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Foreword by
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THE TRINITY *in the*
BOOK of REVELATION

*Seeing Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
in John's Apocalypse*



STUDIES IN
CHRISTIAN
DOCTRINE
AND
SCRIPTURE



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.

Toward a Trinitarian Reading of Revelation

REVELATION IS A CONFUSING BOOK. Did I mention that already? For two millennia of Christian biblical interpretation, most people have recognized that one single methodology, approach, or exegetical tool cannot support the weight of this confusion. Indeed, a brief glance at Revelation's history of interpretation shows a range of conclusions regarding genre, narrative, prophecy, and theological themes.¹ Anyone who reads Revelation understands intuitively that it might take a whole range of tools to build a useful framework. Add to this the complexities of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the problems multiply. So, as we move toward a trinitarian reading of Revelation, it will be helpful to survey some of the tools that have been used in both trinitarian theology and biblical interpretation that we might put in our toolbelts as we seek to bring coherence and clarity to Revelation's trinitarian theology.

HIGH/LOW CHRISTOLOGY AND BINITARIANISM

Much of the mid- to late twentieth-century debates about the Christology of early Christians once centered on the distinction between “high” and “low” Christologies.² High Christology indicated that Jesus was in some

¹Timothy Beal, *The Book of Revelation: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018) is a good introduction to the history of interpretation.

²Portions of this section are drawn from Brandon D. Smith, “What Christ Does, God Does: Surveying Recent Scholarship on Christological Monotheism,” *CBR* 17, no. 2 (2019): 184-208.

sense divine, exalted, and/or worthy of worship alongside Israel's God. Low Christology, on the other hand, indicated that Jesus was a mere man, subordinated agent, and/or a vicegerent of Israel's God. Andrew Chester lays out the various possibilities of how Christology developed among the earliest Christians: (1) it is "utterly alien" to the Jewish context; (2) it gradually developed within Jewish categories; (3) it rapidly developed within the Jewish context and categories, most likely in the pre-Pauline or Pauline traditions; and (4) it was inherent from the beginning and therefore required no development.³ In the early days of the high/low debate, Martin Hengel asserted that "with regard to the development of *all* the early Church's christology . . . more happened in the first twenty years than in the entire later, centuries-long development of dogma."⁴ The discussion around this development has led to ongoing debates regarding Jesus' person and agency, as noted above. We will engage this debate at length in chapter three, but we will survey below a few representative examples with respect to Revelation.

Though the high/low bifurcation has dominated much of the last fifty years of scholarly debate, this distinction is not as common today; instead, modern scholars spend their efforts more directly focusing on Jesus' relationship to intermediary figures, divine identity, the nature of monotheism, and the devotional practices of the early church. These modern discussions can be divided into two major camps with respect to Revelation. On the one hand, scholars such as James McGrath and Adela Yarbro Collins have noticed varying levels of subordination and divine agency in Revelation. For example, when discussing Revelation in particular, McGrath concedes that worship of Christ is a key theme in Revelation, but "were Revelation intended to make a Christological point by applying worship language to Jesus that is normally reserved only for God . . . it misses many opportunities to make this point in a clear and unambiguous manner."⁵ For McGrath, Jesus does not share an ontological identity with God but instead "the divine

³Andrew Chester, "High Christology—Whence, When and Why?" *Early Christianity* 2 (2011): 22-50.

⁴Martin Hengel, *Studies in Early Christology* (New York: T&T Clark, 1995), 383, is quoted here for succinctness, but a similar quote and discussion was introduced in *Son of God: The Origin of Early Christology and the Jewish-Hellenistic Religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976), 2.

⁵James F. McGrath, *The Only True God: Early Christian Monotheism in Its Jewish Context* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 72.

throne and titles.”⁶ In his view, Jesus is an anointed figure in Revelation, but he is clearly subordinate to God. For Collins, John in Revelation “seems to portray the risen Jesus as an angel or at least in angelomorphic terms” rather than the “high” Christology associated with other books of the New Testament.⁷ We must also consider similar arguments from scholars such as Loren Stuckenbruck and Charles Gieschen, who discuss the possibility that early Christians, including John, affirmed some sort of angel Christology or angelomorphic Christology in which Christ was either an angel or at times appeared in the form of an angel.⁸

On the other side, scholars such as Richard Bauckham, Larry Hurtado, and Ian Paul argue for a Christology in Revelation that highlights Jesus’ divinity.⁹ For them, John folds Jesus into the identity of YHWH and/or includes him in devotional patterns historically reserved for YHWH.¹⁰ As I mentioned above and will discuss in further detail later, Hengel was a prominent figure in the “early high Christology” conversation for his insistence that Jesus was recognized in divine terms quite early in the Christian movement, greatly influencing Bauckham, Hurtado, and others we will discuss in chapter three. Bauckham, focusing on Jesus’ identification with YHWH of the Old Testament (OT), stresses that John has an “extraordinarily high Christology,” placing Jesus on the “Creator side” of a sharp Creator-creature divide, leaving no doubt that “what Christ does, God

⁶McGrath, *Only True God*, 74. We will interact with his work more later, but McGrath’s basic point is that transferring names and titles was common in Jewish agency tradition, wherein a unique person might have the authority to act on God’s behalf (e.g., Enoch-Metatron in *3 Enoch*).

⁷Adela Yarbro Collins and John J. Collins, *King and Messiah as Son of God: Divine, Human, and Angelic Messianic Figures in Biblical and Related Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 189. Yarbro Collins wrote the latter four chapters of the volume.

⁸See, for instance, Loren T. Stuckenbruck, *Angel Veneration and Christology: A Study in Early Judaism and in the Christology of the Apocalypse of John*, WUNT 2, no. 70 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995); and Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence*, AGJU 42 (Leiden: Brill), 1998.

⁹As we will see in later chapters, they do not always agree on every detail or nuance but agree generally on the early Christian belief in the identical divinity of the Father and Jesus within the bounds of Jewish monotheism.

¹⁰These authors deal with Revelation in places, as we will see as the book progresses, but also raise important questions and concerns within the broader discussion about the earliest Christology. See, for instance, Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008); Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003); and Ian Paul, *Revelation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018).

does.”¹¹ Hurtado, for instance, noted that McGrath exaggerates the ongoing development of christological beliefs in the Christian community and in turn misses the radicalness of the New Testament (NT) authors’ devotional practices¹² and further argues that Christ is clearly worshiped next to God in Revelation 4–5.¹³ Ian Paul is more strident, saying that Revelation is “the most developed *trinitarian* theology of any New Testament book.”¹⁴ Though James Dunn raises issues with confessional readings of the text, he nonetheless notes that “unlike the other main writings in the New Testament [Revelation’s] affirmation of the deity of Christ is unqualified” and “should not be played down.”¹⁵

However, not everyone agrees with these two camps. For instance, Udo Schnelle detects a blurrier Christology in Revelation: “On the one hand, in Revelation Christ or the Lamb is clearly subordinate to God. . . . On the other hand, this clear primacy of theology in Revelation has its counterpart in the comprehensive participation of Jesus in the work of God, yielding a Christology with a theocentric profile. . . . The tension cannot be resolved in one direction or the other.”¹⁶

Schnelle’s point signifies the reason why these two camps exist. Indeed, precisely because the presentation of Christ’s agency in Revelation can be complicated, we will discuss further details concerning these debates and their relevance for understanding Revelation’s Christology in chapter three.

In addition to christological debates, the person and agency of the Holy Spirit adds another wrinkle to this discussion, as many scholars debate over

¹¹Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 63. Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel*, 58–59, has raised concerns about patristic theology’s “divine nature” logic, a logic that I have mentioned above as important to our argument in this book. I will address these concerns briefly in chap. 5.

¹²Larry W. Hurtado, “Early Christian Monotheism,” *Expository Times* 122, no. 8 (2011): 383–86. This article is a review of McGrath’s *The Only True God*, which is quoted above.

¹³Larry W. Hurtado, “Revelation 4–5 in the Light of Jewish Apocalyptic Analogies,” *JSNT* 25 (1985): 105–24.

¹⁴Paul, *Revelation*, 4; emphasis added.

¹⁵James D. G. Dunn, *Did the First Christians Worship Jesus?: The New Testament Evidence* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 130–32. Dunn hedges his bets slightly, however, noting the rebuttal that the highly symbolic nature of Revelation might skew whether John still belongs to the “low” Christology club. He asks, “Is the imagery perhaps better described as surreal than as real metaphysics?”

