

THE BEAUTY OF JESUS CHRIST

FOUR STUDIES IN HIS PERSON AND WORK



Reformed Theological Seminary | Orlando

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O R L A N D O



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Preface

The Lord Jesus Christ is beautiful. “You are the most handsome of the sons of men,” the psalmist declares (Ps. 45:2). To the psalmist’s declaration, the author of Hebrews adds his praise: Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of his being (Heb. 1:3).

Reformed Theological Seminary exists to train men and women to see the beauty of Jesus in all of Scripture and to commend his beauty to others. This little booklet is designed to give you a taste of the kind of Christ-honoring teaching that our faculty engage in both inside and outside the classroom. The first chapter, by Professor Mike Glodo, addresses the various ways Jesus Christ appears in the Old Testament. The second chapter, by Dr. Greg Lanier, details the significance of the magi in Matthew’s account of the advent of Christ. In the third chapter, I summarize the meaning of Christ’s incarnation. In the fourth chapter, Dr. Michael Allen discusses our future hope of one day seeing Christ face to face.

Our desire at RTS Orlando is to see the purpose of Psalm 45:17 fulfilled: “I will cause your name to be remembered in all generations; therefore nations will praise you forever.” We hope this booklet will help you appreciate more fully the beauty of Jesus Christ and to engage more deeply in the psalmist’s purpose as well.

Scott R. Swain
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Jesus Christ in the Old Testament

Michael J. Glodo

Have you ever read a book or seen a movie that you thought was okay, but not great, until someone pointed out symbolism, something in the plot, or the way the story was told that made you realize it was phenomenal? It made you want to go back and reread or re-watch, perhaps even more than once, so you could experience the full grandeur of the story. The same can be true of the greatest story ever told—the story of Jesus—once you see the plot. This was precisely what happened to two of Jesus’ disciples in Luke 24. Distraught over the death of their teacher and his rejection as the savior of God’s people, they had not yet been able to believe the rumors of his resurrection. Encountering but not recognizing the risen Christ, they were asked by him what they were discussing. In an irony-filled exchange in which they ask him if he hadn’t heard about the events of the last few days, Jesus called them “foolish” and “slow of heart to believe” what the Old Testament said about the suffering of the Messiah and his glory. Luke continues, “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (v. 27). He later adds the “Psalms” as well as the law and the prophets so that, in effect, Jesus said the whole Old Testament was about him and what he would do (v. 44). According to Jesus, he is the interpretive key to reading and understanding the Old Testament.

Luke also tells us the most wonderful thing about realizing this. The two on the road to Emmaus said, after they had their Bible lesson and realized it was Jesus himself who taught them, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?” (v. 32). Since Jesus himself is still our teacher through the Holy Spirit which he sent, we also can meet Jesus and experience his life-changing presence if we read the Old Testament as a book about him.

First, and probably the most well-known, he is *predicted*. Isaiah 7:14 is an often-cited example. While there is a provisional fulfillment in the next chapter, it doesn't fully measure up to what was predicted. More substantially, Isaiah's sweeping descriptions of someone called "the servant" in the last half of his book point dramatically forward to an expectation which is only realized in Jesus. When we read such predictions in light of Jesus, we see with greater clarity and profoundness who he is and what he has done.

But Jesus is not only predicted—in fact that is only a small part of how the Old Testament is about Jesus. We also see him *anticipated*. There are things, events, places, and people in the Old Testament that, in their original context, clearly have symbolic meaning. Mysterious Melchizedek, Abraham's ram in the thicket, the Passover lamb, the tabernacle and temple with all their furnishings, Moses, David, Solomon—the functions all of these play in their original settings tell us there is more than meets the eye. The scapegoat, with the sins of the people laid symbolically on its head and led off into the wilderness, symbolized an innocent creature which would undergo death as a substitute for those sins. No one believed the goat was magic, but rather—in God's intentions—it symbolized something that God himself was carrying out. Such things we call "types" and their interpretation is called "typology."

Jesus is also revealed in the Old Testament because he is *necessitated*. There is some overlap between this and types, but saying Jesus is necessitated by the Old Testament means that the people, things, and events of the Old Testament have a built-in obsolescence—they ultimately can't accomplish what they intended. Moses ultimately couldn't lead the people into the promised land. The blood of bulls and goats could never permanently take away sins (Heb. 10:4). While the sacrificial laws were given by God to teach his people how God loved them, they pointed to something greater. Their failure to completely do what they were intended was God's way of saying that

something more was needed. So, for example, Jesus is a better mediator than Moses because Jesus is God's son while Moses was only God's servant (Heb. 3:5-6).

