* Jesus who speaks of sending the promise of the Father upon his disciples. There is another statement of it in Galatians 3:13f, where the work of the Spirit is made dependent upon the work of Christ on the cross. Notice also the order of Galatians 4:4-7.

What is the significance of all this? It reveals the complete dependence of subjective upon objective Christianity. The special place of importance which Pentecost has is due in large measure to the fact that it was necessary to demonstrate on the plane of history that the Spirit's work – which is not confined to the post-Pentecostal period – is in fact dependent upon the work of Christ. Smeaton quotes Goodwin as saying, concerning the Holy Spirit, 'He must have a coming in state, in solemn and visible manner, accompanied with visible effects as well as Christ had, and whereof all the Jews should be, and were, witnesses.'¹⁴ This means that in some senses Pentecost was an unique event and could never be repeated. In view of this it is not surprising to note that some of the signs which marked it were not repeated — i.e., the rushing wind and the tongues of fire.

The Elements of Newness and of Normality

Although, as we have noted, there are important elements of continuity between the Spirit's work before and after Pentecost, there are also important ways in which something new began at Pentecost. In addition to this, although Pentecost was in some respects unique, it also set the pattern in some ways for all that was to come, for the church age as a whole.

a) *After Pentecost the Spirit's work was broader than before* The passage from Joel, quoted by Peter, speaks of the pouring out of the Spirit upon all flesh, and this phrase usually means 'all mankind' without racial distinction. The Jews and proselytes at Pentecost were from many different countries, and so, although all Jews by religion, they symbolise the wide extension of the gospel. Peter's statement that the promise included those who were afar off (Acts 2:39) may well have been interpretative of Joel 2.

The breadth of the Spirit's work may be illustrated from the writings of

13. See, e.g., C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, London, 1955, *in loc.*
14. G. Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit*, London, 1958, p 49, quoting Goodwin's *Works*, vi, p 8.

Luke. In his gospel, Luke shows clearly that he has a number of special interests. His interest in John the Baptist appears early, for it is he alone who gives the story of his birth and the background to it. There are a number of references to John in the gospel. A Gentile interest emerges early also, and the synagogue sermon recorded in Luke 4 sets a pattern for this interest. Luke was also interested in the Samaritans, giving the ministry of Jesus in Samaria and several incidents concerning Samaritans as well as the parable of the Good Samaritan. There is also a special interest in Jerusalem, for the name appears over 30 times in the gospel; in fact it occurs about as frequently in Luke as it does in the other three gospels combined. Jerusalem is presented as the great place of destiny and the whole story leads to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus in that city.

In the Acts of Apostles each of these interests is taken up again. Jerusalem is not only the place of the Christian Passover, at which Christ died, but also the Christian Pentecost. The Holy Spirit given then takes up other groups representing Luke's special interests. At Pentecost Jews and proselytes were united by the Spirit to form the heart of the new body, the Christian church. In Acts 8, the Samaritans, who could easily have become a separate Church perpetuating the old enmities, were the objects of a special work of the Spirit. In Acts 10 it was the turn of the Gentiles, and in Acts 19 a group of disciples of John the Baptist, who was the one who gave the original promise that Jesus would baptise with the Holy Spirit, were themselves baptised by that Spirit into the one body of Christ. All these groups would appear to have been representative, and they were bound together in the one body of Christ by the action of the Holy Spirit.

b) *After Pentecost, the Spirit's work was also deeper than before* The full Christian facts had now been completed on the stage of history. The Holy Spirit indwelt the disciples as the Spirit, not of the Christ who was yet to come, but who had come and finished his work. The New Testament writers insist, not only that Jesus gave the Holy Spirit to the church, but that the Spirit he gave has a special relationship to him. He is the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11), the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19), the Spirit of the Son of God (Gal. 4:6; cf. Mark 14:36). He is, of course, related to our Lord in a twofold manner: in the eternal mystery of the triune Godhead, and also as indwelling him perfectly in the days of his flesh. This latter aspect opens up the question of the relationship between his work in the incarnate one and in Christian believers. Luke shows special interest in this. It is noticeable that almost all the statements about Jesus and the Holy Spirit in the gospel can be paralleled in the Acts. This can hardly be less than deliberate on Luke's part, and is just one element, although an important one, in a pattern of similarities which runs through the gospel and the

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Acts. We should note that when Peter, in the power of the Spirit, proclaimed the saving facts of Christ, he included the fact he was anointed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 4:27; 10:38).

Without going into detail or dealing with some of the difficulties of exegesis and theology, we note the following points: Lampe says, 'The promise of the Spirit recorded in Luke 24:49 corresponds in some degree to the Annunciation. Like Mary, the apostles are to be endued with "power from on high". At Pentecost they actually received the power of the Spirit in which Jesus preached, healed and exorcised.'¹⁵ The baptism of Jesus in water and the baptism in the Spirit recorded in Acts 2 were both associated with an anointing of power for distinctive service, the one messianic, the other missionary. There is contrast, of course, for the symbolism of the dove on the one hand and of the wind and fire on the other point to the uniqueness and sinlessness of Jesus, which was verbally expressed in the divine utterance from heaven. Jesus was *full* of the Spirit (the adjective is used), and the disciples at Pentecost and on several occasions afterwards were *filled* with the Spirit. The power and joy of the Spirit also find explicit mention both in Luke and Acts. Note also that, like Jesus, as Lampe reminds us,¹⁶ the church awaited the coming of the Spirit in prayer.

This perhaps raises the question as to whether manifestations of the Spirit to which there is no real parallel in the gospel can be of crucial importance unless Luke is deliberately contrasting Christ and the church at this point. For instance, we read of Jesus healing and performing miracles, but we read nothing of a gift of tongues in his case.

So then, the Spirit's function, from Pentecost, is to bring Christians into an experience which has many suggestive parallels with the life of Christ. Through his agency the Christ-life is reproduced in Christian believers. No doubt the pattern of godly living which had always been in the Holy Spirit's mind in his work of sanctification, even in Old Testament days, was the pattern of Jesus Christ, but this pattern could now be in the minds of the godly also. Thus the possibilities of godliness of life and conduct, after the pattern of Christ, are now seen more clearly than ever before.

At Pentecost and with reference to particular occasions afterwards the disciples of Jesus are said to have been filled with the Spirit, especially when there were tasks of ministry to be accomplished (Acts 4:8,31, 13:9), so in such passages he is viewed as the Spirit of power for service, in fulfilment of the promise of Acts 1:8. However, there are other important passages where his fulness is connected with character (Acts 6:3,5 *cf.* v. 8;

15. *Op. cit.*, p 193.

16. *Op. cit.*, p 169.

17. Article, πνεῦμα, πνευματικός, in G. Kittel, G. Friedrich, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vi, Grand Rapids, 1968, p 406.

7:55; 11:24). E. Schweitzer puts it thus: ‘We find, besides the phrase “full of the Spirit” πλήρος πνεύματος (which emphasises the abiding association with the Spirit) the phrase “filled with the Spirit” (which preserves the conviction that every manifestation of the Spirit is always an act of God and proceeds from God).’¹⁷ The common idea behind the two types of passages is that the Christian life is intended to be a life in the fulness of the Spirit, that the abiding character of the life and the recurring opportunities of service both require his operation. As Eph. 5:18 expresses it, the believer is constantly to be filled with the Spirit. So the baptism of the Spirit although unique and unrepeatable, is the first moment in the life which is lived in the fulness of the Spirit when it maintains the norm set at its beginning.

c) *After Pentecost he constituted the Bond of Union between Believers and their Lord in the Unity of the Church.* Pauline teaching in 1 Corinthians 12:12f. brings out the union which the Spirit effects between believers and Christ and also between believers and believers. This means that, in the fullest sense, Pentecost can be spoken of as the birthday of the church. The Epistle to the Hebrews traces the line of faith right back to Abel. Moreover, God always dealt with people on the basis of a covenant, and there is a covenant community in the Old Testament. But it is clear that the true Israel was a remnant within the national entity. The church is, however, given a new and deeper unity by the relationship of its members to Christ and therefore to each other. It is this fellowship which was constituted on the day of Pentecost by the sovereign act of God the Holy Spirit.

