

On the Identity of the Risen Jesus: In Quest of the ‘Apophatic’ Christ

Introduction: The Problem of the ‘Identity’ of Jesus

‘Who, or why, or which or what is the Akond of SWAT?’,¹ wrote Edward Lear in one of his more elusive nonsense poems. No less elusive, however, is the somewhat parallel question: *Who, or why, or which, or what, is the ‘risen Jesus’?* The opening chapter of this book will attempt to probe this misleadingly simple theological question afresh. In particular, it will propose a systematic solution to the task of analysing how historical, dogmatic and what we might call ‘spiritual’, or ‘ascetic’, approaches to the quest for Jesus’s identity might relate, and mutually inform one another. At the same time, I shall begin to ask where the appropriately ‘apophatic’ dimensions of the task of Christology might also lie. The task is a curiously complicated one, as we shall see. Not only is there still great difficulty, even after 200 years of ‘historical Jesus research’, in bringing modern historical/critical discussions about the identity of ‘Jesus’ into clear relation to the older credal, dogmatic

¹ Edward Lear, *The Complete Nonsense of Edward Lear*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (London: Faber & Faber, 1947), 257.

reflection on his ‘person’;² but still less is there a consistent confidence manifested in contemporary systematic theology, as I see it, about the means and possibility of a *direct* relation to the ‘risen Jesus’ now, about what this claim might mean, and about how the probative recognition of him might occur. Indeed, we might say that this last, pressingly existential, question has been all-but occluded – embarrassedly repressed, even – in the era of obsession about the ‘historical’ identity of Jesus.

Let me take a telling example of this modern trend, by way of introduction. Over 50 years ago, in the heyday of the second ‘quest for the historical Jesus’, there was a notoriously frustrating debate between Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann on the ‘continuity’, or lack thereof, between the ‘historical Jesus’ and the ‘risen Christ’.³ After observing awhile the interesting spectacle of these titans in combat, the insightful commentator might have begun to discern that the two giants were apparently arguing at cross-purposes: what Bultmann meant by ‘the historical Jesus’ (and which he so strenuously denied had any ‘continuity’ with the risen Christ of Paul and the gospels) was *not* what Käsemann meant by the same term ‘Jesus’ (which he equally

² As already mentioned in the ‘Prologue’, above, the greatest modern counter-example to this ‘rule’ remains Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s (unfinished) lectures on Christology, *Christ The Center*, tr. Edwin H. Robertson (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978). Opening with the insistence that ‘Teaching about Christ begins in silence’ (ibid., 27), Bonhoeffer goes on to explicate in his own distinctive, Lutheran, way the difficult relationship of modern ‘historical Jesus’ research to classic, conciliar expositions of Christ’s ‘person’ and ‘natures’, given the perennial Christian propulsion to ‘proclamation’. A sensitive and appreciative exposition of the enduring importance of Bonhoeffer’s Christology on this score has recently been given in Rowan Williams, *Christ: The Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), esp. 169–198. Paul DeHart’s *Unspeaking Cults: An Essay in Christology* (Waco, TX: Baylor U.P., 2021), whilst not focusing lengthily on Bonhoeffer’s Christology, nonetheless also provides one of the most nuanced and original contemporary accounts of how to relate the ‘historical Jesus’ to the ‘risen Christ’ and to the Christ of conciliar and scholastic dogma.

³ Käsemann conveniently recapitulates the various moments in this debate with Bultmann in ‘Sackgassen im Streit um den historischen Jesus’, ET in *New Testament Questions of Today* (London: SCM, 1969), 23–65. He is responding to Bultmann’s ‘Das Verhältnis der urchristlichen Christusbotschaft zum historischen Jesus’ (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1961)

emphatically insisted had to be personally continuous with the risen Christ). But nor did ‘continuity’ have the same valency for them either: for one (Bultmann), it meant full and complete ‘identity’ – identity in *all* characteristics, between the prior and latter state (‘Jesus’ and the ‘risen Christ’) – and that is what he wanted to deny; for the other (Käsemann) it merely meant a contentful enduring of certain *key* characteristics between the two – and that is why he insisted on it.⁴ Untangling these confusions about identity seemed to leave little room, ironically, for serious spiritual analysis of what it could mean to encounter ‘Jesus’ *now*.⁵

Three lessons appear to me, with hindsight, to have emerged from this rather tortured and exhausting debate of the 1950s; yet I think it is questionable whether these same lessons have been brought forward consciously into today’s continuing, and popular, fascination with the ‘identity of Jesus’ as (purportedly) capable of delivery by New Testament scholarship. New ‘quests’ for the ‘historical Jesus’ have, since Bultmann, succeeded older ‘quests’, in sometimes confusing waves of fashion;⁶ yet the analytic, *philosophical*, distinctions that need drawing in order to avoid repeating some of the mistakes about the category of ‘identity’ implicit in the Bultmann/Käsemann debate are often absent from the empirical rehearsal of the New Testament ‘evidences’, even now.

In the first section of this chapter, then, I shall rehearse these lessons, but always with an eye to our specific theological goal of clarifying what might be at stake in utilizing historical reconstructions (*one* means of epistemic access) to help identify the ‘risen Jesus’. From here, in the second section of the chapter, I shall turn to the ontological pole and go on to place these (distinctively modern, historiographical) problems in a more robustly *christological* context

⁴ See *New Testament Questions of Today*, 43–58.

⁵ The debate between Bultmann does presume – and contend over – Bultmann’s ‘eschatological Jesus’, and his ‘continuity’ or otherwise with the ‘historical Jesus’; but there is little contentful discussion of what *constitutes* the identity of the post-Easter ‘eschatological Jesus’.

