

# *John Wyclif's Neoplatonic View of Scripture in its Christological Context*

IAN CHRISTOPHER LEVY

Lexington Theological Seminary

John Wyclif's metaphysical realism is well documented, as is the role it plays in his biblical exegesis. Indeed, notable scholars have observed how Wyclif's Christian Neoplatonism goes hand in hand with his view of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> What has not received due attention is the way in which Wyclif's understanding of universals corresponds to his specifically Christological view of Scripture. In fact, Wyclif's threefold system of universals bears a striking similarity to that outlined by the sixth-century Neoplatonist Simplicius, and, in turn, corresponds markedly to Wyclif's division of Scripture into five and three levels.<sup>2</sup> As we shall see, because Wyclif equates Scripture with Christ the Word, in whom all the divine ideas dwell, such an equation results in a very dynamic view of Scripture. For rather than subsisting as a static eternal book, Scripture, in its different levels, functions as a vital extrapolation of Christ the Word. In this article, I have three basic objectives. The first is to show the similarity between Wyclif's theory of universals and the Neoplatonic model presented by Simplicius. Secondly, I plan to examine the place of Christ the Word within that system. Having done these things, the stage is set for demonstrating the connection between Wyclif's system of universals and his understanding of Scripture's own nature and composition.

1. Samuel Harrison Thomson, "The Philosophical Basis of Wyclif's Theology," *The Journal of Religion* 11:1 (1931): 86–116; J. A. Robson, *Wyclif and the Oxford Schools* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), 115–95; Anthony Kenny, *Wyclif* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 1–30, 56–67; Gordon Leff, *History of Heresy in the Later Middle Ages* Vol. 2 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1967), 500–16; "The Bible and Eternity: John Wyclif's Dilemma," *Journal of Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 27 (1964): 73–89; reprinted in *Studies in Medieval Thought and Learning from Abelard to Wyclif* (London: Hambledon Press, 1981): 399–415. A. J. Minnis, "'Authorial Intention' and the 'Literal Sense' in the Exegetical Theories of Richard Fitzralph and John Wyclif," *Proceedings of the Irish Academy* 75 (1975): 1–31.

2. An anonymous reader of a book proposal I submitted to a publisher noted the similarity between Wyclif's system of universals there outlined and that of the Neoplatonist school. Intrigued by this comment, I pursued the connection, and in the process saw the further relationship with Wyclif's theory of Scripture. I remain indebted to this reader for that initial insight.

## PART I. WYCLIF'S NEOPLATONIC SYSTEM OF UNIVERSALS

John Wyclif was a thoroughgoing realist, firmly imbedded in the tradition of Christian Neoplatonism championed by such figures as Augustine, Anselm and Grosseteste. Absolutely opposed to nominalism, Wyclif makes no bones about his contempt for the *doctores signorum*. Still, it should be remembered, as A. C. Lloyd points out, that the pagan Neoplatonists were almost all 'nominalists' in the broad sense of the term, inasmuch they denied extra-mental existence to the universals represented by general expressions. While, strictly speaking, 'conceptualist' would be the more accurate designation, they clearly were not 'realists' in the Platonic sense.<sup>3</sup> At any rate, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Categories*, Simplicius (nominalist/conceptualist) recounts the Neoplatonic system of the three-fold universal, itself inherited from Middle Platonism. Here Simplicius designates the first sort of universal as the causal, that first genus, such as the first animal which makes animality for animals. This is the *universale ante rem*. The second sort of universal is produced by the first and only exists in individuals; it is the *universale in re*. And the third only exists in the intellect, inasmuch as it is abstracted from the particular, and is thus the *universale post rem*.<sup>4</sup> Simplicius' commentary was translated into Latin by William of Moerbeke in 1266. For the Greek τριπλῶν τῶ κοινόν, Moerbeke's Latin offers the *triplex commune*, the first of which, transcending individuals, is the *causa communitatis*. The second is the *commune* which is distributed to individuals by their common cause, and thus resides within them. And the third sort is the abstraction existing *in intellectibus*.<sup>5</sup>

A Bachelor of Arts at Oxford by 1356, Wyclif's earlier student days seem to have included an attraction to the nominalism he later came to abhor, admitting that it was a long time before he learned from Scripture a genuine understanding of ideas, now thanking God and his holy servants

3. A. C. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 68–69.

4. *Simplici in Aristotelis Categorias Commentarium* ed. Carolus Kalbfleisch (Berolini: 1908), 82;35–83;20. Cf. Lloyd, *The Anatomy of Neoplatonism*, 67–68; Lloyd, *Form and Universal in Aristotle* (ARCA classical and medieval texts, papers and monographs, 4; Liverpool, 1981), 62–64.

