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## Higher Criticism and the Incarnation in The Thought of I. A. Dorner

John M. Drickamer

In his significant book on nineteenth-century theology Claude Welch writes that "the whole of the nineteenth century may be seen as a struggle to affirm the humanity of Jesus."<sup>1</sup> This is especially true of German Protestant thought in the middle of that century. There was a great deal of tension and conflict about the doctrine of Christ. I. A. Dorner sought a solution which would retain something of traditional statements about Christ but would also embody the newer ideas coming from Hegelianism and its offspring, higher criticism, also known as historical criticism.

At the beginning of the middle third of the nineteenth century, historical-critical scholarship presented a radical challenge to orthodox Christology. F. C. Baur of Tuebingen had been using the higher critical method for some time, but it was his student, D. F. Strauss, who precipitated a storm of controversy in 1835 by the publication of his *Leben Jesu*.<sup>2</sup> This book treated Jesus as "a thoroughly historical and human figure about whom we have very little reliable information,"<sup>3</sup> and about whom one could make no dogmatic statements about anything supernatural. Strauss' work met with a great deal of opposition. There were voices around Germany insisting on the retention of orthodox Christology in the face of the negative conclusions of the new method. Donald G. Dawe has written that:

... the challenge to church dogma had grown to the point of a strident denial of the validity of the orthodox picture of Christ. The battle was joined between the proponents of historical criticism and the defenders of orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup>

Standing between these opponents was the Mediating School, which attempted to preserve something of traditional Christology without rejecting the historical-critical method. It stood between those who desired to retain the orthodox doctrine and those who seemed to be making Christianity into a new and different religion. It sought to express something which it found in neither option.<sup>5</sup> According to Welch, the principle of this mediating theology (*Vermittlungstheologie*) was "that of reconciling the two great claims, that is, of holding them together in synthesis or fruitful tension, in the tradition of the attempts by Schleiermacher and

Hegel to unite science and theology.”<sup>6</sup>

The Mediating School included C. I. Nitzsch, R. Rothe, Jul. Mueller, Jul. Koestlin, and others, but it was a nebulous category because its unity centered in its program and not in any specific conclusions. There was by no means unanimity of theological opinion among its members.<sup>7</sup> Dawe has well summarized their program for Christology:

Among their many differences these theologians were united in seeing the Christological question as the key one in relating the historical Christian confessions to the modern religious consciousness. Specifically, they saw the problems of relating belief in Christ's divinity to their equally firm belief that Jesus had a fully human mental, moral, and spiritual life. The mediating theologians had accepted from historical scholarship a picture of Jesus that emphasized the reality of his humanity in a manner more radical than had ever been done before. But they rejected the conclusions that Baur and Strauss had drawn from this picture, namely that the traditional Christological formulas are no longer useful in interpreting Jesus' significance. Rather they set about the difficult task of incorporating the new historical picture of Jesus into the earlier doctrines of the two natures of Christ and the Trinity.<sup>8</sup>

Orthodoxy had maintained that Jesus was fully human as well as fully divine. He was true God and true Man. The nineteenth-century historical critics taught that Jesus was merely human and not divine at all. The mediating theologians were trying to retain some sense of Jesus' divinity without denying the historical-critical insistence that Jesus had lived on earth as a mere man.

It was in this atmosphere that Isaak August Dorner (1809-1884) carried on his life of serious scholarly work and active ecclesiastical service. Born in Wuerttemberg,<sup>9</sup> he was a student of Baur and a contemporary of Strauss at the University of Tuebingen.<sup>10</sup> He taught at Tuebingen (1838-39), Kiel (1839-44), Koenigsberg (1844-47), Bonn (1847-53), Goettingen (1853-62), and Berlin (1862-84). At Berlin he also served as Prussian Chief Church Councillor.<sup>11</sup> He was one of the strongest supporters of the Prussian Union.<sup>12</sup> Welch can speak of Dorner's "known paralleling of scholarship with intense involvement in 'practical' church affairs."<sup>13</sup>

Dorner was one of the most respected scholars of his day<sup>14</sup> and may have been "the most important figure among the mediators proper."<sup>15</sup> He authored significant scholarly works, and in 1856 he was one of the founders of the *Jahrbuecher fuer Deutsche*

*Theologie*.<sup>16</sup> In spite of his significant contributions to the theological discussions during the second third of the nineteenth century, by the time he published his own complete work on systematic theology, mediating theology was no longer a live option in most theological circles.<sup>17</sup> Because of Albrecht Ritschl's growing influence, Dorner's work seemed out of date.<sup>18</sup>

Dorner's theology was representative of mid-nineteenth-century Germany in this that it was influenced by both Hegel and Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher's influence is seen in a number of ways but most notably in Dorner's concern for religious emotions, which Welch calls "his testing of theological conclusions against the immediacies of religious life."<sup>19</sup> Hegel's influence is seen "in the concern for objectivity and cognition, but more especially in the dialectical pattern for both historical and systematic interpretation."<sup>20</sup> In the last respect, Hegel's influence on Dorner was very pronounced.

