

John Webster, Theologian Proper

BRAD EAST*

Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation. By John Webster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. 252 pp. \$45.99 (paper).

Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought. By John Webster. London: T&T Clark, 1998, 2004. 236 pp. \$42.95 (paper).

Confessing God: Essays in Christian Dogmatics II. By John Webster. London: T&T Clark, 2005. 248 pp. \$29.95 (paper).

The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason. By John Webster. London: T&T Clark, 2012. 240 pp. \$39.95 (paper).

God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume I: God and the Works of God. By John Webster. London: T&T Clark, 2016. 240 pp. \$122.00 (cloth).

God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume II: Virtue and Intellect. By John Webster. London: T&T Clark, 2016. 200 pp. \$114.00 (cloth).

Holiness. By John Webster. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003. 124 pp. \$19.00 (paper).

Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch. By John Webster. Current Issues in Theology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. 150 pp. \$30.99 (paper).

Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics. By John Webster. London: T&T Clark, 2001. 304 pp. \$29.95 (paper).

* Brad East is a PhD candidate in Religious Studies at Yale University, concentrating in Theology. His writings have appeared in *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, *Pro Ecclesia*, and *The Marginalia Review of Books*. He has an article forthcoming in *Modern Theology*. The author thanks Tyler Wittman for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

The matter to which Christian theology is commanded to attend, and by which it is directed in all its operations, is the presence of the perfect God as it is announced in the gospel and confessed in the praises and testimonies of the communion of saints.

— *Confessing God*¹

Christian dogmatics . . . [is] that delightful activity in which the church praises God by ordering its thinking towards the gospel of Christ.

— *Word and Church*²

In one sense, there is only one Christian doctrine, the doctrine of the triune God . . .

— “*The Place of the Doctrine of Justification*”³

A Theologian’s Theologian

John Webster was a theologian’s theologian. His thought was saturated and irresistibly compelled by the God of Christian confession. The Christian God, contemplated in the perfect plenitude of eternal blessedness as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, was his life’s work, from beginning to end. Sadly, his life and work both came to an end sooner than expected, one month before his sixty-first birthday, on May 25, 2016.⁴ At the time of his death he was one of the foremost theologians in the English-speaking world; figures comparable in stature would be a short list indeed, with names like Williams, Tanner, Milbank, Jenson, Hauerwas, Coakley. Webster’s profile was always less pronounced than these, however, his imprint more easily overlooked, his name somehow less grand. But that is surely due to the personality of the man behind the work and the nature of the work itself. No

¹ *Confessing God*, 1.

² *Word and Church*, 1.

³ “The Place of the Doctrine of Justification,” in *God Without Measure I*, 159–175, at 161.

⁴ For obituaries and remembrances, see “Editorial Announcement” and Ivor J. Davidson, “In Memoriam: John Webster (1955–2016),” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18 (2016): 359, 360–375, as well as Michael Allen, “Toward Theological Theology: Tracing the Methodological Principles of John Webster,” *Themelios* 41.2 (2016): 217–237. W. Travis McMaken has gathered more than two dozen links to online tributes at <http://derevth.blogspot.com/2016/05/tributes-to-john-webster-index.html>.

one would describe John Webster's work as sexy: far from it. Rather, he was consumed—unabashedly—by what he took to be Christian theology's singular and abiding matter: the one holy and undivided Trinity. In the late modern academic world, what could be more irrelevant? But Webster knew what all great theologians have known, from Irenaeus to Barth and beyond: that there is nothing more interesting, nothing more relevant, nothing more arresting—not least for the intellect, though the whole person is involved—than God, the one true living God revealed in Jesus Christ by the Spirit. Technical terminology calls the doctrine of God, as opposed to derivative doctrines (grace, creation, sin), theology *proper*. In that sense John Webster was truly a theologian proper.

In what follows I want to offer a brief sketch of some central themes from Webster's work, followed by critical reflections. It might seem inappropriate to say anything negative about Webster's thought in the same space that pays homage to his achievement. More than anyone, however, Webster would not have wanted mere flattery. He offered the gifts of his mind and pen in service to the church's knowledge and praise of God, in humility and submission to Holy Scripture and the Spirit's illuminating power. Our reception of these gifts is fitting and grateful, not by being uncritical, but by asking of them what he himself asked of the theologians he studied: Is this faithful to the gospel of Jesus? In what ways does it succeed (as it surely does)? In what ways does it fall short (as it surely must)? My goal is to honor the memory and accomplishment of Webster's great service by charitably measuring his words by the evangelical and catholic measure to which he held himself.

God, Christ, and Scripture

One could select nearly any classical doctrinal locus and report on Webster's measured but powerfully argued presentation of the topic "in a (shall we call it?) Reformed and Thomistic key,"⁵ countering the "pathologies of modern reason"⁶ by recourse to confident exposition of historic Christian teaching. Among the many possibilities, I will discuss three major topics in Webster's thought—God, Christ, and Scripture—that give a sense of his project, his mode of doing theology,

⁵ Scott R. Swain, *The God of the Gospel: Robert Jenson's Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2013), 7.