5. *In Praedicamenta Aristotelis V*, ed. A. Pattin vol. 1 (Louvain: University of Louvain, 1971), 110–11: "Forte igitur summendum triplex commune, hoc quidem exemptum a singularibus et causa communitatis . . . Secundum autem est commune quod a communi causa differentibus speciebus distribuitur et inest ipsis, sicut id quod in unoquoque animal; tertium autem quod in nostris intellectibus per abstractionem consistit, posterium genitum existens. . ." On the date of the translation cf. Pattin's introduction, xi–xviii.

like Augustine for finally enlightening him.<sup>6</sup> This admission is instructive not only in tracing the development of Wyclif's thought, but also because it points out the inexorable connection Wyclif found between Scripture and realism. Scripture is the place where one learns about metaphysics. After all, he credits Moses with speaking of the beasts fashioned in their genus and species, namely the universal natures communicated to many particulars.<sup>7</sup> What is more, Wyclif was quite convinced that Aristotle and Porphyry, as well as the Christian writers Boethius and Gilbert de la Porrée, understood universals properly, and were thus in agreement with Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

While Wyclif may have been a nominalist early on, by the time he was a Master of Arts in 1360 his realist metaphysical system was in place, evinced in the earliest of his surviving works, *De logica*, written just about this time.<sup>9</sup> If Wyclif was indebted to anyone for the system of universals he presents in this work, one might expect a reference to that source by the young scholar. Yet in what is an otherwise standard outline of logic, he presents his system of universals as if it were perfectly commonplace, like the rest of the material he is explaining. The second chapter opens with a threefold classification of universals. "The first is the universal of causation, such as God, the sun, the moon etc.; the second is the universal of communication, such as human nature, or angelic etc., and they are called universals of communication because they are universal natures, communicated to a number of subjects. And in this way human nature is communicated to all individuals of the human species. . . . The third is the universal of representation, such as those terms 'man, 'animal' and 'stone,' whether they be written terms, spoken terms, or intentions in the mind." Thus the last category pertains

6. *De dominio divino* I, ix, ed. Reginald Lane Poole (London: 1890; reprint; Johnson Reprint Co., 1966), 63: "Et diu fuit antequam ex Scripturis intellexi istam sententiam de ydeas; quam cum illustratus a Deo perfunctorie repperissem, cum gaudio gracias egi Deo, cum suo famulo Augustino et aliis quos Deus eternaliter ordinat ad hoc ministeraliter me iuvare."

7. *Tractatus de universalibus* ii, ed. Ivan J. Mueller (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 69: "Nam quando ille eximius philosophus et propheta Moyses dixit, *Genesis* I: 'producat terra animam viventem in genere suo, iumenta, reptilia et bestias terrae secundum species suas,' non intellexit terminum vel conceptum humanum per 'genus' et 'speciem,' sed naturae universales communicatas multis suppositis. . . ." Cf. *De dominio divino* II, i, 176–77: "Tercio confirmatur idem ex testimonio Scripture, que, ubicumque loquitur de genere vel specie, intelligit non conceptus in anima vel res secunde impositionis, sed res extra intentas principaliter a natura: ut Gen. i. 12 dicitur quod Deus produxit terre nascencia secundum genus et species suas. . . ."

8. *De universalibus* i, 43: "Ex istis facile est videre sensum Aristotelis, Porphyrii, Gliberti, Boethii et aliorum loquentium compendiose et vere de virtute sermonis, de universalibus et de omnibus non dissonant a Scriptura."

9. For the dating of Wyclif's works cited throughout (with one exception) cf. Willliell R. Thomson, *The Latin Writings of John Wyclif* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1983).

to the term which then represents the extra-mental universal of the second type.<sup>10</sup>

A few years later, in his 1365 *De ente in communi*, Wyclif again offers the ‘*triplex universale*’ consisting of the universal of causation, which is the cause of many things; the universal of communication, which is common to many singulars; and the universal of signification, which functions as a term signifying the second order of universals.<sup>11</sup> And by the time of his *De universalibus*, which Mueller dates to 1374,<sup>12</sup> Wyclif again posits three types of universals: “The first is the universal of causation, as God is the most universal cause, and after him there are the created universals according to the order by which they originate from God. The second is the universal of communication, just as, for instance, a reality is communicated to many subjects, as is the case with human nature and other common and specific natures. The third is the universal of representation, which is a sign of the prior universals, and these are only called universals equivocally, as a picture of a man is equivocally the man.”<sup>13</sup> Here then, in these three descriptions, we have Moerbeke’s *causa communitatis*, namely the *universale causatione*; Moerbeke’s *commune*, namely the *universale communicatione*; and finally Moerbeke’s abstracted universal located *in intellectibus*, which is the *universale repraesentatione*. And while Wyclif prefers the term ‘*universale*’ to Moerbeke’s ‘*commune*,’ the meaning is the same.

