

Clothed in the Word

THE EMBODIMENT OF SCRIPTURE
IN CHURCH HISTORY

DAVID NEY



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Clothed in the Word* by David Ney.

Copyright © 2026 by David Ney.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com



| InterVarsity Press

Copyrighted content.

CONTENTS

	ABBREVIATIONS	ix
	INTRODUCTION	1
1	ELIJAH THE PROPHET: ENSCRIPTURATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT	15
	<i>John the Baptist</i>	
	<i>Jesus the Christ</i>	
	<i>Paul the Apostle</i>	
	<i>Conclusion</i>	
2	PAUL THE ATHLETE: ENSCRIPTURATION IN ANCIENT CHRISTIANITY	64
	<i>Clement of Rome</i>	
	<i>The School of John</i>	
	<i>Origen of Alexandria</i>	
	<i>Gregory of Nyssa</i>	
	<i>Conclusion</i>	
3	MOTHER MARY: ENSCRIPTURATION IN THE LATIN MIDDLE AGES	115
	<i>Aelia Pulcheria</i>	
	<i>Radegund of Poitiers</i>	
	<i>Hildegard of Bingen</i>	
	<i>Early Franciscans</i>	
	<i>Catherine of Siena</i>	
	<i>Conclusion</i>	
4	CAIN AND ABEL, BROTHERS: ENSCRIPTURATION IN THE REFORMATION	170
	<i>Martin Luther</i>	
	<i>Augustine of Alfeld</i>	
	<i>John Foxe</i>	
	<i>Charles I</i>	
	<i>George Fox and James Nayler</i>	
	<i>Conclusion</i>	

5	MOSES THE LIBERATOR: ENSCRIPTURATION	
	IN THE MODERN WORLD	220
	<i>Harriet Tubman</i>	
	<i>William Wadé Harris</i>	
	<i>Martin Luther King Jr.</i>	
	<i>Conclusion</i>	
	CONCLUSION: THE BOOK OF LIFE	279
	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	295
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	297
	GENERAL INDEX	315
	SCRIPTURE INDEX	323



ELIJAH THE PROPHET

Enscripturation in the New Testament

IN THE BOOK OF ACTS THE JEWS OF CORINTH bring Paul before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia. They complain that Paul is “persuading the people to worship God in ways contrary to the law,” but the proconsul, we are told, was uninterested in the case (Acts 18:13). “Since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves,” he says (Acts 18:15). Gallio speaks the truth. To speak about the Scriptures is always to speak about words and names. What Gallio could not see, though, was that the debate was no mere human argument, since the words and names of Scripture are God’s. This presupposed divinity has been the basis of the various exegetical methods that have generated the church’s theology and fueled the church’s devotion from the beginning. It is also the basis of the Christian practice of enscripturation.

Enscripturation takes place when readers use Scripture words to offer a divine interpretation of the world in which they live. It occurs, in other words, when they apply Scripture words as figures.¹ The practice of enscripturation is governed by the conviction that Scripture’s ability to name the things of the world goes well beyond that of other books because its

¹Enscripturation can be described as a particular mode of figural reading. Figural reading is the historic practice of reading the Scriptures as a unified testimony in which words and names are traced throughout the Scriptures and applied to the world to render a coherent vision of Christ, his church, and his world. The definitive contemporary account of figural reading is Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Eerdmans, 2016). For a short introduction, see Ephraim Radner and David Ney, “An Introduction to Figural Reading in the Anglican Tradition,” in *All Thy Lights Combine: Figural Reading in the Anglican Tradition* (Lexham, 2022), 1-24.

words are divine. As the Scriptures absorb the world, the world itself becomes, to again use a phrase from William Jones of Nayland, “a commentary on the mind of God.”²

All Scripture words—nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections—can be the vehicles of enscripturation, since the Scriptures are “as wide as the world itself,” to again quote Jones.³ This book focuses on a particular set of Scripture words: given names. Given names are of great interest because they address personal identity, which is surely one of the most pressing issues in our day. The unrivaled force of given names has to do with their strange constituting power. You can put together a long list of words that describe someone you know. But when you invoke someone’s given name, you call them forth with authority and give them definition as a particular human being among human beings, as if to say, “Look! This one, *here!*”

In the Old Testament human mothers and fathers are not the only ones to impart given names. The Creator God names people too. Adam is perhaps the first human being to be named by God since he is addressed in relation to God as “Adam” while he is still among speechless animals (Gen 2:20). Eve, on the other hand, appears as the first human being named by another human—“Adam named his wife Eve” (Gen 3:20). The people of Scripture receive their names either from God or from other humans. This being said, the distinction between divinely given names and humanly given names is not without difficulties. We can note, to begin, that members of one set are sometimes members of the other (Abram/Abraham, Sarai/Sarah, Jacob/Israel). We might also state the obvious: When God gives someone a name, he expects people to use it. In other words, the divine names of Scripture are also human names since they are uttered by human mouths and written by human hands.

²“Words are the arbitrary signs of natural things; but the language of revelation goes a step farther, and uses some things as the signs of other things; in consequence of which, the world which we now see becomes a sort of a commentary on the mind of God.” William Jones of Nayland, *A Course of Lectures on the Figurative Language of the Holy Scripture* (London, 1787), 9-10.

³Jones, *Course of Lectures*, 10.

The further difficulty that accompanies the distinction between the divinely given and humanly given names of the Bible is that divine authorship is baked into the very idea of scriptural status. Scripture words and names are, as God-breathed words, divine speech. This is why the distinction between divinely given names and humanly given names evaporates in the hands of New Testament authors. New Testament authors do not check to see whether an Old Testament name was divinely given before putting it to a divine use. When a New Testament author calls forth a given name from the Law and the Prophets, the author is saying something that reaches beyond human naming. The author is saying something about who the person is before the face of God.

The second reason the words of the Bible are divine is that they are divine revelation. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead redefines what it means to believe this to be true. From the New Testament onward, the Old Testament was reread as the revelation of the crucified and risen LORD.⁴ R. Kendall Soulen notes that YHWH, the Old Testament's name for God, is given to Jesus in the Gospels, particularly in the Gospel of John. "I made your name known to them," Jesus says (Jn 17:26 NRSV).⁵ The name *Jesus* in this case is itself the divine name since it is the culmination, fulfillment, and embodiment of the divine revelation of the Old Testament. This changes what it means to say that the Old Testament is divine speech. Old Testament words can now be reimagined as words the God the Son speaks on behalf of the God the Father through the power of the God the Holy Spirit.⁶

⁴Some early Christian writers called this consolidated approach to theology the "rule of faith." See Ronnie J. Rombs and Alexander Y. Hwang, *Tradition and the Rule of Faith in the Early Church: Essays in Honor of Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J.* (Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

⁵R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity* (Westminster John Knox, 2011), 1:70-75. We might also note that Paul says that at the very mention of the name Jesus every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is LORD (Phil 2:10-11), and the term LORD here is, like the vast majority of the New Testament uses, the word the Greek Old Testament uses for YHWH. To follow through on this New Testament claim, I consistently use the designation that is frequently used in English translations of the Old Testament, which uses small caps. I have modified New Testament translations in this way as well.

