Reading Forward: The Old Testament and Retrospective Stance

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Recent years have witnessed the rise of an interpretive model that construes the Old Testament’s literal sense in ‘christotelic’ terms.\(^1\) While the term itself appears to be of recent vintage, the hermeneutical assumptions undergirding this approach to Israel’s scriptures find expression in a variety of contexts in the history of biblical interpretation.\(^2\) The approach is arguably at least as old as the reception history of Paul’s letter to the Romans, in which we learn that “Christ is the end [\textit{telos}] of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”\(^3\) Broadly speaking, two different ways of thinking of Christ in relation to the OT find their origins here, one of which interprets the Greek word \textit{telos} in terms of the OT’s subject matter (\textit{res}) or authorizing purpose, and another which glosses that word primarily in terms of an eschatological goal. Because these readings are not mutually exclusive, on one level christotelic readings of the OT may be interpreted in traditional terms as the belief that the person and work of Jesus Christ is the goal or \textit{telos} of the Old Testament. Christotelism would then be something akin to theological shorthand for the belief that the OT finds its fulfillment in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus who is the Christ, a non-controversial claim for most Christian readers of the OT. In the hands of its more recent advocates, however,


\(^{2}\) James Samuel Preus’ study of OT hermeneutics in the era leading up to the Reformation suggests that the church often struggled to do justice to the OT’s literal sense, while at the same time recognizing its christological referent. Despite its best efforts, the former was sometimes played off against the latter, resulting in a construal of the OT’s \textit{sensus literalis} that threatened to demote its witness to a pre-Christian, preliminary status. Scott Hendrix summarizes Preus’ study with these words: “Suffice it to say he concludes a basic inability of the medieval authors to deal with the Old Testament in a manner which allows it to retain its historical integrity. It tends rather to remain in the shadow of the New” (Scott Hendrix, \textit{Ecclesia in Via: Ecclesiological Developments in the Medieval Psalms Exegesis and the Dictata Super Psalterium} (1513-1515) of Martin Luther [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1974], 114 n. 63; cf. James S. Preus, \textit{From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther} [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969], 3-4, 267-71).

\(^{3}\) Romans 10:4, NRSV.
christotelism is bound up with an eschatological reading of the OT that identifies the OT’s christological sense with its NT fulfillment. On this approach, the OT’s literal sense does not bear witness to Christ on its own semantic level, apart from the NT, but awaits correlation with the NT’s own witness to Christ before it may be said to be Christian scripture in more than a telic or eschatological sense.

According to one recent advocate, this conclusion follows from the fact that a “literal (first) reading” of the OT “will not lead the reader to the christotelic (second) reading”. 4 Rather, “what constitutes a Christian reading of the OT is that it proceeds to the second reading, the eschatological, christotelic reading—and this is precisely what the apostles model for us”. 5 From a classical Thomistic point of view, however, the reason why first-order significations in the OT (verba-res) do not speak of Christ on such an approach is because they have been detached from their intrinsic relationship with second-order significations (res-res) in God’s providential ordering of things. Inspired human words (verba) speak of things (res) in their own time, but through his figural ordering of time, God also enables these same things to ‘speak’ of other things (res-res). 6 In this way, the historical realities testified to in the inspired words of the OT become vehicles for the disclosure of christo-trinitarian realities in their own day, and not merely the vehicles for a later retrospective made possible by the NT. 7

Christotelists often draw upon analogies between modern detective novels and the Bible, 8 or the contemporary movie The Sixth Sense, in order to illustrate the way in which the OT’s christological sense depends upon a retrospective knowledge of its end or telos. Thus they speak of a ‘first’ reading of the OT in which the reader is unaware of its ending, a reading experience said to be akin to that of reading a modern detective novel in which the outcome remains unknown. After this a ‘second’ reading

4 Enns, Inspiration and Incarnation, 158.
6 See the classic account of these matters in Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I, article 1, question 10.
7 Cf. the illuminating comments of Hans Frei vis-à-vis Calvin, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974). Frei notes that for Calvin, the figural significance of OT land blessings was not something that arose in the first instance as the retrospective result of a ‘second reading’ of the OT conducted from a NT vantage point. Rather, these land blessings were understood as figures of the heavenly city in their own right (see Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Vol. I, Bk. II, ch. XI, sect. 1, 450-451). Frei writes: “Did they know what it was they enjoyed? Calvin does not say, and the enjoyment is not necessarily the same thing as the direct knowledge that this is what they were enjoying. The point is not really that the land of Canaan was a figure of the future inheritance at the time if, and only if, ‘the Israelites’ knew it to be such. More important is the fact that they enjoyed the land as a figure of the eternal city, and thus it was a figure at the time. It is not a figure solely in later retrospective interpretive stance” (Frei, Eclipse, 35-36; cf. also his later comments on p. 192). Here the OT derives its forward motion from its own figural sense, and not from “the wedding of that forward motion with a separate backward perspective upon it” (36), that is, from its correlation with a retrospective stance which then exercises a sort of Christian backdraft upon the OT.
8 See for example Francis Watson “The Old Testament as Christian Scripture: A Response to Professor Seitz,” 230: “A re-read text (a novel, for example) is a text read in the light of a prior knowledge of the whole—a knowledge as yet unavailable to the first-time reader”.
is performed in which the outcome is known, which reading then justifies the claim that the OT’s literal sense does not render its witness to Christ on the level of its intended words, but rather in terms of its eschatological goal. In this way, the justifying logic for how OT words refer to and mediate Christ is grounded in the reader’s a posteriori knowledge of the OT’s historical telos, rather than the a priori and objective relation of those inspired words to Christ the eternal logos and archê, who as “the firstborn of all creation” is “before all things”.\(^9\) Stated differently, christotelism works with an idealist theory of christological sense-making in which the ability of OT words to refer to and mediate Christ depends upon the reader’s perception. As a result, christotelists fall into the old idealist error of confusing the act of recognition with the thing itself, resulting in a reversal of the proper sequence between the order of being and the order of knowing, a reversal codified in the Berkeleyan confession that “to be is to be perceived” (esse est percipi). The theological realism in which figural reading is rooted resists these approaches to understanding how inspired words both refer to, as well as mediate Christ. The OT’s christological sense is not grounded in a given reader’s experience, as that experience moves from a first to second reading of the OT, but in an objectively real link between Christ and the OT’s words established by God’s providential ordering of things. In this way Scripture’s christological meaning remains an affair of providence (Aquinas), rather than an affair of consciousness (E.D. Hirsch, Jr.).\(^10\)