The Element of Anticipation

The quotation from Joel given by Peter on the day of Pentecost reminds us that Pentecost is in a sense an eschatological event, for Joel speaks of the eschaton and Peter declares, ‘this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel’. The fact is that all that is in the New Testament presented as fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy is, in a sense, realised eschatology. Calvary, the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, and the coming of the Spirit, all fall within this category. By his use of the term *arrabōn*, however ('earnest', 'pledge', 2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:14), Paul points us forward to a more complete fulfilment. The Spirit is in fact a guarantee and foretaste of the full inheritance which will belong to Christians in actual possession in the future.

The passage quoted by Peter from Joel speaks of the great and manifest day of the Lord. The gift of the Spirit assures us that we are living in the period of realised eschatology. For us the Christ has come, and yet he is still to come. The Holy Spirit’s presence in our hearts is the result of the one coming, and the pledge and foretaste of the other. In Pentecost, the kingdom of God has come in power but has not yet been consummated.

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So the life of the Christian in the present has reference both to the past and to the future, and it has an inner spiritual dynamic in which the Holy Spirit creates in us both gratitude for what Christ has done in the past, and eager anticipation of what he promises to do in the future.

THEOLOGICAL LOGIC*

BRUCE RITCHIE

TWYNHOLM

Theology is the study of the being and the acts of God. But there are many who maintain that the traditional Christian description of the being of God is irrational and logically incoherent. They argue that Christian theology is not possible because of the thought-forms demanded by the doctrines of the Trinity and of the incarnation since these types of required thought-forms are beyond human apprehension.

The arguments to this end come from two main sources. (a) On the one hand there are those outside of the faith, scientists, philosophers, logicians, and ordinary doubters, who are quite convinced that the whole enterprise of Christian theology is incoherent, unintelligible, and irrational. In earlier centuries the Christian could point to the diversity and contradictoriness of primitive, conflicting theories about the nature of the world, as evidence of the shallowness and untruth of such theories. Thus Basil of Caesarea could write:

The philosophers of Greece have made much ado to explain nature and not one of their systems has remained firm and unshaken, each being overturned by its successor. It is vain to refute them; they are sufficient in themselves to destroy one another.

Today, the position is reversed. Or at least it seems to be so to the 'man in the street'. Today, the secular scientist, or philosopher, or logician, who no longer works within an acceptance of Christian culture, believes that he can say such things of theology. The theologian cannot dismiss this attitude as simply being a refusal of the moral and spiritual will to submit to God. Rather, the theologian must recognise and deal with a genuine belief that theology appears to be littered with paradox and the irrational in comparison with the apparently well-ordered fields of science. Thus we require a justification of theology to the outsider. T. F. Torrance has done a considerable amount of work in this field. However, his work is focused on theological and scientific *epistemology*, whereas our essay will concentrate on the scientific rationality of clusters of theological statements which such procedures necessitate. (b) On the other hand, there are those within the church who would willingly throw away the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation. They regard them as being hopelessly outdated elaborate metaphysics which are fundamentally illogical. For example, in the past century many of the Protestant confessional churches have experienced an identity crisis. This identity

* A version of this paper was read at the 1985 Edinburgh Conference in Christian Dogmatics.

1. Basil of Caesarea, *Hexaemeron* I/2.

crisis has come about because the confessional statements which have been used as the rule of faith for doctrinal orthodoxy have been qualified in so many ways that their practical authority is totally undermined. Within this uncertain, undefined, environment, it becomes widely assumed that *all* of the teaching of such confessional statements is placed in question as having authority. Thus even such doctrines as the Trinity and the incarnation begin to rely upon the weight of conservative tradition in order to protect their status, rather than upon clear unequivocal statements which brook no exceptions. Thus, imperceptibly, a church changes from being a confessional church to being a church of conservative tradition in which her confessionalism is purely nominal. Confessionalism becomes a semantic illusion in contrast with practical reality. Within such a context it becomes doubly important for theologians to clarify the sense and the rationality and the truth of the orthodox belief in the nature of God, as Triune and incarnate. Our aim, therefore, is to examine the rational basis of Christian theology in the light of incredulity within and without the church.

The Statement of the Problem

We start with the formula of the Athanasian Creed:

Thus the Father is God, the Son God, the Holy Spirit God; and yet there are not three Gods, but there is one God. Thus the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, the Holy Spirit Lord; and yet there are not three Lords, but there is one Lord.

How can we defend the rationality of this statement which is the classic statement of the Trinity, accepted in all branches of the mainstream churches? At the outset of course we assume that this formula is a necessary consequence of New Testament teaching. The New Testament teaching compels us to regard the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as equally identical with the Lord or Jahweh of the Old Testament, and also compels us to recognise them as of simultaneous existence, but yet separate and distinct amongst themselves. Within this understanding, formalised by the Athanasian Creed, how can we make sense of this three in one and one in three? How can we justify theology? There have been attempts to deny that there is a problem at all.

The First Escape-Route

The *first* way out is to deny that any real paradox actually lies in the doctrine of the Trinity or incarnation. This has been a favourite line of defence amongst conservative theologians. The defence is that God is three in a different sense than he is one, and hence there is no paradox. God is three persons, one essence, therefore there is no clash. For example, W. G. T. Shedd wrote concerning the doctrine of the Trinity:

The doctrine is logically consistent, because it affirms that God is One in another sense than He is Three; and Three in another sense than He

is One. If it affirmed unity in the same respect that it affirms trinality, the doctrine would be self-contradictory.²

However, Shedd's assumptions are betrayed by a sentence he wrote in the Introduction to Augustine's *De Trinitate* in the series of volumes on the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*:

The doctrine of the Divine Unity is a truth of natural religion; the doctrine of the Trinity is a truth of revealed religion.³

Shedd appears to assume as a matter of presupposition that God's unity and God's triunity apply to different things altogether. He assumes that one is, and the other is not, a thing communicated solely by revelation. But how many cultures outside of Judaism, Christianity and Islam – all of which are moulded by the revelation in the Old Testament – are consistently properly monotheistic? Hardly any. The natural conclusion for the natural reason would be to be Manichean as indeed Augustine was in his pre-Christian days. Thus a proper understanding of God's uniqueness is dependent upon revelation. But if proper, consistent knowledge of God's uniqueness is dependent upon revelation, then the form of God's unity and uniqueness has been known and revealed only in terms of him being a person, that is; being one person who also becomes revealed as three persons. The unity and uniqueness of God which is the product of Old Testament monotheism was revealed by a God who also revealed himself as a person in his oneness. He is the living God:

'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.'