⁶Scholarly interest in the practice of attributing Old Testament speech to Jesus is growing. See Matthew Bates, *The Hermeneutics of the Apostolic Proclamation: The Center of Paul's Method of Scriptural Interpretation* (Baylor University Press, 2012); Kyle Hughes, *Scripting the Son: Scriptural Exegesis and the Making of Early Christology* (Cascade Books, 2024).

The Christian practice of enscripturation presupposes that what makes the words of the Old Testament divine is that they are the words of the crucified and risen LORD. The substance of this conviction can be understood with reference to Origen of Alexandria's threefold hermeneutic—literal, tropological, allegorical.⁷ The literal sense, for Origen, is the straightforward rendering of a biblical text as it pertains to historical and physical events. The tropological sense is the rendering of this text for the purpose of Christian edification. The third and final sense is the allegorical. While this mode is often maligned in modernity as a flight of fancy, it is at root, for Origen and the ancient church, the christological sense. To say that Christians have consistently interpreted the words of the Old Testament allegorically is to say that they have found them to be the crucified and risen LORD's testimony about himself. Enscripturation is a form of tropological reading. Authentic Christian enscripturation interprets the literal text through a christological lens (often by interpreting Scripture with Scripture) before it proceeds to tropology.⁸

With this in mind, we can proceed to the topic at hand: the New Testament's enscripturation of John the Baptist, Jesus the Christ, and Paul the apostle as Elijah. The literal text of the New Testament is explicit that John the Baptist is the prophet Elijah. And while this literal text also presents Jesus the Christ as Elijah and Paul the apostle as Elijah, these presentations are characteristically allegorical and tropological. The Gospel presentation of Jesus as a new and better Elijah is allegorical since it is a christological reading of the Old Testament. And the epistolary presentation of Paul as the prophet Elijah is tropological as an occasional appropriation of the Old Testament for the edification of the church.

The New Testament use of the Old Testament name Elijah presupposes that it is a divinely given name. When the New Testament calls John the Baptist by the name of the Israelite prophet Elijah, it is not merely

⁷Origen, *On First Principles*, vol. 2, ed. and trans. John Behr (Oxford University Press, 2017), 4.2.4 (p. 497).

⁸Henri de Lubac helpfully describes the relationships between canonical reading and christological reading in his book *Scripture in the Tradition* (Crossroad, 2000), 113-29.

describing him in relation to the divine in a generic sense. It is describing him in relation to God in Christ. John is a type of Elijah because Christ himself, as archetype, is *the* true Elijah. Paul, in this case, also figures Elijah not merely because Paul is a true Israelite but because Christ is *the* true Israelite.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

We begin with the most well-known example of New Testament enscripturation: the identification of John the Baptist with Elijah the prophet. This New Testament claim is, according to Augustine and Thomas Aquinas's way of speaking, a figural claim. It asks the reader to embrace the idea that although the term *Elijah* refers literally to the prophet of the book of Kings, *Elijah* is, within the canon of Scripture, a word with extended, figural referents. The Gospels, however, are not univocal in their approach to John's figural identity as Elijah. Matthew shouts it from the rooftops. Mark whispers it in secret. Luke qualifies it. And John seems to deny it altogether.

Elijah is the divine name Jesus gives his cousin John in the Gospel of Matthew. This enscripturation of John as Elijah provides the three key ingredients that are necessary to understand the New Testament enscripturation and the historic practice of the church. But while I am calling them "ingredients," I do not mean to say that they are to be followed methodologically, much as one follows a recipe. I am speaking descriptively rather than normatively. I am affirming that as we observe the people of God in their enscripturating work, we will often be able to identify three features. First, we will notice that the people of God are applying the words of Scripture to others and to themselves, and that they are able to do so because of their knowledge of the Scriptures. Second, as we consider their practice we will find that they are not merely making attributions with reference to the Bible. They are, rather, making attributions with reference to God and in Christ. Third, we will note as we consider the practice that it is participatory. It extends beyond the one who is given a scriptural name so as to envelop those who gather

around. By means of even a single scriptural attribution, such people suddenly find that they too have been ordered in a particular manner to the Scriptures and to God in Christ.

John the Baptist bursts on the scene in Matthew 3, preaching in the wilderness of Judea. His urgent message, Matthew tells us, is “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” John’s ministry of judgment is in Matthew’s Gospel clearly of divine origin, and this locates John within the Old Testament. Having introduced the prophet John and his message, Matthew proceeds immediately to tell the reader that this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying, “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the LORD, make straight paths for him’” (Mt 3:3). John is, in Matthew’s telling, not only the voice crying in the wilderness. He is *the* prophet—the prophet Malachi names in his oracle. “I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the LORD you are seeking will come to his temple,” Malachi says (Mal 3:1). And again, “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes” (Mal 4:5).⁹

At the time of John the Baptist’s ministry, there was already a widespread expectation that a mass turning to Elijah would precede the LORD’s vindication of his people Israel. Matthew has no doubt that John is just such an Elijah.¹⁰ Like Elijah, Matthew’s John ministers at the Jordan and in the wilderness. Like Elijah, Matthew’s John ministers in a time of moral and spiritual bankruptcy, and people come to him to flee the wrath to come. Matthew 11 even puts John’s enscripturated identity on the lips of Jesus himself: “From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and violent people take it by force. For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John came, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come. Let anyone with ears listen!” (Mt 11:12-15 NRSV). For Matthew the name *Elijah*, which refers literally to the Old Testament prophet, refers figurally to John. It is, in other words, an instance of a scriptural word acquiring

⁹R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1987), 194.

¹⁰Walter Wink, *John the Baptist in the Gospel Tradition* (Cambridge University Press, 1968), 3-4.

theological and especially christological import through extended application. This being said, while Matthew's claim that John is Elijah is a figural claim, it is a claim explicitly stated by the literal text itself, making it both literal and figural.

