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Theology as Pretext

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Theology as Pretext

John Gee

Review of Ben Witherington III, *Rethinking Biblical & Systematic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2026), 232 pages, \$39.00 hardback; and Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005), 332 pages, \$52.24 hardback.

Abstract: *Ben Witherington outlines a method for interpreting the Bible that emphasizes studying the Bible in the original languages and in the original contexts without imposing foreign philosophies or frameworks and focuses on the ethical teachings of the Bible. He wishes to use this method to build a biblical and systematic theology. His method, however, undermines his project. In this, there are lessons for Latter-day Saints.*

Ben Witherington III has made a name for himself as a biblical scholar and has been making a name for himself as a theologian with a distinct methodology. In this review I look at Witherington's method by examining two of his books published twenty years apart: *The Problem with Evangelical Theology*¹ and *Rethinking Biblical and Systematic Theology*.² Witherington's methodology has not changed in the intervening years. Although Witherington is no friend of Latter-day

1. Ben Witherington III, *The Problem with Evangelical Theology: Testing the Exegetical Foundations of Calvinism, Dispensationalism and Wesleyanism* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2005).

2. Ben Witherington III, *Rethinking Biblical & Systematic Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2026).

Saints, he provides substantial food for thought for Latter-day Saints who have much to learn from his approach.

Readers may be vaguely aware that *theology* is used in positive and negative senses in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and so should know that the term *theology* is used three different ways in the Church. The first is the way that Witherington uses it in his works: as a discipline and field of study, which will be discussed later. The second and most common use in the Church is as a synonym for *teaching* or *belief*. Because this is not the way the term is usually used outside the Church, this usage can create confusion. One can find references to the term *theology* used in both of these senses in General Conference, for example, and used in both positive and negative ways. The third way the term has been used in the Church — a recent development of the current century — is to describe the clothing of postmodern philosophy in scriptural language. In this review I discuss it in the sense that Witherington uses it, which is the most common (outside the Church).

The Method

The two books under discussion in this review have much overlap in theme and content. Latter-day Saints will possibly find the earlier book more interesting even though it is the longer of the two. Witherington spends the bulk of both books discussing problems of Evangelical theology within an Evangelical framework. Such internecine squabbles will probably not interest Latter-day Saints, but Witherington's method and some of his conclusions should.

Witherington's latest volume is comparatively slender. He was "*not* [trying] to present the reader with a biblical or systematic theology" but to discuss how such a work ought to be produced.³ Many times in his latest book Witherington notes the tendency for theologians to produce very fat volumes. This brings to mind one of the theological controversies leading up to the Council of Nicea. The historian Sozomen relates that before the Council, one of the debates was: which was the greater miracle, to make a stone speak or a theologian stop.⁴

As an Evangelical, Witherington begins his latest effort with an obligatory off-handed disparagement of the Book of Mormon⁵ and

3. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 185–86.

4. Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.18.

5. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 4n1.

continues to deride the Church later in the book.⁶ There are doubtless minor denominational quibbles which we might have, and there are many places where I would question Witherington's assumptions, interpretations, and understanding of the ancient world, but not his basic method. One of Witherington's points in his books is that,

it is time to recognize that denominations are a result of Protestant differing and bickering. They are children of the Protestant Reformation. They are also the result of profoundly weak ecclesiology on our part, and they reflect and are based upon the biblically weakest aspects of our theology — our distinctives.⁷

That being the case, I will not argue here over denominational differences. I will concentrate on agreements and things that I think he got right and limit my criticism to one problem where his method was correct, but his application was inconsistent with his method.

Witherington's real target, however, is not Latter-day Saints but Protestants who read their theology into the Bible. For most Protestant theologians, theology is an excuse for eisegesis: reading into the text what the theologian wants rather than what is actually there. In both books, Witherington lays down rules with examples both positive and negative of how to implement those rules. The first two rules provided by Witherington are the most important and are explicitly laid out:

1. You need to be able to read the text in its original language, since every translation is already an interpretation.
2. You need to have studied the text in its original contexts (literary, historical, archaeological, theological, rhetorical).⁸

These two, along with two others, are discussed in the following sections.

Reading the Text in the Original Language

Latter-day Saints "believe the Bible to be the word of God as far as it is translated correctly" (Article of Faith 8). Normally, this means that one must be able to read the Bible in the original languages to determine if it has been translated correctly. This provides an impetus for Latter-day Saints to study the original languages. It is typical scholarly

6. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 142n14.

7. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 247.

8. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 246.

practice—and certainly my practice—to refer to the original languages in doing research. Consistent with scholarly practice, I provide my own translations of the original texts throughout this review—both scriptures and other ancient writers—unless otherwise noted. For Latter-day Saints, this practice has scriptural authorization (see also Doctrine and Covenants 128:18).

Not being a Latter-day Saint, Witherington provides additional reasons to read the text in the original languages. Witherington notes one reason to master the original languages:

The Bible . . . is not a theological dictionary with a bunch of topics alphabetically listed. Nor do the many terms in the Bible have only one meaning throughout the canon. Indeed, many of these words have a considerable spectrum of meaning, with the particular meaning determined by *the context*.⁹

Witherington has taken the time to learn the languages, especially Greek, though a couple of typos in Semitic languages did slip through.¹⁰

Witherington faults Thomas Aquinas, considered by some to be the greatest Christian theologian, for never learning Greek.¹¹ He also notes Aquinas’s “detailed interaction with Greek philosophy.”¹² Beyond these two issues raised by Witherington, there is a greater reason for rejecting Aquinas, and it comes from Aquinas himself. Aquinas’s early fourteenth-century biographer, Guillelmo de Tocco, records the following of an event that happened on 6 December 1273, shortly before Aquinas died:

Of this doctor it is also said that when he was in Saint Severinus, the castle of his sister, with his aforementioned associate and other brothers of his order, for a long period of time he was in an ecstasy so that he seemed completely removed from his senses. When his sister was particularly troubled about this, she asked his associate what this might be that had suddenly befallen her brother. He told her: the master is often carried away in the Spirit when he is pondering something, but never for as long as now have I seen him

9. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 38.

10. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 108 (*marana tha* for *maran atha*) and p. 122 (*tov m’ov* for *tov m’od*).

11. Witherington, *Rethinking*, x–xi n. 4.

12. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 107.

so absent from his senses. Then, after some time, the associate went to the master, and pulling him forcefully by the cloak as if he finally aroused him from his sleep of contemplation, who sighing said: Raynalde, my son, I will reveal to you in secret forbidding that you should never dare to reveal it to anyone during my lifetime: My writing has come to an end, because such things have been revealed to me, that those things that I have written and taught seem to me insignificant, and because of this I hope in God that my doctrine and my life will soon come to an end.¹³

Theologians grasping at straws have often mistranslated and misconstrued this episode to try to make it seem as if Aquinas was not repudiating his theological enterprise. Because they value Aquinas's work more than he did, they would like to depict this event as other than Aquinas's rejection of his life's theology. In Aquinas's view, next to the revelation that he received, his theology was insignificant and he hoped that it would not survive him. He deserves a modicum of credit for his insight. If, at the end of his life, Aquinas did not think his theology had any value why should we dispute that?

Reading the Text in the Original Context

Witherington insists on reading a text in context. As he often repeats, "a text without a context is just a pretext for whatever you want it to mean."¹⁴ He insists:

We need to get beyond both ancient and modern ways of

13. *"De hoc etiam Doctore dicitur, quod existens in S. Severino, castro sororis suae cum praedicto socio suo, et aliis fratribus sui ordinis, per magnum spatium temporis fuit passus extasim, ita ut a sensibus totaliter videretur abstractus. De quo cum soror sua praecipue turbaretur, quaesivit ab eius socio, quid hoc esset, quod suo Fratri subito accideisset. Qui dixit ei: Frequenter Magister in spiritu rapitur, cum aliqua contemplatur: sed nunquam tanto tempore, sicut nunc, vidi ipsum sic a sensibus alienum. Unde post aliquam horam ivit socius ad Magistrum, et trahens ipsum per cappam fortiter, quasi a somno contemplationis ipsum ultimo excitavit. Quis suspirans dixit: Raynalde fili, tibi in secreto revelo prohibens, ne in vita mea alicui audeas revelare. Venit finis scripturae meae, quia talia sunt mihi revelata, quod ea quae scripsi et docui, modica mihi videntur, et ex hoc spero in Deo, quod sicut doctrinae meae sic cito finis erit et vitae."* Guillelmo de Tocco, *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino*, 47, in, D. Prümmer, *Fontes Vitae S. Thomae Aquinatis* (Tolosae: Bibliopolam, 1912), 120. I have provided the Latin original because the translations are often inaccurate.