⁶ We should note that the most recent decades of ‘historical Jesus’ work have witnessed a fantastic range of hypotheses about Jesus’ ‘real’ identity – from Cynic teacher to ‘marginal Jew’, from gnostic partner of Mary Magdalene to conscious reformer of Jewish patriarchalism.

of analysis; we shall attempt here the tricky task of mapping what we have learnt from the modern, historical debates about 'Jesus' onto the older, dogmatic debates about his 'person' and 'natures'. This somewhat risky undertaking cannot, however, be effected without generating some further important distinctions in which analytic philosophy of 'identity' can also come to our aid. Our continuing task here will be to clarify quite what meaning of 'identity' we are after when we inquire about the personal identity of Jesus, and particularly of the risen Jesus. The results of these first two (admittedly somewhat arduously cerebral) sections will then open us to the substantial proposals of the third, in which the most novel dimension of my argument will emerge. Here we shall shift back again to the epistemological pole and discuss one specific way of recognizing this identity of the 'risen Jesus' in our contemporary lives, in the context of ministry to the poor and dispossessed. Following leads laid down in the New Testament, but particularly in the fourth-century Cappadocian Fathers' theology of donation to the poor, we shall argue that the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matt. 25. 31–46 presents us with the suggestion of a surprising, indeed we might say 'apophatic', form of epistemic transformation required for the *full* acknowledgement of the 'identity' of the risen Jesus. We shall close with some systematic conclusions about the relation of practices to theory in this proposed account of the meaning of the 'identity of the risen Jesus' and of our graced access to him.

Cautionary Tales from the Bultmann/Käsemann Debate: The Historical Approach to Jesus's Identity

Let me turn, then, in this first section, to the following three lessons that I see to have emerged from the Bultmann/Käsemann debates of the late 1950s on the 'historical Jesus', and how the enunciation of them might help us unpick the knotty question of the risen Jesus's 'identity'.

Firstly, the disjunction between the so-called ('sogenannte') 'historical Jesus' and the 'risen', or 'biblical', Christ was surely now seen – as Bultmann and Käsemann untangled their convoluted misunderstanding – to have been a specifically nineteenth-century product, and one arguably infused from the start, 'from Reimarus to Wrede', with a false positivism about the capabilities of historical

reconstruction. For according to this disjunction, the ‘historical Jesus’ had connoted what one could get *hold of* – verify with the scientific tools of modern research; whereas the ‘risen Christ’ in contrast – if needed at all – was decidedly elusive: he could easily become a sort of gnostic, wafting, idea, or – when rescued to some extent by Bultmann and his ilk – a code for an internal existential *response* by the believer.⁷ Käsemann was rightly concerned about being asked to make this (ostensibly false) choice between ‘Jesus’ and the ‘Christ’; yet his own proposals of reconstruction arguably slid back towards the perils of the first, ‘historical’, alternative (despite the amount of ink he spilled in accusing Joachim Jeremias of a more obvious return to positivistic 19th-century ‘historical Jesus’ research).⁸ So the question remained: how to avoid the false disjunction from the outset? Was it not fuelled precisely by a misleading historical positivism on the one hand, and a pervasive and question-begging coyness about ‘supernaturalism’ on the other? Had the possibility of a direct encounter with the *risen Jesus* been covertly erased even as the disjunction between the ‘historical Jesus’ and the ‘biblical Christ’ had been endlessly rehearsed?

Secondly, the Bultmann/Käsemann debate also underscored the persistent ambiguity of the very term ‘historical Jesus’. For Bultmann, it seemingly had the primary meaning of ‘historian’s Jesus’, a product therefore of a fallible, human enterprise and not a proper *basis* for faith; to ‘found’ belief on such a reconstruction could only, as he argued in *Faith and Understanding*, be a manifestation of ‘works righteousness’.⁹ For Käsemann, however, the same term at least sometimes meant the ‘earthly [or pre-Easter] Jesus’, with which – necessarily, he argued – there had to be some substantial ‘continuity’ if the ‘risen

⁷ The danger of this aspect of Bultmann’s Christology is illuminatingly – but sympathetically – discussed throughout James F. Kay, *Christus Praesens: A Reconsideration of Rudolf Bultmann’s Christology* (Grand Rapids: MI, Eerdmans, 1994).

⁸ See Käsemann, *New Testament Questions of Today*, 24–35, for his sharp critique of Jeremias, and for what Käsemann calls Jeremias’s presumption that ‘the historian has an access road to God himself’ (p. 34).

⁹ See Bultmann, *Faith and Understanding* (London: SCM, 1969), ch. 1, for the clearest enunciation of this point.

Christ' was not to evaporate into a docetic or ghostly visitant.¹⁰ So here, secondly, the question remained: how *should* one construe the significance of the 'historical Jesus' (and in which sense) for the understanding of the 'identity of Jesus'?

And then thirdly, the debate also revealed a connected muddle – or evasion – that lurked in the same nineteenth-century 'Jesus'/'Christ' diremption. The fascination of the choice between *two* (and only two) alternatives in this debate had led the 'biblical Christ' and the 'risen Christ' to become virtual synonyms (over against the 'historical Jesus'). This caused an insidious blurring that occurred just as the false disjunction was driven home, that is, the blurring between *ontological* states of Jesus's 'identity' (whether 'earthly' or 'risen'), and *epistemological* forms of response to him (whether through historical research or decisions of faith). Too often, it seemed, the first and second 'questers' reduced the former to the latter category: they made the question of Jesus's identity *either* a matter of (human) historical reconstruction *or* of (equally human) responses of 'faith' (albeit animated, purportedly, by prior divine 'grace'). The actual earthly or risen Jesus (*se ipse*) threatened to disappear from view into a sort of *noumenal* no-man's land – except, as was notoriously quipped against Bultmann, when he put in a miraculous appearance between 10 and 11 a.m. on a Sunday morning at the behest of a gifted Lutheran preacher.¹¹ Probably, this last evasion (or reduction) was at least as much the effect of modernistic coyness over 'supernaturalism' as was the initial disjunction between 'Jesus' and 'Christ' itself. But I suspect that it also arose – as I have hinted – from an unacknowledged neoKantian presumption that

¹⁰ See, for example, *New Testament Questions of Today*, 43: the 'historical Jesus' is 'among the criteria of [the] validity' of the New Testament kerygma; and thus he is an 'irreplaceable Jesus'. In *Jesus Means Freedom* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), Käsemann gives another reason why the 'historical Jesus' is so crucial to him, viz., as criterion of judgement against a potentially corrupt or idolatrous view of 'Jesus' presented by the church: see *ibid.*, 151.

¹¹ This quip is of course only partly fair to Bultmann's christological position. James F. Kay concludes his insightful study of Bultmann's Christology by distinguishing three strands in it which are often not held in perfect balance by Bultmann himself: the 'mythical (or storied)' Jesus, the pre-Easter historical figure, and the contemporary, 'eschatological' presence of Jesus in the Word of proclamation (see *Christus Praesens*, 174).

the divine *per se* was now epistemologically off-limits, except insofar as *we* ‘construct’ it. The idea, for instance, that one might actually ‘see’ the ‘risen Jesus’ himself, today, now, in some important and transforming way that involves response to *his* proffered ‘identity’, came, implicitly (even if both Bultmann and Käsemann themselves explicitly denied this) to be regarded as fantastic and pre-critical – so much so that the possibility could seemingly not even be mentioned. It is this coyness that this chapter seeks to address and contest.