Matthew's Jesus insists that John is Elijah not merely because he has a prophetic vocation but because he is the forerunner: He carries the specific prophetic vocation of preparing the way before the LORD and making his paths straight (Mt 3:3).¹¹ Were Jesus not the expected Messiah, John would not be the anticipated Elijah. And we can thus say with confidence that the scriptural name *Elijah* just is John's relation to Christ. Walter Wink puts it this way: "John is not Elijah as such, but rather the Elijah of the Messiah."¹² Jesus' declaration that John is his Elijah is the climax of his discourse on John, contained in Matthew 11:7-19. This discourse concludes with a reflection on John's rejection by those who dismissed him on account of his behavior: "For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'" (Mt 11:18 NRSV). This comment sets up Jesus' next statement, which pertains to himself: "the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Mt 11:19 NRSV). Jesus' comments here anticipate his own rejection and death, foreshadowed by John's horrific death at the hands of Herod (Mt 14:1-11).

Elijah's postmortem appearance on the Mount of Transfiguration in Matthew 17 provides Jesus with further opportunity to speak about the forerunner. His disciples ask him why the scribes say that Elijah's appearance must precede that of the Messiah. Jesus replies, "Elijah is indeed coming and will restore all things, but I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but they did to him whatever they pleased. So also the Son of Man is about to suffer at their hands" (Mt 17:11-12 NRSV). Apparently the disciples had forgotten or failed to appreciate Jesus' previous identification of John with Elijah, for Matthew editorializes this second identification. "Then," he comments,

¹¹France, *Gospel According to Matthew*, 91.

¹²Wink, *John the Baptist*, 32.

“the disciples understood that he was speaking to them about John the Baptist” (Mt 17:13 NRSV).

In Matthew 17 Jesus is explicit that he will do more than just share in John’s prophetic ministry; he too will drink from the cup of martyrdom. This revelation takes the logic of Jesus’ identification of John with Elijah in Matthew 11 one step further. Elijah *must* come first, Jesus says. Elijah’s coming must precede Messiah’s coming. Jesus is the Messiah. So John *must* be Elijah. John is Elijah as one who points away from himself and to Christ. The narrative of John’s life must not merely be seen as following a parallel trajectory. As Wink argues, “Every statement about John the Baptist in the Gospel of Matthew is related to his function in redemptive history.” That the Gospel writers describe John’s sufferings shows how deeply they have “integrated him into the gospel of Jesus Christ.”¹³ This point confirms the directionality of identification. Second Temple literature says not a thing about the suffering of the coming Elijah. That John suffers as Elijah confirms that the shape of Elijah, as a scriptural figure, has been conformed to the figure of Christ.

In Matthew 17 Jesus’ revelation of his impending passion is the key that unlocks John’s true scriptural identity. His self-disclosure as suffering servant opens their eyes. In disclosing his path of suffering, Jesus discloses the nature of the true prophet. Thus the point is not merely, as Wink points out, that John’s “execution is proof of the axiom that the prophet must suffer.”¹⁴ The point is that it is only because Christ suffers that God’s prophets must suffer, and it is thus only because Christ suffers that John’s suffering confirms his identity as a true prophet.

Having established that John’s identity as Elijah is his relation to Christ, we can consider the participatory nature of this identification. Matthew 17 makes it crystal clear that while Jesus’ identification of John as Elijah is a matter of “words and names,” this is not to say that it is a trivial matter. In Jesus’ telling, the failure to recognize John as Elijah was what led to his rejection and murder. And what is more, this rejection and murder

¹³Wink, *John the Baptist*, 28, 17.

¹⁴Wink, *John the Baptist*, 27.

is, for Jesus, deeply personal, not just because John was his cousin and collaborator but because it is an ominous sign of things to come. Those who rejected and murdered John will soon reject and murder him. But Jesus does not merely look ahead to this moment; rather, he identifies it in the present. What is to come is constituted by what has already taken place: In their rejection and murder of John, they have already been ordered to Jesus in a particular way. Their future rejection and murder of him has already been secured.

Matthew thrusts the gravity of the failure to identify John as Elijah at the reader as he comes to the climax of his narrative. We would have thought that John and his ministry were things of the past. But, remarkably, the question of Elijah's coming is still in play as Jesus hangs on the cross, about to die. It is still in play because it continues to be, even at this late point in the drama, of central importance to the question of Jesus' identity. Here the tragic inches toward the tragic-comic. The one who suffers before them is apparently one who has been driven from Israel and now stands condemned, for "Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree" (see Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13 NRSV). But it is not Jesus who is to be pitied but those who believe he is calling out for Elijah. Elijah has come, but they still stand there, at the foot of the cross, wondering whether he will arrive. As those who have missed Elijah's coming, they are blind to the cosmic significance of what is transpiring before their eyes. The great irony is that their failure to identify the forerunner has led them to the edge of the precipice: It is their membership in Israel that now hangs in the balance.

The three ingredients that comprise Matthew's presentation of John as Elijah are not all present in the other Gospels, but their treatment of this enscripturation, when read canonically, can help fill out Matthew's account. We will briefly touch on the other Gospels before we proceed to reflect on the scriptural identity of Jesus himself.

For Mark, John's identity as Elijah is, as it is for Matthew, tied to Jesus' messianic identity. One unique feature of this marriage in Mark is the

“Elijianic secret.”¹⁵ Mark’s account of Jesus’ discourse on John the Baptist, found in Matthew 11, does not include the comment that the disciples apprehended John’s Elijianic identity (Mk 1:1-8). For Mark, beholding John’s scriptural name is a pneumatic gift that accompanies the postresurrection revelation of Jesus’ scriptural identity. In the Gospels of Mark and Luke, the apocalyptic nature of this apprehension is buttressed by the narrative presentation of John and Jesus as best man and groom.

In Mark’s Gospel the notion that John is the friend of the bridegroom is an extension of his Elijianic identity. The description of John’s Elijianic clothing and diet in Mark 1:6 is followed by his statement in the following verse, “The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals” (Mk 1:7 NRSV). John’s assertion that the one who follows after him will be greater than he brings to mind Elisha’s difficult request for a double portion of Elijah’s spirit (2 Kings 2:9). This being said, Jesus does not follow John as Elisha follows Elijah. As one who covers himself with Elijah’s mantle, Elisha and his ministry are understood with reference to his predecessor in the book of Kings. But in the book of Mark, the clothing of Jesus establishes this relationship. Elisha’s possession of his predecessor’s mantle points his ministry backward in the book of Kings. John’s refusal to even touch his successor’s sandal points his ministry forward in Mark. The Elijah of the book of Kings remains at least symbolically superior to his predecessor, but the same thing cannot be said of the Elijah of Mark.

Loosening the sandal strap is associated with levirate marriage in the Old Testament.¹⁶ The two Old Testament stories that engage this custom, the unions of Judah and Tamar (Gen 38) and of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4), are both included in Luke’s genealogy. David Lyle Jeffrey thinks the levirate law referenced in Deuteronomy 25:5-10 may be the primary text in the background of Luke’s account. In this text the responsibility to fulfill conjugal rights is passed from the woman’s husband to her brother-in-law as

¹⁵Wink, *John the Baptist*, 16.