In what follows, the hermeneutical assumptions at work in christotelism will be explored in light of a particular problem said to be at work in an exemplary premodern account of the literal sense, as well as its relationship to sensus plenior, an older model for construing the OT’s christological sense that still finds advocates in evangelical Protestantism, though it is now more or less defunct in the Roman Catholic circles in which it originated.\(^11\) Viewed against this backdrop, the hermeneutical problems at work in both christotelism and sensus plenior are seen to originate, not in the context of localized debates peculiar to this or that confessional tradition in the contemporary church, but in the church’s ongoing struggle to come to terms with the question whether the OT’s literal sense may be said to provide hermeneutical access to Christ on its own semantic level, and if so, how this is accomplished. Having established the contextual parameters within which these questions operate, the discussion will then focus more directly upon the theological and hermeneutical issues raised when christotelism is invoked as a model for construing the OT’s christological sense.

**Contextualizing the problem: christotelism, sensus plenior, and the OT’s literal sense**

Although premodern accounts of the literal sense are obviously not monolithic in character, but subject to diversity, in the interests of convenience and brevity I will limit my interaction to a particular

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\(^9\) Colossians 1:15, 17. See now the stimulating discussion of these verses in Christopher R. Seitz, *Colossians* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2014), 86-101.


issue raised by Aquinas’s classic account of the literal sense in his *Summa Theologiae* I, article 1, question 10. On the issue to be examined, namely, the relation between the *multos sensus* of Scripture and divine omniscience, his discussion shares a family resemblance with many of Augustine’s teachings on the matter in *De Doctrina Christiana*, especially Book III, chapters 27-28, and also Augustine’s *Confessions*, Book XII, sections 31-32. For illustrative purposes, Aquinas’s account may therefore be taken as a representative account of premodern approaches to the literal sense, while at the same time acknowledging the variegated nature of premodern approaches to this issue, as well as the presence of continuing disagreements over the proper interpretation of Aquinas’s account of the literal sense, especially with regard to the point under discussion.

In his book *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther*, James Samuel Preus argues that Aquinas’s effort to fully clarify the nature of the relation between the literal sense and human agency includes a “loophole” that generates a serious hermeneutical problem in a project that would have been otherwise successful. That problem centers around Aquinas’s attempt to justify the *multos sensus* of the literal sense by an appeal to the omniscient nature of divine authorship, the result being that in addition to a definition of the literal-historical sense grounded in the historical agency of inspired authorial intention, Aquinas also offers a theological definition of the literal sense, which he grounds in the non-historical agency of the mind of God, who “comprehends in his *intellectus* all things at once”. Preus suggests that by so doing, Aquinas inadvertently introduced two ways of construing the *sensus literalis*, one of which is historically mediated (the literal-historical), and the other of which is not (the divine-literal). He thereby created an internal conflict in an otherwise consistently historical (read: providential) account of the means by which the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture are mediated to us.

Whether Aquinas’s reference to the omniscient character of divine authorship in ST I.1.10 was intended to function as an *additional* account of Scripture’s spiritual sense, over and above a providentially mediated account, makes for an interesting question. It strikes me as unlikely that Aquinas’s appeal to divine omniscience was intended to suggest, let alone argue for, an account of Scripture’s spiritual sense that, while residing in the literal sense, is not a product of the historical mediation made possible by God’s providential ordering of things. Defining the literal sense in this way tends to loosen the hold of the literal sense on Scripture’s theological sense, resulting in a more or less purely formal connection between the two. This would certainly run counter to Aquinas’s desire, as well as that of medieval scholasticism in general, to tighten up the hold of the literal sense upon the extended or spiritual sense(s) of Scripture. Nevertheless, that a number of subsequent interpreters may have read Aquinas in this light seems probable. It is but a short step, for example, from Aquinas’s grounding of the spiritual sense in divine omniscience, to Ray Brown’s construal of the *sensus plenior* of

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12 See the discussion in Preus, *From Shadow to Promise Old Testament Interpretation*, 53-60, quote from 53.

13 Aquinas, *Summa Theologicae* I.1.10.

the OT as “that additional, deeper meaning, intended by God but not clearly intended by the human author, which is seen to exist in the words of a biblical text (or group of texts, or even a whole book) when they are studied in the light of further revelation or development in the understanding of revelation”. 15

Whatever his intentions, the difficulty with Aquinas’s ‘additional’ definition is that it may be read in a manner that loosens the connection between Scripture’s theological sense, and the role of human agency and historical context in the production of that sense, thereby generating the problem of hermeneutical access to that sense. Commenting on the hermeneutical issues this ‘loosening’ raises for our access to Scripture’s theological dimension, Karl Froehlich notes that “…the centrally important reading...of the Bible’s spiritual sense, was left without final criteria in the text, without a necessary bond to the very words of Scripture”. 16 Stated differently, if the literal sense of a given biblical text does not disclose a christological sense for its own day, but merely serves as a formal marker for what is in the omniscient mind of God, then its christological meaning must therefore have to do with some future fulfillment or material ‘effect’ in later history, at least if creatures are to know that meaning, for there is no access to meanings that God intended apart from their mediation through a particular historical economy or agency. It thus appears that appeals to sensus plenior, much like appeals to various christotelisms, are a function of the eclipse of providence in modern accounts of biblical sense-making.

