INTERPRETING RHETORIC
CHRISTOLOGY AS A TALE OF MANY CITIES

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Introduction

While complex historical issues can never be reduced to clear dichotomies, discourse as such is generated by a need for some form of defining rhetoric. This rhetoric usually seeks to consolidate an identity, position, or perspective in contrast to, and often in conflict with, another potential alternative.\(^1\) Something is said, because it needs to be said, at least from someone’s point of view.\(^2\) Tensions and struggles between largely implicit epistemological and philosophical assumptions, frequently generate this rhetorical positioning, even if explicit rhetoric is a response to a specific issue or anxiety. Explicit rhetorical discourse as conflict, is contingent on implicit assumptions from within which this conflict arises. I will explore this phenomenon in relation to the milieu of early Christological debates, and the necessity, indeed, the inevitability of constant revision and reshaping of theological perspectives in conversation with contextual presuppositions.

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1 Discourse is generated from an “interested” position, and therefore, either explicitly or implicitly, resisting some other proximate position. An appraisal of discourse is also concerned with what is not being said in what is being said. The presence of rhetoric against a perspective, implies a plausibility of that perspective, and the strength of rhetoric implies the pervasiveness of an alternative voice. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992) 30-34. Suspicious evaluation of the explicit claims of discourse can tease out implicit assumptions, and therefore other foci, other than the rhetorical focus articulated. On such a “hermeneutic of suspicion,” see David Tracy, Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope (London: SCM, 1988) 66-81.

2 Assertions of belief are perspectival. We interpret our world from within a given perspective. Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method, Trans. William Glen-Doepe (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975) 235-274. Implicit understanding via a “point of view” precedes explicit
A tale of two cities

A tale of two cities has often been told - usually an old tale in a new guise, in different cities. An old tale, because an ancient tension is recast in a new context, with new players. For example, “how do we know truth: by using our senses to discover the world around us, or through innate ideas, a kind of mental DNA inherited from conception?” Two cities to be sure! Or another: “how do we conceive of life as One when we are surrounded by plurality?” Another two or more cities in this! The metaphor, a tale of two cities, might provide a way of showing why seemingly incomprehensible Christological debates existed and persisted for so long.

In the face of perceived Greek cultural and philosophical erosions of Christian faith, the early Christian father, Tertullian, asked rhetorically: “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Christian thinkers have often returned to this line as they lamented the marriage of culture and faith, philosophy and theology in a tale of two cities - as if Christianity lost its pristine innocence when it ventured outside the front gate of its Jewish domicile.

However, having established this plot - a tension between two cities, I need also to say that the tale of two cities is never as simple as this. Athens already inhabited Jerusalem. All our New Testament writings are Greek, and if the thesis that “language is culture” is sustainable, then the Christian tradition, rooted in Jewish life, theology, and Scriptures, was already infiltrated by Athens - in the Septuagint, the Scriptures of the early church, and in the lingua franca of Alexander the Great’s Hellenised world, the koine Greek of the New Testament writings. Athens is also present in the Diaspora churches in which the Hebrew “congregation of the Lord” (Heb: qahal Gk: ekklesia) is also the political assembly of the Greek polis (ekklesia). The first Christian theologian of whom we have writings, a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” is also a dexterous Greek thinker and writer from the Hellenistic city, Tarsus. If Athens had infiltrated


Epistemology for several centuries preceding our time, has been divided between apriori (idealism) and aposteriori (empirical) ways of knowing truth. Epistemology (from Gk: epistemon ἐπιστήμων understanding) relates to the basis of beliefs, knowledge, perceptions, interpretations and the question of how these are acquired, determined, justified, weighed, evaluated, critically doubted, discerned or believed.

Following Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations. Trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1958): "Language is culture and culture is language, with no one language able to provide the benchmark for definitive meaning in human discourses."

Translation never occurs without some change of meaning.
Jerusalem, even “Athens” contained within itself two significant “cities” - Plato and Aristotle.

Now there are many subplots and characters to be sure, but who could resist these two? Could one therefore avoid introducing Raphael Sanzio’s fresco The School of Athens into the story at this point? In the fresco, Plato and his student Aristotle are the central figures, surrounded by a plethora of people who represent diverse ways of engaging the great issues of human existence. For Raphael, they all find their source of inspiration in either one of the two central figures. Plato points upwards, gesturing to the invisible, eternal Forms behind all appearances. Aristotle points horizontally, gesturing toward the particulars of life as the focus of philosophical investigation and understanding. On Plato’s side of the fresco, philosophers and poets are engaged in issues of the soul, eternal Forms, and the dissembling nature of material appearances. On Aristotle’s side, scientists and mathematicians debate one another about the character of the natural world and its ultimate principles of cause, substance, and life animation.

