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The Lively God of Robert Jenson
—by David Bentley Hart

A year ago, I was interviewed by a small theological journal concerning a book of mine that had appeared a few months earlier. Near the end of the conversation, my interlocutor (a young and obviously intelligent divinity student) asked me if there was any modern American theologian whose thinking I thought especially fascinating, to which I answered Robert Jenson; he then asked if there was any American theologian with whose thought I myself found it especially profitable to struggle, to which I again answered, without a moment's hesitation, Robert Jenson. At this, my interviewer smiled abashedly and admitted that he had never read any of Jenson's work. I doubt the severest critic could have found fault with my extravagant show of alarm: How very extraordinary it was, I told him, that an American graduate student of systematic theology should be unacquainted with "our" systematic theologian, and what dereliction it suggested on the part of his teachers, and what a very great pity it all seemed . . . (and so on and so on, with many a rueful shake of the head).

This, of course, is a thoroughly boring anecdote; I relate it, however, because this small incident soon caused me to begin reflecting upon the curious neglect America's perhaps most creative systematic theologian has suffered not only among reasonably theologically literate American Christians, but in the academic world. I do not mean to suggest that Jenson is what one would call an obscure figure: Among those who do genuinely care about systematic theology in this country, his work is known and esteemed (indeed, by many, revered), and the appearance a few years ago of his *Systematic Theology* confirmed his stature not only as an exciting thinker—more theoretically audacious than almost all of his contemporaries—but one whose achievement is indisputably enormous. Still, as of yet (and he is over seventy years old), his thought is too little taught and too little studied; too few dissertations engage his ideas; not nearly enough attention is paid to his contributions to modern dogmatics; and too little pride is taken in the dignity his work lends to American theology. Why, I wonder, should this be so?

One reason, I suspect, is precisely that Jenson is an American (to be exact, a Minnesota Lutheran of Norwegian extraction, and of the "high church" variety). It is a prejudice widely held—but by no people more fervently than by Americans themselves—that it is not our calling as a nation to indulge in "primary discourse." It is all well and good for an American theologian to write at length about (for instance) what German theologians might have to say about the Trinity, but it is something altogether different for him to write too boldly about the Trinity as such. We would not usually—as a rule—presume. Another reason, perhaps, is Jenson's inveterate and perverse refusal to be dull. His books are not buttressed (as we know such things should be) by long, ponderous, Teutonic prolegomena on method or on critical history or on the *status quaestionis*; his scholarly apparatus rarely exceed what is necessary to support his assertions and are almost ascetically devoid of needless displays of exhaustive erudition; his method and peculiar concerns are typically disclosed in the act of theology itself, on the wing, and he tends to say what he wishes to say once only, and as concisely as he can.

Of course, this last characteristic can occasionally prove daunting. At its most idiosyncratic, Jenson's prose has about it at once a spare tautness and a condensed energy that are almost palpable; one sometimes has the premonition that if certain of his sentences are handled too casually they might detonate. Whether his style is the result of a conscious method, or merely of the legendarily laconic reserve of the Scandinavian upper Midwest translated through a rigorous speculative intelligence, it occasionally produces formulations of a positively oracular terseness. At times, one is conscious of the aphoristic precision of one of his assertions, but not necessarily of its meaning. To take a moderately opaque example of his style, more or less at random:

> "In Trinitarian theology "the Word" stands for God's identifying communication of himself, and is at once the content of God's self-conception that "I am the one who . . . " and the act of sharing that conception. If we may formulate a content of the unitary "Word of the Lord" that "came" to Israel by her prophets and moved her history, it can only be, "I am JHWH your God, who . . . . Therefore you shall . . . " This word, as actually spoken, is precisely the Trinitarian Logos."

This is not by any means unintelligible, nor (whatever one thinks of it) especially resistant to paraphrase; but neither is it making any great effort to do at least as much work as it demands of the reader. And sometimes Jenson is clearly more concerned for the force of a phrase than for its felicity—"God is a great *fugue*," for instance (the poetry lies here in the idea, I think it safe to say, rather than in the words). At such junctures, his prose does not exactly "sing." Still, for the most part, Jenson is a compelling writer, altogether more precise than one has a right to expect in regard to matters as subtle and intricate as those he chooses to address, with something of the dramatist's flair for keeping the action moving. And, as a result, it is difficult to resist the power of the theological story he tells.

