

## Review Essay\*

# How Theological Exegesis Disrupts Theological Tradition

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“To my knowledge,” Bruce D. Marshall notes in his foreword to this welcomed volume, “no systematic theologian of his generation commented on the Bible as extensively as [Jenson] did.” Likewise, in his Introduction, editor Brad East describes Jenson as “a theologian for whom the Bible makes a material difference in his thought; exegesis is operative, even determinative, at every stage of the theological task.” Yet, “the reception” to date of the work “of the most significant American systematic theologian of the second half of the twentieth century,” East continues, “is at most embryonic.” If these notices prove true, the present volume makes a significant contribution to filling a lacuna and thus enabling proper reception. Jenson never published a monograph on the problems of Scripture for theology today, despite the fact that he wrestled mightily with the task of reading Scripture theologically throughout his long career. A representative spectrum of Jenson’s writings on Scripture, formal and occasional, is here collected and organized both chronologically and topically. This arrangement aids in following the steps Jenson took working through various difficulties before arriving at his mature positions in the publication of theological commentaries on the Song of Songs and Ezekiel.

Thus, in the latter half of his career, Jenson was fully engaged in the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology’s project of “reclaiming the Bible for the

\* Robert W. Jenson, *The Triune Story: Collected Essays on Scripture* (ed. Brad East with a foreword by Bruce D. Marshall; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 376 pp., \$41.95 hb., ISBN 9780190917005. Page references appear in parentheses within the text.

church.”<sup>1</sup> There is an interesting backstory regarding the journey Jenson undertook to arrive at a new place where the usual preoccupations of historical-critical biblical scholarship had receded into the background in favor of a sophisticated deployment of the creedal dogmas of the church as guides to exegesis. An appreciation of that journey through historical-critical biblical scholarship to postliberal theological exegesis helps to underscore a crucial point regarding the proper reception of Jenson’s legacy. Jenson’s mature theological commentary on Scripture, so-called “second naïveté” notwithstanding, does *not* represent a flight into pre-critical dogmatism; it is rather a decidedly *post*-critical endeavor which takes Christian orthodoxy accordingly as a work still in progress. However ambivalent Jenson’s feelings were about so-called postmodernity, his reinvention of theological commentary on Scripture could not have emerged in the preceding epoch of epistemological foundationalism; it in fact waited upon the contemporary criticism of criticism, i.e., of the contradictions and blind spots, the conceits and pretensions of modernity’s ballyhooed historical consciousness.

Be that as it may, Jenson knew that Christian theology experienced the rise of the sciences in the historical criticism of the Bible, which is as much today a settled fact as Copernicus’s discovery of the heliocentric order we now call our solar system. After criticism, the point, for Jenson, was how creedal Christian theology moves forward toward what this reviewer calls “critical dogmatics” –a stance, as we shall see, that makes his apparently traditional reading of the Bible profoundly unsettling also for the very dogmatic inheritance Jenson appears to rehabilitate by seeking anew to read the Bible theologically.

## ■ Historical-Critical Discoveries

Jenson’s entire theological project turns on settled accomplishments in the Bible’s historical criticism. This claim pertains first and foremost to the chief axiom operative in Jenson’s theology from beginning to end: the gospel word of God tells the resurrection of the crucified Jesus as a promise of the redemption of the body, personal, social-ecclesial, and cosmic. Jenson’s early deliberations on the doctrine of Scripture pivot on this historical-critical discovery of the primitive gospel announcing the exaltation of the crucified Jesus as the decisive saving action of Israel’s God of promise. This insight reflects the young Jenson’s deep but discriminating drinking at the well of Rudolf Bultmann’s analysis of the primitive Christian kerygma; it is and remains in some definite tension with a traditional plain-sense reading of the canonical New Testament.

For example, if a reader takes for granted the existence of the canonical New Testament, she would likely begin at the beginning with study of the Gospel according to Matthew and travel a long twenty-eight chapters before learning of the resurrection and its significance. Indeed, she would think instead of divine

<sup>1</sup> Full disclosure: this reviewer was a junior partner with Jenson in this project of the Center and its journal *Pro Ecclesia*.

incarnation, signified by birth from a virgin, as the material content of the gospel and, consequently, would take the publication of Immanuel's authoritative, new Torah for regulating the life of a new Israel as its saving significance. And she would think of the resurrection accordingly as little more than a supernatural sign of validation for the preceding, authorizing disciples to spread the new Torah of Immanuel, God-with-us. Following canonical order, this initial reading of the New Testament would likely color all that follows as well as precedes. Consequently, the Genesis-to-Revelation canonical Bible as a whole would be read as providing a revealed worldview in which the resurrection of the crucified Jesus appears as but one miraculous event alongside many others, with no particular priority epistemically or hermeneutically, contrary to Jenson's theological axiom.