A primary philosophical question before Plato’s time was this: how could reality be undivided, yet plural in its manifestations? Plato sought to solve this in a “disembodied turn” by positing ultimate reality in the realm of eternal Forms (perceived by the soul) - and plurality in the world of shadows (material appearances). Pull up a chair and I’ll explain. There are many tables of various shapes and sizes in the world - and these are eventually broken, burnt, or rot - they are only shadows of “tableness,” the eternal reality or Form for all tables. Consequently, as you can see, matter, including your chair, is merely a shadow of “something more real somewhere else.” This is an ancient tension between two significant ways of thinking, living, and perceiving the world: is the clue to ultimate reality right in front of us? (Raphael’s Aristotle gesturing toward the diverse phenomena of life), or is it somewhere else in another realm (Raphael’s Plato pointing upwards to the invisible, eternal Forms). For Aristotle, Forms do not exist without embodiment. These two famous figures and their

7 Plato, Phaedo, 76b–78e. Within the corpus of his writings, Plato registered an ambivalence about many of his ideas, hence, Plato’s interpreters are usually more “Platonic” than Plato.
8 For example, what you are sitting on is the form “chair” which has given shape and definition to matter (wood). It has realized the potential of matter in a certain way. While there are many varieties of chair, each specific form of chair giving shape to matter, the Form “chair” doesn’t exist elsewhere as the reality or “chairness” of all chairs. The form
"philosophical gestures," seem to sum up central tensions of ancient philosophical life, which also had a significant influence on the early Christological debates of the Church. Hence, early Christian engagement with its central confession "God was in Christ," often reads like a sustained tale of two cities.9

In a variation of this tension, the metaphor, tale of two cities, is played out in the subtle and dramatic contests of the early centuries of the Church's life. Heresies are forged and counter-forged, depending on their agreement or disagreement with the choristers of the "Athenian city" - who are nowhere but everywhere in this story. Platonically influenced Christology usually expressed an attempt to protect divinity from material impediment, but resulted in a loss of identification with human life, diminishing the importance of incarnation - this being a partial or even dissembling identification only - a phantom, a "ghost who walks."10 After all, in Platonism, reality was somewhere else, not here in the material world - even of Jesus' body. The other major influence, having its impetus in Aristotelian thought, was a quest to protect two things: first, "stuff" or "what is," and how it found its regular forms in the diversity of life,11 including humanity as a unity of body and soul; and second, the changeless "first cause" of all changing particularity in the world.12

"chair" without matter, is simply an image associated with a word. We have no way of knowing about the form chair, except by particular chairs, and these are always different. For Aristotle, God alone is perfect Form, but that is another matter. Aristotle, Metaphysics, 987B, 988A-B, 1032B-1034A; Physics, 194A-B, 195A.

9 Curiously replicating the tale of two cities - Plato's ideal forms and Aristotle's observations of life - John Macquarrie cites two major methodological approaches to Christology which have dominated the nature of Christological exploration: deductive and inductive - or - Christology from abstraction (sometimes referred to as "Christology from above" beginning from divine truths, or metaphysical ideals) and Christology from particularity (sometimes referred to as "Christology from below" beginning from the recurring dynamics of human experience). John Macquarrie, Jesus Christ in Modern Thought (London/Philadelphia: SCM/TPI, 1992) 3-26, 147-172. Also see Gerald O'Collins, Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus (NY: Oxford University Press, 1995) 1-21; George S. Hendry, "Christology" in A Dictionary of Christian Theology edited by J. Macquarrie, J. (London: SCM, 1983).

10 Especially after Neo-Platonism (Plotinus 204–270 CE). Docetism (dokein to seem) resisted any thought that God could be implicated in "evil" matter (Christology is therefore Theophany).

11 Aristotle, Metaphysics, Book VII.

12 Otherwise known as God's aseity. In the quest for God's aseity as changeless "first cause" of all changing particularity in the world, there is a tendency to lose the biblical witness to
Now such a story needs to introduce two further cities. Early Christological enquiry was often in tension over variations of thought derived from these two Athenian actors, which became the tale of yet another two cities: Alexandria in North Africa, and Antioch in Syria, in the great ecumenical debates of the 4th and 5th centuries. Even though theological, they are caught in the undercurrents, eddies, and tides of enduring philosophical tensions between the traditions of “Plato” and “Aristotle.”

