

## Jesus, Did You Know? Christ's Divine Omniscience and Human Ignorance Considered in Light of the Partitive Exegesis of Gregory Nazianzus

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### Abstract

Classical Christology has held that the two natures of Christ are united together in one person. Christ then possesses both divine and human attributes. This then creates a dilemma: how then does the God-man Jesus Christ experience ignorance as he seems to do in differing ways in Scripture? In various Gospel texts (Luke 2:40–52, Mark 13:32, Mark 5:30 in particular) Jesus is portrayed as growing in knowledge, admitting an unknown fact, and asking a question that he may not know the answer to. The texts cry out for a method of reading which allows for divine omniscience and human ignorance to be simultaneously affirmed. Gregory of Nazianzus' method of *partitive exegesis* gives us an historical example of such a method. I consider this exegetical method as a way not to complete resolution or comprehension of the inner psychology of Christ, but to hold in tension both divine omniscience and human ignorance.

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Every Christmas, some tinny Muzak version of the song “Mary Did You Know” is piped over shopping mall speakers. Written in 1984 by Mark Lowry and first recorded in 1991, it has become the subject of countless memes and is notorious for provoking debate on social media as to its theological merits or whether it is even a good song.<sup>1</sup> The song ponders whether Mary, the mother of Jesus, knew about all the things her divine/human son would go on to do. Whatever the musical or lyrical merits, the question of what Mary did or did not know does not approach real theological profundity. Far more compelling is the question of her son's knowledge. What did Jesus know about himself, the world, and the future? And how, if we accept his divinity, ought we to read texts where Jesus seems to

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1 I personally do not look forward to hearing this song each December.

lack knowledge? We must seek an exegetical method which can best accord with the full biblical account and creedal tradition.

Classically, it has been held that the two natures of Christ are in personal union within one person: a hypostatic union.<sup>2</sup> The one person of Christ possessing both divine and human attributes, he experiences all his divine-ness and all his human-ness concurrently.<sup>3</sup> But this ‘all’ creates a dilemma for exegesis: How are we to read instances where Christ appears to experience ignorance? Help will come through the *partitive exegesis* exemplified in the thinking of the fourth-century Cappadocian Father, Gregory of Nazianzus. His commitment to what would become the Chalcedonian view of Christ and yet his willingness to let the two natures “be themselves” provide an excellent model for how to engage with Christ’s apparent ignorance.<sup>4</sup> Whether Gregory of Nazianzus can give us a comprehensive understanding of how divine omniscience and human ignorance can coexist within the inner psyche of the God-man is another matter. This coexistence may be beyond comprehension. However, Gregory can, and does, provide a model of how to read confounding texts. If we want to hold to the confession of Chalcedonian Christology, we do need to see how we can exegete without either disregarding the Gospel descriptions or tearing apart the ancient Christological consensus. What can Gregory’s partitive exegesis offer us? What can this patristic reading method actually do? It does not give complete resolution of *how* the two natures of Christ operate regarding his knowledge. Rather, it gives a method of reading by which we can preserve the mystery of the *who* of Christ. Even if we cannot fully comprehend, we are at least able to hold to a confession.

The juxtaposition of divine attributes with human ones produces many questions. For the purposes of this inquiry, the questions will revolve around the knowledge of Christ, or apparent lack thereof. How can he fail to know a piece of information? How can he seek knowledge by investigation? At several points he appears to do these things. Jesus as a youth is said to grow in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:40–52). He claims not to know the day or the hour of the climax of eschatological events (Mark 13:32). Amid a crowd, he is touched by a woman and then asks: “who touched my garments?” (Mark 5:30). This is a candidate for what could be called a genuine question, one seeking an actual answer to an unknown. These three representative texts are immediately relevant to the question of the lack of knowledge, the ignorance, of Christ. They cover different angles of apparent lack of knowledge: the need to grow in it, the admission of an unknown fact,

2 Thomas C. Oden, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Harper One, 1992), 302.

3 Daniel J. Treier, *Lord Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 199.

4 For a short introduction see Cody Glen Barnhart, “Exegetical Lessons from Gregory of Nazianzus,” The Center for Baptist Renewal, December 7, 2020. Accessed online February 5, 2024. I am indebted to this short blog post for introducing Gregory of Nazianzus as a model for partitive exegesis.

and the act of asking a question to gain knowledge of what is unknown. How can we read these three discrete texts, and others like them, when they seem to call into question the divine attributes of Christ?