¹⁶David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke*, Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible (Brazos, 2012), 59.

kinsman-redeemer, and in this case John asks Israel the bride to look instead to his close relative. This nuptial interpretation of the figure of the loosed sandal is well attested in patristic literature. Gregory the Great gives voice to this tradition when he says, “John denounces himself as unworthy to loose the latchet of Christ’s shoes; as if he openly said, ‘I am not able to disclose the footsteps of the Redeemer, and do not presume to take unto myself unworthily the name of bridegroom.’”¹⁷

When Jesus’ relationship to his cousin John is again discussed in Mark 2, Jesus calls himself the bridegroom. While this discussion is taken up in both Matthew and Luke’s Gospels, Luke’s account stands out because of the wedding’s extended historical horizon. Luke, as is well known, tells the story of Jesus (and therefore John) with the story of the church in mind. The coming of the kingdom is thus deferred to the eschaton as the time of the final gathering. John is in this case not the forerunner but a transitional figure. In Luke’s telling he is an Old Testament prophet who comes “in the spirit and power of Elijah” (Lk 1:17). As an Old Testament prophet, he preaches repentance, and as a preacher he is the first to announce the coming of the kingdom that will finally come on the day of the LORD at Christ’s return.¹⁸ John, in this case, is not quite Elijah, since Elijah is the eschatological prophet whose coming communicates that the arrival of this kingdom is imminent. Christian tradition was more than happy to interject his arrival as one of the two witnesses announced in Revelation 11. This surprising deferral of Elijah’s second coming to Christ’s second coming is understandable from the standpoint of the history of enscripturating practice. As a history of human naming, human enscripturations are provisional and incomplete. The true scriptural identity of each person is a divine possession that will be unveiled only at Christ’s return, when he reveals the contents of the Lamb’s book of life.

It is easier to square the opinion of the Gospel of Luke regarding John’s relation to Elijah with the canonical witness than it is to square the opinion of the Gospel of John. John’s John denies what Matthew and Mark’s Jesus

¹⁷Jeffrey, *Luke*, 60.

¹⁸Wink, *John the Baptist*, 47.

affirms: When the priests and Levites ask him whether he is Elijah, he insists, “I am not” (Jn 1:21). He is not the Messiah, he is not Elijah, and he is not the prophet. But he is, as he is for the other Gospel writers, “the voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way for the LORD’” (Jn 1:23). This last positive affirmation adds to the difficulty, since for Matthew and Mark, as we have seen, it is precisely as one who goes before the LORD that he must be called by the name Elijah. Patristic interpreters felt this difficulty acutely since they took for granted that God’s prophets always spoke the truth. But it is not necessary in this case to give John a lying tongue.

The scribes and Pharisees evidently had wrong expectations about Elijah’s return and his message, perhaps even anticipating that his person was to be raised from the dead. John is merely noting that he is not the Elijah they are expecting. Since it is intimately connected to Jesus’ identity as Messiah, John’s identity as Elijah is concealed from all those who fail to identify Jesus’ messiahship. The scribes and Pharisees John addresses reject Jesus’ messiahship, and thus John cannot be, for them, Elijah.

This presupposition, which is unveiled for Christ’s true disciples in his death and resurrection, provides the theological underpinnings of the Gospel’s retelling of Christ’s life and work. Thus the Gospel writer notes that the disciples recalled that Jesus had said he would rebuild the temple after three days and that it was only then that they “believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken” (Jn 2:22). As one who is ignorant of this unveiling, even John himself stands on the outside of this revelation, and thus we can hardly expect him to have a fully articulated sense of his own scriptural identity. As John Behr’s masterful treatment of John’s Gospel makes clear, Jesus’ death and resurrection do not merely unveil his personal identity. They are, rather, the beginning that sets in motion the divine reinterpretation of all things by means of the study of the Law and the Prophets.

The differences between the Gospels confirm that scriptural identities, like garments, are things that can be put on and taken off based on context and ultimately on divine vocation. And while the differences are real, the

Gospel of John is consistent with the synoptic witness since John the Baptist does not in any of the synoptic accounts call himself Elijah. In the first place, the knowledge that John is Elijah belongs to Jesus the Christ. Only Matthew's Gospel speaks of others perceiving that John is Elijah. And we might well ask just how well they understood it. Their knowledge was partial at best, since they still did not understand that the Messiah had to suffer and die. For all the Gospel writers the apprehension of Jesus' divine identity is only granted at the resurrection. This apprehension was tied, as we will see, to their rereading of Israel's Scriptures, which in turn was an invitation to the disciples to behold themselves and their world as Christ himself beholds them. Elijah is John's resurrection identity.¹⁹

JESUS THE CHRIST

As a thought experiment, it is interesting to ask whether Gospel writers might have applied other Old Testament given names to John the Baptist. We can at least imagine them zeroing in on correspondences between John the Baptist and other Old Testament characters. This being said, there is a set of Old Testament words and names that was off-limits: the words and names that refer to God. The most astonishing thing about the Gospel presentations of the man Jesus is that they flagrantly violate this boundary. They take it for granted that all the words and names of the Scriptures are at their disposal, whether used to describe God's people or God himself.

In the Gospels, Jesus applies both the human names and the divine names of the Old Testament to himself. Another way of describing John's ignorance about himself, standing as he does at the end of the old order, is to say that he is not granted to know his own divine name since he cannot possibly fully grasp that his cousin is the bearer of *the* divine name. John's

¹⁹A comprehensive study of Elijah as John's divine name would need to engage five aspects of the name's divinity. (1) Elijah is John's divine name since it is the name the God-Man uses to refer to him. (2) It is his divine name since it denotes his relation to God the Son. (3) It is his divine name since it is the application of an Old Testament name to his person. (4) It is his divine name since it is the name the New Testament uses to describe him. (5) And finally, it is his divine name since it is *the* name Christians give him in light of the resurrection.

John is only a voice (Jn 1:23). “I am not,” John repeatedly says (Jn 1:20, 21, 27; 3:28). But Jesus says, “I am.” He says it forty-five times! And in so doing he names himself with the name God revealed to his people in the Scriptures to publish his divine identity (Ex 3:14; 6:2; Deut 32:39; Is 48:12). These “I am” statements bind the Jesus who uses them to the God of the Old Testament. They are the linchpin confirming that the divine actions Jesus performs are actions he also performs as God in the Old Testament. In his seven key “I am” statements (Jn 6:35; 8:12; 10:7; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1), Jesus is not merely retrospectively applying Old Testament texts to himself. “Before Abraham was, I am,” he says (Jn 8:58). This “I am” statement, like the others, confirms that the works of his Father in the Old Testament are also works Jesus performs. Early Christian authors recognized that Christ’s divinity could be established only by enscripturating him as the actor of the divine work the Old Testament describes. Early Christian exegesis was electrified by this wonder.