Jesus is also *personified* in the Old Testament. God appeared in physical form at times—the smoking firepot of the covenant with Abraham, the burning bush of the Midian desert, the glory cloud atop Mt. Sinai—but in a certain number of instances he appeared in human form. Usually these appearances refer to the man as the “angel of the Lord.” Even when not explicit, it is evident that this person was understood to be God himself. Hagar regarded the words of the man as God himself speaking to her (Gen. 22:11-15). Joshua was commanded to take off his shoes before him (Jos. 5:15). While general appearances of God in visible form are called “theophanies,” those in human form are called “christophanies” because they foreshadow the time in which God the Son will take upon a human nature and perform the same actions as the angel of the Lord.

If these ways of seeing Jesus in the Old Testament are familiar to you, there is one more way that is perhaps the most overlooked. In the Old Testament we see Jesus *provided*—that is, we see how the benefits of what Christ would do in the future are actually administered to believers in the Old Testament. The most explicit reference to this is 1 Corinthians 10:4. In citing the example of Old Testament Israel to warn about the need for persevering faith, Paul reminded his readers that “all” passed through the Red Sea, all were “baptized” into Moses and the glory cloud, all ate the same manna, all drank water from the rock, but not all believed. Then he stunningly adds, “and the Rock was Christ.” Not “the rock was like Christ” or “the rock reminds us of Christ,” but “the Rock was Christ.”

If we reflect on this, it begins to make sense. There is no other name by which people can be saved. There is no other mediator between God and man. Yet we are told in the New Testament of many believers in the Old Testament

before Christ came. From the moment of humanity's fall into sin and judgment, God promised the gospel in seed form (Gen. 3:15). As God's plan of redemption progressed, his people believed his promises. Since every promise of God is "yes," and "yes" *only* in Jesus, their faith was in Christ to come (2 Cor. 1:20). The Westminster Confession of Faith sums this up beautifully when it says:

Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after his incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof were communicated unto the elect, in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices, wherein he was revealed, and signified to be the seed of the woman which should bruise the serpent's head; and the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world; being yesterday and today the same, and forever (WCF 8.6).

Therefore, when Israel in the wilderness ate bread from heaven, drank water from the rock, observed the sacrifices and offerings, and did everything else which was promised and provided by God—and only when they did so *in faith*—they were sharing in the grace of God in Jesus Christ. This is why the writer of Hebrews can claim Old Testament believers as paragons not merely of generic faith, but of justifying faith *in Christ* (Heb. 11). As such, Old Testament saints are not only (and sometimes not actually!) moral examples of ethical behavior, but examples of saving faith in God's free grace (Rom. 4:1-8).

Seeing Jesus in this way will change the way we read our Bibles. We will read the New Testament differently knowing that the New Testament is not the beginning of a new story, but the fulfillment of an older story. We will see the "glory become flesh" as the full manifestation of the glory that was on Mt. Sinai and the true bread from heaven toward which the daily manna of the wilderness pointed (Jn. 1:14; 6:35).

We will also read the Old Testament differently. We will not read it merely as a set of examples for moral behavior or an impossible ideal which we could never attain (although it does tell us these things at times), but as the unfolding story of Jesus Christ which was inspired by the Spirit of Christ himself and written for our sake today, not just for people of old (1 Pet. 1:11; Rom. 15:4). We will read the Old Testament with a thirst and hunger to have our hearts warmed like the two on the Emmaus road because we will read it in order to know Jesus Christ. If we read the Old Testament this way, we will read it the way God intended, to help us persevere in believing God's good news of forgiveness of sins, of new life and purpose, of rescue from slavery to sin, of protection by our divine king, and to walk in God's ways (1 Cor. 10:6).

We Three Kings of Orient Aren't

Gregory R. Lanier

They typically receive fourth billing in Christmas plays. Outfitted with oversized bathrobes and foil crowns, they present shoeboxes to the baby doll in the manger. Nearby are cattle-a-lowings, angels, and shepherds too young for speaking parts. They are the “wise men.” Immortalized in Matthew 2:1–12 and seared into our collective consciousness by the song “We Three Kings,” these figures have been a mainstay in retellings of Jesus’ birth for centuries.