The hermeneutical difficulties this presents for gaining access to the OT’s christological sense should be clear. When the OT’s christological sense has little more than a purely formal connection with its literal-historical sense, the problem of hermeneutical access to that sense in Israel’s own day arises as a necessary consequence, effectively deferring that access into some future historical context yet to come. The result is a purely eschatologized version of the OT’s christological sense that identifies that sense, not with the OT’s own material form, but with its future effective history, the latter of which provides the material means for accessing its meaning. Understood within this schema, the future context provided by the NT establishes both the material means necessary for gaining access to the OT’s christological sense, as well as a material control upon that sense. The OT’s christological sense becomes a purely a posteriori or retrospective reality, since it cannot be said to materially inhere in the OT’s literal sense in an a priori sense that goes beyond that of a purely formal connection (the problem of sensus plenior), or a goal or telos yet to come (the problem of christotelism). Because the OT’s christological sense is now a retrospective reality, one can no longer speak of the OT’s christological sense in its own right, apart from its a posteriori fulfillment in the NT. Stated differently, the OT’s christological sense is a purely formal cause whose material effect or realization requires the NT. 17

15 Ray Brown, The Sensus Plenior of Sacred Scripture (Baltimore: St. Mary's University, 1955), 92, emphasis added.

16 Karl Froehlich, “Always to Keep the Literal Sense in Holy Scripture Means to Kill One’s Soul”: The State of Biblical Hermeneutics at the Beginning of the Fifteenth-Century,” in Literary Uses of Typology from the Late Middle Ages to the Present (ed. Earl Miner; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 47.

17 Cf. the comments of Robert Bruce Robinson, Divino Afflante Spiritu, 150.
effect, the NT is the OT’s literal sense, an interpretive assumption typically underwriting the top-heavy freight the NT use of the Old has been made to carry in modern biblical theologies.

Having situated christotelism and sensus plenior in the larger history of the church’s struggle to come to terms with the character of the OT’s christological witness, it should be clear that the issues these approaches raise are not limited to localized confessional battles in the contemporary church. Rather, they are a species of a larger family of retrospective approaches to grounding the OT’s christological sense whose roots precede the birth of modernity. I will now focus more directly upon a number of problems that typically attach themselves to these approaches, bearing in mind that they are not new, but of some vintage, and ultimately bound up with the church’s ongoing struggle to hear the OT as a christological witness on its own terms.

Noetic surplus and the new covenant

Among the authorizing assumptions at work in christotelic readings of the OT is the idea that the OT’s christological sense is a function of the level of noetic awareness present in the consciousness of the historical agents who wrote the books. This contrasts with the church’s traditional conviction that the OT’s christological sense is a function of the providentially mediated relation between the literal-historical sense of OT books, on the one hand, and their theological subject matter, on the other. The end result of departing from the church’s traditional outlook in this regard is the conflation of OT’s christological sense with the level of Israel’s noetic awareness of the Christ or messiah disclosed in Israel’s scripture.

That Israel had a different historical experience of Christ is not under dispute. That difference is grounded in the fact that the Israel of the OT lived within a different historical economy than we do, that is, the economy of the Logos asarkos, or the Word not yet made flesh. There is also the fact that within that economy, Israel had a special relationship with God, grounded in his election, that was not generally available to the nations, expect insofar as the nations identified themselves by faith with the OT people of promise. As outsiders brought into the covenant, however, OT Gentiles were brought

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18 Interestingly, the modern tendency to identify the OT’s christological sense with the interpretive category Vetus Testamentum in Novo receptum does not find a correlate in Calvin’s account of apostolic exegesis. Calvin’s remarks suggest that in making use of the OT, the apostles sought to render a subject matter proper to their own presentation of the NT, and not to lend credence to the (modern) assumption that Christian reading of the OT is now to be identified with how the New receives it. See the discussion in Christopher R. Seitz, The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 149-50.

19 The issue whether Logos asarkos is a fitting term for the Second Person of the Trinity in his redemptive office in eternity (election) is not in view here, but is simply being used in its more traditional sense to express the historical integrity of the economic distinction between the old and new covenants, as well as the historically unique character of the incarnation (cf. John 1:14). At the same time it remains true that because the redemptive work of the incarnate Christ in time was an eternal act, as well as a historically unique act, its benefits were figurally available to OT believers by means of the OT witness to his death in the Passover lamb, Levitical sacrifices, and other redemptive figures in Israel’s history.

20 Cf. for example, Rahab in Joshua 2.
into a relation with God to which faithful Israel enjoyed privileged access (Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5). Like the Gentile nations of the OT, the Gentiles of the NT were also strangers to the commonwealth, outsiders brought into a relationship to which faithful Israel was already an insider. Thus what we as NT believers see in the OT as the consequence of our place in time is not a warrant for quantifying the extent of OT Israel’s experience and knowledge of Christ, especially inasmuch as we are outsiders looking in on a relationship between God and Israel that was not generally available, and that Israel enjoyed privileged access to as insiders (Deut. 4:7-8, Ps. 147:19-20; cf. John 4:22).

