

Holy Scripture under the Auspices of the Holy Trinity: On John Webster's Trinitarian Doctrine of Scripture

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Abstract: As he approached the monumental task of writing his own systematic theology, John Webster gave strategic attention to constructing a doctrine of Scripture that was adequate to support such a project. In contrast to some well-respected modern systematic theologies that got by with less robust bibliologies (those of Pannenberg and Jenson), Webster saw the need to establish from the outset a more fully elaborated doctrine of Holy Scripture. He framed that doctrine of Scripture by appealing above all to his central dogmatic commitment, the doctrine of the Trinity. The trinitarian contours of Webster's doctrine of Scripture are most conspicuous in his treatment of the missions of the Son and the Spirit. Webster understands the entire Bible as the self-testimony of the risen Christ (mission of the Son), and explains its cognitive effectiveness in terms of the full range of the work of the Holy Spirit in inspiration and illumination (mission of the Spirit). The trinitarian grounding of his doctrine of Scripture enabled Webster to retrieve the Protestant orthodox doctrine of Scripture's inspiration.

John Webster's death left the theological world in considerable suspense. Many of Webster's most compelling lines of thought were apparently coalescing in the final year or two of his life, and great expectations attended his moving on from the prolonged phase of his self-imposed re-education, during which he issued that brilliant series of 'working papers in Christian doctrine' to the period that would have seen the actual drafting of a systematic theology. Webster seems to have passed from the scene in the very middle of a dramatic doctrinal gesture toward something astonishingly rich. But in many cases where his readers and students have good reason to believe he had made a

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judgement, turned a corner, or settled on a satisfying formulation, we are left with only fragmentary evidence. Those who felt professionally implicated in Webster's theological progress now gather around his literary remains looking for signs to confirm our suspicions: here a turn of phrase suggests the trailhead of a new departure; there an unexpected footnote indicates the sources he was reading and finding persuasive; or else a pattern of Scripture citation suggests which canonical voices were drawing his attention.

One doctrinal area in which there is some evidence that the later Webster was taking up a significantly new position is the doctrine of Holy Scripture. It is a field in which he had already written a considerable amount: there is the 2003 book by that title, of course, and a half dozen substantive essays on things like canon and hermeneutics in the collection *Word and Church*,¹ as well as the fact that whenever he spoke of theological method, he routinely devoted attention to the place held by Scripture among the principles of systematic theology and biblical reasoning.² Publications like these document Webster's sustained reflection on the doctrine of Scripture, and were substantial enough that it is meaningful to speak of a discernible and consistent Websterian approach to these bibliological matters of first theology. But there is also evidence suggesting that as John Webster drew nearer to the significant vocational moment of drafting a late-career systematic theology, he began reconsidering the doctrine of Scripture with a view to clarifying its role in constructing a system. The resulting doctrine of Scripture, still somewhat implicit at the time of his death, drew directly from his most important dogmatic commitment, a commitment to the doctrine of the triune God ('all other Christian doctrines are applications or corollaries of the one doctrine, the doctrine of the Trinity'³). He worked his way out from this doctrine of God to the doctrine of revelation and salvation by way of an appeal to the Christology and pneumatology of the divine missions, grounded characteristically in the eternal processions. Webster was evidently building a broad and deep foundation for a systematic theological structure that could distinguish and relate what classical Reformed theology called the ontological principle of theology (God) and the cognitive principle of theology (Scripture). Precisely because his goal was to provide an adequate basis for a comprehensive systematic theology, Webster developed a

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- 1 John Webster, *Word and Church: Essays in Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001). Commentary on the key texts for Webster's theological method can be found in Michael Allen, 'Toward Theological Theology: Tracing the Methodological Principles of John Webster', *Themelios* 41 (2016), pp. 217–37.
 - 2 These phrases refer to the titles of essays gathered in John Webster, *The Domain of the Word: Scripture and Theological Reason* (London: T&T Clark, 2012). 'Principles of Systematic Theology' had appeared originally in 2009; 'Biblical Reasoning' in 2008.
 - 3 John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 43.

trinitarian account of Scripture that was especially serviceable for extensive systematic construction. The difference such a doctrine of Scripture would have made in a completed system is something about which we can only speculate, but the main lines of the doctrine are evident, and the implications for the culture and rhetoric of theological formation are especially clear in Webster's work.

If this article were to be constructed along Webster's lines, it would need to follow his own preferred order of exposition, an order that achieved, through sheer repetition, nearly axiomatic status in his later works: first the doctrine of God, then the works of God. A systematic account of the principles of theology would therefore treat the ontological principle first, and then take up the cognitive principle: first God, then Scripture. But even Webster freely admitted that it was permissible to compose in a different order. When pondering the structure of a systematic theology, he could wonder aloud, 'is the sequence or order of exposition to be a direct transcription of the material order or the order of knowing?'⁴ And he could give the answer that 'the material primacy' of the doctrine of God ('first the worker, then the work') did not necessarily need to be 'mirrored in the order of knowing or in the order of exposition adopted in a theological system'.⁵ He may have routinely followed the sequence himself, most notably whenever he sketched an outline of a theological system,⁶ but in theory he always allowed for the possibility of other arrangements. 'Provided that the material order remains undisturbed, expository arrangements may be invented or adapted according to the requirements of didactic circumstances.'⁷ For didactic purposes, then, this article on Webster's trinitarian doctrine of Scripture begins not with the Trinity but with one particular subfield of the doctrine of Scripture: the doctrine of biblical inspiration. Compared to the doctrine of God, of course, the doctrine of Scripture's inspiration is dogmatically tiny. But as Webster learned, it is strategically important for securing a systematic account of how Scripture informs theology, and that in turn makes a great difference in how 'the doctrine of the Holy Trinity' is allowed to function as 'the ruler and judge over all other Christian doctrines'.⁸

4 John Webster, 'Christology, Theology, Economy', in *God Without Measure: Working Papers in Christian Theology, Volume I: God and the Works of God* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), p. 45.