It might be helpful here to make a short comment on the use of the word “ignorance.” This word will be used throughout, in reference to any lack in Christ’s knowledge, either of himself or of the world. Some have wondered whether it is the best word to use at all. John Duncan thought that “Christ was *nescient* but not *ignorant*.”<sup>5</sup> This distinction was to avoid attaching any moral culpability to Christ. Donald MacLeod pointed out though, against Duncan, that *nescience* and *ignorance* are basically synonyms. So, following MacLeod, the term *ignorance* will be used throughout, though no moral failing is intended by its use.<sup>6</sup>

It will also be helpful to address what is meant by “knowledge” as epistemology is a vast and complex field. What the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, means by “knowledge,” or “to know,” covers a lot.<sup>7</sup> What is intended by the term, in my usage, is the broad array of facts, skills, information, and perception that is available to a knowing agent. Knowledge comes to us through education, experience, general familiarity, and understanding attained by judging and reflecting upon sense experience.<sup>8</sup> “Wisdom,” an expansive biblical category, is certainly not just knowing facts (Luke 2:40–52). While knowledge can mean cognitive awareness, it can also involve intuition and a sense of things, for example when Jesus “knew what was in man” (John 2:25). This kind of intuitive knowledge is distinguished from both reasoning and computation of empirical facts.<sup>9</sup> Knowledge can even be tacit, that is, difficult to explain or transfer to another. Consider what it means to “know” how to ride a bike or how to breastfeed.<sup>10</sup> When we speak of Jesus knowing, we may have in mind his hands knowing how to set a fishing net just as much as his memorization of an Isaiah scroll. Some knowledge is as much “in the hands” as it is “in the head.”<sup>11</sup> What the Bible means by “knowledge” also can include experience, personal relationship, and even covenantal

5 John Duncan, *Colloquia Peripatetica*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: David Douglas, 1879), 26. Emphasis added.

6 Donald MacLeod, *The Person of Christ* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 168.

7 It can even be euphemistic of sexual relations, see Genesis 4:1, at least in some English translations.

8 E. D. Schmitz, “Knowledge, Experience, Ignorance,” In *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, Volume 2*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976): 390.

9 G. H. Clark, “Knowledge” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 613.

10 See the fascinating project of Esther Meek, who applies Michael Polanyi’s theory of tacit knowledge to Christian faith and understanding. Esther Lightcap Meek, *Longing to Know* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003). Esther Lightcap Meek, *Loving to Know: Covenantal Epistemology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011).

11 Even this distinction between “hand” knowledge and “head” knowledge should be called into question. Also, the distinction between these and “heart” knowledge. We may get what is intended by such distinctions but whether they actually are warranted is another.

obedience.<sup>12</sup> What is meant by “knowledge” is not less than intellectual cognition, but it is also a great deal more.

### **Divine Omniscience and Human Ignorance Considered**

In the year 451, the Council of Chalcedon codified both the union of and the distinction between Christ’s two natures by pronouncing that they were without division or separation, and without confusion or change.<sup>13</sup> The Son never ceases to possess divine attributes, but concurrently he remains, in his incarnation as a human being, the possessor of finitude and limitations.<sup>14</sup> The lowliness of humanity is joined with the loftiness of divinity.<sup>15</sup> The *communicatio idiomatum* articulates that the properties of each of the divine and human natures are predicated of the one person, Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> This means that some things can be attributed to the divine nature, some to the human, but whatever ability, act, or experience has as its subject the one person of Christ.

Divine omniscience needs definition, and what follows will serve for what is meant by the term in this paper. Omniscience means that God knows everything there is to know. God has consciousness and knowledge of everything outside himself. His knowledge is exhaustive in all respects. Herman Bavinck writes that “Scripture nowhere even hints that anything could be unknown to him.... The notion that something should be unknown to him is dismissed as absurd. Would he who plants the ear not hear, and would he who forms the eye not see? (Ps 94:9).”<sup>17</sup> How God knows all things is due to his very divinity, his knowledge is related to his very being. His self-knowledge is complete because in his being there is no becoming, no process, no development.<sup>18</sup> He is completely himself within himself, and his knowledge has no grounding in anything outside of himself. He needs nothing to know everything. His aseity (complete self-existence) secures the utter independence of his knowledge.<sup>19</sup> God’s knowledge relates to his existence as Creator, it is not dependent on anything received from the world. God’s knowledge is not passive, receiving new information or stimuli from the

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12 See David Naugle, “What is Knowledge? Biblical/Hebraic Epistemology,” Summer Institute in Christian Scholarship, Dallas Baptist University, July 31, 2001. Seminar handout.

13 As per the Chalcedonian Definition.

14 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 256.

15 Hans Boersma, “The Chalcedonian Definition: Its Soteriological Implications,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992): 59.

16 “Communication of attributes,” Treier, 199. And Bavinck, *Volume 3*, 308.

17 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 192.

18 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 195.

19 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 196.

Creation. Instead, it is active, and all things exist because of his thought.<sup>20</sup> He does not learn or gain knowledge. God is eternal and so does not experience any succession of events as a growing perception. “He knows everything by one eternal act.”<sup>21</sup> In short, God knows everything because he is God, and he knows everything as God. This is what divine omniscience has been classically defined as.