Despite this similarity, Wyclif never mentions Simplicius by name in his writings. Might he still have read Moerbeke’s translation, though? There

10. *De logica* I, ii, ed. Michael Henry Dziewicki (London: 1893; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1966), 8: “Iam consequenter dicendum est de universalibus, supponendo primo quod tripliciter dicitur universale: primum est universale *causatione*, ut *Deus, sol, luna* etc.; secundum est universale *communicatione*, ut *natura humana*, sive *angelica* etc.; et dicuntur universalia *communicatione*, quia sunt universales naturae, communicate pluribus suppositis. Et sic natura humana communicatur omnibus individuis speciei humane . . . Tercium est universale *repraesentatione*, sicut isti termini, *homo, animal, lapis*, sive sint termini scripti, sive termini vocales, sive intenciones in anima cum illis convertibiles. Et dicuntur universalia *repraesentatione*, quia principaliter representant universalia a parte rei, sicut iste terminus, *homo*, respresentat principaliter vel primarie naturam humanam, que natura est species universalis omnium hominum, et universale a parte rei. . .”

11. *De ente in communi* I, iv, ed. S. Harrison Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), 54–55: “Est igitur triplex universale, scilicet universale *causatione*, ut quilibet causa multorum, universale *communicatione*, ut commune quod est multorum singulum, et universale *signatione* ut terminus signans universale secundo modo dictum.”

12. Cf. Mueller’s introduction to *Tractatus de universalibus*, xxix–xxx.

13. *De universalibus* i, 15–16: “Primo quod triplex est maneries universalium in genere. Primum est universale *causatione*, ut *Deus* est causa universalissima et post eum res universales creatae secundum ordinem, quo originatur a Deo. Secundus est universale *communicatione*, ut puta res communicata multis suppositis, ut natura humana et aliae naturae generales et specificae. Tertium est universale *repraesentatione*, ut signa priorum universalium, quae aequivoce dicuntur universalia sicut homo pictus aequivoce homo.”

are twelve extant manuscripts containing the translation, none of which is in England.<sup>14</sup> And while Wyclif's beloved Grosseteste had translated Simplicius' commentary on the *De caelo*, there is no record of his having translated the *Categories* commentary.<sup>15</sup> And, as noted, Wyclif makes no mention of having read of this system, nor of anyone having taught it to him. In fact, as Robson notes, there is no record of Wyclif having studied under a specific master. Rather, his debt was to theologians of the past, from Augustine to Anselm, and of course Grosseteste.<sup>16</sup> As to where he might have encountered the Neoplatonist threefold universal, even if uncredited, the most likely answer is Grosseteste, but Grosseteste does not present this threefold system. Perhaps Wyclif's version is simply a modification of Grosseteste's own system, which Wyclif specifically recounts in his own *Tractatus de universalibus*. Here he refers to Grosseteste's commentary on the *Posterior Analytics*, and attributes five categories of universals to him. The first is the eternal exemplar idea residing in God; the second is the common created reason residing in celestial spheres; the third is the common form found in singulars; the fourth is the common form in its accidents; and the fifth is the sign or concept.<sup>17</sup> Notwithstanding the similarity, Wyclif does not claim here, or in his earlier works, to have modified Grosseteste's system. And it is interesting to note that modern scholars simply accept Wyclif's system as his own device, born of a general adherence to the long Christian Neoplatonist tradition.<sup>18</sup> Of course, Wyclif could have cobbled it together himself; the constituent parts were all there for him to arrange as he saw fit. But the articulation of the system does run quite close to Simplicius. No matter how Wyclif did arrive at such a system, his application of this

14. Cf. Pattin's introduction, vol 1, xxiii–xxxix.

15. Cf. James McEvoy, *Robert Grosseteste* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 86; Bernard G. Dod, "Aristoteles Latinus," in *Cambridge History of Later Medieval Philosophy* ed. Norman Kretzmann, Anthony Kenny, Jan Pinborg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 74–79.