The distinction between divine and human in Scripture is important to the historic practice of enscripturation. In the temple of the Scriptures, divine names are something like the holy of holies. They are off-limits, or at least almost always off-limits. And the inability to enter in is something the people of God have by and large had little difficulty coming to accept. The high priest, who is permitted to enter once a year, may be seen in this case as a figure of Christ Jesus, since he alone of all those who have taken on the name *human* has also taken up the name *God*. Yet this does not mean the human names of Scripture are unclean. They are not the holy of holies. But they are, perhaps, the holy place. The human names in the Old Testament, like the divine, have God as their author and therefore belong to him.

We might note, further, that the revelation of Jesus Christ’s divine identity in resurrection does not merely justify the application of the divine names of the Old Testament, such as “I AM,” to his person. It requires equally the reapplication of the human names of the Old Testament as names that now apply to God himself. Having applied these names to

himself, Jesus takes hold of them and redeems them, giving them an equal share in Scripture's redeeming power.

It is a great mercy that the Old Testament contains human names and not just divine. For it is through his embrace of these human names that Christ condescends to his people and enables them to grab hold of him. It is true—as Christ himself warns—that many false Christs will arise. These false Christs are those who, in failing to note the distinction between divine and human names, have applied divine names to themselves. Yet they are by far the minority. Most of those who have applied the names of Scripture to themselves have been more than content to use only human names. That they have done so does not validate their interpretive choices, as we will see, for there are not only false christs but also false prophets. But we can at least say this: Those who come to identify with the human actors of the Old Testament participate in Christ by way of his humanity.²⁰

While the distinction between the divine and human names of Scripture obtains for human readers, it does not apply to God in Christ. We can note that Jesus applies the divine names of the Old Testament only to himself and that he applies the human names of Scripture not only to himself but to others. His application of these human names to himself does not necessarily precede his application to others chronologically in the Gospel stories. However, his application of these names to himself, both divine and human, must be given priority, for the scriptural names he gives to others are *his* scriptural names.

I recognize this all sounds rather complex. But I think it will become clear as we consider the testimony that Jesus, like John, is to be given the

²⁰The human actions of the Old Testament can be his actions since he is human, and the divine since he is divine. It is tempting to say that these divine works apply exclusively to Christ's divine nature, just as the human works apply exclusively to his human nature. But the creedal tradition will not permit us to speak in this way. Indeed, the creedal tradition rejects all such dividing work. All the divine works the Father performs in the Old Testament are works he performs with the Son and with God the Holy Spirit. And all these works God the Son performs are equally, as Chalcedon maintains, works that are both human and divine. The distinction between the divine and the human in the Old Testament cannot be mapped onto Christ's two natures, with the divine actions attributed to the divine person and the human actions to the human person. For an incisive reflection on the applicability of the hypostatic union to the Scriptures, see Eric Larson, "Chalcedonian Hermeneutics of the Word: Reconciling Biblical and Theological Studies Through the Incarnational Analogy," *Didaskalia* (2024): 34-35.

name Elijah. Jesus identifies with the figure of Elijah in all four Gospels. Luke seems to be most interested in making this connection, and this is perhaps one reason why he is reticent about calling John *Elijah*. Just as identifying John with Elijah is of great interest to Matthew, identifying Jesus with Elijah is of great interest to Luke.

In Luke's account, Jesus returns to his hometown after he is baptized by John, and he tells the people who think they know him who he really is. It is evident that they know him only in a human manner. According to Luke, Jesus discloses his true and divine identity by reading the Scriptures. He enters the synagogue on the Sabbath and is asked to read the lection from the prophet Isaiah. He reads,

The Spirit of the LORD is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor. (Lk 4:18-19; see Is 61:1-2)

Those present may well have recognized that in saying these words Jesus was embodying them, for Luke notes that "the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him" (Lk 4:20). Perhaps he thought this preaching was preaching enough. He "rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down" (Lk 4:20). But those who looked at him looked with eyes of amazement, and likely disbelief, and he therefore proceeded to exposit the text.²¹ The content of this second proclamation reiterated that of the first: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," he preached (Lk 4:21).

The people of Nazareth were quite willing to allow Jesus to claim for himself the mantle of the Old Testament prophet. Luke tells us that they

²¹Hooker describes the public reading of Scripture and the exposition of this reading as the two modes of preaching. In this case Jesus can be understood as having delivered two complementary sermons or, perhaps, a single two-part sermon. See Richard Hooker, *The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity: A Critical Edition with Modern Spelling*, ed. Arthur Stephen McGrade (Oxford University Press, 2013), book V, chaps. 19-22.

were “amazed at the gracious words that came from his lips” (Lk 4:22). They may even have been willing to accept him as the long-anticipated Elijah, with whom he identifies in the verses that follow. But it is clear that, even if they were willing to do so, they were willing to do so only on their own terms. And for Luke, accepting Jesus on their terms was the same as not accepting him at all. The disagreement between Jesus and the people of Nazareth does not concern his prophetic identity but the measure of such an identity. The measure of a prophet, Jesus says, is hometown rejection, and he appeals to Elijah and Elisha to confirm this point.

Like Elijah and Elisha, Jesus did not travel widely, and like them he ministered largely to the people of Israel. He says that, like Elijah, he comes in a time of “famine,” and he may here be speaking of the present time as a time in which the Word of God is seen to be “rare” (1 Sam 3:1). Jesus then demonstrates that his people have failed to understand or support his ministry by pointing to two stories from Elijah and Elisha’s prophetic ministries. He reminds his readers that Elijah was sent to the widow of Zarephath in the region of Sidon even though there were many suffering widows in Israel (1 Kings 17:7-24), and that Elisha cleansed Naaman the Syrian though there were many in Israel with leprosy whom he did not cleanse (2 Kings 5). The clear implication here is that they were sent abroad because of Israelite unbelief. Jesus’ ministry is a dividing ministry that, like John’s Elijahan ministry, will cause the “falling and rising of many in Israel” (Lk 2:34). The great scandal for the people of Nazareth is not that his prophetic ministry will enact such a division but that this rising will include those who stand outside the nation of Israel. “The Queen of the South,” Jesus will later go on to say, “will rise at the judgment with the people of this generation and condemn them, for she came from the ends of the earth to listen to Solomon’s wisdom; and now something greater than Solomon is here” (Lk 11:31).