5 Webster, 'Christology, Theology, Economy', p. 46.

6 Paragraph-sized sketches of a well-ordered system are scattered throughout Webster's writings. Perhaps Webster's largest project organized on the principle of treating God before turning to the works of God can be found in his still-unpublished Kantzer lectures, 'Perfection and Presence', the very title of which reflects his judgements about the right order of exposition.

7 Webster, 'Christology, Theology, Economy', p. 47.

8 Webster, *God Without Measure, Volume I*, p. 159.

Biblical inspiration and the demands of systematic theology

Most theologians do not write systematic theologies; they presuppose some mental map of how various doctrines are interrelated, but the actual labor of publishing a system is relatively rare. Webster was moving toward one quite self-consciously, and it is instructive to put him in dialogue with two other theologians who carried out the task. There is a curious relationship between the doctrine of biblical inspiration and a full-scale systematic theology, or, more precisely, between the burden of writing an adequate account of biblical inspiration and the burden of writing a full-scale systematic theology. Evidently it is difficult to produce a doctrine of inspiration adequate to a systematic theology, at least in late modern times. In recent decades, two of the most accomplished systematicians wrote their theologies with weak accounts of biblical inspiration, and then subsequently explained that they in fact needed a more robust account of biblical inspiration to support the doctrinal work they had done.

Consider first Robert W. Jenson, whose impressive two-volume *Systematic Theology* appeared in 1997 and 2001.⁹ Its account of Scripture is an intriguing one, drawing powerfully on an account of God's self-revelation in history, and relying on the role of the church for the normative interpretive construal of Scripture. In many ways, it must be considered a strong account of Scripture. Jenson assigns Scripture a kind of primacy among the norms of theological judgement, prior to and superior to liturgy, dogma and the magisterium.¹⁰ It is also, as would be expected from Jenson, a system in which the actual dynamics of the scriptural witness are creatively and innovatively present throughout. In doctrine after doctrine, Scripture's own claims, motifs, judgements, imagery and vocabulary exert a decisive influence in his formulations of doctrine. And his account of how systematic theology relates to Scripture is bracing: 'a *system* of theology, such as will here be presented, is tested against Scripture by its success or failure as a hermeneutical principle for Scripture taken as a whole, as one great text with a very complex internal structure'.¹¹ For Jenson as a systematician, Scripture forms one vast thesis, to which an individual theologian responds by proposing how it is to be read. An entire systematic theology ought to be evaluated as a comprehensive proposal for how to construe Scripture. All of Jenson's most characteristic conceptual moves (the weight he gave history, the way he interpreted body as availability, the importance of narrative, and other elements of 'revisionary metaphysics'¹²)

9 Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume I: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); *Volume II: The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

10 Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume I*, pp. 23–41.

11 Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume I*, p. 33. Emphasis in original.

12 This phrase is Jenson's own late characterization of his project. See the essays gathered by Stephen John Wright in Robert W. Jenson, *Theology as Revisionary Metaphysics: Essays on God and Creation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

should be understood as serving the task of saying systematically how we should construe the total content of Scripture.

But the actual doctrine about the nature of Scripture, the bibliology, is strikingly thin in Jenson's systematics. In particular, one searches the pages of the *Systematic Theology* in vain for an account of biblical inspiration. He simply does not appeal to Scripture's inspiredness, nor give any account of it. Though it was not much remarked on in reviews and responses to Jenson's first volume, the omission is nevertheless curious. In a 2004 essay, 'A Second Thought about Inspiration', Jenson frankly admitted in retrospect that his omission of the doctrine of inspiration from his system had not been accidental, but intentional. He explained why he had left out the doctrine:

Throughout most of my theological writing, I have tried not to rely on the proposition 'Scripture is inspired.' My aversion to the notion of inspiration was partly occasioned by the uses to which it was often put in my original midwestern Lutheran milieu, and partly was reasoned agreement with Wolfhart Pannenberg that modernity's historical consciousness made the classical doctrine of inspiration irretrievable.¹³

He had contracted his 'aversion to the notion of inspiration' from early (non-academic?) exposure to abuses of it which probably yielded a flat and authoritarian approach to Scripture. Reading the historical arguments of Pannenberg (about whom more below) had convinced him that the time of this doctrine's usefulness had passed. Jenson was always alert to the contextual situation in which he was writing, and his judgement about contemporary necessities entered directly into his doctrinal formulations. In this case, he considered the doctrine of inspiration at best irrelevant to the task of confessing the authority of Scripture. And so Jenson's entire *Systematic Theology* was raised up on a foundation that did not include biblical inspiration. But just a few years later Jenson felt he had to admit that 'it has been more and more born in on me that Christian exegesis of the Bible, and specifically of the Old Testament, does not itself work without something like the old doctrine of inspiration'.¹⁴ In other words, he came to recognize that he had made use of the exegetical conclusions of classic Christian theology, but had implicitly denied the presuppositions that led to those conclusions.

'I have come to believe that already churchly reading of the Bible requires a doctrine of inspiration', Jenson confessed. 'Without it, churchly reading, specifically of the Old Testament, must in modernity or postmodernity always undercut itself.'¹⁵ Reasoning backward from the fact that a particular understanding of the content of Scripture ('churchly reading') is necessary,

13 Robert W. Jenson, 'A Second Thought about Inspiration', *Pro Ecclesia* 13 (2004), p. 393.

14 Jenson, 'A Second Thought about Inspiration', p. 393.

15 Jenson, 'A Second Thought about Inspiration', p. 394.

Jenson recognized that such a reading could not have been produced by a group of merely human authors producing texts to be interpreted by merely human readers. For Scripture to function the way it did in the classic tradition of Christian thought, and even in Jenson's own systematic theology, its production and reception could not be a purely historical phenomenon or a matter of the immanent dynamics of the temporally extended community of discourse. Some appeal to divine action was necessary. After the fact, Jenson recognized that he must have been presupposing some such divine action throughout his own constructive theological work: 'It was – I now have come to see – a function of the old doctrine of inspiration to trump the created author and first readers with a prior agent, the Spirit, and prior readers, the whole diachronic people of God, preserved as one people through time by that same Spirit.'¹⁶