Perhaps the simplest thing one might say about Jenson's theology is that it is a theology of the *living* God. To put the matter thus, however, scarcely conveys any inkling of the vibrancy of Jenson's sense of God's liveliness, or of the force with which that sense has impressed itself upon—and occupies every page of—Jenson's theology: There is nothing in the triune God, one might better say, that is not an infinite act of life—and that life an act of boundless love. God *is* the movement of the Father's love for the Son, and the Son's love for the Father, and their inexhaustible life together in the endless love of the Spirit; and within that movement is contained all beauty, glory, splendor, joy, and future. As Jenson insists upon saying, God is an event—the event, to be precise, of Christ in its eternal fullness—and this event has a real and concrete history. To understand what this means, however, one must understand how Jenson's thought stands in relation to the Christian dogmatic tradition as a whole.

Most Christians, no matter how orthodox or devout they may be, have (through no fault of their own) little notion of how the doctrine of the Trinity took shape, or why it assumed the form it did. Few, certainly, take an interest in the doctrinal disputes of the Church's early centuries, and many harbor at best some vague conception of the Christian doctrine of God that, if more closely examined, turns out to be either some version of one of the heresies rejected by the councils of the ancient Church—"tritheism," "adoptionism," "modalism," even "Arianism"—or a bland ethical Unitarianism bound only tenuously to the historical career of Jesus of Nazareth. Many, I suspect, think of the doctrine of the Trinity (when they have occasion to think of it at all) either as a mere revealed "fact" susceptible of no rational investigation or as something rather arbitrary and historically fortuitous, to be embraced *ex convenientia* but accorded little serious reflection. In fact, however, the orthodox articulation of Trinitarian theology came at the end not only of many decades of extremely complicated theological dispute, but also of centuries of meditation upon the meaning of the scriptural account of Christ's life, death, resurrection, and continued presence to the Church in the Holy Spirit.

At the beginning of the fourth century, there were many models by which Christian theologians attempted to grasp the nature of the interrelations of Father, Son, and Spirit, and to determine to which of the three Persons—and in what manner—it was correct to apply the name "God." Scripture made it impossible, of course, to deny Christ at least some ascription of divinity, and equally difficult to reject the divinity of the Spirit. But it was by no means clear to all that the three divine Persons should be understood as co-equally, co-eternally, or "co-essentially" one and the same God. Hence, the most appealing, intellectually sophisticated, and plausible fourth-century alternative to what would become Nicene orthodoxy was some variant of "subordinationism." This was the school of thought (especially well established in the great city of Alexandria) that saw the Son and Spirit as derivative and lesser emanations of the Godhead of the Father—"economically" reduced versions of God mediating between the transcendence of the Father, who dwelt in light inaccessible, and the darkness of the material world.

This was a version of what is sometimes called the "pleonastic fallacy," which pervaded almost every school of Alexandrian thought: the fallacy that says that—since there is an infinite qualitative distance between the ultimate principle of all reality and the world of "unlikeness" here below—it is necessary to posit a certain number of intermediate principles or "hypostases" in the interval between the two in order to bridge that distance. The most speculatively accomplished forms of this fallacy were to be found among the Neoplatonists, and the most barbarous, fabulous, and risible among the various Gnostics. But among Christian thinkers the most consistent and austere form of this fallacy was found among the Arians, who were so anxious to preserve a proper sense of the Father's transcendence that they were moved to assert that the Son was a creature: the highest and most god-like of creatures, of course—worthy even of being called "God" honorifically, the Great High Priest of heaven who leads all intellectual creation in its worship of the unknowable Father—but a creature for all that.

