

Chapter Summaries and Research Topics

Divine Complexity

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Introduction and Chapter One

Chapter Summary: In the first chapter, we noted and explored a fundamental feature of the New Testament literature: that all that is written about Jesus is written from the retrospective perspective of resurrection faith. We were introduced accordingly to the thesis that the primal form of the gospel was the contingent event of the Father's recognition of the crucified, dead and buried Jesus as truly His beloved Son. This mysterious divine recognition of the Son by the Father in the Spirit is the theological meaning of "resurrection." As such, resurrection of the Crucified formed a "hermeneutic," that is to say, a sense of the divine Word making sense of all the other words, the special frame of meaning in which memories of Jesus were gathered, collected and organized in order to tell the story of His coming, His defeat and death by crucifixion, His vindication and continuing role as present Lord of those called to faith in Him and ultimately as the world's judge. This discourse of gospel narrative is the primary theology of Christianity. In this second chapter, we studied more precisely the problem of resurrection which generates the narrative which renders Jesus Christ present in His word of promise.

Research Topics:

1. The author introduces a number of theological ideas: the harrowing of hell, the starting point of faith, the gospel as narrative that both authors and authorizes, natural theology as a Platonist tradition of thought, creation as eschatological, the pragmatic account of belief, and the kataphatic claim of Christian theology that one of the Trinity suffered. Choose one of these ideas and uncover its background in contemporary theological debate. Use the extensive endnotes to track down sources.
2. The author repeatedly makes one propositional claim: that God the Almighty Father is determined by His Son through His Spirit to create, redeem and fulfill the world. This claim is restricted to the region of theology but at the same time given structural import for the whole body of Christian belief. Research the background of this proposal in Karl Barth's theology of divine election.
3. Ideas of the early Martin Luther are taken up in support of the critique of epistemology and revision of metaphysics. Identify these ideas precisely and inquire into how they differ from later Lutheranism, or more broadly, Protestantism.
4. Compare the statement of Luther that forms the epigraph to the book to Augustine's influential discussion of the equal possession divine properties by the Three in his book, *On the Trinity*.
5. The author cites Dietrich Bonhoeffer's criticism of the tendency in liberal Protestantism to substitute theological ideas like "grace" or "divine love" for the encounter with living Word of God incarnate in Jesus Christ. Connect the author's ideas of theology as critical dogmatics of the gospel narrative and its need to "test the spirits" with other ideas about the nature and task of theology during the German Church struggle in the 1930s.

Chapter Two

Chapter Summary: In the second chapter, we studied the notion of resurrection itself, inquiring into its theological and historical meanings. We found the conceptual background for it in inter-testamental apocalyptic Judaism, with its root ethical meaning being the conviction that the martyrs of Yahweh will experience vindication. We studied the difficult interpretive decision theologians have to make: whether to treat resurrection as a causal event (but thus introduce contingency into the life of God) or as a disclosure event (but thus require a morally unambiguous and certain knowledge of the Jesus of history). Deciding for the former, this chapter then went on to specify the sense in which critical historical knowledge of the public persona of Jesus plays a self-critical role in Christian theology as a check against abuse of the name of Jesus. It concluded by finding a precedent for that knowledge of the “beginning of the gospel” in the first instance of the gospel genre, Mark. In the coming chapter, our investigation continues by studying the development which led from the resurrection kerygma through gospel narrative to the Johannine theological idea of the Incarnation. We will see how this anti-docetist idea was able to unify the varied literature of early Christianity into the canonical Bible.

Research Topics:

1. The author introduces a number of theological ideas: apocalyptic imminence, the apocalyptic parable in distinction from simile or allegory, the moral ambiguity of the Jesus of history, resurrection as retroactively causal or as disclosure event, miracle as mystery. Choose one of these ideas and uncover its background in contemporary theological debate. Use the extensive endnotes to track down sources.
2. The author makes the repeated claim that gospel narrative is the consequence of understanding the resurrection rightly as the vindication of the martyr Jesus. Research the background of this claim in Pannenberg’s *Jesus: God and Man* in the context of inter-testamental Judaism’s apocalyptic beliefs.
3. The author criticizes the attempts by liberal theology in the past two hundred years to uncover the “personality” of the “historical” Jesus. Research the background of this criticism in Schweitzer’s *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* or Leander Keck’s *A Future for the Historical Jesus*.
4. The author concludes this chapter with a study of the first instance of gospel narrative, the New Testament book we call Mark. Research commentaries on the Gospel of Mark to see how the treatment of important Marcan texts compares with other scholarship.