14. For example, Witherington, *Rethinking*, ix.

handling the text that strip away the story, leaving a mass of quivering ideas and concepts that we then are free to rearrange in any order that pleases us. That may be an intellectually satisfying exercise for some, but in fact it turns out to be a way of neutralizing the story, and not allowing it to have its effect on us. It is in fact a power trip, an attempt to take control over these stories before they fully take hold of us. If that is what thinking theologically and doing theology amounts to, we need a moratorium on thinking and doing theology.¹⁵

He notes the discord among theologians:

When one assesses the few recent attempts in the twenty-first century at undertaking such a task [constructing a systematic theology] . . . one is left feeling one is in the period of the Judges, where “each did what was right in their own eyes.” There is not only content diversity in such volumes; there is in addition no agreement about methodology either.¹⁶

This is because they read the text out of context.

One important reason to read scriptures in context is because “nothing can be theologically true and redemptive that is historically false.”¹⁷ It is therefore imperative that scriptures be historically true. Latter-day Saints and Witherington agree on this point.

Eschewing Outside Frameworks

Another point that Witherington repeatedly makes is that it is a mistake to read the scriptures through the lens of philosophy. He faults “ideas about God that come from Greek philosophy and do not appear to comport with what the Bible says about God” such as “the notion of God’s impassability and immutability.”¹⁸

Though the Reformers were not all equally indebted to Augustine, it seems clear that the indebtedness of Luther and Calvin was considerable, especially when it came to the understanding of issues like predestination, election, salvation, perseverance of the saints, and the nature of the

15. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 239.

16. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 4.

17. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 12.

18. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 109.

limited atonement of Christ on the cross. Behind all of this was a particular conception of God's sovereignty, a conception which in the case of Augustine owed something to Manicheanism, and fatalism.¹⁹

Ancient Greek philosophies are not the only philosophies that create problems in reading the scriptures. "It is of course also true that there are many problems with applying various forms of modern philosophy to the analysis of Biblical Theology. For example, the unhelpful attempt to read Biblical Theology through a Kantian epistemological lens."²⁰ "All later forms of theologizing, including contemporary theologies such as post-colonial theology, philosophical theology, or historical theology and much more, *must be tested against and normed by the Bible, not least because these later constructs were not inspired directly by God.*"²¹ Witherington is particularly critical of postmodernism and work on intertextuality that depends on postmodernism.²² "The Biblical text is not an ink blot into which one can read whatever comes to one's mind, or one prefers. . . . Modern theories of semiotics and theories of meaning being in the eye of the beholder (or in the reading of the text and its interaction with the beholder) are not assumed to be true or helpful in the interpretation of the Biblical text. . . . The text means what the author meant."²³ Witherington, thus, has major problems with "a reader-centered theology of scripture"²⁴ that "treats scripture less as an established deposit of truth certified by 'author'-ity and more as a field of potential ready for communities of readers to unlock its meaning and power."²⁵ Asserting that "the half-century of literary theory that has unfolded since the late 1960s has made forcefully clear" that "a book is no more than the set of interpretations it proves capable of prompting,"²⁶ is a notion that he would reject. (Seriously, if an author really believed that "a book is no more than the set of interpretations it proves capable of prompting," why would he or she bother writing a book?) Theology, in Witherington's

19. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 87.

20. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 112 n. 15.

21. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 11, emphasis added.

22. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 165–69.

23. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 166.

24. Rosalynde Frandsen Welch, *Ether: A Brief Theological Introduction* (Provo, Utah: Neal A. Maxwell Institute for Religious Scholarship, 2020), 72.

25. Welch, *Ether*, 77.

26. Joseph M. Spencer, *A Word in Season* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2023), xi.

view, becomes a travesty when the Bible is read through intellectual frameworks brought in from outside the Bible.

Foregrounding the Ethics of Theology

Witherington decries the abandonment of the study of ethics among theologians.²⁷ He notes that,

Early Judaism, like the ancient Israelite religion, was more about orthopraxy than orthodoxy, and by orthopraxy I mean both ethical behavior and what came to be called religious practices such as sacrifices, food laws, Sabbath observance, issues of clean and unclean. These things were not at the periphery of Jewish religion; they were at the heart of it.²⁸

He laments that “the world is laughing at us because our witness is so divided and we speak with forked tongues.”²⁹ Witherington is not exaggerating. About the same time that Witherington wrote that sentence, Ronald Sider noted that evangelicals were just as likely if not slightly more likely to divorce than the general population.³⁰ Over time, evangelicals had given less and less a percentage of their wealth to charity even as they have become richer.³¹ The majority of evangelicals engaged in premarital sex, their rates of cohabitation were only slightly lower than the general population, and a significant number did not believe that extramarital sex is wrong.³² “The number of evangelicals that blatantly reject biblical sexual norms is astonishing.”³³ Sider cited studies that show that “theologically conservative Christians, according to these studies, commit domestic abuse at least as often as the general public.”³⁴ In the intervening time, not much seems to have changed. Eleven years later, the cohabitation rate among Christians had more than doubled.³⁵ Twenty years later, the Barna Group was still

27. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 113–26.

28. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 114.

29. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 247.

30. Ronald J. Sider, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience: Why Are Christians Living Just Like the Rest of the World?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2005), 18–20.

31. Sider, *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 20–22.

32. Sider, *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 22–24.

33. Sider, *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 24.

34. Sider, *Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience*, 26–27.

35. David Kinnaman and Roxy Lee Stone, “Majority of Americans Now

reporting that "Christians experience divorce as often as the general population."³⁶

I, too, worry about the neglect of ethics among theologians, though I suspect for different reasons than Witherington. There have been high-profile cases of theologians who were unethical, like Paul Tillich, Ronald Thiemann, Richard Pervo, and Ravi Zacharias.³⁷ The impact of theology on unethical behavior and unethical behavior among theologians affects more than just high-profile names. While I know this from personal observation and reported anecdotes, consider the following story.

Over a decade ago, the sociologist, Christian Smith, explored how the American sociology profession was generally devoted to a specific sacred project of

realizing the emancipation, equality, and moral affirmation of all human beings as autonomous, self-directing, individual agents (who should be) out to live their lives as they personally so desire, by constructing their own favored identities, entering and exiting relationships as they choose, and equally enjoying the gratification of experiential, material, and bodily pleasures.³⁸

Smith argues that, having rejected Christianity, it is as if "American sociologists felt compelled to fill in the sacred and eschatological void left in Christianity and Judaism's absence by constructing, embracing, and proselytizing the world with a secular salvation gospel of its own making."³⁹ In pursuit of this sacred project, Smith documents many examples of places where some sociologists have violated all sorts of ethical norms in pursuit of the sacred project. It is not, however, just sociologists who have embraced this project. For years, those in religious studies have been pursuing a holy grail, a religion that is politically progressive (basically one that is following American sociology's

Believe in Cohabitation," *Barna* (website), 24 June 2016, barna.com/research/majority-of-americans-now-believe-in-cohabitation/.

36. "Marriage and Divorce in 2025: Five Trends Shaping Today's Families," *Barna* (website), 12 November 2025, barna.com/trends/marriage-divorce-trends-2025/.

37. Christian Smith, *Why Religion Went Obsolete: The Demise of Traditional Faith in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025), 232–37.

38. Christian Smith, *The Sacred Project of American Sociology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 7–8 (emphasis removed).

39. Smith, *Sacred Project of American Sociology*, 20.

sacred project) that is growing or at least holding its own.⁴⁰ If such a religious movement could only be found and analyzed then perhaps its success could be replicated. Then they could have what they want: a properly politically liberal or progressive Christianity without what they consider all that Christ nonsense — in other words, a discipleship without discipline.

Enter Eliza Griswold, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and journalist. Her father, Frank Griswold, was the presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church from 1998 until 2006, when she was in her late twenties and early thirties. She describes:

When he consecrated the first openly gay bishop in 2003, I watched a modern schism in real time. This wasn't an arcane theological disagreement: it was a profound rift, and divided the church for good. Some evenings after dinner around our kitchen table, I watched my usually reserved dad put his head in his hands and cry over his failure to hold the church together.⁴¹

The younger Griswold wanted to show how progressive evangelicals were flourishing.⁴² One such group was an Anabaptist organization in Philadelphia, the Circle of Hope. In 2019, she asked permission to do an immersive journalism experiment where she embedded herself into the lives and meetings of the pastors to see how the church worked and what they were doing that made them a thriving progressive Christian church so that this could be replicated elsewhere.⁴³ What happened did not exactly go to plan. She wanted to describe the secrets to their success but instead ended up chronicling how the organization tore itself apart so that the Circle of Hope was bankrupt and defunct four years later.⁴⁴

Although Griswold tries to depict each of the pastors sympathetically, none of them comes off particularly favorably. They appear, in her telling, as variously ambitious, money-grubbing, dishonest, immoral, or profane — cheating and backstabbing each other in pursuit of gain,

40. See, for example, Tim Clydesdale and Kathleen Garces-Foley, *The Twenty-Something Soul: Understanding the Religious and Secular Lives of American Young Adults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

41. Eliza Griswold, *Circle of Hope: A Reckoning with Love, Power, and Justice in an American Church* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024), 3–4.