With this dialectical pattern of historical thought, Dorner could be very optimistic about his own time, expecting from it a new and higher synthesis beyond the problems of the past.<sup>21</sup> He entitled a section of one of his books "The Nineteenth Century or the Regeneration of Evangelical Theology."<sup>22</sup> Without implying that history always can or always should be interpreted dialectically, it can still be asserted that Dorner's theology stood in a dialectical relationship to his own generation as well as to the preceding one. His solution to the Christological problems posed by the conflict between higher criticism and orthodoxy was formulated in response to the solution proposed by his contemporaries, the kenoticists.

The kenoticists did not belong to the Mediating School but dealt with the same Christological questions. Accepting the historical-critical emphasis on the development of Jesus, they tried to explain the relationship between the divine and the human in Christ in terms of a self-emptying of the Divine Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity. Their name derived from the Greek word *kenosis*, which they used for their doctrine and which they understood to mean "emptying." The related verb was found in Philippians 2:7, which was the most important text by which they sought to support their opinion. According to Franz Pieper, they taught that "the Logos emptied itself. The kenoticists fear that an unreduced deity would exert so strong a pressure on the humanity as to make 'a genuinely human development of Christ' impossible."<sup>23</sup> Gottfried Thomasius, the father of kenoticism, betrayed the rationalistic roots of this doctrine by his own explicit refusal to accept a doctrine which he could not understand:

I cannot maintain on the one hand, the full reality of the divine and human natures of Christ, particularly the full truth of the natural development of his human life, and on the other hand, the full unity of his theanthropic person, unless I assume a self-limitation of the divine Logos, which took place in the Incarnation, for without this assumption I cannot conceive of the unity affirmed on the subject.<sup>24</sup>

The simplest form of kenotic doctrine was "the theory of the Logos changing himself into a human being."<sup>25</sup> According to this theory, as Dorner explained it, "the Logos is capable of development and subject to change [*werdefaehig und verwandelbar*] according to his essence, and is thereby distinguished from the Father, who alone has aseity."<sup>26</sup> The full theory was expressed in the words of one of its proponents:

The Son of God became man, that is, he renounced his self-conscious divine personal being and took the form of a spiritual potency, which, self-forgotten, as unconscious formative power worked in the womb of Mary, and formed a body which was fitted so to serve the development of this spiritual potency that it could use it as its own property and become conscious, could develop itself therein, and by means thereof put forth its energy.<sup>27</sup>

This doctrine was taught by several theologians, including Thomasius early in his theological career. Pieper called the proponents of this doctrine "pankenoticists."<sup>28</sup> Because of criticism, Thomasius later taught that the Logos had laid aside not his deity nor all its attributes but only certain attributes which were not essential to deity. The Logos had emptied himself of omniscience, omnipotence, and omniscience, which, according to Thomasius, pertained not to God in himself but only to his relationship to the world.<sup>29</sup> The Logos retained the essential divine attributes such as love. Those who taught this doctrine were called by Pieper the "semi-kenoticists."<sup>30</sup>

Dorner rejected both forms of kenoticism. He shared some of the same concerns and had at first been attracted to the *kenosis* doctrine. But he came to oppose it because he thought it created insoluble difficulties for the doctrine of the Trinity without solving the Christological problem.<sup>31</sup> Dorner strongly denied any change in God. He saw change in the relationship between God and the world so that there could be a history of salvation, a growth of revelation, and a reconciliation of God to the world and vice versa.<sup>32</sup> But he insisted on the immutability of God, which he thought was irreconcilable with kenoticism. Perhaps under the influence of Hegel, for whom unity was the key idea,<sup>33</sup> Dorner also

stressed the oneness of God's essence over the Trinity of Persons to the point that he could even speak of "the absolute divine Personhood."<sup>34</sup> For Dorner, the doctrine of *kenosis* violated monotheism, which Trinitarian formulas left intact:

If a Member of the Trinity demotes himself to a mere potency for the time of Christ's development and therefore also interrupts his sustaining and governing activity, then the Logos becomes not only changeable but also superfluous for the Trinity and holds only a contingent place in it, all of which leads to subordinationism.<sup>35</sup>

Dorner maintained, in other words, that the problem of the relationship between the two natures in Christ could not be solved by imputing change to God.

