Throughout the centuries, theologians have used the Bible in unique ways to understand both the person and works of Christ. While the study of Christology can be based on philosophy, history, or even phenomenological events, it is virtually impossible to construct any Christological meaning without the use of Scripture. Both the Old and the New Testaments provide witness to the Christian narrative. This is clearly demonstrated in the writings of numerous theologians—both ancient and contemporary. To more completely understand the diversity and complexity of biblical interpretation regarding the Christian narrative, it is helpful to focus on a few religious scholars who can be employed to represent a more general understanding of Christ within their society and time. In particular, Origen of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa and John Calvin use the scriptures in innovative ways to accumulate an understanding of Christ that is profoundly thought provoking. These three thinkers provide examples of the diversity of beliefs that may arise when Scripture is examined in fundamentally different ways.

The question of how to interpret scripture has been debated from the earliest years of the Church up until the present day. Particularly in the Victorian era, around the same time that Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* sparked controversy between science and religion, Benjamin Jowett addressed a central
The Influence of Scripture on Three Christological Perspectives

Frances Mason

problem in scriptural interpretation related to literary and historical criticism.\(^1\) Jowett asserted that:

“However different the subject, although the interpretation of scripture requires ‘a vision and faculty divine’, or at least a moral and religious interest which is not needed in the study of a Greek poet or philosopher….the meaning of words, the connection of sentences, the settlement of the text, the evidence of facts, the same rules apply to the Old and New Testaments, as to other books”.\(^2\)

Jowett’s assertion that the Bible should be interpreted in the same way as any other book has revolutionized present criticism of the use of hermeneutics by theologians. The need for hermeneutics arises from a variety of meanings regarding the Word of God in all stages of Church history.\(^3\) In addition to differences in time and place of the interpreters, the Bible inherently contains dark sayings, and revelation in the form of symbols, parables, allegories, and dreams, which may lead to variety in interpretation. For this reason, we find that in examining specific parts of Scripture, often no two Biblical interpreters can agree on its meaning, even if the Bible is interpreted like any other book. Having given reasons as to the striking variety in Biblical interpretation, the attention of this paper will be focused on the four theologians who are representative of major Christological thinking in their time periods.

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\(^2\) Ibid., 8.

\(^3\) Ibid., 9.
Origen of Alexandria was an early Christian scholar and theologian and is considered one of the most prominent Church fathers. From the second to third centuries, Origen devoted his life to scriptural interpretation and, in turn, to the proper instruction of Christians. Origen’s unique interpretation of the Scriptures as allegory led to an understanding of Christ that is fundamentally different than that of many other theologians, and is especially representative of his location and time period. His theology is also unique in that he bases his whole theology on the Bible. Origen’s exegesis is based on what critics call “verbal inspiration”, in which he deems not even one word of Scripture to be meaningless. In fact, Origen declares “God gave the command ‘Thou shalt not appear before Me empty’, and therefore He cannot speak anything which is empty.” Origen believed the Holy Spirit intentionally hid mysteries of the Christian faith in the form of literal text, both to benefit the simple of mind and as a task for the intelligent to understand the spiritual meaning. One most prominent example of Origen’s use of allegory is his interpretation of the Song of Songs. Taken literally, this book of the Bible tells the story of a man and a woman from the time of their courtship up to and including their consummation. Origen instead sees the Song largely as an allegory of love for the relationship between the Church gathered among the Gentiles and Christ.

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5 Ibid., 40.


Origen, unless the Song is interpreted allegorically, it can be spiritually harmful to read. Origen applies these interpretive principles to his understanding of Christ, who is most appropriately thought of as the Logos.

