

Without Separation? Christ's Tomb and the Hypostatic Union

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ABSTRACT: Is the hypostatic union—the union of divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus—indissoluble? Or did it undergo a temporary suspension during Jesus' entombment? Although most theologians and philosophers considering the question have opted for the former, this article explores the latter possibility as a way to maintain (i) Thomas Aquinas's "subsistence" theory of the incarnation, (ii) the widespread judgment that the entombed Christ is not a human, and (iii) the traditional definition of the hypostatic union. Such a position, this article argues, neither runs afoul of Chalcedon's teaching that Christ's two natures were united "without separation" nor imperils human salvation.

1. Introduction

At the center of classic conciliar Christology is the belief that the incarnation is salvific. At Nicaea, the council fathers proclaimed that "for our salvation," the Son "was incarnated and became human." The Council of Chalcedon (451 C.E.) elaborated, formulating the incarnation as the hypostatic union, a joining of divine and human natures in one person (*hypostasis*), without confusion and without separation. What, however, does "without separation" mean? Specifically, is the possibility of a temporary dissolution of the hypostatic union within the bounds of conciliar teaching?

Given Jesus' death on the cross and subsequent entombment, this question is not purely hypothetical. St. Thomas Aquinas (d. 1274) and many others have stated that to call Christ a "man" (rather than something like a "corpse") during this period after his death but before his resurrection is erroneous. Such a judgment raises the question: If there is no "human being" in the tomb, what of the "human nature" which stands as a basic constituent of the hypostatic union? One answer worthy of our attention is St. James of the Marches's suggestion that the Holy Saturday interim coincides with a suspension of the hypostatic union, strictly speaking. Strategies for avoiding this conclusion come at the cost of redefining several traditional formulas and definitions. Moreover, James's proposed hiatus, I will argue, can be successfully reconciled with the "inseparable" language used at Chalcedon. Finally, I will consider the soteriological implications of a ruptured and reestablished hypostatic union. Given the salvific import of the incarnation in Christian thought, it may seem that a broken hypostatic union jeopardizes human salvation. On the contrary, I will conclude by suggesting that a broken and restored hypostatic union is in fact a necessary, culminating moment in one biblically grounded account of salvation history.

2. An Indissoluble Union? A Trend and an Exception

In his *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, Ludwig Ott considers the statement, "The Hypostatic Union was never interrupted," to be "sententia certa," that is, a "certain opinion" the truth of

which is guaranteed by its close connection to divine revelation (1962, 150).¹ On Christ's time in the tomb, he agrees with Thomas that Christ was not a "man," but nevertheless writes that "His death did not dissolve the attachment of the Godhead [the divine nature] and humanity, or of their parts." The main authority that Ott cites here is the patristic *Quod assumpsit* dictum: "What the Word once assumed, He never dismissed" (1962, 151). Since the Word (i.e., the eternal Son) assumed a human nature, it would follow that the two could never cease to be hypostatically united.

A more frequently cited authority for those who agree with Ott is the language of "inseparability" used at the Council of Chalcedon, which defined the "one person, two natures" formula. For instance, Fernando Ocariz et al write, "The Magisterium has always consistently asserted that the hypostatic union is indissoluble. The two natures are united in Christ inseparably, says the Council of Chalcedon" (2004, 224). Alyssa Lyra Pitstick likewise affirms that the "Church's doctrine . . . is that Christ's human nature remains subsisting without interruption in its perfect entirety in the Person of the Word from the moment of His conception." Like Ocariz et al, Pitstick grounds this claim in Chalcedon's teaching: "According to the Council of Chalcedon . . . the union of the two natures in the Person of the Word is 'without separation,' that is, it has continued permanently from its beginning and it will continue so forever. Hence, the incarnation can in no way be suspended, for it is nothing other than the hypostatic union" (2007, 202). When theologians have considered the issue, the predominant position seems to be that the hypostatic union is indissoluble, even during the entombment.²

One intriguing exception is St. James of the Marches (d. 1476), whose preaching sparked a fierce debate about the propriety of adoring the blood of Jesus' corpse during the entombment. This showdown between Franciscans and Dominicans culminated in 1464 with Pope Pius II forbidding either side from charging the other with heresy. In his Easter sermon two years earlier, James had preached against adoring the spilled blood of Christ, drawing on the earlier teaching of his fellow Franciscan Francis de Mayronis (d. ca. 1328). Mayronis had taught "four separations" that occurred in Jesus' death: (i) his soul and body were separated from each other; (ii) his separated soul and body were in turn separated from "any third entity" (i.e., human nature); (iii) divinity was separated from humanity, though the former remained united to Christ's corpse and separated soul; and finally (iv) his blood was separated from his corpse when it poured from his side, at which point it was no longer God's (since it no longer belonged to the united corpse).³

Although the episode's epicenter was James's support of this last "separation," his endorsement for the third separation, which posited the dissolution of the hypostatic union, made waves as well. False rumors even spread that James went so far as to deny that Christ's corpse remained united to the divine Son during the three days. In fact, while James did indeed deny an extant hypostatic union of human and divine natures in the tomb, he, like Mayronis, affirmed that the Word remained united to Jesus' dead body.⁴ After all, it is clear why one

¹ See also *ibid.*, 9–10. Joseph Pohle judges the similar statement, "The Logos never even for an instant dissociated Himself from His manhood," to have the slightly less authoritative status of a "doctrina catholica" (1913, 168–170).