¹⁶Udo Schnelle, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 755. I discovered after concluding this chapter that Malcolm B. Yarnell III also employs this quote to make a similar point in *God the Trinity* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016), 211.

the Spirit's apparent divinity in Revelation or the assertion that the Spirit (or "spirit") is likely an angel or some other type of divine agent. For some, like Hurtado, the Spirit is portrayed in the biblical text as a divine agent, but ultimately early Christian worship patterns reflected "binitarian exclusivist monotheism, able to accommodate Jesus, but disdainful of any other god or lord as rightful recipient of devotion."¹⁷ As we will see in chapter four, a Father-Son binitarianism that subordinates the Spirit is a debate that continues today.

This brief survey makes clear that the theology, Christology, and pneumatology of Revelation prompts a range of views when attempting to understand how God, Jesus, and the Spirit relate to one another. Yet this debate proceeds from what is largely undebatable: John the seer has a theological commitment, an intense messianic devotion, and a pneumatic experience. Indeed, Revelation prompts the reader to consider the trinitarian dynamics of the book, so that even those above who disagree with a trinitarian reading ultimately feel pressured to respond to the narrative presence of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

In chapters two through four, we will address these concerns and demonstrate the benefits of our trinitarian reading through theological interpretation and patristic retrieval; in chapter five, we will discuss the ongoing benefit and potential shortcomings of these high/low and binitarian conversations. The rest of this present chapter will begin to move in that direction by turning to specific terms, tools, and reading strategies—both ancient and modern—that will help us engage in a trinitarian reading of Revelation.

THEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION AND BIBLICAL PRESSURES

In recent years, scholars have taken up the task of bridging the gap between canonical interpretation, biblical theology, the history of interpretation, and theological exegesis and/or theological interpretation of Scripture (TIS) vis-à-vis the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁸ This study will draw on and (hopefully)

¹⁷Larry W. Hurtado, "The Binitarian Shape of Early Christian Worship," in *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus*, ed. Casey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 212.

¹⁸Though the definition of TIS is somewhat elusive, I resonate with Daniel Treier and Uche Anzor's self-aware and confessional definition: "The reading of biblical texts that consciously seeks to do justice to their nature as the Word of God, embracing the influence of theology on the interpreter's enquiry, context, and methods, not just results"; cf. Daniel J. Treier and Uche

contribute to this discussion. Though some of the following scholars' presuppositions and conclusions may vary from my own—for instance, this book will contain a more distinctly confessional and patristic or premodern bent than some of their works—many of us who are engaged in the TIS conversation are indebted to them and their paradigms. The following brief overview illustrates a set of recent contributions to this discussion that have influenced this study's methodology and will help clarify some of this book's interpretive assumptions.

David Yeago's "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma" has been perhaps the most influential single article on this topic.¹⁹ In this article, he lays out a "concept-judgment paradigm," which states that a creedal doctrine can be biblical even if the creeds use different words than the biblical text does. So, one can use a conceptual word like "Trinity" to render the same judgment about God as the biblical text. Highlighting Philippians 2:6-11 as an example, Yeago contends that Paul's description of Jesus as "equal to God" and having a "name above every name" renders the same judgment as creedal language "of one substance." Yeago locates this confession within the ecclesial context of the early church, noting that they must have considered Jesus to be divine: "This remarkable identification reflects the inner logic of the worship of the church in the Spirit. Whether the text from Philippians is an actual fragment of early Christian liturgy, or a free composition of Paul, its background is clearly the liturgical acclamation of Jesus."²⁰ So, though *ὁμοούσιος* (*homoousios*) is not technically a biblical word, Athanasius and others used this term to explain what they understood the Bible to be teaching about Jesus' relationship to God. While we must be sensitive to the complexities of patristic interpretation and theologies, Yeago's paradigm helps us see generally that a trinitarian reading is not foreign to the

Anizor, "Theological Interpretation of Scripture and Evangelical Systematic Theology: Iron Sharpening Iron?" *SBJT* 14, no. 2 (2010): 4-17; emphasis original. See also Daniel J. Treier, "Biblical Theology and/or Theological Interpretation of Scripture?: Defining the Relationship," *SJT* 61, no. 1 (2008): 16-31. Jeremy M. Kimble and Ched Spellman, *Invitation to Biblical Theology: Exploring the Shape, Storyline, and Themes of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2020), 15-118, offers a useful introduction to some of these issues. See also, Hank Voss, "From 'Grammatical-historical Exegesis' to 'Theological Exegesis': Five Essential Practices," *ERT* 37, no. 2 (2013): 140-52.

¹⁹David S. Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *ProEccl* 3, no. 2 (1994): 152-64.

²⁰Yeago, "New Testament and the Nicene Dogma," 155.

NT, though later writers may use different terminology and make particular hermeneutical or rhetorical moves on their own terms and in the constellation of other biblical passages and imagery.

Brevard Childs lauded Yeago's work, saying:

The decisive contribution of Yeago lies in correctly insisting that traditional Christian exegesis understood its theological reflection to be responding to the coercion or pressure of the biblical text itself. It was not merely an exercise in seeking self-identity, or in bending an inherited authority to support a sectarian theological agenda. His illustration is fully persuasive that the church's struggle with the testimony to God, found in both Testaments, finally forced a triune formulation of the identity of the one God, even though neither Testament made explicit reference to the Trinity.²¹

Childs used this idea of "the coercion of the biblical text" in numerous works to highlight the way the text "coerces" or "pressures" the reader into a theological reading.²² He deftly wrote between two worlds, as a critic of historical-critical scholarship from the perspective of a theologian, while also maximizing its best elements from the perspective of a biblical scholar. Moreover, Childs notes that a "reader response" element is inherent to theological reflection; however, he is quick to warn against a subjective reader response that does not attend to the canonical and textual witness of Scripture.²³ I join Childs in his aversion toward a non-textual, reader-response reading, but as I noted above, a close reading of the text highlights the trinitarian dynamic of Revelation in a way that pressures us into considering its theological implications.

Kavin Rowe's discussion on the use of κύριος ("Lord") in the Gospel of Luke also assists our work here. Consciously drawing on Childs's idea of "coercion" with his notion of "biblical pressures"²⁴—that biblical writers were "pressured" by Israel's Scriptures into making theological claims about Jesus'

²¹Brevard S. Childs, "Toward Recovering Theological Exegesis," *ProEccl* 6, no. 1 (1997): 17.

²²See, for example, Brevard Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 12, and "Interpreting the Bible Amid Cultural Change," *ThTo* 54 (1997): 203. This study will use "pressure" instead of "coercion" to avoid confusion and potential negative connotations.

²³Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 335-36.

²⁴C. Kavin Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *ProEccl* 11, no. 3 (2002): 295-312.

oneness with YHWH—he says, “Luke chose a different way to express the identity of Jesus, one much more like Mark and Matthew, but he shares with Paul and John a remarkably similar—if not the same—underlying judgment about the identity of Jesus.”²⁵

Rowe’s argument is that Luke designates Jesus as “Lord” as a way to conceptualize for his readers the identity of Jesus alongside YHWH, who is called “Lord” throughout the OT. Drawing on Childs, Rowe rightly notes that the early church asked the same question we should still be asking: “Who is the God of *the whole Bible*? and How do we read the Bible in light of this God?” given the two-Testament witness of the biblical canon.²⁶ One can argue from this juncture, then, that patristic interpreters followed the lead of biblical writers like Luke, heeding biblical pressures as they contemplated the roles, relationships, and identities of the respective divine persons. We will see that John’s language at times pressures readers to make certain judgments about the nature and relationships between the persons, and these pressures help us rule out certain alternate readings. These pressures help us see along with Rowe that “there is (or can be) a profound continuity, grounded in the subject matter itself, between the biblical text and traditional Christian exegesis and theological formulation.”²⁷ Childs and Rowe, then, remind us that a close reading of the text requires theological reflection. We could expand on this claim slightly, and further assert that rightly *understanding* the theological content as retrospective readers is a type of divine pressure via divine illumination (Lk 24:36-49; Jn 14:26; 1 Cor 2).

Hill, in his discussion on the trinitarianism of Paul, says that the high and low Christology debates threaten to “obscure the way in which, for Paul, the identities of God, Jesus, and the Spirit are constituted by their relations with one another.”²⁸ Rather than placing Jesus and the Spirit at various points on a vertical axis below God, Hill contends that a “reciprocal web of relations” is a better representation of “the patterns of New Testament speech

²⁵C. Kavin Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology: The Lord in the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 29.