⁶ *Domain of the Word*, 4.

and the substantive features that distinguish his work from that of his peers.

“God is. This is the simple statement which we have to develop and explain In so doing we confront the hardest and at the same time the most extensive task of Church dogmatics”: so Barth at the outset of his doctrine of God.⁷ Webster comments, “The *Church Dogmatics* as a whole is one lengthy exposition of [this] statement . . . that ‘God is.’ One of the ways in which the *Dogmatics* can be construed is as a massively ramified reassertion of the aseity of God: as an intense pursuit of the truth that neither in the realm of being nor in the realm of knowledge is God contingent or derivative, but rather axiomatically real, true and free.”⁸ First published in 1994, these words apply equally well to Webster’s own work as a kind of programmatic declaration for the rest of his career. *God is*. All else that Christians have to say derives from, circles round, and returns to this single astonished confession.

God may be considered in Godself or in God’s external works. Webster judges it an error with potentially damaging consequences to move too quickly to God’s works *ad extra*, which are grounded in and issue from God’s infinite immanent life as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Indeed, where modern and postmodern theologies have gone wrong, they have done so in part because of an insufficiently developed account of God’s life in Godself, at times proposing an identity between immanent and economic that effectively collapses, even exhausts, the former into the latter. Certain theological problems only arise once “the attribute of perfection ha[s] ceased to bear any real weight.”⁹ This spells disaster, for “God’s perfection is a lovely, spacious and resonant piece of Christian theological teaching, and one which is immensely fruitful, not only in theology proper but also throughout Christian dogmatics.”¹⁰ What is God’s perfection? It is “the sovereign and majestic fullness with which God is himself; it is the eternal and entirely spontaneous plenitude and completeness of his life as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”¹¹ This perfection is material, not merely formal;

⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, W. B. Johnston, Harold Knight, and J. L. M. Haire (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1957, 2010), 257.

⁸ *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 79.

⁹ *God Without Measure I*, 186.

¹⁰ *Confessing God*, 1.

¹¹ *Confessing God*, 1–2.

it is “determined not from abstract notions of *deitas* but from God’s self-demonstration which is announced in the Christian gospel.”¹² Theological “talk of aseity,” of perfection, of God in and of Godself, is a matter of severe, even ascetic concentration, determined to speak of nothing else than “that which is proper to *this one*.”¹³ With Barth, Webster wants “to map out a meaning for the term ‘God’ which is controlled by unswerving fidelity to the first commandment, which consistently recalls itself from the idolatrous drift towards the general away from the specificity of God’s self-utterance.”¹⁴ Aseity may be understood, then, on the one hand as “a (doxological) affirmation of God’s matchless and utterly replete being in and from himself,” as “a repetition of the divine ‘I am,’”¹⁵ and, on the other hand, as irreducibly trinitarian, for “aseity is *life*: God’s life *from* and therefore *in* himself,” “the eternal lively plenitude of the Father who begets, the Son who is begotten, and the Spirit who proceeds from both.”¹⁶ In sum: “This movement, without cause or condition, and depending on nothing other than itself, is God’s being from himself. In this perfect circle of paternity, filiation and spiration, God is who he is.”¹⁷

Just as transcendence is not distance, so aseity is not self-enclosure, nor perfection indifference. “God’s perfection includes his perfecting of creatures”:¹⁸ “The movement of God’s triune life has its perfection in and of itself, and is utterly sufficient to itself,” but precisely *in* “its perfection, it is also a movement of self-gift in which the complete love of Father, Son and Spirit communicates itself *ad extra*, creating and sustaining a further object of love. Of himself, God is *gracious*.”¹⁹ God’s grace depends upon, has its source and derivation in, God’s perfect life *a se*. For God is, yet “creatures might not have been.”²⁰ The contingency of creatures is neither a bit of superfluous metaphysics nor extrinsic to the gospel: it is internal to the good news, and necessary to its being good. For “such is the plenitude of life enjoyed by Father, Son and Spirit that God does not create out of

¹² *Confessing God*, 2.

¹³ *God Without Measure I*, 14.

¹⁴ *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 40–41.

¹⁵ *God Without Measure I*, 15–16, 19.

¹⁶ *God Without Measure I*, 19, 20.

¹⁷ *God Without Measure I*, 20.

¹⁸ *Confessing God*, 2.

¹⁹ *God Without Measure I*, 24.