² Other theologians in this group include Alfred Mortimer, who asserts that "death could not interrupt the Hypostatic union" (1902, 175), and perhaps Aaron Riches, who writes that "the entombed cadaver – maximally different from God's *apatheia* – is nevertheless predicably only by virtue of the hypostatic union" (2016, 205).

³ See Caroline Walker Bynum's chapter, "Christ's Blood in the *Triduum Mortis*," in Bynum 2007, 112–131, at 115.

⁴ "What Jacopo had in fact affirmed in his sermon was that Christ, after his death on the Cross, was no longer a man during his three days in the tomb because his divinity was separated from his humanity, but only in so far as

would want to say that the Word remains united to Christ's corpse and separated soul—the Creeds themselves hold that the Word who “was incarnate” was also “buried” and “descended into hell,” statements which indicate that the dead body and separated soul, respectively, remained the Son's own. But why do so while proposing the dissolution of the hypostatic union itself? As I will argue, James's position builds on many of Thomas Aquinas's relevant teachings and offers the most straightforward way to preserve both Thomas's preferred “subsistence” theory of the incarnation and the traditional formula of the hypostatic union.⁵

3. No Man, No Human Nature, No Hypostatic Union

Before looking at what Thomas has to say about the entombment period in particular, it is important to consider a few important definitions, namely, of death and of the hypostatic union. In Thomas's day there were multiple models of the hypostatic union being advanced by theologians, and it is important to consider his own position in this debate as well.

3.1 What Is Death? What Is the Hypostatic Union?

Most contemporary conversation about death centers upon empirical observations about the body (e.g., whether the heart is driving the circulatory system or the brain is active).⁶ Classically, Christian theologians have defined death in terms of the body's separation from the soul. Thomas quotes St. Augustine⁷ and St. John of Damascus⁸ to this effect, and even today, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks of death in these terms, stating, “In that ‘departure’ which is death the soul is separated from the body” (2000, § 1005). Moreover, this definition works well with the hylomorphic anthropology that Thomas develops from Aristotle. Without the soul operating as the form animating the matter or flesh of the body, the living substance perishes—indeed, it ceases to be that substance at all, since to be a substance is to be a unity

humanity is the result of the union of body and soul, a union that is dissolved by death. This teaching was in perfect accord with that of the best theological doctors and more especially of St Thomas Aquinas. . . . Accordingly, only Christ's human nature lost its totality, for neither the body nor the soul of Christ, though separated from each other for three days by his death on the Cross, was separated from the person of the Son of God” (Lightbown 2004, 168).

⁵ Along with James, another noteworthy exception to the indissolubility trend is Hans Urs von Balthasar, who writes, “If ‘man’ is the living and mortal being composed of body and spirit in a unity whom we know and if *this* man ceases to be in death (whatever might become of him after death), then Jesus has gone to the end of his being human. . . . Holy Saturday is thus a kind of suspension, as it were, of the Incarnation, whose result is given back to the hands of the Father and which the Father will renew and definitively confirm by the Easter Resurrection” (1995, 411–412, emphasis original). If Pitstick's reading of Balthasar is correct, however, Balthasar's account of the Son's “laying up” or “depositing” his divinity and humanity with the Father may make him considerably more extreme than James, who, like Thomas, maintained that Jesus' body and soul remained hypostatically united to the Word. As she summarizes, for Balthasar, “[t]he Son abandons his divine attributes in ‘depositing’ them with the Father through the Incarnation, and He abandons His human attributes in His descent [into hell], abandoning Himself as hypostasis to the *visio mortis* of sin itself. . . . [W]hat is revealed in Sheol is the ‘naked’ Son of God, the relation without any nature except the act of kenosis” (Pitstick 2007, 203).

⁶ For an argument that these two indicators are inadequate and that only bodily decomposition stands as a reliable sign of death, see Oderberg (2019).

⁷ Christ's “death severed the body and the soul” (*Tract. Xlvii in Joan.*), qtd. in Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [henceforth *ST*] III.50.3 ad 1.

⁸ “Christ died as a man, and His holy soul was separated from his spotless body” (*De Fide Orth.* III, qtd. in *ST* III.50.3 s.c.).

of form and matter, body and soul. This traditional hylomorphic approach can coincide with contemporary outlooks on death: without this animating principle giving it life, the body ceases circulation and brain activity, as the living human body becomes merely a corpse.

Another fundamental term in this discussion is hypostatic union. Almost all definitions of this term accord with the components in Robert Krieg's succinct formulation: the hypostatic union is "the uniting of the divine nature and the human nature of Jesus Christ in one person, or *hypostasis* (Gk)" (1995, 647).⁹ This definition, of course, comes from the one person (*prosōpon, persona*), two natures (*physes, naturae*) formula defined at the Council of Chalcedon. And when speaking of the single subject of the Word who subsists in these two natures, Thomas Aquinas treats the terms person, *hypostasis*, and *suppositum* as synonyms (Wawrykow 2010, 235).