But what do we really know about these men? Narrative padding has tended to stifle their profound importance in Matthew’s Gospel. Yet by looking at things afresh—what they *aren’t* and what they *are*—we can better appreciate their role in heralding the gospel itself. Indeed, God can use even pagan astrologers to inaugurate the worship of the world’s divine King.

Mental pictures of biblical stories can gain traction even if they don’t quite square with Scripture. Let us first, then, recalibrate some things about these “three kings of Orient” by asking six specific questions.

How Many Were There?

Tradition pegs their number at three. One is hard-pressed, however, to find that detail in Matthew 2. Three, which dates back at least to Origen (AD 185–254), comes from ascribing the number of *gifts* (gold, frankincense, myrrh) to the number of men bringing them.

But church history is not uniform here: Two men appear in the ancient catacomb of Peter and Marcellinus, four in the catacomb of Domitella, and eight or twelve in other medieval lists. We simply do not know. Matthew just uses the plural.

What Were They?

The traditional “wise men” or “kings” are not found in Matthew’s account either. He simply calls them “Magi” (Greek *magos*). Who are these mystery figures? *Magos* derives from a Persian word denoting a priestly caste, but it’s also used for interpreters of astrological signs or dreams. Philo uses *magos* for the Egyptian sorcerers of Exodus 7. Josephus uses it for dream interpreters. In the Greek of Daniel 2, *magoi* appear with the Babylonian enchanters and wise men consulted by Nebuchadnezzar to interpret his dream. Acts 13:6–8 describes Bar-Jesus/Elymas as a *magos*. Some believed *magoi* legitimately possessed supernatural abilities; others deemed them charlatans.

Matthew’s *magoi* were likely specialists in dreams and astrological phenomena, as attested by their interpretation of the star. They were “wise men” only in a secular sense, and it’s unlikely they were real kings.

Where Were They From?

“Orient” is a largely outdated word for eastern Asia. In the hymnody it probably derives from the Latin *oriens*, which means “east” and is a fine translation of what Matthew actually says: “*magoi* from the East” (2:1). The English word “Orient,” however, confuses things.

These *magoi* were likely from Persia, Arabia (Syria/Jordan, not Saudi Arabia), or Babylonia. Some church fathers, such as Clement of Alexandria, favored Persia, since it was a hotbed of Zoroastrian astrology. Other fathers, such as Justin—partly based on the typical sources of the spices mentioned, partly based on Psalm 72:15—favored Arabia. Babylonia is also a great candidate, since its *magoi* would have come into contact with Israel’s Scriptures during the captivity.

They came “from the East” (2:1) and “went back to their territory” (2:12). We know little more—but they probably did not come from “the Orient.”

When Did They Visit Jesus?

Traditional nativities place the *magoi* with the shepherds at the stable on the night of Jesus' birth. This harmonization of Matthew 2 with Luke 2 is well-intended, but it misconstrues some details. In Matthew, the *magoi* apparently arrived some time after the birth—perhaps weeks, even months.

Matthew 2:1 reads, “Now after Jesus was born . . . *magoi* from the East came to Jerusalem”—implying a time gap. Word reached King Herod, who assembled his advisers, consulted the *magoi*, and dismissed them to Bethlehem (2:4–9). It would be nearly impossible to fit these proceedings in the gap between the birth and the angelic appearance to the shepherds that night (Lk. 2:7–8).

Further, if the star appeared at or shortly before Jesus' birth, it would have taken days or weeks for the *magoi* to travel from “the East.” Upon their arrival (2:9–11), Matthew describes Jesus as a “child,” not a “baby” as in Luke 2:12. And the *magoi* visit him in a house, where the family apparently relocated after the birth. Finally, Herod decrees the death of boys 2 years old or younger, “according to the time ascertained” from the *magoi* (2:16). The *magoi* weren't there that first night but sometime later. The combined Matthew/Luke sequence runs: Jesus' birth, angels/shepherds, circumcision, presentation at the temple, visit by the *magoi*, flight to Egypt, and resettlement in Nazareth (where the storylines reunite—Matthew 2:23 and Luke 2:39). But, of course, that sequence makes for a complicated live nativity.

Why Did the Star Prompt Them to Go to Jerusalem?

Why did these *magoi*, upon seeing a star, go to Jerusalem looking for “he who has been born king of the Jews” (Mt. 2:1–2)? The hymns envision the star floating along, “westward leading, still proceeding,” guiding the *magoi* from “the Orient” to Jerusalem. Matthew's account does not actually say this. Something like that occurred on the short trip *south* to Bethlehem (Mt. 2:9),

but Matthew is silent on the initial westward trip to Jerusalem. There's a different explanation.