²⁰ *God Without Measure I*, 86.

need, making good some deficiency.”²¹ Indeed, “God’s impassibility in relation to creation . . . is an affirmation that the world has value in itself.”²² Creatures are what they are in relation to God, whose being, will, and action sustain them in life at all times; but nevertheless, creatures *are*.²³ They live. Yet this life is not a possession; it is “the gift of life from God,” the God who is love: “Love *gives* life, and love gives *life*.”²⁴ Creatureliness and finitude are not burdens to be endured but gifts to be cherished with gratitude and awe, acknowledging them as such. Creation is grace, and all that creatures are, have, and do comes—for no other reason than gratuitous, boundless love—from the undivided triune God, who is and has life in and of Godself.

God’s action toward creatures is not limited to their creation. Humanity defects from its status as God’s creature, and initiates a rebellious history of sin, evil, violence, and suffering. But God resists human resistance; this sordid history becomes the history of salvation, that is, “the history of fellowship between God and creatures.” In one place, Webster summarizes thus:

This history is the long, complex yet unified movement of God’s giving, sustaining and consummating created life. Created reality is as it participates in this history with God. It is a history with three principal moments, which correspond to the three great external divine works. There is, first, the moment of creation; God the Father, maker of heaven and earth, brings creatures into being out of nothing, and bestows on them their several natures. To human creatures he gives a nature which is not fully formed, one which unfolds over time, which is enacted. There is, second, the moment of reconciliation. Human creatures reject the vocation that their given nature entails, and seek to be what they are not: self-originating, self-sustaining, self-perfecting. Yet such is the goodness of the creator that creatures are not permitted to ruin themselves. God destines the creature for perfection, and is not hindered. In the history of covenant grace, at whose centre lies the incarnation of the Word and

²¹ *God Without Measure I*, 91.

²² *God Without Measure I*, 92.

²³ *God Without Measure I*, 106.

²⁴ *God Without Measure I*, 110.

which embraces creatures now in the Spirit's quickening power, God arrests the creature's plunge into destruction and turns the creature back to himself. And so there is, third, the moment of consummation, inaugurated but awaiting completion, in which the creator ensures that creatures attain their perfection.²⁵

Webster concludes, "All created reality is caught up in and determined by this history."²⁶

The scope and substance of Webster's thought are best understood in light of this claim, coupled with the ontological and epistemological priority afforded God in God's triune perfection and aseity. *Everything* (in reality) is what it is in relation to God; just so, *everything* (in theology) is what it is in relation to this history.²⁷ Two facets of this history are of especial interest in Webster's work: Jesus Christ and Holy Scripture. I will take them up in order.

Saving history, writes Webster, "is a history of comprehensive scope, gathering up all of God's acts towards the creature. Yet at the centre of this all-embracing series of divine acts lies a particular history, the history of Israel, and—as the centre of the centre, so to speak—the history of Jesus, the Son of God."²⁸ "The gospel," therefore, "is the good news of Jesus Christ, who is its sum and substance."²⁹ Webster's Christology seeks to maintain a dual focus on both the preexistent, antecedent deity of the incarnate Son of God and the fully human nature of the man Jesus, in whose life, death, and resurrection God acts to reconcile lost creatures to Godself. In this respect his Christology remains consistent across his work, particularly in its emphasis on the living, present reality of the risen and ascended Christ, having accomplished ("the Christological *ephapax*"³⁰) the work of reconciliation. Along these lines, Webster affirms "the personal presence of Jesus Christ. [For] Jesus Christ is present; his

²⁵ *God Without Measure II*, 143.

²⁶ *God Without Measure II*, 143.

²⁷ "Everything" in both clauses being everything *that is created*, that is, all that is not God. God is not determined by, but determines, the history of salvation.

²⁸ *Confessing God*, 125.

²⁹ John Webster, "What is the Gospel?" in *Grace and Truth in the Secular Age*, ed. Timothy Bradshaw (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 109–118, at 109.

³⁰ *Word and Church*, 217 (transliteration mine).

identity is not simply past. . . . He is our contemporary, . . . in the sense that he is *with* us.”³¹ Accordingly, he argues that “ascension and enthronement are not mere withdrawal, but express the lordly freedom with which [Christ] enters into relation with and, indeed, freely binds himself to those to whom he presents himself in the power of the Holy Spirit.”³² And what is the work Christ accomplishes *pro nobis*? He “carries our sin, and so does indeed bear God’s holy wrath against our pollution”;³³ in the death of the author of life, “there takes place the death of death.”³⁴ Webster is never more Reformed than in his soteriology: “Reconciliation is effected and righteous relations are restored in his person and work, that is, in what he does as the one he is. . . . The Son’s work in this matter is his suffering of the Father’s judgement upon sin, in passive obedience. In our place and for our sakes, the righteous judge submits to God’s judicial righteousness.”³⁵

This account, then, is representative of Webster’s more or less unchanging position. In another respect, however, there is an important shift in his Christology. This concerns the question of the centrality of Christ for theology. Put simplistically, in terms of symbolic authorities: a move from Barth to Thomas Aquinas—a gradual but notable shift in Webster’s thought over the last decade of his life—is a move from christocentric to theocentric theology. Thus in an earlier essay he writes that “the church’s Lord, Jesus, is the incomparably comprehensive context of all creaturely being, knowing and acting, because in and as him God is with humankind in free, creative and saving love.”³⁶ Expositing Barth approvingly, he wards off the most common charge levied against him by claiming that “Christocentricity . . . excludes Christomonism.”³⁷ He writes further of Barth’s “predication of an entire ontology of human history upon a single, nameable sequence of events, Jesus Christ the God-man. . . . [For] reality, what really *is*, is constituted by Jesus’ history,” a history characterized by “ontological sufficiency and plenitude.”³⁸

³¹ *Confessing God*, 131–132.