3.2 Three Theories of the Incarnation

Although this Chalcedonian definition of the hypostatic union has long been the standard one, theologians of Thomas's day conceived of the hypostatic union in three different ways, as explicated in Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. The first of these models has come to be known as *homo assumptus*. On this theory, the one person or *hypostasis* of the Word assumed a *homo* or human being, that is, a body-soul unity which itself comprised its own *suppositum*. Supporters of *homo assumptus* maintain an important distinction between *hypostasis* and *suppositum*; the *homo*—Jesus of Nazareth—which the Word assumed, has its own subjectivity as a supposite, but it does not rise to the level of "*hypostasis*" or person. Thus, *homo assumptus* (1 person, 2 supposites, 2 natures) is conceptually distinct from Nestorianism (2 persons, 2 supposites, 2 natures). Nevertheless, Thomas found this theory inadequate, and operating with a synonymous understanding of "person" and "supposite," he judged the two-subject *homo assumptus* theory to collapse into Nestorian heresy.

Lombard's third opinion for modeling the hypostatic union (and the one which he himself is said to have embraced) is known as the *habitus* theory. Eager to avoid the advent of a second *suppositum* (as in *homo assumptus*), supporters of this theory maintained that the human nature assumed by the Word consisted of the body and soul of Jesus, but not united to one another. That is, unlike standard considerations of a human nature that require the body and soul to be united, proponents of *habitus* theory deemed the Word's possession of a separated body and soul to be sufficient for having a human nature, with the intended benefit of avoiding a second subject showing up in Christ. Thus, on the *habitus* theory the Word "puts on" the pieces of the human nature like separate articles of clothing that leave, to borrow Joseph Wawrykow's memorable image, a Christological "midriff." In both the *Scriptum* (i.e., Thomas's commentary on Lombard's *Sentences*) and the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas deems this third opinion to be "heretical," failing to provide for a genuine human nature and offering only an "accidental" union of the Word's divinity and humanity.

Lombard's second opinion is known as the subsistence theory.¹⁰ On this model, the Word, already subsisting in a divine nature, takes on a human nature—body and soul, united to one

⁹ Gerald O'Collins and Edward Farrugia similarly define "hypostatic union" as "[t]he union between full divinity and humanity in the one (divine) person of Jesus Christ, which occurred when 'the Word became flesh' (Jn 1:24; see *DS* 252–63; 301–02)," (1991, 98), and the glossary of the English *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines it as "[t]he union of the divine and human natures in the one divine Person (Greek: hypostasis) of the Son of God, Jesus Christ" (2000, 882).

¹⁰ Like Thomas, William of Auxerre (d. 1231) favored the subsistence theory over *homo assumptus* and *habitus* theories. For his arguments concerning the three, see Principe 1963, 71–78.

another. That is, the Word begins to subsist also in a human nature, which has the Word as its only subject. Unlike Nestorianism and *homo assumptus*, subsistence theory holds 1 person, 1 supposite, and 2 natures. Thomas expresses his favor for this theory in the *Scriptum* and he later, in the *Summa Theologiae*, elevates this position to an “article of Catholic faith.”¹¹

Thomas insists that a genuine, conciliar account of the hypostatic union of two natures in one person includes a bonafide human nature (i.e., that of a living human normally defined, a body-soul unity). *Habitus* theory, with its well-intentioned but shoddy and halfway account of a human nature, will not suffice. Such a commitment looms large in his treatment of Christ's time in the tomb.

3.3 Thomas and the Tomb: Implications for the Hypostatic Union

In question 50 of the *Summa Theologiae's Tertia Pars*, Thomas considers the implications of Christ's death, asking in articles 2 and 3 whether the Word was severed from its unity with Christ's body and soul and in article 4 whether it is proper to say that “Christ was a man” during the entombment. Thomas maintains that the Word remained united to Christ's corpse and separated soul during the three days. However, in the fourth article, Thomas states that it is erroneous to call Christ a “man” at this time. Tellingly, he notes that Lombard, who favored *habitus* theory, considered Christ to be a human in the tomb, but only because for proponents of *habitus*, having a separated body and soul is entirely sufficient for qualifying as human. (A Cartesian-style dualist who identifies human beings with human souls could likewise maintain Christ's humanity during the *triduum mortis*.) Thomas on the other hand, having rejected the *habitus* theory and working with a hylomorphic (rather than dualist) anthropology, reasons that

it belongs to the truth of the death of man or animal that by death the subject ceases to be man or animal; because the death of the man or animal results from the separation of the soul, which is the formal complement of the man or animal. Consequently, to say that Christ was a man during the three days of His death simply and without qualification, is erroneous. Yet it can be said that He was “a dead man” during those three days. (*ST* III.50.4 resp.)

So long as one operates with this traditional definition of death, insists that Christ suffered a real death, and rejects the *habitus* theory (as well as its Cartesian cousin), one is faced with no other option but to say that Christ is not a human during this time period. William of Auxerre (d. 1231) and St. Bonaventure (d. 1274) said the same, and eventually this position became standard in the dogmatic manuals like Ott's in the twentieth century.¹²

Although Ott follows Thomas in deeming Christ “not a man,” he still insists, as we saw above, that the hypostatic union remained intact. However, such a pair of positions seems like a difficult one to hold together. If there is no “man” in the tomb, it stands to reason that there

¹¹ *ST* III.2.6 resp.; cf. *Scriptum Super Sententiis* [henceforth *Sent.*] III.6.3.1–2; see Wawrykow 2010, 235–236, 245–246.