So Jenson had a second, post-system thought about inspiration, and he retroactively described a version of the old doctrine that cohered with the systematic commitments he had already articulated. In doing so, he wanted a doctrine that was not simply an appeal to the formal authority of inspired text, the kind of thing that could guarantee the correctness of whatever propositions happened to be found in a book known in advance to be inspired. Instead, Jenson's system required a doctrine of inspiration more conspicuously determined by its content, and more obviously centered on Christ. 'The great flaw of the Old-Protestant doctrine of inspiration,' in his opinion, 'particularly as it sought to enable Christian reading of the Old Testament, was that it was itself too little Christological.'¹⁷

To address this problem, Jenson sketched out a doctrine of inspiration in a few bravura strokes, and it is a suitably odd and characteristically Jensonian account of the doctrine. It is drastically trinitarian. The first move is patrological: when God speaks in the Old Testament to the Fathers, he does it *in persona Verbi*, in the Word who is the second person of the Trinity, who is incarnate as Jesus.¹⁸ The second move is therefore christological: If the prophets spoke of Christ, this does not mean 'that they made promises that happened to be fulfilled by his coming ... but that Christ is the one who spoke by them, testifying to himself'. The third move is pneumatological and also an appeal to the immanent Trinity: the work of the Spirit, as Jesus says in John 16:14, is to 'take what is mine and declare it to you'; that is, the Spirit whose role in the life of God is to unite, also unites here: 'A chief part of his uniting work is to unite the Word with the testimony of his witnesses.'¹⁹ We need not dwell

16 Jenson, 'A Second Thought about Inspiration', p. 396.

17 Jenson, 'A Second Thought about Inspiration', p. 396.

18 Jenson, 'A Second Thought about Inspiration', p. 398. Jenson's careful negotiation of the question of the *logos asarkos* here is worth studying. It is entirely in line with his revisionist account of narrative pre-existence.

19 Jenson, 'A Second Thought about Inspiration', p. 398.

on this brief sketch of a trinitarian doctrine of inspiration here, though it is necessary to admit that this is not a doctrine of inspiration that would entirely satisfy the traditional instinct for God's involvement in the inscripturation of the actual words in the text. But Jenson has no intention to satisfy that instinct; he continues to be motivated by a desire to avoid what he perceives as the deficits and distractions of the old Protestant doctrine of inspiration even as he takes on the main advantages of it. The crucial thing to note is that after publication of the *Systematic Theology* he perceived that he needed to backfill it with a doctrine of inspiration which could ground his appeal to ecclesial ratification of the text, could definitely extend to the Old Testament, and could underwrite the typological argumentation crucial to his constructive task. That is the character of Jenson's post-systematic second thought about inspiration.

Something similar happened with another important twentieth-century Lutheran systematician: Wolfhart Pannenberg published an impressive three-volume systematic theology with minimal reference to inspiration, and then subsequently wrote a brief article in which he clarified his account. In a programmatic early essay, Pannenberg had argued that the Protestant Scripture principle had collapsed, partly under historical-critical pressure (as the assured results of modern scholarship undermined key truth claims), but partly under its own demands (as thoroughgoing appeals to Scripture generated an expanded historical awareness and opened a hermeneutical gap between the time of the text and the time of the reader). Since the Scripture principle was the primary way Protestant theology had justified its claim to be properly scientific (in the sense of being a *Wissenschaft* that belonged in the modern university), 'the dissolution of the traditional doctrine of Scripture constitutes a crisis at the very foundations of modern Protestant theology'.²⁰ Christianity, according to Pannenberg, was still very much a religion of revelation, but in order for Christian theology to continue to function among the sciences, its approach to revelation needed to be depositivized. In his view, no approach to revelation was more positivistic, treating revelation as simply a given in the Bible, than the traditional Protestant Scripture principle.

For this reason, when Pannenberg wrote the first volume of his *Systematic Theology*, he made no appeal to the inspiration of Scripture, which he took to be the doctrinal foundation of the entire Scripture principle. The long opening chapters of *Systematic Theology* volume I are broadly apologetic in their strategy of winning a hearing for the truths of revelation. From these elaborate opening strategies, Pannenberg turns to God's revelation in history, using the text of Scripture in a historical-critical way to gain access to the historical events in which revelation proper is to be grasped. As a multivolume elaboration

20 Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'The Crisis of the Scripture Principle', in *Basic Questions in Theology Volume I* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970), p. 4.

of his understanding of revelation as history, Pannenberg's systematic theology is a remarkable performance for its doctrinal scope, theological richness, and, of course, its historical acumen. It is astonishing how well Pannenberg reproduced the traditional content of Christian theology on the modified platform of depositivized revelation, without appeal to the Scripture principle.²¹

But just as Jenson did, Pannenberg reconsidered this decision in a subsequent, post-system article. In Pannenberg's case, rather than confessing any error or testifying to a change of mind, his article simply explained the rationale for his handling of inspiration. He had not omitted it by an oversight, nor by failing altogether to perceive its necessity. Instead, Pannenberg had deliberately postponed it until the final pages of the second volume of his system, in order to bring it under the heading of his theology of the gospel. He explains his choice of location in his brief article 'On the Inspiration of Scripture':

In the first volume of my *Systematic Theology*, the doctrine concerning the inspiration of Scripture was discussed only in terms of criticism of its use in seventeenth-century Protestant theology in the attempt to justify a formal concept of scriptural authority before any discussion of the content of the biblical writings. The criticism of this conception of inspiration, however, does not discard the idea of the inspiration of Scripture as such. Rather, the second volume offers a new foundation of the idea of scriptural inspiration in the context of a discussion of the concept of the gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the foundation of the authority of the Bible in the church and over against the church.²²