42. Griswold, *Circle of Hope*, 5.

43. Griswold, *Circle of Hope*, 7.

44. Griswold, *Circle of Hope*, 265, 313–15.

power, popularity, the lusts of the flesh, and the things of the world. Most important for our purposes is that Griswold chronicles in great detail the theology that the pastors were reading⁴⁵ and how it changed their thinking so that what they previously thought was good they later considered evil and what they previously thought was evil they came to consider good. Whether or not one agrees with any individual position that any of the pastors took before or after their theological readings, the fact that their theological reading diet reversed their intellectual and especially ethical positions is more than a little disturbing, particularly since all of this thinking was supposedly based on the Bible. Witherington insists that "we need to stop creating churches that essentially serve ourselves and nurture our own way and style of living, and do missions only as a bonus."⁴⁶

The Problem

If I fault Witherington for anything, it is that he does not take his project far enough. According to Witherington, "anachronism in the form of reading things into the text that aren't there is to be discouraged, not encouraged."⁴⁷ Unfortunately, Witherington's project, for reasons he seems only vaguely aware of, is one great anachronism of reading something into the text that is not there. The biggest anachronism that Witherington reads into the Bible is theology itself; theology is a term that never occurs in the Bible. Witherington goes further: "Put bluntly, we do not have 'theology' in the New Testament."⁴⁸ To understand why theology is unbiblical, we need to understand what Jesus and the New Testament authors understood by *theology*.

Plato first introduces the term *theology* in the second book of his *Republic* after a discussion of the perceptions of justice or righteousness (*dikaia*) and injustice or unrighteousness (*adikaia*). Is it better to be righteous or unrighteous? Do the benefits of righteousness accrue from actually being righteous or merely seeming to be righteous? Do

45. Griswold, *Circle of Hope*, 37, 57, 58, 63, 72–75, 77, 94, 98, 113, 141, 148, 162, 171, 217, 267, 295, 300.

46. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 248. Compare 3 Nephi 27:10–11: "And if it so be that the church is built upon my gospel then will the Father show forth his own works in it. But if it be not built upon my gospel, and is built upon the works of men, or upon the works of the devil, verily I say unto you they have joy in their works for a season, and by and by the end cometh, and they are hewn down and cast into the fire, from whence there is no return."

47. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 166.

48. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 229.

the benefits of being unrighteous come from being so or seeming to be so? The discussion concludes that one accrues the most benefits by being unrighteous but seeming to be righteous.⁴⁹ (As an aside, this is an important discussion for Christians since Jesus was really righteous but appeared to men not to be.) Plato's discussion then turns to how to best produce a well-ordered society, and the method is through theology.

In the original sense of the term, *theology* is a way of interpreting texts, particularly the poets Homer and Hesiod, who were memorized as part of the educational curriculum at the time.⁵⁰ "The word *theology* (*theologia*) was first introduced into philosophic discourse in Book II of Plato's *Republic*, where it describes models of the 'fine tales' that poets, broadly understood, ought to be required to tell children in a well-ordered city."⁵¹ Plato describes it this way: "First we will tell children (or slaves, *paidiois*) stories (*mythous*), which are on the whole false, but have a little truth."⁵² Then, they would establish censors (or administrators, *epistatêton*) to approve certain works,⁵³ and the ones that are unapproved would be censured, silenced (*sigasthai*), cancelled, or otherwise taken out of circulation.⁵⁴ This exercise of power is to manipulate people for political purposes and craft a society that those in power desire.⁵⁵ And this is called *theology* (*theologias*).⁵⁶ It tries to depict God the way that the theologians want him to be,⁵⁷ whether or not God actually is that way. To put it bluntly: For Plato, *theology* meant lies that men tell about God based on texts they do not think are true to manipulate, for political purposes, people they think are stupid.

In Jesus's day, theology had developed into a way of trying to explain — and mostly to explain away — Homer and Hesiod. It was part of a larger intellectual project of understanding the world through the lens of Greek philosophy, particularly Plato and Aristotle. As such, theology was of no interest to Jesus, his apostles, or the earliest Christians. Why should they care about how non-Christians interpreted Homer?