The manner in which God is revealed to his people in the Old Testament as a person forces us to confess that the Lord in his *oneness* is a person. Consider also the type of parameters traditionally employed to demonstrate the distinct personhood of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. References are made to the fact that the Holy Spirit is addressed, is called 'He', is the subject of divine acts, is identified with the Lord or Jahweh of the Old Testament, and so on. Now if all of these traditional parameters which are used to prove that the biblical revelation demands that we regard the Holy Spirit as an individual person, are likewise applied to the revelation of God in his uniqueness in the Old Testament, then we are inevitably forced to speak of God as a person in his oneness. Nor can we escape from the dilemma by disowning Boethius' definition of a person, namely that: *a person is an individual substance of rational nature*. Boethius' definition was a common basis for the definition of person in medieval and later philosophy. However, disowning this Boethian definition, and claiming the 'person' is not properly characterised by *individualism* but more properly by *fellowship*

2. W. G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* Vol I, New York, 1891, pp 270ff.

3. W. G. T. Shedd, *Introduction to Augustine, De Trinitate*, New York, 1887, p 3.

or *community* is not enough to solve the problem. It is not enough to posit a brand new definition of ‘person’ in order that ‘person’ may only, by definition, be predicated of God’s threeness (in community) and not of his oneness. This type of escape-route from the dilemma smacks of the type of thinking needing pruned by *Occam’s Razor*, for it seems to multiply definitions and entities needlessly just to escape from a problem. Moreover, this escape-route through redefinition of the terminology is totally nominalistic. It only pushes the questions one stage further back. Ultimately the problem is not what we call things. The problem is that the Bible speaks of God in his oneness in the same way as it speaks of the ‘persons’ in their threeness, as unique subjects of the divine act. We shall call it ‘personhood’. And if God is not a person in his oneness then we end up with a form of tritheism, even if it is disguised as a tritheism in community. That God is one, and that in that oneness *he* is a person, is an inevitable conclusion of exegesis. If there were no problem here then it is strange why Christian theology for almost 2000 years has termed the Holy Trinity a mystery. If God is three is a different sense than he is one, then – quite simply – there is no problem, no mystery, nothing to worry us. But Christian theology has always tacitly realised that the biblical data demands us to confess in some sense, under some terminology, that there is a sense in which his threeness and oneness apply to the same thing. Theologians have been reluctant to formally admit this. Hence, for example, Boethius, in his *De Trinitate*, taught that Trinity is not predicated *substantially* of God, but only *relatively*. We cannot accept this. Boethius’ conclusion was the result of nothing more than the direct application of unadulterated Aristotelian categories to the doctrine of the Trinity. Earlier, the doctrine of the Trinity found in the Cappadocian Fathers tended in the same direction, of declaring that God is three in a different sense than he is one. For example, Basil of Caesarea wrote:

How, then, if one and one, are there not two Gods? Because we speak of a King and of the King’s image, and not of two Kings.⁴

But if ‘King’ is the same as ‘Lord’ then surely the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each individually and distinctly each ‘Lord’. This is what the Athanasian Creed teaches, and is the consequence of biblical exegesis. Yet there are not three Lords but one Lord. Thus the paradox remains whether we desire it or not. The fundamental reason why this very attractive escape-route from paradox is closed to us emerges in the fact of the incarnation. In the Bible’s account of the life of our Lord we see that God relates to himself as person to person (under any sensible ‘definition’ of person) and yet as the one God is one person. Therefore however much we try we cannot avoid concluding that God is three persons and yet is one person. Thus the paradox remains and will not go away.

4. Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto* XVIII/45.

The Second Escape-Route

The *second* way out of the dilemma takes the opposite route. If the first attempted solution tried to accommodate the Trinity to earthly canons of logic by bringing it to '*the bar of human reason*' and denying that the problem of paradox exists at all, then this second attempt tries to lift our earthly forms of thought up to God and to make our earthly forms of thought trinitarian. The most famous attempt in this direction was that of G. W. F. Hegel who sought to show that the difficult concepts involved in the Christian idea of the Godhead were in fact the very concepts operating in the whole of the natural world if that natural world were viewed aright. It may seem strange that Hegel's influence is cited in the 1980's, but if one examines the indexes in Jürgen Moltmann's books then one discovers that references to Hegel are consistently thick in number and outweigh many of the traditional authorities one would expect to find cited. This is partly due to Moltmann's sympathy with Hegel on matters of social and political concern, but is also because of Moltmann's sympathy with Hegel's logic of Thesis – Antithesis – Synthesis. In Hegel's dialectic, the Absolute Spirit (God) becomes its opposite before progressing onwards, as a necessity of process inherent in the Divine Being. Thus the *form* of God's Being exhibits the Absolute Spirit as a distinction of the eternal essence from its manifestation which by this difference *becomes the phenomenal world* into which the content (*of God's Being*) enters (*in Incarnation*) ...⁵

In simple terms this basically means that the nature of the Absolute Spirit is such that whatever *is* necessarily becomes its *opposite* before progressing onwards. Thus Father becomes Son and returns to himself in the unity of the Spirit. Thus God becomes man – by necessity. Thus the uncreated becomes the created – by necessity. Thus eternity becomes time, and, unavoidably, good necessarily becomes evil before advancing on. Thus Hegel's radical solution to the problem of the Trinity makes the world into a particular moment in the nature of God. Thus the forms of being in the world are not opposing forms of being or logic, but are only a particular part of the ongoing dynamic of the divine logic. Thus Hegel's solution involves a necessary world, a necessary incarnation, and ultimately necessary evil. The forms of Trinity and incarnation are thus the necessary results of the essential logic of Absolute Spirit which pervades all being whether created or uncreated, natural or spiritual. Thus it is merely because our human minds are limited by being caught and trapped at one particular stage of the cycle of Absolute Spirit that we cannot see the whole, and cannot realise that there is no paradox, just natural process. Moltmann of course does not take this over lock, stock and barrel. But it influences him far enough to produce problems with the necessity of creation, and tremendous problems with the apparent

5. G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford, 1971, sect. 566.

inevitability of evil and leaves him with a very inadequate doctrine of the fall. But here again a solution to the problem of paradox is contradicted by the New Testament teaching on the incarnation. The New Testament teaches that God is not just opposed to evil because it is an undesirable but essential part of his nature as God, but that his victory over it is a free act of grace. It is an opposition and victory forged in the freedom of the divine will, and the freedom of the divine action, and not as some necessary, inevitable movement in the being of God himself.

Hegel's attempt to identify natural rationality with trinitarian rationality in order to solve the problem is perhaps the most fantastical but not the only attempt to invert the problem by claiming that natural rationality is really trinitarian if viewed aright. Some thinkers, influenced by sub-atomic physics have suggested that the theological concept of *coherence* is the best model to use to describe certain sub-atomic states.⁶ Some would go further and claim that such a concept reflects the true nature of all being, but is only apparent and only reveals itself in extreme, boundary situations at the very limits of investigation. However it would seem to be both unwise and unnecessary to base trinitarian apologetics on such models. First, because – as in the differences between the Trinity and the incarnation themselves – *coherence* can have different forms. Second, because sub-atomic theory is a very unstable and changing field. Third, because when we properly understand the nature of logic there is no need to have a one-to-one correspondence between *created* logic and *God's* logic, or between *created* forms of being and *God's* form of being.

The Nature of Logic

We cannot adapt the logics of the Trinity and the incarnation to the logic of the world. Nor can we adapt the logic of the world to God. How then can we justify theology?

Here we must ask the question: What do we mean by logic? Normal logic is based on the laws of inclusion and exclusion in the form of the syllogism. The logic of a situation, or the logic of a series of statements usually refers to the relationships of *strict* necessity which that situation or series of statements involve. The development of logic in both the Western tradition and the Chinese tradition has largely been no more than the clarification of the syllogism, and the clarification of the grammatically acceptable forms of the statements to be fed into the syllogism.

Now the remarkable thing is that we can represent the principles of exclusion and inclusion diagrammatically in a form of diagram commonly used in mathematics and called a Venn diagram. In such diagrammatic form the relationship of statements to one another can be represented

6. See Russell Stannard, *Science and the Renewal of Belief*, London, 1982, pp 146ff.

spatially, and the syllogistic inferences can be readily and easily read off. All of the axioms of logic can be so represented in diagrammatic form. This is because the law of the syllogism is only itself one ‘axiom’ in the more general propositional calculus, and all of the laws of propositional calculus can be represented logically and spatially in the physical form of the Venn diagram. These Venn diagrams can describe with equal ease the relationships involved in the axioms of logic, and the relationships involved in the axioms of spatial geometry. We believe that this is not accidental. It is not accidental because each principle of logical inference has a direct partner in the axioms of physical space. Thus each logical relationship is able to be represented spatially. This again is not accidental, but is derivative. For although logic deals with the relationship between statements, and geometry deals with the relationship between ‘objects’ in space and time, *our statements are about objects or events in space and time, and therefore the verbal relationships between these statements has a direct correspondence to the physical-temporal relationships objectively existing between these objects and events in their own reality.* (There may be other kinds of statements concerning, for example, aesthetic qualities. But the types of statements normally subjected to logical analysis are of the form we describe.) Statements have no validity in themselves. They only have validity in virtue of the faithfulness of their reference to the ‘things’ they describe. And the relationship of statements to each other is valid only in so far as they are a faithful reflection of the objective relationship existing between the ‘things’ they refer to. And *logic* is the science of the relationship existing between statements – in the first instance. Hence the logic of statements is dependent in its form upon the physical properties of space and time, or the space-time continuum if one wishes to be Einsteinian. However, before we proceed further there are some questions which must be touched upon.