Now, there are other ways some have conceived of God’s knowledge and other potential ways to read texts. Open Theism, and the related Process Theology, posit that the ignorance is not merely in the human but also in the divine nature.<sup>22</sup> God himself has information or experience denied to him in this array of views. Any type of Open Theism or Process Theology eliminates the need to wrestle with Christ’s ignorance as a Christological issue at all, as it places the ignorance back into the realm of theology proper. There is no need to wrestle with apparent ignorance or growth of knowledge in Christ because the Divine Being is said to be in need of learning and growth. God can be said to be omniscient in Open Theism but in a highly qualified way. God can know all that there is presently to know, but because the future is indefinite, it is not included in this definition of omniscience.<sup>23</sup> Advocates of Open Theism appeal to certain biblical passages.<sup>24</sup> But critics of Open Theism point out that there are just as many countering texts which indicate God’s complete control over events and outcomes.<sup>25</sup> Paul Helm, for example, argues that there will always need to be some kind of prioritization of which texts control the reading.<sup>26</sup> In this inquiry, I consider it best to consider texts which depict God as changing, relenting, or being acted upon as controlled by those which depict his all-knowing or unchanging nature. Likewise, texts which portray God’s (not the human Christ’s) asking after knowledge are best viewed as literary anthropomorphisms and examples of divine accommodation.<sup>27</sup>

Human ignorance hardly needs as much effort to describe as divine omniscience. We innately understand that there are many things we simply do not know. We don’t know the future, we don’t know a myriad of facts, we don’t know

20 Matthew Barrett, *None Greater: The Undomesticated Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 193.

21 Barrett, 194.

22 Open Theism generally involves the indeterminate nature of the future. Process Theology typically posits that God is temporally affected. The two schools of thought are not the same but are alike enough in the sense that they challenge classical conceptions of divine omniscience.

23 Edwin K. P. Chong, “On Jesus’ Eschatological Ignorance,” *Journal of Biblical Theology* 7, no. 2 (April–June 2024): 170.

24 Like Genesis 18 or Genesis 22:15–18, where God appears to alter his plans because of human choice or intervention. Or like 1 Samuel 15:10 where God appears to express regret.

25 Ferhat Yöney, “An Examination of the Biblical Evidence for Open Theism,” *Heythrop Journal* 61, no. 2 (2020): 256. For every 1 Samuel 15:11 there can be a 1 Samuel 15:29, where even in the same chapter God is said to repent and also not repent as such would go against his very nature.

26 Paul Helm, “An Augustinian-Calvinist Response,” in *Divine Foreknowledge Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001): 61–64.

27 For instance, Genesis 3:9 or Isaiah 6:8.

what is happening on the other side of the world, we don't even know ourselves. Regarding tacit knowledge, there are some of us who do not know how to master a fretboard with their fingers. Every human person begins as a baby and then must grow by learning things and gaining ability. We ask questions of all kinds, some of them rhetorical or pedagogical, but many seeking information. Jesus, as a true human being, does each of these. He grows, he admits he doesn't know something, he seeks information (Luke 2:40–52, Mark 13:32, Mark 5:30). Ignorance is a necessary implication of finitude. Human persons are very much finite. In fact, for a human being to be omniscient may even destroy that which is human in them.<sup>28</sup>

### The Dilemma Expanded

Jesus of Nazareth does at times seem to have supernatural knowledge. He sees Nathanael under the fig tree (John 1:48), something that could not normally be known. It is not difficult to imagine, though, how a human being could receive supernatural revelation. Other figures in Scripture receive revelation. If we assume Jesus's capacity for receiving such revelatory knowledge is far greater than others, it is still only a difference in degree and not in kind or principle.<sup>29</sup> Jesus sees within people, into their inner psyche even (John 2:25). There are many times where his knowledge is not mere cognition but is deeply intuitive. This again is not unimaginable. Just as an instance of supernatural knowledge is not omniscience, neither is telepathy. At any rate, it is not the presence of knowledge beyond human ability that causes the dilemma as much as the absence of divine knowledge in the Christ.

The incarnation was not a subtraction from divinity but the addition of humanity to it. It occurred not by "the conversion of divinity into flesh but by the assumption of humanity into God."<sup>30</sup> Gregory of Nazianzus, our soon to be conversation partner, gave his formulation in Oration 29:19: "what he was he continued to be; what he was not he took to himself."<sup>31</sup> It is far and away easier to imagine how the God-man can *gain* ability, knowledge or power beyond limited human capability. More mind-bending is imagining how the possessor of the divine nature could appear to *be absent* an ability, knowledge, or power. Furthermore, when it comes to knowledge specifically, it becomes even harder to imagine than other divine abilities and powers. It is at least somewhat imaginable how Christ could withhold some act of power by restraint just as a parent holds back beating their child at a board game. Conceivably, an act of power can be withheld, but how does one

28 MacLeod, 197.

29 MacLeod, 166.

30 Oden, 268.

31 Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Press, 2002), 86.

not know something that they know? How does one choose not to know? How do we read this?

Nestorius (d. AD 451) accepted the full humanity of Jesus but not that the divine Word was born of the Virgin Mary.<sup>32</sup> This caused his critics to object that he separates the two natures such that there was no essential union between them.<sup>33</sup> Acts of one of the two natures are not necessarily predicated to the one person. Christ then possesses not just two natures but is two persons, with whatever unity they have being dependent upon the moral agreement of two wills.<sup>34</sup> This could conceivably account for how Christ's divine omniscience and human ignorance could coexist but in a "dual-consciousness" model.<sup>35</sup> In Nestorianism, there can be no singular person of Christ.