By locating inspiration in this nontraditional place, Pannenberg bought himself systematic maneuvering room in two regards. First, he ensured that there could be no appeal to inspiration until the content of the inspired message is announced. He was worried that an appeal in advance to inspiredness, to be filled in materially by whatever content was to be provided later, would be asking for modern critical thought to suspend its judgement and write a blank check of credulity to whatever happens to be set forth as inspired:

The inspiration of Scripture is to be understood in the light of the center of the Scripture, in the light of Jesus Christ as its center and criterion. The idea of the inspiration of Scripture cannot establish a formal concept of the authority of Scripture as the word of God independently of the content of the proclamation of Christ. Such a formal concept of the authority of

21 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, vols. 1–3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991–8).

22 Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Theological Table Talk: On the Inspiration of Scripture', *Theology Today* 54 (1997), pp. 212–15.

Scripture, considered as a presupposition for the doctrine of Jesus Christ and the revelation of God in him, cannot be established on the basis of the idea of inspiration. The sequence of the argument has to proceed the opposite way, starting from the apostolic gospel about Jesus Christ.²³

That is, he insisted on a material understanding of inspiration and rejected a formal understanding of it, believing that the formal and material can and must be distinguished in this way to keep formal claims of inspiration from capsizing the apologetic enterprise. The second way Pannenberg bought room to maneuver was by establishing a distance between the written words themselves and the text's ability to witness to a theological truth: 'Certainly the Scriptures are to be understood as divinely inspired in the literal concreteness of their wording, but only insofar as they witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.'²⁴ Pannenberg did go on to provide some more detail about his doctrine of Scripture in the third volume of the *Systematic Theology*, but again not in a way calculated to satisfy the demands of the old Scripture principle in the form of the doctrine of verbal inspiration. Having decisively rejected its traditional setting and force, he contextualized its legitimate claims within the doctrine of the gospel.

Jenson was engaged in retrofitting his dogmatic structure; he rightly perceived that the hermeneutical arguments he had made in his *Systematic Theology* presupposed that Scripture was inspired in some way more traditionally expansive than he had allowed for. Pannenberg, by contrast, did not change his mind and did not admit that a more classical bibliology was functioning anonymously in the background of his doctrinal work. He remained consistently committed to keeping inspiration out of his prolegomena. Prolegomena for Pannenberg needed to be public reasoning of an evidentialist sort, appealing to more generally available canons of rationality. His plan always included a doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture to be expounded after his Christology and soteriology, and strictly subordinated to the content of the gospel. Kept safely in that position, Pannenberg hoped it would secure the correctness of the Old Testament witness in particular, but only in a way limited to the content of the gospel, never extending to the form of the words, and never acting as a guarantee of the truthfulness of actual sentences. It is a chastened inspiration to be sure, and if it appeared late in his theological system, it did so by design.²⁵

23 Pannenberg, 'On the Inspiration of Scripture', p. 214.

24 Pannenberg, 'On the Inspiration of Scripture', p. 215.

25 It is interesting that Katherine Sonderegger launched into her own biblically informed systematic project (*Systematic Theology: The Doctrine of God, Volume 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015)) without establishing an account of Scripture, but has since written an essay explaining her underlying view of Scripture. See Katherine Sonderegger, 'Holy Scripture as Sacred Ground', in Oliver Crisp and Fred Sanders, eds., *The Task of Dogmatics: Explorations in Theological Method* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), pp. 131–43.

Trinity and Scripture

The dynamics of their own systematic thought colored Jenson and Pannenberg's treatment of the doctrine of Scripture, and some of their decisions are not easily transferable to other contexts. They might not align with other systems. The theological program of John Webster in particular is different enough from theirs that we would not expect an easy transfer: Pannenberg's thick apologetic historicism and Jenson's drastically economic trinitarianism were among the things against which Webster tended to warn. But in at least two areas, the lessons learned from these systematic theologies seem quite relevant to Webster's trinitarian account of Scripture and its inspiration on the eve of writing his own systematics. First, Jenson's recognition that an operative doctrine of Scripture needs to be shaped by the doctrine of the Trinity is an axiomatic claim affirmed also by Webster. Even the particular way that Jenson developed this claim, by appealing to the Son as the agent of all divine communication (God speaking *in persona Verbi*), has strong parallels in Webster's theology, especially as it enables a christological confession about the nature of the Old Testament (preceding the incarnation) and the formation of the canon (following the ascension). Second, Pannenberg's insistence on a material definition of the Bible's authority and inspiration ensured that whatever its formal claims, the actual content of the doctrine of Scripture must be the gospel. Scripture has authority because of the use God makes of it for soteriological ends. Among the systematic conclusions Pannenberg drew from this were on the one hand a recognition of the power of Scripture to stand over against the church in judgement (since gospel outflanks church), and on the other hand the priority of the apostolic preaching about Jesus Christ over the written testimonies which serve that preaching (since the word of salvation precedes the New Testament). The most obvious systematic issues implicated in a doctrine of Scripture, according to these major twentieth-century case studies, are trinitarian and soteriological. The touchpoints are God and the gospel.