It may be argued by some that it is wrong for us to jump from saying that the relationship in logic can be *represented* by the geometry of space, to concluding that the relationships in logic are ontologically *derived* from the geometry of space. Is it not perhaps the case that both logic and the nature of space-time have a form determined by ‘rationality’ which pervades everything, and therefore one is not determined by the other but both by something else? Or is it not perhaps the case that there is this correspondence between logic and being because the nature of physical space is moulded by the ‘laws of logic’ rather than vice versa?

However, if we are not going to concede every starting point to the presuppositions of the non-Christian (a very unfair and unrealistic demand, even in apologetics) then we may be allowed the presupposition of a beginning to the physical universe. And if that is so then where was this *tertium quid* rationality, or where was this prior logic ‘beforehand’ when there was only God? Was it an eternal entity like a Platonic form?

Was it God's logic? But God's logic of being is trinitarian. Or was it a logic in his *mind* different from the logic of his being? But that 'solution' only repeats and restates the problem. For even if one posited that the logic of God's *mind* moulded the form of created being, we still have two types of being with differing rationalities. Further, one has had to abandon the notion that there is in the natural universe itself a rationality which determines its own forms of being. Can there be a 'logic' without something it refers to? Even from atheistic presuppositions, and putting aside the problem that both the Steady-State and Oscillatory theories of the universe as well as the Big-Bang Theory seem to require physics which allow creation out of nothing,⁷ if the physical universe is posited to be *eternal* then the whole question as to which determines which, logic or being, is made impossible to answer. It then becomes a case of which of them it is *reasonable* to assume determines the nature of the other. If it is inherently undecidable as to which determines which, then we need only demonstrate that our hypothesis is *reasonable* for us to proceed on its basis. We are quite prepared to concede a state of undecidability. But we also believe that our hypothesis (being determines logic) is reasonable.

In 1931 Kurt Godel showed that in any formal system adequate for number theory, there necessarily exists an undecidable formula. Thus the consistency of a formal (logical) system adequate for number theory cannot be proved within the system itself. We would argue that this means that the consistency, and therefore the validity of the rationality employed in number theory, arithmetic, mathematics and geometry, cannot be demonstrated within theory alone. Thus the validity of rationality is dependent upon an appeal to our 'intuitive' grasp of the nature of objective reality itself, which is ultimately the nature of the physical universe about us. Therefore, unless one was going to be agnostic about the question of which determines which, logic or being—in which case one is not allowed to state that our assumption is wrong!—the *reasonable* thing to do is to accept that because *for us* the nature of being has to be appealed to in order to validate notions of consistency, then *for us* the nature of being determines the nature of logic.

However, the thrust of our position can be demonstrated in our understanding of the definition of logic. Logic deals with the relationship between statements. Statements refer to objects and events in space and time, or ordinarily to the impinging of objects and events on space and time. The actual relationship between these objects and events is dictated by the nature of the physical universe, the 'geometry' of the universe as it were. Thus because verbal statements are but verbal descriptions of objects and events in time and space, the *relationship* between these verbal statements (logic) must have a direct correspondence with the actual physical, empirical, geometrical relationships between the actual

7. See Stanley Jaki, *Cosmos and Creator*, Edinburgh, 1980.

objects and events themselves. The logic we employ when linking together the statements we make about that real world is forced by experience to become a logic in harmony with the objective relationships operating in that real world, otherwise logic would not give the correct answers when used as a tool. The logic so derived by experience becomes so commonplace and ‘obvious’ that we prescind it into a thing in itself and forget that without its roots it is nothing. Thus logic is not an *a priori* system used to organise a set of statements and their consequences, but is an *a posteriori* set of axioms fashioned from the empirical world and our experience of it. But logic is so highly polished and so long extracted from its roots that it has the deceptive appearance of having an existence of its own.

Christian Theology and Logic

We have suggested that over-familiarity with the particular form of logic appropriate for our space-time continuum has made us elevate it into a thing in its own right. A millennium and a half ago St. Augustine wrote:

And yet the validity of logical sequences is not a thing devised by men, but is observed and noted by them that they may be able to learn and teach it; for it exists eternally in the reason of things, and has its origin with God.⁸

Augustine rightly saw that if logic and language are divorced from objective being and are made purely subjective then truth is lost. But Augustine also displays an error common in the history of thought. This is because he teaches that the validity of logical sequence exists *eternally* in the reason of things. If ‘eternally’ is interpreted to include the eternity of God also, then it would mean that the being of God was subject to the same logic as the forms in creation. But the nature of God in Trinity seems to contradict that.

Our human logic is, by the nature of its origins, determined by the nature of the natural universe. Consequently it is therefore obviously also *limited* in its domain of applicability to that natural universe out of which it was born. Thus the Gordian knot has been cut. For the Gordian knot in this field is the notion that formal logic is a transcendent entity, transcendent over both God and creation. But our normal human logical concepts which we employ when relating statement to statement are not such. Normal logic is simply a representation of the physical forms in the universe applied to the verbal statements which describe physical relationships.

The logic of statements is dependent upon, and ultimately dictated by the physical structures of creation, and the physical creation – including the relationship between things as well as the things in themselves – is

8. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* II/32.

created out of nothing, *creatio ex nihilo*, and not out of some eternal transcendent form. Therefore there are absolutely no grounds for the common assumption that the normal logic used in language is applicable to God. It is only applicable in its own domain, within the created order. The doctrine of creation out of nothing means that the *form* as well as the *matter* of the universe had no pre-existence or eternity. When we use our reason, the mind is manipulating a created form, not a transcendent or eternal form. Thus, given the empirical basis of logic in a created universe formed by the free act of the divine will, it is in fact positively irrational and unscientific to apply that logic to God's being, the uncreated, eternal and transcendent. Logic is dependent upon the forms of created being. Created being has no connection with the being of God. This is what *creatio ex nihilo* tells us. Therefore logic is denying its own validity when applied outside its own domain.

We are therefore claiming a very specific and definite thing. We are claiming that it is irrational and unscientific and unreasonable to seek to apply to the being of God a logic which is totally determined by the physical nature of a creation which is outside of God. Thus the objector has no rational grounds for claiming that theology is irrational.

At this point we must make it clear that we are not sweeping away the principle of non-contradiction. Rather, we are emphasising that the correspondence test of truth has priority over the consistency test of truth. This is because the true consistency of a set of statements is determined ultimately by whether or not the 'real things' the statements refer to actually exist in a particular form of relationship to one another. Too often we only deal with a second-hand notion of consistency. In this second-hand notion of consistency statements are said to be consistent if they relate to one another according to our canons of suitability, i.e. our logic. But it is the reality of being itself which determines whether two entities can exist simultaneously, and therefore whether two statements can exist side by side. In our normal modes of thought and logic and experience of things, the types of situation which are demanded by the consequences of the doctrine of the Trinity appear to be impossible. But they exist. Therefore, because actuality determines possibility, we cannot say they do not exist or are impossible. Thus the notion of the principle of non-contradiction is not eliminated, but revised. The nominalism of the ordinary syllogism is seen, not to be false, but only applicable in that form in its own domain. Actuality determines possibility. Actuality determines truth. Revelation determines actuality, therefore there is no need to fear the 'unhinged mind' running amok!

Thus we may arrive at the conclusion that the types of logical concepts involved in thought concerning the Trinity and the incarnation cannot be ruled out of court as illogical. But this is not the end of the matter if we are seeking a rational – in the broad sense – justification of theology. We must now ask ourselves deeper questions.