The historical-critical discovery of the earliest gospel announcing the resurrection of the crucified Jesus and his exaltation as saving Lord was important for Jenson, however, just because it rescued the Bible from such a pre-critical misreading of the canon, fixed doctrinally in the notion of a divinely given miracle book, as if the Bible fell intact from heaven, preserved from all error, and as such was authoritative as a revealed worldview, complete with divinely sanctioned regulations, not just for the community of faith, then, but potentially for civil society as well. As with Bultmann before him, the historical insight into the primitive kerygma and the unveiling of the historical process of canonization that ensued from it elicited fresh appreciation of a pivotal hermeneutical insight of the reformer Martin Luther, in whose tradition Jenson stood.

In response to challenges to his use of the Bible to advocate certain reforms of the church, Luther wrote: "You may ask, 'What then is the Word of God, and how shall it be used, since there are so many words of God?' I answer: the apostle explains this in Romans 1. The Word is the gospel of God concerning his Son, who was made flesh, suffered, rose from the dead, and was glorified through the Spirit who sanctifies. . . . Faith alone is the saving and efficacious use of the word of God. . . ." <sup>2</sup> Just as the apostle Paul had appealed in Rom 1:1–4 to the earliest Christian kerygma to launch the theological project of the letter to the Romans to tell how the just will live by faith, Luther too singles out *the* faith-creating word of God which just so bestows epistemic access to Christ as the object of faith, simultaneously identified by its proto-creedal narrative embedded, howsoever embryonically, in the kerygma. Such is *the* word of God in distinction from the many words of God found even in the Bible—let alone elsewhere. As such, it claims the primacy of epistemic access, the avenue through which all the other words of God are to be read and interpreted.

In time, Jenson saw the theological failure of contemporary biblical scholarship as an equal and opposite hermeneutical naïveté regarding epistemic access as had existed in the ecclesiastical dogmatism that historical criticism otherwise subverted.

<sup>2</sup> *Luther's Works* (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Boyd Brown; 75 vols.; Philadelphia: Muhlenberg and Fortress, 1955–) 31:346.

Both the dogmatists and their modern critics begged the question of epistemic access and instead chased after supposedly unassailable foundations of knowledge, be it the miracle of inspiration or the recovery of what really happened. Given the academic victory of historical-critical biblical scholarship and the discrediting of fundamentalism, biblical scholarship consequently fell into the highly ironic stance of insisting that to acquire a putatively honest and objective interpretation of a literature written from faith for faith, one had methodologically to exclude the access of faith in the Easter gospel by which the Bible came to exist as canon.

The new construal of the Bible that results from the historical-critical discovery of the epistemic primacy of the primitive gospel of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus thus led Jenson to correlative discoveries, which also had some precedence in the sixteenth-century reformer in whose tradition he stood. First, for Jesus and the apostles in the earliest community of faith, there was as yet no New Testament Scripture; rather, Scripture was Israel's sacred writings as gathered, organized, and spiritually received in the time we now call Second Temple Judaism. Israel's canon was thus inherited by the primitive Christian community, which read it in the light of Easter morn as a book of messianic promises providing background depth, in this way illuminating their Easter perception of a messianic fulfillment in the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. Second, while the various writings that came to be the Christian New Testament were largely already in existence, for more than a century the primitive Christian church existed without a collected and internally ordered New Testament. What governed the embattled faith of the New Testament community before the existence of a New Testament canonically appended to the Scriptures of Israel?

The gospel ceremonies of Baptism and Eucharist and the succession of overseers descending from the apostles provide the historical-critical answer. Indeed, these provided the criteria for selection into what eventually became the canonical New Testament. The gospel rite of initiation provided a proto-creedal affirmation of faith in Israel's God as the heavenly Father who sent his beloved Son to redeem humanity fully by the counterintuitive path of total identification with lost humanity, as vindicated and attested by the Holy Spirit who raised Jesus from death and exalted him as the saving Lord of those with whom he had identified at the cross, thus constituting an earthly body of the risen Lord. On analysis, the nascent Trinitarianism found in the baptismal *regula fidei* simply articulates for Jenson a narrative plot analysis by identifying the divine cast of characters at work in the gospel event, giving clarity to their interactions and collaboration.