¹² For William's position, see Principe 1963, 89–91. Bonaventure writes that “when [Christ] died, even though his soul was separated from his body, the oneness of his person remained, and thus neither soul nor body was separated from his Godhead. Now since it is precisely the union of body and soul that makes a living human being, it follows that, during those three days, Christ was not a man, though both his soul and body were united with the Word. But because death in Christ's human nature could not bring death to the person who never ceases to live, death itself perished in life. Through the death of Christ, *death is swallowed up in victory* and the Prince of Death has been vanquished” (Bonaventure, *Breviloquium* IV.9.8, 164).

is no *humanity* and thus any talk of “human nature” is, strictly speaking, bankrupt. As Matthias Scheeben explains, “for being a man means possessing human nature as such; human nature however is only a body animated by a spiritual soul,” and so Christ’s death marks “the *temporary disintegration of Christ’s human nature*” (2020, 311, 308 (nn. 498, 494); emphasis original).¹³ But there can be no union of divine and human natures during the *triduum mortis* if there is no human nature.¹⁴ That is, the temporary dissolution of Christ’s human nature coincides with a temporary dissolution of the hypostatic union itself.¹⁵ Of course, since the corpse and soul each remain personally (“hypostatically”) united to the Word, as the Son’s own, Thomas recognizes some kind of hypostatic unions here. (See *ST* III.50.2 resp., where Thomas writes, “[A]s before death Christ’s flesh was personally and hypostatically united with the Word of God, it remained so after His death.”) But whatever unions are constituted by such connections, none is *the* hypostatic union, as the term is almost universally used and is defined above (i.e., the union of divine and human *natures* in the person of Christ).

We might sum up the situation by considering the following claims:

- (1) The hypostatic union is the union of the divine nature with Christ’s human nature in the person of the Word, accomplished in the Incarnation.
- (2) The hypostatic union is indissoluble (i.e., this unity cannot cease to hold once it has been established).
- (3) When he died, Christ’s soul ceased to inform his body (thus he was no longer a man).
- (4) When Christ’s soul ceased to inform his body, he no longer had a human nature.

¹³ In Thomas’s own day, Hugh of St. Cher (d. 1263) came to the same conclusion in his *Sentences* commentary. As Principe explains, Hugh affirmed “the need of body and soul in Christ to be united to form a human nature if there is to be a full realization of the Incarnation, that is, that God be man and that their union result in a unity of being. In an earlier text, Hugh had discussed the situation in the triduum in terms of the part-theory: ‘. . . In the triduum,’ he had said, ‘the Son was not a reality of human nature, because human nature did not exist at that time, but only its parts: by parts I mean not actual parts of the Son at that time, but habitual parts.’ [III, 5, 54] This text likewise indicates the dissolution of human nature and the fragmentation of the unity of Christ” (Principe 1970, 133). Here, Hugh may be following William of Auxerre, who taught, “I say that although in the triduum the Son of God was truly united to the soul, he did not have the nature of the soul” (*De Statu* 1, 12, qtd. in Principe 1963, 90). Even so, Principe reports that both Hugh and William held the hypostatic union to be “indissoluble” (1970, 109).

¹⁴ In his exposition of Thomas’s theology of the *triduum mortis*, Andrew McGinnis suggests that “in order to preserve the hypostatic union even in death, Aquinas states that Christ remains united to his human nature even as it is divided in death” (2014, 69). However, in the *Scriptum*, which McGinnis cites, Thomas is clear that during the *triduum*, the Word “did not subsist in a human nature, because . . . there was no union of the soul with the body” (*Sent.* III.22.1.1 ad 2). That is, while Thomas affirms Word’s unity with the dead body and separated soul (*Sent.* III.21.1.1), he denies an extant human nature in the period between Christ’s death and resurrection. Somewhat confusingly, Thomas reportedly preached in a sermon that “the divinity was so indissolubly united to Christ the human [*indissolubiliter unita fuit homini Christo*] that, although body and soul were separated from each other, nonetheless the very divinity was always perfectly present both to the soul and body” (2005, 78–79, translation adjusted where indicated). This report, though, is a translation of notes taken by an observer, and likely not reviewed by Thomas himself (*ibid.*, 3–4). And importantly, Thomas explicates the indissoluble unity during the *triduum* not in terms of “Christ the human” or a human nature, but rather in terms of the separated body and soul; after all, he is clear throughout his work that the dead Christ is not a human.

¹⁵ By analogy, consider Skipper’s ownership of a single sailboat, a major component of which—say, the sail—disintegrates into a broken heap of shredded canvas and a splintered mast. Now, even after this destruction some kind of “ownership” obtains, but Skipper no longer owns a *sailboat*. Likewise, the Son remains personally united to the broken pieces of Christ’s humanity, but it does not then follow that *the* hypostatic union—which by definition requires Christ’s human nature, and not just its broken pieces, to exist—remains extant.

As I have argued, these claims appear to be jointly inconsistent. At least if one holds to the standard definition in (1) and follows Thomas's hylomorphic anthropology (from which (3) and (4) follow), the second claim seems untenable when considering the *triduum mortis*.¹⁶

How might one circumvent this conclusion of a hiatus in the hypostatic union? One path is to deny (3) by insisting that the entombed Christ *was* a man and so retained a human nature, even in death. The *habitus* approach, as Thomas notes, employs this strategy, and by maintaining Christ's humanity it likewise preserves an indissoluble hypostatic union. However, as we have seen, Thomas has some strong reasons for opposing the Lombard's third opinion; accepting an "accidental union" and redefining "humanity" so that even a separated body and soul are sufficient to constitute a human seem like a high price. Likewise, the substance dualist version of this solution is not an option for those who hold hylomorphic anthropologies.