Webster approached the task of describing a systematically sufficient doctrine of Scripture with characteristic shrewdness and concern, highly alert to the implications. 'A good deal hangs on locating a theological account of the Bible in the right doctrinal place', he confessed. Above all, the resources he brought to bear were the resources of trinitarian theology. 'The proper doctrinal location for a Christian theological account of Scripture is (primarily) in the doctrine of the Trinity and (secondarily and derivatively) in the doctrine of the church.'²⁶ His motivation for locating the doctrine of Scripture within

26 John Webster, 'Afterword: Hans Frei, Scripture, Reading, and the Rhetoric of Theology', in Hans Frei, *Reading Faithfully, Volume 1: Writings from the Archives: Theology and Hermeneutics*, ed. Mike Higon and Mark Alan Bowald (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), p. 211. In this essay on Frei, Webster necessarily gives considerable attention to ecclesiology: more than my selective quotations may suggest.

the doctrine of the Trinity was, of course, not to treat Scripture as somehow divine; Webster always insisted on the creatureliness of Scripture itself. Instead, what he intended by placing bibliology within trinitarian theology was to emphasize that its ontology was constituted by the Trinity's action and work. Though it had many other functions in Webster's thought, 'one of the functions of the doctrine of the Trinity is to ensure a fully theocentric account of how it is that we know God. Trinitarian doctrine is, in part, a way of articulating how the entire process of the church's knowledge of God is God's own work, the work of Father, Son and Spirit.'²⁷

When he came to specify the trinitarian contours of this doctrine of Scripture, Webster became strikingly Christocentric. Rather than canvassing broadly for doctrinal affirmations about the Father and the Holy Spirit, rushing straight to pneumatological resources for a doctrine of inspiration, or seeking a clever threefold structure corresponding to distinct works of the persons, Webster tightened his focus. The trajectory of his thought can be discerned perhaps in his early fascination with Karl Barth's 'extensive recovery of the prophetic office of Christ',²⁸ in which Christ is the 'radiant and eloquent' proclaimer of his own person and work.²⁹ The bibliological possibilities of Christ's prophetic office began to inform Webster's own decisions about the doctrine of Scripture in numerous ways. In terms of Barth scholarship, we might describe Webster as a creative Barthian taking advantage of the resources Barth provided in *Church Dogmatics* IV/3 to enrich, extend and correct the doctrine of Scripture offered in *Church Dogmatics* I/2. At any rate, thinking constructively, Webster considered the advantages of using this particular christological resource for the doctrine of Scripture:

It is worth recording that this doctrine offers a fruitful dogmatic context within which to expound a theology of the Bible. The older Protestant dogmatics customarily treated the Bible in two places: first (and primarily) in the locus *de revelatione* and second (with much less intensity) in the treatment of the *munus propheticum Christi*, where the mediating functions of Bible and church proclamation were discussed. When handled in the first locus, the Bible often became associated with the foundational enterprise of seeking indubitable foundations for knowledge, as well as with the rationalistic method of deducing proofs for doctrines from biblical propositions. Handled in the second context, however, the Bible is

27 Webster, 'Afterword: Hans Frei', p. 211.

28 John Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology: Some Doctrinal Reflections', in *Word and Church*, p. 66. The essay originally appeared with the same title in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51 (1998), pp. 307–41.

29 John Webster, "'Eloquent and Radiant:" The Prophetic Office of Christ and the Mission of the Church', in *Barth's Moral Theology: Human Action in Barth's Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 125–50.

much more happily related to the living presence and activity of the risen Christ.³⁰

The worries voiced here are practically Pannenbergian: 'seeking indubitable foundations', 'deducing proofs ... from biblical propositions' and so on. Webster would later come to adopt a chastened rhetoric about the methods and results of Protestant scholasticism (see the 'Retrieving inspiration' section below). Nevertheless he attained here an abiding insight into the value of focusing on Christ's own self-testimony as the basis of the doctrine of Scripture, an account 'more happily related to the living presence and activity of the risen Christ'. Attempting to take the measure of modern hermeneutics in all its fraught, theory-laden complexity, Webster suggested an unfashionable solution. 'Above all, the argument' of his essay on modern hermeneutics

is contrary insofar as it suggests that fruitful theological work on these issues requires us to give sustained attention to a figure who has virtually disappeared from theological hermeneutics in the modern era, namely Jesus, of whose risen and self-communicative presence in the Holy Spirit the Bible and its reading are a function.³¹

Sustained attention to Christ as 'self-communicative' prophet gave Webster the scope he needed for an adequate account of Scripture. We might speculate that if Webster had undertaken to write a systematic theology around the year 2000, he would have elaborated a trinitarian doctrine of Scripture on the basis of the prophetic office of Christ. Webster never left the *munus propheticum* behind, but as his systematic agenda widened, he began to devote more attention to the resurrection as the christological basis of Scripture.

It is the important 2007 essay, 'Resurrection and Scripture',³² which most conspicuously displays the main lines of Webster's trinitarian doctrine of Scripture, because it is here that his thematically narrow christological concentration yields trinitarian breadth and depth. Webster begins the essay rehearsing the need for an ontology of Scripture, that is, an account of its nature.³³ 'The core of such an account is, of course, the doctrine of the triune God, who alone is the *ratio essendi et cognoscendi* of all creatures; its near edge is Christian teaching about the resurrection of Christ.'³⁴ In what sense, doctrinally, is Christ's resurrection the 'near edge' of a trinitarian core? In the

30 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 66.

31 Webster, 'Hermeneutics in Modern Theology', p. 48.

32 John Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', in *The Domain of the Word*, pp. 32–49. The essay was originally published with the same title in A. Lincoln and A. Paddison, eds., *Christology and Scripture: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), pp. 138–55.

33 The conviction that 'bibliology is prior to hermeneutics' determines most of the essays in *The Domain of the Word*. 'Preface', p. viii.

34 Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', p. 33.

sense that ‘the resurrection of Jesus is the temporal enactment of the eternal relation of Father and Son’.³⁵ That is, the life that Jesus takes up on the far side of death is properly and manifestly the life of God the Son, having the same character as that divine life: it is not contingent, but absolute; not subsequent to anything, but prior to everything; not merely the next event in any history, but the breaking through of the primal and original life.

