

# Nicaea and the Analytic Unfolding of Divine Sonship

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**Citation:** Fred Sanders, ‘Nicaea and the Analytic Unfolding of Divine Sonship’, RTR 84, no. 3 (Dec 2025), 202–217. <https://rtrjournal.org/index.php/RTR/article/view/449>.

**Keywords:** *eternal generation, Nicaea, Nicene Creed, Nazianzus, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas*

**Abstract:** *The doctrine of eternal generation sometimes draws the objection that it sounds like it is covertly telling a story about how the Son came to be. This objection, called here the story objection, can be answered in several ways. Trinitarian theology will never be able to preempt the raising of the story objection, because Scripture itself reveals the second person as the Son, and the Nicene Creed rightly models the classical theological practice of unfolding that revealed term by the use of action verbs: if Son, then generated. Thomas Aquinas is a key example of a trinitarian theologian who accepts both the biblical name and its Nicene unfolding as action that does not reduce to story.*

A common objection to the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son is that the doctrine, as classically stated, seems to present itself in terms that presuppose narrative development and perhaps even to claim that the Son was narratively constituted. To say that the Son is, or was, eternally generated from the Father seems like an origin story explaining where the Son came from. To claim that the second person of the Trinity is the Son because he was begotten from God the Father seems to posit a founding event in the past: God the Father begat or has begotten God

the Son. This suggests some kind of theogony, if not at the level of divine substance, then at least at the hypostatic level. ‘Once upon a time’, apparently, within the domain of the divine being, something definitive happened that resulted in the Son being with the Father. However, if God is immutable, then a divine person cannot have an origin story, so the doctrine of eternal generation is incoherent. This can be called the story objection.<sup>1</sup>

The story objection has considerable force, especially when all parties in the discussion agree in advance that the Christian confession of God’s eternity does not permit any origin stories about how God came to be God. A God with an originating narrative that accounts for his existence or even his way of being God cannot be God.<sup>2</sup> If trinitarian theology claims that God eternally exists as Trinity, then it must offer some explanation of why eternal Sonship and eternal generation do not entail an origin story for the Son.

There are several possible replies to the story objection to the doctrine of eternal generation. Below, four will be briefly described before turning to the fifth, which will emphasize the analytic unfolding of Nicaea along Thomist lines.

## 1. Four Possible Replies to the Story Objection

The first possible reply to the story objection to eternal generation is to insist that a denial of story is simply built into the doctrine of eternal generation from the start. This is exactly why the tradition generally puts

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<sup>1</sup> Some version of the story objection animated Arius himself, for though Arius was careful to say that the Son was begotten ‘timelessly’, he nevertheless drew the conclusion that the begotten one ‘did not exist before he was begotten.’ This quotation is from the 320 ‘Profession of Faith’, according to R.P.C. Hanson, who is especially concerned to report Arius’ own words in context. See Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 8.

<sup>2</sup> This was axiomatic in ancient metaphysics and pervasive in medieval thought (consider Anselm’s ‘that that which nothing greater can be thought’). A modern restatement of it can be found in Wolfhart Pannenberg’s account of the concept of God requiring that God be the all-determining power; see his *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), but also his *Metaphysics and The Idea of God*, trans. Philip Clayton (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

the adjective ‘eternal’ in front of the noun ‘generation’. The idea of generation is always paired with an explicit denial that it is temporal. Non-story generation is simply the opening bid to begin the conversation. The pro-Nicene theologies of the fourth and fifth centuries led the way in this strategy. Gregory of Nazianzus not only described the generation of the Son as non-painful and non-physical (*apathōs* and *asōmatōs*) but as non-temporal (*achronōs*).<sup>3</sup> There is, of course, a polemical edge to this way of putting it, as seen in Nazianzus’ choice of the negative word *achronōs* rather than the more positive or qualitative *aionōs*.