Similarly, the primitive eucharistic meal, "proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes again," underscored the holy divine identification with wholly perishing humanity as the very sense of the saving event as redemption of the body, a stance that Jenson saw articulated in the apostolic father, Ignatius of Antioch, who carried on a battle against early christological docetism in words like these:

Mark those who hold strange doctrines concerning the grace of Jesus Christ which came to us, how that they are contrary to the mind of God. They have no care for love, none for the widow, none for the orphan, none for the afflicted, none for the prisoner, nor the hungry or thirsty. They abstain from the Eucharist and prayer, because they do not allow that the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, which flesh suffered for our sins, and which the Father in his goodness raised up.<sup>3</sup>

Some decades later, it was Irenaeus of Lyons who met the challenge posed by Marcion's reductive, semi-Gnostic, and anti-Judaic first attempt at New Testament Scripture. By the aforementioned gospel criteria, Irenaeus began the process of making explicit recognition of New Testament Scriptures, simultaneously consolidating their tacit but necessary relation to Israel's Scripture in his wide-ranging battle against theological dualism. So, for Jenson, following Luther, and further armed with this new historical-critical knowledge of canonization in the course of the second century, the Christian "Old Testament" is the Scripture, and the New Testament its proclamation—now codified in writing because of the passing of the living voice of the apostolic generation, reflecting the so-called delay of the parousia.

A third historical-critical insight emerged from these early discoveries in the course of Jenson's career and became increasingly important for him as he sought a new and constructive relationship with living Judaism. Following the research of Jewish scholars like Jacob Neusner, Jenson grasped the profound hermeneutical significance of the defeat of the first-century Jewish rebellion and the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans: this catastrophe catalyzed the simultaneous emergence of early Catholicism and rabbinic Judaism as rival readings of the Scriptures of Israel. Until this point, howsoever tense were the relations between Jewish Christians and the majority of Jews who did not believe the Christian gospel, their differences remained a family quarrel within Second Temple Judaism. But the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of its worship put an end to the form of religious unity that had hitherto prevailed for the Jews, Christian Jews included. With this loss, the descendants of the New Testament's "Pharisees" evolved into the rabbis of diaspora synagogues instructing Jewish life in scriptural Torah as the way after catastrophe to prepare for Messiah's coming and Israel's restoration. At this juncture, therefore, the presence within the synagogue of Jews who blasphemously affirmed the messiahship of a crucified man became intolerable, and consequently, the definitive separation of Judaism and Christianity, which was becoming increasingly Gentile, followed. Hermeneutically, then, neither emergent rabbinic Judaism nor early catholic Christianity read Israel's Scripture in some direct plain sense apart from their respective avenues of epistemic access,

<sup>3</sup> Ignatius, *To the Smyrnaeans*, in *The Apostolic Fathers: Revised Greek Texts with Introductions and English Translations* (ed. J.B. Lightfoot and J.R. Harner; Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 6.

whether in rabbinic Mishnah on the one side or New Testament kerygma on the other. So Jenson summarized: ever since, Jews read the Scriptures as Torah with narrative framework, and Christians read the Scriptures as promissory narrative, with moral structure provided by Torah.

The cumulative effect of such historical-critical discoveries, with their implications for theological hermeneutics, drove a stake through the heart of classical Protestant biblicism which had claimed magisterial authority for "Scripture alone." Biblicism was founded on the miracle of inspiration, which guaranteed infallibility equal and opposite to that claimed for the Roman Catholic papacy. The latter at least had the virtue, in Jenson's eyes, of recognizing what an ecclesial chaos would result from private interpretation of Scripture. The ensuing multiplication beyond number of Protestant sects in the centuries since the Reformation, each claiming to read the Bible for its plain meaning, betrays the hermeneutical failure (even as this insight into Protestant sectarianism stimulated Jenson's midcareer ecumenical turn). The misreading of the Bible as the word of God, in place of the saving message it bears in announcing as good news the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, was the root error of Protestant biblicism. But Jenson dug deeper than this commonplace observation. The hermeneutical failure of biblicism is correlated with a debilitating theological failure in the inherited doctrine of God, especially in Western Christianity. He noticed that the inerrant Bible was the perfect revelatory product required by Perfect-being theism, in contrast to the diverse testimonies of Israel's prophets and of the gospel's apostles, which deliver instead the triune God in saving advent. In the latter, knowledge of God as Trinity in subtle but critical distinction from Perfect-being theism now becomes the singular task of theological readings of the Bible.