Often overlooked, however, is the fact that this problem typically works itself out within the hermeneutical parameters established by a particular way of construing the testaments. There is more going on, and the ‘more’ here has to do with the fact that an evaluative comparison between the two testaments is also operative on another level. This necessarily moves the discussion beyond the modern tendency to ignore the hermeneutical difference God’s election of Israel makes when it comes to assessing the extent of Israel’s knowledge of Christ in the OT, deplorable as that may be in itself. It also requires us to come to terms with christotelism’s paradigmatic commitments to ‘salvation history’ and ‘progressive revelation’ as integral components in a model or ‘hypothesis’ for uniting the testaments.

In this hypothesis, the evaluative comparisons drawn between the Old and New Testament operate within a single economic context for uniting the two testaments provided by the doctrine of progressive revelation. Moreover, the character of progressive revelation is typically interpreted within the larger interpretive environment provided by evangelical appropriations of Heilsgeschichte, appropriations which may be said to constitute the conservative reflex to the Biblical Theology Movement (BTM) of the mid-twentieth century. Arguably, the exploitation of salvation history as the interpretive paradigm for negotiating the two testaments formed a central plank in the BTM and its quest to unify the broken Bible they inherited as the hermeneutical legacy of two centuries of historicism. In its more mainline ecclesial expressions, this paradigm was typically accompanied by a tradition-historical model for construing the nature of progressive revelation. Its more conservative

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21 For an overview of the hermeneutical issues raised by the broader movement, see Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). For an example of an early twentieth century appropriation of salvation history as a paradigm for interpreting the two testaments, as well as a strong hermeneutical investment in the corollary axiom of progressive revelation, see Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948). The later works of Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., and Meredith G. Kline, self-consciously build upon Vos’ approach to redemptive history and progressive revelation, albeit in differing ways and with different outcomes. Kline’s approach in particular shows a number of affinities with the BTM of the mid-twentieth century, especially its fusion of comparative method with Biblical Theology.


23 Gerhard von Rad developed a version of Heilsgeschichte that sought to exploit the forward-thrusting or progressive character of revelation as actualization (Vergegenwärtigung) in connection with tradition history. As Brevard Childs has noted, while von Rad “was very critical of J.C.K. von Hofmann’s organic concept of Heilsgeschichte,” he nevertheless “succeeded in reformulating many of Hofmann’s central ideas for a post-Wellhausen age” (Brevard Childs, “Gerhard von Rad in American Dress,” in *The Hermeneutical Quest: Essays in*...
instantiations retained the notion of progressive revelation, but usually preferred to disassociate that concept from the notion of an editorially constructed tradition history.

As a result of their commitments to these paradigms, christotelism works with what might be called a BC/AD way of construing the relation of the testaments, primarily because the distinction between the two economies of the Old and New Testament has become enmeshed in a particular salvation-historical construal of the ‘progress’ and the ‘plus’ made possible by new covenant blessings. Traditionally, new covenant progress was primarily understood in economic terms as a movement from Israel’s election to Gentile adoption, that is, as the salvific progress involved in expanding the scope of salvation’s reach to Gentiles. Christotelic readings of the OT reconstrue this movement in terms of noetic progress. In so doing, a different frame of reference for evaluating covenantal differences between the testaments inserts itself into Scripture’s perspective on this matter, thereby helping underline the questionable assumption that when the apostles spoke of the ‘noetic surplus’ on offer in the new covenant, they measured this progress in a critically evaluative way.

The point at issue here does not concern whether, in light of Christ’s first advent, a fuller understanding of the inexhaustible riches of the OT’s christological subject matter was made possible for new covenant believers. By virtue of their location in the economy of the Word not-yet made flesh, many OT prophets and righteous people longed to see and hear what the apostles saw, and did not see it (Mt. 13:17). Rather, the issue turns on the interpretive context in which we understand this surplus, as well as how that surplus is to be construed. Later contexts allow for greater insight and blessing, but the nature of this noesis and blessing must be carefully appreciated and specified. New covenant blessings are an expansion of the blessings attached to the theological realities testified to in the OT, not a replacement for the OT, still less the putting in place of a christological reality (res) that was not there. Through the ministry of the Spirit, NT believers are ushered into an ongoing communion with Christ the eternal Word already operative in Israel’s history (John 8:56–58), and they join a christological conversation already underway in Moses and the prophets (Mt. 17:1–5). In the hands of christotelists, however, the surplus of the new covenant becomes noetic progress, where progress is glossed in a sense authorized by a particular way of framing the relation between the testaments in terms of

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24 This word has been chosen advisedly. To have such riches available is not the same thing as being in possession of them, and the case can be made that in at least some cases, the christological awareness of the OT prophets would probably outstrip the level of awareness possessed by a nominal churchgoer in the NT era.

25 At the same time, it should also be noted that the perspective from which John’s gospel speaks in John 20:29, to wit, “Blessed are those who believe but have not seen”, presupposes a distinction between the narrative stance John adopts for the sake of persuading a post-apostolic ‘us’, on the one hand, and the stance of those who beheld the incarnate Christ, and the other. Thus from the narrative perspective of the Gospels and the Epistles, the stance of both OT Israel and the post-apostolic church are symmetrical in the sense that neither behold Christ according to the flesh, as the apostles did (cf. 2 Cor. 5:16). Rather, both OT Israel and the church share a stance in which their experience of the body and blood of Christ is mediated through word and sacrament, a premise clearly at work in Paul’s sacramental reading of Israel’s history in 1 Corinthians 10:1-11.
progressive revelation. Once the distinction between the two economies is transposed into this context, apostolic teaching on the surplus accompanying the new covenant becomes a warrant for the idea that Israel’s noesis and apostolic noesis are being compared to one another for the purposes of exalting the latter at the expense of the former. Stated differently, the claim is not simply that the OT is differently instrumental in its rendering of Christ, but that it is somehow deficiently instrumental as well.26