A second strategy, mentioned by Tim Pawl, is to redefine the hypostatic union so that the incarnation consists not of the Word assuming Christ's human nature, but rather of the Word assuming *the component parts* of Christ's human nature (2019, 109–111). That is, one would replace (1) with

(1*) The hypostatic union is the union of the divine nature with the component parts of Christ's human nature (i.e. with Christ's body/matter and soul/form) in the person of the Word, accomplished in the Incarnation.

On this strategy, one can agree with Thomas that the dead Christ is not a "man" *and* leave the hypostatic union preserved. For on this revised definition, such preservation requires only the Word's unity with Christ's corpse and disembodied soul, unities which Thomas and many others affirm. However, this move comes at the cost of scuttling the ubiquitous definition of hypostatic union (two *natures* in one person) and holding instead that it suffices for the Word to subsist in a divine nature and the *component parts* of a human nature.¹⁷ This cost, which requires regarding the standard and traditional definition as imprecise shorthand, seems to be a significant one.

A third strategy agrees that Christ ceases to be human at death, but suggests that this fact doesn't sufficiently undermine his created, human nature to jeopardize its role in the hypostatic union. Though he does not explicitly weigh in on the issue of the hypostatic union's permanence, Jeff Brower advances a position he calls "non-human survivalism" that could undergird such a strategy. On this position, individual humans survive their deaths; however, each individual does so as a non-human, since one cannot be human without a material body. Since such an individual's (separated) soul is disposed toward informing matter and so toward the fullness of humanity (to be achieved in the resurrection), Brower argues that the dead, non-human individual retains a human nature in a "dispositional sense" (2014, 295–306).¹⁸ Accordingly, a non-human survivalist could arguably preserve the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Christ during the triduum *and* agree with Thomas that Christ is "not a man": for even a dead non-human like the entombed Christ retains his previously assumed

¹⁶ I am grateful to Jeff Brower for his analysis of these four claims in feedback on an earlier version of this essay.

¹⁷ Elsewhere, Pawl leaves room for this solution by adding an important qualifier to the standard definition of the hypostatic union, explaining that the "relata of the hypostatic union are, on the divine side, the divine nature, and, on the human side, the human nature, *or its parts*" (2020, 23, emphasis added).

¹⁸ Brower suggests that such an individual can even be called a "'human person' in a broad sense" (2014, 295).

nature, which remains at least “dispositionally” human. In other words, the non-human survivalist might circumvent the joint inconsistency of the four claims by rejecting (4) in favor of

- (5) When Christ's soul ceased to inform his body, Christ's human nature (or better, the individual nature with which it is identical) ceased to be composed of matter; it thus ceased to be human in the strict sense, though it remained human dispositionally.

Such a strategy for preserving an intact hypostatic union comes with costs and questions. First, adopting this solution requires commitment to a broad and “dispositional” interpretation of nature and the implications of such an interpretation, like allowing for “human beings to exist temporarily without being human, despite the fact that they are essentially human” (Brower 2014, 299). Those (e.g., corruptionists) not inclined toward such a commitment must weigh it against costs of other solutions to the dilemma, like that of James, which lack such metaphysical restrictions.¹⁹ Moreover, such an attempt at preserving the hypostatic union seems to require recasting it from its standard formulation to the union in Christ's person of (i) a divine nature and (ii) a nature which is at least *dispositionally* if not *actually* human. After all, Brower's non-human survivalism stops short of affirming that the dead Christ possesses a nature which is, strictly speaking, human; his nature is only human in a “dispositional sense.” One must ask: What does the traditional formula mean by “humanity” or human nature? If one takes it to mean an *actual* human nature, non-human survivalism falls short of preserving an intact hypostatic union.²⁰

The most straightforward way of maintaining both Thomas's subsistence theory and the virtually universal definition of the hypostatic union, it seems, is to follow James in embracing a hypostatic union of two natures, which—strictly speaking—underwent a hiatus during Christ's time in the tomb and resumed with the Resurrection and Christ's glorified humanity.²¹ This view too, is not without its potential complications.

3.4 Challenges Facing a “Temporary Hiatus” Approach

As we saw earlier, many theologians in the last century have taught the hypostatic union's indissolubility, sometimes granting the position great theological weight. Why might they do so? One reason, as we saw above, is Ott's recourse to the patristic axiom, “What the Word once assumed, He never dismissed.”²² Since the Word assumed a human nature, a position like James's—which denies a genuine human nature and thus the hypostatic union during the entombment—would arguably run afoul of this axiom, strictly understood. Then again, so would Thomas's, it would seem, for Thomas says that in the tomb there is no man, and without a man there is no actual human nature—and hence there is absent something which had been assumed in the incarnation.²³ It seems that Lombard's third opinion, the *habitus* theory, would

¹⁹ For defenses of survivalism and corruptionism see, respectively, Oderberg 2012 and Toner 2009.

²⁰ For other potential complications that may arise with this general approach, see Timothy Pawl's treatment of “The Survivalist View” (2019, 107–109). I thank both Chris Hauser for suggesting Brower's work as a possible solution to the dilemma and Brower himself for his insights about its applicability.

²¹ Pawl treats this possibility in 2019, 113–115.

²² Thomas himself appeals to a similar rationale: “What is bestowed through God's grace is never withdrawn except through fault” (*ST* III.50.2 resp.). The “*Quod assumpsit*” axiom was also a key part of the Dominican argument against James of the Marches in the *triduum mortis* dispute in 1462 (see Bynum 2007, 122).