³² *Confessing God*, 132.

³³ *Confessing God*, 127.

³⁴ *God Without Measure I*, 147.

³⁵ *God Without Measure I*, 172, 173.

³⁶ *Word and Church*, 113.

³⁷ *Barth’s Ethics of Reconciliation*, 103.

³⁸ *Barth’s Moral Theology*, 84, 85.

Comes the question: Is christocentrism in theology compatible with trinitarian theocentrism? Is the Barthian resolve to make Christ the center, source, and standard of all Christian talk consonant with the claim that “all other Christian doctrines are applications or corollaries of the one doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity”³⁹ or with the claim that, *pace* Luther, “the ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines is the doctrine of the Holy Trinity”⁴⁰ Webster considers the question directly in a late essay. On the one hand, it is true that “each element of Christian teaching bears some relation to Christology.” The real question is twofold: “What kind of relation? and What kind of Christology?”⁴¹ Webster is not reticent with his answer, though it swims against the current of much modern Protestant theology, at least in those streams descending from Luther and Melancthon, Schleiermacher and Ritschl, Barth and Bultmann. Although “Christology is a distributed doctrine, not restricted” to either theology proper or the economy,⁴² it is nonetheless “a division of the doctrine of the Trinity” and, crucially, it “is not in and of itself the starting-point or centre of Christian teaching, but one indispensable element of a complex whole.”⁴³ Thus “it is not Christology *per se* but a doctrine of God’s triune being and his inner and outer works (including the godhead of the Son and his works in time) which occupies the pre-eminent and commanding place in Christian teaching.”⁴⁴ If I may be permitted to exaggerate: Whereas Schleiermacher “relegated the Trinity to an appendix,”⁴⁵ Webster here “relegates” Christology to a parenthesis (in the doctrine of the Trinity). The difference from—though not the rejection of—Barth could not be clearer.

Webster highlights at least two corollaries of this affirmation. First, outside Christology distorts theology proper: “Contemporary trinitarian theology is often insecure in its grasp of the first person of

³⁹ *Holy Scripture*, 43.

⁴⁰ *God Without Measure I*, 159. See further *Holiness*, 53.

⁴¹ *God Without Measure I*, 43.

⁴² *God Without Measure I*, 47.

⁴³ *God Without Measure I*, 48.

⁴⁴ *God Without Measure I*, 43.

⁴⁵ See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. and trans. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Berkeley, Calif.: Apocryphile Press, 2011), 738–751. Regarding this oft-repeated phrase and its implied critique, see Paul J. DeHart, “*Ter Mundus Accipit Infinitum*: The Dogmatic Coordinates of Schleiermacher’s Trinitarian Treatise,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 52.1 (2010): 17–39.

the Trinity, and the insecurity affects not only the doctrine of God but soteriology and ecclesiology, where the first article cannot be retired without damage.” The second consequence is exegetical and disciplinary: “The only historical Jesus there is is the one who has his being in union with the Son of God who is eternally begotten of the Father. Those who pore over the gospels searching for another Jesus (whether their motives be apologetic or critical) pierce their hearts with many pangs, for they study a matter which does not exist.”⁴⁶ This last comment exemplifies the role that divine aseity, along with the encompassing history of saving triune action, plays in Webster’s thought, and the practical (that is, hermeneutical) implications that follow. It also echoes another comment, which brings us to our next topic.

Writes Webster: “Scripture can no more be read in isolation from the divine Word than the history of Jesus can be grasped apart from or prior to its relation to the eternal divine Logos.”⁴⁷ This comment reveals how tightly knit theology and exegesis (and therefore Christology and interpretation of the Gospels) are for Webster. Indeed, exegesis is “the chief task of Christian theology . . . because its matter is Jesus Christ as he communicates himself through Holy Scripture.”⁴⁸ Such assertions about Scripture and the divine Word, and Christ communicating himself through it, rest on a bedrock claim on which Webster founds the rest of his bibliology. By God’s will and action Holy Scripture has a determinate nature, an “ontology.” Scripture has a given role and end “in the saving economy of God’s loving and regenerative self-communication.”⁴⁹ It is “the sign and instrument of God’s loving address of intelligent creatures,”⁵⁰ “the prophetic and apostolic sign of divine revelation.”⁵¹ The texts that make up Scripture are thus “acts of communication whose primary author is God the Holy Spirit, acting in, with and through the apostles [and prophets].” Through Scripture “the Spirit ministers Christ,” for “Scripture is the Spirit’s auxiliary.”⁵² Scripture’s true context, therefore, is not (merely) the ancient Near East or the Mediterranean cities of the first century. It belongs to “the domain of the Word of God,” which “is constituted

⁴⁶ *God Without Measure I*, 41.