Apollinarianism, unlike Nestorianism, affirms that there is one person in Christ, but the union is accomplished by the divine Word subsuming the human mind of Christ.<sup>36</sup> It denies that Christ has a reasonable human soul in either will or intellect.<sup>37</sup> None of Christ's perception, memory, intuition, or logic would be in any way human.<sup>38</sup> It is this Apollinarianism that Gregory of Nazianzus took aim against in his Letter to Cledonius.<sup>39</sup> Gregory writes:

Whoever has set his hope on a human being without mind is actually mindless himself and unworthy of being saved in his entirety. *The unassumed is the unhealed, but what is united with God is also being saved.*<sup>40</sup>

It is worth noting that one of Gregory's most well-known statements (italicized) is, in context, about the human mind of Jesus and how it has direct bearing on salvation. Our minds need saving, and this cannot be done unless Christ has a mind as human as ours. An Apollinarian Christology also potentially makes Jesus a liar every time he expresses a lack of knowledge.

Kenotic theory, based largely on Philippians 2:5–8, posits that in the incarnation the divine Son emptied himself of "all or some of his properties down to the level of the human development attained and then gradually won them back in the

32 C. Fitzsimmons Allison, *The Cruelty of Heresy* (New York: Morehouse, 1994), 121.

33 Allison, 122. It is doubtful that Nestorius himself taught full Nestorianism and it is quite likely that he was more orthodox than he is sometimes remembered. Nevertheless, it is Nestorianism considered here, not its namesake.

34 Allison, 123.

35 Andrew Loke, "The Incarnation and Jesus' Apparent Limitation in Knowledge," *New Blackfriars* 94, no. 1053 (September 2013): 595.

36 Allison, 107.

37 MacLeod, 160.

38 MacLeod, 164.

39 Behr, 401.

40 Gregory, 158. Letter 101:5. Emphasis added.

way of development.”<sup>41</sup> It was in fact due to the quandary of his human ignorance that Kenotic theory was first developed by Gottfried Thomasius and others.<sup>42</sup>

But the *emptying* that Paul speaks of in Philippians 2:7 has more to do with the intended ethical example of Christ in 2:4 than the attributes and their activation or deactivation. Scott Oliphant writes, “it is not as though Christ emptied himself *of something* [divinity]; that is not Paul’s point. Paul’s point is that Christ emptied himself *by becoming something* that he was not previously, something that, by definition, required humility and, ultimately, humiliation (Phil 2:8).”<sup>43</sup> The incarnation thus remains an addition to the divine Son and not a subtraction of anything. Nestorianism, Apollinarianism, and Kenotic theory serve as examples of insufficient resolutions, creating more problems than they relieve.

### Gregory of Nazianzus – The Theologian

In the summer of 380, Gregory of Nazianzus preached a series of orations, five of which (27–31) have become known as the *Theological Orations*. They, along with his *Letter 101: To Cledonius*, contain relevant insights to this discussion of how to interpret divine omniscience coexisting with human ignorance in Christ. Gregory lived and died before the Chalcedonian Definition of 451 asserted that the two natures of Christ are united unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, and inseparably. He is proto-Chalcedonian in that he anticipated and argued for what Chalcedon would later go on to define.<sup>44</sup> Some have suggested that Gregory believed in some sort of “mixing” or “blending” of the natures of Christ.<sup>45</sup> He does, after all, use this type of language. In Oration 29:19 for example, he writes, “Through the medium of mind he had dealings with the flesh, being made that God on earth, which is Man: Man and God, *blended*.”<sup>46</sup> He used the word surely, but he goes on to argue for the distinctness of the two natures. It is certain that whatever he meant by *blending* or *mixture*, he meant that divinity and humanity persisted in the union of Christ. Gregory’s view, according to Brendan Harris, was that the union is achieved by the interpenetration of the natures.<sup>47</sup> One can still distinguish between the ‘names’ of Christ which refer to his divinity or his humanity. This theological insight drove his exegetical method.

41 Bavinck, *Volume 3*, 263–64.

42 Treier, 202.

43 K. Scott Oliphant, “Most Moved Mediator,” *Themelios* 30, no. 1 (Autumn, 2004): 48.

44 C. A. Beeley, “The Early Christological Controversy: Apollinarius, Diodore, and Gregory Nazianzen,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 65, no. 4 (2011): 378.

45 Brendan A. Harris, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Christology of Mixture,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 73, Pt 2 (October 2022): 731.