Traditionally, the church’s catholic confession has been that the hypothesis of Scripture, that is, its unifying reality, is the triune God, and not a doctrine of progressive revelation understood as a quasi-independent entity in its own right. It is one thing to make the claim that one can see more standing on the other side of Christ’s incarnation and resurrection than one can see standing where Hosea stands. It is another thing altogether to argue that the Paul and the apostles are registering this observation in a critically comparative context. The latter claim has more to do with situating apostolic reading of the OT within a particular construal of revelation than it does the NT witness per se. Understood as a way of construing the economy of revelation uniting the two testaments, progressive revelation obscures rather than reinforces the economic distinction between the two testaments registered by apostolic teaching in John 1:1 and 1:14, and elsewhere in the New Testament. Instead of construing the relation of the two testaments in terms of two unique witnesses to the one triune God speaking in Christ by the Spirit, rendered through two different economies, modern understandings of progressive revelation re-contextualize the progress of revelation within a single economic context that moves from Genesis to Revelation, or ‘from bud to blossom’. As a result, the progress or surplus achieved by the new covenant is construed in terms of a concept of revelation closely tied to the notions of historical progress and development, rather than the ontological frame of reference provided by the triune God revealing himself in and through Christ in both testaments. On the latter approach, progress in the NT is understood as the progress involved in coming to terms with the inexhaustible richness and scope of OT scripture—which scope already embraces within itself ‘the former and latter things’ involved in the surplus accompanying the new covenant.27

26 Note how this contrasts with traditional confessional statements of the 16th and 17th centuries found in the XXXIX Articles and The Westminster Confession of Faith. Cf. for example the XXXIX articles, art. VII: “The Old Testament is not contrary to the New: for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and Man, being both God and Man. Wherefore they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises. Although the Law given from God by Moses, as touching Ceremonies and Rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the Civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments which are called Moral” (emphasis added). See also the WCF VII.5: “This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the Gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foresignifying Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament” (emphasis added; cf. also chapter VIII.6).

Christological revelation and the Incarnation

The dislocation of revelation from its proper ontological and trinitarian framework not only reshapes revelation in terms of historical progress, but also impacts our understanding of the incarnation’s purpose. Thus christotelic readings of the OT that re-contextualize revelation in terms of historical progress often carry with them the corollary that Christ the eternal Word assumed a body, not only to redeem us, but also to remedy a deficiency in the OT, namely, the absence of christological revelation. As a result, retrospective christologies of the sort being challenged here often proceed upon the implicit assumption that the incarnation’s purpose was to provide a revelation of the eternal Son of God not otherwise available in the OT. This stands in tension with the church’s traditional affirmation that the eternal person of the Son remains the locus for revelation in both testaments. Moreover, the teaching of Scripture does not support the notion that the motive of the incarnation was to provide a christological revelation per se, but to redeem us, as evidenced by the fact that the motive for Christ’s coming is always stated in Scripture within the context of God’s redemptive purpose. Christ assumes a body, then, not because a revelation of himself would have been impossible otherwise, apart from the incarnation, but in order to redeem us. Nor should it be forgotten that the redemption Christ brings as the incarnate Lord was already figured to Israel in its own day through various figural modes of representation and mediation, for example, the Passover lamb and the death of the Servant in Isaiah 53.

concludes that “The New is dependent upon the Old for its logic, its sense of fulfillment, its vis-à-vis authority, and its radicality. The Old requires the New’s authority of Newness and finality to complete its own picture of God’s final ways with creation...” (113).

Speaking of this problem in reference to those who regard the book of Ecclesiastes as a portrait of life under the sun without Christ, Chris Seitz notes: “The Book of Koheleth is not a road with pot holes that requires to be filled with asphalt from a Jesus Christ truck. It is the Royal Road itself, negotiating the space between pride and despair so as to pave the proper enjoyment of God’s good gifts. That was Luther’s Christian reading, but it arose from the book’s own plain sense. He employed no NT asphalt truck to make the road right” (email correspondence to author).

See further note 32 below. Cf. also the comments of John Webster, “Resurrection and Scripture” in Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives (ed. A. Lincoln et al; London: T&T Clark, 2007), reprinted in The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason (London: T & T International, 2012), 34: “This is part of why the event of the resurrection is necessarily followed by the event of the ascension: because the risen one shares the infinite life of God, his existence after Easter is not his return, prolonging his earthly human presence indefinitely. It involves, rather, a withdrawal and separation in which there is reaffirmed his transcendent relation to creaturely reality. In this there is manifest the fact that the incarnational union of the Word and the human nature of Jesus is not a matter of the Word’s enclosure or imprisonment, but of a free personal union of the Word with the human nature in which the Word remains the subject of the act of assumptio carnis, and so in one inescapable sense extra carnum.”

See for example Luke 19:10, I Timothy 1:15, Hebrews 2:14, 1 John 3:8. Aquinas and Calvin were on the right track on this, over against Duns Scotus, mainly because Scotus failed to let his theological thinking be disciplined by Scripture on this point. See the chapter titled ‘The Motive of the Incarnation’ in G.C. Berkouwer, Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 19-34.
Noesis and the Incarnation

This line of thought is helpful for clarifying the distinction between the NT’s notion of the noetic surplus made possible in light of the resurrection, one the on hand, and the idea of noetic progress at work in a christotelic understanding of progressive revelation, on the other. Advocates of christotelism suggest that Jesus’ incarnation makes it possible, in a way the OT does not, for people to have greater spiritual insight into Christ’s identity. But just what is meant by this assertion? If it somehow means to suggest that Jesus’ humanity per se made christological truths more easily accessible to people, then the Gospels suggest otherwise. Those who had proximity to Jesus’ humanity were precisely those who often did not understand him, his teachings, or his identity (Luke 9:44-45, 18:31-34). Interestingly, John Behr notes Origen’s discounting of the christotelic notion that the enfleshment of the Word makes it possible for one to recognize the Word.31 Origen argues that if seeing the body of Christ means knowing the Word, then Pilate and Judas knew the Word.32 Even the light the resurrection brings as an objective event confirming Christ’s divine identity can be missed unless our spiritual ‘eyes’ are opened and we too, as it were, are raised from the dead (Luke 24:45; 16:29-31; cf. Eph. 2:4-6). Indeed, there is an ‘externality’ to the biblical witness of both prophets and apostles that simply cannot be penetrated without insight (theoria),33 the latter of which the events of the incarnation and the resurrection do not provide in themselves, apart from the Spirit’s work in restoring our spiritual vision.