Antioch emphasised Jesus’ humanity and the issue of how he was conferred with divinity, but erred on a “combination” of two natures side by side, and therefore, did not confirm an intrinsic union. Lingering logic of Aristotle’s substances - “stuff” or the particularity of matter and how it found its regular forms in the diversity of life. Inasmuch as Christology debates were concerned with how “God was in Christ,” how the two natures - God and human - “fitted” together in terms of substances, and these substances maintaining their essential integrity (divinity and humanity), there is the influence of Aristotle’s thought. So in one city, Antioch, they had difficulty fusing together two essential qualities that were considered theologically important: God’s changeless nature as “first cause” of all living and changing things, and, the real human particularity of Jesus as one who experienced hunger, fatigue, anguish and pain.

Alexandria emphasised divinity, with Jesus’ humanity a merely passive recipient of divine qualities; and erred toward the divine nature dominating in the divine-human union. Lingering shades of Plato’s hierarchy of the invisible or “spiritual” God who experiences time and journeys in relationship with creation and people in their experiences of change and the vicissitudes of life. Aristotle’s God is the “unmoved mover”. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072B–1073A.

13 Antiochenes sought to exegete scripture as historical documentation. Alexandrians sought to exegete scripture as allegorical writings. For Antiochenes, the presence of God in human life was salvific; for Alexandrians, deification, the human being taken into the divine, was salvific.

14 J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: A&C Black, 1958) 281. We must remember that the texts of great philosophers are not homogenous, but rather, their works are eventually distilled into reasonably unified perspectives, so that people come to refer to “Plato’s thought,” or “Aristotle’s philosophy.” Jacques Derrida, *On The Name*. Trans. David Wood *et al.* edited by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) 119-121. Therefore, we are speaking of prevailing movements with the labels Plato, or Aristotle applied to them in philosophical tradition. Indeed, Plato contests his own theory of *Forms* in *Parmenides* 130–135. Unlike Aristotle’s writings, Plato’s use of mythology lent itself to considerable adaptation and popularising.
over the material. Inasmuch as Christology debates were concerned to have divinity unsullied by indwelling a human body, we are dealing with variations of Plato’s legacy (in its extreme form, Docetism). In Platonic tradition, the body impedes the soul. Therefore, it is not surprising to see attempts to depict how the unadulterated soul or psychology of the divine Word might dwell in a human body. Hence, Jesus only assumes partial humanity. Therefore, in this other city, Alexandria, they had difficulty keeping sight of the integral humanity of Jesus while emphasising his divinity.

Antioch resisted the Alexandrian Distillery LMT INC with its distillation of pure spirits free from the “dross of humanity,” in the divine–human union. Antioch was Aristotelian in its quest to maintain a body–soul unity. However, this unity of two natures (Aristotle’s substances) in one human person (prosopon) raised splinters and corresponding rhetoric. Alexandria resisted the Antioch Joinery LMT INC, with its “crude” conjunctions of “substances.” Both cities had important business concerns, but both also committed some major malpractices in promoting their merchandise - one, shoddy joinery, the other, importation of foreign spirits.

When it came to casting creeds to sort out the dilemma, these were largely developed out of the conceptual repertoire of, you guessed it, Plato and Aristotle.

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16 According to Plato, the practice of philosophy is a preparation for death, or “practicing death” (Plato, *Phaedo* 62e–64a, 68b–68c, 81c–83a) by focussing attention on the soul and away from the body which is a “hindrance,” distraction, and impediment to the attainment of truth (64b–65c, 81d–84d). The body contaminates the soul (66e), and the aim is to transcend the body and be rid of it because it is always a danger to the soul (65c–68b, 80a–81c). Indeed, the soul is helplessly imprisoned in the body (83a) without the practice of philosophy which can effect its release from the “shackles of the body” (76a) and the rivets of bodily desire (83a–84d). This release is only ever effected by death (66e, 67a), hence, philosophy is a “preparation for death” (62e–64a, 68b–68c, 81c–83a). Plato (d 347 BC) was considered “a Christian before Christ” by many church fathers. (See the caveat at note 7).

17 For example, in Apollinarianism the divine mind inhabited a human body: the Divine Word was incarnate in the mind of Jesus, but, being impassible (unable to suffer) it was not incarnate in the human suffering of Jesus.