46 Gregory, 86.

47 Harris, 775.

Gregory disliked novelty and innovation in theology.<sup>48</sup> Gregory also revered conciliar doctrine and the role of the church in formulation of creeds, seeing the consensus of councils as the Spirit's work.<sup>49</sup> His theological method was thus fairly restrained, remaining within the boundaries of Scripture and prior interpretive agreement. Gregory was interested in how the divine and human Christ may have tensions between his various attributes and roles. In Oration 29:20, he gives a long litany of seemingly opposing aspects of Christ.<sup>50</sup> He acknowledges the difficulty of this but encourages readers not to abandon the creed for the sake of faulty reason. The "frail organ of human understanding," he says, is no substitute for faith.<sup>51</sup> But neither does he abandon reason rightly aligned with faith. With Gregory "there is no hint of belief on the basis of the unreasonable. But there is also no sense of giving reason full priority."<sup>52</sup>

### Gregory's Partitive Exegesis

In Oration 29, Gregory acknowledges there is a great gap between Christ's divine activities and the "even lowlier expressions used about him."<sup>53</sup> He even mentions specifically Christ's ignorance, his asking of questions, his progress, and his growing up.<sup>54</sup> He then assures us that it is "not a hard task to clear away the stumbling block that the literal text of Scripture contains" so long as any of our puzzlement is in good faith and not just "willful malice."<sup>55</sup> He then delivers the principle by which we might rightly read Scripture:

In sum, you must predicate the more sublime expressions of the Godhead, of the nature which transcends bodily experiences, and the lowlier ones of the compound, of him who because of you was emptied, became incarnate and (to use equally valid language) was "made man." The next he was exalted, in order that you might have done with the earthbound carnality of your opinions and might learn to be nobler, to ascend with the Godhead and linger on in things visible but rise up to spiritual realities, and that you might know what belongs to his nature and what to God's plan of salvation.<sup>56</sup>

48 Wyatt Aaron Graham, "Gregory of Nazianzus: How the Church Formulates Doctrine," *Churchman* 130, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 47.

49 Graham, 50.

50 Gregory, 87–88.

51 Gregory, 88. Oration 29:21.

52 Frederick W. Norris, "Of Thorns and Roses: The Logic of Belief in Gregory Nazianzen," *Church History* 53, no. 4 (December 1984): 463.

53 Gregory, 85. Oration 29:18.

54 Gregory, 85.

55 Gregory, 86.

56 Gregory, 86. Oration 29:18.

This passage describes what has come to be called *partitive exegesis*. Not unique to Gregory, the term was coined by Lars Koen in reference to the Cyril of Alexandria's commentary on John's Gospel.<sup>57</sup> Augustine later defined it in *De Trinitate*.<sup>58</sup> Gregory's friend Basil of Caesarea argued for a partitive exegesis directly in reference to Mark 13:32.<sup>59</sup> Gregory of Nyssa examined Acts 2:36 in light of partitive exegesis to explain how God could "make" Jesus both Lord and Christ.<sup>60</sup> It is Gregory of Nazianzus, though, who in Oration 29:18 gave us the clearest fourth-century statement of it. John Behr summarizes it as this: "some things said of Christ pertain to his divine nature, while other things express what he has done for us in the unfolding plan of salvation."<sup>61</sup> Following this principle, it is always important that we see what is said about Christ as God and as human, though distinct in their properties, are applied to the one, personal subject.<sup>62</sup>

This is how such an exegetical method as Gregory's<sup>63</sup> explicitly avoids a Nestorian trajectory. Some predicates of Christ's divine nature could be listed as: eternal, all-knowing, all-powerful. Predicates of his humanity could be listed as: the son of Mary, a body with a rational soul, travelled in a boat on the Sea of Galilee.<sup>64</sup> What can be said to be true of one of the natures is nevertheless predicated to the one person of Christ. It is his divinity which makes him eternal, but we say that Christ, the one Person, is eternal. His human nature is the son of Mary, but it is true to say that the one Christ is the Son of Mary. It was this specifically that Nestorius tripped over and could not confess, that to be Mary's son could not be predicated to the one person of the Christ. Thus, she could not be properly called God-Bearer. Nestorianism flounders exegetically in three ways.<sup>65</sup> First, it lacks a single referent of Christological speech. Second, it fails to account for a genuine union of Christ's two natures. Third, it does not account for union of the incarnated actions of Christ.<sup>66</sup> A partitive exegesis like Gregory's explicitly avoids these Nestorian moves. Though some things Christ does can be said to

57 R. B. Jamieson and Tyler R. Wittman, *Biblical Reasoning: Christological and Trinitarian Rules for Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 154.

58 Augustine, *the Trinity* 2.2, quoted in Jamieson and Wittman, 154.

59 Basil, *Epistle 236:1*, quoted in Behr, 292. An example of how Basil exegeted Mark 13:30–32 is included below in the section "Admitting an Unknown Fact—Mark 13:30–32."

60 Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 15:2, quoted in Behr, 437.

61 Behr, 349.

62 Behr, 350.

63 And Cyril of Alexandria, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, and other patristic exegetes.

64 John Lamont, "The Nature of the Hypostatic Union," *Heythrop Journal* 47, no. 1 (2006): 16. These are Lamont's examples.