There would be no purpose in rehearsing here the long history of the Arian controversy and its sequelae. What is important in this context is that the dogmatic discords of the fourth century forced theologians to examine perhaps more deeply than ever before (or, at least, more explicitly) the governing logic of the Church's immemorial Trinitarian diction. The greatest achievements of this period, in defense of Nicene orthodoxy, were those of the so-called Cappadocian fathers: Basil of Caesarea, Basil's younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and Basil's friend Gregory of Nazianzus. These three, in the course of their disputes with the "Eunomians," the intellectual heirs of the Arians, grasped with a special urgency that a proper attention to biblical language regarding Father, Son, and Spirit—and, most particularly, regarding the story of our salvation in Christ—makes a subordinationist construal of that language impossible. I am simplifying their arguments rather brutally in phrasing the matter thus, but the essence of their position was that if the Son and Spirit are not God in the same sense as the Father, we cannot be saved.

It must be appreciated, I hasten to add, that "salvation" was not understood by the Cappadocian fathers in that rather feeble and formal way many Christians have habitually thought of it at various periods in the Church's history: as some sort of forensic exoneration accompanied by a ticket of entry into an Elysian aftermath of sun-soaked meadows and old friends and consummate natural beatitude. Rather, salvation meant nothing less than being joined to the living God by the mediation of the God-man Himself, brought into living contact with the transfiguring glory of the divine nature, made indeed partakers of the divine nature itself (2 Peter 1:4) and co-heirs of the Kingdom of God. In short, to be saved was—is—to be "divinized" in Christ by the Spirit. In the great formula of St. Irenaeus (and others), "God became man that man might become god."

It is precisely here, therefore, in the economy of salvation, that the true nature of the eternal Trinity must declare itself—for, simply said, no creature could ever join us to God. The calculus of the infinite is absolute: The finite can never reach the infinite, the created can never aspire to its transcendent source, and nothing—no economically reduced manifestation of the God-head, no "ontological pleonasm" of

mediating principles, no conceptual Tower of Babel erected upon the foundations of the human spirit—can unite us with God save that God in His mercy condescend to unite us to Himself, by becoming one of us. If the Son saves us by joining us to the Father, then the Son must necessarily be, in every sense, God of God, essentially and infinitely. But, then again, how are we joined to the Son? By the Holy Spirit—in the sacraments and corporate life of the Church and in His sanctifying work within the soul—and so the Spirit too, it follows, must be God of God, no less than the Son. Only God can join us to God, and so we must affirm that in the incarnation of the Son and actions of the Spirit God Himself is in our midst. Or rather, more wonderfully, we are in the midst of God, and the movement of relation among the three divine Persons, as it is unfolded through salvation history, is nothing less than the triune God drawing us into the infinite splendor of His life.

Trinitarian doctrine, then, is not merely an abstract metaphysics forcibly imposed from above upon the more spontaneous and vital experiences of the Church (though it most certainly requires and gives shape to a number of profound metaphysical conclusions); it is first and foremost a "phenomenology of salvation," a theoretical articulation of the Church's experience of being made one in Christ with God Himself. It would not be too much to say, in fact, that this is the central and guiding maxim of all Christian dogmatics, which in the twentieth century was enunciated with admirable clarity by Karl Rahner: The "economic" Trinity (that is, God in the history of salvation) is the "immanent" Trinity (that is, God in Himself) and the "immanent" Trinity is the "economic" Trinity. In witnessing the drama of redemption, we are seeing nothing less than the triune God's revelation of His eternal life within time; and so in that drama we may discern (within the limits of our created intellects) who God is.

This, at last, brings me back to Jenson, for it is Jenson's special distinction to have pursued the logic of this equation—at least, along a very particular path—more relentlessly than almost any other American theologian, in a way at once faithful to and defiant of classical Christian language. Traditionally, even in implicitly acknowledging the necessary identity of the economic Trinity and immanent Trinity, Christian theology has striven to preserve a strict and inviolable "analogical interval" between the two—that is, it has always asserted that what happens in the story of salvation is a perfect *expression* (or dramatic revelation) of how it is with God in His timeless eternity and how it would be even were there no creatures at all, but also that between this temporal expression and its eternal source there is a relation only of grace. God is not affected by time, His eternal identity knows neither before nor after, and the incarnation of the Logos is in no sense necessary to or determinative of that identity. Jenson, however, falls within a school of modern, predominantly Protestant thought that chooses to collapse this analogical interval, and to assert that the event of our salvation in Christ and the event of God's life as Trinity are simply one and the same; what occurs in Jesus of Nazareth is in some sense the story of God becoming the God He is, within which story we are also included—for love's sake.