16. Robson, 144.

17. *De universalibus* ii, 59: "Primo quod est dare quinque maneries universalium, ut declarat Lincolniensis, *I Posteriorum*, capitulo 7. Primum et supremum genus est ratio vel idea exemplaris aeterna in Deo. Secundum genus est ratio communis creata in causis superioribus, ut intelligentiis et orbibus caelestibus. Tertium genus universalium est forma communis fundata in suis individuis. Et illa, inquit Lincolniensis, sunt genera et species de quibus loquitur Aristoteles. Quarto: forma communis in suis accidentibus, apprehensa ab intellectu infimo, est universale. Sed quantum modum universalium—pro signis vel actibus intellegendi—dimittit Lincolniensis ut sibi impertinens." Cf. *Commentarius in Posteriorum Analyticorum libros I,7* ed. Pietro Rossi (Florence: 1981), 139–41. See Kenny's discussion of these five levels in "The Realism of the *De universalibus*," in *Wyclif in His Times* ed. Anthony Kenny (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 23–34.

18. In addition to the works cited at the outset, consider Paul Vincent Spade's detailed and erudite account of Wyclif's theory of universals and predication in the introduction to Kenny's translation, *On Universals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), vii–xlvii.

Neoplatonic order to Holy Scripture is especially interesting. And it is to that relationship we now turn.

## PART II. THE WORD IN WHOM ALL THINGS WERE MADE

That Wyclif credits Scripture with teaching him a proper metaphysical system coincides with the prominent role that Christ plays in Wyclif's realist hierarchy. Christ the Word is the site of the exemplar reasons, the essential foundation in whom all things were made.<sup>19</sup> Thus, in his 1374 *De dominio divino*, when addressing Paul's declaration in Ephesians 1:4 that, "[God] *elegit nos in ipso* [Christ] *ante mundi constitutionem*," Wyclif calls exemplar reasons the eternal universals which are necessarily presupposed with respect to the existence of a creature. This scriptural passage is an instance, he says, where one must distinguish between the existence of the creature and the means by which it subsists through the exemplar reason or divine essence. It is the creature's exemplar reason which was in God before the foundation of the world. And while the creature is not God, it is still the same as God in its exemplar reason, precisely because the reasons belong to the divine intellect and thus to the divine essence.<sup>20</sup> In Christ subsists that first category of universal, that causal principle which is the *universale ante rem*.

For Wyclif, the eternal truths are identical with God inasmuch God causes them, though formally speaking they are distinct both from each other and from God.<sup>21</sup> Wyclif would thus agree with Aquinas that the exemplar reasons are not the self-subsisting ideas of Plato, since according

19. *De dominio divino* I, vi, 39: "Tunc enim cognoscemus quomodo Christus secundum rationes exemplares est *omnia in omnibus* illapsus, ut dicit apostolus, I Cor. xv. 28. Ipse autem est fundamentum essenziale, quod secundum esse vitale adintra est omnia, iuxta illud Ioh. i. 3, 4, *Quod factum est ipso vita erat*."

20. *De dominio divino* I, ix, 62–63: "Et iste rationes exemplares sunt universalis eterna, que sunt necessario presupposita ad existenciam creature . . . quia equivocatur in medio a ratione exemplari vel divina essencia ad existenciam creature. Et si queritur, quid hoc est, *ante mundi constitutionem*, dicitur quod ratio exemplaris et per consequens Deus; et hoc est ista creatura: et tamen ista creatura non est Deus, sed idem Deo in ratione exemplari, et secundum esse intelligibile adintra est Deus."

21. *De ente librorum duorum excerpta* i, ed Michael Henry Dziewicki. (London: 1909; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1966), 6: "Ulterius quo ad dictum sancti Thome et Lyncolnensis in libris suis de veritate, patet que intendunt, sicut et quicunque alii probabiliter sapientes in ista materia, quod nulla talis veritas, quamvis sit eterna a parte ante, dicit aliquam essenciam vel naturam sic eternam, nisi solum deum. Unde in predicacione secundum causam concedunt doctores quod quelibet talis veritas est deus, sicut scriptura vocat deum illuminationem, resurrectionem, et quotlibet talia; cum sit omnia in omnibus. Et tamen, loquendo formaliter, non dubium quin distinguntur ab invicem et a deo, ut patet per Augustinum *de ydeis 83 questionum* questione 46. Nec est michi verissimile quod tam venerabilis cetus doctorum Parisiensium dampnaret dictum articulum, nisi secundum sensum falsum et causam racionalem."