In antiquity, astrological wonders were understood to accompany political events, from the star landing in what becomes Rome to the star presaging the destruction of Jerusalem. Herod was no mere paranoid fool when he detected something politically amiss with the star's appearing (Mt. 2:7).

Magoi were experts in such astral phenomena. But what about *this* star drew them to Jerusalem? The most plausible explanation lies in Israel's Scriptures. As learned men who interacted with various religious literature, the *magoi* would have been familiar with Jewish political or messianic oracles. And one of the central political prophecies in the Hebrew Scriptures is Balaam's oracle.

In Numbers 22–24, Balak of Moab summoned the pagan Balaam to curse Israel. Balaam was a performer of incantations and divinations (Num. 23:23; Jos. 13:22). He came “from the east” (23:7), and was labeled a *magos* by Philo. But this pagan seer, otherwise a scoundrel (2 Pet. 2:15), blessed Israel by prophesying its deliverer-king via the symbol of a star:

I see him, but not now; I behold him, but not near: *a star will arise out of Jacob*, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel; it shall crush the forehead of Moab (Num. 24:17).

This future figure is also described as “a man from [Jacob's] seed who will rule many nations” (Num. 24:7).

Of great importance is the verb used in Numbers 24:17: the star “will arise.” Matthew alludes to it in 2:2 and 2:9, with the *magoi* seeing the star “in its rising,” which is derived from the word in Numbers 24:17. Matthew does not specify whether it was a supernova, comet, planetary conjunction, or other supernatural event—only that it “arose” and “appeared” (2:7, 16).

Balaam's star oracle was read messianically in other early Jewish writings: Dead Sea Scrolls, Sibylline Oracles, Aramaic translations of Numbers (replacing "star" with "king"), and rabbinic tradition.

In short, the star fulfilled a well-known Jewish messianic prophecy within a broader ancient sensitivity to astrological politics. The *magoi* observed the star and recognized that the *true* king of Israel, the one promised by God of old—not the one appointed by Caesar, whose neurotic obsession for self-preservation was exacerbated by the star—had entered the world. It's a fascinating collision of earthly revelation with divine revelation through the mouth of a pagan! *That* is what prompted the *magoi* to look for Jesus in Jerusalem.

What Is Their Significance for Matthew's Nativity?

What role, then, do the *magoi* play in Matthew 2? Foreign dignitaries visiting new rulers was not uncommon. It happened to Herod the Great himself, and Pliny lists *magoi* in the entourage honoring Nero. So when the *magoi* "fall down and pay homage" to the boy Jesus (Mt. 2:11), it could simply signify respect for the one they believed to be Israel's future earthly king.

This, by itself, is immensely significant in Matthew's Gospel. Matthew goes to great lengths to portray Jesus as embodying Israel's entire history. Matthew's genealogy places him in King David's line (Mt. 1:1, 17). His father Joseph's dream leads to Egypt to escape a murderous king—much like the patriarch Joseph's dreams led to Egypt, where Moses would be born, escape a murderous pharaoh, and deliver the people. In this way God said "out of Egypt I have called my son" (Mt. 2:15; cf. Hos. 11:1): Israel as God's firstborn culminates in Jesus as God's *true* firstborn and deliverer.

But, as Matthew proceeds to recount, the bulk of Israel in Jesus's day would reject him as their deliverer-king. The nativity anticipates death; the myrrh of

the *magoi* points to that of the cross (Mk. 15:23) and tomb (Jn. 19:39). Israel's leaders who knew the Scriptures (Mt. 2:6) wanted nothing to do with the "star arising from Jacob."

Instead, it is thoroughly pagan Gentiles—perhaps from a nation that had held Israel captive, if the Babylon theory is right—who alone read the Scriptures rightly and came to herald the true King.

But there's more. By responding to a starry light and bringing gifts, these *magoi* fulfill Scripture in another way—every phrase of Isaiah 60:1–6 reads like a script for Matthew's scene. The nations, here represented by the *magoi*, respond to the rising of the LORD with "gold and frankincense" and "good news." When the *magoi* bow down, they implicitly signal what Matthew later makes explicit (28:19–20): Jesus is not just Israel's king, but *their* king, possessing authority over all nations.