Chapter Three

Chapter Summary: In Chapter Three, we explored the Johannine idea of the Logos who became (and remains forever) flesh as a theological decision which was able to unify the varied literature of the New Testament. We saw that Incarnation reflects both the theology of the martyrs and an anti-docetic decision. Correlated with this is the discovery of the universal or “catholic” church united in by baptismal creed and a common eucharist. In the course of the second century, however, an alternative construction of Christianity grew out of docetism and became a powerful challenge to the heirs of Ignatius and Polycarp, Gnosticism. In the next chapter, we explore the confrontation with Gnosticism, beginning with the Apostle Paul.

Research Topics:

1. The author introduces a number of theological ideas: the Logos, Gnosticism, docetism and antidocetism, kenosis, Incarnation. Choose one of these ideas and uncover its background in contemporary theological debate. Use the extensive endnotes to track down sources.
2. One of the twentieth century's most important theologians, Rudolph Bultmann, is extensively discussed in this chapter. Study Bultmann's *Commentary on John* on important passages in the Gospel and compare it to the treatment of the same passages in *Divine Complexity*.
3. Another theologian much discussed in this chapter is Ernst Käsemann. Study his famous essay on "Apocalyptic as the Mother of Christian Theology" and ask how his insights have been appropriated in *Divine Complexity*.
4. This chapter suggests that a significant source of Gnosticism was disillusion apocalyptic Judaism (and Jewish Christianity) after the Romans crushed the revolt and destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E. Research current scholarship on the relationship of apocalyptic and Gnostic ideas.
5. Compare and contrast the plot line of the Synoptic gospels with that of the Gospel of John. Following Hoskyns, this chapter argues that John is unintelligible except under the assumption that the author is knowingly re-telling the familiar story from the Synoptic gospels to make theological points. Study how John treats the Baptism of Jesus, the Transfiguration, and the Agony in the Garden and ask what kind of theological points are being made by John's telling.
6. Read the Seven Letters of Ignatius and Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians and identify all the creed-like formulations and allusions to the writings that later became the New Testament. Relate what Schoedel calls the "negative pole" of Ignatius' Christology to what Hinlicky commends as the "positive pole" of the witness-martyr's engagement for the creation against the demonic powers. Conclude by considering why docetism was perceived as such a threat and why Farmer calls the New Testament a "martyr's canon" and Hinlicky calls it the church's first dogmatic decision.
7. This chapter concludes by suggesting that Ignatius' Christological paradox of the impassible passibility of God in the Crucified Christ cannot be made intelligible without a Trinitarian account of God. Review the first two chapters of *Divine Complexity* to see how the complex social figure of the Father and the Son in the unity of the Spirit is in tension with the simple figure from mental life of the Thinker and its thought. Connect this to this chapter's discussion of the Logos in the Prologue to John.

Chapter Four

Chapter Summary: In Chapter Four, we traced a line of doctrinal development from Paul the Apostle and his early followers in the Pastoral Epistles through Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons. A leading feature of this line of development is the correlation between biblical monotheism's rejection of Gnostic dualism and the ethos of early Christian martyrs. We noted in passing, however, how theologians in this line availed themselves of certain concepts of Platonic philosophy to express the ineffability of the Creator (apophaticism) in such a way that the capacity of the creature for participation in the divine Life

(kataphaticism) is clarified and supported. In the next chapter we uncover the conflict hidden in this tactical alliance in the developments that led to the Arian crisis, when Arianism is interpreted as consistent Platonism.

Research Topics:

1. The author introduces a number of theological ideas: the economy, recapitulation, theology of the martyrs, exclusive monotheism, apatheia, the hermeneutical circle of Word and Spirit, critical dogmatics, theodicy, image and likeness of God, Logos-sarx and Logos-anthropos Christology. Choose one of these ideas and uncover its background in contemporary theological debate. Use the extensive endnotes to track down sources.
2. The author refers repeatedly to the “moral perversity of the Bauer thesis” and an extreme representative of a Protestant polemical tradition. Study Walter Bauer’s *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity* and the critiques of it referenced in the endnotes.
3. The author argues that “canonical Christianity” is as old as Paul’s Letter to the Galatians. Connect this thesis both to the Reformation confession of Justification by Faith and the emergence of canonical Scripture.
4. In this chapter there is further discussion of the problem of anti-Judaism. How does the author distinguish between supercession of the Temple and supercession of Israel’s election? Study the references in the endnotes to the work of Jacob Neusner on this question.
5. In this chapter there is reference to criticism of the Pastoral Epistles for “bourgeois moralism.” Research biblical commentaries to substantiate this claim.
6. The claim is made that Platonism became a “tactical ally” of early Christian orthodoxy in its conflict with Gnosticism. Study the writing of Justin Martyr to see whether and how this is so.