Origen first develops his thinking of the allegorical interpretation of Scripture in his work *On First Principles*. It is also in this work that readers capture a glimpse of Origen’s understanding of the Logos as the core of his theological vision. Origen’s Christology presupposes a Trinitarian theology. He sees Christ as God’s eternal Word, or Logos, who is involved in the whole process of creation and salvation moderated by the divine Trinity. Christ is present throughout the scriptural record and hence Scripture may appropriately be called “the one body of Truth” and identified as Christ. Origen categorically identifies Christ as being equal in eternity and divinity with the Father, and the humanity of Jesus is understood as a Soul-joined-with-the-Logos. The Soul-joined-with-the-Logos completes his mission in the flesh by interacting with other souls. His action calls for imitation and his message dispels ignorance. All of the Logos’ work on Earth is done in order to recover humanity’s original integrity as descriptions of the image of God, who is the Logos himself. It is in this way that Origen’s allegorical interpretation of scripture led him to the formulation of a more nuanced understanding of Christ as the eternal Word of God. Origen’s Christological conclusions are indicative of his time and place, since they can be considered as pioneering works in a time of Judeo-Christian infancy.

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9 Ibid., 77.
Gregory of Nyssa is another theologian whose distinct use of scripture led to a novel understanding of the person and work of Christ. This theologian and bishop lived in the fourth century, and it is clear that his time period is reflected in his theology since he is greatly influenced by Origen and other Church Fathers, as well as Platonist philosophy. Gregory, similar to many Church Fathers, practices two levels of scriptural interpretation. The first is an explanation of what Gregory calls the *historia*, which means the narrative, overt account, or teaching. The second requires insight into a divinely intended meaning of that account or teaching. For this Gregory uses *theoria*, meaning a vision or contemplation. Gregory’s *The Life of Moses* clearly reveals the author’s approach to Scripture, which will be later used to form his Christology. The first book of *The Life of Moses* reveals the *historia*. Gregory believes that when *historia* is historically and grammatically clarified, it provides a reasonable account as to what happened in the past. It is important to note that the account in the first book does not shun theology. Rather, the narrative describes Moses’ entrance into “the inner sanctuary of divine mystical doctrine.” In the second book, illustrating the *theoria*, Gregory’s ideas tend to resemble Origen’s allegorical interpretation. Gregory asserts that a story about Moses would not fulfill its purpose of providing inspiration to humanity unless it is also a story about us. It must train humanity and bring us closer to spiritual life. For this

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11 Ibid., 533-537. 533.

12 Ibid., 533-537. 534.
reason, Moses’ ascent up Mount Sinai becomes a climb up “the mountain of the knowledge of God”, which all persons must strive to ascend.\textsuperscript{13}

Gregory’s function of Scripture as having narrative significance, as well as a spiritual meaning extrapolated to include all human persons, greatly influences his Christology. Both the narrative of Christianity and its deeper significance for all of humanity are central elements in Gregory’s Christology. In fact, Gregory treats Christology, soteriology, eschatology, ethics and spirituality as part of one topic; from Christ’s incarnation arises an understanding of salvation. Salvation, therefore, has consequences for our practical daily life and its eschatological effect.\textsuperscript{14} One of Gregory’s famous images suggests that Christ’s humanity is mixed with his divinity, “as a drop of vinegar is dissolved in a vast sea”.\textsuperscript{15} This image is best understood as a transformation and possible obliteration of the properties of human nature, such as disease and mortality, while retaining a human nature as well as the glory of God. Another important image in Gregory’s theology is the fishhook, in which God wins humankind back from the Devil through the ransom payment of Christ. These two images are most important for the development of Gregory’s Christology. They relate to his idea of \textit{theoria}: that there is ‘an ontological unity of all humanity in Christ’, meaning that all Christians may derive meaning from the event of Christ and should not regard it as a purely narrative event. From this reality springs forth Gregory’s idea of the good life. Ethics, like the incarnation and salvation, involve


\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 99.
transformation. The unity of human nature grounds Gregory’s theology in social action, which rests on the principle that God gave the goods of the world to the whole of humanity and therefore anyone who takes more than needed robs those who do not have enough.\footnote{Morwenna Ludlow, \textit{Gregory of Nyssa: Ancient and (Post) Modern}, 137.} Focusing on the incarnation, soteriology, and ethics, Gregory’s Christology is related to his two main principles of biblical interpretation. The unique Christological images he generates are a testament to his innovative use of the scriptures.