But meanwhile, today, the idea still endures in some quarters that the question of the ‘identity of Jesus’ can be *settled* by appeal to historical reconstruction, that is, by reference to what we have just called the ‘historian’s Jesus’. Why else, one might say, are there the continuing popular *frissons* of excitement occasioned by the Jesus seminar, by Marcus Borg, or by John Dominic Crossan? The idea of *settling* the ‘identity’ of a past figure in this way, after all, is not obviously stupid; it might be regarded, surely, as relatively uncontentious in historians’ circles if applied to some other past figure (Socrates, Genghis Khan, for instance), on whom historical details are relatively scarce, and mediated through texts and traditions with a distinct ‘slant’ to them. Despite the fact that philosophers might balk, and inquire much more closely what precisely the quest for ‘identity’ could entail (a point to which we shall return),¹² historians are generally at ease with the task of an assiduous and critical gathering of evidence for the characterization of a past life – in this loose sense of ‘identity’. Yet in the case of Jesus such an historical approach is obviously *pre-theological*. By definition, it shrinks what can be said of Jesus to what the secular historian regards as appropriate to her task and duty, and as such it necessarily consigns him to the past.¹³ Yet if this secular reduction is to

¹² Modern analytic philosophy distinguishes i. discussion of the problem of ‘identity’ as ‘sameness’ between items with identical characteristics (the issue of the so-called ‘identity of indiscernibles’), and ii. discussion of the problem of ‘personal identity’ through time and change.

¹³ To be sure, according to a specifically *idealist* view of the historical task, it is deemed possible to reconstruct and even ‘re-enact’ the life of a past figure by appropriate historiographical skills (see, for example, R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), esp. Part V). But clearly even this is distinctively different from claiming to encounter a living and resurrected ‘Son of God’.

be avoided, what are the alternatives open to us in the matter of the ‘identity of Jesus’?

The rest of this chapter will be devoted to sketching *one* such alternative, one in which the ‘historian’s Jesus’, as we have defined it, can indeed continue to play a certain significant role (although not a primary or decisive one) in answer to the question of ‘Jesus’ human ‘identity’, and in which a certain boldness about a claimed access to the ‘risen Jesus’ *himself* will be a salient feature of the discussion. But to arrive at this alternative we first have to renounce the modern dualism (as it still bedevilled Bultmann and Käsemann) between ‘the historical Jesus’ and the ‘Christ of faith’, *tout court* – at least as it appears to apply *ontologically* to the ‘identity of Jesus’; and we have to probe both through and behind the disjunction. It appears, then (and this is the conclusion of this first part of my reflections), that we need to be dealing with *four* items for discussion and analysis rather than two: the ‘historian’s Jesus’ and the ‘response of faith to “Christ”’ at the epistemological level, and the ‘earthly Jesus’ and the ‘risen Jesus’ at the ontological level. Whereas the first two items are clearly distinct forms of human analysis and response (though maybe not as cleanly disjunct as some would have it: more on that shortly), the latter two items are arguably *personally* ‘identical’: they constitute descriptions of the ‘same’ ‘person’ at different times – an issue which we must now explore. For it is here that we hit distinctive christological and philosophical issues that require much further explication.

Christological Identity as ‘Hypostasis’: The Ontological Approach to Jesus’s Person

We have noted up to now how tempting it is to impose the modern template of a ‘Jesus/Christ’ disjunction onto the issue of the ‘person’ of Jesus himself. But in this way, modern debates about the identity of the Jesus of ‘*history*’ can become confusingly entangled with pre-modern debates about the ‘person’ (*hypostasis*) of Christ (the latter debates being in contrast essentially metaphysical rather than historiographical). In fact, let me again suggest that there seem to be three such temptations of confusion in this area, equally seductive and equally misleading christologically. Each has relevance for the contested question of Jesus’s ‘identity’, which we seek to clarify.

The first temptation causes one to slide straight back to the epistemological pole. It assumes, in neoRitschlian mode, that talk about 'Jesus' is a matter of establishing 'fact', whilst response to 'Christ' is a question of 'value'. The crudest form of this misapprehension is the naïve empiricist attempt to 'justify' an ascription of divine 'identity' to Jesus by reference to historical 'evidences', a ploy which has in the past much exercised evangelical and British empiricist approaches to Christology, but which I myself take to be a category mistake: evidences may at best *suggest* the presence of divinity, but cannot logically compel such a conclusion. There is however also a more subtle version of the same fact/value distinction, to which we shall have reason to return later. To cite a suggestive essay by Rowan Williams, the response of faith to Christ is *not* a matter of dispassionate factual investigation, but 'everything depends, in our reading of the gospels, on whether the story displaces or decentres us, whether we read it as an address to us, a call to *dispossession*'.¹⁴ Williams himself, then, is careful to go on to deny that 'fact' and 'response' can be rent apart here, as might appear to be the case: 'There is no path to a secure portrait of Jesus independent of how he has been responded to; ... Part of the "reality" we seek is that the history of Jesus did indeed begin the process that led to the definition of faith in the Christian sense'.¹⁵ In other words, not only is the quest for 'facts' about Jesus strongly already entangled with implicit issues of 'valuation', but underlyingly too there is a metaphysical *reality*, Jesus, with whom both historians and believers have to do; the temptation to slice him in half is to be sternly resisted. Yet that temptation, we may note, may also come in another two forms as well. The modernistic template may suggest, secondly, either that *clarity* may be achieved in the area of 'Jesus', whereas 'mystery' necessarily attends the figure of 'Christ', or – thirdly, and worse – that 'Jesus' is code for the *humanity* of the God/man, and 'Christ' for his divinity. But in both cases, this is to divide the 'natures'.