⁴⁷ *God Without Measure I*, 60.

⁴⁸ *Word and Church*, 110. See also *Confessing God*, 36; *Holiness*, 3–4, 17–21.

⁴⁹ *Holy Scripture*, 2.

⁵⁰ *Domain of the Word*, vii.

⁵¹ *Domain of the Word*, x.

⁵² *God Without Measure I*, 58.

by the communicative presence of the risen and ascended Son of God who governs all things. . . . In the domain of Christ's rule and revelation, Holy Scripture is the embassy of the prophets and apostles. Through their service, and quickened to intelligent and obedient learning by the Holy Spirit, the communion of saints is instructed by the living Christ."⁵³

Perhaps Webster's greatest impact in contemporary theology has been through his writings on the Bible. He entered the fray around the time when Stephen Fowl's *Engaging Scripture* was published.⁵⁴ This seminal book was the culmination of a number of trends, including Barth's legacy on Scripture, Brevard Childs's "canonical" proposal, and the so-called Yale School associated with Hans Frei, George Lindbeck, and David Kelsey.⁵⁵ Webster's training and early career were simultaneous with these developments, and in many ways Fowl's proposal found in him a ready audience. Certain elements present in Fowl, however, tended (in Webster's view) toward the ecclesiocentric, and that proved to be the sticking point. Webster's many ventures into theology of Scripture, theological interpretation, and scriptural hermeneutics in the last twenty years might be characterized as a whole as a sustained threefold contention: that "ecclesiology [must] not become 'first theology'";⁵⁶ that "bibliology and hermeneutics are derivative elements of Christian theology"; and that "bibliology is prior to hermeneutics."⁵⁷ Theological interpretation, in other words, must remember the modifier, and in doing so root itself in a materially operative doctrine of the triune God;⁵⁸ else it will degenerate into little "more than offering an ecclesial gloss to a sociology of texts and their uses."⁵⁹

⁵³ *Domain of the Word*, 3.

⁵⁴ Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 1998).

⁵⁵ For discussion, see James Fodor, "Postliberal Theology," in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, third edition, ed. David F. Ford (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 229–248; Paul J. DeHart, *The Trial of the Witnesses: The Rise and Decline of Postliberal Theology* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

⁵⁶ *Confessing God*, 155. See also *Domain of the Word*, 159, as well as John Webster, "Ecclesiocentrism: A Review of *Hauerwas: A (Very) Critical Introduction*," *First Things* (October 2014): 54–55.

⁵⁷ *Domain of the Word*, viii.

⁵⁸ See *Domain of the Word*, 54.

⁵⁹ *Word and Church*, 25.

Criticizing what he calls the “mislocation” of the doctrine of Scripture in ecclesiology, Webster therefore argues for “re-locating” it in the doctrine of revelation, which is itself a function of the doctrine of the Trinity. The church is indeed the setting and audience of Scripture; in that sense Scripture may be called “the church’s book, that is, a text which has its place in that sphere of human life and history which is generated by God’s revelation.”⁶⁰ And yet “Scripture is not the church’s book,” if by that is meant “something internal to the community’s discursive practices.” For “what the church hears in Scripture is not its own voice,” but the voice of another, *extra se*.⁶¹ Here enters the affirmation of *sola scriptura*, which neither denies the creaturely character of the text nor “extract[s] Scripture from Christian history.” What it does, instead, is “qualify that history as one which is addressed by an intrusive voice, the voice of the one who awakens the sleepers and raises the dead.”⁶² For “Scripture has its being in the ‘word’ (the magisterial self-utterance) of the risen one. Brought into being by that word, made resonant by it, the biblical texts are caught up in the exalted Christ’s proclamation of himself and his glory.”⁶³

Webster’s primary dogmatic innovation is his use of “sanctification” to characterize God’s action in relation to Scripture, from the earliest stages of its inception to its ongoing reception in the church.⁶⁴ Sanctification thus names the entire sweep of God’s relationship to the Bible, a single movement spanning millennia, continents, languages, cultures, countless communities, and billions of people. (Within this process, the two more specific works of God the Spirit on Scripture have their place: inspiration and illumination.⁶⁵) The upshot of his proposal is the following. On the one hand, it elevates Scripture: as the sanctified instrument of Christ’s rule and speech in the church, it calls for reverence, obedience, submission. On the other hand, it qualifies

⁶⁰ *Word and Church*, 100.

⁶¹ *Confessing God*, 189.