Jesus’ allusion to the duration of Elijah’s prophetic ministry, three and a half years, inaugurates his own three-and-a-half-year ministry.²² This

²²“In Jesus’s inaugural sermon in his home synagogue in Nazareth, he mentions the famine in Elijah’s day and gives the duration of this famine as three and a half years (Luke 4:25), a detail not found

identification generates what some have called an “Elijianic midrash,” a series of parallels between Elijah and his ministry and Jesus and his ministry, which give the impression that Luke’s narrative retelling proceeds by way of comment on the book of Kings.²³ The many parallels leave no doubt that for Luke Jesus is to be understood as a new (and better) Elijah.²⁴ We might also note that Luke’s presentation of Jesus as Elijah is oriented toward his disappearance and the passing on (*paradosis*) of his prophetic mantle, which in Luke’s Gospel falls to the disciples who are clothed with the power of the Holy Spirit. While there is a great deal more to say about this, here it suffices to say that it begins with Jesus’ appropriation of the Old Testament, in which given names play an important part. R. T. France’s still-relevant discussion *Jesus and the Old Testament* concludes that the basic difference between Jesus’ use of the Old Testament and that of his contemporaries is that he believed and taught that it “found its fulfillment” in him.²⁵ We might note, though, that the success of this reading meant Jesus would not stand out for long. While in Luke’s account Jesus’ ministry begins with him enscripturating himself, the ministry of his disciples begins when they follow him and “go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37) by finding him in the Scriptures.

in the Old Testament traditions concerning Elijah (1 Kgs. 17-18). Perhaps in Luke’s reckoning three and a half years is the right amount of time for a prophet’s ministry—or for the ministry of an Elijah-like Messiah.” Joseph L. Mangina, *Revelation*, Brazos Theological Commentary (Brazos, 2017), 136.

²³Wink, *John the Baptist*, 45.

²⁴When, in Lk 9:54, Jesus’ disciples ask him for permission to consume the unbelieving with fire from heaven as Elijah does in 2 Kings 1, Jesus, the new Elijah, rebukes them. But he later goes on to say that it falls to himself, as the new Elijah, to “bring fire on the earth” (Lk 12:49); this new Elijah raises a widow’s son in Lk 7:15, just as the old Elijah had in 1 Kings 17:22; in Lk 9:61, a would-be disciple of the new Elijah asks for permission to first return to his father in a way that evokes the story of Elisha’s decision to leave his father behind and follow the old Elijah (1 Kings 19:20); in Lk 12:24 Jesus asks his disciples to consider the ravens, in a clear allusion to the provision they offered to the old Elijah in 1 Kings 17:6; in Lk 12:54 he says to the crowd that they are seasoned weather-watchers, able to discern that a cloud rising in the west is sure to bring rain, and this allusion to the old Elijah’s weather watching in 1 Kings 18:44 is a call to be attentive to the eschatological significance of Elijianic ministry that is unfolding before their very eyes; in Lk 22:43 an angel of the LORD appears to strengthen and revive the new Elijah in his hour of testing, just as an angel appears to the old Elijah in 1 Kings 19:4; the new Elijah asks his disciples to stay and wait for him in Lk 24:49, as the old Elijah asks his disciple to do so in 2 Kings 2:4. In Luke 24:51 and Acts 1:9, the new Elijah is taken up into the cloud, just as the old Elijah was enveloped by a whirlwind in 2 Kings 2:11. The list here largely conforms to the pattern set out by Wink, *John the Baptist*, 44. See also R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (Baker Books, 1982), 50.

²⁵France, *Jesus and the Old Testament*, 200.

Jesus' long conversation with his disciples on the Emmaus road in Luke's Gospel was not merely a matter of teaching them about himself or about the contents of the Old Testament. It was a lesson in hermeneutics.²⁶ Jesus taught his disciples how to read—and how to read with him in mind. The reason for this is that the proclamation of the gospel (*kērygma*), and therefore the continuation of Jesus' prophetic witness, depends on the ability to reread the Scriptures as Jesus himself reread them. And they *did* learn. Luke's Gospel is confirmation that they did. The hermeneutics lesson started with Jesus condemning the disciples for being slow to believe what the prophets had spoken regarding the Messiah as one who must suffer before he enters into his glory. And then, "beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Lk 24:27). Luke doesn't bother to include *which* Scriptures he addressed. Luke's Jesus does not divide the Scriptures into Scriptures that reveal him and Scriptures that don't. He speaks to the disciples from *all* the Scriptures because they all point to him. "Not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished" (Mt 5:18) because the crucified and risen LORD fulfills every letter and every stroke of every letter.²⁷

Jesus himself speaks to his disciples on the Emmaus road as the first to look on the Old Testament from an elevated position. Faith in his resurrection enabled Gospel writers to follow suit. Each Gospel narrative is itself a reading of the Old Testament. As an extension of Jesus' resurrection reading of the Old Testament, the Old Testament reading of the Gospel writers is at once a reading of his life. From this it follows, as Joel Marcus notes, that "The movement of thought . . . is not *exclusively* from Christ to

²⁶One of the important hermeneutical principles that can be unveiled by this text is the way it anticipates the twofold division of the liturgy—that is, the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the table—suggesting in this division that the apocalyptic unveiling of Christ's divine identity depends on scriptural exposition and sacramental action within the church.

²⁷Behr describes the transfiguration of the Scriptures as follows: In the revelation of the Risen One, what it means to be Scripture is forever changed. Scripture is now to be read within "an apocalyptic framework pivoted upon the cross." John Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 130.

the Scripture but also from the Scripture christologically-construed to a deeper understanding of the events surrounding Christ.”²⁸ This is not to say that every Old Testament word can be applied directly to the Gospel witness. It is to affirm that, having begun with any given Old Testament word, the one who searches the Scriptures will be led to the feet of the crucified and risen LORD of the Gospels through the mediation of the canonical witness.

Elijah is only one of the many human names of the Old Testament that the Gospel writers apply to Jesus’ person. France notes several other given Old Testament names that Jesus takes on himself. He is a new and greater Jonah (Mt 12:39-41; 16:4; Lk 11:29-30), a new and greater Solomon (Mt 12:42; Lk 11:31), a new and greater David (Mt 12:3-4; Mk 2:25-26; Lk 6:3-4), a new and greater Isaiah (Mt 13:13; Mk 4:12; Lk 8:10).

In the next section of this chapter we will consider the idea that Jesus is a new and greater Jacob. But first we must briefly consider the difference between the New Testament’s application of Old Testament names to Jesus and to the people of God. At root the difference is a simple one, namely that the meaning of words is not found in dictionaries only but in the application of these words to the objects of the world. Thus when Old Testament names are applied to Jesus and to the people of God, they mean different things since Jesus is God and they are not. This is something most biblical interpreters recognize intuitively when it comes to words such as *father*.²⁹ And there is no avoiding this conclusion, whatever the word in question: To say that John the Baptist is Elijah is one thing, and to say that Jesus Christ is Elijah is quite another.