The first and most enormous consequence of the course of reflection Jenson takes—a consequence he exuberantly embraces—is that he must reject many of the classical perfections ascribed to God, at least as they have traditionally been understood. For instance, the venerable teaching that God is, in His nature, impassible—that is, immune to suffering and change—Jenson all but absolutely abjures. More to the point, the very definition of God's eternity as "timeless" Jenson regards as unbiblical and incompatible with the story of creation and redemption. God's eternity, he claims, is intrinsically temporal, however much that temporality may transcend the fragmentary successiveness by which the days of creatures are measured. God possesses a past, present, and future, though in His infinity He possesses all of these in perfect fullness. The Father, for Jenson, is the whence of the divine life, the Spirit the whither, and the Son the present in which the divine past and divine future hold together in one life and identity.

Moreover, God's "present" is not something that can be abstracted from the particular historical identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Here is where Jenson's thought is perhaps most radical, and most in accord with one

very pronounced extreme within modern Protestant dogmatics; for in his theology it is as the man Jesus—and in no other fashion—that Christ is the eternal Son and Word of the Father. There is no *Logos asarkos* for Jenson—that is, no timeless and "fleshless" Word of God; rather, God the Father has decided from all eternity to determine Himself in this man as His Son, to make Jesus the object of His perfect attention and complete preoccupation, and thereby to determine Himself as the Father of this Son. As the unique object of the Father's absolute concern, the man Jesus "stays" the consciousness of the Father and gives it the shape that it has. The eternity of the Son, therefore, begins as the eternal presupposition of the election of Jesus in the infinity of God's choice; the preexistence of the Son is not a preincarnate state, but rather a pattern of movement within salvation history toward the arrival of this "incarnation."

Who God is, therefore, subsists in the Father's loving concern for the Son and the Son's loving obedience to the Father, and in the freedom of the Spirit who—as unending divine futurity—makes this relation eternal. In Jenson's rather daring formulation, the Spirit "frees" the Father and the Son for the adventure of this love and for the infinite possibility that is this love's perfection. As for us, our place in this drama is that of the companions of the Son; we are included in the story of God's freedom because Christ is the man who is for all men, and so for the Father to have Christ as His Son He must have us as well; for there is no Son apart from Him who said "Father, forgive them." And thus we are taken up into the one story of God's infinite love, in which all our particular and shared stories—insofar as they are true stories—live, and move, and have their being.

Another implication of this line of thought, from which Jenson does not shrink, is that not only does God overcome death for us in the death and resurrection of Christ, by virtue of His transcendence; He in fact overcomes death *for Himself*, indeed constitutes Himself *as* transcendent of death by way of His confrontation with death upon the cross and His triumph over death at Easter. Which is also to say that—inasmuch as God has eternally decided to determine His identity in this man—God has eternally elected the world of sin, death, and the devil "alongside" His election of the Son as the context in which the drama of triune love must be played out. Thus, even the fallenness of our world falls within the story of God's life as Trinity, but only insofar as that fallenness is overcome by God in Christ. There is sin only that we might be saved, for it is as the God who saves that the Father determines Himself in His Son, and raises the Son by the Spirit, and draws us into that mystery. The triune "event" that God is, then, involves the cross of Christ not as something incidental or subsidiary, but as (so to speak) its axis: the moment in which the Father's love for the Son and the Son's obedience to the Father arrive at their crisis, and in which the Spirit lifts up that love and obedience into an eternal living future.