When the *magoi* "pay homage" to Jesus (2:11), the verb can also mean "worship," as in many English translations. Matthew leaves it open-ended. But no doubt, as the full identity of Jesus unfolds, their instincts prove right. For this boy is not only "king of the Jews," not only king of all nations, but the fully divine Son and Lord—Immanuel himself.

The wonder of Christmas, then, is that pagan astrologer magician-types are transformed to worship the incarnate divine Son through reading and responding to the ancient words of a pagan seer. Indeed, this is good news for lost sinners of all kinds throughout the world.

“In Christ two natures met to be thy cure”

Scott R. Swain

Introduction

“In Christ two natures met to be thy cure.” George Herbert’s elegant line captures two essential features of Christian teaching about Jesus Christ. The first feature concerns the consequence of the incarnation: “In Christ two natures met.” At the Father’s sovereign behest, and by the Spirit’s power, the Son of God became one of us, assuming human nature in Mary’s womb, with the result that two natures, divine and human, “met” in one person. The second feature concerns the ends of the incarnation: “to be thy cure.” The Word became flesh, not to benefit himself, but to benefit us, to be our “cure.” The Father sent the Son into the world because we needed a brother, a redeemer, and a Lord. If we are to appreciate the biblical significance of the person of Jesus Christ, we must consider both of these features.

“In Christ two natures met”: the nature and consequence of the incarnation

In order to understand the implications of the incarnation for Jesus’ person, we must first consider the nature of the incarnation itself. John 1:14 well expresses the “grammar” of the incarnation: “The Word became flesh.” (1) The *subject* of the incarnation is “the Word”—the one who existed “in the beginning,” who was “with God” and who “was God” (Jn. 1:1). While all three persons of the Trinity are operative in the incarnation (the Father sending, the Spirit empowering), it is the Son who personally became incarnate. (2) The *object* of the incarnation is “flesh”—not simply a human body, but human nature in its entirety, body and soul, in its miserable condition east of Eden (Isa. 40:6-7). (3) The *verb* of the incarnation, “became,” indicates that incarnation is not a matter of the Son coming to indwell a human person, as God indwells tabernacle and temple or as the Spirit indwells the saints. No:

the Second Person of the Trinity *became* human, assuming human nature into union with his person. As Thomas F. Torrance so ably put it, in the incarnation the Son of God came to dwell *among us as one of us*.

As a consequence of the incarnation, two natures exist in one person. In Christ two natures meet. This personal or “hypostatic” union of divine and human natures in the Son of God is a “great” mystery (1 Tim. 3:16) that outstrips the powers of human comprehension and transcends our highest capacities for praise. The hypostatic union is, nevertheless, a luminous mystery, characterized by its own intrinsic intelligibility that, through the Spirit-inspired testimony of prophets and apostles and by faith, we may grasp. Bathed in this great light, we may come to adore the person of Jesus in truth and to avoid Christological error.

The union of two natures in Christ surpasses all other unions that occur between God and creatures. In providence, God and creatures cooperate in fulfilling divinely appointed ends. In the covenant of grace, God binds himself to elect sinners for the sake of union and communion. In the incarnation, the Son of God unites divine and human natures *in his person* with the result that everything he is and everything he does is simultaneously fully divine and fully human. The God-man never is and never acts in separation from his divine and human natures. Thus, when Jesus pronounces the forgiveness of sins, he does so by means of his own divine authority and by means of his own human vocal cords (Mk. 2:1-12). When Jesus dies on the cross, the Second Person of the Trinity simultaneously suffers an all too human fate and enacts a work of divine wisdom and power (1 Cor. 1:23-25). When Jesus ascends into heaven, he returns to his own native state of divine glory (Jn. 17:5) and raises the now glorified DNA of Abraham, David, and Mary to the Father’s right hand (Ps. 110:1).

The intimacy of two natures in Jesus Christ transcends all other divine-human unions. Nevertheless, the hypostatic union does not bring about any

modification to Jesus' two natures. Jesus is wholly and truly God and wholly and truly man. In him the fullness of the Godhead dwells in bodily form (Col. 1:19; 2:9). In him the fullness of human nature exists in its integrity: he has been made like his brothers and sisters "in every respect" (Heb. 2:17), "yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Furthermore, the hypostatic union does not bring about any confusion of Jesus' two natures. In Christ two natures meet, but they do not mix, becoming some "third thing" (*tertium quid*) that is neither divine nor human. When horses and humans meet, we have a centaur, no longer horse nor human. When deity and humanity meet in Jesus Christ, we have a perfect Mediator, fully God and fully man.