Dorner believed that kenoticism offered no real answer to the Christological question of the day. It left Christ less than fully divine by "demoting" the Logos. Even in view of Jesus' completely human development, kenoticism saw the Logos as completely communicated to him, even from the time of the embryo's total lack of self-consciousness. This seemed to Dorner to leave no room for the Logos to possess even the divine attribute of love, for which self-consciousness was a prerequisite. Kenoticism's radical reduction of Jesus' deity still gave no explanation of how the two natures in Christ were related to each other. The only explanation which Dorner thought could be derived from kenoticism was that Christ was not really a human being but only the divine nature "in the form of a servant." Dorner believed that kenoticism could explain Christ only by making the *kenosis* itself the Incarnation. Christ would then be only a theophany, God appearing in a visible form. The logical conclusion would be theopaschism, the idea that Christ's suffering pertained properly to his divine nature. In this way, also, change would be imputed to God.<sup>36</sup>

Dorner believed that the true synthesis, the best answer to the Christological antitheses of the nineteenth century, was a doctrine of a growing or becoming (*werdende*) unity of the Logos and the human person Jesus. The development of Christological doctrine was seen by Dorner as a dialectic between the duality of the natures and the unity of the person. This was finally to be transcended in a nineteenth-century synthesis which would do justice to the divine, the human, and their union.<sup>37</sup> For Dorner, with his Hegelian attitudes, the confusion of philosophical systems influencing Christology in the nineteenth century indicated only a transitional stage (*Uebergangsstufe*) in the production of a new common conviction (*Gemeinueberzeugung*).<sup>38</sup>

Implicit in the emphasis on Jesus' human development and necessary for Dorner's new conception of the Incarnation was the belief that Jesus was a separate human person in himself. Orthodox Christology had taught there had been no separate human person with which the Person of the Logos entered into union but that there was always only the one Person of the Logos and that the complete human nature had been assumed into unity with that Person without having existed apart from that union. This doctrine, the *anhypostasia* of Jesus' human nature, had been given up by most theologians. Dorner said, "hardly a single theologian worth naming still dares to deny to it [Christ's humanity] its own personhood."<sup>39</sup> This conclusion was considered inescapable as a result of the new scientific historiography, which insisted that Jesus had lived on earth as a mere human being. Only two conceptions could answer the question of how the divine and the human were related in Christ. Only two doctrines were still considered possible. Either the Logos limited himself, the kenotic doctrine which Dorner had rejected, or the Logos limited the communication (*Mittheilung, Hingabe*) of himself to the growing developing Jesus. Dorner proposed the latter solution.<sup>40</sup>

Dorner conceived of a gradual assumption of the human person Jesus into the Logos so that "the theanthropic unity, and not only the humanity, is a growing thing, . . . We have a true and vital conception of that unity only when we understand it as in constant process."<sup>41</sup> Dorner wrote that "the Incarnation is not to be thought of as complete [*fertig*] at once but as a progressive [*fortgehend*], indeed, growing [*wachsend*]."<sup>42</sup> The specific line of argument is seen in the following passage from Dorner:

Since, of course, as all admit, a human being who is still becoming [*werdend*] cannot constitute a personal unity with the absolutely self-conscious and actual Logos, especially as long as the human being has not yet even become self-conscious, and since the truth of this becoming [*Werden*] does not permit this unity to be established in the old way through an absolute exaltation [*Erhoehung*] of the human nature from the very beginning, then there is nothing left but to postulate that the Logos has somehow limited himself in his being and working *in this human being*, as long as the same is becoming.<sup>43</sup>

Dorner's words and emphasis mean that the Logos limited not his essence but only his relationship to Jesus. The qualification "somehow" indicates that even this formulation was not a full explanation of the facts.

Dorner taught that Jesus had been gradually drawn up into

unity the Logos, and he tried to express it in terms of the historical events of Jesus' life. He was not so taken with historical criticism that he adopted a stance of radical skepticism towards the gospels. Instead he seems to have been assured that they were historically reliable, at least in outline. The major points in that outline were for him stages in the development of the theanthropic unity.