In Jenson's own words:

The doctrine of the Trinity is at its root the insistence that the history God has with his people, plotted by the relations of its *dramatis personae*, is not only our life but his. In his history with us, precisely as Israel's Scripture plots it, God is the author of the story, the personal Do-er and sufferer within the story, and the breath of life that enlivens and binds the two—in Christian jargon, he is Father, Son/Logos, and Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity, right to the farthest reaches of its dialectical development, is merely the conceptualized insistence that God is not Father, Son/Logos and Spirit only for us, but for himself. (320)

That God is triune also means, for God and God's eternal life, that eternal life cannot be conceived as timeless self-identity, a notion that had been the metaphysical undergirding of Western theology since Augustine. We shall return to this deeply unsettling contention vis-à-vis the inherited theological tradition Jenson was ostensibly rehabilitating. But first we will attend to his attempt late in his career to retrieve the doctrine of inspiration, for the redescription here of the movement of the Spirit in the formation of canonical Scripture provides a gateway into Jenson's

attack, on behalf of the doctrine of the Trinity, on the usual articulations of divine simplicity.

### ■ Disillusionment with Historical Criticism

A firsthand witness as a seminary professor and then at a church-related college, Jenson grew increasingly concerned about the secularization of biblical studies and the loss of theological interest within them. Taken as a self-sufficient hermeneutic rather than a useful academic methodology, historical criticism increasingly fronted an ideological decision to debunk the presumptive authority of Scripture by subversively unveiling the suppressed history hidden behind the scriptural text. Discrediting fundamentalism with such moves, however, the broad brush also wiped away the text as Scripture, i.e., speaking prophetically or apostolically to the present community of faith by way of theological exegesis. As Jenson saw things, the historical critic typically discovers a scriptural text in its past circumstances of origin and leaves it there, like a relic in a museum, problematizing beyond repair its contemporary use in the community of faith to speak the word of God to present-day experience. He endeavored, therefore, to reclaim the Bible for the church, without abandoning his aforementioned deep debts to the historical-critical method and its discoveries. As he reflected on this new challenge, Jenson confessed that he had done without any doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture for most of his career, thinking that inspiration, i.e., the miraculous production of an authoritative text, had fallen victim to Occam's razor. Was not historical-critical insight into the prophetic and apostolic functions of the Christian canon of Old and New Testaments theologically sufficient to get contemporary theologizing for biblical proclamation up and running?

It seems not. With increasing secularization and loss of theological interest in biblical studies, the ideological origins of biblical criticism in Enlightenment foundationalism was not only clarified in Jenson's lifetime but became newly operative in phenomena like the so-called Jesus Seminar. As a consequence, the hermeneutical significance of the aforementioned discoveries was largely lost on the biblical guild and the church historians who had made these discoveries. And when, occasionally, the challenge to read the Bible as Christian Scripture was noted, the standard professional deflection was to stake a claim for the original sense of the text, which historical criticism alone could establish and deploy critically against any and all later misreadings and misappropriations—*satis est!* Of course—Jenson could barely suppress gleeful observation of the grim irony that the multitude of conflicting historical-critical reconstructions mirrored perfectly the multitude of biblicistic Protestant sects that historical criticism was supposed to supersede, scientifically and objectively.

Jenson never rejected this scholarship so far as it goes—even as he only affirmed it so far as it goes. Following the “second quest for the historical Jesus” initiated by Bultmann's renegade disciple, Ernst Käsemann, Jenson did not imagine that



he could found Christian faith on “the historian’s Jesus,” but he did think that, as a theologian, he could acquire warranted historical knowledge of the human individual, Jesus of Nazareth, adequate to Christian theological purposes. Jenson’s motives here were not foundationalist, then, but were instead professedly doctrinal concerns about christological docetism and pneumatological concerns about the error the Reformation named “enthusiasm.” These concerns stand behind Jenson’s little parable variously deployed: “I’ve got good news! Someone has defeated death and is now on the march, coming to establish his victory and his name is Joseph Stalin (or, Adolf Hitler)!” Such, Jenson explains, would not be good news at all. The sense of the gospel as good news depends on the identity of the subject term, “Jesus of Nazareth,” of whom the gospel predicates, “He is risen.”

There is a backstory here. Traumatized by the historical skepticism of Albert Schweitzer’s *Quest of the Historical Jesus*, with its dark intimation of an apocalyptic Jesus, Bultmann had made a virtue of necessity by teaching that the historical Jesus had risen, i.e., *disappeared* “into the kerygma.” The result is a kind of christological neo-docetism that bears the theologically deleterious effect of de-Judaizing Jesus in the process of turning the proper name into a cipher, a vacuity to be filled out with whatever figuration a contemporary might regard as “liberating.” Enthusiasm plays the same game with the predicate term, “he is risen”; having de-Judaized the messianic expectation of prophetic Scriptures for the cosmic renewal of the stricken creation, soteriology according to contemporary spirits becomes the constant, and Christology, ever so loosely bound to the historic man Jesus of Nazareth, becomes the variable.