"To be thy cure": ends of the incarnation

Mention of Jesus' mediatorial office brings us to the ends or reasons for his incarnation. Here we must address the question, Why did the Son of God become human? As we noted above, the Son of God did not assume human nature for his own benefit but for our "cure." The Son of God assumed human nature into union with his person in order that he might become the perfect Mediator between God and human beings, that he might reconcile two estranged parties for our good and God's glory. The God-man's mediatorial role may be summarized in terms of the threefold relationship he holds with his elect people: the Word became flesh in order to be our brother, our redeemer, and our Lord.

The Word became flesh in order to be *our brother*. The incarnation creates a kinship relation between God's eternal Son and God's elect children. As it is the kinsman-redeemer's responsibility in Scripture to deliver his family members from ruin (Ruth 3-4), so Jesus is a brother born for adversity (Pv. 17:17). The Son of God "had to be made like his *brothers* in every respect" if he was to be a fit Mediator (Heb. 2:17; 1 Tim. 2:5). But Jesus' kinship relation to us is not merely a function of the human nature he assumed. Through the incarnation, and in the work that follows therefrom, the Son of God extends to us a creaturely fellowship in his unique relationship to the Father: *his*

Father becomes *our* Father; *his* God becomes *our* God (Jn. 20:17; Gal. 4:4-7). “See what kind of love the Father has given us”—in and with the God-man—“that we should be called children of God” (1 Jn. 3:1; with 1 Jn. 1:1-3)!

The Word became flesh in order to be *our redeemer*. Jesus’ identity as the God-man informs his redemptive work in both its passive and active dimensions. The Mediator’s humanity is requisite to his suffering and death on the cross, since his divine nature is immortal and impassible. The Mediator’s humanity is also requisite to his obedience as the Second Adam, since it is the human race, not the divine Son, that owes a debt of obedience to God’s law. That said, the Mediator’s divine Sonship is no less significant for his redemptive work. The value of Jesus’ sacrificial death lies in his identity as God’s beloved Son (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 8:32). This is what makes his blood more precious than silver or gold (1 Pet. 1:18-19) and thus more than sufficient as a ransom for our souls (Ps. 49:7-9, 15). Moreover, the human obedience Jesus offers to the Father in Gethsemane and Golgotha (Mt. 26:36-46; Phil. 2:8) is the creaturely form of the divine filial obedience he offers to the Father in coming into the world (Jn. 6:38; 10:36). The former draws its infallibility and strength from the latter.

The Word became flesh in order to be *our Lord*. Strictly speaking, the Son of God is our Lord before and apart from the incarnation by virtue of his deity. However, by means of his mediatorial office and work, he assumes a lordship relation toward us that goes beyond the relation he holds toward us as our creator and providential ruler. Through his obedient death, our kinsman-redeemer has purchased us for himself (Tit. 2:14). Therefore we belong to him (1 Cor. 6:19-20). Therefore we acclaim him as our Lord (Jn. 20:20; Rom. 10:9; Phil. 2:11). Certainly, we worship him *because of* his deity and *because of* the divine favor he has exhibited toward us in reclaiming us as his own. But we also worship him *in* his humanity. It is in his person as the Lamb who sits upon the throne, in his person as the God-man, that he receives “blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever” (Rev. 5:13). We praise the

incarnate Lord, for in him God's supreme glory is revealed (Heb. 1:3) and in him our nature's supreme happiness is realized at the Father's right hand (Ps. 16:11).

Indeed, I believe the Bible pushes us to say that the ultimate reason for the Son's incarnation was not so that he could save us, but so that we could be saved for him. God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters (Gal. 4:4-7; Rom. 8:29), that in all things he, the incarnate Son of God, might be preeminent (Col. 1:18; Heb. 1:2, 4). For this reason, the incarnate lordship of the Son will endure forever (Ps. 45:6; Heb. 1:8).

Conclusion

"In Christ two natures met to be thy cure." This is true, wonderfully so. For now, our cure lies in belonging to the God-man, our brother, our redeemer, our Lord (1 Jn. 3:1). Ultimately, our cure will be perfected in beholding the glory he had with the Father before the world was, the glory he now and forever radiates in and through his incarnate person as the firstborn among an innumerable host of redeemed siblings (1 Jn. 3:2; Jn. 17:24-26; Rev. 7:9-10).