The Creed of Nicaea 325 (followed by the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381<sup>4</sup>) seems to include within itself a constitutive insistence that generation must be understood as eternal. In its imposing set of nine specifications of what is meant and not meant by calling Jesus Christ the Son, it asserts that he was ‘from the Father begotten before all ages’, and is the one ‘through whom all things came to be.’ ‘Before all ages’ is a construction that sets up a paradoxical relation to time itself, a paradox resolvable only by acknowledging that the Son’s begetting cannot be located within any of the ages. Indeed, the ‘ages’ themselves are among the ‘all things’ that were created through the Son. The theology of Nazianzus in 379 had already been even more explicit on this point, bluntly stating that the Son has been begotten for exactly ‘as long as the Father has not been begotten.’ Of both the Son’s begetting and the Spirit’s procession, Nazianzus says that ‘they transcend “whenness”, just as ‘there has not been a “when” when the Father has not been in existence.’<sup>5</sup> Based on what is known about the theology of Arius, he seems to have been grappling with the same issues but refusing to think them all the way through to ultimate resolution. As a result, he seems to have defended a begetting that was ‘timeless’ in the honorific sense of being exalted above cosmic time, but this was a begetting that

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<sup>3</sup> Nazianzus, Oration 29.2, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 70.

<sup>4</sup> I will hereafter refer to this as the Nicene Creed. I will quote from Mark DelCogliano’s translation, ‘The Creed of the Council of Constantinople (381)’, *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings, Vol I: God*, ed. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (CUP, 2017), 268–269.

<sup>5</sup> Nazianzus, Oration 29:3, *On God and Christ*, 71.

still took place within some higher sequence of successive moments, before which he was not. The consistent pro-Nicene doctrine of eternal generation replied that there has never been such a ‘when’.

The first reply to the story objection, then, is to remark that pro-Nicene theology has always been aware of the objection and has always added the modifier ‘eternal’ to the verbal form ‘generation’ precisely to intercept or preempt the story objection. This is, in fact, the classic response and the best short answer, and for some objectors, it carries sufficient persuasive force. Nevertheless, this response turns on the sheer assertion of the definition and does not offer much analytic purchase, so it is often judged unsatisfying by objectors.

The second response is to redirect attention to issues arising from the tensed verbs that have to be used in describing the Son’s relation to the Father, and to admit that no tensed verbs are adequate to the thing described by the doctrine. A number of influential figures have pursued this line of thought. Augustine raises the question in a couple of places,<sup>6</sup> in these terms: is it better to say that the Son *was* eternally generated or *is* eternally generated? Hilary of Poitiers also raises the same question,<sup>7</sup> and it catches the attention of Peter Lombard. For Lombard, in fact, it has become an element of the received tradition, so he gives it an entire chapter in his *Sentences*,<sup>8</sup> resolving it in dialogue with Augustine and Hilary, but also Gregory the Great, Chrysostom, and Origen. The treatment is typically Lombardian, concerned to read Scripture accurately and to reconcile apparent contradictions in what has been said ‘among the doctors’.

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<sup>6</sup> See Augustine, *Enarrationes Psalmos* 2:7; *De Trinitate* V:5–6. See also the 37<sup>th</sup> question in his *Responses to Miscellaneous Questions*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2008), 54). The Latin, which can be found in Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina* (Paris: Migne, 1845), vol. 40, column 27, runs: *Melior est semper natus, quam qui semper nascitur. Quia qui semper nascitur, nondum est natus; et nunquam natus est aut natus erit, si semper nascitur. Aliud est enim nasci, aliud natum esse. Ac per hoc nunquam filius, si nunquam natus; filius autem quia natus, est semper filius: semper igitur natus.*

<sup>7</sup> Augustine, *De Trinitate* VII:27; also IX:54.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Lombard, *The Sentences, Book 1: The Mystery of the Trinity* (Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2007), 54–57. This is Distinction IX, Chapter 4(32).

Lombard's summary view is that we should 'say that the Son was born from the Father before all time, and is forever being born from the Father, but more fittingly, is forever born.'<sup>9</sup> To say that the Son 'was born' has the advantage of using the past tense to indicate a perfectly accomplished eternal act; to say 'is forever being born' has the advantage of recognizing how fully alive everything in God always is; but to say 'is forever born' is to treat the eternal generatedness as a relational reality 'located' in the Son, a reality that distinguishes Father from Son. 'Foreverborn' is, in this case, a kind of title of the second person.<sup>10</sup>