²³ Thomas speaks frequently in the *Tertia Pars* of the Word assuming a human nature (e.g., *ST* III.2.8 and III.4);

fare well with a strict application this axiom, but given the choice between *habitus* theory and running afoul of such an application, the latter seems quite preferable. After all, as Scheeben has observed, a strict “mathematical” use of this axiom runs into other problems, like what to make of the tears, sweat, and metabolic products which had once been assumed by the Word but which were shed at various points of Jesus’ life (2020, 309 (n. 495)).²⁴

Moreover, this patristic dictum would not be the only one to fail when pressed too hard and beyond its original intentions. Consider Gregory Nazianzen’s famous saying: “That which he has not assumed he has not redeemed.” Strictly speaking, a created human person (or a supposite) was not assumed; does that entail that all of us, created human persons as we are, fall outside the scope of redemption? Of course not—Nazianzen’s saying was formulated to combat Apollinarianism (i.e., the theory that Christ had no human soul), and we must be careful when employing it in later debates involving Nestorius. Likewise, the axiom cited by Ott was, according to Ott himself, meant to combat “Gnostic-Manichean teaching according to which the Logos left the man before the Passion” (1962, 151). We should not be surprised if it could also lead us astray in other, dissimilar contexts—particularly one in which the Word did not so much “dismiss” Christ’s human nature as he did remain bound to its broken pieces during its disintegration.

A second, weightier reason to balk at the temporary dissolution of the hypostatic union concerns the dogmatic language employed at the Council of Chalcedon, particularly its use of “inseparable” to describe the union of the two natures. The Council taught

the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects except for sin; begotten before the ages from the Father as regards his divinity, and in the last days the same for us and for our salvation from Mary, the virgin God-bearer, as regards his humanity; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division [*adiaretos; indivise*], no separation [*achōrisos; inseparabiliter*]; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; he is not parted or divided [*merizomenon ē diairoumenon; partitum sive divisum*] into two persons, but is one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ. (Tanner 1990, 86)

If the two natures are united unchangeably and inseparably in one person, isn’t any dissolution of the hypostatic union ruled out ipso facto?

When considering past dogmatic statements, it is of the utmost importance to attend to the intentions of the authors to avoid misapplying and misconstruing them. According to Piet Fransen, who devoted much of his career to doing just that, “One has each time to look back

he also specifies that during the *triduum mortis*, the Word “did not subsist in a human nature” (*Sent.* III.22.1.1 ad 2).

²⁴ Notably, the Franciscans mounted a similar defense of James during the 1462 *triduum mortis* dispute. “Accusing the Dominicans of an excessively literalist understanding of *Quod assumpsit*, the Franciscans assert that the body joined to Logos in incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension is an essential body, not the extraneous bits of effluvia (snot, sweat, or humors such as blood) Dominican theory would hold to be included” (Bynum 2007, 124).

to the Acts and testimonies of those responsible . . . at the Council in order to know precisely the real dogmatic implications of the canons.”²⁵ And what was the historical context of the Council of Chalcedon? Any answer must feature two Christological heresies, Nestorianism and Monophysitism, both of which the Council ruled out. When it comes to the language of “inseparability” which complicates our present case, it seems that the primary objective for including it was to target Nestorian Christologies which divided Christ’s two natures between two persons. As Gerald O’Collins writes, “‘Without confusion or change’ was aimed to exclude the current error of Eutyches in merging Christ’s two natures; ‘without division or separation’ was intended to exclude the error which had been attributed to Nestorius of separating the two natures.”²⁶ The language employed at the Council supports this conclusion—after first insisting on the inseparability of the union *simpliciter*, the decree elaborates, teaching that “he is not parted or divided *into two persons*.” Indeed, Nestorianism is clearly the motive for employing “inseparability” language.

The Council of Chalcedon definitively and dogmatically rules out two-person Christologies—but it would be a misuse and misapplication of its language to say that the Council fathers meant also to rule out a temporary suspension of the hypostatic union brought about by Christ’s death (i.e., by the dissolution of his humanity into a separated corpse and soul—which, again, on both James’s and Thomas’s accounts, each remain independently and hypostatically united to the Word; see *ST* III.50.2–3). “Without separation” opposes a very specific, Nestorian kind of separation. James’s proposed dissolution, on the other hand, does not *separate* the two natures so much as it does recognize that for a brief time, one of them fails to properly *exist*, and so it is a far cry from the censured Nestorian position. Accordingly, contra Pitstick and O’Cariz et al, it does not seem that a hiatus in the union during the *triduum mortis* lands one afoul of Chalcedon’s dogmatic pronouncements.

In sum, the costs of a temporary hiatus in the hypostatic union are rather meager. One must sacrifice a “mathematical” application of the “what the Word once assumed” axiom, but most theologians already do so for other cases (sweat, tears, etc.). And one must restrict Chalcedon’s “inseparable” language to its historical context of opposing Nestorian two-person Christologies, a restriction which is arguably just the fruit of responsible conciliar hermeneutics. These costs seem comparatively mild to those incurred by attempts to maintain the union’s indissolubility, namely, having to redefine human nature so that the dead Christ is a man (as does *habitus* theory) or having to redefine the hypostatic union as something other than its standard “one person, two natures” formula, understood in a straightforward way (as do the “component parts” and the non-human survivalist solutions).