A Christ-Centered Vision of Hope

Michael Allen

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). In describing the blessed life, Jesus hearkens to an ancient yearning: “When shall I come and behold the face of God?” (Ps. 42:2). Central to the biblical and classical description of Christian hope, then, is that promise described through the centuries as the doctrine of the beatific vision or the vision of God (*visio Dei*).

Like other doctrines central to the faith, the beatific vision prompts us to reflect upon seeming tensions in the Scriptures. The way in which the prophets and apostles say one thing alongside another thing may frequently cause us to wonder how the two realities can both be true and not be mutually contradicting one another. Excursions into Christological and Trinitarian doctrine are the most widely known of such instances, though they are not alone. It is for this reason that theologians speak of the significance of mystery (a favored term of Paul: see, e.g., Eph. 6:19; 1 Cor. 15:51; 1 Tim. 3:9,16) and the accompanying doctrine of the incomprehensibility of God. In what ways does the beatific vision seem to express a key element of the mystery of the faith?

Psalm 11:7 offers a brief anatomy of the promised reality: “the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold his face.” Here we see that the beatific vision denotes a relational reality premised upon moral grounds: only the upright enjoy it, because God loves righteous works, because, ultimately, God himself is righteousness. In other words, the beatific vision, then, involves intimacy or proximity relationally that corresponds to a moral conformity. It is the one who is holy as God is holy (Lev. 11:44) or perfect as God is perfect (Mt. 5:48) who fits the bill. David addresses this reality in Psalm 24:

“Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
Who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.
He will receive blessing from the LORD
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.
Such is the generation of those who seek him,
who seek the face of the God of Jacob.”

The hands, the heart, even the soul itself must be true, right, and pure. Only then may the man of God see the face of God. The problem stems from the fact, narrated so forcibly and repeatedly through the Old Testament, that God’s people do not fit this bill. Upon being freed from bondage in Egypt, God’s people come to Sinai. Yet we are told there that “the people stood far off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (Ex. 20:21). God had warned that they could not touch the mountain, lest they die (Ex. 19:21-24). As Dennis Olson has argued in significant detail (especially in his book *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses*), this begins the mediatorial work of Moses, who will serve as a sign of one yet to come (a point made not only in Dt. 18:15-22, but also in Heb. 3:1-6). An intercessor is needed, because sinners cannot see God and live. Tragically, we learn that Moses is not holy enough as he can only see God’s back side (Ex. 33). We need one “worthy of more glory than Moses” (Heb. 3:3) if we are to have any good news about seeing God.

The transfiguration account serves a definitive role, then, in defining the gospel. Atop that mountain, God’s people are able to behold the glory of God radiating before them, without need for a tabernacle (Mt. 17:4) and without any fear (17:7). Notably, they not only see the resplendent Jesus but the holy one “came and touched them.” The imagery involves that of Sinai recapitulated. In which case, we must ask: how? How can they stand there? How can they watch? How can they be touched by the incarnate God? And,

most pointedly, how is it that they do not die then and there? Dale Allison has observed, in a number of studies, that Matthew the Evangelist pairs the transfiguration account with another episode upon a hill, the crucifixion of Jesus in Mt. 27:32-54). In reading Matthew's account coherently or fully, then, we see that the two are interrelated. A proleptic enjoyment of promised blessings can be given to those privileged disciples because of the work to be done in a similar setting that, as it turns out, is actually quite different: Jesus will be cursed, not blessed; marked by Godforsakenness, not divine illumination (27:46). Indeed, Elijah's absence in the later episode (27:49), and the result it brings, makes possible the restored fraternity with the great prophet in the earlier instance.

The beatific vision is a gift enjoyed by those who are perfect and righteous, those who are pure in heart, and those whose hands are clean. While believers are marked by such realities in their regenerate lives in an increasing way throughout the course of their discipleship and sanctification, they are not ultimately and finally marked by such descriptions apart from the forgiving, reconciling, justifying work of Jesus. Augustine spoke of descent and ascent in addressing the communion we have now with God. In commenting upon the Psalms, he said: "They are songs of one ascending and loving, and he is ascending because he is loving ... Even though now we have fallen by evil desire, hope remains for us. If we acknowledge who it is who has not fallen but descended to us, we will ascend by clinging to him, because we are not able to rise by our own strength" (Augustine, *en. Ps.* 122.1). The blessed sight of God is the culmination of our journey, but the path is one which requires, first and fundamentally at every step, our union with Jesus Christ and our bearing his purity, perfection, and righteousness.