This second response is perhaps more elaborate and sophisticated than the first response. By drawing out the mismatch between the Son's begottenness and the available tenses of temporality, it goes some distance to establishing a plausibility for the Nicene assertion that the Son's begetting is a thing 'before all worlds.' The meditation on the Son's identity as Foreverborn was not evoked by sharp conflict so much as by the patient elaboration of faith seeking understanding. As a response to the story objection, it might be that the Son's relation to an origin story is too complex to be filed away as a past event. It might be said that the story objection fails because it misunderstands what is at issue in the doctrine of eternal generation. Eternal generation is not a temporal act to which our tensed verbs apply in literal correspondence; it is instead an atemporal reality about which we must speak in tensed vocabularies. The gap between the atemporal reality and the tensed terms requires us to recognize both continuity and discontinuity of meaning. Failing to mind this gap is what gives rise to the story objection.<sup>11</sup> As with the first response to the story objection, this second response is satisfactory to some inquirers, but can seem diversionary to others.

The third response to the story objection would be to provide some kind of non-narrative conceptual model or analogy for how to picture

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<sup>9</sup> Lombard, *Sentences*, 57.

<sup>10</sup> Though every commentator on the *Sentences* must deal with this matter, it is interesting that when he writes in non-commentary mode, as in the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas does not give this question much attention. He treats it concisely in *Prima Pars*, question 42, article 2: 'Whether the person proceeding is co-eternal with His principle.' He agrees with Lombard.

<sup>11</sup> Thanks to Matthew Owen for putting the point this way in response to an earlier draft of this essay.

the relation of eternal generation, which is what C. S. Lewis offered to his popular audience in the broadcast talks that became *Mere Christianity*.<sup>12</sup> Lewis encourages his listeners to imagine a stack of two books, in which the top book sits in a position that requires the bottom book for its elevated location, but was somehow never in an unstacked position. The second book ‘arises from’ the first but never did not do so. Lewis elaborates this view with reference to a Boethian view of eternity’s relation to time. Furthermore, Lewis develops his analogy along with a high tolerance for mystery:<sup>13</sup> in the same popular project, Lewis appeals to the analogy of higher dimensions to explain why inhabitants of Flatlands should not expect to be in a position to comprehend a third dimension or higher. This tolerance for mystery is just part of the atmosphere within which Lewis offers an alternative imaginary account of how A can depend on B without ever having begun to do so: this, at a popular level, is a non-story approach to the doctrine of eternal generation.

A fourth response to the story objection would be to paraphrase the doctrine into philosophical categories that do not require taking time and tense into account. Mark Makin has canvassed a number of such attempts in recent analytic theology. His own preferred model makes use of ‘essential dependence’ terminology from the field of modern analytic metaphysics and epistemology.<sup>14</sup> These models are abstract and even

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<sup>12</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952). The Trinity discussion all takes place in section 4, which had originally been published as the standalone volume *Beyond Personality: The Christian Idea of God* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944).

<sup>13</sup> It may be the case that some form of explicit ‘mysterianism’ should be catalogued as its own kind of response to the story objection. See the dispute between James Anderson and Dale Tuggy in James Anderson, *Paradox in Christian Theology: An Analysis of Its Presence, Character, and Epistemic Status* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2007), and Dale Tuggy, ‘On Positive Mysterianism’, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 69, no. 3 (2011), 205–226. If that is the case, then J. C. Beall’s contradictory account would also need to be considered; see J.C. Beall, *Divine Contradiction* (Oxford: OUP, 2023). In this brief article, I have chosen not to expand my generalized taxonomy of options to accommodate these two views.

<sup>14</sup> See Mark Makin, ‘Philosophical Models of Eternal Generation’, *Retrieving Eternal Generation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2017), 243–259; ‘God from God: The Essential Dependence Model of Eternal Generation’, *Religious Studies* 54, no. 3 (September 2018), 377–394.

conceptually severe; they move in a different domain than the popular explanations of an apologist like Lewis. What these models have in common is the resolute move away from narrative or temporal categories. They respond to the story objection by way of the ruthless elimination of story and the resourceful replacing of story categories with various analytic relations such as grounding or dependence. This high road around temporal relation may well be successful, though in many cases it raises two new questions. First, it raises the new question of whether the atemporal conceptual paraphrase has succeeded in delivering the same content as the traditional doctrine. Even in the case of Makin (whose work I take to be an especially clear and careful example of what other modern philosophers of religion gesture less patiently toward), the question arises whether an essential dependence relation does the same kind of work that traditional eternal generation did. Secondly, it raises the new question of the relation between the strange new language of analytic metaphysics and epistemology, on the one hand, and the biblical language of sonship on the other. The entire project of affirming eternal generation and finding ways to explain it arose, after all, from the acceptance of certain Scriptural terms delivered by revelation. Among these, sonship is the most conspicuous. So far, the conceptual paraphrases offered by analytic philosophy of religion operate at a great distance from anything as concrete as sonship.