to his essence God is the likeness of all things, such that the idea in God is nothing other than the divine essence itself.<sup>22</sup> Yet Wyclif did in fact think Aristotle had misrepresented Plato, who was likely in agreement with Holy Scripture.<sup>23</sup> At any rate, Thomas knew that divine simplicity would be compromised if the divine intellect were formed by the many things it knows. Hence, the many ideas in the divine mind are there as things known by God. In other words, their being derives from their being known.<sup>24</sup> And so for Wyclif, while God knows his creation primarily through universals and secondarily through individuals, divine simplicity is never impaired since these universals of the first order exist in God as second intentional concepts.<sup>25</sup> Despite the similarity between the two theologians, one should remember that Aquinas does not call such exemplar reasons 'universals,' inasmuch as universals for him exist only in singulars.<sup>26</sup> Wyclif, in the Neoplatonist vein outlined by Simplicius, equates the highest level of universals with the exemplars, as causal principles, while his second level corresponds to Aquinas' *universale in re*.

### PART III. CHRIST THE ETERNAL SCRIPTURE

The system illustrated above has a direct bearing on Wyclif's description of Scripture. Scholars such as Minnis, Robson and Smalley have commented

22. *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 15, a. 1 (Taurin: 1950), 90: "Dicendum quod Deus non intelligit res secundum ideam extra se existentem. Et sic etiam Aristoteles improbat opinionem Platonis de ideis, secundum quod ponebat eas per se existentes, non in intellectu . . . Dicendum quod Deus secundum essentiam suam est similitudo omnium rerum. Unde idea in Deo nihil est aliud quam Dei essentia."

23. *De universalibus* ii, 60–61: "Sed Dominus Albertus, Sanctus Thomas et alii glossantes Aristotelem cum favore dicunt quod Aristoteles aequivocavit cum Platone, intellegendo eum dixisse quod ideae sunt substantiae per se entes, separatae a Deo et individuus. Quod non est intelligibile, cum talia monstruosissime superfluerent. . . Probabilius tamen videtur mihi quod Plato sane sensit de ideis cum Scriptura nostra sacra, sicut de eo Augustinus testatur, *Octoginta trium quaestionum*, quaestio 47, et Eustratus, ubi supra."

24. *STI*, q. 15, a. 2, 91: "Hoc autem quomodo divinae simplicitati non repugnet, facile est videre, si quis consideret ideam operati esse in mente operantis sicut quod intelligitur; non autem sicut species qua intelligitur, quae est forma faciens intellectum in actu. . . Non est autem contra simplicitatem divini intellectus, quod multa intelligat: sed contra simplicitatem eius esset, si per plures eius intellectus formaretur. Unde plures ideae sunt in mente divina ut intellectae ab ipso." Cf. W. Norris Clarke, "The Problem of the Reality and Multiplicity of Divine Ideas in Christian Neoplatonism," in *Neoplatonism and Christian Thought* ed. Dominic J. O'Meara (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 122–23.

25. Stephen Lahey, "Wyclif and Lollardy," in *The Medieval Theologians* ed. G. R. Evans (London: Basil Blackwell, 2001), 336.

26. *Contra Gentiles* I, c. 65 in *Opera Omnia* vol. 12 (Paris: Vives, 1880), 70: "Universalialia autem non sunt res subsistentes, sed habent esse solum in singularibus, ut probatur in septimo *Metaphysicorum*, c. XIII."

upon the effect Wyclif's Neoplatonism had on his understanding of Scripture, generally regarding that effect as negative. For Minnis, Wyclif built "a castle in the air, in honour of the *liber vitae*. His enthusiasm for the Word of God in the Neoplatonic sense blinds him to the flesh and blood reality of scribes, compilers, and authors."<sup>27</sup> Acknowledging the vitality of Wyclif's view of Scripture as the life-giving Word, Minnis finds that Wyclif refuses to recognize Scripture as "a book *per se*," given his exaltation of the highest level of Scripture as the Book of Life. All of this, says Minnis, leads Wyclif to eschew the subtle literary classifications that late medieval exegetes, such as Lyra and FitzRalph, employed to differentiate the various senses of the text.<sup>28</sup> While Robson also finds that Wyclif's estimation of Scripture as the eternal truth led him into countless difficulties, he too is aware of the dynamic quality of Scripture, writing that for Wyclif, "the Word of Scripture was God Himself, an emanation of the Supreme Being 'transposed into writing.'"<sup>29</sup> Smalley likewise notes that Wyclif associated Scripture with an emanation from the divine being. Likening him to Plotinus, she concludes that Wyclif wound up destroying time itself in his effort to preserve the eternal validity of scriptural discourse.<sup>30</sup> These points are well taken, for there is no question but that Wyclif's system led him into exegetical difficulties. The present study cannot take up the closely related, though separate, matter of exegesis, as that would take us too far afield. Nevertheless, the above observations do serve to highlight that it is precisely the dynamic quality of Wyclif's Scripture which can produce such results. Yet this dynamic quality does not derive simply from the fact that Scripture is divine in nature, but rather that it is specifically Christological in nature. And that is, in turn, intimately bound to the larger role of Christ the Word, source of all being, dwelling place of the eternal exemplar reasons.