If the nature of being determines the nature of logic, and if therefore the nature of God's being is solely determinative in the formation of the concepts and logic applicable to statements about the divine being, then should it not be the case that everything in theology must exhibit relationships of the same type? Theology describes the acts of God. The acts of God are God's being in action. Therefore the inner logic of these acts should be determined by the nature of God's own being. In other words, is it acceptable and honest for theologians to claim a special dispensation to use 'paradoxical' concepts in Trinity and incarnation and then in every other field to revert back to the normal categories of thought? We examine this next.

Trinitarian Theology

Many attempts have been made to write so-called trinitarian theology in which trinitarian concepts permeate the whole of the subject-matter. But repeatedly such attempts degenerated into disguised tritheism. The three persons are each given spheres of influence within which to work, with an acknowledgement of the role of the other two persons at each stage, and with numerous reminders that all are involved in every operation. But the logic of Triunity is not really worked into the matter. Furthermore, the problem is compounded by the following question: if the nature of being solely determines the nature of the logic of statements about that being, what happens when the two spheres interact? If the nature of God's being demands logic A, and the nature of created being demands logic B, what happens when we want to make statements about God working in the creation? To which logic, A or B, are these statements subject? Happily the practical, existential problem is solved by the actuality of revelation in Holy Scripture. In Holy Scripture we are *given* the message, we do not have to work out how to deduce it from scrappy data. Actuality determines possibility. But the philosophical and apologetic problem remains, especially if we seek to justify theology.

The old solution was to state that when God acts outside of himself he only acts in the *unity* of Trinity. Hence the phrase which was given by Augustine: *opera Trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*. The escape hatch is then apparently open. If one focuses only on the unity of God there are no problems. But God's being is in his act. And in the incarnation of the eternal Son of the Father, an immovable stumbling block closes this path of escape. Because the Son alone, and not the Father or the Spirit, became incarnate then we see that God encountered the world in the mode of his *Triunity*. Thus it is the Triunity of the Trinity, and not the unity of the Trinity which impinges upon the logic of the created order in the very event, the central event, which our theological statements must deal with and cannot avoid. The other solution to this dilemma of a clash of logics is to argue that it is the form of incarnation as a *tertium quid* which resolves the interaction of the logic of God and the logic of

creation. But that route leads us back to Hegel.

Therefore we have to take stock of the way in which our statements about God come to be.

The Christological Basis of Theological Logic

In Christian theology we view God from only one vantage point, from being ‘in Christ’. The doctrine of the Trinity is dependent in both form and content, upon the nature of the person and the work of Jesus Christ. It is true that ontologically and chronologically the incarnation of the Son of God comes after the Trinity. But in terms of our actual knowledge of God our formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity depends upon our Christology. However, that is not a temporary stage. It is a permanent state of affairs. This is partly because the source for theological reflection has a once-for-all historical givenness in Holy Scripture. There, we see enough in order to be able to confess the Triunity of God, but that Triunity is mediated to us in the incarnation. It is not just that knowledge of the Triunity is so mediated. It is also the case that the form, or logic of Triunity is mediated through – though not identical with – the incarnation. *Therefore when we are asked to explain how we deal with the problem of the interaction of two logics, we are able to justify theology by pointing out that we actually start from the point of interaction as a given, and that our theology of the Trinity is distinctly limited by that.* Therefore we are not claiming to have a full picture of Triunity which we then try to interact with the creation. Rather, we admit that we only have a fragmented picture of Triunity because we have started from that very area of interaction, in the birth, life, death and resurrection of our Lord.

Because we cannot step outside of Christ to view God from some independent absolute vantage point, it means that we must confess that our doctrine of the Trinity is necessarily not only a very limited description of what God is like, but is also a distorted view. For example, we are all familiar with the shape of a square. Now consider, not the *representation* of a square upon a sheet of paper, but a *real* square. If we were always compelled to view that square from one of its corners, and not from an ideal vantage point, then it would appear foreshortened and more like a rhombus. That would be the result of being unable to step outside of the square itself and therefore being unable to have a bird’s-eye view. It would be the result of being inherently unable to approach the entity from all angles we wanted to. A trustworthy text-book may well inform us in words – verbal propositions – that all of the sides are of equal length and all the interior angles of equal size, but our perception is distorted. Our ability to synthesise these truths about the shape and so to see the figure as it would appear from a birds-eye view, has been taken away and limited by the permanent viewpoint, the fixed position, from which we must observe it, and relate to it.

Similarly, it is like this with our doctrine of God. We cannot step

outside of Christ and observe the being of God from another angle. Thus our doctrine is true but distorted. Thus we cannot impose an all-round, 360 degrees symmetrical framework on the doctrine. We only have a doctrine worked out from a particular corner, from being 'in Christ'. We behold the Godhead not only *through* Jesus, but *in* Jesus. We do not relate to the Trinity equally, but 'in Christ', united to Christ, and our mode of relationship to the Father and the Holy Spirit is determined by Christ's relationship with them, for we are united to *him*. Thus our Trinitarian concepts will be inherently *assymetrical* and not symmetrical. We must avoid the idealist perfectionism which made Origen of Alexandria deduce that in heaven all the resurrection bodies would be perfectly spherical since total symmetry is a prerequisite of idealist thought. In Holy Scripture however, all of the doctrines are weighted towards the activity of the Son of God.

A Fresh Look at Appropriation

Sunday by Sunday, the church recites the words of the Apostles' Creed: 'I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth . . .' Theology has therefore traditionally followed the principle of *appropriation*. This principle of appropriation states that although in his works the Triune God is undivided, yet the work of creation is particularly appropriate to the Father, salvation to the Son, and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. But if our theological method is to be governed purely by Holy Scripture and not by tradition, or by a neat symmetrical division of labour, then there is far, far more evidence in the Bible to correlate the act of creation with God the Son than the Father, if indeed a special correlation is to be made with any of the particular persons at all (*cf* John 1; Col. 1 etc). We should not be surprised at this, given the implications of the rationality of theological concepts which we have described above. Truly the Father and the Spirit are involved in creation also, but just as God was in Christ, yet it was only the Son who was made incarnate, and thus incarnation is particularly appropriate to the Son, so also if the New Testament is examined on its own merits and not according to tradition, we should be forced to say that creation is also particularly appropriate to God the Son. This is not Christomonism. It is the way the Triune God chooses to relate to us in his fulness of Triunity. In his *Church Dogmatics*,⁹ Karl Barth has several pages of scriptural quotations and exegesis to this effect, although he is reluctant to abandon the traditional form of the doctrine of appropriation. Thus we are claiming that Scripture bears out in reality, what our analysis of the interaction of divine and natural logics pointed to in theory. *For us*, from our fixed angle of approaching the Godhead and the acts of God, the Father and the Spirit come to us, and relate to us, and are seen by us, as they come in the Son and relate to him. Thus *for us* God is creator in him.

9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, Edinburgh, 1958, pp 51ff.

For us, God is saviour in him. *For us*, God is even our judge in him. We cannot move outside of that and view creation, salvation, or judgment from another angle. We do not have an absolute viewpoint. We only have one ‘in Christ’.