The Gospels do not teach the idea that proximity to Jesus’ flesh guarantees the possession of christological insight and truth. On the other hand, perhaps those who argue that Jesus’ incarnation provides greater insight and truth simply mean to say (somewhat confusingly) that Jesus’ redemptive death, and not the incarnation per se, is revelatory in a way that the OT is not, and that this constitutes the noetic plus that retrospectively elevates the christological character of the NT over the OT. But if Christ is the Passover lamb and sacrifice proclaimed by the OT, as both John and Paul insist (John 1:29 and 1 Cor. 5:7), then just how is it that the incarnation per se puts the NT on superior ‘revelatory’ or


32 This tends to highlight the fact that the noetic ‘plus’ the incarnation brings is not rooted in the humanity of Christ per se, but in his divine person. In lieu of the communicatio idiomatum, by which the properties of Christ’s divinity may be predicated of his human nature (e.g., the Son of God was crucified), one may speak of Christ’s body as revelatory in a qualified sense. Even here, however, one must bear in mind that the communicatio idiomatum does not entail an ontological transfer of divine properties to Christ’s humanity. Be that as it may, it seems clear that advocates of christotelism do not have this qualified sense in view. Rather, for them, the incarnation is revelatory precisely because it is a bodily or empirical reality per se. This tends to situate the locus of christological revelation in Christ’s humanity per se, rather than his divine person. As a result, unless one is prepared to speak of multiple incarnations rather than one, the OT’s christological sense is left bereft of any content prior to the incarnation. OT christology becomes pure eschatology, that is, a future goal yet to be realized.

33 See the discussion in Origen, On First Principles, Book IV, chapter 10, where he argues this point in reference to the witness of the prophets, gospels, and apostolic epistles.
christological ground? Of course one may acknowledge, along with the NT book of Hebrews, that the new covenant is a ‘better covenant’ than the old (Mosaic) covenant. However we might interpret the force of the English gloss ‘better’ in this comparison, it remains clear that this is not the same as saying that the NT offers a better theological witness. To argue in this way conflates the category of ‘covenant’, understood as a particular covenantal polity, with the category of ‘testament’, understood as an enduring theological witness. Texts like John 1:29 and 1 Cor. 5:7 fit more easily into an account of the NT’s surplus in which the noesis made possible by the resurrection is understood as the progress involved in coming to terms with the inexhaustible richness and scope of OT scripture, the latter of which finds its ground in the salvific progress involved in expanding the scope of salvation’s reach to Gentiles.

Again, this is not to deny the presence of progress per se in moving from the OT to the NT, but rather to raise the question how that progress or movement is to be understood. If the pressure to understand the noetic plus or progress in christotelism derives from the text of the NT itself, well and good, but there are good reasons to believe that the pressure actually derives from construing progress in terms of a paradigm for uniting the two testaments grounded in the conjunction of a highly particular construal of progressive revelation with an interpretive paradigm styled salvation history. As a theological witness, the christological sense of the OT provides a unique witness to the Logos asarkos, a witness the NT comes in alongside of, but does not either duplicate, replace, or somehow critically evaluate from the retrospective stance offered by the apostolic witness. To think in this way is to misconstrue the true nature of the distinction between the christological sense of the Old and New testaments. The pressure for this kind of misconstruction arises, not from the apostolic witness per se, but from the modern practice of transposing the distinction between the OT and NT’s christological sense into an economic context construed in terms of progressive revelation. Once this happens, progress and noetic surplus take on an entirely different hue.

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34 There are good reasons to question whether the Greek term glossed as “better” in Hebrews 8:6 is to be understood in a morally evaluative sense, especially since the editors of The Greek New Testament and the Novum Testamentum Graece, as well most commentaries, support a reading of Hebrew 8:8 that locates fault in Israel’s failure to obey, and not in the old covenant per se.

35 Regrettably, the term Logos asarkos is now tangled up in post-Barthian worries about a ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’ God behind the God disclosed in Scripture. This tends to introduce a different set of concerns into the discussion that were not in the purview of the early church’s use of the term, which as far as I can tell primarily functions as a way of describing the eternal Logos in his relation to the OT saints and the historical economy they inhabited, prior to the incarnation. As an inseparable prefix that derives from the Greek, the negative force of ‘a’ in asarkos means not, but can also mean without or apart from. Its usage here is not intended to suggest that OT saints were redeemed by a Word without or apart from the flesh, a disembodied Christ, as it were (a classical Lutheran worry), nor is it intended to open the door to the possibility that the incarnate Word may be someone other than the eternal Word (a post-Barthian worry). On the misunderstandings that have arisen between the Reformed and Lutherans regarding what it means to speak of the etiam extra carnem in the sacramental context of communion, see the discussion by Richard Muller, “Calvin on Sacramental Presence, in the Shadow of Marburg and Zurich,” Lutheran Quarterly XXIII (2009): 147-167.
While christotelists are willing to acknowledge that Christ is preached to Israel in the OT, the need to remain consistent with their view of the motivating cause for the incarnation drives them to the conclusion that Christ was preached to Israel only in a future or eschatological sense. Christ is primarily present in the OT as a goal \((\text{telos})\) yet to be realized in the incarnation. Once that realization occurs, one may then speak of an apostolically authorized christological sense for the OT, but only in a ‘second reading’ or retrospective sense. As a result, the OT’s \textit{prospective} christological sense, taken on its own terms, functions as an indispensable ‘preliminary’ foundation whose discrete christological sense is either absent or at best unclear, as suggested by the following example of such thinking:

“A re-read text (a novel, for example) is a text read in the light of a prior knowledge of the whole—a knowledge as yet unavailable to the first-time reader. The second reading does not simply repeat the first reading, but neither does it erase it; it preserves within itself the knowledge that, although the end or goal is now known, that was not the case at first. Old Testament texts should therefore be initially interpreted within a purely Old Testament context, with distinctively Christian concerns temporarily bracketed out. The ‘discrete witness’ that emerges in this way is only a provisional and preliminary witness whose scope will be clarified and expanded by the second, explicitly Christian reading. But the initial provisional and preliminary witness remains an indispensable foundation for the re-reading". \(^{36}\)

Instead of giving us back the OT as Christian scripture on its own terms, the inherent logic in this approach recalibrates the ontological status of its Christian witness in noetic terms, thereby demoting the character of its discrete witness to a provisional, pre-Christian status. It remains difficult at best to distinguish this account of ‘second’ reading from an account that grounds the ability of OT words to mediate Christ in the reader’s \textit{a posteriori} experience of their historical \textit{telos}, rather than their \textit{a priori} linkage with the ontological reality of Christ’s pre-existence.

\textit{Conclusion}

Christianity did not originate with the redemption inaugurated by the incarnation, but actually goes back to creation’s witness to Christ the cosmological \textit{Logos}, through whom God spoke the world into creation (John 1:1-3). The order of creation reflects an architectural wisdom that bears witness to the \textit{Logos} as Wisdom, the One through whom all things were made. Arguably, the distinctive canonical function of the wisdom literature in the OT—especially the core wisdom books of Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes—is to offer a witness to the wisdom of the eternal \textit{Logos} in the architecture of creation, alongside the prophetic hermeneutics of hope, lest the latter subordinate the former in the name of a christotelism that conceives of Christ only as a historical goal \((\text{telos})\), and not also as creational beginning.

\textsuperscript{36} Francis Watson, “The Old Testament as Christian Scripture: A Response to Professor Seitz,” 230. Cf. N.T. Wright’s construal of the OT as ‘ship’ that carries us into the NT era, after which it continues as an ineradicable memory, rather than an abiding witness that continues to exert a distinctive theological pressure upon the life of the NT church. See N. T. Wright, \textit{Scripture and the Authority of God: How to Read the Bible Today} (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 57.
This OT grammar forms the authorizing matrix Paul works with in Colossians 1:15-18, establishing Christ’s identity as the cosmological Logos (1:15-17) before speaking of Christ the soteriological Logos who has risen from the dead (1:18). In the context of Paul’s christological hymn, verse 15-17 identify the risen Christ of redemption in verse 18 (“the firstborn from the dead”) in terms of Christ “the firstborn of creation” (1:15), who is “before all things” (1:17), again suggesting that for Paul, Christ is the risen one because he is the firstborn of creation, rather than the reverse.

Stated differently, the authority of Christ the risen Lord finds its ground in the eternal and indestructible life of Christ the firstborn of creation, the ‘begotten Wisdom’ through whom Israel’s LORD uttered the creation into existence (cf. Prov. 8:22-31). The direction in which Paul’s argument moves in Colossians 1:15-18 clearly stands in tension with a christotelic account of the OT that retrospectively justifies its christological sense on the basis of ‘reading backwards’ from a ‘second’ to a ‘first’ reading of the OT. The remarks of Brevard Childs are especially insightful at this juncture, and are worth quoting in full:

“At the outset it is important to recall that the New Testament in relating the message of the Gospel to the Jewish Scripture goes far beyond asserting its relationship in terms of a historical sequence. Although the various writers make very clear that Jesus appeared at a given historical moment in the life of Israel—Gal. 4:4 speaks of the ‘fullness of time’—this temporal orientation does not rule out at the same time moving the discourse to an ontological plane. According to John 1.1 Jesus Christ was the eternal Word who was with God in the beginning. Col. 1:15f. speaks of his being ‘the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things were created’. Rev. 13:8 makes mention of ‘the lamb slain from the foundation of the world’. The term ontological refers to a mode of speech in relation to a subject matter which disregards or transcends temporal sequence. Of course, this New Testament usage does not itself resolve the issue within a Biblical Theology, but it does provide a precedent for further hermeneutical and theological reflections, and calls into question a widespread reflex of biblical scholars to dismiss the term ontology as an illegitimate intrusion from the side of philosophy”.

In view of these considerations, it should be clear that to confess that the Word is not yet made flesh in the OT is not the same as saying that the Word is not yet made visible in the OT. Rather, the visibility of the Word, the eternal person of the Son of God, is rendered differently in the OT, in a manner

37 See also C.F. Burney’s now classic study of the influence of Proverbs 8:22 on Paul’s christology in Colossians 1:15-18 (C.F. Burney, “Christ as the APXH of Creation,” JTS 27 [1926]: 160-177). Burney makes a strong case for the claim that the Hebrew term רֶשֶׁת in Gen. 1:1 and Prov. 8:22, as well as the Hebrew verb qanah in Prov. 8:22, exercised an ontological pressure upon Paul’s christological confession in Col. 1:15-18, particularly the twin Pauline declarations that Christ ‘is the beginning’ (ὁς ἐστιν ἀρχή) and ‘the firstborn of all creation’ (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως).