⁶² *God Without Measure I*, 208.

⁶³ *Domain of the Word*, 39.

⁶⁴ See *Holy Scripture*, 17–30; *Domain of the Word*, 3–19.

⁶⁵ Webster’s accounts of these doctrines are traditionally Reformed. See “Illumination,” in *Domain of the Word*, 50–64; John Webster, “On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture,” in *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit: Essays in Honour of Andrew T. Lincoln*, ed. J. Gordon McConville and Lloyd K. Pietersen (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2015), 236–250.

Scripture: the texts of the Bible are not simply identical to divine revelation, but are its appointed servant and witness.⁶⁶ Scripture cannot be divinized, for the sole divine Word is Jesus Christ, God incarnate. Scripture is the *medium* of Christ; it is a creaturely means he *uses*; it is the “*embassy* of [his] eloquence”—“not God’s own voice in unmediated force and power to persuade, but God’s voice *as it has been heard and then repeated by other creatures*.”⁶⁷ Scripture, like the church, is a fallen creature; but also like the church, Scripture is made holy by God’s gracious and purposive act.⁶⁸ God sets apart this book and no other as the mediate form of the divine saving address; thus and not otherwise do “its human words . . . attest the divine Word, and give a share in God’s knowledge of himself and of all things.”⁶⁹

Much more could be said about Webster’s thought, not least his ecclesiology, ethics, and account of human action. My presentation of his understanding of God, Christ, and Scripture is already too brief, but is meant to give a sense of the contours as well as the core of his theological vision. Let us now move on to some critical reflections.

Politics, Abstraction, and the Flesh of Israel

In what follows I want to draw attention to areas in Webster’s thought that are underdeveloped, present potential problems, or require further expansion. My comments barely rise to the level of arguments; they are placeholders for future conversation, as theologians begin the process of reflecting on Webster’s legacy and receiving his work as an imperfect gift to the church—imperfect as all theologians’ gifts are. While I will attempt to be clear and forthright in my critiques, I intend them in a spirit of humility, charity, and gratitude.

To begin, Webster’s theology is pervasively apolitical. Lacking is nearly any mention of contested features of either human identity (race, class, gender, sexuality) or human community (authority, money, sex, violence, religion). Not only do these play no substantive role in Webster’s thought, they almost never appear at all. It might be argued that Webster, like Barth, so focuses on theology’s subject

⁶⁶ Late in his career Webster’s mind changed or at least shifted regarding the relationship between Scripture and revelation; this description belongs to his earlier work.

⁶⁷ *Domain of the Word*, 120 (emphasis mine), 9 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁸ See here *Holiness*, particularly the chapter on the holiness of the church, 53–76.

⁶⁹ *Domain of the Word*, vii; see also 61.

matter that (a) he may be absolved from not commenting on ancillary matters or (b) his theology actually *is* political, only indirectly so. Each of these is true as far it goes.⁷⁰ But it remains surprising, and perhaps significant, that a writer as prolific, systematic, and comprehensive as Webster would remain aloof from these issues. Moreover, it is precisely his convictions about the global character of theology that ought to lead to theological reflection on such pressing questions as, say, sexual ethics or the just use of violence. Nor does the comparison with Barth get much traction, for Barth was highly active politically: apart from his role in the Confessing Church and Barmen, he wrote on the state, on war, on gender, on socialism, on the nuclear arms race, and more. Nor were his opinions secreted away in occasional lectures and private correspondence; they are right there on the pages of the *Dogmatics*.⁷¹ Why the dissimilarity in Webster?

Second, Webster's writing is prone to abstraction.⁷² I do not mean that he talks about difficult topics, like divine simplicity, or non-empirical matters, like moral ontology. I mean that, regarding certain issues, there is a lack of *texture*, a propensity to advert to personified concepts, dogmatic synecdoches, and sweeping generalities that elide important ethical and theological questions. For example, Webster often refers to humanity as Adam's children, and to Adam as the first human being, created good but fallen.⁷³ It is unclear from Webster's writings, however, what historical or theological force this is meant to have. Was there "an" Adam? Or is "Adam" a trope, a stand-in for our evolutionary ancestors? Are the doctrines of original sin and justification affected by evolutionary biology? What about traditional

⁷⁰ One occasionally sees political reflection in Webster's sermons, collected in *The Grace of Truth*, ed. Daniel Bush and Brannon Ellis (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Oil Lamp Books, 2011). For brief but direct moral-political application, see the end of Webster's essay "Mercy," in *God Without Measure II*, 49–66, at 64–66.

⁷¹ For a selection from just one part-volume, see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/4, The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. A. T. Mackay, T. H. L. Parker, Harold Knight, Henry A. Kennedy, and John Marks (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1961, 2010), 116–240, 397–470.

⁷² Others have criticized Webster's ecclesiology in particular on this point. See, for example, Christopher Craig Brittain, "Why Ecclesiology Cannot Live by Doctrine Alone: A Reply to John Webster's 'In the Society of God,'" *Ecclesial Practices* 1.1 (2014): 5–30.