Anyone familiar with the struggle between the confessing church and the pro-Nazi German Christians for a “people’s church,” in the shadow of which these theological issues were hotly debated in the 1950s when Jenson was educated at Heidelberg, grasps with Käsemann the theological importance, consequently, of modest, careful historical-critical scholarship for theology. The name, Jesus, refers to the first-century, Second-Temple Galilean Jew who proclaimed and enacted the imminence of the promised reign of God, telling it forth in parables to warrant the provocative act of befriending sinners, for which, at length, Jesus was crucified as the blasphemous or deluded “King of the Jews.” Theology must know this Jesus of history, with all the tools of scholarship available, not for apologetic purposes of proving Christianity but for the kerygmatic and dogmatic ones of predicating resurrection properly to its subject term. Similarly, one must know historically the Jewish apocalyptic “motherhood” (so Käsemann) of predicates like Messiah and resurrection. Jenson thus maintains that historical study, howsoever disillusioning, contributes a baseline common sense of the New Testament text’s central reference to Jesus of Nazareth as risen and appointed Messiah, which subsequent appropriations cannot honestly or ethically violate.

But if the method of historical criticism transforms into a self-standing hermeneutic, innocent of contemporary theology, and often willfully so, the



problematic tendency to reduce the scriptural text to its unique and unrepeatably place in the general human religious past caused Jenson to move beyond his early positions. By the 1980s, he was professedly rethinking and critically retrieving the Orthodox Lutheran doctrine of inspiration of Scripture that, as mentioned, he had previously rejected. What transpired was a *critical* retrieval making a *single* point: When theology recognizes the movement of the Holy Spirit supervening the human-historical author/writer in the creation, preservation, and selection of scriptural texts in service to the core gospel message, what is at stake in claiming “inspiration” is simply, even solely, the blocking of any such reduction of the significance of the text to original meaning, with the consequent disabling of the text as Scripture, namely, as the Holy Spirit’s chosen means of speaking presently the word of God in the community of faith to interpret experience in the world. Recognition of the Spirit’s role in the production of canonical Scripture requires the interpreter to discern and enunciate not only an original meaning of a given text but also further congruent meanings as the text plays in the cumulative Genesis-to-Revelation narrative and breaks forth in the Spirit to speak the word of God today.

Yet a person might reasonably object: What narrative unity can possibly be found in this collection of diverse texts by a multitude of authors in various genres spanning centuries? The standard Western answer is that the variety of biblical texts tells us nothing properly about God in any case but only about human experiences of God. The simple God is ineffable, thus unknowable but certainly timelessly self-identical; consequently, all the changes predicated of God as narrated in Scripture must be assigned to variable creaturely relations to and perceptions of this in-itself unchanging God. Jenson’s rejection of this a priori agnosticism with its protological metaphysics is as drastic as it is fraught with surprising, destabilizing meaning for the Western theological tradition: the literary unity of canonical Scripture is, and only can be, its chief character, namely, the God as narrated in his canonical history with his people from *Urzeit* to *Endzeit*. That means that genuine knowledge of Scripture is tantamount to knowledge of God and that the task of theological exegesis of Scripture is the ongoing production of doctrine or dogma that identifies God in the maelstrom of human experience amid the contending spirits, i.e., over against the idols and the demons holding humanity in thrall. This way of doing critical dogmatics focused on knowledge of God by way of scriptural exegesis thus becomes the distinguishing feature of Jenson’s late oeuvre. But that is because, for Jenson, the unity of the Bible has to be sought and found in the actual work of contemporary theologizing as it endeavors to know the God of the gospel here and now through the interpretation of the prophetic and apostolic testimonies. For this task, the creedal doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ serve as guides. Yet if this task is to be renewed, Jenson must also explain what has so singularly disabled the knowledge of God in recent times, not only in the rise of historical-critical biblical studies but first of all within traditional Western theology itself.