In his portrayal of the life of the risen one, Webster uses two unusual descriptive techniques. First, he intentionally thins out the distinction between the earthly history of Jesus and the eternal deity of the Son. He maintains and presupposes all the proper Chalcedonian categories, but places them in the background precisely here where the theme of life is in view. Jesus’ resurrection ‘is the elucidation and confirmation of his antecedent deity’,³⁶ it is ‘part of the material definition of God’s aseity’.³⁷ The second descriptive technique Webster uses throughout this section is to brandish a vocabulary of ontology, conspicuously pressing metaphysical claims while pointing to an event in history: ‘There are startling implications’ of the resurrection ‘for the metaphysics of created being. The resurrection of Jesus is determinative of the being of all creaturely reality.’ In fact, ‘determination by the resurrection is not accidental to created being but ontologically definitive’. And finally, ‘the risen one is the domain within which the creation lives and moves and has its being’.³⁸

Both descriptive techniques, the conflationary and the metaphysical, serve the same end: they ensure that the reality of the risen Christ cannot be conceptually outflanked by anything. He cannot be located within any framework, because as God and as the source of creaturely being, he is the location of all frameworks within which we might consider placing him. Both techniques also pay off richly when Webster moves from the ‘near edge’ of resurrection theology back to the ‘core’ of trinitarian theology:

He is absolutely, not comparatively, superior. No reality may pretend to be more fundamental or comprehensive than he. He simply *is*, necessarily and underivatively. He is this, of course, in relation to the Father and the Holy Spirit, for to speak of his resurrection is to speak of the will and work of the Father who raises the Son from the dead and gives him glory, and also to speak of the Spirit in whom the resurrection power of the Father and the resurrection life of the Son are unleashed in creation. But as this

35 Webster, ‘Resurrection and Scripture’, p. 33.

36 Webster, ‘Resurrection and Scripture’, p. 33.

37 Webster, ‘Resurrection and Scripture’, p. 35.

38 All taken from Webster, ‘Resurrection and Scripture’, p. 36. The entire passage (pp. 33–6) is an example of Webster writing in a mode he considered appropriate to theology, a ‘rhetoric of edification’. He used this phrase to characterize ‘one of the central tasks of Christian theology’, which is ‘to generate persuasive depictions of Christian faith’: Webster, ‘Afterword: Hans Frei’, p. 218.

one, the risen Son is that by which all creaturely realities are placed. His resurrection is not a conditioned truth.³⁹

It is no surprise that the trinitarian reality manifested in the resurrection of Christ grounds the doctrine of Scripture; it grounds everything, after all. But the results for systematic bibliology follow rapidly in Webster's exposition. Having expounded the resurrection as the basis of Christ's pre-eminence,⁴⁰ Webster recurs to the themes of Christ's prophetic office. The risen Christ proclaims himself in Scripture, both in the Old and the New Testaments: 'Scripture is to be read as what it is, a complex though unified set of texts through which the risen Christ interprets himself as the one in whom the entire economy of God's dealings with creatures has its coherence and fulfillment.'⁴¹ Scripture is a creaturely reality that is assembled, sanctified,⁴² requisitioned and employed by the risen Christ in his work of self-communication.

In characterizing Webster's account of Scripture as trinitarian, we do not have in mind a kind of equalizing of emphases such that the three persons are named seriatim. Webster intended something much more christologically concentrated than that. With respect to the Holy Spirit in particular, a certain over-emphasis on pneumatological accounts of Scripture has been more a feature of modern bibliologies than of classical ones. Webster sketched a doctrine of Scripture that gave great prominence to Jesus as the giver of knowledge of God, and let pneumatology find its proper place within that christological setting. That pneumatological place can be briefly characterized in Webster's general statement that 'it is the office of the eternal Son to terminate corrupt nature and in its place to create a new nature; and it is the office of the Holy Spirit to make this new nature actual and operative in creaturely conduct'.⁴³ But especially in the structure of the collection *The Domain of the Word*, where some of Webster's strategic organizational decisions can be seen most clearly, the work of the Spirit appears in the long essay 'Illumination'.⁴⁴ The chapter on illumination is both an account of the proper functioning of theological reason under the influence of the Holy

39 Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', p. 35.

40 In my quotations I have avoided picking up the way the language of Colossians pervades Webster's treatment of this theme, but it colors everything. Ephesians is also prominent because of the way it elides the resurrection and the ascension (Eph. 1:20), but the distinctive vocabulary of Colossians predominates.

41 Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', p. 32.

42 The claim that Scripture is sanctified for God's use, so fruitful in 2003's *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, is here given an even more powerful christological intensification.

43 John Webster, 'What Makes Theology Theological?', *Journal of Analytic Theology* 3 (2015), p. 26.

44 John Webster, 'Illumination', in *The Domain of the Word*, pp. 50–64. This chapter had previously appeared in the *Journal of Reformed Theology* 5 (2011), pp. 325–40.

Spirit, and an indication of how Webster viewed the relation between the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit: ‘Corresponding to the perfect and wholly sufficient work of the Son in the redemption of fallen creatures, there is a further mission of God in their regeneration and restoration in intelligent, consensual, affective and active fellowship with God. This is the mission of the Holy Spirit.’⁴⁵ What is clear is that Webster presupposed an expansive account of the trinitarian missions as the framework for relating the work of the Son and the Spirit. What we can only guess at is how he would have extended, balanced and related these two missions in an overall elaboration of a trinitarian doctrine of Scripture. This is something the planned systematic theology would probably have made clear; for us it remains a summons to think these matters through.