In his 1376 *De civili dominio*, Wyclif described Scripture as the Book of Life and the eternal truths grounded therein, while the manuscripts are called Scripture in an equivocal sense, as a remote picture humanly imposed for the sake of signifying the prior, higher levels of Scripture. Moreover, once one deforms Scripture with an erroneous sense it ceases to be Holy Scripture, just as the defaced image is no longer the man depicted. And yet the catholic who devoutly understands the truth possesses Scripture in his soul.<sup>31</sup> The content of Scripture, those truths which it bears, is Scripture,

27. Minnis, 13.

28. Minnis, 13–14.

29. Robson, 146. For Robson's views on the deleterious effect of Wyclif's realism on his exegesis, especially in the context of his 1372–74 debate with John Kenningham cf. *ibid.*, 156–70.

30. Smalley, 410–14.

31. *De civili dominio* III, xix, ed. Johann Loserth (London: 1904; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1966), 403–04: "Istud autem dubium relinquo loycis pertractandum, sollicitus ad intelligendum librum vite et veritates eternas in ipso fundatas; quorum uterque est scriptura sacra. Codices autem nostros voco scripturam

and the truths are none other than all that is found in the Eternal Word. Thus the catholic who grasps Christ in his soul has Scripture.

By the time of his 1378 *De veritate sacrae scripturae*, Wyclif contends that Scripture has five different levels: "I have been in the habit of describing Holy Scripture as the inscription of sacred truth, whether in its revealing of other truths, or insofar as it is the very revelation of truth itself. I have customarily posited five levels of Holy Scripture. The first is the Book of Life, which Apocalypse speaks of in Chapters 20 and 21. The second consists of the truths inscribed in the Book of Life, according to their intelligible being. Both levels of these Scriptures are absolutely necessary, although they do not differ essentially, but rather according to reason, as I said of this matter in *On Ideas*. On the third level, Scripture is considered in light of the truths which are to be believed in their proper genus. These are inscribed in the Book of Life according to existence and effect. The fourth level considers Scripture in light of the truth which must be believed as it is inscribed in the book of the natural man, that is, in his mind. Some people call this Scripture an aggregate abstracted from actions and truths, spoken of in the third manner. For some this is an intellective habit, and for others it is an intention or species. Yet in the fifth manner, Holy Scripture is understood as referring to the manuscripts, sounds or other artificial signs designed to bring to mind that first truth."<sup>32</sup>

As the argument continues, Wyclif proceeds to equate Scripture with Christ himself. The Gospel of John provides him with the proof that Christ is identical with Scripture, for Christ is the Scripture God sent into the world: "*et non potest solvi scriptura quem Pater sanctificavit et misit in mundum* (Jn 10:35–36)." Actually, Wyclif had been equating Scripture with Christ as early as 1372, when arguing in his *De benedicta incarnatione* that the hypostatic union cannot be separated. Much of this material would re-appear almost

---

sacram equivoce tercio modo dictam; *equivoce* dico, quia non est nisi pictura remota humanitus imposita ad significandum scripturas priories. . . . Unde difformans ipsa per sensum erroneum facit ea tunc non esse scripturam sacram, sicut deturpans ymaginem facit ut tunc non sit homo pictus; verumtamen catholicus pie intelligens habet scripturam sacram in anima."