## ■ De-Platonizing the Doctrine of God

As bold as is Jenson's claim about God as the narrative unity of canonical Scripture, equally radical is his diagnosis of the disabling of any theology that would be biblical within the theological tradition, namely, the hegemony of Greek philosophical theology, which long ago entered the church like a Trojan horse and has since captured the city. One must note here, carefully, that Jenson is not opposed to metaphysics, taken broadly as a rational account of ultimate reality, or even speculative reason, provided it operates in a normed and disciplined way in theology whose material remains Scripture. What is at issue for Jenson is a specifically theological incoherency latent in the theological tradition, which actually prepared the way for the historical-critical disabling of Scripture as Scripture. One may think here of a seminal figure like Baruch Spinoza who mocked the notion that a timelessly eternal God could ever initiate anything new, beginning with the very creation of the world. Jenson's question takes up Spinoza's seminal challenge at the founts of historical criticism and, with it, cuts to the heart of the matter:

How can an eternal God act within time? The effort [to answer this question recently in neo-Thomist circles] was mostly wasted, because it was assumed that "eternal" meant "timeless," and when the question is set that way no answer is possible. It is all but obvious: a sheerly timeless God simply could not *act within* time. He could—again at incoherent best—only interfere with it from a distance. (314)

A metaphysically Perfect Being cannot act temporally, because that would entail the ontological imperfection of an unrealized possibility preceding the act. Whatever else the canonical narrative renders, however, it renders the God who acts within time to redeem and fulfill the creation, indeed, to make all things new. And thus the metaphysical correlate surfaces: it is the assumption within the theological tradition of divine timelessness that disables biblical theology.

At its best, the Greek tradition of philosophical theology helped early Christian theology to articulate the biblical distinction of Creator and creature: the one true God is God who is creator of categorically everything which is not God, hence, implying the unlimited existence of Perfect Being; the only alternative to the true God's way of being is to be God's creature, an existence temporally and spatially delimited. Thus, we have a Chalcedonian-Christian metaphysics of two natures. To the contemporary defenders of Christian Platonism, Jenson's open assault on Perfect-being theism was reminiscent of the German idealist, Friedrich Hegel; it seemed to jeopardize this categorical metaphysical distinction, articulated classically in the Platonic terminology of being, nature, or substance. To this "*either creator or creature*" objection from the side of a Chalcedonian "Two-Natures" doctrine, Jenson argues that he has the *homoousios* of the creed of Nicaea on his side, as well as the subsequent ecumenical councils, in affirming rather for human salvation One who is *both* "creator and creature": "one and the same unique God

[is] both the author of the history he makes with creatures and one or more of the *dramatis personae* of that history” (314). Such a God, both transcending creatures and at the same time capable of life *with* creatures *as* a creature, *is* antecedently a life, indeed, the infinite tri-personal communal life. But this requires in turn that theology see clearly how Trinity provides both for space-like alterity and time-like succession in the eternal life which God lives, such that incarnation is not necessary but rather fitting. Pressing this point, Jenson avers that the Trinity is manifestly “no proper God at all by the standards of that part of our metaphysical tradition most indebted to the Greek theologians. . . . He is not ‘simple’ in the usual—and in my judgment disastrous—Christian-theological sense: his relation to creation and its temporality cannot be modeled by the relation of a point to a line or a center to a circle” (315)—a punctiliar relation of the wholly other to the wholly different.

Instead, the living God of the Bible lives purposefully, in anticipation of his creation redeemed and fulfilled by coming to dwell in the eternal life of God. Consequently, nature and history, interpreted theologically, are not “one damn thing after another” where, according to the Greek myth, Chronos devours his children. In the Greek mythology rationalized by Platonic metaphysics, true being is what persists, holding up against the ravages of ceaseless time working all things with fatal necessity. In this mythology, however, even the gods came and went until Plato worked the demythologizing magic of imagining timeless self-identity as the really real: Nietzsche’s reification of a “no-thing.” To the consequent Christian “Platonism for the people,” Nietzsche’s retort was decisive for the young Jenson: human beings are so desperate for meaning that they would rather have a nothing (= the timelessly self-identical deity) as meaning than no meaning at all. But now the nothingness of Perfect-being theism has been exposed culturally with the death of God, i.e., an incredibility for those who perceive the agony of life on the earth.

But a theology that, by contrast, takes the narrative self-identification of God with the crucified Jesus as the apocalypse of the promised final reality bends natural and human history in the direction of the coming of the beloved community—concretely, for Jenson, the true eternity of “the marriage of the Lamb,” for which “his bride has made herself ready.” Thus, theology in biblical vein supplants the hoary metaphysics of persistence with a metaphysics of anticipation. “In Scripture, for me to be is to be drawn forward to what I will be when fulfilled in God, it is being *in via* à la Paul” (325–26).