65 Once again granting that Nestorius himself may have been different than the Nestorianism refuted by his critics.

66 Glenn Butner, "The Need for Nicene Dogmatics," in *Classical Trinitarianism*, ed. Matthew Barrett (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2024): 710.

have extended from his divine nature, and some others could be said to extend from his humanity, there is only ever one “he.”<sup>67</sup>

This is how Gregory held in tension the apparent divine action and attributes of Christ and those of his human nature. He began his next oration continuing directly from this point:

We have now established a general, and I believe, clear solution, satisfactory to people of sound sense – the solution, I mean, of allocating the more elevated, the more distinctly divine expressions of Scripture to the Godhead, the humbler and more human to the New Adam, God passible for our sake over against sin.<sup>68</sup>

There it is: a solution offered to those of sound sense. Gregory goes on, in Oration 30, to immediately use this partitive exegesis with Proverbs 8:22, a text that occasioned Christological controversy in the fourth century.<sup>69</sup> Proverbs 8:22 was one of the most contentious verses in early Christological dispute. It could be read as undermining the doctrine of the pre-existence of God the Son, identified in Gregory’s day as the personification of Wisdom and the “me” referred to in the verse.<sup>70</sup> But Gregory’s exegesis can make sense of the human beginning of Christ alongside the divine pre-existence. The *creation* of Christ applies only to his humanity, while his eternal divinity is properly said to be *begotten*.<sup>71</sup>

A partitive exegesis always asks a biblical text about Christ this question: in what sense does this apply?<sup>72</sup> The referent of a text is discerned to be which of the natures is in view. Thus, partitive exegesis both recognizes and maintains the distinction between Christ’s human and divine natures.<sup>73</sup> Some things written about Christ may be true only of his human nature while others are only true of his divine nature.<sup>74</sup> Partitive exegesis is very much a “two nature” exegesis and so is very much in line with the unconfused, unchangeable, indivisible, and inseparable principle of Chalcedon. Jesus can be viewed as a true human being with the appropriate properties, actions, passions, and even limitations. The personal unity of the two natures is maintained and so does not erect a Nestorian wall of separation between them. So, when we come across any text concerning Jesus, the question of partitive exegesis is always: “which dimension of Christ’s existence

67 Behr, 352.

68 Gregory, 93. Oration 30:1.

69 Mark DelCogliano, “Basil of Caesarea on Proverbs 8:22 and the Sources of Pro-Nicene Theology,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 59, no. 1 (April 2008): 183.

70 DelCogliano, 186.

71 Behr, 353.

72 Jamieson and Wittman, 155.

73 Jamieson and Wittman, 155.

74 Jamieson and Wittman, 155.

is the author talking about?”<sup>75</sup> This is not to say that Christ alternates between his divine nature and his human nature.<sup>76</sup> He is both concurrently. We always say that it is the one person of Christ who is the subject, but in some instances his divinity is in the foreground and sometimes his humanity is, at least in terms of how a given text presents him.

Bobby Jamieson and Tyler Wittman take this patristic approach and helpfully distill it into some exegetical principles which lead into these accompanying principles and rules:

**Principle 6:** One and the same Lord Jesus Christ, the only be-gotten Son of the Father, exists as one person in two natures, without confusion or change, without division or separation.

**Rule 7:** The eternal, divine Son is the sole subject of everything Jesus does and suffers. Christ is one person, one agent, one “who.” Therefore, in reading Scripture’s witness to Christ we must never divide Christ’s acts between two acting subjects, attributing some to the divine Son and others to the human Jesus as if there were two different people.

**Rule 8:** Since Christ is a single divine person who subsists in both a divine and a human nature, Scripture sometimes names him according to one nature and predicates of him what belongs to the other nature. Scripture ascribes divine prerogatives to the man Jesus, and human acts and sufferings to the divine Son. So read Scripture in a way that recognizes and reproduces this paradoxical grammar of Christological predication.<sup>77</sup>

**Rule 9:** Scripture speaks of Christ in a twofold manner; some things are said of him as divine, and other things are said of him as human. Biblical reasoning discerns that Scripture speaks of the one Christ in two registers in order to contemplate the whole Christ. Therefore read Scripture in such a way that you discern the different registers in which Scripture speaks of Christ, yet without dividing him.<sup>78</sup>

These exegetical rules are a bit of a balancing act. We can see how Chalcedonian

<sup>75</sup> Jamieson and Wittman, 163.

<sup>76</sup> See MacLeod, 189.

<sup>77</sup> Jamieson and Wittman, 126. Their principles and rules cover many patristic insights. But only the later ones directly address partitive exegesis of Christ in the Gospels, hence we begin far down the list with Principle 6.

<sup>78</sup> Jamieson and Wittman, 153.

commitments are upheld in Principle 6 and Nestorian nature-splitting is forestalled in Rule 7. Rule 8 encourages the exegete to maintain the paradoxical presentation of Christ. Rule 9 introduces the idea of different *registers* in which each nature of Christ can “be itself” without dividing his personal unity. Like two keys played at the same time on a piano, one note might be discerned foremost by the ear while the other still rings. These rules represent what Gregory could have come up with if he had been pressed into making exegetical rules for us. They do accurately distill what he argues for in Oration 29 and 30. They give us a grammar which we can apply to scriptural passages; a lens through which to look, so as not to distort a text in one direction or the other. Now, finally, we can turn to our three texts from above (Luke 2:40–52, Mark 13:32, and Mark 5:30), instances seemingly portraying the ignorance of Christ.