The medieval theologians treated the logic of the Trinity in a very different way. The Platonism inherent in the Augustinian tradition treated God as ideal perfection. It was a principle also that there are no unrealised potentialities in God. That meant that they started out by assuming that each and every inner-Trinitarian relationship was reversible, and each activity was attributable to each of the persons in a balanced symmetry *unless* there were specific truths of revelation to the contrary. The Council of Florence codified this principle of trinitarian logic as follows: ‘*Unity does not lose its consequence unless some opposition of relation stands in the way*’. Earlier, Anselm of Canterbury had used this principle in his treatise *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*. Anselm treated everything in the Godhead, and each inner-Trinitarian relationship, as reversible and identical, unless logic or revelation decreed otherwise. Using this principle Anselm was able to prove – as he thought – that the Holy Spirit must proceed from the Father *and* from the Son. In this way Anselm constructed his defence of the *Filioque* clause. But the logical principle employed consciously by Anselm, and often subconsciously by others, is that the divine being is perfect in symmetry according to our canons of analysis. But we have no grounds for this kind of methodology, especially when we have seen that *logically* as well as by *revelation*, our considerations concerning the nature of our God are taken from our being ‘in Christ’, and not from an idealist vantage-point outside of our subject matter. An early scientist once exclaimed ‘Give me a fulcrum and I will move the earth!’, but to do so he would have had to step outside of the earth. We can no more step outside of our position in relation to God, than he could in relation to the earth.

The rationality of theology demands that, because God is God, because he is transcendent over logic as well as over time and space, we can say nothing about him except what he chooses to reveal to us. The integrity of theology as a discipline is therefore only justifiable in terms of its own rationality, when it is controlled by its centre in Jesus Christ, revealed in Holy Scripture.

THE KINGDOM AND THE POOR*

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Much theological thought has gone into the question of poverty and the poor of late, no doubt because of the experience of Christians in the Third World church who have been trying to relate the Christian faith to the circumstances in which they found themselves. In their reflection upon the Scriptures many have come to the conclusion that God has a special concern for, indeed, a 'bias' towards, the poor, which if true ought radically to affect our Christian life and church practice.

The Old Testament

God and the Poor There are four main Hebrew words used in the Old Testament to denote the 'poor', each with its own particular nuances of background meaning, and it may be an enlightening place to start by looking into these meanings.¹ The word '*eb iōn*', used 25 times, usually refers to the very poor, 'those with no roof over their heads'. As a result of this extreme poverty they are at the foot of the social scale, the subject of oppression and abuse, and therefore in desperate need of help or deliverance from their predicament.

The second word *dal*, used some 43 times in the Old Testament, refers usually to 'one who is wrongfully impoverished or dispossessed'. It is used more with the idea of expressing a relationship rather than the state of social distress; *i.e.*, that one is poor in relation to someone else, because of their greed or oppression.

The adjective '*ānî*', used over 60 times, has the meaning 'poor, afflicted, humble, needy'. This word has religious connotations in that it is used of the pious people in Israel who are afflicted by the wicked in Israel itself, or by the wicked nations around them. God has compassion on such people (Is. 49:13), and saves them (Ps. 34:9).

The final Hebrew word of the four is *rūš*, meaning 'poor, impoverished'. It is related to the verb *yāraš*, which basically means to 'take possession of, inherit, dispossess'. The word *rūš*, is used in one form to mean 'to be dispossessed, impoverished, brought into a state of poverty' and is used in the Wisdom literature in antithesis to the 'rich'.

* A version of this paper was read at the 1986 Conference of the Scottish Evangelical Theology Society.

1. Background information extracted from the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* and R. L. Harris *et al.*, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Chicago, 1980.

Study of the words used in the Old Testament and their range of meaning shows that the writers were aware of the close relationship between being poor and needy, and being afflicted, oppressed and dispossessed. It is worthwhile keeping this in mind as we look at what Sider calls ‘pivotal points of revelation history’.²

The Exodus ‘Then the Lord said, “I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians . . . and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land . . .”’ (Ex. 3:7, 8a).

‘Say therefore to the people of Israel, “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great acts of judgement and I will take you for my people, and I will be your God; and you shall know what I am the Lord your God who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians,”’ (Ex. 6:6, 7).

Both Sider³ and Kirk⁴ point to the two-pronged aspect of the revelation of God in this major incident in the history of Israel. First there is the emphasis on liberation – that God was revealing himself as the liberator of a people from oppression and cruelty under the Egyptians. God was in this act showing himself to be against oppression and very much concerned about justice. Secondly, nevertheless, God did not enter history at this point to free all people of this period who were under the yoke of slavery, but rather he chose the Israelites to be a special people – a people who were to have a special relationship with him and who were to reflect in their life as a nation the attributes and characteristics of God. This aspect of the revelation is often missed by those concerned with portraying God simply as the great freedom-fighter on behalf of the oppressed. Certainly in the Exodus we see God acting in that way, as the liberator of an oppressed people, but they were liberated for a purpose – to reflect the justice, love and purity of the God who had called them up out of Egypt.

A further danger among some exegetes is that they see this incident purely in human terms as an oppressed people rebelling against their masters. Rather, the text consistently proclaims that Israel’s liberation is due to the initiative, direction and overwhelming power of God.

The Law Having established themselves in the promised land we see clearly in the law the reflection of their experience prior to the Exodus. Written into the law were various aspects that were anti-oppression and positive expressions of liberation and justice. So, for example, in Ex. 22:25f, Lev. 19:13, and Deut. 24:7, there were specific laws to prevent

2. R. J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, London, 1977, p 54.

3. *Ibid.*, p 54f.

4. J. A. Kirk, *Theology Encounters Revolution*, Leicester, 1980, p 169.

exploitation in money lending, the taking of a pledge, the paying of wages and stealing of sheep. In other laws, *e.g.* Ex. 22:21f; Deut. 10:17f, 24:17f, new standards were set for the living of life in the community with special reference to the vulnerable, *e.g.* widows, sojourners and strangers, often relating the need to look after these people to the experience of the Israelites in Egypt. The laws concerning tithing and gleaning allowed the poor to be able to obtain food and thus provided a simple welfare system appropriate to the agrarian community that existed at that time.

Two laws in particular ought to have special mention. In the sabbatical law the land was to lie fallow every seventh year (Ex. 23:10f; Lev. 25:2ff), not only to help the land renew itself, but also so that the poor may be able to eat, because they were allowed to gather whatever grew on the land that year. However, not only was the land freed, but people who, because of poverty, had sold themselves as slaves, were also released (Deut. 15:12f), as were any who had debts (Deut. 15:1f). Thus the sabbatical year spelt liberation for the soil, the slaves and debtors.

The second law worthy of particular mention is in Leviticus, chapter 25. It is referred to by Sider as ‘one of the most radical texts in all Scripture’.⁵ Every fifty years, in the year of jubilee, all land was to be returned to its original owners – without compensation!

The absolute importance of land in an agrarian economy is the basis for this law, in that should anyone lose their land through ill-health, mismanagement, or for any other reason, then it could lead to all sorts of dangers of inequality. Thus both these laws – the sabbatical and jubilee laws – prevented the permanent creation of great differences of wealth within the community and would have helped maintain an equal and just society which reflected the impartial justice of Yahweh.

The Exile There is, however, little to suggest that these laws were in fact ever seriously put into practice, and it becomes very evident by the 8th century B.C. that there was gross inequality and oppression throughout the land. Onto the scene comes a series of prophets whose preaching, based on the knowledge of God in the law, ruthlessly attacked the rich oppressors who claimed to know and worship God. Knowing God was to do justice, they said, for justice is integral to the being of God (Jer. 22 especially v. 14). It is impossible to worship God if the commitment to justice is missing. Therefore, referring to the rich women of his day, Amos could prophesy, ‘Hear this word you cows of Bashan . . . who oppress the poor, who crush the needy . . . The Lord God has sworn by his holiness that behold the days are coming upon you when they shall take you away, even the last of you, with fish-hooks’ (Amos 4:1f). Similar passages throughout the minor prophets, and in Isaiah (especially chapters 10 and 65) and Jeremiah (*e.g.* chapters 5, 11 and 34) warn Israel

5. Sider, *op. cit.*, p 79.

that doom is about to fall on them due largely to their lack of practice of the worship of Yahweh, especially in relation to their dealings with the poor and needy – that on account of their oppression of the afflicted, God has had no alternative but to inflict upon them destruction and captivity. Here again we see the consistency in the revelation of the character of Yahweh, namely, that the God of the Exodus is still at work correcting the oppression of the poor in the national catastrophe of the exile from Israel.