Something else needs to be thought through, however, regarding the link between the beatific vision and the Christ. Consider the final words of Matthew's account of the transfiguration: "And when they lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only" (17:8). Surely Paul's comments to the

Corinthians and Colossians are prompted by this episode, when the apostle later speaks of God who “has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6) and then when he names the Son “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). It is for this reason that the Reformed tradition has regularly included not only an emphasis upon the singular mediation of Christ in making the beatific vision possible for sinners, but also, as John Owen and G. C. Berkouwer have both suggested in various ways, that Christ singularly defines the very vision itself. Jesus is not just the salvific context of the vision; the good news is that Jesus is the content of the vision as well.

Berkouwer went so far as to suggest that the beatific vision somehow requires the denial of divine invisibility (“*Visio Dei*” in *The Return of Christ*, 359-386). His motivation is noble, of course, in seeking to commend rigorously the promises of the gospel offered in Holy Scripture. But in so doing, he has extracted the gospel promise from its wider canonical matrix, wherein we are told that “God is spirit” (Jn. 4:24) or that the “invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature” are perceived in nature (Rom. 1:20). Indeed, Berkouwer’s critique of divine invisibility not only forecloses the breadth of biblical teaching which he can attest (honoring the promise of divine sight at the cost of losing the repeated witness of divine invisibility) but also renders unsteady the Christological character of that sight. If God per se were not invisible, why then would the Christ’s work as “image of the invisible God” be definitive and noteworthy and not merely the latest episode of a temporary theophanic appearance?

In thinking about eschatological hope, one fundamental rule is that this doctrine and its various sub-topics not be allowed to function separately from the wider teaching of the prophets and apostles. The beatific vision, for example, points to a unique and necessary facet of biblical teaching, and it will serve a needful role in supplementing, augmenting, and qualifying other teachings. That said, understanding its character also requires a contextual

reception of it that does not forget the basic metaphysical, covenantal, and ethical parameters of Christian existence as sketched by the Holy Scriptures. Issues of coherence and interrelationship, then, are necessary exercises in faithful Christian reflection upon eschatology. In the Reformed tradition, one recurring emphasis has been the re-tethering of eschatology and Christology. Whereas certain version of late medieval piety severed the links between Christ and the specific character of the heavenly bliss enjoyed by God's people, the early Reformed sought to think clearly and consistently about ways in which Christ singularly provides the pathway to participatory bliss for those united to him by faith and even how he might definitively and singularly define that blessedness itself.

Might it be that vision of the Christ opens up a wider vista wherein we somehow see God in the form of the persons of the Father and the Spirit? Perhaps. We can certainly say that there is an ocular focus upon the Christ as the one in whom such vision occurs. We can furthermore say that there are scriptural principles regarding divine invisibility that seem to suggest that seeing the divine persons as such would be impossible: "No one has ever seen God" (Jn. 1:18). And, of course, the incarnational availability of the divine Son for sight owes to his enfleshment or tabernacling presence: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). Dogmatic discipline will suggest avoiding speculation beyond scriptural promptings. Here the Reformed tradition—especially as typified in the analyses of Owen—has shown a restrained focus upon Christ as the image or vision of God. But restraint is not merely prompted by scriptural silence (regarding other visions) alone; restraint from speculation flows also from a concern to think this doctrine together with other adjoining truths (e.g. divine invisibility). With Turretin, then, we must say: "Because the Scripture does not disclose it to us, so neither should we rashly define anything concerning it" (*Inst.* XX.viii.14).

We can surely say that we will see Christ more fully than has been the case in any prior situation (1 Jn. 3:2). And we can attest that our knowledge of the whole Godhead will be greater in glory than in this time of grace (1 Cor. 13:12). To what extent the idiom of sight is helpful in attesting not just the first escalation of intimacy with the God of the gospel but also that second sort of escalation—that intellectual and volitional perfection unto glory in knowing and loving the triune God in his entire blessedness as Father, Son, and Spirit—that is a matter for fine judgment and well beyond this sketch (though see Turretin for a keen example: *Inst.* XX.viii). Perhaps it is best to conclude with a suggestion from Augustine of Hippo: “There we shall rest and we shall see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. Behold what shall be in the end and shall not end” (*City of God*, XXII.xxx). Amen.

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