appropriate to, or decorous with, the economy of the Word not-yet made flesh.\textsuperscript{39} How then is Christ the eternal Word made visible in the OT without a bodily incarnation? In a word, through the visibility rendered by the architectural Wisdom of the structured space of creation,\textsuperscript{40} the christomorphic form of Israel’s historical events (e.g., the Exodus), its offices and institutions (e.g., prophet, priest, king, tabernacle, temple), its persons (e.g., Abraham, Moses, David), its places (e.g., Zion, Jerusalem), and the cross-shaped logic of God’s simultaneous acts of judgment and mercy, by which he redeems a people for himself.\textsuperscript{41}

In this figural mode of witness and proclamation, OT Israel not only hears God speaking in Christ, but also sees Christ (objectively speaking), albeit in a visible form distinct from incarnation in the narrow sense.\textsuperscript{42} Stated in more popular terms, the witness given to Christ in the OT, like the witness of the NT,

\textsuperscript{39} As codified in Quintilian’s \textit{Institutes}, the observation of \textit{decorum} confronts orators with the need to adapt their speeches to a particular time and audience, that is, to speak in a way that ‘fits’ the situation. Thus Cameron defines \textit{decorum} in terms of the question of ‘literary propriety,’ that is, the suitability of words to a given historical audience (see David Cameron, \textit{Christ Meets Me Everywhere: Augustine’s Early Figurative Exegesis} [Oxford: OUP, 2012], 31). This helps us understand how Christ is rendered in the OT, for as a master Orator, God fits or adapts the OT witness to Christ to Israel’s persons, places, events, and institutions, through a language that operates on a semantic level appropriate to this historical, providential, or economic location. In other words, the OT’s witness is ‘in accordance with’ or appropriate to Israel’s historical point of standing in the economy of the \textit{Logos asarkos}. For example, animal sacrifices are part of the \textit{decorum} of the OT’s christological sense, that is, the means by which a visible witness to Christ’s redemption is ‘fitted’ or made appropriate to the time prior to his assumption of a human body.

\textsuperscript{40} Again, at least part of the reason why christotelism offers a truncated account of the OT’s christology is because it does not reckon with the fact that the eternal Son or \textit{Logos} is not only the goal (\textit{telos}) of creation and history, but also their foundation or beginning (\textit{archê}), as we learn from the figural witness to the Son rendered through the cosmological architecture and special ontological status of Wisdom in Proverbs 8:22-31. Precisely because Christ is both \textit{telos} and \textit{archê}, the witness of the OT’s literal sense to the architectural Wisdom of creation, as well as to the redemptive providence at work in Israel’s history, is not only christotelic, but also christomorphic.

\textsuperscript{41} This general account of the different forms of Christ’s visibility in the OT is not limited to the early church, but also finds expression in Reformational figures such as Calvin. Describing Calvin’s view of the christological shape of both creation and redemption, Kathryn Greene-McCreight writes: “The purpose of Moses, says Calvin, in the beginning the book of Genesis with the creation accounts, is ‘to render God, as it were, visible to us in his works.’ Calvin says that God, otherwise invisible, here ‘clothes himself, so to speak, with the image of the world, in which he would present himself to our contemplation.’ He then goes on to say, following Paul’s letter to the Romans, that while God invites us to himself by means of the created order, this serves only to leave us without excuse, for natural knowledge of God is not ‘sufficient for salvation’. Therefore, God has added a ‘new remedy’, which is, interestingly enough according to Calvin, not Jesus but Scripture, and specifically the Torah: ‘For if the mute instruction of the heaven and the earth were sufficient, the teaching of Moses would have been superfluous’.” See Kathryn Greene-McCreight, “‘We are Companions of the Patriarchs’ or Scripture Absorbs Calvin’s World,” \textit{Modern Theology} 14:2 (1998): 213-224, quote from 215.

\textsuperscript{42} William M. Wright IV notes that while Origen taught that the eternal Word first clothed himself in the language of Scripture before assuming a body at his incarnation, these two modes of christological presence, while not separable, are nevertheless distinct. See William Wright, “The Literal Sense of Scripture According to Henri de Lubac,” 256-57. Cf. also the comments of Henri de Lubac, \textit{History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen} (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 389: “In the literal meaning of Scripture, the Logos is thus not, properly speaking, incarnated as he is in the humanity of Jesus, and this is what allows us still to speak of
is both aural (given through hearing) and ocular (given through seeing), but the nature of that ocular vision differs from that of the witness given in the NT. In the OT economies of creation and Israel’s redemption, the incarnate visibility of the NT is rendered through the verbal iconography or ‘body’ of OT Scripture, as well as the cross-shaped logic visible in God’s providential ways and dealings with the body of Israel as a people.43

In conclusion, to recognize the NT affirmation that the economy of the Word made flesh brings with it the possibility of a greater or more extensive comprehension of Scripture’s theological subject matter need not, and in fact does not imply that the OT’s christological sense is somehow deficient in its own right. Still less does it authorize the claim that by speaking of the greater blessings available to NT believers, the apostles somehow mean to quantify the nature and limits of Israel’s knowledge of Christ. Rather, it is better to understand the noetic plus or progress made possible by Christ’s resurrection, not as that which makes the OT Christian in a retrospective sense, but as the progress involved in coming to terms with the inexhaustible richness and scope of the OT as Christian scripture. In this way, the noetic plus or new understanding of Christ made possible by the incarnate Christ’s death and resurrection is properly takes its place as part of “a drama of recognition” already prefigured and present in Isaiah’s account of the death and exaltation of God’s servant (Isaiah 53).44

43 See the discussion in Ephraim Radner, The End of the Church: A Pneumatology of Christian Division in the West (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 26-35.