²⁶Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” 295; emphasis added. Cf. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments*, 376.

²⁷Rowe, “Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics,” 308.

²⁸Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 25.

about God, Christ, and the Spirit.”²⁹ Further, Hill does not find fruitful the bifurcation between biblical exegesis and theological constructions; rather, he makes the basic claim, “If trinitarian theology can assist in the task of interpreting Paul,” then “interpreting Paul is of benefit to trinitarian theology.”³⁰ We will see in the following chapters how Hill’s model serves as a viable and helpful methodological aid. For example, understanding the “web of relations” over and against a type of hierarchical “vertical axis” will help us see that the persons’ economic missions presented in Revelation need not indicate a type of subordination, ontological or otherwise.

These hermeneutical aids and reading strategies will serve as methodological guardrails as we engage in a trinitarian reading of Revelation in two ways. First, they function as fruitful tools for mitigating against anachronism because their paradigms in different ways attempt to read the biblical text in light of its own present and native theological dynamic. Though anachronism is a danger, ultimately all historical inquiry requires certain tools and labels if one wants to avoid mere nominalism that is unable to speak generally or holistically. The true judgment regarding anachronism is not whether a tool is alien to the historical situation but rather whether the tool highlights the judgments of the text itself. So theological readings in general and patristic readings in particular focus on the text and thus find their own foundations rooted in trying to understand the text itself through the eyes of the human author and divine providence. They further help us avoid eisegesis because they are attuned to the text itself, paying attention to the biblical author’s grammatical choices, use of intertextuality, and theological judgments.

Second, then, they allow us to consider more specifically in each chapter how pro-Nicene tools help elucidate John’s native theology with respect to the unity and distinction of our triune God.³¹ The pro-Nicenes used tools to aid their understanding of God’s nature and activity, and their conceptual tools can in turn enable us to work through some of the interpretive difficulties in Revelation related to God’s nature and activity. I will address

²⁹Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 167.

³⁰Hill, *Paul and the Trinity*, 47.

³¹We will further define various words and concepts in later chapters as they are specifically applicable.

these concepts directly in the following chapters through brief historical surveys and throughout our exegesis of passages. For now, we will consider this book's approach in light of these interpretive issues and models.

TOWARD A TRINITARIAN READING OF REVELATION

In what follows, I will first define the two primary terms used throughout this book—trinitarian reading and close reading. Then, an explanation of some methodological points of emphasis will clarify this study's interdisciplinary approach to theology, exegesis, and history.

1. What is a trinitarian reading? This phrase does not suggest that John used the same terminology as those who affirmed the Councils of Nicaea (AD 325) or Constantinople (AD 381), nor am I saying that we need the creeds in order to see trinitarian theology in Revelation.³² Rather, a trinitarian reading observes the way in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are of the same divine nature (e.g., a singular will, power, and authority) and yet are also distinct persons in Revelation. So, I will argue in this book that John's understanding of the identities and relationships between the Father, Son, and Spirit is not terminologically identical to the later Christian creeds but is nonetheless *trinitarian* because he makes strong claims for the divine nature of the Son and the Spirit combined with their inseparable activity with the Father. The church fathers and those who formed the orthodox trinitarian creeds sought to be faithful to the biblical text as they articulated their theology, so reading alongside them—as the church has done for most of its history—can prove useful for us as well.

Of course, trinitarian language was articulated differently throughout the later centuries, and this trajectory was by no means linear or tidy;³³

³²Of course, the word "Trinity" is not used in Revelation nor anywhere else in the Bible, so I acknowledge that using this term is itself technically anachronistic. We could also use the phrase a "triadic reading" with respect to Revelation itself to point out the same dynamics. However, for our purposes, I will note below a level of reciprocity between a trinitarian reading of Revelation and later patristic theology.

³³Several scholars have rightly noted that it is a mistake to divide up early theological controversies into "trinitarian" or "christological," as though they can be easily excluded from one another or neatly defined; see Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3; John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, part 1 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 33; R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy, 318–381* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), xx. However, I will use the term *trinitarian* as a catchall term, not to downplay the

indeed, from Jesus' resurrection through the patristic era, trinitarian language was certainly not systematized because it was used by different figures in light of various contextual, missional, and cultural concerns and situations, particularly in response to dissident and varying theologies.³⁴ So, trinitarian language and thought cannot be described in terms of mere development, as though it improved (or devolved) over time. So, instead of a value judgment about which era or particular theologian is "best," it is better to acknowledge certain *trajectories* of thought in the first few centuries of Christian history, as early Christians intentionally built on those who came before them. We will see these trajectories more clearly in subsequent chapters, but a general overview will be helpful at this stage. To start, the trinitarian language for the Father, Son, and Spirit contained in the biblical texts—what we might call *incipient* trinitarianism³⁵—contributed to a unified scriptural portrayal of trinitarian theology in distinct ways, based on the book's particular genre, audience, or argumentation. This canonical coherence allowed later theologians to interpret these texts and begin to distill them into well-defined biblical-theological judgments across various scriptural books. For example, the Gospel of Matthew's "I have come" statements; the Gospel of John's "in the beginning," "I and the Father are one," and "I will send a Counselor" statements; and Paul's reworking of the *Shema* in 1 Corinthians 8:6 do not compete with one another, but instead make related judgments about the Son's preexistence, the Spirit's distinct divine prerogatives, and the divine personal relations between them.

complexities related to the development of the doctrine and term, but to acknowledge for retrieval purposes the basic trinitarian tenets that were developed or debated, as summarized by Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 36-38.

³⁴I am ultimately unconvinced by John Henry Newman's classic attempt to chart a trajectory of continuity in the early development of doctrine; see John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Pickering, 1878). On the one hand, the patristic theologians we will note in this book have in common a general attempt to explain the transcendent and heavenly nature of Christ and, at times, the Spirit. On the other hand, any attempt to flatten out the development of doctrine in the patristic period is always found wanting. At best, we are able to note the sometimes similar and other times disparate trajectories and influences from one author or century to the next.

³⁵I use "incipient" to simply acknowledge that the biblical canon does not contain a systematic approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, at least not in the modern sense of the term, but nonetheless offers a coherent doctrine of the Trinity.

In the second and third centuries, trinitarian terminology took different forms, sometimes in relation to Jewish or Greek philosophical questions about the divine nature and activity, some of which set a trajectory for later theological controversies around and after the Council of Nicaea.³⁶ We see this, for instance, in the “Logos Christology” and “two hands” theology of Irenaeus regarding the Son and Spirit³⁷ and in Origen’s work on the eternal generation of the Son and its implications for the divine nature and activity.³⁸ These ideas prefigure fourth-century theology, but there is nonetheless a notable stabilizing of theological definitions and terminology after this period.³⁹

In the latter part of the fourth century, pro-Nicene trinitarianism emerged. Lewis Ayres employs the term “pro-Nicene” to describe the “culture” of theologies in the latter fourth century that were “recognized as orthodox by the Council of Constantinople (381) and by subsequent imperial decrees.”⁴⁰ Though not a neat-and-clean consensus, the term “pro-Nicene” indicates a type of *habitus* among fourth-century theologians in language, logic, and practice that animates historic Christian orthodoxy.⁴¹ As the book unfolds,

³⁶As Ayres notes: “The fourth-century debates were themselves dependent on modes of arguing philosophically about scriptural texts that Christians had been shaping since the early second century”; Lewis Ayres, “Scripture in Trinitarian Controversies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 439. As we will see, it is possible that this subversion of Greco-Roman philosophies is already evident in the biblical texts themselves.

³⁷See, for instance, *Haer.* 3.16.4 and 4.5.2. John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 126, notes that “Irenaeus clearly anticipates the key point which emerged centuries later in the christological controversies surrounding Chalcedon: the one and same Jesus Christ is what it is to be both God and man.” For a fuller treatment, see Eric Osborn, *Irenaeus of Lyons* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). We also see something similar in Tertullian’s polemics on the “economy” of God, arguing for distinctions among the Father, Son, and Spirit against modalistic teachings that collapse the persons into one identical person or being; cf. *Prax.* 1.1, 5.

³⁸See, for instance, *Princ.* 1.2.1-3.

³⁹Again, I do not use the word “stable” as a value judgment; rather, it is an acknowledgement that orthodox trinitarian language did not change as drastically after the pro-Nicene “consensus.”