4. A Soteriological Challenge and Opportunity

As acknowledged at the outset of this essay, classical Christian statements like the Nicene Creed have professed Christ’s incarnation to be salvific. And so we must ask: Does a rupture

²⁵ Fransen 1985, 219. Fransen remarks that although such a project is frequently considered “taboo,” historians of dogma must operate according to an important rule: “*Omnis scriptura debet legi eo spiritu quo scripta est*, every text should be read in the spirit in which it was written. This is self-evident. Yet dogmatic, philosophical and psychological reasons have hitherto prevented theologians from accepting this obvious truth, in the matter of conciliar texts. Many seem to experience an odd kind of anxiety when it comes to applying this rule to a conciliar decree. And the reason is very simple. We have just emerged from a very unfortunate period of rationalism” (Fransen 1962, 66).

²⁶ Gerald O’Collins 1995, 294–295.

in the hypostatic union, even if just temporarily during the *triduum mortis*, jeopardize human salvation? Nicolas of Cusa (d. 1464) was troubled by precisely this issue. As Bynum explains, Christ's humanity functioned in Cusanus's thought as a kind of

conduit (*manuductio*)—a fullness of being that lifts us all into God . . . catching our mortal humanity up into his, which is immortal, perfect, indivisible, and full. . . . [Cusanus] is obsessed with the idea that any separation of blood from humanity, or of humanity from divinity, undercuts a salvation effected only by that which is both *effusus* and *indivibilis*. (2007, 126–127)²⁷

Accordingly, to avoid any such gap in the hypostatic union, Cusanus bucked the later medieval consensus and, like Peter Lombard, insisted that the entombed Christ, despite being dead, remained a human.

But is it, in fact, the case that a temporary hiatus in the hypostatic union undermines human salvation? Fully answering this question would require analyzing just *how* the incarnation is understood to save. Although we do not have space to consider the wide range of incarnational soteriologies and so to exhaustively treat this objection, let me close by proposing one such story of salvation which is *not* imperiled by the sort of temporary rupture advanced by James of the Marches. In fact, on this story, such a rupture is an important, even necessary factor in Christ's victory over sin.

The story centers on the biblical idea of covenant, a relationship or pact between God and God's people through which God works in the world. As presented in the Bible, this notion of covenant has two remarkable features. First, as many biblical scholars and theologians have observed, the Bible presents Israel's covenantal relationship with God paradoxically as both conditional and unconditional, a breakable contract which can be ended by human sin *and* an everlasting promise of love guaranteed by God's faithfulness.²⁸ How can it be *both*?

The answer depends on a second feature, the relationship between God's seemingly multiple covenants. Clearly, the Bible reports God establishing a series of covenants—Noahic (Gen 8), Abrahamic (Gen 15,17), Mosaic (Exod 24), and—Christians would add—Christic (1Cor 11; Heb 12). Emphasizing the covenants' particularity, one could argue that certain covenants are breakable while others are everlasting. However, some early Christians insisted on reading these multiple covenants not simply as discrete or separate, but as possessing an underlying unity. For theologians like Irenaeus of Lyons (d. ca. 200), who fervently opposed the Gnostics' fragmented story of deception by some gods and rescue by others, the Bible is properly understood as a continuous story featuring the *same* divine Creator and Redeemer self-revealing and relating to the world. For Irenaeus, early *theophanies*, appearances of God to figures like Abraham and Moses, were in fact *Logophanies*, with God's Word "rehearsing" his eventual incarnation. Building on Irenaeus's insight about the unity of salvation history, Jacques Dupuis explains that none of the covenants eradicate each other; rather they function more like stages in a single, unfolding covenant, in which each movement takes up and recapitulates what came before it, the entire process culminating in the person of Christ, the Word made flesh (Dupuis 1997, 64, 225, 232).

²⁷ Cf. Bynum 2007, 142–143. John of Capistrano seems to have been motivated by similar concerns (*ibid.*, 117–118).

²⁸ Ratzinger 1999, 56; Lohfink 1991, 21; Balthasar 2000, 132; Balthasar 1994, 213, 218. Balthasar points to biblical statements like Ezek 20:23 and Hos 11:9, 2:18–20 as evidence of the covenant's conditionality and perpetuity, respectively.

Irenaeus's approach suggests another strategy, which we will take up here, for understanding the Bible's paradoxical presentation of God's covenant as both breakable and everlasting. The covenant is a single, ongoing relationship which continuously cycles through damage wrought by sin on the human side and merciful renewal steadfastly effected by God, who draws ever nearer as the process repeats and gradually unfolds in various sites, times, and contexts.

Where can we locate Jesus in this ongoing spiral? Pope Benedict XVI has suggested that Jesus goes beyond simply "doing" the Torah (the basis of the Mosaic covenant) and claims that Jesus in fact stands "*as* the Torah – as the word of God in person. . . . Torah in person" (2008, 110–111).²⁹ Similarly, Hans Urs von Balthasar has spoken of Jesus as "not one 'party' in a 'pact,' but someone who, in his Person, has become the unity of God and man. He is the Covenant personified" (1998, 276).³⁰ The notion of Jesus *as* the Covenant-in-flesh places the Irenaean single-covenant story in an intriguing new light. The intensification of God's relationship to God's people reaches an apex as the covenantal partners are forged together in the Person of Christ. Here, the covenant is not etched into stone but rather into a human being who dedicates his life to proclaiming and enacting God's Reign. Accordingly, God's self-offer to humanity reaches a new, unprecedented, and even risky level of exposure.