However, the God of liberation is not finished yet. Later in the exile when the Israelites again found themselves under an oppressive regime, Ezekiel raises once more the theme of the Exodus, to the effect that, upon repentance for past injustices, God will release them just as he had done in Egypt. Israel would be set free so long as they returned to God's way of justice and righteousness. Thus we see the close relationship between the economic exploitation of the poor and the action of God in the liberating of the people from their affliction. God's justice is consistently manifested in his action with his people Israel, both for and against them.

New Testament

The Poor The principal word for the poor in the New Testament is *ptōchos*¹ from the verb *ptōssō* meaning ‘to crouch’ or ‘to cower’, the inference being one of begging. Thus there is still this undercurrent of relations with those who have wealth – the relationship being one where the poor person, having to beg, is very much at the mercy of the rich.

The Incarnation However, of far greater importance in the New Testament is the appearance of the divine in human form in the incarnation. How did the God of the Old Testament, with his concern for those who were oppressed, and for justice in society, enter the world? Were those particular concerns followed through consistently into his incarnation? The answer is a resounding Yes! We see his humble birth to a carpenter and his wife caught up in a census registration by being members of a subject race. We see him having to flee as a refugee from a tyrannical ruler who is set to destroy him. We see him brought up in Nazareth, a village held in low regard by the people of that day. ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’, asked Nathanael in John 1:46.

In his first recorded preaching opportunity, Jesus lets his hearers know exactly what his purpose is. ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord’ (Luke 4:18f). When John the Baptist sent to Jesus to ask whether he was the one who was to come (Matt. 11), Jesus validated his messianic

ministry by pointing to, amongst other things, the preaching of the good news to the poor.

The Kingdom of God Thus the Messiah came to establish the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God was (and still is) God's programme for the total redemption of every aspect of creation – *i.e.*, there was to be a liberation of relationships. The relationships between people and God, between people and people, and between people and the physical world were all to be transformed, and Jesus made it plain by his lifestyle and his preaching that the poor had a crucial role to play in the work of transformation involved in the coming of the kingdom. In the Beatitudes Jesus gave new hope to those who were poor, hungry, thirsty and oppressed. The news that God loved and wanted them gave them a dignity and self-worth society had denied, and was still denying them.

Indeed such was the identification between Jesus and the poor that implicit in his teaching is the fact that Jesus *was* the poor, for that which was done to the 'least of the brethren' – the hungry, the prisoner, the thirsty, the naked – was actually done to Christ himself (Matt. 25). However, it was not just help or aid that Jesus brought to the poor. It was liberation and justice which he sought. It was this that brought him into so much conflict with the religious and social powers of his day. His verbal attacks were specific, telling the rich that it would be harder for them to enter the kingdom than for a camel to get through the eye of a needle, cursing them for their greed and selfishness (Luke 6:23f), and lambasting the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who had turned the law of freedom and love into an oppressive and destructive bondage.

However, the passion for justice did not stop at the verbal level. Indeed it could not, for in Christ we see a man whose speech, deeds, and very being were so uniquely integrated, that he entered the Temple in Jerusalem, which was not only the religious centre of the nation, but also the financial and economic one, and made a 'highly significant display'⁶ by clearing out the money-changers. Thus we see his total antagonism to all agents of oppression throughout his ministry, whether they be demonic, religious, social, political or economic, and at the same time an identification with the concerns, hopes and desires of the poor and oppressed.

Crucifixion There can be little doubt that it was this identification which led to his death. For while we can rightly say that Jesus Christ died as the sacrifice for sin, for the atonement of guilt, for reconciliation between God and man, and man and man, it must also be made quite clear that, at the human level, Jesus Christ died a political death. He was put to death to maintain the *status quo*. The political and religious authorities saw him as a threat to their social power, a threat that had to be removed. They

6. C. Sugden, *Radical Discipleship*, London, 1981, p 31.

saw him as a revolutionary who had too much popular support for their comfort. He had to die, and so he did – between two robbers, the death of a social and religious outcast. Thus we see in his crucifixion his continuing commitment to the oppressed and powerless, his continuing identification with the poor and the outcast.

Resurrection Were that to have been the end of Jesus, it would have been an heroic gesture of self-sacrifice, but ultimately a futile act of a revolutionary visionary. However, the subsequent resurrection of Jesus gave ultimate victory and power to those who would continue the work of the kingdom. ‘The revolutionary presence of Jesus in the new community he founded was not simply a memory, nor a repetition of revolutionary language and symbols, but an objective reality through the gift of the Holy Spirit. The resurrection of “this same Jesus” meant that the disciples were already living in the reality of the new age. The eschatological forces of God’s Kingdom were already operating in the middle of time.’⁷

The Church It was in the body of believers established by the resurrection and Pentecost experiences that we see the next stage of the establishment of God’s kingdom. If there was any description worthy of the Christian community of the early church it was quite simply that it was ‘new’. It was the *avant garde* of God’s new creation in which former relationships and attitudes were transformed, and through which the social and religious assumptions of the day were severely challenged, none more so than in the economic realm of the community. We see clearly from Acts, chapter 2, that, following the practice of Jesus (John 12:6), the early church practised the common purse, where individuals’ monies and property were put together for the common use – at the individual’s own choice (Acts 5:4). Jesus had inaugurated a new kingdom of faithful followers who were to be completely available to each other, not just within the local community, but also in the relationships between and among the Christian communities as they were being founded. So when Paul hears of the famine and poverty in the Jerusalem church, he sets about organising an appeal in the churches of Macedonia and Achaia (2 Cor. 8 and 9). The result was that within the worldwide Christian community there was ‘unconditional economic liability for and total financial availability to the other brothers and sisters in Christ’,⁸ both at the level of individual relationships within the community, and between the communities of fellow-believers. The aim of this sharing was not just to use up excess, but was, in fact, equality (2 Cor. 8:14). Once again we see the importance of the post-Exodus emphasis on community-living, living together in such a way that they would avoid extremes of wealth and poverty.

7. Kirk, *op. cit.*, p 175.

8. Sider, *op. cit.*, p 90.

A further radical break was in the make-up of the new community. Paul (in 1 Cor. 1:26f) describes the church thus: 'Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many of you were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.' Likewise James (2:5): 'Has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs to the kingdom?' This teaching, together with the incarnation itself, suggests that the frequent use of the poor as his special instruments is not insignificant. It points to something in the very nature of God.

This emphasis on the early church consisting mainly of the poor and despised does not mean that there were no rich in the church. Indeed one of the very problems that James is trying to wrestle with in his letter is how to deal with relationships between the rich and the poor within the congregation. It was in this area of reconciliation, of unity, not just between rich and poor, but across all the social and ethnic divides of the period, that radical inroads were again made in the life of the church. 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, freeman, but Christ is all, and in all' (Col. 3:11). This catholicity of the church is crucial in its mirroring of the kingdom of new relationships. All are one in Christ Jesus, and while, numerically, certain groups may dominate, this was in no way taken to mean control. For example, in Acts, chapter 6, when the Hellenists, who must have been a minority in the church at Jerusalem, were worried about the apparent raw deal that the Hellenist widows were getting in the sharing of resources, they seem to have been given complete control, judging by the names of the seven deacons chosen.

The biggest problem of the early church over their catholicity, however, seemed to have come in the Jewish-Gentile relations. The Jews would seem to have had every right in maintaining the pre-eminence of their culture and religious ethos, seeing that the links between the Jewish faith and Christianity were fundamental. However, they soon realised, at least Paul did (Eph. 3:4f), that the Christian faith was much bigger than the Jewish background from which it arose, and indeed that the gospel of Jesus Christ was a universal gospel. There can be little doubt that this would have hit the Jews hard, because of the nationalistic fervour with which they worshipped their God, and the importance of authority and control within the Jewish faith (especially of the law), all of which would be lost were they to allow the unconditional entry of the Gentiles into the church. However, it is to their eternal credit that they did just that. Kirk emphasises the importance of this when he says, 'The entry of the Gentiles into the new community on a completely equal footing with the

Jews was, in itself, a revolution of incalculable consequences.⁹

Thus the Christian gospel spread, due in the main to Paul, who had become aware of the power of the new gospel, and its adaptability and suitability to each new culture and social group which he encountered. Roy Joslin¹⁰ has looked at the terms in which Paul couched his preaching of the gospel to the two totally different centres of Lystra and Athens, and notes how differences were appropriate to the situations in which Paul had found himself. Thus the church grew in numerical size, but more significantly it grew in the number of ethnic groups from which followers of Jesus Christ joined together in the new community, continually extending its catholicity.