## **2. Nicaea: Doubling Down on Sonship as Generation**

There is another possible type of reply to the story objection, one that intends to stay closer to the revealed categories of sonship. This response to the story objection is, in fact, not only to be counted among the pro-Nicene responses but is simply Nicaea itself. That is, it is the central second article of the Creed of 325, as refined in the Creed of 381.

The central article of the Nicene Creed is designed to valorize the word ‘Son’ and to provide an elaborate set of glosses on its meaning. Scripture itself, of course, calls Jesus the Son of God (Matt 16:16; Rom 1:4; 1 John 5:10, etc.). Christians have some sense of what they mean when they simply repeat biblical language in creedal form in an act of worship: ‘I believe in...Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’ At a more elaborately conceptual level, the Nicene Creed unfolds the meaning of that key word, Son, guiding believers to a specific understanding of what it includes and excludes. No sooner has the Nicene Creed proposed faith

in the Son than it unfolds it with an extended clarification. Here is the key passage:<sup>15</sup>

[We believe] in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the Son of God, the only-begotten,  
who was begotten from the Father before all ages,  
light from light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
the same-in-substance with the Father,  
through whom all things came to be,  
who for us humans and for our salvation  
came down from the heavens,  
and became incarnate of the Holy Spirit and Mary the Virgin,  
and became human ...

Note how much analytic reflection on sonship is packed into this brief series of words. ‘Son of God’ is the basic confession, and everything that follows it is explanatory. Most English translations of the Nicene Creed used in public worship have traditionally rendered the second line as ‘the only begotten Son of God’ rather than, as here, ‘the Son of God, the only begotten.’ The conventional translation is smoother English, but it has to reverse the word order of the Greek text. That word order is a helpful clue to the main idea, because it puts ‘*the Son of God*’ at the head of a series of nine explanatory phrases. After the Son, this entire section of the Creed is a series of developments of the idea of divine sonship.

The first word is especially important: the Son is only-begotten (*monogenes*). This biblical word (see John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) shows up in the Creed with its definite article, making it a Christological title that might be rendered ‘The Only-Begotten One.’ There has been some dispute in modern times about whether, in its Johannine occurrences, *monogenes* ought to be translated ‘unique’ or ‘only begotten.’ For its part, the Nicene Creed makes it clear that it intends begottenness, since the next phrase is ‘begotten from the Father’. The effect of this sequence of words is something like saying ‘Son, by which we mean *monogenes*, by which we mean begotten from the Father.’ In

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<sup>15</sup> This is Mark DelCogliano’s translation.



other words, Nicaea develops the idea of sonship by unfolding it into a more and more elaborate notion of being uniquely generated or begotten. What starts with a noun (Son) moves on to a modifier (only-begotten) and finally reaches a verb form (begotten, *gennethenta*). Son, according to the Nicene Creed, means uniquely begotten. This sonship is a reality that is confessed to be grounded in some kind of action.

The Creed goes on from there with several other clauses well worth examining ('light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, the same-in-substance with the Father, through whom all things came to be'), because each of them contributes something to the Nicene concept of sonship. For the purposes of this article, it only need be noted that the Nicene Creed has plucked the word 'Son' from Scripture and insisted that its trinitarian meaning has to do with its foundation in an action that takes place within God. This is directly relevant to considering how to respond to the story objection. Nicaea accepts the revelation of sonship as a fundamental, basic datum of our knowledge of the second person and bequeaths to Christians the strategy of defining that sonship with reference to an act in which it is grounded. All of this could be put negatively by saying that if we follow Nicaea, we are stuck with the biblical word 'Son', and the only thing to do with 'Son' is to unfold its meaning in language that will go on inviting the story objection.<sup>16</sup> That is, in fact, the main road to be followed by classical trinitarianism, and many have followed it. For instruction about responding to the story objection, the trinitarian theology of Thomas Aquinas is most helpful.