Following the pattern, Christ takes up, affirms, and recapitulates the whole covenantal history in his own life. As he inaugurates a renewed way of being human in perfect conformity to God's will, the darker parts of the cycle manifest themselves. Although many rejoiced in the news of God's Reign, human authorities, particularly Roman political leaders and some sympathetic allies in the Temple, sensed within it a change to the status quo and a threat to their own power.³¹ Human sin resurfaces in opposition to the Covenant and makes designs to bring it—or better *him*—to an end.

Now, sin cannot destroy God, but it can indeed break the Covenant from the human side. On the cross, despite his own personal fidelity as the New Adam living in perfect obedience to God, Jesus' humanity is broken to pieces by those who oppose their will to God's own. Accordingly, the hypostatic union—the basis for this Covenant-in-flesh—is suspended, ruptured in Jesus' death.

But sin does not have the last word. Recall, the Covenant is not simply breakable but stands as everlasting. God remains committed to this Covenant, this time at the greatest cost, remaining personally united to even the broken pieces of the Covenant so it is true to say God "suffered death and was buried." And true to form, God does not allow the Covenant to remain broken. Rather, God restores it gloriously in the resurrection of Jesus, the New Adam and the Son of God. This Risen Covenant can never again be destroyed, for its maximal instantiation—Jesus, the Covenant in flesh—has already faced and overcome the maximal rejection in sin. The cross stands as salvific on this story because it is there that the Covenant faces its greatest challenge. There, the New Adam remains unwaveringly committed to inaugurating God's Reign in his own life, even at the cost *of* that life. And God answers the

²⁹ Emphasis added. See also Henrix, who paraphrases Ratzinger's proposal as that of the "Torah incarnate" (2011, 122), and "The Gifts and Calling of God Are Irrevocable," where Kurt Koch and the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (CRRJ) state, "Jesus Christ can be considered as 'the living Torah of God'" (26).

³⁰ Balthasar articulates a similar idea in Eucharistic terms in 2000, 95–97.

³¹ Importantly, this historical rejection should in no way be extended falsely to "the Jews," either as a whole in Jesus' own day or throughout history. This "deicide" charge and "replacement theology" which so frequently accompanies it have been thoroughly repudiated by church authorities and theologians alike in recent decades. See the Second Vatican Council's *Nostra Aetate* n. 4 (1965); Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews (1985 and 2015); John Paul II (1987); Isaac (1964); Cunningham et al (eds.) (2011).

greatest possible personal rejection—death at the hands of his creatures—with ongoing commitment. The Covenant has confronted the worst that sin has to offer and, from both sides and at great cost, has nonetheless won the day. And the perfected humanity of Jesus, the New Adam, is the eternal entryway into this everlasting relationship which has overcome sin once and for all.³²

This incarnational, covenant-based soteriology shares Cusanus's commitment to Christ as our meeting point with God and his humanity as our "conduit" to salvation. However, here the temporary breakage of Christ's humanity is not a ruinous defect that jeopardizes our redemption's structural integrity. Rather, it fits the pattern of covenantal breakage and renewal, acknowledges the serious consequences of sin, and is even integral to explaining how God's love persists in the face maximal rejection and emerges victorious. Accordingly, James's position need not be criticized as suffering from a soteriological bug; it can actually function as a soteriological feature.

5. Conclusion

The hypostatic union lies at the center of the Christian faith, and countenancing the prospect of its dissolution, even temporarily, is no light matter. That said, it seems like a reasonable, if not inevitable, implication which follows from Thomas's (well-founded) judgment that Jesus was not a human in the tomb: If there was no human, there could be no human nature, and without a human nature, there could be no hypostatic union, strictly speaking and as that union has been traditionally defined. Although theories which redefine either human nature or the hypostatic union can maintain the union's indissolubility during these three days, the maintenance of traditional definitions favors James of the Marches and his theory that, despite the Word remaining personally united to the broken parts of Jesus' humanity, there was hiatus in the union of two natures between Christ's death and Resurrection. Such a conclusion does not run afoul of Chalcedon's dogmatic statements about the divine and human natures being "inseparably" united, since such statements were targeting normative Nestorian Christologies; applying them to irregular, liminal moments of Christ's story misuses them. Finally, James's position need not imperil human salvation, even if that salvation depends on Christ's humanity as our conduit to God. On the contrary, the temporary hiatus occasioned by Christ's death is the site at which God's loving commitment to humankind becomes most costly and, nonetheless, perseveres.³³

³² "[T]he people of the Covenant is wholly recreated out of the single, fully valid representative of that Covenant on earth (to which belongs the beloved patristic image of the birth of the new Eve from the side of the new Adam asleep in death)" (Balthasar 2000, 132). On Karl Rahner's soteriological reflections on this patristic image, see Peterson (2017, 162–188); for a look at several thirteenth century illustrations of this image, see *ibid.* (182–183), <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10538038j/f375.item> and "Plate 12" in Bynum (2007, 132ff).

³³ I am grateful to Tim Pawl, Jeff Brower, Kenny Boyce, Tom O'Meara, Anne Siebels Peterson, Robert Krieg, Paul Crowley, Jonah Schupbach, and participants at the "Person, Soul and Consciousness" Colloquium (Dominican School of Philosophy & Theology) for their insights, suggestions, and feedback about earlier versions of this project.

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