49. Plato, *Republic* II.361-366.

50. Xenophon, *Symposium* 3.5.

51. Louis Midgley, "Directions that Diverge: 'Jerusalem and Athens' Revisited," *FARMS Review of Books* 11, no. 1 (1999): 58.

52. Plato, *Republic*, II.377a.

53. Plato, *Republic*, II.377b-c.

54. Plato, *Republic*, II.378a.

55. Plato, *Republic*, II.378b-e.

56. Plato, *Republic*, II.379a.

57. Plato, *Republic*, II.379c.

Accordingly, *theology* is not mentioned anywhere in any Christian writing from the first century or so of Christianity. Witherington rightly rejects "ideas . . . that come from Greek philosophy and do not appear to comport with what the Bible says."⁵⁸

There is no explicit condemnation of theology in the New Testament simply because, at the time, theology was the attempt to explain Homer and Hesiod away. It explicitly dealt with texts that were seen not to be true (*mythous*). The apostles were testifying of things that were true, of events that actually happened. "For we have not followed cunningly devised fables (*mythois*), when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty" (2 Peter 1:16, KJV). Why would they need to bother with something so far afield? Still, they condemned philosophy (Colossians 2:8), and Witherington rightly agrees with them. This changed in the second century.

One of the problems in the Church in the second century was the presence of intellectuals. We know them from the Greek term for intellectuals: *gnostikoi*, or Gnostics. These intellectuals wanted the Church to be intellectually respectable. They tried either to reconcile the philosophies of the day with the gospel, or to portray contemporary philosophy as though it were the gospel. For example, the philosophical treatise, *Eugnostos the Blessed*, which did not even pretend to be Christian, was put into the mouth of Jesus during his forty-day post-resurrection ministry, and retitled the *Sophia Jesu Christi*, or wisdom of Jesus Christ.⁵⁹ This was one way that the intellectuals could make Jesus say what they wanted him to say, by couching their philosophies in words falsely attributed to Jesus. Another thing they did was to try to harmonize the story in Genesis with the current philosophies of the day.

The start of the problem is that any intellectual person at the end of the first century knew that "those who think that bodily matter is mixed with the divine are mistaken."⁶⁰ This meant that Jesus, as God, being incarnate in a physical body was a problem for those who wanted to be intellectually respectable. Philosophers knew that God did not have a body and everyone who wanted to seem intelligent just capitulated

58. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 109.

59. See John Gee, "The Apocryphal Acts of Jesus," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 2 (2012): 158, interpreterfoundation.org/journal/the-apocryphal-acts-of-jesus.

60. Plutarch, *On the Generation of the Soul in the Timaeus* 1022f.

to the philosophers. This extended to Jews rewriting their scriptures to accommodate Greek philosophy by avoiding anthropomorphism, depicting God as having a body and body parts.⁶¹ In Christianity, this coincided with the rise of Docetism, the idea that Jesus only seemed (*dokein*) to suffer on the cross, since every intelligent person of the day knew that God did not feel and certainly could not suffer. Thus, Ignatius at the end of the first century asks from his chains going to his death, “If—as some godless, that is faithless, say—He [Jesus] seemed to suffer (though they are the ones who seem), why am I bound?”⁶² “If these things done by our Lord were only seeming, then I am only seeming to be bound.”⁶³ Ignatius knew the difference between *seeming* and *being* and could see no point dying for a fiction.

One of the goals of philosophy at the time was to produce theology. Plutarch mentions a certain Demetrius the grammarian who proposed a “philosophy which had as its goal theology (*theologian*) as he called it.”⁶⁴ For the philosophers, according to Albinus (or Alcinus), there were three dialectics: the theological, the physical, and the mathematical. “The purpose of the theological dialectic is the knowledge of the cause of the first and the higher and the original things.”⁶⁵ For the philosophers of the day, God was “bodiless,” of course; this was the theological account of “first things (*archōn*).”⁶⁶ They spoke “about the first things (*peri tōn archōn*) and the theological things (*theologikōn*).”⁶⁷ How one got from an immaterial god to matter was accounted for in Plato’s *Timaeus*: Plato posited that the creator was entirely good, and only did good things.⁶⁸ That meant that the cosmos, which had evil, was a copy of something else.⁶⁹ At some point, they were copied badly (*kakōs an aphomoioi*).⁷⁰ Christians jumped on the bandwagon to produce works that were also about the “first things (*archōn*).” Thus, the Gnostics produced a work on “The basis of the

61. Paul V. M. Flesher and Bruce Chilton, *The Targums: A Critical Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 372–73.