Only when we have shaken off these misapprehensions like dust from our feet, can we proceed to less misleading ways of framing the

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, 'Looking for Jesus and Finding Christ', in eds. D. Z. Phillips and Mario von der Ruhr, *Biblical Concepts and our World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 150, my emphasis.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 151.

metaphysical question about Jesus's own 'identity'. What we have suggested so far, then, is that this *one* 'person' is the subject both of 'historical' enquiry and of the arousal of faith; that he is no less personally mysterious and elusive in his 'earthly' life as in his 'risen' existence; and that (from the perspective of faith, not of 'secular' historical research) we must speak of his personal, 'hypostatic' identity in the incarnation as involving a *co-existence* of the human with the divine.

Once we are talking about personal 'hypostasis' as the locus of Jesus's identity, we have declared a sort of dogmatic *fiat* (some would say by a mere sleight of hand): we have not exactly clarified the issue intrinsically, but at least we have shed certain modernistic muddles. The word 'hypostasis' in fact merely serves here as a place-holder for a strong metaphysical claim: that Jesus was God's Son incarnate. It does not provide an answer to the notoriously complex philosophical problems of 'personal identity' in general – indeed, it complicates them not a little! Whereas debates about 'personal identity' in analytic philosophy focus on whether to appeal to mental states (memory in particular), or to physical ones (bodily features), as criteria of 'identity' through time – a debate which has given rise to a memorable range of fantastic counter-factual thought-experiments about brains-in-vats¹⁶ – the concept 'hypostasis' does nothing to *solve* such debates in this christological context; it merely trumps them in Jesus's case by appeal to an unchanging, divine locus of 'identity' (the Logos, the second 'person' of the Trinity) that is inseparably conjoined to a human 'nature' at the incarnation.

Is then the 'risen Jesus' *also* human in his 'identity'? The question is, in a sense, a trick one, and has had no clearly unanimous answer from the Christian theological tradition.¹⁷ However, if we take the gospel 'appearance' narratives as broadly credible, we must surely answer Yes rather than No: this 'risen Jesus' seemingly *claims* to be the 'same' Jesus who taught and healed and suffered and died (the Lockean memory

¹⁶ A fine, if now somewhat dated, collection of essays on these issues, which gives the flavour of the analytic debate is ed. Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, *The Identities of Persons* (Berkeley: U. California Press, 1976).

¹⁷ At the Reformation this question became inextricably entangled with debates in the *Abendmahlstreit* about the sort of presence Christ has at the eucharist. Those denying a 'real', that is, physical, presence would also be inclined to question the risen Jesus's present 'human', bodily availability in general.

criterion for personal identity); and he is recognizable to at least some of his followers and acquaintances, has wounds and scars consistent with an experience of crucifixion, and a voice that also evokes recognition; so secondly, too – on the physical criteria for ‘personal identity’ mentioned above – he is ‘the same’ Jesus as was known to his disciples before his arrest, trial and death. Yet it seems that his human ‘identity’ has also undergone a significant change: he is strangely unrecognizable at times to some who knew him before (an epistemic problem which we shall address shortly); he moves around in ways incompatible with normal human bodiliness; and he is perceived as densely ‘present’ in ways and places not strictly compatible with ordinary human physical existence. Perhaps we must therefore call the ‘risen Jesus’ ‘human’ in some expanded, intensified or transformed sense, no longer simply ‘a man’; he is rather – as Luther as would have put it – the ‘proper man’, as only one who is also ‘God’ can be: God ‘for us’.

But this conclusion of course raises further complications for our ‘identity’ issue. For especially as the era of physical resurrection appearances seems to draw to a close in the biblical text, we are again pushed up against the question of how *physical* criteria of ‘identity’ could continue to apply in the identification of the ‘risen Jesus’. What has now become of the ‘individual’ who is/was ‘Jesus’? Simply to re-summon the patristic argument of metaphysical fiat at this point may not adequately satisfy us: it may rather at times strike us as too much lifted away from the known contours of individual bodily existence. Docetism again looms. Perhaps then we need to step back at this point and distinguish several *different* ways in which we now see that the question of the ‘identity’ of ‘Jesus’ may be tackled, and also return to the question of what part, if any, may be played in this by the modern project of ‘historical reconstruction’.

At one level of discussion, as we have now shown, the question of Jesus’ ‘identity’ is metaphysically straightforward, if deeply mysterious and unique: for those who subscribe to an ‘orthodox’ Christology, Jesus simply *is* God incarnate; his ‘identity’ *is* the divine ‘hypostasis’ of the Word. As such, the mystery of his ‘personhood’ has an ‘apophatic’ dimension qualitatively different even from the mystery of every human ‘personhood’; for he, alone amongst humans, is also ‘God’. But if it be objected that this claim merely begs the question of the relation of this metaphysical pronouncement to historical manifestation, we have to acknowledge the challenge and take some riskier and

more complicated steps. Firstly, we have to summon the bag and baggage of the philosophically contested criteria of memory and of physical 'identity' through time, and enquire how those criteria could possibly apply to a God-man who has undergone death and resurrection. Let us suppose, for a moment, that this first task will not defeat us, by dint of some clever analogical reasoning. After all, contemporary philosophers such as Derek Parfit have made the ingenious claim that a personal 'identity' over time may be more akin to a lake with its ever-changing shores than to a strictly stable entity;¹⁸ and if ordinary 'persons' can thus maintain their malleable identity no less than mutable lakes do, surely it is also logically possible that Jesus's divine/personal 'identity' can also endure – in and through certain notable bodily transformations of the passion and resurrection – and retain the capacity to be recognized even *as* a resurrection body?

But things get yet tougher to handle hereafter; for it seems that the gospels and epistles also press on us the thought that the risen Jesus's 'identity' is to be found (if not always easily recognized) even when *individual* resurrection 'appearances' by him are not in play. Specifically, he is to be found in 'the breaking of bread' (Luke 24. 35), and in the faces of the poor, the imprisoned, the bereaved and the destitute (Matt. 25. 31–46). And further, if Paul's theology of the church as the 'body of Christ' (Rom. 12, 1 Cor. 12) is to be taken as more than a mere metaphorical frill, he is also to be 'identified', more generically, in the very mystery of the life of the church, his ecclesial 'body'. Analytic identity theorists may at this point throw up their hands in horror: where is the 'identity of Jesus' then *not* to be found ('Split the wood and I am there?') – and this query certainly has point. But perhaps it is just at this juncture that we can rescue our 'historian's Jesus' and at last give him/it something to do *theologically*. Simultaneously, however, we can also introduce our own distinctive proposal about the relation of continuing Christian *practices* to the capacity for graced recognition of the identity of the 'risen Jesus'. To fill out these latter points, I turn now to my third and last section of this chapter. Here, at last, historiographical and dogmatic criteria of Jesus' 'identity' finally come together, undergirded epistemically, however – or so I shall argue – by the necessary

¹⁸ See Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

sustaining matrix of the Christian practices of meditation, prayer, sacrament and – as we shall now proceed to explore – acts of mercy to the poor.