18 For example, Arius’ *Wordflesh Christology* asserted that the Word became flesh but not a human, in the same way the divine Word animated the prophets. Jesus had a divine not human soul. Hence Jesus is the “God–bearing man” anthos theophoros. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 280–284. Later, Apollinarius (see above), to which Gregory of Nazianzus responded: “What is not assumed, cannot be healed”.
Plato, in assuming that the invisible (spiritual) and material are hierarchical entities.\textsuperscript{19} Aristotle, in assuming that a logical formula for joining various substances could be constructed, while maintaining a difference between God as unmoved mover, and humanity as caught up in change and time. So the Greek choristers of each city kept this “Athenian drama” moving forward, even if it was played out in “Jerusalem,” now represented in Antioch and Alexandria - each with variations on finer points of issue. This was somewhat akin to “in-house” smouldering squabbles between members over certain issues in a local church community.\textsuperscript{20}

We do not have to choose any city. Indeed, in any attempt to “pin down” the phrase “God was in Christ” - which is confessional, narratival (told as a story), and demonstrative (known in actions) - we have an impossible scenario to cast in any definitive formula. This is the problem with the tale of two cities, even with its variations - the assumption that Athens or Jerusalem, Plato or Aristotle, Alexandria or Antioch can provide the right ingredients for the correct formula. The tale of two cities - between bible and culture, between Jew and Greek, between Greek and Greek Christians - is inevitable in the quest to articulate this “strange claim” that “God was in Christ.” Indeed, it is really a tale of many cities, but as often happens, these were distilled into ancient tensions such as the one present in Raphael’s The School of Athens. Christology is a story that is told and lived in the lives of people who belong to specific cultures and who interpret biblical tradition through the prisms of their own history and community, often in the cross-currents of more than one culture. For example, the Pauline confession “God was in Christ” is already a hybrid expression emerging out of two major cultures - Jewish with its diverse messianic horizons, and Greek (Christos), which begins to work through this story, conceptually, in a different world. However, one thing remains consistent - Christology is immersed in a story that needs to be retold in every city and culture. Therefore, fresh Christological formulations will always generate rhetoric in the face of alternative formulations, and explicit rhetorical claims, new and old, will continue to be driven by implicit presuppositions of time, place, culture, and world view.

\textsuperscript{19} Plato, Phaedo, 78d–80b.

\textsuperscript{20} The challenge was to work out the relationship between Father, Son and Spirit in the Trinity. Nicæa affirmed that the Son is of the same substance of the Father (\textit{homoousios} - one essence \textit{ousia} therefore \textit{consubstantial}). Others asserted that Father and Son were of like, not the same essence (\textit{homoiousios}). There was ensuing debate over whether Father, Son and Spirit were of one nature or three natures (\textit{hypostasis}: nature or being; plural \textit{hypostaseis}). One proposal combined \textit{homoousios} (of the same substance) with three \textit{hypostaseis} (Father, Son and Spirit are one substance but distinct natures).
Conclusion

The Christological drama remains a tale of many cities in its confession, theology, and practical expressions from culture to culture. Every city is the tale of many cities, and this is no less so in understanding, and articulating the confession that “God was in Christ.” The story began with Nazareth and Jerusalem, and found its way into Jerusalem and Athens; Alexandria and Antioch; Rome and Constantinople. New cities have been added to these prisms of Christological perspective: Wittenberg, Geneva, Calcutta, Bombay, Belfast, Chicago, Hiroshima, Capetown, Oslo, Sarajevo, Dili, and perhaps even Alice Springs. There will be other cities to add to the Christological story as it continues to unfold in the midst of time and diverse places. This is not to be lamented in a dream for “the ideal city” of Christological exposition, which has or can say everything that needs to be said. Rather, every tale in a new guise is a variation on the tension between “two cities.” There are always at least “two cities” and many choristers acclaiming the worth of either, with their sub-plots too. They must be explored energetically, learnt from, critiqued, but always as part of the continuing story of Christology - that “God was in Christ.”

The early Christological debates were not some unfortunate aberration in the history of Christian thought, but were, and still continue to be inevitable, given the issues at stake in the interface between theology and culture. Imaginative access into the richness of this field might begin with a metaphor, such as a tale of many cities, and reverberate through subtle nuances, tensions, and corresponding rhetorical claims, each claim having, in some context, an integral resonance with thinking through Christology.