## ■ Dramatic Coherence

A metaphysics of anticipation in theology, elicited by reading the Genesis-to-Revelation narrative theologically to produce knowledge of God, exhibits “dramatic coherence.” In dramatic coherence the conclusion of the narrative, with its resolution of the plot tensions, could not have been predicted but in hindsight is seen to be perfectly fitting. In following the story of Jesus given in the Gospels, a reader, any more than the disciples within the story with whom they identify, could not have

foreseen the outcome of resurrection and its specific saving sense as atonement accomplished, reconciliation achieved, and fulfillment vouchsafed. Readers, along with the disciples within the story, might rather have foreseen the denouement in denial, betrayal, and abandonment to death by crucifixion. But in hindsight, resurrection of this one crucified coheres dramatically as the self-revelation of the God who, from the beginning, makes something out of nothing, good out of evil, and life out of death, penultimately to justify the ungodly and thereby ultimately to call into existence a world that does not yet exist in an act of new creation. At his most daring, Jenson mines this center of the drama attending biblical narrative. In his systematic theology, he had ventured that by the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, God decides what kind of God God will be.<sup>4</sup> This assertion therewith of a freedom in God to decide anew what kind of God God will be in relation to creatures yet again destabilizes the West's standard Perfect-being theism for which God just is God with timeless inner necessity—no drama, coherent or otherwise, about it!

The *crux intellectuum* here is the cry of dereliction from the cross, which notoriously, as Jenson acknowledges, Jürgen Moltmann made an “axiom” of his theology, understanding it “as an actual abandonment of God the Son by God the Father, a rupture of the concord between them.” Attracted as he admits he is to Moltmann's axiom, Jenson nevertheless asks: “But is a divergence of wants between the Father and the Son, who with the Spirit are supposed to be but one God, thinkable?” (305). Does not such discord put the being of the Trinity itself at risk, as if the unity of being of the three could be so jeopardized? Jenson, true to his Lutheran christological convictions, rejects Nestorian solutions to the problem posed, as if it were the human nature that experienced dereliction while the divine Son serenely observed the judicial murder, an imperturbable bystander. He finds resolution to the dilemma in Maximus the Confessor's “daring move: since Jesus and the Son are but one person, it is the very decision made by the man Jesus that constitutes the Son's concrete role in the triune decision,” so that we see “in Gethsemane a man making a hard decision . . . as an event in the triune life, as nothing less than the triune deciding that this man will in fact be faithful, that is, that there will be an atonement” (308).

Perhaps, but one may observe some slippage in the argument executed here: we have moved from the initial problem of the cry of dereliction on the cross to the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, and in this way the actual contention of Moltmann for a moment of cleavage in the life of the Trinity in the Son's experience of abandonment has been dodged—even if, as per Gethsemane, this moment is divinely willed. Attending to the narrative, is the bitter cup Jesus resolves to drink in Gethsemane anything other than the triune will, as per Jenson's argument, to wit, that the sin-bearing Son experience the divine condemnation of the sin that he personally assumes “in the likeness of sinful flesh,” namely, as of those whom

<sup>4</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1, *The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 189.

he has forgiven and whose guilt therewith he has transferred upon himself as per Isaiah 53? Was this moment of true death, physical *and spiritual*, not then the Father's fitting abandonment of his own beloved Son "to condemn sin in the flesh?" Who indeed can forgive sin but God alone? Was not this presumption to forgive in God's name the evident crime of Jesus of Nazareth making him accountable for the sin he had forgiven?

If Easter morn is the dramatic resolution of this cleavage between the Son's daring act of forgiveness in God's name and his Father's righteous wrath against the sin that ruins his creation, it would be just as Jenson frequently intimates: resurrection is the work of the Spirit who, having freed the Son in Gethsemane to obey his Father's uncanny will that he drink the cup of wrath, in turn frees the Father to see his own love for the lost performed to the full in his crucified, dead, and buried Son. That inner-Trinitarian dramatic coherence interprets the resurrection of the crucified theologically, not as the merely miraculous validation of an allegedly superior prophet, but as disclosing an intra-divine achievement of surpassing mercy in real history with creatures.

### ■ Apocalyptic or Salvation History? Toward a Christian Theology of Judaism

One must pose such a question to Jenson, because his account of the original schism between Judaism and Christianity and his proposal to remedy it turns on it. Under the influence of the first canonical Gospel of Matthew or the late Gospel of John, one might think that it is the incarnation of the divine Son/Logos that marks the breaking point between the two. But Jenson's historical-critical discovery had been that the doctrine of the incarnation arises in Christianity as an implication, slowly realized, of the resurrection of the crucified Jesus, and in any case is broadly prepared in scriptural accounts of the Angel of the Lord, the Glory of the Lord, and the rabbinic *Shekinah*. Jenson has instead expressly accounted for Jewish disbelief in the Christian proclamation of Jesus as Israel's expected Messiah on the grounds that, at best, Jesus could be no more than one of countless other messianically motivated but all the same sadly deluded and defeated Jews littering the underside of imperial history. The promised messianic world transformation has not occurred with Jesus, who was defeated and thus refuted.