One might justly wonder, though, how such thinking accords with traditional understandings not only of God's transcendence but of the Person and nature of Christ. After all, if indeed Irenaeus' formula is correct (and it most certainly is), how can the man Jesus—as a man—be the unique instance of a perfect union between divine and human natures in a single Person, through whom we are admitted to a share in divinity? And how can the consent of Jesus' human will to the divine will within Him serve to reconcile humanity with God? How can the divine and human wills be said to subsist together in His one Person if it is only as the man Jesus that He is the Son of the Father? But, again, Jenson's central claim is that God *is* the event of what happens between the Father and Jesus, as enabled by and lifted up in the Spirit. And so it is the human Jesus who is the second Person of the Trinity, and the human will within Jesus that is the divine will of the Son. Hence, the perfect human love of Christ for the Father, and His perfect assent to the Father's will, is also the salvific divine decision that sets all of us free, and the one great High-Priestly act whereby the Son hands all of us over—in our corporate nature—to the Father's love.

Summary is usually invidious. It is not possible to provide any great sense of the subtleties of Jenson's arguments here, nor to sketch in many of the more beguiling details of his exposition, nor certainly to convey any sense of the great biblical sweep of his narrative. And I should myself be candid and admit (in

case I am—or will be—guilty of any inadvertent misrepresentations) that there is scarcely any aspect of the theological story I have just told with which I am not in profound disagreement—for reasons I believe to be at once biblical, doctrinal, philosophical, and historical. I write neither as a disciple of Jenson's, nor as a "Jensonian," but only as an admirer. But, for just this reason, I think I give myself license to declare something like perfect disinterest in the high claims I wish to make on Jenson's behalf.

There are, one should note, many extremely good reasons, thought out over many centuries, why theologians have for the most part found it impossible to do without the "analogical interval" between God's immanent life and His economic revelation of Himself, and have wanted to deny the identity of divine and human wills in Christ, and have found it necessary to affirm the *Logos asarkos*. Moreover, many of Jenson's interpretations of several of the Church fathers—the Cappadocians, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor—are (to say the least) controversial and perhaps somewhat eccentric. There are also compelling arguments as to why it seems logically impossible to attribute actual temporality of any kind to God's eternity, and some would even argue that it was Christian philosophy (not pagan Greek thought) that first enucleated a perfectly coherent account of God's transcendence of temporal succession. And, of course, a great number of very reflective theologians continue to believe that the classical perfections traditionally ascribed to God—simplicity, timelessness, and above all impassibility—are vital not only to a rationally coherent description of the Christian faith, but to a consistent interpretation of Scripture, and indeed to the very essence of the gospel.

All that said, even the most traditionalist of theologians—even those most implacably averse to the sort of approach to Trinitarian theology that Jenson's thought represents—should be prepared not only to praise Jenson, but to submit their convictions to his interrogations. He is simply one of the most provocative, ingenious, and formidable proponents of a certain kind of Trinitarianism writing today, and he possesses a singular power to call any number of comfortable traditional certitudes into question. More to the point, theologians of every stripe should praise him for enunciating a Trinitarian theology with whose biblical *shape*—that is to say, specifically, his reading of scripture as Trinitarian throughout—it is impossible to take issue. Indeed, if one contemplates that shape in all its contours, one must almost certainly acknowledge that, were it not for the absence of the aforementioned "analogical interval," Jenson's theology might well appear to be the purest orthodoxy. And yet that interval remains absent: It is a small difference; it is an immense difference; and it is a difference that cannot be negotiated away, mediated in some third term, or reconciled.

At the same time, however, no one familiar with the development of modern theology could really deny that there is something of an historical fatedness in this irreconcilability; and this is a sobering and chastening thought. Jenson most definitely comes from that Protestant tradition that has long deplored (without doubting the historical necessity of) the alliance struck between the theology of the early Church and "Hellenism"—or, to be more precise, "Platonism."

But there is another venerable school of thought that still regards this alliance as definitive and indissoluble, and is therefore predisposed to view that part of Protestant tradition that Jenson represents as misguided and destructive. After all, it is arguable that "Hellenism" is already an intrinsic dimension of the New Testament itself and that some kind of "Platonism" is inseparable from the Christian faith. In short, many theologians view the development of Christian metaphysics over the millennium and a half leading to the Reformation as perfectly in keeping with the testimony of Scripture, and "Hellenized" Christianity as the special work of the Holy Spirit—with which no baptized Christian may safely break. To such theologians, the alliance struck in much modern dogmatics between theology and German idealism is a far greater source of concern than any imagined "Greek captivity" of the Church.