Recognizing the ‘Anonymous’ (Risen) Jesus

In a famous essay on ‘meaning’, J. L. Austin once averred that the word ‘same’ (like other difficult-to-define words such as ‘real’, or ‘exists’) is one of a group in which ‘the negative use wears the trousers’.¹⁹ Whatever we think of the gender-ascription here (a point to which we shall return), we immediately see what he means: we tend to know when something, or someone, is *not* the ‘same’ as another; but it is much harder to say (definitively) when it/she *is* the ‘same’. And thus perhaps oftentimes – or so Austin indicates – it is better not to try too hard. So it may be, I suggest, that such a semantic intuition helps us now to discern the proper *christological* use of the ‘historian’s Jesus’ for the broader issue of Jesus’s identity. To attempt to found, or more precisely *justify*, faith in historical research is, or so I have argued (and Bultmann too insisted), a category mistake of some spiritual magnitude; but that is not to say that historical research cannot play some significant, if secondary, role as ‘negative’ testing for claims to the ‘identity’ of Jesus.²⁰ It can ‘wear the trousers’, to use Austin’s phrase.

¹⁹ J. L. Austin, ‘Truth’, in *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 88.

²⁰ I want to be clear what I mean by ‘negative’ in this context. First, I do not mean ‘negative’ in the sense of either ‘hostile’ or ‘destructive’; I mean it rather in the sense of ‘chastening’ or ‘constraining’. Nor do I mean, on the other hand, that ‘positive’ (in the sense of ‘sustaining’, or ‘fulfilling’, or ‘contentful’) reflection on Jesus cannot be supplied both by meditative and prayerful study of the canonical biblical literature (a requirement for any Christian spiritual life), and indeed by historical/critical study of Jesus (which, for those with access to the latter, can often be in fruitful interplay with biblical meditation). However, my point is that we must most carefully avoid, first, the supposition that we can ever ‘catch’ and ‘hold’ Jesus, let alone ‘justify’ our belief in him, by way of historical evidences; and thus, secondly, that the continuous need to ‘chasten’ and ‘correct’ our own incipient blasphemy or idolatry in this area can in one degree be importantly catered for by the use of historical evidences for that (‘negative’) purpose. (Indeed ‘historical Jesus’ research can be used no less significantly against a false ‘captivity’ of Jesus by the church, and by a smug presumption

The kinds of conclusions that secular historians may gather about a past person's 'identity' (in the loose sense, discussed above, of character qualities or distinctive personal beliefs and actions) can at least indicate when a claim about that person is palpably errant. Thus, for instance, if a self-proclaimed Christian believer avers that 'Jesus' was not a Jew (a denial on which so much hung in the twentieth century), or if she insists that 'Jesus' tells her that being obedient to him should rightly result in worldly influence and financial success (a supposition not absent from certain Evangelical forms of twenty-first-century spirituality), we may appropriately object, not only on intra-Christian biblical grounds, but also on *historical* grounds – open too to 'secular' investigation – that this cannot be the 'same' Jesus whom Christians worship and claim to encounter today, but who lived and taught and walked about and was crucified in Palestine at a known period in the first century C.E.

And so here, finally, we reach the nub to which the foregoing argument has eventually led. If historical evidences can properly supply only *negative* tests on Jesus's earthly personal 'identity', what are to be the appropriate *positive* 'tests' in the case of Jesus' risen 'identity'? To extend our gender metaphor, a little provocatively: if historical evidences 'wear the trousers', albeit only negatively, in the matter of the identity of Jesus, where are we to find the more alluring and enveloping *skirts* of this issue?²¹

that he is available only to the credally 'orthodox', as it can against more individual manifestations of fantasy or self-righteousness). I shall argue shortly below, however, that this continuous task of a 'negative' use of *historical* evidences must always be balanced, indeed undergirded, by a *spiritual* erasure of self-certainty, in and through the Holy Spirit, who alone discloses the identity of the risen Jesus to us. I trust it will thus also be clear that I am using the word 'negative' here in a distinctly nuanced way, as explained, to be contrasted with Albert Schweitzer's famous utilization of the same word at the end of his *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1952), when he writes (p. 396), under the heading *Results*: 'Those who are fond of talking about negative theology can find their account here. There is nothing more negative than the result of the critical study of the Life of Jesus'.

²¹ One cannot help recalling here the famous – albeit unnecessarily sceptical – remark of R.H. Lightfoot (*History and Interpretation in the Gospels* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1935), 255, my emphasis, that 'we trace [in the gospels] but the *outskirts* of his ways'. I do intend a playful gender allusion here (in the spirit of the

The investigation of the identity of the 'risen Jesus', surely, shares something special with the investigation of the 'identity' of any other *living* human 'person', but also has something entirely unique to it. What it shares with the investigation of living 'personhood', it seems to me, is the possibility of relationship: I do not only 'grasp', but am also 'grasped', by the living mystery of the 'other' (something not possible in the same way, note, in a detective's investigation of the technical 'identity' of a dead body, nor in the secular historian's reconstruction of a deceased personality). But what I now suggest is unique to the risen Jesus, if his hypostatic identity *qua* second divine 'person' is to be properly intuited and responded to, is the necessity of my first being grasped – not just directly by the mystery of the 'person' of Jesus himself – but by that in God (what Christians call the Spirit) which so *dispossesses* me that I can truly 'see' Jesus', and not merely my own face at the bottom of a well. Note here that I am picking up a theme – dispossession – that we earlier saw adumbrated briefly by Rowan Williams; but I am giving it now a particular, and we might say *semi-otic*, significance, in terms of the transformative, even de-stabilizing conditions of entry into inner-trinitarian participation. In other words, what is needed here – in the richest theological sense of 'identifying' the risen Jesus – is some prior, interruptive, undoing of epistemic blockage, some mending of the blindness of the ravages of sin, in order that the 'person' of Jesus truly be 'identified'. Paul memorably puts it thus, heading off a proto-gnostic threat before he discloses his teaching on the 'body' of Christ: 'No one can say Jesus is Lord *except by the Holy Spirit*' (1 Cor. 12. 3); and in the contemporary period, Hans Urs von Balthasar has expressed a similar sentiment, precisely in relation to the problem of our contemporary obsession with the historical reconstruction of 'Jesus': we need, he says, to avoid 'fixing [our] eyes so narrowly on the historical aspect of Christ's revelation, as the thing of ultimate significance, that [we] neglect the Holy Spirit'.²² In other words, to 'see' God (the Son) – to identify the risen Jesus – involves a profound epistemic transformation, one that may first

Lacanian category of the 'semiotic'), for as we shall see, a very particular, and normally undiscussed, form of epistemic receptivity is here required of us, which is spiritually transformative rather than gender-stereotypical or essentialist.