62. Ignatius, *Trallians* 10:1. Compare Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans* 2:1.

63. Ignatius, *Smyrnaeans*, 4:2.

64. Plutarch, *The Obsolescence of Oracles* 410b.

65. Albinus, *Introduction* 7, in Carl Friedrich Hermann, *Platonis Dialogi* (Liepzig: B. G. Teubner, 1873), 6:161.

66. Albinus, *Introduction* 11, in Hermann, *Platonis Dialogi*, 6:166.

67. Albinus, *Introduction* 8, in Hermann, *Platonis Dialogi*, 6:162.

68. Plato, *Timaeus* 29e–30b.

69. Plato, *Timaeus* 29b.

70. Plato, *Timaeus* 50e.

first things (*archōn*)," commonly called *The Hypostasis of the Archons*. Clement of Alexandria wrote a now-lost treatise on the subject called "Explanation of First Things (*archōn*) and Theology."⁷¹ Origen also wrote a treatise on first things (*Peri Archōn*), usually mistranslated "On First Principles."

Tertullian famously solved the problem of Greek philosophy by rejecting Greek philosophy altogether: "What indeed has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the Academy and the Church? . . . Away with all attempts to produce a mottled Christianity of Stoic, Platonic, and dialectic composition!"⁷²

Origen's teacher, Clement of Alexandria, himself an intellectual, tried to solve the problem of the intellectuals a different way. He worried that the Gnostic sects were overrunning the Church with philosophy ("There are great crowds of such").⁷³ Revelation was something that was reserved for a future world.⁷⁴ In the present world, "the power that divinely spoke to Hermas through revelation said, 'Visions and revelations are for doubters, who debate in their hearts whether it is or is not so.'"⁷⁵ Not having any other means at his disposal, he turned to Plato's theology, and seems to have been the first Christian to use the term. Clement speaks in terms borrowed from Plato's introduction of *theology*. The sources of theology, Homer and Hesiod, are the same as they were for Plato.⁷⁶ Clement was a philosopher and tried to push philosophy on the Church and even claimed that what the prophets taught was theology.⁷⁷ He distinguishes between barbarian philosophy and true theology,⁷⁸ or right theology.⁷⁹ Clement classified visions and revelations as child's fables (*pais mythos*)⁸⁰ using the same vocabulary as Plato when he first used the term *theology* but in a way that completely reverses the earliest Church's understanding of those terms. Therefore, he reasoned that since "before the appearance of the Lord, the Greeks needed philosophy for righteousness, now it is

71. Clement of Alexandria, *Quis Dives Salvetur* 26.

72. Tertullian, *Prescription Against Heretics*, 7, as quoted in Witherington, *Rethinking*, 106.

73. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(3).22.1.

74. Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor* 1.6.

75. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(29).181.1.

76. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.(4).24.1.

77. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.(4).24.1.

78. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.(9).56.3.

79. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 5.(8).46.1.

80. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(29).180.5.

useful for piety.”⁸¹ Even an early Christian philosopher like Clement, however, acknowledged that philosophy was not a good guide to the things of God. “Philosophy,” says Clement,

does theology (*theologei*) in an understandable fashion, but it does not preserve exactness or particular details, for it treats neither the Son of God nor the way things work according to providence as we do, for it does not recognize worship according to God. Consequently, the sects of barbarian philosophy, even if they talk of God, or sing of Christ, talk according to their understanding, but not the truth.⁸²

Even for Clement, who promoted theology, theology was an inferior product. Though both Clement and his student Origen took pains to contrast the theology of the Christians from the pagan sources from which they had borrowed both the term and its usage,⁸³ for the next three hundred years, Christians continued to use the term to mean “theology in the wider sense,” the way it was used in pagan sources.⁸⁴

The adoption of theology, however, did not stop the problems as Clement hoped it would. According to the ecclesiastical historian Socrates, Alexander the bishop of Alexandria

at one time in the presence of the presbyters who were under him and the rest of the clergy, began speculating (*etheologei*, or doing theology), in a most vainglorious way (*philotimoteron*) concerning the holy Trinity, philosophizing (*philosophōn*) that the Trinity was a monad. A certain presbyter who was under him, Arius, a man not unpossessed of rhetorical skill, . . . taking the opposite position out of ambition (*philoneikias*, or competitive instinct) . . . vehemently responded to the things said by the bishop.⁸⁵

Thus “having constructed an argument from this novel reasoning, he stirred up many to contention, and from a little spark was ignited a great fire.”⁸⁶ The result of doing theology, in this case, was a creed.

81. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(5).28.1.

82. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 6.(15).123.2.

83. Clement of Alexandria, *Miscellanies* 1.(13); 5.(6); 5.(9).56.3; Origen, *Against Celsus* 7.42.

84. G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 627–28.

85. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.5.

86. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.6.

Eusebius, responding to criticism that the creed was not biblical, wrote: "we knew that previous bishops and ancient writers when discussing the theology of the Father and the Son did not use the word *homousios*" but the committee "after extensive examination of the issue, all agreed . . . having unanimously agreed to the stated rationale (*logismois*)."⁸⁷ The teaching was not biblical, but the committee of theologians worked hard and so the Church should simply acquiesce to their doctrine. It is interesting that later, Friedrich III (1559–1576) — having hired Calvinist theologians after firing all the Lutheran theologians in the University of Heidelberg who had been hired only three years earlier to replace the Catholic ones⁸⁸ — had Johann Sylvanus publicly beheaded for pointing out that one could not find the doctrine of the trinity in the Bible,⁸⁹ something that the committee at Nicaea had openly acknowledged a millennium earlier.

Witherington is aware on some level that the earliest Christians avoided theology. He writes: "You will look in vain to find this sort of systematic theologizing in the Apostolic Fathers, or the Patristic Fathers. Indeed, you will not find even a reasonable facsimile of this sort of theology before the later reflections of St. Augustine."⁹⁰ One reason is that, "Put bluntly, we do not have 'theology' in the New Testament."⁹¹ The other reason is that systematic theology, as a branch of theology, does not appear until the eighteenth century. It is, if possible, even less biblical.

If, as Witherington urges us, we should reject Greek philosophy and external frameworks, why should we use theology—a Greek philosophical framework—to understand the Bible or the gospel of Jesus Christ? It seems to me that the tendency for theology to be an eisegetical way of reinterpreting the scriptures to mean whatever the theologian wants it to mean—in Witherington's terms "a pretext for whatever you want it to mean"⁹²—has always been part and parcel of theology. Jesus had no need for theology, why should his followers?

87. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.8.51-52.

88. Oliver Fink, *Heidelberg: Kleine Stadtgeschichte* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2005), 48–53.

89. Fink, *Heidelberg*, 53.

90. Witherington, *Rethinking*, 84.

91. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 229.

92. Witherington, *Rethinking*, ix.

Conclusions

For Latter-day Saints, Witherington's methodology sounds a lot like the "gospel methodology" recommended by Spencer W. Kimball to Brigham Young University,⁹³ as elaborated by the Church Commissioner of Education at the time:

Latter-day Saint scholars will show the way by being able to read firsthand such ancient texts rather than relying on secondary scholarship, as was the case earlier in this dispensation. We will be able to reach such texts through a Latter-day Saint lens rather than relying solely upon able Protestant and Catholic scholars, of whom it is unfair to expect full sensitivity to the fulness of the gospel's doctrines and ordinances.⁹⁴

Latter-day Saint scholars have generally not followed that methodology, particularly not recently. Most self-proclaimed Mormon theologians have no training whatsoever in the original languages, just as they have no training whatsoever in theology. As Witherington wrote,

in an age of biblical illiteracy we must have a renewal of the commitment to contextual study of the N[ew] T[estament], including original language exegesis. We must stop watering down our Christian college and seminary curriculums so that students can escape without a hint of understanding the original languages and contexts in which the Bible was written.⁹⁵

Witherington, nevertheless, has shown what it looks like to read firsthand ancient texts through a Wesleyan lens. In many cases, the view is the same as, or at least similar to, a Latter-day Saint lens, though not in other cases, for which we can hardly blame Witherington. Indeed, we can thank Witherington for showing what following that methodology might look like.

Theology was not condoned by Jesus or the writers of the New Testament. It was a pagan philosophical interpretive framework imposed onto Christianity used from the very beginning to make the text mean whatever the theologian wants it to mean. As such, it has

93. Spencer W. Kimball, "The Second Century of Brigham Young University," in *Envisioning BYU: Foundations and Dreams*, ed. John S. Tanner (Provo, UT: Brigham Young University, 2022), 1:55.

94. Neal A. Maxwell, *Deposition of a Disciple* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 49.

95. Witherington, *Problem with Evangelical Theology*, 227–28.

always been a parasite on the body of Christ. It is precisely because I use a methodology that is similar to Witherington's that I utterly reject theology.



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