Retrieving inspiration

Our point of departure in this essay was the curious phenomenon of two of the twentieth century’s most creative and accomplished systematic theologians struggling with certain features of the doctrine of inspiration. In their own ways, Pannenberg and Jenson searched for a doctrine of Scripture that could support the weight of a theological system, and in their own ways they found that what they needed was a doctrine of Scripture that was conspicuously trinitarian and soteriological. Neither Pannenberg nor Jenson embraced a traditional doctrine of scriptural inspiration; each put a novel account of inspiration in that place and carried on with their work. As Jenson confessed, he was persuaded by Pannenberg’s own arguments that ‘modernity’s historical consciousness made the classical doctrine of inspiration irretrievable’.⁴⁶

But the judgement of irretrievability is a weighty judgement, and in this case, it seems that while Webster shared some of the scruples of Pannenberg and Jenson, he did not ultimately share their judgement about what could be retrieved from classical doctrinal sources. We have seen the ways in which Pannenberg and Jenson grappled with issues that were very important to Webster, but we have also seen that Webster did not directly engage their approaches to the doctrine of Scripture. If we want to find John Webster in dialogue with a major late-twentieth-century theologian on the nature of Scripture and revelation, what we find is an appreciative interaction with T.F. Torrance.⁴⁷ Webster’s essay on Torrance’s doctrine of Scripture reveals Webster to be a keen observer of the lineaments of systematic bibliography. He laments the fact that Torrance’s work on Scripture is too scattered and unfashionable to

45 Webster, ‘Illumination’, p. 53.

46 Jenson, ‘A Second Thought about Inspiration’, p. 393.

47 John Webster, ‘*Verbum mirificum*: T.F. Torrance on Scripture and Hermeneutics’, in *The Domain of the Word*, pp. 86–112. This chapter had previously appeared as ‘T.F. Torrance on Scripture’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65 (2012), pp. 34–63.

have exerted the influence it should have. Though he views Torrance's work as somewhat neglected and out of the mainstream, he also affirms that 'his writings on these matters constitute one of the most promising bodies of material on the Christian theology of the Bible and its interpretation from a Protestant divine of the last five or six decades – rivalled but not surpassed by, for example, Berkouwer's magisterial study *Holy Scripture*'.⁴⁸ There are some obvious features of Torrance's approach to Scripture that would have drawn Webster's attention. As Webster puts it, 'part of Torrance's achievement was that he insisted that thinking about Scripture must be ordered from a trinitarian and incarnational theology of revelation, through an ontology of the prophetic and apostolic texts to a hermeneutics of repentance and faith'.⁴⁹ That is a good description of Torrance, but it could also, with a few shifts of terminology, describe the work of John Webster. Still, the fact that Webster would direct his attention in these matters not to figures like Pannenberg and Jenson, but instead would commend figures like Torrance and Berkouwer, indicates that in this doctrine, he was on a trajectory of retrieval.

There are indications that Webster was becoming increasingly comfortable with a doctrine of Scripture that had drastically more conservative lines than the regime of modern theology has normally allowed for. His worries about historical criticism were dissipating, and his confidence in some older lines of thought seemed to be growing. In a 2015 essay, Webster finally made explicit his willingness to retrieve a more classical doctrine of Scripture, all the way down to the doctrine of inspiration. The essay almost seems designed for obscurity; it is in a festschrift for a New Testament scholar, published by Wipf & Stock's Cascade imprint, and given the long Greek main title 'ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι'. This fearsome string of non-English characters is from 2 Peter 1:21, 'men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost'.⁵⁰

In this late inspiration essay, Webster committed himself to three theses on biblical inspiration. First in order is the divine illumination of the human author:

The Holy Spirit grants to the writer that measure of understanding (practical or theoretical) of God and all things in relation to God that is necessary for literary representation. This vivification of intelligence, countering the lingering cognitive damage caused by sin, is essential if the prophet or apostle is to communicate divine truth in writing.⁵¹

48 Webster, 'T.F. Torrance on Scripture and Hermeneutics', p. 87.

49 Webster, 'T.F. Torrance on Scripture and Hermeneutics', p. 89.

50 John Webster, 'ὑπὸ πνεύματος ἁγίου φερόμενοι ἐλάλησαν ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἄνθρωποι: On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture', in J.G. McConville and L.K. Pietersen, eds., *Conception, Reception, and the Spirit: Essays in Honor of Andrew T. Lincoln* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), pp. 236–50.

51 Webster, 'On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture', p. 245.

Second, the Spirit gives the author an impulse to write. This *mandatum scribendi* comes from God, but it does not remain some sort of external nudge: ‘The divine *mandatum* is appropriated, so that it becomes an inner impulse, and the text-acts to which it gives rise are in the fullest sense acts that also arise from the writer’s own will and understanding.’ That is, ‘the Spirit’s mandate also operates intrinsically, as an augmentation of creaturely powers, and not merely as an extrinsic efficient cause’.⁵² So the Spirit has prepared the mind of the author and given him the impulse to write.

Third, and most strikingly, we have the production of the words of Scripture for which the previous two movements have prepared:

The Spirit supplies both the *res* of the biblical writings and the *verba* by which that matter is expressed. This does not mean that the biblical writers are wholly passive; they are authors, not conduits: conscious, intelligent, deliberate. They speak and write. But this speech and writing of theirs is not wholly original to them: it is ἀπὸ θεοῦ.⁵³

There, in all its glory and shame, is the distinctly recognizable Protestant orthodox doctrine of the inspiration of Scripture. Can it truly be that Webster urges this ‘irretrievable’ doctrine on moderns with a clear conscience, and without trepidation? Has he not learned what moderns are supposed to worry about when confronted by this artifact of the seventeenth century? Webster’s article is brief, and instead of canvassing widely for these worries, Webster strategically selects one interlocutor. He considers Karl Barth’s doctrine of Scripture as it began to take form in the *Göttingen Dogmatics*:

Lecturing on dogmatics for the first time, Barth worried that verbal inspiration effects ‘a false stabilisation of the Word of God,’ which changed the mystery of God’s act of revelation into ‘direct revelation,’ forgetting ‘the indirect identity of the Bible with revelation,’ and making Scripture into a deposit of revealedness. The worry is, however, misplaced: verbal inspiration does not eliminate what Barth later called ‘God’s action in the Bible,’ but simply indicates one kind of action that God performs in relation to Scripture.⁵⁴