32. *De veritate sacrae scripturae* I, vi, ed. Rudolf Buddensieg (London: 1905; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Co., 1966), 108–09: "unde solebam ponere quinque gradus scripture sacre: primus est liber vite, de quo Apoc. vicesimo et vicesimo uno, secundus est veritates libro vite inscripte secundum esse earum intelligibile, et utraque istarum scripturarum est absolute necessaria, non differens essentialiter, sed secundum rationem, ut dictum est in materia De Ydeis. tercio sumitur scriptura pro veritatibus credendis in genere, que secundum existenciam vel effectum inscribuntur libro vite. quarto sumitur scriptura pro veritate credenda, ut inscribitur libro hominis naturalis ut anima, quam scripturam quidam agregatum ex actibus et veritatibus tercio modo dictis, quidam, quod est habitus intellectivus, et quidam quod est intencio vel species. sed quinto modo sumitur scriptura sacra pro codicibus, vocibus aut aliis artificialibus, que sunt signa memorandi veritatem priorem."

verbatim five years later in *De veritate sacrae scripturae*. As Christ the Truth speaks here in John 10, he is not referring to Scripture as that artificial aggregate made up of the pelts of dead animals; after all, those scriptures are destroyed on a daily basis. Rather, he means the Book of Life in which all things are inscribed, that is, the intrinsic Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity. And this is authenticated by the Third Person, who leaves us an example by speaking of the “living Scripture.” Supplying the relative pronoun in the masculine gender (*quem Pater sanctificavit*), the Holy Spirit thus marks the relationship with the Son.<sup>33</sup>

When Wyclif picks up this theme in *De veritate sacrae scripturae* one finds the “whole Trinity” at work again. The Word in his divinity sent himself into the world, for in his humanity he is the nobleman of Luke 19:12 who went off to a distant country to receive his kingship and then return. That this book i.e., Christ cannot be destroyed is verified by the fact that his divinity and humanity are insolubly united in a single person. Again it is both a Christological and a Trinitarian matter, as we read of the Holy Spirit so ordaining the correct manuscripts to read the relative pronoun in the masculine (*quem*), thus referring to Christ. For as Christ is fully human, born of a woman, and fully divine, begotten not made, so God ‘made’ the manuscripts sacred in regard to Christ’s humanity, while he ‘begot’ Scripture and ‘caused’ it to be sacred with respect to his divinity, with the result that Scripture must be supremely authentic, surpassing all sensible signs.<sup>34</sup> For the sensible Scripture found in manuscripts is only Holy Scripture in an equivocal sense, as one might say the painted image of a man is the man himself.<sup>35</sup> This is the Scripture liable to

33. *Tractatus de benedicta incarnatione* v, ed. Edward Harris (London: 1896; reprint, Johnson Reprint Co., 1966), 72: “Primo quod Veritas non loquitur de scriptura nostra artificiali aggregata ex ficturis atramenti et pellibus mortuorum; tum quia talis scriptura cottidie per artifices potest solvi . . . Unde Spiritus Sanctus ad relinquendum nobis exemplar, quod loquitur de scriptura vitali, subdit in genere masculino—‘*quem* Pater sanctificavit’—innuendo nobis relacionem faciendum ad Filium.” Cf. Thomas Geoffrey Oey, *Wyclif’s Doctrine of Scripture within the Context of His Doctrinal and Social Ideas* (unpublished diss., Vanderbilt Univ., 1991), 181–192. Oey believes that Wyclif has in mind here those who argue that the hypostatic union could be dissolved *potentia Dei absoluta*.

34. *De veritate* I, vi, 109–110: “ymmo tota trinitas et per consequens ipsummet verbum divinitus misit se ipsum, humanitus est homo nobilis, quo abiit in regionem longinquam accipere sibi regnum et reverti. iste liber non potest solvi . . . ordinavit spiritus sanctus in correctis codicibus hoc relativum ‘quem’ et non ‘quam’ . . . deus ergo fecit dictam scripturam sanctam quoad humanitatem, et genuit vel causavit sanctam quoad divinitatem. et patet ex fide scripture, quod oportet esse scripturam summe autenticam preter signa sensibilia.”

35. *De veritate* I, vi, 111: “unde ista scriptura sensibilis in vocibus vel codicibus non est scriptura sacra nisi equivoce, sicut homo pictus vel ymaginatus dicitur homo propter similitudinem ad verum hominem.”

destruction in the jaws of dogs and contamination at the hands of fool and heretics.<sup>36</sup>

The composition and subsequent plight of Scripture is remarkably close to that of Christ the Incarnate Word. Just as Christ is fully God and fully man, so Scripture can be seen as the product of a hypostatic union, namely the Divine Word and parchment. The Word assumed perishable flesh, liable to injury and death at the hands of sinners, and so too the Word is united to cured goat hide, liable to scribal error and the yet worse blasphemous senses imposed upon it by impious sophists. Yet as Christ could not suffer in his impassible divinity, so the Word, the Book of Life, cannot be altered or destroyed in its eternal truth. Those who deface Scripture can do no damage to the truth preserved in the devout catholic soul where Christ, the substance of Scripture, dwells.