⁴⁰Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 239. The complexities and developments between Nicaea and Constantinople will be addressed in various places in subsequent chapters, but we should note that Constantinople sought to reaffirm and expand on Nicaea, while the burgeoning pro-Nicenes were seeking a consensus against other dissident and varying theologies. For a helpful survey of the “idea of Nicaea” as a polemic in the fifth-century conciliar context, see Mark S. Smith, *The Idea of Nicaea in the Early Church and Councils, AD 431–451*, OECS (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴¹Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 236–40, notes that there must be some “flexibility” given to this term because of the nuances among theologians but generally identifies three “central principles” of pro-Nicene theology: “1. a clear version of the person and nature distinction, entailing

we will more directly interact with pro-Nicene theology and some important trajectories that led to it, as they pertain to our present study.

In later chapters, when engaging key patristic theologians, there is no assertion that the historical-cultural situatedness, choice of terminology, or rhetorical style of any individual theologian is monolithic, either with respect to John or each other. Again, the trajectories of trinitarian theology are complex, and theological reflection on scriptural texts did not happen in a vacuum; so, while I will be sensitive to the contextual factors of a theologian's intellectual life and thought, it is beyond the scope of this book to fully engage every historical-cultural nuance. Instead, interaction with these theologians in subsequent chapters will offer avenues of basic theological retrieval—showing that the church's reception of biblical texts, including Revelation, produced trinitarian theological language, logic, and rhetoric that is still beneficial to current issues in theology and exegesis. As Wesley Hill has argued,

Approaching the task of theological interpretation of the Bible armed with a particular doctrinal framework is not—or should not be—to find oneself shoehorning the Bible into an alien conceptual apparatus but is rather to find oneself searching out (1) how that framework may have arisen from exegesis itself and (2) how it may best be understood as an effort to enable ongoing exegesis in turn.⁴²

This reciprocal relationship between theological confession and rigorous exegesis will be practiced throughout this book.

As we work through select passages, I will utilize a “pro-Nicene toolkit”⁴³ of trinitarian conceptual categories to help build a theological-exegetical scaffolding for the divinity of the persons and their relations, including but

the principle that whatever is predicated of the divine nature is predicated of the three persons equally and understood to be one (this distinction may or may not be articulated via a consistent terminology); 2. clear expression that the eternal generation of the Son occurs within the unitary and incomprehensible divine nature; 3. clear expression of the doctrine that the persons work inseparably.”

⁴²Wesley Hill, “In Defense of ‘Doctrinal Exegesis’: A Proposal, with Reference to Trinitarian Theology and the Fourth Gospel,” *JTI* 14, no. 1 (2020): 22.

⁴³I owe this terminology to Fred Sanders in personal correspondence (April 10, 2021). Sanders has drawn out similar types of retrieval categories in many of his works, such as “Chalcedonian categories” for Christology in “Introduction to Christology: Chalcedonian Categories for the Gospel Narrative,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective: An Intermediate Christology*, ed. Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2007), 1-41, and “conciliar Christology” as a

not limited to (1) eternal relations of origin—the “ordered” (taxis; τάξις) relations among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the divine life; and (2) inseparable operations—that the three persons of the Trinity always act with one singular will, power, and authority as the one God. In discussing this unity and distinction between the persons, some scholars have used the term *redoublement*—the patristic idea that we must talk about God “twice over” in biblical texts, noting what the Father, Son, and Spirit have in common (divine nature) and what distinguishes them from one another (processions or missions).⁴⁴ For our purposes, then, *redoublement* enables us to speak about the unity and distinction among the persons in John’s theology without unnecessarily emphasizing one aspect over another. These types of tools allow for a trinitarian reading that acknowledges (1) there is one divine nature and thus one divine power and will, so the divine persons do not act unilaterally or confusedly; (2) persons act, not natures, so each divine person carries out distinct economic operations or missions in creation and salvation (e.g., the Son becomes incarnate, not the Spirit) as one person subsisting in the singular divine nature, with a distinct mode of operation within the unified, inseparable divine action; and (3) this unity and distinction are not at odds with one another, but are rather a way to speak about the unity of the divine power and will, and then “double back” to talk about their relations and operations or missions as divine persons carrying out divine acts on the basis of the one divine nature. As Adonis Vidu has rightly argued, “The unity and distinction between the persons [are] equally basic,” and so we should be careful to uphold both.⁴⁵

“framework” for theological readings in “Biblical Grounding for the Christology of the Councils,” *CTR* 13, no. 1 (2015): 93-104.

⁴⁴This term is owed to Ghislain Lafont, *Peut-on Connaître Dieu en Jésus-Christ?* (Paris: Cerf, 1969). See its use also in Gilles Emery, *The Trinity: An Introduction to Catholic Doctrine on the Triune God*, trans. Matthew Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 86-94; and Hill, *Paul and the Trinity*, 99-103. I should note here that I am using the term in a constructive and methodological way as I define it in this paragraph, while acknowledging along with Ayres “that there are in fact many forms of ‘redoublement’ to be found in the Trinitarian tradition”; cf. Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 260.

⁴⁵Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), xv-xvi. In relation to *redoublement*, Vidu helpfully draws on Aquinas’s idea of “equiprimordialism” (that two things exist together as equally fundamental): “the nature of God and his tripersonality . . . are, in fact, one and the same thing, in reality, though regarded from different perspectives, respectively substantial and relational” (147).

Moreover, along with the pro-Nicenes, we must be precise and careful when discussing who God is ontologically in his divine nature (θεολογία; theology) and how he has revealed himself in creation, redemption, and so on (οικονομία; economy).⁴⁶ When we affirm that the Father, Son, and Spirit are of the same divine nature or substance and act inseparably as distinct persons, we should avoid two issues: (1) a division in the singular divine will such that we claim three divine “centers of consciousness” working together as a coordinated “team”; or (2) a collapsing of the distinction of the persons such that we become functional modalists claiming the three persons are just “modes” or “masks” of the same singular divine person.⁴⁷ The doctrine of the Trinity is not built on a mere confusing mathematical equation—e.g., $1+1+1=3$ —but rather on a biblical idiom that speaks of the oneness and threeness of the triune God, taking into account the richness and depth of the one God’s self-revelation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Where one is tempted to highlight unity to the point of modalism, Scripture highlights the distinction of persons; where one is tempted to separate the persons into a tritheistic model, Scripture equally highlights their irreducible unity.

Now, if the triune God who has providentially inspired Revelation and the rest of Scripture seeks to reveal himself—and it seems clear that he has—then we should expect to pick up on these trinitarian dynamics when we read and interpret the text. As we will see, a pro-Nicene impulse will allow us to talk about each divine person as truly and fully God with the same singular divine nature and its entailments, showing that there is no need to assume an ontological subordination with respect to Jesus or the Spirit simply because there are ordered processions or missions, as we will see in

⁴⁶I use “theology” and “economy” here because it is the more classical distinction—most notably introduced to Christian theology by Origen of Alexandria and picked up by the Cappadocians and others—but I recognize that the usage is less common today. So, when referring to the divine nature of the divine persons, I will primarily use the language of “ontology” or “ontological” rather than “theology” since “theology” can have broader and more general definitions that might confuse the reader in subsequent discussions. A similarly worded but clear version of this appears in Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 18.6.3, in which he speaks about the distinction between God “in relation to himself” (καθ’ ἑαυτόν) and “his plan” (οικονομία).

⁴⁷This is precisely why “mode of operation” is specifically used above in relation to the personal distinctions of divine persons. The persons are not modes of one person, but rather three distinct persons subsisting in and as the one divine nature and acting within the one divine will.

some of our interlocuters' arguments in subsequent chapters.⁴⁸ These categories are, then, not merely doctrinal formulation, nor am I concerned with recovering pro-Nicene categories because it is fashionably retro; rather, they serve as helpful guides to understand God's revelation of himself, which is our ultimate aim as readers of Scripture. Though this pro-Nicene toolkit is heuristic in a sense, nonetheless I see a substantial agreement between Revelation's trinitarian dynamic and pro-Nicene trinitarianism.