Chapter Five

Chapter Summary: In chapter five, we traced out the conceptual confrontation of biblical and philosophical monotheisms in order to appreciate the central thesis of *Divine Complexity*, namely, that the doctrine of the Trinity arises as the gospel’s critique of the antecedent metaphysics of apophatic theology. In particular we focused upon the ambiguous synthesis of the two in the systematic theology of Origen of Alexandria, who could use the notion of simplicity as a rule to qualify the Father’s generation of the Son as eternal and immutable but could also use the notion of simplicity as a metaphysical axiom to deduce an equally eternal creation (in that God cannot be conceived to “begin” to create). We saw how this ambiguity could be developed in the two directions of Trinitarianism and Arianism. In the sixth and final chapter of *Divine Complexity*, we will follow the actual course of the development of mature Trinitarianism through Athanasius and the Cappadocians to think of “God” as the title of the life lived by the Father and the Son in the Spirit as Beloved Community, which in Jesus Christ and by the Spirit reaches out to include lost and perishing humanity.

Research Topics:

1. The author introduces a number of theological ideas: immanent and economic Trinity, modalism, tritheism, subordinationism, demythologizing and the quest for ‘God beyond God,’ Nietzsche’s criticism of Platonic apophatism as nihilistic, Aristotle’s notion of deity as thought thinking itself

in pure actuality, thesis, systematic theology, eternal generation, alpha-privatives. Choose one of these ideas and uncover its background in contemporary theological debate. Use the extensive endnotes to track down sources.

2. Read Origen's *Exhortation to Martyrdom* and other examples of the early Christian martyriological genre, such as *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* to determine whether a tradition of the "theology of the martyrs" can be identified.
3. Compare and contrast the positions of Paul Tillich and Wolfhart Pannenberg on the relation of the exclusive God of biblical monotheism to the God of the philosophers.
4. What is the difference between an "idol" and an "icon?" Compare the treatment of Jean Luc Marion in the first chapter of *God without Being* and Martin Luther's treatise against Karlstadt, "Against the Heavenly Prophets."
5. Trace out the evolution in Greek philosophy from Plato and Aristotle through Stoicism to Middle Platonism and finally Neo-Platonism to test the thesis of this chapter about the tendency of apophatic theology towards what Nietzsche calls "nihilism."
6. Research the distinction R. D. Williams urges at the end of this chapter between the term, "God," as a substance defined by essential qualities and as the title for an "office."

Chapter Six and Postscript

Chapter Summary: In chapter six, we followed the maturation of Trinitarian doctrine from its initial formulation at Nicea in 325 to the settlement at Constantinople in 381. We correlated Athanasius's doctrinal work with the ethos of the martyrs from which the young theologian emerged after the Great Persecution of the years 300–310, and with the soteriological tradition descending from Irenaeus. This allowed us to see how the apparently modalist language of Nicea could be reconceptualized in the course of Athanasius's career, when a semantically arbitrary but conceptually clear distinction was reached in Constantinople between the one essence and the three hypostases. This distinction became clear with the "completion" of Trinitarian theology in Constantinople's recognition of the Holy Spirit as the third of the three hypostases and thus of the Trinity as irreducibly complex, like a life rather than a thing. In this light, we were able in the Postscript to clarify the sense in which the impassible essence of the Trinity can be said truly to suffer in the hypostasis of the Son, who "counted not equality with God a thing to grasped, but emptied himself..." (Phil. 2).

Research Topics:

1. The author introduces or develops a number of theological ideas: eschatological creation, *esse deum dare*, the complexity of charity, the social as opposed to mental model of the Trinity, divine substance as numerically (not generically) one, divine substance as life (not thing), Spirit as completion of the Trinity, soteriology of redemptive exchange, the divine dilemma, divine suffering, rhetorical paradox, impassible possibility, thesis/divinization, biblicism. Choose one of these ideas and uncover its background in contemporary theological debate. Use the extensive endnotes to track down sources.
2. Study Robert Jenson's *Triune Identity* to evaluate his claim that the relative "who" clauses, which expand upon the divine Names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, serve as descriptors (not

definitions) by incorporating biblical narrative. Contrast this task of ontological description with attempts either to define deity or to refrain from definition of deity.

3. Study Augustine's *On the Trinity*, Book IX-XI, to compare and contrast a mental operations model of the Trinity with the social Trinity argued for in *Divine Complexity*.
4. Research Augustine's teaching on the Spirit as the bond of unity between the Father and the Son and compare it with the argument in this chapter about the Spirit as the completion of the Trinity.
5. Research the patristic teaching on divine *apatheia*, impassibility, to see whether or in what senses patristic writers took it over uncritically from Greek philosophy or instead transformed it in light of the gospel.