In summary, Barth should not have worried about an inspired text putting God out of revelatory business, because ‘verbal inspiration is an extension of (not a replacement for) the theology of divine instruction’.⁵⁵

In his footnote to this point, Webster speculates that Barth’s ‘worry was probably prompted by study of Heppe’s textbook of Reformed dogmatics, which gave voice to a similar disquiet’. This is one of those telling footnotes

52 Webster, ‘On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture’, p. 246.

53 Webster, ‘On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture’, p. 247.

54 Webster, ‘On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture’, p. 246.

55 Webster, ‘On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture’, p. 246.

that does not just point to quoted material; it reveals significantly where Webster had been directing his attention. It is a commonplace among Webster's readers that the drift of his thought can often be detected simply by observing that his footnotes increasingly featured less and less Barth and more and more Thomas. Almost as telling is the shift in his patterns of reference from Heinrich Heppe to Richard Muller when discussing crucial issues connected with Protestant orthodoxy. Certainly we see the payoff of such a critical shift here: Heppe's nineteenth-century worries colored his account of the seventeenth-century doctrine of Scripture among the Reformed orthodox. This worry was one of the sources of Barth's own worries about the objectivity of the word of God and its possible captivity in written form; at least it formed part of the genealogical story that Barth told about how the doctrine of Scripture went horribly wrong. As Webster slides from Barth and Heppe to Muller, he of course takes on considerable more precision and detail (as any reader of Muller's *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* must⁵⁶), but he also becomes open to twentieth-century continuators of that old orthodox theory: the Lutheran Robert Preus's book on the inspiration of Scripture⁵⁷ begins to make itself known around the edges of Webster's discussion, cited approvingly and apparently without horror. Surely Webster knows that all the bogeymen of dictation and inerrancy must lurk down that pathway. But rather than pulling away from Preus on the matter of dictation, Webster instead retails Preus's own defense of the terminology: 'Preus points out that *dictatio* is only one of a range of terms in post-Reformation divinity for the Spirit's relation to the scriptural *verba*; other, more intrinsic, terms include *influxus*, *afflatus*, *suggestio*, and *instinctus*.'⁵⁸ It is of course not a simple embrace of dictation on Webster's part; it is more a matter of him warning theologians with a phobia about dictation that they have got their genealogy wrong, are misconstruing the key terms, and need to reconsider the dogmatic issues involved. John Webster obviously was no fundamentalist and was not on his way to becoming one. But to side with Preus over Pannenberg and Jenson is to side with the wrong sort of Lutheran by current academic standards.

Webster's late attention to inspiration is not a matter of 'how I learned to stop worrying and love the Protestant scholastics' doctrine of Scripture'. He does register a few worries. For example, before sketching his own doctrine of inspiration he reminds readers that

it is important not to allow inspiration to become the principal element in the doctrine of Scripture. Polemic against reductive naturalism may

56 Richard Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003).

57 Robert Preus, *The Inspiration of Scripture: A Study of the Theology of the 17th-century Lutheran Dogmaticians* (St Louis: Concordia, 1955).

58 Webster, 'On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture', p. 246.

encourage disproportionate attention to what is properly a derivative of more primary teaching about the economy of divine instruction and the grounds of that economy in God's immanent life.⁵⁹

But what worry could be more characteristically Websterian than this? It is the kind of concern that is addressed by establishing context and order, not by sacrificing or suppressing a doctrine. To establish this context, Webster announces three formal requirements for a well-ordered doctrine of Scripture: an eye to the total form of the doctrine, a commitment to follow the correct material sequence, and a sense of maintaining the right proportions among the constituent parts. The brief outline of a doctrine of Scripture that follows⁶⁰ is vintage Webster: he considers the location, origin and nature of Scripture before turning to its ends, purposes and uses. Inspiration has its proper place: subordinated to the economy of revelation, at the end of the treatise on the origin of Scripture, with implications for the purposes and uses of Scripture.

In the title essay of *The Domain of the Word*, Webster wrote that 'developing an adequate theology of Scripture depends on the ability to make some large doctrinal moves', and listed chief among them 'a trinitarian description of God's ordering of created reality as the domain of his saving presence and speech'.⁶¹ But it is one thing to become aware of a theological need, and another thing to have the courage and comprehension to meet that need in teaching and writing. Webster confessed:

Weighed down by spiritual and intellectual custom, we are often stiff and clumsy in making these moves, and we need the training which comes from watching and trying to keep pace with earlier generations who did not share all our compulsions and so can help us discover a relative freedom from them.⁶²

His retrieval of inspiration and his trinitarian account of Scripture, then, align with his commitment 'to keep pace with earlier generations' in his teaching.

Webster's retrieval of the doctrine of inspiration is directly connected to the trinitarian contours of his overall account of Scripture. Only because he had already put in place the major elements of trinitarian theology could he consider admitting a traditional, even classical, doctrine of inspiration into his doctrinal system. The trinitarian ontology, the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit, the resurrection of Christ as the 'temporal enactment of the eternal relation of Father and Son',⁶³ the ordered noetic operations of the Spirit as inspirer and illuminator, and many other doctrinal resources and

59 Webster, 'On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture', p. 244.

60 Webster, 'On the Inspiration of Holy Scripture', pp. 247–9.

61 John Webster, 'The Domain of the Word', in *The Domain of the Word*, p. 17.

62 Webster, 'The Domain of the Word', p. 17.

63 Webster, 'Resurrection and Scripture', p. 33.

counterweights must be confidently established in order to make a safe place for a doctrine of inspiration along classical lines, if it is to function helpfully in a contemporary context. A theology of Holy Scripture under the auspices of the doctrine of the holy Trinity is a theology of Holy Scripture that can support the full weight of a systematic theology. John Webster did not, literarily speaking, give us that systematic theology. But there is still much to learn, and much work to do on the basis of, that remarkable series of essays in which he probed, considered, weighed and sketched out the directions theology is allowed and commanded to move.