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that many of those who criticize the doctrine of eternal generation by raising some version of the story objection are thinkers who affirm the doctrine of the Trinity. They are not non-trinitarians, and, in that sense, they are friendly or internal critics. A good example of such a critic is Paul Helm, news of whose death reached me as I revised this article in December 2025. Helm's objections are considered and countered in Oliver D. Crisp, 'The Eternal Generation of the Son', *The Word Enfleshed: Exploring the Person and Work of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 1–18.

### 3. Sonship as Habitude (Aquinas)

Here is how Aquinas approaches the matter. In his treatise on the Trinity in the *Summa Theologiae*,<sup>17</sup> he says that when one thing originates from another, the main way we infer that origination is to have seen it in action. If the cue ball imparts motion to the eight ball, we infer that the action originated from the cue ball and was the principle of passion, reception, or the cause of motion, to the eight ball. This is where we get the original sense of these words, Aquinas says. However, in a case where we use the same words to talk about a situation in which there is no motion, we still use the words while acknowledging the motionlessness. 'If we take away movement, action implies nothing more than order of origin, in so far as action proceeds from some cause or principle to what is from that principle.'

Eternal generation, as a procession within God, is such a case. Thus, we come to it with the words and concepts we derived from the land of time, but apply those words to eternity. The first thing we have to subtract, obviously, is the motion of the action (or what I called 'the story' above). Aquinas says that 'since in God no movement exists, the personal action of the one producing a person is only the habitude of the principle to the person who is from the principle; which habitudes are the relations, or the notions.'

It is worth lingering over that phrase, 'the habitude of the principle to the person who is from the principle.'<sup>18</sup> What is a habitude? In this context, it is apparently something in a person that retains the status of that person being the principle of the other person. More concretely, the Father's habitude is toward the Son, who is from him. This is fairly abstract, but consider what a habitude is not: it is not an action that takes up space or time. The Father does not beget the Son at a particular time, nor does the Son proceed outward from the Father by traversing local motion to some other place. 'We cannot speak of divine and intelligible things except after the manner of sensible things, whence we derive our knowledge', says Thomas. Therefore, we should start with an idea of a begetting in time and space, but then abstract or subtract out of it the

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Prima Pars, q. 41, a. 1, ad. 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Habitudo principii ad personam quae est a principio.*

time and space. What we will be left with is what a begetting would be if it excluded time and space. What is that? It is basically a relation. The Father-Son relation is the Father begetting the Son. It is the Father begetting the Son, minus the concepts of time and space, which is the Father-Son relation.

There is another thing that a habitude is not. It is not just a characteristic of a person, as though it were simply inside them, like an element that distinguished them from another person. It is not as if the Father is gold and the Son is silver, so you can tell by their metallurgic properties who is who. Instead, habitude includes the element of relatedness. If it were possible to inspect the Son's habitude, what that habitude inspection would reveal is relation to the Father. So, in that sense, the Son has a habitude that distinguishes him, but the habitude is not self-contained; it is nothing but a reference to the Father. It is like the aspect of the relation that is in him. What makes the Son himself is the habitude of Father-fromness.

One way this idea of a habitude of relation is helpful is in explaining the conceptual balance between substance and person in the Trinity. Imagine that you draw three circles on the board to represent the persons of the Trinity. You have read the Athanasian creed, so you know to put the divine attributes in the space between them: divine power, wisdom, and mercy all go in there. You avoid making them three separate divine powers, and you refuse to exclude any person from having the one divine power. Then you wonder what you should put in the person-circles. You draw arrows between them, showing that the Father begets the Son, but with those arrows indicating actions are between them, not in them. You write their names in them, but those are only names. Is there nothing else in the person? John Calvin tried to fill this gap by simply insisting that each person had a distinguishing mark that showed them to be themselves and not another.<sup>19</sup> However, Calvin refused to say more than that, and what he meant by it was not luminously clear. Possibly, what he intended by invoking these distinguishing marks is something like habitude. Each person of the Trinity has within them the characteristic of being marked by their

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<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Institutes* I:13.

relation to the others or how they stand in the relations of origin, from the others.