### Gaining Knowledge as He Matures – Luke 2:40–52

At both the head and the tail of this passage there is reference to him growing and increasing in wisdom (v 40 and 52). This Lukan passage presumes Jesus’s growing in knowledge, but note that what is meant by “wisdom” need not mean mere cognitive information. The full biblical range of wisdom (existential, covenantal, character, and virtue) can be brought to bear in our reading of the text. Jesus’s increase of wisdom could involve self-awareness of his lordship and of his messianic identity. Herman Bavinck identifies different types of growth in Christ: in intellect, in faith, in moral development.<sup>79</sup> But it remains a conundrum as to how Jesus filled a previous lack with learning if he is divine and thus omniscient. Thomas Aquinas identified this as an objection to the doctrine of the incarnation in his *Summa Theologica*. The objection was expressly about whether Christ can have any acquired knowledge.<sup>80</sup> It is notable that Thomas dissented from the medieval majority opinion and saw Christ’s growth in knowledge as literal.<sup>81</sup>

A partitive exegesis allows us to see a true reality to his human growth. His childhood need not have been some illusion and his acquisition of knowledge (intellectual, moral, vocational self-awareness) is actual. Divinity cannot learn past omniscience, but Christ’s divinity is not in view here. The *register* being used here, to use Jamieson and Wittman’s term, is the human. Once again, Christ does not alternate between human and divine natures but in displaying him, a given text presents one of those natures as coming to the foreground. And so, we are to contemplate the union of Christ in light of this.

In his humanity, he grows and learns. A partitive exegesis, like one Gregory

79 Bavinck, *Volume 3*, 311–13.

80 Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 9, a. 4, trans. Benziger Brothers (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1948), 2077.

81 Kevin Madigan, “Did Jesus ‘Progress in Wisdom?’ Thomas Aquinas on Luke 2:52 in Ancient and High-Medieval Context,” *Traditio* 52 (1997): 180.

would use, allows us to avoid jettisoning that fact as Thomas's medieval contemporaries did, and allows us to respect what the text actually says. His divinity does not learn; his humanity does. But the one Christ is the subject of the action of Luke 2:40–52. Gregory himself pondered “how could Wisdom possibly need a teacher or be incapable of doing something without instruction?”<sup>82</sup> Yet he acknowledged as real and actual “his progress, and growing up.”<sup>83</sup>

### Admitting an Unknown Fact – Mark 13:30–32

As part of longer eschatological discourse, Jesus says to his disciples that “concerning the day or the hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.” Some commentators avoid the issue of Christ's ignorance by stating that it is not the main concern of the text. William Lane writes, “his purpose was not to define the limits of his theological knowledge, but to indicate that vigilance, not calculation, is required.”<sup>84</sup> We can grant Lane's point. But Jesus still admitted to not knowing a fact and just one unknown fact is enough to puncture omniscience. This text still compels us to question how Jesus could admit to an unknown. Gregory questioned it: “yet how can any fact be unknown to Wisdom, the worlds' maker, who perfects, transforms, and limits things created, who knows the things of God just as man's spirit knows the things in man?”<sup>85</sup>

Various resolutions to this conundrum have been proposed. Basil of Caesarea thought the language did not imply an admission of ignorance at all. His *philological* solution took the text to be “But of that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, *if not (ei me)* the Father.” Basil then reasoned that Jesus was in effect saying: “If I were not one with the Father, even I would not know the time of my second coming.”<sup>86</sup> Jesus was then not expressing his ignorance of a fact but his dependence on the Father for his knowing of it. Augustine and Gregory of Tours dismissed Jesus's statement as a mere figure of speech, and so it caused no problem for them at all.<sup>87</sup> In Oration 30, Gregory of Nazianzus saw Mark 13:32 as the perfect place to apply the partitive exegesis he had articulated just prior in Oration 29.<sup>88</sup> “Surely everyone will see that if you separate the real from the apparent meaning of the passage it is saying that he does know as God, but that, as man, he does not ... we interpret this ignorance in the most truly

82 Gregory, 101. Oration 30:11.

83 Gregory, 85. Oration 29:18.

84 William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark, The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 482.

85 Gregory, 106. Oration 30:15.

86 Francis X. Gumerlock. “Mark 13:32 and Christ's Supposed Ignorance: Four Patristic Solutions,” *Trinity Journal* 28, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 206.

87 Gumerlock, 207.

88 Gumerlock, 210.

religious way by ascribing it not to the divine but the human.”<sup>89</sup> Gregory was not alone in seeing Mark 13:32 this way. His contemporary Athanasius agreed with him as did Gregory the Great and John of Damascus in the period following.<sup>90</sup> A partitive exegesis permits us to exegete the ignorance as human, specific to the incarnated Son.