²² H. U. von Balthasar, *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 149–150.

throw me out of kilter but ultimately knit me participatively into the life of the Trinity. And *this* is why acknowledging the ‘identity’ of Jesus is different from any other such ‘identifying’ of ‘persons’.

Let me now try, in what remains of this opening chapter, to spell this suggestion out a little further in order to bring this argument to its climax and conclusion.

I have attempted in an earlier publication²³ to explicate the possible conditions for contemporary ‘seeing’ of the resurrected Jesus by reference to the patristic ‘spiritual senses’ tradition, so-called. This tradition charts in some detail the proposed capacity of our gross physical senses to undergo profound transformative change, or sharpening, in the Spirit in order to come, ultimately, into desired recognition of, and union with, the risen Jesus. The tradition is founded originally in the work of Origen, in his *de Principiis*, his *Contra Celsum*, and perhaps most richly in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*;²⁴ but there is some continuing debate as to whether Origen’s own rendition of this type of epistemology is at times rendered problematic by a sharp disjunction between ‘inner’ (spiritual) and ‘outer’ (physical) senses: does this suggest a certain squeamishness about the ultimate redeemability of the ‘flesh’ on his view?²⁵ The subtle extension and adjustments made to Origen’s approach by the fourth-century Gregory of Nyssa, I have argued, present a telling and creative alternative, in which ‘spiritual senses’ are developed by the grace of the Holy Spirit and through patient Christian practice over a life-time of purgation and transformation *starting with the raw material of the ‘fleshly minded’* (as Gregory

²³ Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), ch. 8.

²⁴ For a recent, and discerning, account of Origen’s understanding of ‘spiritual sensation’ and its modern reception, see Mark J. McInroy, ‘Origen of Alexandria’, in eds. Paul L. Gavriluk and Sarah Coakley, *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2012), ch. 1.

²⁵ This is the view I adumbrated in *Powers and Submissions*, 136–141; but more recently I have somewhat revised my thoughts on the relationship of Origen and Nyssen on this theme: see Sarah Coakley, *Sensing God? Reconsidering the Patristic Doctrine of “Spiritual Sensation” for Contemporary Theology and Ethics* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, the Père Marquette Lecture, 2022), for a more nuanced discussion. I now see that Origen’s views on ‘spiritual sensation’, especially when viewed as anticipatory of the resurrection body, do not always rehearse a disjunctive view of the relation of body and soul.

himself puts it in the introduction to his *Commentary on the Song*.²⁶ In other words, for Gregory, it is precisely the stuff of my flesh that is worked on, rather than disdained, in this process towards Christic recognition and union. Yet what is also distinctive to Gregory's account is an insistence that a de-throning darkness – a 'blinding' of normal sight and intellectual power – will necessarily attend any *close* approach to intimacy with the bridegroom, Christ; the soul must adopt the ostensibly 'feminine' posture of virgin/lover, must embrace what we might now call the destabilizing realm of the 'semiotic', in order to reach the goal of closeness and embrace of the Logos.²⁷ 'She' (for it is 'she' in a novel and *sui generis* sense) must exercise her epistemic responses in new, and subtle, ways – by dark touch and taste and smell (the supposedly 'lower' senses of classical philosophy, now elevated to superior significance) – if Christ is to be truly encountered. Only through this lengthy process is the soul sufficiently cleansed to be able see, because also *reflect*, the beauty of the risen Jesus: 'So too', says Gregory, 'the soul reflects the pure image of that unsullied Beauty, when she has prepared herself properly and cast off every material stain. Then may the soul say – for she is a kind of living mirror possessing free will: When I face my Beloved with my entire surface, all the beauty of His form is reflected within me.'²⁸

²⁶ See again *Powers and Submissions*, 138: the idea that the 'fleshly-minded' could be drawn into the higher realms of contemplation required to comprehend *The Song* is unique to Gregory, and marks a real difference of emphasis between his and Origen's Prologues to their *Song* commentaries. See tr. Richard A. Norris, Jr., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 2–13, at p. 3 for 'fleshly folk'.

²⁷ I discuss in detail the issue of how gender is not merely 'destabilized', but substantively re-made as relationship to Christ, according to Gregory of Nyssa, in *Powers and Submissions*, ch. 9. To read him as re-establishing a 'worldly', subordinated, view of 'femininity' would be entirely to miss his subtlety here. For the most recent, and detailed, account of Nyssen on the body and gender (including some astute criticism of my own earlier views), see Raphael A. Cadenhead, *The Body and Desire: Gregory of Nyssa's Ascetical Theology* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018), esp. Part III.

²⁸ 'Commentary on the Song of Song, 15', tr. in ed. H. Musurillo, *From Glory to Glory* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 282.

Why, then, do I argue that the ‘spiritual senses’ give us the final and necessary epistemic key to the problem of the ‘identity’ of the risen Jesus? It is partly because I see this tradition as able to explain, retroactively, certain characteristic features of the New Testament stories of the resurrection which otherwise remain obscure or quirky: the possibility of being with the risen Jesus and *not* recognizing him, for instance; of having to go through a personal process of change or of particular ritual acts in order to ‘see’ him; of the context of uncertainty and disturbance and ‘fear’ in which the resurrection is distinctively encountered; or of the significance of women’s testimony to the resurrection that was so quickly sidelined or superseded. But I am also, and more systematically, wishing to highlight the significance of the spiritual senses because I take it they indicate a particular sort of knowing that is alone *appropriate* to the solution of the problem of the mystery of the ‘identity’ of Jesus: a knowing by destabilized unknowing, a knowing by so-called ‘feminine’ desire, a knowing by a gradual spiritual transformation and merging into the object of longing.