A third Christian who uses the Bible in a strikingly different way to develop his own Christological ideas is John Calvin. Calvin lived and preached in the sixteenth century and as a result his biblical interpretation culminated in a Christology relevant for a vastly different time period than that of Origen or Gregory of Nyssa. While Gregory used his own imposed imagery to solidify his understanding of Christ, Calvin used the written text of Scripture as the highest appeal in his teaching. Calvin operates from the assumption that the proof of Scripture can be held legitimate because “God in person speaks in it”.\footnote{Randall C Zachman, “Oracles, Visions, and Oral Tradition: Calvin on the Foundation of Scripture”, \textit{Interpretation (Richmond, Va.)} 63, no.2 (April 2009): 117-129. 117.} Scripture has higher authority than any appeals to prophesies, visions, or oral traditions, which although essential to Christian thought and history, are often subject to error. Calvin attests a “natural and obvious meaning” of Scripture, and contrary to Origen, denounces allegorical interpretation as “play[ing] with frivolous guesses”.\footnote{Arthur Skevington Wood, \textit{The Principles of Biblical Interpretation: As Enunciated by Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Luther, and Calvin}, 90.} Other
assumptions Calvin brings to Scripture are certain theological convictions. An example of this idea is that human reason cannot fully divulge the meaning of divine truth, and that God accommodates readers by using more easily understood language.¹⁹

John Calvin’s understanding of Scripture as the most authoritative method of obtaining revelation is reflected in his Christology. His professed belief in “sola scriptura” is a testament to the time period in which he lived, since this idea permeates much of sixteenth century Protestant theology.²⁰ The importance of the Bible to Calvin is first evident in his reasoning as to the need for a mediator, that is, Christ. Calvin views human sin as disobedience, and the primal act of disobedience was Adam’s. Since Adam is the father of the whole human race, what Adam received from God he received for us all: gifts and then loss. After discussing the need for a mediator with reference to Genesis, Calvin writes about the nature of the Incarnation. The Son of God has two distinct natures, and in Christ there are ‘peculiar attributes of divinity’ and of humanity that must not be confused.²¹ For example, while the two natures are inseparable, Christ’s pre-existence and glory are incompatible with humanity, while his suffering and death are attributes of his humanity alone. Calvin recognizes that there are some instances in the New Testament that seem to violate this rule by attributing to one nature what is properly ascribed to the other. For instance, when Christ’s amazing distress and

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²⁰ Ibid., 462-464. 462.

agony climaxes, he says, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” thus implying that his divine nature is quiescent. Calvin calls these cases “communication of properties” which are only a manner of speaking, and unity among natures should always be stressed. Calvin continues to use the Scripture as authority to justify his conclusions that Christ is punished in place of all humankind. God’s wrath can be thought of as spent in this way. In these instances, Calvin utilizes his belief in the primary importance of the written Word of God to argue his unique Christological premises. His emphasis on the Word as the true path to salvation can be thought of as a testament to the period of ecclesiastic reform occurring in his time.

The interpretation and use of the Bible is dynamic among theologians past and present. Methods of Biblical interpretation are often categorical of the author’s time and place. For this reason, and also simply due to differences among the beliefs of theologians, variety in biblical interpretation often yields vastly diverging Christological understandings. Origen of Alexandria uses allegorical interpretation as his path to understanding Christ as the divine Logos, who is eternal and can be evidenced in both the Old and the New Testaments. Gregory of Nyssa uses narrative Biblical accounts and their enduring meaning for all of humanity as the basis for his most prominent Christological images. Lastly, John Calvin’s belief in the authority of Biblical text led to a formulation of Christ as mediator who has two distinct natures. These three theologians provide interesting examples of the importance of the use of the Bible when theologizing. Religious scholars will continue to use the Bible in

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22 Paul Matthews Van Buren, *Christ in Our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin’s Doctrine of Reconciliation*, 22.
ways relevant to their context in order to make new discoveries about the person and works of Christ.
The Influence of Scripture on Three Christological Perspectives            Frances Mason

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