Early Christian interpreters took this difference for granted. While they spoke of a first and a second Adam, following cues Paul gave them (particularly in 1 Cor 15), they well understood that the one who considers the relationship between the first and second Adam will have to invert the ordering. As Byzantine theologian Nicholas Cabasilas observes,

²⁸Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (Westminster John Knox, 1992), 108.

²⁹In this instance texts such as Ps 27:10—“Though my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will receive me”—help us a good deal.

It was not the old Adam who was the model for the new, but the new Adam for the old, even though it is said that the new Adam was generated according to the likeness of the old (Rom 8:3) because of the corruption which the old Adam initiated. The latter Adam inherited it in order that He might abolish the infirmity of our nature by means of the remedies which He brings and, as Paul says, so “that which is mortal might be swallowed up by life” (2 Cor. 5:4).³⁰

Cabasilas is adamant that while it is easy to see the old Adam as the archetype, this point of view belongs to fallen human nature. Those who have been brought from death to new life have been given a new point of view. They must, he says, regard “Christ as the Archetype and the former Adam as derived from him,” for “the Saviour first and alone showed to us the true man, who is perfect on account of both character and life and in all other aspects as well.”³¹

Cabasilas gives voice to a tradition that goes back to Irenaeus of Lyons and from him to John’s Gospel. This Gospel is, as John Behr observes, the paschal Gospel, since Christ’s death and resurrection are the basis of a rereading of Christ’s life that the Gospel commends. This rereading presents Christ as the transfigured one, whose self-revelation as the Word and as the beginning demands not merely that the events depicted in John’s Gospel be reframed and reinterpreted but that all the Scriptures be reframed and reinterpreted as well. This transfigured rereading of the Scriptures is not merely offered alongside John’s transfigured rereading of Jesus’ life.³² John’s transfigured rereading of Jesus’ life is rendered *through* this rereading. “The garments of the Word,” Origen writes, “are the phrases of the Scripture, the divine thoughts are clothed in these expressions.” And as Behr notes, Origen is even prepared to describe these fleshly garments as the flesh of the Word. “For always in the Scriptures the Word became

³⁰Nicholas Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ*, trans. Carmino J. deCatanaro (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 190.

³¹Cabasilas, *Life in Christ*, 191.

³²Kevin Vanhoozer explores the hermeneutical implications of the transfiguration in part three of *Mere Hermeneutics*. He describes the luminescent rereading of the text in light of the transfiguration as “trans-figural” interpretation. Vanhoozer, *Mere Hermeneutics: Transfiguring What It Means to Read the Bible Theologically* (Zondervan, 2024), 193-372.

flesh that he might tabernacle among us,” Origen says.³³ While the Synoptics offer the reader the choice of rereading Christ in this way, such a choice is hardly offered to John’s readers, for the only Christ they are permitted to see, as Origen notes, is the Word clothed in these transfigured words of Scripture.

The conviction that the unseen God is revealed in the words of Scripture is endemic to the notion of Scripture itself. Rabbinic exegesis proposes that the words of Torah are the material expression of the divine counsel that exists in the mind of God. Origen’s description of the Scriptures as the flesh of the Word can be described as a transfigured or paschal rendering of this shared insight. “Just as this spoken word cannot according to its own nature be touched or seen, but when written in a book and, so to speak, become bodily, then indeed is seen and touched,” Origen says, “so too is it with the fleshless and bodiless Word of God; according to its divinity it is neither seen nor written, but when it becomes flesh, it is seen and written.”³⁴ Jesus of Nazareth just is the Word made flesh, and he is enfleshed in the Virgin’s womb and in the Scriptures. Along with its necessary accompaniment, his self-revelation in the breaking of the bread, this written testimony necessarily accompanies his virginal birth. These three embodiments work in harmony to confirm that Jesus of Nazareth’s divine status exists in eternity and is expressed in history. As Maximus the Confessor puts it, “The Word of God is called flesh not only as having become incarnate but as God the Word understood simply in the beginning with God the Father.”³⁵

³³Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.77, as quoted in Behr, *John the Theologian*, 113.

³⁴Origen, “Matthew Commentary Fragment,” in *Origen: Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings*, ed. Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. Robert J. Daly (Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 87-88. Godfrey of Admont speaks of God’s presence in Scripture using the figure of the kingdom of God. “By the ‘mystery of the kingdom of God’ is meant the mystery of holy Scripture, which is not unfittingly likened to the kingdom of God: since God is truly present in holy Scripture, God may truly be known from holy Scripture.” “Homiliae dominicales,” in *Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Latina* 174 (Paris, 1854), 154 D, as quoted in Henri de Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, vol. 2, *The Four Senses of Scripture*, trans. E. M. Macierowski (Eerdmans, 2000), 82n79.

³⁵As Origen insisted, it is possible to read this “fleshly” God in a “fleshly” way. Indeed, each act of scriptural reading is a test that unveils the identity of the reader. In this case to speak of Christ as a rock of stumbling and a stone of offense (1 Pet 2:8) is to speak of Christ-with-the-Scriptures. “The Word becomes flesh through each recorded word,” Maximus says, and yet, “When he is present to men who cannot with their naked mind reach naked spiritual realities, and converses in a

Like his decision to make Mary's flesh his own, God's decision to make the words of Scripture his own is for Maximus a great and merciful act of condescension that corresponds to the status of creatures as fleshly beings.

He consented to be both embodied and expressed through letters, syllables, and sounds, so that from all these He might gradually gather those who follow Him to Himself, being united by the Spirit, and thus raise us up to the simple and unconditioned idea of Him, bringing us for His own sake into union with Himself by contraction to the same extent that He has for our sake expanded Himself according to the principle of condescension.³⁶

Christ has, in his self-revelation as the crucified and risen LORD, claimed every word of Scripture as a member of his flesh. As George Lindbeck puts it, of every word it might be said, "He is the subject, everything else is predication."³⁷

This was the consensus of the premodern church even though Christ is not literally seen in every Old Testament text. This church interpreted the Old Testament christologically (allegorically) not because it was disposed to a particular method but because of its underlying conviction that every Old Testament word is the revelation of the crucified and risen LORD. As the documents of the New Testament gradually came to be imparted a similar scriptural status, this impartation was an acknowledgment that these documents required the same transfigured reading. Such a reading was not to be reserved for the Gospel of the disciple who alone was given the privilege of resting on Christ's breast at the Last Supper (Jn 13:23). Indeed, as Origen observes, this beloved disciple takes for

way familiar to them in a variety of stories, enigmas, parables, and dark sayings, then he becomes flesh. Our mind does not in this first encounter hold converse with the naked Word, but with the Word made flesh, certainly in a variety of languages; though he is the Word by nature he is flesh to the sight, so that men think they see flesh and not the Word even if he is truly the Word." George C. Berthold, ed. and trans., *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings* (Paulist, 1985), 159-60.