Aquinas is clearer and more elaborate than Calvin about this and introduces *habitude* when he is describing the persons in terms of both their relations and their actions. Relations do not imply movement, but actions do. Thus, if we say the Father has the relation of Father to the Son, we have implied a relative state. If we go on to say that the Father begets the Son, we have now implied an action and a passion, and we have suggested motion. Noticing this, we then subtract motion from that implication. We are left with whatever an action minus its motion is: the *habitude of act*. What Aquinas wants is both act and relation: 'It was necessary to signify the *habitudes* of the persons separately after the manner of act, and separately after the manner of relations.'<sup>20</sup>

Why was it necessary to signify using both act and relation? It was necessary because Aquinas was attempting to exegete Scripture's way of talking and to unfold the conceptual assertions of Nicaea. The Biblical revelation of the Trinity includes both the names of the persons, from which we can discern their relations, and also the acts of the persons, from which we can discern their active relations. Aquinas might want to put this the other way: their actions are active, and the resulting relations are passive or quiescent states. The Father is Father of the Son precisely because he begets the Son. Furthermore, 'it is evident that they are really the same, differing only in their mode of signification.' The mode of signification is what we are talking about, so we have to be clear about it.

The main point to bear in mind is that both the name 'Father of the Son' and the claim 'the Father begets the Son' are Biblical statements, and so Aquinas is providing a conceptual gloss on what is essentially a biblical theology project. Ultimately, if we entertain the objection that eternal generation sounds like a divine origin story, we have to blame God for speaking in terms like this in Scripture. Rather, we have to seek clarity on what God does and does not mean by making the Father-Son relation known to us in terms that carry with them ideas of action, motion, and time. This is why eternal generation continues to be worth explaining and defending as an element of the doctrine of the Trinity.

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<sup>20</sup> More technically, Aquinas' approach drives toward recognizing the constitution of a trinitarian person as a relation founded upon an act, as the later Dominican tradition will say.

Perhaps analytic philosophers of religion may be clear and creative enough to come up with a more abstract way of putting these relations. However, in matters of revelation, we are stuck with what God has made known, and that means we might as well dig in at eternal generation and do the work of explaining it in a way that does not break any of the other theological rules. Thomas Aquinas' use of the category of habitude is a good resource for that.<sup>21</sup>

Aquinas derives a few other advantages from his way of handling act and relation. In the next section of the *Summa Theologiae*,<sup>22</sup> he asks whether we should call the persons of the Trinity equal. It is fairly obvious that we must, in fact, do so. Still, one of the objections he considers (the third) is that a relation of equality is reciprocal, but to say the Father is equal to the Son sounds weird and backwards; it might be as wrong as saying the Father is the image of the Son. So, Aquinas makes a distinction: 'Equality and likeness in God may be designated in two ways—namely, by nouns and by verbs.'<sup>23</sup> If we use nouns, like essence or greatness, then equality is mutual and reversible, 'because the divine essence is not more the Father's than the Son's.' It makes sense to say the Father has the Son's greatness, which is just the flip side of the Son having the Father's greatness. It is not another greatness but numerically the same greatness. However, this only applies when we are designating likeness by using nouns, which have a wonderfully static character.

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<sup>21</sup> I am elevating habitude here in hopes of drawing the interest of a broad range of theologians who are not already invested in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. In the Thomist literature, the key technical language is not 'habitue' (a rather colorless word which Thomas does not in fact use as a term of art), but 'notional act'. For analysis of notional acts, see Nicholas E. Lombardo, 'Divine Persons and Notional Acts in the Trinitarian Theology of Thomas Aquinas', *Theological Studies* 82, no. 4 (2021), 603–625. Lombardo provides a good bibliography on the subject at p. 606. William Marshner translates *actus notionales* as 'identifying acts' and translates *notionaliter* with the phrase 'as an identifier-verb'. See Marshner's translation in *Summa Theologiae, Prima Pars, with the Commentary of Cardinal Cajetan, volume 2: On the Holy Trinity and Creation in General*, QQ 27–74 (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2024), 665, 714.

<sup>22</sup> ST Prima Pars, Q 42, a1, ad 3.

<sup>23</sup> *Nomina et verba* in Latin.