⁷³ See, for example, *Domain of the Word*, 16, 18, 131, 188, 190; John Webster, "Perfection and Participation," in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 394; *God Without Measure II*, 147, 184.

ways of reading the book of Genesis? So far as I can tell, Webster trades on the biblical and classical understanding of Adam without registering his judgments regarding debates from the last two centuries about Adam, Genesis, evolution, and historical criticism. I am not pre-judging the kind of answer he should have given. I am signaling this kind of avoidance as a problem, and one not unrelated to the apolitical observation above.⁷⁴

Third, Webster's tendencies toward de-politicized abstraction have further consequences, one regarding Israel and the other regarding Jesus. Regarding Israel, the problem simply stated is that Israel is close to absent in Webster's corpus. Not that Webster does not mention, here and there, Israel's election when recounting the biblical narrative. Rather, the calling, life, and mission of the people Israel—and the obverse, the identity of God *as* the God of Israel—play no material role in Webster's theology. Recall the lengthy excerpt above, in which Webster lays out the three principal moments of the history of fellowship between God and humanity, moments that correspond to the Trinity's works *ad extra*. One would not know that Israel has any role at all in salvation history.⁷⁵ And this précis is not an outlier. When Webster talks in broad strokes or in detail about God's relationship to the world and God's gracious acts to deliver and save, Israel receives either a scant reference or, more likely, no mention at all. Indeed, in an essay on justification in which he discusses divine and human righteousness, he devotes a section to law and law-breaking. At one point he even writes, "To reject the law of God is to reject God."⁷⁶ Yet nowhere do we read of Israel or its Torah—of the law of Moses and Sinai given for the holy life of God's elect people, the law that Jesus came not to abolish but to fulfill (Matt. 5:18), the law that Paul called "holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12)—only "law" in general. Something has gone amiss here. The problem, to be sure, is not limited to Webster: Israel's erasure from Christian theology is a long and

⁷⁴ Another example of this kind of avoidance via abstraction, though one I do not have sufficient space to discuss, is the absence of any discussion of hell or damnation (or universalism) in Webster's work.

⁷⁵ Though an exception may be found in Webster's comments in his essay on the exordium to Hebrews, "One Who is Son," in *God Without Measure I*, 59–80, at 63–66.

⁷⁶ *God Without Measure I*, 172.

lamentable story, one fortunately on the mend in recent decades.⁷⁷ But it must be noted where it occurs, along with the problems of which it is a symptom (or vice versa). The primary problem here is an overly schematic, generalized, and *uncarnal* account of God's presence and action to bless and to save God's human creatures. And the problem reappears in Webster's Christology.

Webster greatly admired Barth's doctrine of reconciliation. In particular he lavished praise on what he called Barth's "massive descriptive expansion of the person and works of the central subject in the history of reconciliation: Jesus."⁷⁸ Indeed, "Barth's doctrine of reconciliation is . . . striking above all for its *narrative density*, its ceaseless vigilance against conceptual takeover," for the history of Jesus is irreducible; it is nothing more or less than this man's "historical progress from Bethlehem to Calvary."⁷⁹ Webster has Barth in mind when he turns to criticize Eberhard Jüngel's depiction of the crucified Jesus:

Jesus' death is expounded [by Jüngel] in an almost contextless way, in relative isolation from the life which he lived. In the Gospel drama, the death of Jesus has its full weight of meaning as an event which, even in its sheer pointlessness and waste, is the culmination of the life of the one who dies. Calvary "sums up" the life of Jesus, not as a symbol which allows us to pass over or dispense with all that has gone before, but as that which is the culmination of his life of willed obedience. Though one could expect Jüngel to have an interest in this feature, he shows little sense of its importance, and it may be interesting to speculate why this is so. In part it is that his Christology, oriented to the speech-event of Jesus' proclamation, does not attach much significance to the dramatic features of Jesus' life as the

⁷⁷ See, for example, R. Kendall Soulen, *The God of Israel and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1996); Mark S. Kinzer, *Post-Missionary Messianic Judaism: Redefining Christian Engagement with the Jewish People* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2005); Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Jews and Christians: People of God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003); John Howard Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003).

⁷⁸ *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 82.

⁷⁹ *Barth's Ethics of Reconciliation*, 83–84, 84.