³⁶Maximos the Confessor, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, ed. Nicholas Constas (Harvard University Press, 2014), 2:65.

³⁷George A. Lindbeck, "Story-Shaped Church: Theological Interpretation and Critical Exegesis," in *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. James A. Buckley (Eerdmans, 2003), 164.

granted that the meaning of his Gospel will be understood only by those who, like him, have “leaned on Jesus’ breast.”³⁸

While John’s Gospel and his mystical theology may well be the most impressive monument of a transfigured reading, patristic New Testament interpretation confirms that each New Testament document has the potential to be richly explicated through this newly discovered hermeneutic. Indeed, John’s concluding statement that the works of God in Christ can hardly be contained in a single volume is an admission that his transfigured reading of the life of Christ opens up onto infinity (Jn 21:25). This confirms that John’s purpose is not to do battle with alternative transfigured readings of Christ but to make sure that transfigured readings are the only ones admitted by the church. The importance of his prologue, in this case, is that it sets the parameters for such ruled readings, whether found within John’s Gospel or without. For this reason Behr describes it as a “prologue” to theology.³⁹

At the beginning of the prologue we are forcefully confronted with the God/not-God divide that was basic to the Old Testament understanding of creation *ex nihilo* and which the church ratified at the first ecumenical council. Here the divide is established not merely by announcing the identity of the man who is God but by announcing the identity of a man who is not God. This man, we might say, testifies to the light by not being the light. Other scriptural characters do this too, though not only the obvious examples—Peter, for instance, saying, “Stand up; I am only a mortal” (Acts 10:26 NRSV). Humans whose names are found in Scripture are humans whose identities are given in relation to the Maker of all things. And set, as they are, in relation to him, their names cry out with the voice of Peter, “I am only a mortal”! Everything that Scripture’s humans are, they are in relation to God and to God in Christ. So while Jesus is the Word, John merely testifies to this Word with his words (Jn 1:7); while Jesus is the light of the world, John is a lamp who burned for a short time

³⁸Behr, *John the Theologian*, 243.

³⁹Behr, *John the Theologian*, 323–32.

(Jn 5:35); while Jesus is the bridegroom, John is the friend of the bridegroom (Jn 3:29).

Whatever the Baptizer is in relation to God, he is in relation to Christ. This provides insight into the conundrum of John's refusal to be called by the name *Elijah*. Because his Christ is not Elijah, John the Theologian has little interest exploring the Baptizer's Elijanic identity. Were John's Christ the new and better Elijah, this would be an identity that could be imparted to him by way of participation. John's Gospel works according to the same principle as the others: What his disciples are called to be "in Christ" is what Christ already is. John can be Elijah for Matthew and Mark (and in a qualified sense for Luke), since Christ is, in their presentation, a great prophet. But he is not Elijah for them as Christ is Elijah for them. In John 6 those who have eaten their fill declare, "Surely this is the Prophet who is to come into the world" (Jn 6:14), but these are also those who do not understand Jesus' true identity and thus, as the narrative continues, are among the disciples who fall away. John's Jesus does not ascend the Mount of Transfiguration and stand among Moses and Elijah the prophets, for to place John's Jesus among the prophets is to misunderstand his transfigured identity and calling. The prophet peers into the heavenly realm, but only from afar. As the crucified and risen LORD, Jesus fully inhabits this realm as the transfigured one who now dwells among his people (Jn 1:14).

This is not to say that Christian exegetes can no longer attribute to Christ a prophetic office. It is merely to say that the words of each text describe, in their own way, the relation between humans and God in Christ. The unveiling of Christ's fullness requires the unveiling of each and every scriptural text. The literal text is not merely an aid to reflection but a temptation that alluringly invites the reader to tear the Word of God asunder. The ignorant soldiers, who in John's Gospel do not perceive Jesus' divine identity, divide Jesus' clothes into four shares, one for each of them. But the beloved disciple who sees the crucified and risen LORD high and lifted up (Jn 12:32) beholds the untorn, seamless undergarment, which was "woven in one piece from top to bottom" (Jn 19:23).

This single garment presents a single image of the King, to borrow Irenaeus's famous description: There is no need to mix and match and tear and sew the way the heretics do in their attempts to create an image of their own devising, for this atomizing approach inevitably produces the image of a dog or a fox.⁴⁰ Christ's kingly image is an image beheld in the Scriptures as received by the church. It is an image that comprises each and every text, for, as Jesus says, not a single iota can ever be torn from the law (Mt 5:18). Not a single iota can be torn away since Christ himself is not divided (1 Cor 1:13-15). And not a single iota can be torn away since he has lost none of those whom he has been given (Jn 18:9).

The importance of the given names of humans—and here we can speak not only of the given names of the Old Testament but also of the New—is that they are easily identifiable handles that the reader can grasp since they showcase a common humanity. This common humanity belongs, in the first place, to Jesus Christ the true human being.⁴¹ The Scripture names of human beings are not the bearers of God's salvific work because they belong to the saints. Scripture names are the bearers of God's salvific work because the true human being, the new Adam, bears them also. To be identified with Abraham, Isaac, Israel, Moses, or Elijah is therefore to be identified in relation to Christ. As the people of God grab hold of these Scripture names, they name themselves in Christ. And in so doing, they point to him: "Here is the man" (Jn 19:5)!⁴²

⁴⁰Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, trans. John Behr (Oxford University Press, 2013), 124. See also John Behr, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 105.

⁴¹The creaturely names of Scripture, in which human creatures can find themselves, are drawn up into Christ's divinity by way of his humanity. The humanity of Christ is thus the ground of the history of enscription. But, to reiterate, it is not the ground because it corresponds only to the texts in which human creatures are named—for he makes every text his own in the unity of his divine/human person. It is the ground because these texts show forth his humanity by way of an accommodation that allows human creatures to grab hold of them and make them their own. Another way of saying this is that while human beings are able to grab hold of only a part of this single garment, like the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, this is contact enough (Mk 5:25-34). For the countless enscriptionators of history, the act of reaching forth is for them, as it is for her, an act of faith, driven by the hope that in taking hold of Christ he will willingly take hold of them.

⁴²"The glory of God is a living human being." By this Irenaeus means the martyr. Behr, *John the Theologian*, 199.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/clothed-in-the-word



InterVarsity Press

Copyrighted content.