Verbs, on the other hand, ‘signify equality with movement’.<sup>24</sup> The Son receives from the Father that he is equal, but the Father does not receive this from the Son. So ‘the Son is equalled to the Father, but not conversely.’ This is interesting and helpful for several reasons. It states the full equality of Father and Son without flattening out their relation to each other and thinking of them as interchangeable or their relation as reversible. Without using the word *homoousios* (consubstantial), Aquinas captures the taxis that was built into that word in much pre-Nicene usage: that is, it is more proper to say the Son is *homoousios* with the Father than that the Father is *homoousios* with the Son, or that they are *homoousios* with each other.<sup>25</sup>

#### 4. Conclusion

Trinitarian theology can answer the story objection satisfactorily but can never preempt it altogether. Nor should it desire to do so. There is no way to prevent the story objection from occurring to inquiring minds, or from recurring as each new generation learns the basics of the doctrine of the Trinity. The fundamental reason for this is that its elements are built into the primal, basic terminology of God’s self-revelation in Scripture. As long as the Christian account of God is determined by the fact that the Father’s sending of the Son is the definitive revelation of an eternal reality in God, theology will need to give an account of the eternal identity of the Son. Some accounts of Sonship run the risk of explaining away the revealed image’s implications, replacing it with less objectionable alternatives, or, most disastrous of all for trinitarianism, assigning Sonship exclusively to the sphere of God’s outer works. The grand lines of classical Christian thought have proceeded differently.

One of the most important contributions of the Nicene Creed is that it valorizes the revealed image of Sonship, installing it as the central category in its central article. The Creed professes belief in Jesus Christ as the Son of God and unfolds that Sonship by way of an action verb, begetting, which is an analytic restatement of the relation implied by the revealed term Son itself. In doing so, the Nicene Creed pursues a strategy of analytically unfolding the revealed image of Sonship. To be the Son is

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<sup>24</sup> *verba significant aequalitatem cum motu.*

<sup>25</sup> ST Prima Pars, Q 40. a2, resp 2. ‘The distinction of the persons must be by that which distinguishes the least possible; and this is by relation.’

to be from the Father, to be uniquely from the Father, to be begotten of or generated from the Father, to be so begotten before all ages, and so on. The Nicene Creed goes on to deploy other conceptual strategies, most conspicuously by specifying the Son's consubstantiality with the Father ('same-in-substance'). As important as consubstantiality is for Nicene theology, it is best understood as being conceptually downstream from eternal generation. It does not offer an alternative account of the Son's relation to the Father but draws out one implication of eternal generation and paraphrases it in terms of substance. The key word, *homoousios*, so decisive for pro-Nicene polemics, occupies a place in the Nicene Creed that has been carefully prepared by the unfolding of Son terminology: Son, only-begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages. This is where the story objection can be raised, and this is where it can be answered and settled by the Nicene settlement. If trinitarian theology will never be able to preempt the raising of the story objection (because Scripture itself reveals the second person as the Son), the Nicene Creed makes a virtue of this necessity, modelling for us the classical theological practice of unfolding that revealed term Son by the use of action verbs: If Son, then generated.

This article has called on certain categories in the trinitarian theology of Thomas Aquinas to demonstrate how the work of Nicaea can be conceptually elaborated further, especially with resolution of the story objection as a goal. Aquinas is only one of many possible witnesses who could be called to illustrate the analytic unfolding of Nicaea's doctrine of Sonship. The categories highlighted from Aquinas (*habitude*, *signification through movement*) are neither the most structurally important of his categories nor the most distinctive of his particular brand of trinitarianism. They are not, in other words, especially Thomist.<sup>26</sup> Just to mention one witness from the Protestant tradition, Petrus van Mastricht's treatment of eternal generation follows the same unfolding logic. Mastricht says that 'generation has the primary place' among the characteristics of the Son and therefore explains it 'a little more distinctly' than other aspects of trinitarian Christology. Mastricht describes eternal generation as 'communication of the same essence in

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<sup>26</sup> An argument that was intentional about being distinctively Thomist would have traded heavily on the categories of subsistent relation, the psychological analogy, *supposita*, and notional act, among others.

number' from the Father to the Son and safeguards it with four adverbs: eternal generation happened incomprehensibly, timelessly, inseparably, and 'without any passion or change, either in the Father or the Son.'<sup>27</sup> Here again is found eloquent witness to the classical method of teaching trinitarian theology: Sonship unfolded analytically as generation, bearing all the advantages of an act but none of the defects of a story.

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<sup>27</sup> Petrus van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, vol. 2, *Faith in the Triune God*, trans. Todd M. Rester, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 546–548.