Predictably, perhaps, my initial essay on this theme produced some vehemently negative response: it is surprising, but noteworthy, how committed most contemporary theologians seemingly are to the *impossibility* of any present ‘physical’ re-identification of ‘the risen Jesus’ at all, of whatever sort. Ingolf Dalferth put it thus, and uncompromisingly, scolding me for what he saw as a major category error: ‘... “seeing” the risen Christ [he said] is not a case of seeing at all, but a metaphorical way of expressing the fundamental change of life brought about [in the believer in relation to the resurrection]’.²⁹ However, I beg to differ: if we cannot, by definition, respond to Jesus’s identity through our bodies – our eyes, our hands, our lips, our ears – what is the cost to our Christian principle of ‘incarnation’? Who is ‘wearing the trousers’ here? And that is why, in the closing portion of this chapter, I wish – doggedly – to repeat, and extend, this earlier line of argument on the ‘spiritual senses’ with a further responsive suggestion. I want to say that that supposed ‘*impossibility*’ (as Dalferth puts it) of relating physically to the risen Jesus is really, and more truly, a profound *possibility* of a paradoxical and ‘apophatic’ sort – one that intrinsically undercuts my natural longings to control and predict the

²⁹ Ingolf U. Dalferth, ‘The Resurrection: The Grammar of “Raised”’, in Philips and von der Ruhr, *Biblical Concepts and our World*, 202, my emphasis.

epistemic outcome. And it seems to me that even the New Testament authors already show us – and the patristic authors on the ‘spiritual senses’ ramify this approach – that the ‘spiritual’ or epistemic conditions for the recognition of the ‘risen Jesus’ (involving crucially, as I have hinted, a radical dispossession to the Spirit) demand a cumulative tangle of *practices* – meditative, sacramental, but also moral, in order to sustain this paradoxical form of unknowing/knowing.³⁰

The repetitive ‘emptying’ of self, in the Spirit, towards the possibility of seeing and finding ‘Jesus’, has to be formed and shaped by deep positive meditative immersion in the narrative of the gospels, firstly, to be sure, but no less also by the sort of *rupture* of expectation that the sacramental ‘breaking’ of bread implies.³¹ He is made known in ‘the breaking of bread’ (Luke 24. 35), but only because his ‘death’ is proclaimed ‘until he comes’ (1 Cor. 11. 26).³² It is through this paradox of making and breaking of my sense of ‘Jesus’ that my true sense of Jesus, by grace, emerges. It involves a sort of ‘turning’, and ‘turning’ again – as the Magdalene did before she recognized the gardener for ‘Rabboni’ (John 20. 14, 16) – that I am ever engaged in as I seek the identity of the ‘risen Jesus’. By the same token, in my moral life, in my intended acts of mercy, though it is ‘Jesus’ I seek to obey and emulate, it is always in the *erasure* of expectation that Jesus truly presents himself to me – in the entirely unromantic ‘other’, in the exhausting and defeating poverty of my ‘neighbour’, in the nuisance of the beggar at my gate. And that ‘apophatic’ lesson surely sustains the insights of the parable

³⁰ Marianne Sawicki creatively develops a somewhat similar line of approach to ‘practice’ and resurrection in *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1994), and does so in a way that gives close attention to particular New Testament evidences. However she does not systematically develop the ‘apophatic’ dimension of the argument in the way I am suggesting here.

³¹ It strikes me that the ‘doing in memory’ of the eucharist might itself be seen as a sort of extension of the ‘identity’ criterion of ‘memory’ for the existence of ‘persons’ through time (the Lockean tradition on personal identity), but here extended by means of Jesus’s followers *identifying* themselves with the body of Jesus who has to suffer Passion and death.

³² I discuss in more detail this reading of the eucharistic ‘breaking’ as a questioning and chastening of desire in the chapters in the final section of this book. A discerning reading of the Emmaus story as both ‘demanding and surprising’, especially in a Jewish/Christian context, may be found in R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2000), ch. 2.

of the sheep and the goats in Matt 25. 31–46, if anything does. Whatever the original provenance and intention of this ‘parable’, its paradoxes in the Matthaean redaction are striking and powerful: the true ‘recognizers’ of Jesus are precisely the ones who are unaware of it (Matt 25. 37–39); yet presumably their moral antennae have in some sense been trained, spiritually if unconsciously, and by repetitive breakage, to respond to the ‘identity of Jesus’ in those whom they serve. ‘Jesus’ is found precisely in the incarnational *physicality* of these poor and destitute to whom they have given their acknowledgement and aid; ‘Jesus’ is ignored, unrecognized, despised, by those who fail so to act and will. Such is not merely a question of ethical rectitude, let alone a worthy project of human self-improvement; it is a subtle matter of ‘seeing’ – of identification and response. And perhaps more: for according to at least one strand in patristic exegesis of Matt 25, what is given back to us by the poor whom we serve (Jesus himself) is far greater a gift than anything we could ever give to them.

It is, indeed, Gregory of Nyssa’s elder brother, Basil, who expresses this point with the greatest spiritual acuity and daring. Although all the Cappadocian Fathers insist on the revolutionary social significance of donation to the poor,³³ the possibility thereby of up-ending the network of class and privilege that sustains the order of the ‘world’,

³³ This is a striking theme throughout the writings of the Cappadocian fathers: see, e.g., Gregory of Nyssa, GNO 9 (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 93–127; and, for Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil on the same issue, see tr. M. F. Toal, *Sunday Sermons of the Great Fathers* 3 (Chicago: Regnery, 1959), 43–64, and 325–332. Two of the most important homiles by Gregory of Nyssa on *philanthrōpia* to the poor are edited, with commentary, by Adrianus van Heck, *Gregorii Nysseni de Pauperibus Orationes Duo* (Leiden: Brill, 1964). A compendium of patristic and later interpretations of Matt 25 can be conveniently found in Sherman W. Gray, *The Least of My Brothers: Matthew 25: 31–46 – A History of Interpretation* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989). However, Gray is mostly interested in whether the text is interpreted in a universalistic or intra-Christian way, and this leads to neglect of other themes that the patristic authors (such as the Cappadocians) also cover. I am much indebted, in this final section of this chapter, to Brian E. Daley’s lecture, ‘Building a New City: The Cappadocian Fathers and the Rhetoric of Philanthropy’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999), 431–461, and also to the continuing work of Susan R. Holman on the theme of poverty in the patristic era: see her *The Hungry Are Dying: Beggars and Bishops in Roman Cappadocia* (New York: O.U.P., 2001).