2. What is "a close reading of the text"? This phrase suggests paying attention to textual clues—grammatical and narrational choices—native to John's writing that illuminate his theological commitments.⁴⁹ Moreover, John uses native language and concepts familiar to his audience—particularly the christological interpretation of the OT, patterns of devotion, and religious experience—to describe the apparent distinction of persons within the nature and identity of Israel's one God. As Ian Paul observes:

The task of describing the trinitarian dynamic in the book of Revelation is fascinating for two main reasons. First, there is an extraordinary diversity of terms, actions, and ideas deployed in relation to the understanding of God (the Father), Jesus, and the Spirit and their inter-relationship, far in excess of any other text of comparable length in the rest of the New Testament, and there is some real diversity and discontinuity with and between these ideas. Secondly, the complexity and internal self-references within the book create a sophisticated intratextual web which needs careful exploration if we are to discern the theological picture that the text is painting.⁵⁰

⁴⁸In other words, *redoublement* provides a healthy reciprocity between the unity and distinction and/or between ontology and economy. It also mitigates against the concern Chris Tilling has rightly shown: oftentimes scholars assert the unity of the divine nature or identity by virtue of the persons' divine actions or "roles," but then at other times inconsistently talk about or emphasize the strict distinction between nature and action; Chris Tilling, *Paul's Divine Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 35-62. Andrew Ter Ern Loke, *The Origin of Divine Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 82-83, reflects on Tilling's concern and offers other helpful ways to determine valid and invalid ways of discussing the relationship between ontology and action.

⁴⁹This phrase is at risk of overuse in academia, but it nonetheless highlights the posture of the interpreter. It is not a given that one insists upon reading with the flow of the biblical text. We might think here of phrasing by John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch*, CIT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 129: "The concepts and language of Christian dogmatics 'follow through' the act of reading Scripture; they are the transposition into reflective terms what is learned from *attentive reading*" (emphasis mine).

⁵⁰Ian Paul, "The Trinitarian Dynamic in the Book of Revelation," in *Trinity Without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology*, ed. Michael F. Bird and Scott Harrower (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2019), 86.

Simply put, if one investigates the roles and descriptions of the Christ or the Lamb and the Spirit in Revelation, a trinitarian dynamic is clear and thus must be engaged. The aids and reading strategies below will assist our trinitarian reading, not by helping us impose trinitarianism onto the text, but rather enabling a close reading of the text by alleviating many of the theological-exegetical difficulties that we will encounter. Ultimately, then, these aids help us read Revelation better.

It is also important to note that a close reading of Revelation does not entail a historical-critical or stunted historical-grammatical approach that finds the sole meaning of the text within a modernistic notion of the *sensus literalis*—the literal sense—which seeks to psychoanalyze the human author by recreating his mindset through observing literary clues and historical context.⁵¹ This approach breaks away from much of the Christian tradition’s general (but certainly not monolithic) understanding of the literal sense: the historical and literary context of Scripture as the grounding for the spiritual or theological sense(s).⁵² A modern response to this posture is *sensus plenior*—an attempt to recover a concern for the “fuller sense” or deeper theological meaning that the divine author intended through canonical reflection and the Spirit’s illumination.⁵³ While these categories can

⁵¹Historical-critical and historical-grammatical approaches are not synonymous. Generally speaking, historical-critical approaches view Scripture as “any other book,” whereas proponents of historical-grammatical approaches tend to view Scripture as an authoritative text. However, both approaches are similar in their emphasis on the historical and literary environment of each individual author and their audience. An important essay at the genesis of this discussion is Benjamin Jowett, “On the Interpretation of Scripture,” *Essays and Reviews*, 7th ed. (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1861), 330–443. Jowett argues here that Scripture has a single meaning, which rests in the mind of the human author and his immediate audience. This edition of *Essays and Reviews*, a collection of essays from a handful of English churchmen, was explicitly written to challenge “traditional” theological views—in this case the theological or spiritual sense of Scripture’s meaning.

⁵²For a discussion of the issues, see Brevard Childs, “The ‘Sensus Literalis’ of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem,” in *Beiträge zur Alttestamentlichen Theologie: Festschrift für Walter Zimmerli*, ed. Herbert Donner (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1977), 80–94. Also see William M. Marsh, *Martin Luther on Reading the Bible as Christian Scripture: The Messiah in Luther’s Biblical Hermeneutic and Theology* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2017) for a survey of Luther’s view on the literal sense and, by extension, ways some reformers retrieved patristic exegesis.

⁵³Don C. Collett, *Figural Reading and the Old Testament: Theology and Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), especially 41–57 and 139–45. Collett makes the compelling case that this divide is a modernistic construction based on an overwrought concern about authorial intent. I am not arguing that “authorial intent” is necessarily problematic—I will refer to John’s intent extensively in this book—but we should take care to explain what we mean by “authorial intent,” how many “authors” there are, the distinction between and unity of God and the biblical authors, and so forth.

be useful in certain contexts, we are ultimately not required to choose between the literal and fuller sense, or to spend our time trying to separate the intentions of two authors—one human, the other divine. Instead, we can acknowledge that the meaning of the text is wrapped up in the inseparable relationship between the human author and the Holy Spirit who providentially inspired him. For millennia, Christians have viewed the meaning of the text as rooted in God’s self-revelation in history, recorded by human authors according to his providence and inspiration (Ex 7:14; Jer 1:5, 30:2; 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:21, 3:15-16; Rev 1:11).⁵⁴ This underlying assumption requires an attentiveness to the nature of Scripture as divine revelation, as well as a concern for “the way the words go”⁵⁵ in the various genres, themes, intertextual connections, and other textual features that make up the biblical witness.⁵⁶

This does not mean, then, that we shun all facets of historical inquiry when it comes to exegesis; however, we cannot visit John on Patmos and ask him questions about his thought process in writing Revelation—we can only read and seek to interpret the witness he has left us. So, we must acknowledge that we cannot and need not read John’s mind in order to understand all of his intentions and presuppositions, so the historical-grammatical method only gets us so far; that said, the historical-grammatical method’s emphasis on textual and historical prudence can help us probe Revelation’s text in order to ascertain judgments about his theology. For example, John clearly constructs Revelation as a combination of apocalypse and epistle, with a prologue and epilogue (Rev 1:4-6; 22:21), and his method for applying concepts and allusions varies but is not haphazard.⁵⁷ As Ched Spellman

⁵⁴As Stephen E. Fowl, *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2009), ix, notes, the recent explosion in scholarly work on TIS reflects something Christians have been doing “from the very beginning.”

⁵⁵This phrase is drawn from Aquinas’s “*salva circumstantia litterae*” in, for example, *De Potentia Dei* 4.1c. and used effectively in modern works such as Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical Linguistic Approach to Christian Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 167.

⁵⁶For a seminal essay on premodern exegesis and the “senses” in contrast with modern critical scholarship, see David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *ThTo* 37, no. 1 (1980): 27-38. Steinmetz rightly contends that though the premodern treatment of the senses of Scripture had its defects, modern critical scholarship does not always adequately grapple with the nature of the text, namely its divine inspiration and canonical unity.

⁵⁷So I disagree with R. H. Charles’s assertion that the Apocalypse’s author was “unintelligent” and “ignorant”; see R. H. Charles, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John*,

reminds us, “The overall framework of the book of Revelation contains textual clues that help guide readers in their understanding of its literary meaning, its theological message, and its expectations for those reading this ‘book.’”⁵⁸ These textual clues are crucial and are situated under the providence of God’s revelation and ordering of Scripture as a unified canon.

A close reading of Revelation thus prompts the reader to consider the trinitarian dynamics of the book, not as a subjective reader response where anything goes, but as a response to the theological pressures arising from the text. We will see that God’s address through the text of Revelation places pressure on its audience to wrestle with certain theological issues (e.g., Jesus’ and Spirit’s nature and activity), which has yielded a variety of responses in Christian theological reflection. Ultimately, John’s discourse about God is complex and contested, and yet one of its historical effects was to contribute to the trinitarian arguments of later theologians. The questions now before us are: how did Revelation contribute, and is it appropriate to retrieve their formulations if one is concerned with making sense of the contextual and phenomenal features of John’s Apocalypse? With respect to these features, this book endeavors to demonstrate that (1) John’s grammatical and narrative choices highlight the nature and agency of God (the Father), Christ, and Holy Spirit; and (2) the hermeneutical tools described in the following section and pro-Nicene tools and trajectories covered in subsequent chapters have the capacity, when applied to the book of Revelation, to help frame and develop trinitarian doctrine.