One final radical departure from society's prevailing attitudes was the response of the new community to service and suffering. The willingness to be part of the spreading of the gospel, and the willingness to serve the kingdom, led often to suffering and even martyrdom, due usually to those who were worried that their position of power (economic, social or religious) was likely to be challenged, for example, the owners of the soothsayer at Philippi (Acts 16:16f). The Christian community was essential at these times when Christian involvement in mission meant persecution and personal suffering. Paul's letters, especially those from prison, rejoice in the knowledge of the prayer and also the practical support he was receiving, aware as he was that Christians are 'not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Eph. 6:12). The war now waged with spiritual weapons is a war in which the whole community of the people of God is engaged. This people fights in close ranks. The letter to the Ephesians does not envisage the saints as lonely heroes who fight the battle and win the victory independent of the support of the community.

Recent commentators have attempted to point out that this particular passage does not just refer to spiritual realms, but that social structures or institutions may also have been in Paul's mind. 'The "principalities and powers" are at the same time intangible spiritual entities *and* concrete historical, social or psychic structures or institutions of all created things and all created life.'¹¹ Such an interpretation has important consequences for the task of mission, and for advancing the kingdom, especially in the way in which social and political involvement is related to Christian discipleship and church life, which has been a major topic of much recent theological study and debate.

9. Kirk, *op. cit.*, p 175.

10. R. Joslin, *Urban Harvest*, Welwyn, 1982, especially ch. 6.

11. *Ephesians*, Anchor Bible Commentaries.

Pointers from some recent Theology

Two major strands of theological enquiry have arisen of late which have great significance for the gospel to the poor. They arise out of different historical contexts, but the contexts both have a significant role in the formation. One is the Liberation Theology movements, coming principally from Third World churches, all of which originate in contexts of oppression and domination. I would include in this category the South American, Marxist-related, theology of revolution, the more conservative (relatively speaking) theology of liberation, feminist theology, and the Black Theology movement especially in the United States.

The other strand is a much more Western-European phenomenon, sometimes referred to as Political Theology. The main exponents of this are Moltmann, Gollwitzer, and the Roman Catholic, Metz. I suspect that the experience of the Second World War, especially the rise of Nazism in Germany, has had much to do with this particular movement, although Moltmann and Metz in particular have significant Third World experience. Both these strands, however, have made and are still making significant contributions to the socio-political involvement of the church, especially in relation to the poor.

There are four important pointers which these recent theological movements have for the church today. All of them are interrelated, and indeed may prove useful in summarizing the previous biblical themes we have been looking at.

Salvation has social and political consequences. ‘*Soteria* must also be understood as *shalom* in the Old Testament sense. This does not merely mean salvation of the soul, individual rescue, or comfort for the troubled conscience, but also the realisation of the eschatological *hope of justice*, the *humanizing* of man, the *socializing* of humanity, peace for all creation.’¹² Therefore, ‘the acknowledgement of the sole Lordship of Christ plunges the church into political conflict. A logical and consistent Christian discipleship always has logical political consequences.’¹³ The aim of this involvement is liberation. ‘The rule of Christ who was crucified for political reasons can only be extended through liberation from forms of rule which make men servile and apathetic.’¹⁴ In particular Moltmann lists five ‘vicious circles’ from which men must seek liberation. These are poverty, force, racial and cultural alienation, pollution and feelings of senselessness and godforsakenness.¹⁵ Any advancement in these areas of liberation can be seen as ‘materialisations of the presence of God.’¹⁶ On this theme Chris Sugden writes, ‘When Kingdom-shaped things happen,

12. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, London, 1967, p 329.

13. J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, London, 1977, p 15.

14. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, London, 1975, p 324.

15. *Ibid.*, pp 329ff.

16. *Ibid.*, p 337.

whoever does them and however insignificant they are, God's Kingdom is at work.'¹⁷

Theology and Church structures are culturally conditioned. 'When (Christian churches) regard themselves as being either unpolitical or apolitical, this is only because of the blindness which their social position inflicts upon them.'¹⁸ Gollwitzer points out that the idea of order, and the need to preserve the order of social institutions assumed to be immutable, has often been the guiding principle behind the churches' social involvement. However, 'Christianity does not bind the hearts of the citizen to the state, but lures them away from it. The path of a theology of the cross that is critical of society goes between irrelevant Christian identity and social relevance without Christian identity.'¹⁹ Theologians must therefore become aware of the possible effects of ideological presuppositions upon their theologizing.

The gospel is biased to the poor. Is it possible to have a 'pure' gospel, free from ideological biases? No, say the theologians of liberation, and therefore Christians must do their theology from the perspective of the poor, the emphasis being on *doing* theology, i.e. active participation with the poor. Liberation theology 'is a theology which deliberately starts from an identification with persons, with races and with social classes which suffer misery and exploitation, identifying itself with their concerns and struggles. There is no option; theology must be done from out of a commitment to a living God who defends the cause of "the hungry" and who "sends the rich empty away" (Luke 1:53).'²⁰ Nevertheless, while siding with the oppressed and humiliated, 'efforts are directed equally to the free and human future of the oppressor.'²¹ The rich, however, will only be helped when they recognise their own poverty and enter into fellowship with the poor, especially those whom they have caused to be poor. Thus Moltmann says, 'It is precisely as the partisan gospel for the poor that the Kingdom of God brings freedom to all men, for it brings both rich and poor, healthy and sick, the powerful and the helpless for the first time into that fellowship of poverty to which it is possible to talk without distinction about "all men". In a divided, unjust and violent world, the partisan gospel reveals the true universality of the coming rule of God.'²²

Community is important. 'The more communal life in society approximates to a real togetherness and the more through solidarity – so far as laws can compel it and educate men towards it – they show *chesed*,

17. Sugden, *op. cit.*, p 69.

18. J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p 324.

19. *Ibid.*, p 324.

20. J. A. Kirk, *Liberation Theology*, London, 1979, p 205.

21. J. Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*, p 74.

22. *Ibid.*, pp 79f.

solidarity to each other, by that much more there comes into being an earthly horizon of grace for the earthly life of men . . . and by that much more such a communal life will become a “parable” of the Kingdom of God.²³ This search for community involves political participation ‘with the aim of supporting those efforts to increase togetherness so far as is possible under the conditions of the old world; and this aim is at the same time the *criterion* by which tendencies, theories, attitudes and alliances of the disciples are measured.’²⁴ It also means identification with the poor. ‘To opt for the poor man, to be identified with his lot, to share his destiny,’ means a desire to turn history into genuine brotherhood for all men.²⁵

I finish with the same quote from Gutierrez with which Kirk finishes his book. ‘We need be conscious of the always critical and creative character of the liberating message of the gospel – a message that does not identify itself with any social form, no matter how just it may seem to us in any given moment, but which always speaks from the stance of the poor and which asks of us a very concrete solidarity in the present of our situation and our capacity to analyse it, even at the risk of being mistaken. The Word of the Lord interprets every situation and places it in the wider perspective of the radical liberation of Christ, the Lord of History.’²⁶

23. H. Gollwitzer, *An Introduction to Protestant Theology*, Philadelphia, 1982, p 204.

24. *Ibid.*, p 192.

25. H. Assman, *Practical Theology of Liberation*, 1975, p 13.

26. G. Gutierrez, in J. A. Kirk, *Liberation Theology*, p 209.