Here, however, one must tread cautiously. There was among theologians a great revival of interest in Trinitarian theology during the latter half of the twentieth century, but it tended to fall into two distinct camps: those who sought to rearticulate the doctrine of the Trinity by way of a full return to the patristic and medieval sources of the tradition, and those who did so directly in response to—and so largely in the terms of—the "Trinitarian" metaphysics of Hegel and others. It is with this latter camp that one tends to associate the collapse of the analogical interval that Jenson seems to advocate; at first glance (and at several glances thereafter), it is extremely easy to read Jenson merely as a representative of the German idealist tendency in modern dogmatics, and specifically as a disciple of the greatest of the German idealists, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, in his early phase. But Jenson actually, it seems, takes his arguments from his own reading of Scripture; I have it on good authority (Jenson himself, to be exact) that Schelling's thought has had no appreciable direct influence on Jenson's at all.

Nevertheless, it is hard not to place Jenson in that company, if for no other reason than that he is willing to speak of God becoming the God He is, determining Himself in time, *choosing* to be *this* God—the Father of Jesus of Nazareth—and doing so in an irreducibly temporal fashion. If nothing else, in reading Jenson a theologian committed to traditional Catholic metaphysics will almost inevitably find himself suffering from the same apprehensions inspired in him by other, more indisputably "Teutonized" theologians, and thus he will find himself raising certain very classical objections to what he is reading: Does it make sense, ultimately, to speak of God both as the source of all being and yet as *becoming* the God He is? Can temporality be intelligibly ascribed to God without one's theology lapsing into contradiction or myth? What of the moral nature of God, if He must elect sin, death, and evil as the context of His self-determination in time? If it is true that, in order for God to transcend death, He must triumph over it in time, is death then an independent reality over against God?

Perhaps most crucially, what could it mean to speak of God determining Himself, of God choosing to be the God He is? Could He choose otherwise? Is there—as classical Christian thought has always denied—"possibility" in God, potential that must be realized? How then could He be the infinite source of all actuality, from which everything draws its being? There really are many very sound reasons why the Church has long maintained that this sort of deliberative choice—this sort of arbitrary power of decision—would be an imperfection in the divine nature, a mark of finitude, in fact a limitation upon the divine freedom. God *is* God, and the infinite eternal actuality of this "is"—unbounded by any outward necessity, never needing to become what it is, undimmed by possibility, undivided by succession—is absolute freedom. And so it must surely be degrading to the divine majesty, many are inclined to think, to speak of God *choosing* to be the God He is.

And yet precisely here one encounters perhaps the best example of Jenson's power to shake even the firmest traditionalist certitudes. No one else's theology that I know of has the biblical depth to make theologians of my persuasion so poignantly conscious of the metaphoric limitations that encumber all the words we attempt to use of God, and of how quickly our terms can disintegrate into incoherence when we attempt to press them past a very rudimentary level of signification. When Jenson speaks of divine temporality, he surely does not mean to suggest that God experiences time as we do: as loss, as the possibility of things that may never come, as always fragmentary and haunted by disappointments and vain longings, as a future never yet possessed and only dimly imagined, as a present forever slipping away into oblivion, as a past mourned or regretted. Nor certainly, I am sure, does he speak of God's decision to be *this* God intending us to understand that decision in a human way. For us, after all, decision is always preceded by some kind of indecision, and no decision can be reached that is not in some sense the arbitrary selection of possibilities confronting us from outside ourselves. One may find the language of "choice" unsatisfactory, but no one who reads Jenson should be unwilling to acknowledge that the mere denial of "choice" within God is no less inadequate to the truth theology wants to describe. For in saying

that God's nature suffers no constraints, one should want also to urge that God is not passively or indifferently the God He is, and that His will abides in perfect freedom. And to speak of this mystery, no language really suffices.