It is worth noting that many scholars today tend to see any type of theological or confessional reading as anachronistic or eisegetical. Indeed, it is a veritable nonstarter in certain pockets of scholarship to propose that a trinitarian reading could be a “close reading of the text” in the first place.

vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1920), xxii. I also disagree with Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. Kendrick Grobel (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 175, who says that John “does not reflect about the past which in Christ has been brought to its end and out of which believers have been transplanted into a new beginning. Hence the present is understood in a way not basically different from the understanding of it in the Jewish apocalypses: namely as a time of temporariness, of waiting. The clear symptom of this understanding is the fact that *pistis* is essentially conceived as ‘endurance,’ as in Judaism.”

⁵⁸Ched Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible: Exploring the History and Hermeneutics of the Canon* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 207. Spellman further asserts that John writes in this way “to exhort [his readers] to become certain types of readers.”

As Ulrich Mauser wrote: “The historically trained New Testament scholar will today proceed with the task of interpretation without wasting a minute on the suspicion that the trinitarian confessions of later centuries might be rooted in the New Testament itself, and that the trinitarian creeds might continue to function as valuable hermeneutical signposts for modern understanding.”⁵⁹

It is impossible to answer every critic or charge of bad hermeneutics, but it is nonetheless important to heed this warning. I will conclude this chapter, then, with an explanation of an approach to interpretation that takes the Bible seriously on its own terms and in light of the Christian tradition, with the aim of showing that a trinitarian reading is, indeed, drawn from a close reading of the text.

A THEOLOGICAL-CANONICAL APPROACH

Kevin Vanhoozer rightly said that “God must not be an ‘afterthought’ in biblical interpretation . . . instead, God is prior to both the community and the biblical texts themselves.”⁶⁰ In light of this truth, this study will employ what I (uncreatively) call a *theological-canonical* approach to interpretation.⁶¹

⁵⁹Ulrich Mauser, “One God and Trinitarian Language in the Letters of Paul,” *HBT* 20, no. 2 (1998): 100. Adela Yarbro Collins, “The Use of Scripture in the Book of Revelation,” in *New Perspectives on the Book of Revelation*, ed. Adela Yarbro Collins (Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2017), 32, has warned similarly: theological readings have “distracted an interpreter from paying attention to the features in the text that do not fit that model.”

⁶⁰Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Introduction: What Is Theological Interpretation of the Bible?,” in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 22.

⁶¹Aside from those cited above, recent works that have shaped my thinking on this topic include: Matthew W. Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in the New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Matthew Y. Emerson, *Christ and the New Creation: A Canonical Approach to the Theology of the New Testament* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013); Mark S. Gignilliat, *Reading Scripture Canonically* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019); Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008); Madison N. Pierce, *Divine Discourse in the Epistle to the Hebrews: The Recontextualization of Spoken Quotations of Scripture*, SNTS 178 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Darrin Sarisky, *Reading the Bible Theologically*, CIT (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016); Spellman, *Toward a Canon-Conscious Reading of the Bible*; Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Reading, and Revelation: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011) and *The Trinity and the Bible: On Theological Interpretation* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2021); Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008); Vanhoozer, *Drama of Doctrine*; Francis

This approach will be applied in the exegetical sections in the following chapters and offers some guardrails to show that a trinitarian reading of Revelation is drawn from a close reading of the text.

Theological. The Bible is a *theological* book in the plainest sense—it is a *logos* (word) about *theos* (God). Rhyne Putman is right, however, in warning us that theology is “categorically different” from any other “-ology,” such as biology.⁶² The Bible is a collection of books written by human authors under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as a testimony to God’s self-revelation in history, so its content is therefore determined by and rooted in God himself. Indeed, since its primary subject matter is God, we cannot read Scripture apart from taking theology into account. So while historical-grammatical tools help us understand some of the issues “behind” the text, they are just that: tools. Therefore, my method is aided by historical-grammatical tools, but not completely bound by them. As mentioned above, to insist solely on the modernistic version of *sensus literalis* can at times flatten out the biblical text’s rich canonical depth, minimize the truth of divine inspiration, and treat Scripture as an historical document to be described rather than a divine book through which we encounter the triune God. This divine inspiration and spotlighting of the triune God’s words and deeds pressures us to make sense of his portrayal. And as we also saw above, a theological reading of Scripture built on trinitarian foundations was essential to pre-modern exegesis—and rightly so. We cannot read Revelation rightly without a *theological* approach.

Canonical. The Bible is a two-Testament book, which means that we cannot isolate Revelation as a mere historical piece of data, or even as an isolated book among other biblical friends and/or rivals. This is not to deny Revelation’s distinct contribution to the canon—I will emphasize this point in the final chapter—but we must also recognize that it is one piece of a larger canon of sixty-six books that is partially, if not primarily, understood in light of its intertextuality with and witness to the OT. Christopher Seitz is right:

Watson, *Text and Truth: Redefining Biblical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997); and Webster, *Holy Scripture*.

⁶²Rhyne R. Putman, *The Method of Christian Theology: A Basic Introduction* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2021), 10.

The NT declares the authority of the Old, and the apostolic witness to Christ is authoritative precisely because it is “in accordance with the [OT] Scriptures.” The authority of both the NT and the Christian Scripture as a twofold witness is derived from the claims of the OT—claims presupposed in the NT and asserting themselves in the milieu from which its own composition, as the “apostles” half of the “prophets and apostles,” is coming about.⁶³

As we will see, John’s extensive use of the OT highlights the obvious benefit of and reason for a canonical approach.

We cannot read Revelation rightly without a *canonical* approach. This approach does not ignore John as a real person who wrote a real piece of literature rife with OT intertextuality to a real first-century audience; however, it also highlights how divine providence and inspiration shaped the biblical witness in such a way that “YHWH” and “the Trinity” are inescapably synonymous. For instance, in God’s unfolding revelation in human history, the incarnation of the Son—the *λόγος ἐνσαρκος*—is the economic unveiling of the triune life. Likewise, the Spirit’s relationship to and inseparable work with the Father and Son highlights the same canonical continuity. Both the OT and NT contain this data, for we would not know that the Son and Spirit are truly divine persons without the OT’s witness to the nature and activity of YHWH. So, we are concerned here not primarily with debates about canon formation or variant canon lists but rather with the theological claim that God has providentially inspired a unified, lasting witness about himself through the writings of human authors, which we now have in the form of the biblical canon.⁶⁴ In the triune God’s self-revelation and ordering of all of creation (and by extension, Scripture), we do not merely affirm the Trinity based on retrospective readings of the OT, as though YHWH somehow *became* triune in light of the incarnation and Pentecost.

⁶³Christopher R. Seitz, *The Character of Christian Scripture: The Significance of a Two-Testament Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 75.

⁶⁴It is notoriously difficult to define the unity of the biblical canon. Some may call it a “story,” others may call it a “two-part history,” and still others may call it “progressive revelation.” These ways of describing biblical unity can have heuristic value; however, we must caveat this language with the recognition that Scripture is a different “thing” as the revelation of God than a typical story that moves from point A to B. I will speak more consistently of Scripture as a unified “witness” to highlight the revelation of God’s providence and ordering of creation. This is not to deny the distinct contributions of the OT and NT to the unified witness but rather to acknowledge that its content and character are not merely bound to the time-and-space historical experiences of his creatures. More on this below.

Instead, we see that the subject matter of the biblical canon has always been a unified and providentially ordered witness to the perfect and unchanging nature and activity of the triune God.⁶⁵ So, in the case of John, it is not merely that he and the NT authors were self-consciously inventing a new form of monotheism as an experiential reader response; rather, their writings were divinely inspired revelation in continuity with the divinely inspired revelation of the OT (2 Pet 1:21; 3:16). Put another way, though the OT and NT are a unified witness to the triune God in different historical or economic moments, they are complementary and interconnected: the OT gives the NT much of its logic and grammar, as well as a basis for its authority; the NT provides a culmination to God's promises in the OT and makes plain things which were once hidden.⁶⁶ To speak of Scripture as God's revelation is to make a theological, even metaphysical, claim. As Seitz has said plainly, "Canon functions in an explicitly theological context."⁶⁷ In sum: this theological-canonical approach affirms that the unity of God's nature and activity (three in one) implies the unity of his revelation in the biblical witness (sixty-six in one).⁶⁸

CONCLUSION

The following chapters on the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will be organized in two main ways. First, I will discuss patristic conceptions of each person, with a survey of major figures and key ideas that helped shape pro-Nicene trinitarianism. This will orient us to the types of theological moves we will make as we work our way through specific passages in Revelation. Second,

⁶⁵Don Collett, "Reading Forward: The Old Testament and Retrospective Stance," *ProEcl* 24, no. 2 (2015): 178-96, draws out this distinction well, noting that some modern "Christotelic" models treat the relationship between the OT and NT as a matter of mere experiential consciousness, such that the OT only points to Christ in a retrospective manner or as a deficient testimony when compared to Christ and the new covenant. However, he rightly points out that the "traditional" reading, which highlights God's a priori providential ordering of Scripture, offers a better avenue for understanding "the inexhaustible richness and scope of the OT as *Christian Scripture*" (196); emphasis original.