The kerygma of "Christ crucified" rightly appeared to Jews as an impossible contradiction. It is like saying, "Joshua put to the edge of the sword," or "David crushed by Goliath." In other words, the breaking point between Judaism and Christianity is already discovered in the historical-critical insight into the earliest Christian kerygma asserting the resurrection of the crucified Jesus. It is this kerygma that emergent rabbinic Judaism disbelieved. Hung on an imperial stake, Jesus died accursed according to the book of Deuteronomy and was so exhibited publicly. His cry of dereliction was no fraud but a true testimony of divine judgment upon him. For Jews, it would thus be against God to believe in the crucified Messiah.

Jensen's innovative reading of Rom 9–11 in an exploratory essay toward the development of a new Christian theology of Judaism grasps this Jewish disbelief in the primitive Christian kerygma as a “detour” willed by God and thus as a check against Christian triumphalism. It is only a detour, however, because the conclusion of Paul's meditation on the disbelief of the Jews announces as apocalyptic revelation the stunning disclosure that God has consigned all to sin in order to have mercy on all. It is this concluding stunner that elicits the rhapsody about the unfathomable wisdom of God—not the doctrinal muddle that goes by the name of “double predestination.”

Speaking of apocalypse, in a very interesting late engagement with J. Louis Martyn,<sup>5</sup> Jenson gingerly defended a revised notion of salvation history and criticized in turn what he perceived as a punctiliar model of apocalyptic revelation, reminiscent of Karl Barth's *Romans*, namely, the divine “invasion” in Martyn's account of the apostle Paul. Jenson argues that the doctrine of creation stands in the way of too sweeping and exclusive a claim for the apocalyptic, even though he quickly concedes Martin Luther's apocalyptic teaching that, given creation's sinful fall into the thrall of anti-divine forces, by the mere “light of nature” as we presently experience God's hiddenness, we should be forced to conclude that the author of our existence is evil, at best negligent, or just not there at all. Consequently, the doctrine of creation, complicated by fallenness, cannot totally succeed in the blocking operation Jenson explores. Jenson accordingly argues biblically against Martyn's invasion trope that in the actual literature of a Second Temple apocalypse, one does not see God invading earth from heaven but rather revelation of “an extended conflict carried out at once on earth and in heaven, with the heavenly version dramatizing the divine plot of the earthly events” (339). In this light, the battle of the reign of God on the earth extends from the Garden of Eden to the victory of the New Jerusalem coming down from above. Salvation history is not, therefore, the sacralization of ecclesial progress imagined in classic Christian triumphalism, nor of human progress toward Kant's “kingdom of ends” in the Protestant liberalism of the nineteenth century. Rather, from the outset the history of salvation is a story of battle.

Jenson thus asks Martyn whether “the old history-of-salvation theology merely had it the wrong way around? What if the narrative told by Scripture, from Genesis 1 to the end of the Revelation, is itself the embracing historical reality, within which secular constructs . . . have to find their places and to which they must accommodate themselves if they are to claim a grip on truth?” (341). As for George Lindbeck, a lifetime theological friend, so also for Jenson, canonical Scripture, read as an apocalyptic history of salvation, functions as a world-absorbing narrative. Notwithstanding his atypical theological interest, Martyn, as a classical historical critic who has read “with Galatian ears” in order to grasp precisely the original sense of Paul's missive, might reply that too much tension within Scripture is thereby

<sup>5</sup> Full disclosure: Martyn was my teacher, who served on my dissertation committee.

swept under the rug, particularly the breach opened up in Galatians between the law mediated by angels to imprison wayward humanity and the gospel of God's invasive disruption of the law-bound world to liberate its denizens.

All the same, Jenson's ruminations upon fitting the contemporary Euro-American world into the canonical narrative might fairly be called "apocalyptic." His dire representations of the collapse of Christendom, the depressing self-destruction of modernity, and from these ruins our emergent "post-modernity" appear more than once in this collection of essays, sounding a "lament over our developing chaos—our nihilistic ideologies, the collapsing sexual order and related social and political dysfunction, the idiot's greed of masters of the financial universe, and so forth" (342). While such prophetic criticism of culture is not the immediate subject of the present volume but rather its occasional by-product, it may be that in reclaiming the Bible for the humiliated church of today and firmly locating theology there in the ruins of Christendom, Jenson's seminal reiterations for our time of the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures to produce knowledge of God will provide the acute diagnosis of the present temptation to fascism. Reception, therefore, is urgent.