God's creative and sustaining powers combined, according to Dorner, in the production of the God-Man,<sup>44</sup> so that he came into being both from nature and from beyond nature. Dorner emphasized the supernatural in the origin of the God-Man, and he considered this the important dogmatic point behind the idea of the virgin birth, which he did not necessarily hold to be literally true. He wrote that "no dogmatic interest seems to demand the exclusion of male participation" in Christ's origin.<sup>45</sup> Dorner discussed the first stage of unity, the extent to which "divine essence can live and rule already in the beginnings of this human child."<sup>46</sup> He wrote:

In the center of his being this human being is admittedly from the beginning a theanthropic being, but at first this person still lacks much, and other things are only loosely united to him, e.g., the body still mortal; other things are still changing and alterable [*wechselnd und veraenderlich*] in this person without damaging his identity.<sup>47</sup>

Dorner taught that, because of this "natural theanthropicity," Jesus grew and developed "to perfect theanthropic character through a real and fruitful, both purely and genuinely human moral process" in which there were always "opposed possibilities."<sup>48</sup> Jesus could have sinned, but, because of the work of God in him, he always made the perfectly correct moral choice. As a result of this maturing, Christ at his baptism came to the stage of "official theanthropicity" (*aemtliche Gottmenschheit*), which also involved a new self-consciousness of "God's absolute revelation to the world."<sup>49</sup> This work of revelation ended in Christ's death, which was also, according to Dorner, a new stage in Christ's personal development:

With Christ's death not only in his earthly work completed but also the inner, at first spiritual, perfection of his person is accomplished. Therefore the deepest level of his external humiliation is in itself the beginning of his exaltation.<sup>50</sup>

Death brought Jesus to a new level of perfection in his inner personal life. The low point for his body was a new high point for his soul. Christ's descent into hell belonged to the exaltation and meant "for Christ's person a higher life status of a spiritual

character, in which he can prove his spiritual power free of space and time."<sup>51</sup>

In contrast to many of his contemporaries, Dorner believed that Jesus had risen from the dead and that this real, physical resurrection had theological significance. He did not accept the resurrection on the strength of the testimony of Scripture although he took note of such testimony. He accepted it because he considered it logically necessary for the full exaltation of the God-Man. His spirit had been glorified or transfigured (*verklaert*), and death could not be allowed to rob him of part of his being, his body.<sup>52</sup> The necessity of the resurrection was "in this that the inner, spiritual perfection which he had achieved in death could allow this [death] no kind of further power over his holy person."<sup>53</sup>

This resurrection was not, for Dorner, a simple revivication that left the body still mortal. In fact, the body does not seem to have remained physical. According to Dorner, Jesus rose "to an already higher existence."<sup>54</sup> The resurrection and the ascension were really one movement:

In the ascension of Christ, or his absolute exaltation, his resurrection finds its completion, as the full animation or transfiguration of his earthly personhood into a spiritual one presents itself in perfection. The exalted God-Man has left behind temporal and spatial limits and the humanity of Jesus has become the free, adequate instrument of the Logos.<sup>55</sup>

It certainly seems that this last stage points to an end for any existence of Jesus in spatial, temporal, or physical terms at all. The person Jesus, according to Dorner, seems to have been finally diffused or dissolved into the Logos.

Dorner's Christology was a serious attempt to solve the major theological problem of his day as he understood it. He came up with an original and not altogether clear Christology. His doctrine was false when judged by Scripture, and it was certainly not true to the creedal statements of the early church, which were based on Scripture. Dorner's view of the earthly life of Christ was Nestorian, separating Christ into two persons, one human and one divine. But his view of Christ after the ascension was somewhat Eutychian, implying only one nature. But Nestorianism and Eutychianism had been mutually contradictory heresies in the early church, departing in opposite directions from the Biblical truth. Neither was Dorner's synthesis faithful to the clear and factual presentation of the canonical Gospels, according to which Jesus Christ is one Person who is both true God and true Man.