⁶⁶This draws on Collett, "Reading Forward," 188, and his interaction with Christopher R. Seitz, *Figured Out: Typology and Providence in Christian Scripture* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 113.

⁶⁷Christopher R. Seitz, *The Elder Testament: Canon, Theology, Trinity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018), 26.

⁶⁸This "66-in-1" language assumes my own Protestant tradition regarding the canon, though this book's argument certainly does not rise or fall with this delineation.

we will interpret specific passages in Revelation, chosen because of their clear triadic framing, in which one or more of the persons are shown in terms of their divine nature and activity, as well as their relationship to one another. Through these passages, we can see the trinitarian dynamic most clearly.

By surveying the patristic sources on trinitarianism and showing Revelation's place in the development of doctrine, I will show that John's theology was used in later trinitarian discourse and that reading Revelation is also aided by similar theological concepts used by patristic theologians. In turn, we will see that some patristic language can be a helpful conceptual guide for understanding John's theology but, at the same time, that we need not anachronistically force later trinitarian language into the text of Revelation in order to engage in a trinitarian reading.⁶⁹

When we consider the text of Revelation in the exegetical sections of each chapter, we will see the legitimacy of our claim that a trinitarian reading is not an imposition on the text but rather is drawn from a close reading of the text. Notably, it will be argued that John hinges his doctrine of the Father, Son, and Spirit on the OT and Christian tradition⁷⁰ as a theo-logical trajectory or fulfillment of Jewish monotheism in God's providential, two-Testament witness, oftentimes using concepts and language that bear a family resemblance to other sources.⁷¹ So, the passages we cover are not a

⁶⁹Though, as Loke, *Origin of Divine Christology*, 16, has pointed out, historians often must use so-called anachronistic language as an explanatory function for past events, so it should not be considered entirely odd to use later terminologies to refer to Jesus' divinity. That said, I will attempt to avoid anachronism as much as possible.

⁷⁰By this I mean that at the very least John was a recipient of Israel's Scripture and the oral Jesus tradition, which is why his writings mirror contemporary Christian writings. Whether he had access to other Christian writings is beyond the scope of this book, and we cannot fully know the answer anyway, as I have already noted.

⁷¹John's source material and criteria by which he employs allusions has been debated for years. Given that John appears to have a strong grasp on multiple languages and makes use of whichever version best underscores his point, one can consult Beale's conclusion that John consciously and subconsciously borrows from both the MT and the LXX, considering that he seemingly "draws from both Semitic and Greek biblical sources and often modifies both." See G. K. Beale, *The Book of Revelation*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 78. Garrick V. Allen, *The Book of Revelation and Early Jewish Textual Culture*, SNTS 168 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 5, asserts that "John read, interpreted, and reused scripture in a manner commensurate with the practices of scriptural reuse operative in Second Temple Judaism." For a helpful discussion on the debate especially between Beale and Steve Moyise, see Jon Paulien, "Criteria and Assessment of Allusions to the Old Testament in the Book of Revelation," in *Studies in the Book of Revelation*, ed. Steve Moyise (New York: T&T Clark, 2001), 113-29; and "Dreading

piecemeal attempt to show some trinitarian highlights but rather to show a consistent trinitarian discourse throughout Revelation that is also in accordance with the unified biblical witness. Regarding Revelation's scriptural rootedness, Peter Leithart asserts,

Revelation is a book of the Bible, and it operates within the world and history described in the OT and NT. Creation, fall, flood, Babel, Abraham, Sodom, Egypt, plagues, exodus, conquest, temple, tabernacle, kingdom, exile, Elijah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, return, rebuilding: These books, people, and events provided the coordinates of John's imagination, long before he was swept up by the Spirit to see visions of God. He *did* have an ecstatic visionary experience, but what he saw reflected the events and institutions of the Bible, and when he recorded them he naturally recorded them in the vernacular he knew, the vernacular of the Scriptures.⁷²

As Leithart says elsewhere, the New Testament authors' christological and ecclesiological readings of the OT are not "some bizarre form of sacred hermeneutics" but rather "are giving us pointers to the nature of reading itself: clues to the meaning of meaning, the functions of language, and the proper modes of interpretation."⁷³

It is clear from the text that John grappled with the implications of Jesus' and the Holy Spirit's relationship to YHWH, and in the end he does not hesitate to apply divine titles and characteristics of YHWH to the Son and Spirit, nor does he downplay clear worship of the persons even as they stand next to God. As Michael Bird has described regarding "the birth of Christology":

At the risk of simplification I would suggest that early Christologies emerged as the attempt to express, in belief and devotion, what the earliest Christ-believers thought God had revealed in the life, passion, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus of Nazareth. In addition, there was a palpable need to make

the Whirlwind Intertextuality and the Use of the Old Testament in Revelation." *AUSS* 39, no. 1 (2001): 5-22. Further, as J. Julius Scott Jr., *Customs and Controversies: Intertestamental Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 371, reminds us: "Although historical study provides much necessary and helpful information, we can never know and feel all that the writer and his original readers experienced."

⁷²Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 1-11*, The International Theological Commentary on the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2018), 4; emphasis original.

⁷³Peter J. Leithart, *Deep Exegesis: The Mystery of Reading Scripture* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2009), viii.

sense of what they had experienced of Jesus in their own communal and interior religious life.⁷⁴

John joins this line of early Christian writers attempting to explain the roles and relationships of Jesus and the Spirit proximate to God the Father in light of Jewish monotheism, Christian worship of Jesus, experience of the Spirit, and prophetic and interpretive traditions. While John uses these elements historically and literarily in his writing, we also must acknowledge that the revelation he received confirms not a new thing per se, but rather a continuation of God's providential promise-keeping throughout history.

Further, John's descriptions of Father, Son, and Spirit resonate with common early Christian discourse about God. For example, in 1:1 he shows that the Father *gave* the revelation to Jesus (ἔδωκεν αὐτῷ) *from* whom (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ) John directly *received* the revelation. John is a recipient of this revelation but is neither the author nor its direct agent. Writers of books that would later be canonized into the NT repeatedly stressed that Jesus was sent by the Father to *reveal* him to humankind (Mt 11:27; Mk 9:37; Lk 10:16; Jn 1:1-14; 4:34; 6:39-44; 8:26-29; 20:21; Gal 4:4; 1 Tim 1:15; Heb 1:2; 1 Jn 4:10) and that he only says what his Father says (Mt 11:27; Lk 10:22; Jn 8:26-29). Jesus, the Son, brings—and in fact *is*—the divine message (Rev 1:1; 2:1, 8 et al.; cf. Jn 1:1-14). Among the collection called the “Apostolic Fathers,”⁷⁵ several writings reveal a similar theological impulse. Perhaps most comparably to Revelation, Ignatius of Antioch's letters all include a salutation and/or doxology that includes the Father and Christ. Three of Ignatius's letters directly call Christ “our God” (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν; cf. Ign. *Eph.* sal.; Ign. *Rom.* sal.; 3; Ign. *Smy.* 1) while not conflating him with the Father. As Hurtado put it, these types of passages present “Jesus as both integral to the knowledge of God and ‘one’ with God, sharing in divine glory, and yet also as a distinguishable figure.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴Michael F. Bird, *Jesus the Eternal Son: Answering Adoptionist Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 1.

⁷⁵Unless otherwise noted, English translations of this literature are from *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, 3rd ed., ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007). As Holmes rightly notes, the apostolic fathers collection was written generally in AD 70–150 and are “crucial witnesses” to the development of early Christianity in late antiquity (3). We will engage many of these texts in subsequent chapters.

⁷⁶Larry W. Hurtado, “Observations on the ‘Monotheism’ Affirmed in the New Testament,” in *The Bible and Early Trinitarian Theology*, ed. Christopher A. Beeley and Mark E. Weedman (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2018), 59.