Gospel narratives unfold it: Jesus is less a character with dispositions than an eschatological voice. Partly it is because, in stressing that the cross is an event in the being of God, Jüngel may run the risk of losing its human specificity. . . . None of this is to accuse Jüngel of idealism; but it is to say that the “unsubstitutable” character of Jesus, his resistance to mythologization, demands that a good deal of attention be paid to the concrete, if his particularity is not to be overwhelmed by interpretative concepts.⁸⁰

“Almost context-less . . . a symbol which allows us to pass over [what] has gone before . . . less a character with dispositions than an eschatological voice . . . losing its human specificity . . . overwhelmed by interpretative concepts”: these words apply uncomfortably well to Webster’s Christology. And this, *not* because Webster’s doctrine of Christ is “too high,” but because it does not come *down* from the heights (of divine aseity, preexistence, generation, sending) into the first-century sociopolitical Jewish world of Roman-occupied Palestine, into which the eternal Son of God was sent and born—*born*, indeed, of a woman, Mary, under the law, Torah, to a people, Israel, aching for deliverance, for a Messiah, for a kingdom. (Not for nothing did the apostles ask the risen Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”⁸¹) Webster’s Christology and his summary of salvation alike lack the same thing: narrative density, the textured human carnality of the fully human man Jesus of Nazareth, the particularities of whose life—his disputes, teachings, actions, healings, parables, signs, miracles, sufferings—are the flesh and bones of an orthodox doctrine of Christ. Abstraction from these particularities leaves Christ emaciated, ghostly, disembodied. Jesus was and is indeed the eternal Logos, *unus ex Trinitate*; but it is Jesus, Mary’s son, with his flesh and his people and his irreducible narrative identity in their midst, who is the Logos incarnate. Christology comes up short if it fails to reckon with this one, in all his carnal specificity.

More could be said, on this and other topics. One of the most interesting problematic areas in Webster’s thought is one that he himself came to alter over time: the integrity, continuity, and habitually formed character of human action. His earlier work espoused “an

⁸⁰ *Word and Church*, 174–175.

⁸¹ See Acts 1:6.

apophatic account of mediation,” according to which creaturely (here ecclesial) action “is as it were an empty space in which that which is mediated is left free to be and act.”⁸² This was rooted in the concern that “the language of virtue, character and the acquisition of habits through learning skills and adopting roles . . . can threaten to immanentize or psychologize the eschatological character of life in Christ.”⁸³ Regarding “habits of mind and heart” such as “love of the gospel, docility in face of our forebears, readiness for responsibility and venture, a freedom from concern for reputation, a proper self-distrust,” he could go so far as to say: “*None of these things can be cultivated*; they are the Spirit’s gifts, and the Spirit alone must do his work. What we may do—and must do—is cry to God, who alone works great marvels.”⁸⁴ Just a decade later, by contrast, Webster published a sequence of essays on classical virtues and vices, such as curiosity, mercy, courage, intellectual patience, sorrow, and sins of speech. These essays come within hailing distance of being straightforward commentaries on Thomas, with help from Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory the Great, Cyprian, Bernard, and other patristic and medieval sources. They assume the moral psychology and vocabulary of Thomas and the greater Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition; they take for granted the fact and goodness of ethical formation, habit, stable virtue. Consider at random a representative sentence: “One of the ways in which moral intelligence enables specification, and therefore more effective performance, of a virtue, is by discriminating it from its opposing vices.”⁸⁵ Or another: “Patience is that excellence of character by which, for the sake of some good end, we tolerate difficulties, and encounter obstacles to present happiness with equanimity, collectedness and steadiness of purpose.”⁸⁶ We have come a long way from apophatic mediation and non-cultivable habits.

The sad fact is that Webster likely would have had other surprises in store for his readers. Perhaps his projected systematic theology would have included separate volumes respectively dedicated to Israel and the Gospel narratives. Perhaps it would have included a political theology of order, authority, warfare, and markets. Perhaps his

⁸² *Word and Church*, 226.

⁸³ *Word and Church*, 84.

⁸⁴ *Confessing God*, 83 (emphasis mine).

⁸⁵ *God Without Measure II*, 95.

⁸⁶ *God Without Measure II*, 176.

planned Ephesians commentary, in a section on the *Haustafeln*, would have addressed questions of marriage, gender, and sexuality. Indeed, I am confident that some of the shortcomings discussed above would have been addressed or resolved in his later work. After all, Barth did not even begin his doctrine of reconciliation until the age of sixty-five. Who knows what riches would have awaited us in Webster's *magnum opus*? But it was not to be. The servant is with his master, at home in a better country. May he rest in peace and rise in glory.

In his life, John Webster was at once an impressively consistent and ever-evolving thinker, unflinching in his basic commitments yet perfectly willing to change his mind or shift his emphasis if compelled by his subject. Perhaps nothing else is so impressive or exemplary in this great theologian of our time as his unyielding, dogged pursuit of that loftiest and most inexhaustible of subjects, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Webster once wrote that Barth's "theology—ecclesial, engaged, culturally and politically alert—was fuelled by [his] utter preoccupation with the substance of Christian doctrine. He believed that substance to be a grand matter for the mind; it absorbed and satisfied his capacious intellect."⁸⁷ So it did Webster's as well. So may it ours after him.

⁸⁷ John Webster, *Karl Barth*, second edition (London: Continuum, 2000, 2004), x.