Dorner was torn in different directions. He wanted to hold to something of the orthodox doctrine of Christ and to be true at the same time to what he considered the reliable results of modern science and historiography. Whether Dorner and the mediating theologians or, for that matter, Thomasius and the kenoticists are taken as examples of such efforts, historical criticism was not capable of being harmonized with orthodox Christology. It must also be remembered that the Calvinist insistence that the finite was not capable of the infinite was behind this whole Christological problem, in spite of the fact that many of the theologians involved claimed to be Lutheran. The only real solution to the theological problems of that day was to be found with those few theologians who still held to a completely true Bible and whose teaching was subject to the written Word of God.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Claude Welch, *Protestant Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 1:6.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 149.
4. Donald G. Dawe, *The Form of a Servant: An Historical Analysis of the Kenotic Motif*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), pp. 89-90.
5. P. Lichtenberger, *History of German Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. by ed. W. Hastie (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), pp. 467-68.
6. Welch, *Protestant Thought*, p. 142.
7. Joerg Rothermundt, *Personale Synthese: Isaak August Dorners dogmatische Methode* (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupprecht, 1968), pp. 12-13.
8. Dawe, *Form of a Servant*, pp. 91-92; see also Isaak August Dorner, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der Lehre von der Person Christi von den aeltesten Zeiten bis auf die neuste dargestellt* (Stuttgart: Verlag von Samuel Gottlieb Liesching, 1845), 2:1199-1200.
9. Lichtenberger, *History of German Theology*, p. 477.
10. Welch, *Protestant Thought*, p. 273.
11. Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. anonymous (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1973), p. 578.
12. Welch, *Protestant Thought*, pp. 273-74.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
14. Rothermundt, *Personale Synthese*, pp. 42-43; see also Barth, *Protestant Theology*, p. 578.
15. Welch, *Protestant Thought*, p. 273.
16. Rothermundt, *Personale Synthese*, p. 13.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 47-48; Isaak August Dorner, *System der christlichen Glaubenslehre* (Berlin: Verlag von Wilhelm Hertz, 1886), 2 vols.
18. Barth, *Protestant Theology*, p. 578.
19. Welch, *Protestant Thought*, p. 275.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
21. Dorner, *Entwicklungsgeschichte*, 2:1276; see also *Glaubenslehre*, 2:300-301.
22. Isaak August Dorner, *Geschichte der protestantischen Theologie besonders in Deutschland nach ihrer principiellen und intellectuellen Leben*

- betrachtet* (Muenchen: G. G. Cotta'schen Buchhandlung, 1867), p. 769.
23. Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, trans. Theodore Engelder (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 1:292.
  24. Gottfried Thomasius, *Christi Person und Werk*, 2nd ed., 2:543, quoted in Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:105-6; see also Thomasius, "Against Dorner" *God and Incarnation in Mid-Nineteenth Century German Theology: G. Thomasius, I. A. Dorner, A. E. Biedermann*, trans. and ed. Claude Welch (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 89.
  25. Dorner, *Glaubenslehre*, 2:368. Since in German, pronouns referring to God are not singled out for capitalization, no conclusions about a German theologian's attitude toward Christ can be drawn on the basis of his use of capitals. To avoid injecting any implications, this writer has limited the use of capitals in translating the words and explaining the views of these German theologians.
  26. *Ibid.*
  27. Schneider, quoted without further identification or reference in Richard Joseph Cooke, *The Incarnation and Recent Criticism* (New York: Eaton & Mains, 1907), p. 204.
  28. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:292; see Dawe, *Form of a Servant*, pp. 93-94.
  29. Dawe, *Form of a Servant*, pp. 96-97.
  30. Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:292.
  31. Rothermundt, *Personale Synthese*, pp. 192-94; see Welch, *Protestant Thought*, p. 278, and Dawe, *Form of a Servant*, p. 95.
  32. Rothermundt, *Personale Synthese*, pp. 178-79; see pp. 195-96.
  33. Welch, *Protestant Thought*, p. 88.
  34. Dorner, *Glaubenslehre*, 1:395-96; see pp. 430-31.
  35. *Ibid.*, 2:370.
  36. Dorner, *Entwicklungsgeschichte*, 2:1268-70.
  37. Dorner, *Glaubenslehre*, 2:300-301.
  38. Dorner, *Entwicklungsgeschichte*, 2:1198.
  39. *Ibid.*, 2:1224-25; see p. 1260 and Dorner, *Geschichte der protestantischen Theologie*, p. 875; Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:80-81.
  40. Dorner, *Entwicklungsgeschichte*, 2:1263-66.
  41. *Ibid.*, 2:1272.
  42. Dorner, *Glaubenslehre*, 2:431.
  43. Dorner, *Entwicklungsgeschichte*, 2:1261-62. The emphasis was Dorner's.
  44. Dorner, *Glaubenslehre*, 2:403.
  45. *Ibid.*, 2:403.
  46. *Ibid.*, 2:438.
  47. Dorner, *Entwicklungsgeschichte*, 2:1273.
  48. Dorner, *Glaubenslehre*, 2:460.
  49. *Ibid.*, 2:475.
  50. *Ibid.*, 2:659.
  51. *Ibid.*, 2:662.
  52. Rothermundt, *Personale Synthese*, pp. 194-95; see pp. 198-99.
  53. Dorner, *Glaubenslehre*, 2:666.
  54. *Ibid.*, 2:666-67.
  55. *Ibid.*, 2:672-73.