it is Basil who first presses home the radical point that gifts to the poor are not really ‘free’ donations at all, but rather the paying back of an initial debt that God lays on us even as we are created. Since life itself is a gift, all of life is also a repayment. But if we are all debtors to start with, then our response to the poor is not some good civic duty of supererogation, but a *necessity* – which, however, to our great surprise, issues in yet further divine gift, the gift of being given Jesus back by the poor. As Basil puts it, ‘And you, whatever fruits of beneficence you do yield, you gather up for yourself; for the grace of good works and their reward is returned to the giver. Have you given something to a person in need; what you have given becomes yours, and is returned to you with an increase’.³⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil’s great friend and collaborator, finishes his great sermon ‘On the Love of the Poor and Those Afflicted with Leprosy’, with a similar sentiment, expressly summoning the paradoxes of Matt 25: ‘If, therefore, I have convinced you of anything, O Servants of Christ, who are my brothers and my fellow-heirs, let us, while there is yet time, visit Christ in his sickness, let us have care for Christ . . . , let us give to Christ to eat, let us clothe Christ in his nakedness, let us do honour to Christ . . . not only with precious ointments, as Mary did, not only in his tomb, as Joseph of Arimathea did, . . . ; but let us honour Him because the Lord of all will have mercy . . . Let us give Him this honour in His poor, in those who lie on the ground here before us this day, so that when we leave this world they may receive us into eternal tabernacles, in Jesus Christ our Lord. . .’.³⁵ The Cappadocian view of acts of mercy, then, must finally be seen as intrinsically connected to the question of the identification of ‘Jesus’; to know Christ *is* to have served the poor, to have felt the indebtedness of the very gift of life that animates such service, yet also to have received the ‘identity of Jesus’ back afresh in the process.³⁶

³⁴ Basil in Toal, *Sunday Sermons* 3, 327.

³⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus in Toal, *Sunday Sermons* 3, 63–64.

³⁶ Perhaps this is most beautifully expressed in Gregory of Nyssa’s explicitly christological remarks: ‘Do not look down on those who lie at your feet, as if you judged them worthless. Consider who they are, and you will discover their dignity: they have put on the figure (*prosōpon*) of our Saviour . . .’ Van Heck, *de Pauperibus*, 8. 23–9.4, cited in Daley, ‘Building a New City’, 451.

Conclusions

Let me now sum up the results of the somewhat complex argument in this first chapter of this volume. We started with the question: *'Who, or why, or which, or what, is the risen Jesus?'* As we have seen, when we ask what are the conditions for the recognition of the 'identity' of Jesus, we are asking a deep and complicated question, one in which epistemic, sacramental and moral factors are profoundly entangled, as well as necessary speculations about the historical investigation of Jesus's life and about the metaphysics of divinity. We have come a long way from the original quest for the 'historical Jesus', with its optimistic positivism about 'the facts'. Yet along the path, we have suggested a 'trouser'-like part – significant but circumscribed – that historical work can and indeed should play in responding to the 'identity of Jesus'; but we have been far more interested in developing less well-worn lines of approach. Thus we have identified some of the confusions caused by the superimposition of modern disjunctions between 'Jesus' and the 'Christ' on traditional christological metaphysics, and have attempted to give new coinage to that metaphysics with the help of analytic reflection on philosophical criteria for 'personal identity'. Finally, we have suggested that the full recognition of the 'identity of Jesus' may be a unique and life-long task, one that necessarily 'skirts' – as I have put it – the borderlands of desire and nescience; it is the product of an only gradually emerging spiritual and erotic maturity, and rooted transformatively in sacramental practice, prayer and service to the poor. But only in the light of the union with Christ to which the Spirit draws us, it has been suggested, will our epistemic responses be fully cleansed and engaged to receive him; only then shall we realize that we have seen Christ most fully in the 'least of our sisters and brothers'; only then, indeed, shall we *know*, with the appropriateness of a continuing and paradoxical 'unknowing' brokered by the Spirit, the full mystery of the 'identity of the risen Jesus'.

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In this first chapter of this volume, then, I have begun to delineate – but deliberately not to confine – the complexity of the various pieces that should make up a fully formed Christology for today; and I have pointed especially to that strange, primary epistemic 'displacement' in

the Spirit that I have argued any authentic response to the risen Christ demands. Armed with these insights, we go on now, in chs. 2 and 3, to reconsider certain christological modes and *strategies* of discourse (ones that were, again, uniquely attuned to the ‘apophatic’ transcendence of the divine), and which arose in the contested period of christological discussion leading up to the political *dénouement* that precipitated the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE). Just as we have noted in this chapter that Gregory of Nyssa’s spiritual insights led to an insistence that a special recognition of the risen Christ could be found in the ‘faces’ of the poor, we shall now trace two other – underrated, or misunderstood – elements in his pre-Chalcedonian ‘apophatic’ christological armoury. In the first (ch. 2) we consider the various renditions of divine ‘self-emptying’ (*kenōsis*) of Philippians 2 in the fourth to fifth century patristic discussion, and bring to the forefront a neglected and original exegesis of this key passage by Nyssen himself, in which he traces the unspeakably transcendent outpouring (*kenōsis*) of divine grace into the fragile, but malleable, container of Jesus’s human nature, with all its passionate elements opened transformatively to this divine infusion. In the second example (ch. 3), we expound Nyssen’s equally misunderstood account of how the divine and the human thus ‘mingled’ in the incarnation, again in such a way that the divine fully *suffused* the human for our healing and salvation, but without in any way overwhelming or obliterating it.

From the later perspective of Chalcedon, both these exegetical endeavours would come to seem obtuse, if not wayward. But once we free ourselves from the modernistic presumption that all pre-Chalcedonian Christologies were either false starts or merely clumsy approximations of the supposedly ‘final’ clarification that Chalcedon would deliver, then we are also released to attend afresh to the subtle alternatives that Nyssen proposed. And in particular, we are able to see how certain discrete ‘apophatic’ strategies were here applied by him, and with considerable sophistication and depth. Once we get to ch. 4, then, we shall be able to re-assess Chalcedon itself through this ‘apophatic’ lens.

But that is to anticipate. For now, we turn first (ch. 2) to the great debate on the meaning of christological ‘self-emptying’ in the classic patristic period.