My principal reason, however, for thinking Jenson's work so enormously important for serious theologians, or even just for reflective Christians who have had the good sense not to become theologians, has to do with the single great Christian mystery from which all theology arises: the mystery of the Person of Christ. For numerous reasons (which cannot be enumerated here, alas), it is an absolutely essential theological principle that there is nothing arbitrary or accidental in the relation of the identity of Jesus of Nazareth to that of the eternal Logos. Jesus is not an avatar of the Logos, a mask the Son assumes in a transient or extrinsic fashion, or a part he plays in some grand cosmic charade. When God becomes man, this is the man He becomes—and there can be no other. That is why it is silly to ask the questions that bad theologians, or casual catechists, or well-meaning Sunday school teachers have sometimes felt moved to ask: whether the Son might have been incarnate as someone else—as a Viking, or a Nigerian, or a woman, or simply another first century Jew. The Logos, when He divests Himself of His divine glory, is this man; between this finite historical individual and the eternal and infinite Son of God, there is no caesura. Jesus is not just one manifestation of the Son, but the Son in His only true human form.

It is an understanding of just this truth that lies at the very heart of Jenson's theology, and that constitutes its secret motive power in every part. Jenson's thought represents, to my mind, the most ambitious and unflagging attempt any American theologian has yet made fully to grasp the uniqueness of Christ—the one incommutable human identity of the incarnate God—which is no simple thing. When any theologian is daring enough to risk reflection upon this mystery, he is immediately immersed in all the other mysteries that must attend it: time and eternity, necessity and freedom, divine sovereignty and divine abasement—above all the mystery of where Christ's "cry of dereliction" on the cross ("My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?") falls within the life of the Trinity. Jenson has never failed to struggle with any of these questions.

This is not to say that the theologian whose convictions in this matter run counter to Jenson's cannot plausibly argue precisely the contrary case: that only by affirming God's timelessness and the reality of the *Logos asarkos* can we truly say that the identity of Jesus of Nazareth is in no sense arbitrary and that God has not somehow chosen this one man out of an infinity of other possibilities. But this in no way diminishes the power of Jenson's meditations upon the mystery of the identity of the divine Son or the appeal his thinking should exercise upon any theologian concerned to approach that same mystery in an attitude of reverent inquiry. In the end, as I have already more or less argued, it is the entire shape of Jenson's narrative that proves so compelling, as that narrative unfolds around the Person of Christ. Here one need only direct the reader to Jenson's work: there (especially in his *Systematic Theology*) one will find an account of the triune God drawing near to us—and of us drawing near to Him—of extraordinary richness, one that is (depending on one's temperament or intellectual affiliations) either seductive or scandalous, but one that is also impossible to dismiss or forget.

Again, I feel free to plead my own disinterest where Jenson is concerned. As it happens—to return to the anecdote with which I began—whatever elf or imp it is that arranges the little ironies of our lives had contrived that, on returning home from the interview with the young divinity school student that I mentioned above, I should find an e-mail waiting for me from a fairly authoritative interpreter of Jenson's work, complaining that my critique of Jenson's theology, in the very book concerning which I had just been interviewed, had been written in such a way as to appear merely as an exemplary episode within my own narrative of modern philosophy, and thus had all but entirely failed to provide a balanced account of Jenson's theological intentions, or of the greater scope of his thought, or of the biblical concerns animating it. And after some hours of indignation, I came to the conclusion that this was quite probably

true. Hence this article (though I cannot be sure I have not merely compounded my earlier malfeasance with an inadequate synopsis).

So, speaking for myself, I wish to say only that I find it impossible to have done with Jenson's work, or to cease returning to it as a challenge to refine and clarify my own understanding of the gospel. And whenever I make that return, I cannot help but feel that, in a small way, the experience is rather like that of Jacob wrestling with God in His angel at the ford of Jabbok. No one of my theological persuasion, I think, who engages Jenson's thought in earnest can doubt that it is indeed the living God with whom he has come to grips: not some fabulous metaphysical phantom conjured out of Jenson's fixations or fantasies, but a genuine attempt to describe the God of Scripture in the fullness of His historical presence and eternal identity. Nor, I think, can such a theologian hope to retreat from that contest without a wound; but neither, for that matter, will he depart without a blessing.

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