### Asking a Genuine Question – Mark 5:30

Anyone who has ever moderated a Q and A session knows that not all questions are seeking an answer. Jesus asked many questions and for many reasons. Most of them served some kind of pedagogical purpose, or to “pierce the minds and hearts of his listeners.”<sup>91</sup> In the instance of Mark 5:30, where a woman reaches out and touches Jesus’s robe, he was prompted to ask, “who touched my garments?” This question does not appear to be for some rhetorical or pedagogical purpose. Some commentators dismiss out of hand that this question could be genuinely seeking an answer. J. A. Alexander called the possibility that Jesus asked what he didn’t know “absurd” and reads the question along the lines of “I know it, but I wish you to confess it, for your own sake, and as due to me by whom the cure has been effected.”<sup>92</sup> C. S. Lewis referred to this specific question considering Christ’s human ignorance:

And if limitation, and therefore ignorance, was thus taken up, we ought to expect that the ignorance should at some time be actually displayed. It would be difficult, and, to me, even repellent, to suppose that Jesus never asked a genuine question, that is, a question to which He did not know the answer. That would make of his humanity something so unlike ours as scarcely to deserve the name. I find it easier to believe that when He said “Who touched me?” He really wanted to know.<sup>93</sup>

Lewis was correct in that this question, out of those asked by Jesus in the Gospels, is likely the best candidate to be a genuine one. In fact, there is no reason to believe it is not, unless one is pre-committed to its impossibility.

Gregory of Nazianzus’ partitive exegesis allows us to see Jesus asking a question seeking an answer without doing damage to his own divine knowledge. As God, he did not need to ask. As a man, he was curious to fill a gap in knowledge.

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89 Gregory, 106. Oration 30:15.

90 Gumerlock, 213.

91 Ferdinand Alexander, Zummy Anselmus Dami and Yanjumseby Yeverson Manafe. “Jesus’s Questions in the Gospel of Matthew: Promoting Critical Thinking Skills.” *Christian Education Journal* 18, no. 1 (April 2021): 93.

92 J. A. Alexander, *Mark, The Geneva Series of Commentaries* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1984), 130.

93 C. S. Lewis, *The World’s Last Night* (San Francisco: Harper One, 2017), 107.

The person of Jesus may have had many gaps in his knowledge and may have asked any number of questions. The *register* of his human nature comes to the fore in this text. This is its most natural meaning. The two natures are present within the one person but are not in competition. This can allow us to acknowledge and confess the presence and reality of both natures of Christ within the one personal subject, even if we cannot imagine what the inner psychology would be like. Full comprehension may not be possible for us, but at least we have a reading method where the biblical text and creedal tradition are both upheld.

## Conclusion

What can this method of reading actually give us? What does partitive exegesis do? Gregory of Nazianzus, with his partitive exegesis, did not give us complete understanding as to what it would have actually been like to experience both divine omniscience and human ignorance concurrently, as Christ did. It describes a reality that is hard for us to imagine. With partitive exegesis, mystery is not resolved but rather safeguarded. What it also does is preserve the conciliar Christology of the indivisible and unconfused dual natures of Christ. His divinity is not diminished. His humanness is not rendered unrecognizable by superhuman features. Is this preservation a retreat into mystery? A dodge? Theology does offer answers but not always ones that exhaust every mystery to arrive at comprehensibility. We can know enough to confess, not always to comprehend. Chalcedonian Christology is thus a matter for confession, even while it poses issues beyond comprehension.

Thomas Weinandy comments on the place of mystery in theology in his book *Does God Suffer?* He explores and defends divine impassibility, another hard to comprehend theological topic. Weinandy notes that at the heart of theological inquiry is faith that seeks understanding.<sup>94</sup> The expectations of this understanding ought not be conditioned on the expectation that we will solve every problem. He distinguishes, too, between problem and mystery. Problems aren't always solved, but mysteries can be apprehended, and in that apprehension is where the tensions of orthodoxy are guarded. He writes, "the true goal of theological inquiry is not the resolution of the theological *problems*, but the discernment of what the *mystery* of faith is."<sup>95</sup>

Sometimes the best we can grasp for is not the resolution that brings the most understanding but one that does the least damage to what we can and do know. Jesus Christ is one person; he has two natures. His divine nature is omniscient; his human nature has appropriate limitations. The chameleon has two eyes that can look in two separate directions. One can read about this in a science book, and

94 Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000), 28. He is referring to Augustine of Canterbury's principle *fides quaerens intellectum*.

95 Weinandy, 31. Italics original to author.

it can be logically understood. But can one actually imagine what that would be like, processing two images in our own single-visioned brains? This analogy cannot even come close to the knowledge—cognitive, existential, intuitive, tacit—of the person of Christ. It is doubtful, too that we can accurately imagine the inner psychology of the God-man—the All-knowing who grew in knowledge, lacked a fact, and asked an honest question seeking an honest answer. We can ask the question “Jesus, did you know?” In the register of his divine nature he did know, while concurrently in the register of his humanity he could answer in the negative. With partitive exegesis, following Gregory, this can be true, “though it cannot be imagined.”<sup>96</sup> Where comprehensive understanding ends, worship can begin. We can have true understanding of Christ, as there are formulations which accurately describe his dual natures and their union. But it is uplifting and hopeful to have something which hovers above what can be completely grasped. Finally, we can let Gregory have the last word: “If you make incomprehensibility a ground for denying the fact, it is high time you ruled out as non-existent a good number of things you do not understand....”<sup>97</sup>

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96 Lewis, 106.

97 Gregory, 76. Oration 29:8.