Likewise, the Spirit carries John into the vision to hear God's message (Rev 1:10) and assists Jesus as the message giver to the churches (Rev 2:7, 11). The NT testimony about the Spirit is consistent with these types of descriptions. The Father and Son send the Spirit to deliver God's message post-resurrection via inspiration to continually remind Christians of Jesus' teaching (Jn 14:26; 16:13; Rom 8:26; 1 Cor 2:13; 2 Pet 3:16) by literally dwelling within them (Jn 20:22; Acts 1:8; Rom 8:9; 1 Cor 6:19). In the apostolic fathers, Ignatius's letters contain triadic formulas that include the Spirit (Ign. *Eph.* 9; Ign. *Magn.* 13), as does *Didache* 7 in a triadic baptismal formula. Similar to the Spirit speaking in Revelation 2–3 and John being “in the Spirit” elsewhere, Clement quotes Jeremiah 9:23 as a word “the Holy Spirit says” (1 Clem 13:1). Likewise, the author of Barnabas 12:2 says that the Spirit spoke to Moses and 13:5 says Jacob saw a prophecy “in the Spirit” (εἶδεν δὲ Ἰακώβ τύπον τῷ πνεύματι). Another early Christian apocalypse, *Ascension of Isaiah*, also describes the Spirit as a revealer (Mart. Ascen. Isa. 3:16–26), while also distinctly placing the Spirit at the left hand of the Father (Mart. Ascen. Isa. 9:36; 11:33). We will look at many of these connections in more depth in subsequent chapters.

Though we will use pro-Nicene trinitarian conceptual tools to aid our interpretation, our primary argumentation for a trinitarian reading of Revelation will come by reading and interacting with the text itself. As N. T. Wright suggests, “Even in [the prologue] John manages to unveil a good deal of what he believes about God and Jesus, and about the divine plan.”⁷⁷ Leithart further notes the triadic formula of Revelation: “The Father is he who is, was and comes; the Spirit is sevenfold; and Jesus is the witness, firstborn, and ruler. . . . Even the enemies of the church come in parodic threes.”⁷⁸ Indeed, the way each person works inseparably from the other as the book's message and narrative unfold is plain, so a close reading of the text will notice the trinitarian dynamics already present. We will see both the unity and distinction of the trinitarian persons that affirms what would later be called the *taxis* (order) and inseparable operations, while also

⁷⁷N. T. Wright, *Revelation for Everyone* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 5.

⁷⁸Peter J. Leithart, *Revelation 12–22*, The International Theological Commentary on the Holy Scripture of the Old and New Testaments (New York: T&T Clark, 2018), 441. We address the possibility that the “seven spirits” are the Holy Spirit in chap. 4.

avoiding certain novel versions of subordination between the persons that have crept their way into modern trinitarian discourse.⁷⁹

The trinitarian reading proposed here is dependent upon how Revelation describes the divine persons, which reveals that the persons are understood not on individual islands but “in specific relationships or correlations.”⁸⁰ Perhaps most obviously, we must note that there can be no Father without a Son and no Son without a Father. As Hurtado noted, worship patterns during the NT period left no doubt that “one cannot adequately identify the one without reference to the other.”⁸¹ Likewise, the Holy Spirit is only truly understood—to use pro-Nicene terminology—in relation to his procession or spiration, as his mission is ultimately to point back to and perfect the work of the Father and Son. So, binitarianism is untenable given the biblical data because the Spirit’s completion of the work of God pressures biblical interpreters into a trinitarian understanding of God’s nature and activity. The pro-Nicenes understood the unity-yet-distinction dynamic presented by the biblical text, and thus, as Madison Pierce has suggested, we can say that biblical authors can also describe “a Trinity without *tiers*, but not a Trinity without *taxis*.”⁸²

Finally, it should be noted that the method used in this book is multi-valent in two ways. First, this book operates within several disciplines—biblical studies, systematic theology, church history, and patristics. I consider myself primarily a systematic and historical theologian who loves the

⁷⁹For helpful distillations of this debate, see Keith S. Whitfield, ed., *Trinitarian Theology: Theological Models and Doctrinal Application* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2018); and Millard J. Erickson, *Who’s Tampering with the Trinity?: An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2009). See also Scott Harrower, “Bruce Ware’s Trinitarian Methodology,” in *Trinity Without Hierarchy*, 307-29; D. Glenn Butner Jr., “Eternal Functional Subordination and the Problem of the Divine Will,” *JETS* 58, no. 1 (2015): 131-49; and Thomas H. McCall, *Which Trinity? Whose Monotheism?: Philosophical and Systematic Theologians on the Metaphysics of Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 175-88 for useful critiques of some of these novel formulations.

⁸⁰Rowe, *Early Narrative Christology*, 21. In dealing with how Luke uses κύριος, Rowe explains that the identity of Jesus in Luke is dependent upon a narrative identity that reveals Jesus’ inseparable tie to the identity of God. We will see that John is not dependent on any specific word to accomplish this task but rather espouses trinitarianism through canonical continuity of titles and roles.

⁸¹Larry W. Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 43.

⁸²Madison N. Pierce, “Trinity Without *Taxis*?: A Reconsideration of 1 Corinthians 11,” in *Trinity Without Hierarchy*, 53; emphasis original. Pierce is particularly speaking of how Paul describes the God-Christ relationship in 1 Cor 11, but the point is pertinent for our purposes.

Scriptures and seeks to understand them faithfully and rigorously, so I am attempting to bring together what others may put asunder.⁸³ Given the aim and scope of this book, each discipline can be engaged with depth and rigor but will be somewhat limited by our narrow focus on a trinitarian reading of Revelation. I therefore will engage with various disciplines while avoiding anachronism or contextual ignorance as much as possible, but nuances are sometimes only able to be covered in footnotes. In each exegetical section in subsequent chapters, I will intentionally interact with commentaries, monographs, and articles from various viewpoints and disciplines, both to highlight their strengths and as a foil to show where my reading differs and hopefully provides a better way forward. That said, this chapter has introduced basic definitions, assumptions, aids, and strategies to clear the ground and set forth a trajectory to those chapters.

Second, this trinitarian reading of Revelation will be explicated in a variety of ways under the umbrella of the theological-canonical approach. The methods noted above from Yeago, Childs, Rowe, and Hill will serve as surfaces on the interpretive kaleidoscope, but we should not expect John to have used a neat-and-clean method.⁸⁴ As mentioned above, John used familiar language and concepts—particularly those found in the OT Scriptures—to describe what may have been a borderline indescribable vision. Therefore, the levels of explicitness with which John describes the divine persons may vary based on the particular portion of the vision he is witnessing and will be described in his own vernacular, so to speak, given that his writing comes from “experienced reality.”⁸⁵ Indeed, as Childs

⁸³As Ayres put it, there is an “increasing realization [in early Christian studies] that many of the professional distinctions between scholars of ‘New Testament,’ ‘patristics,’ ‘Church history’ and ‘systematics’ . . . are increasingly problematic”; Lewis Ayres, introduction to *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community*, ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones (New York: Routledge, 1998), 3. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture*, 27, similarly laments, “The Enlightenment and its aftermath finalized [an already developing] metaphysical separation between history and God.”

⁸⁴Jan Fekkes, *Isaiah and Prophetic Traditions in the Book of Revelation* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 59–103, details at length John’s use of the OT. Fekkes helpfully reminds us that it is impossible to build a neat framework for John’s use of the OT, particularly because (1) he employs allusions rather than quotations, and (2) he does not employ allusions in a monolithic way.

⁸⁵Gordon D. Fee, “Paul and the Trinity: The Experience of Christ and the Spirit for Paul’s Understanding of God,” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 51.

observed: “The issues of symbolism, literary genre, and fluctuating tradition pose a complexity which does not allow for a simple method of ‘decoding’ the text.”⁸⁶ So, as Matthew Bates has said, I acknowledge the NT writers did not yet have stable “nomenclature to express the Trinity” but that “the die had been cast” through their understanding of and interaction with the OT.⁸⁷ Again, this does not weaken the assertion that a pro-Nicene toolkit can provide helpful ways to understand Revelation’s theology, because it helps bring clarity and coherence to John’s marvelous vision.

⁸⁶Brevard S. Childs, *The New Testament as Canon: An Introduction* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1984), 504. Richard B. Hays, “Faithful Witness, Alpha and Omega: The Identity of Jesus in the Apocalypse of John,” in *Revelation and the Politics of Apocalyptic Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Hays and Stefan Alkier (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 69, says similarly, “This visionary book deploys a kaleidoscopic profusion of imagery to depict its chief protagonist.”

⁸⁷Bates, *Birth of the Trinity*, 40.

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