The dynamic quality of Scripture comes to the fore now. By 'dynamic' one means an active power at work in the world. Christ the creative Word of God, source of all being, is active in Scripture as both the content of Divine Truth and the very one who reveals it. The Truth is present in Scripture more permanently than any place else, says Wyclif, inasmuch as Scripture is eternal and indelible, the very radiance of eternal light, that flawless mirror of divine majesty spoken of in Wisdom 7:26. What is more, this Truth is the very cause of the inexorable nexus formed between the written book, the truths therein, and the writer himself. The Eternal Word is the thus the locus of the hypostatic union. Here is the Word of Life (Jn 14:6), the very gospel Paul proclaimed to the Galatians (Gal 1:6–9).<sup>37</sup> And because Scripture is a mirror of the divine will those who live by faith may trust that the Truth himself will deign to descend and instruct them, free from all deception.<sup>38</sup>

As Wyclif speaks of Scripture in this manner it becomes clear that *Scriptura Sacra* is interchangeable with *Veritas* and *Sophia*, the Truth and Wisdom which are none other than the *Verbum*, that is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Thus to hold up all doctrines to the eternal mirror of Scripture is to judge them in light of a living, eternal Person, not some vague, ethereal book hovering above the plane of human affairs. Scripture is a 'who' not

36. *De veritate* I, vi, 111: "... ymmo a cane solubilis et corrigibilis a scurra sicut maculabilis, et omnis scriptura foret a quotlibet hominibus hereticabilis. . ."

37. *De veritate* I, vi, 111–12: "veritas enim est ibi permanencior, quia eterna et indelebilis, liber est sereniore, quia candor lucis eterne et speculum sine macula, Sap. septimo, et est causata ydemptias libri scripti, veritas scripse et persone scribentis, quod omnia hec tria distincta secundum rationem sunt verbum vite et veritates in abstracto, Joh quarto decimo, et ista scriptura est evangelium, de quo doctor genicum ad Gal primo sic loquitur. . ."

38. *De veritate* I, xv, 377–78: "... quam si deus, qui mentiri non potest, in scriptura sua, que est speculum voluntatis sue, hoc dixerit, igitur verum. nec oportet, catholicum contendere circa probationem antecedentis, quia sit sibi scriptura sacra, sicut debet esse ex fide, et eo ipso magister adest, docens ipsum antecedens et excitans ad assumptum."

a 'what.' Moreover, it is this Eternal Person who became incarnate and offered testimony to Truth in word and deed, thereby providing the Church with a perfect example of the sacred conduct which brings the faithful into conformity with the creative Word, the source and principle of all being. Thus to the extent that any exegetical difficulties arise on account of Wyclif's doctrine of the eternal Scripture, we must always bear in mind that he regards the words of Scripture as the words of Christ the Word, the one who cannot lie. Wyclif is concerned with the veracity of a Living Person, not the correctness of a fixed record.

By the time of his 1382 *Trialogus*, Wyclif has narrowed down his fivefold Scripture to a tri-partite system, though the Christological theme is still intact. "As I should speak more succinctly, you must remember that there is some equivocation with regard to the term 'Scripture.' First of all, the term 'Holy Scripture' signifies Jesus Christ, the Book of Life, in whom every truth is inscribed, in keeping with John 10: 'the Scripture cannot be broken, whom God sanctified and sent into the world.' In the second manner, it signifies the truths inscribed in the very Book of Life, whether they are the eternal exemplar reasons or other temporal truths. In the third manner, which is better known to the general public, it signifies that aggregate which is derived both from the manuscripts of God's law, and from the truth which God imposes upon them. Yet this bare material Scripture should not be called Holy Scripture, inasmuch as these manuscripts are only sacred to the extent that the sacred meaning accompanies them."<sup>39</sup>

Both the earlier fivefold version, and this condensed version, seem strikingly similar to Wyclif's system of universals. In both the fivefold and the threefold systems, Scripture on its highest level is Christ the Word. And as the Word is the repository of the eternal exemplar reasons, then it seems the second level of Scripture must be equated with those exemplar reasons. For just as the exemplar reasons subsisting in the divine intellect are not distinct from the divine essence, so the truths inscribed in the Book of Life are not (as he says) essentially different from the Book of Life itself.

Let us look at each level of the fivefold system before comparing the two systems, level by level. In the fivefold system, the first and highest level is Christ the Word and Book of Life, thus corresponding to the divine intellect. The second level corresponds to the truths inscribed therein; these are the eternal exemplar reasons (*universale ante rem*). The third level corresponds

39. *Trialogus* III, xxxi, ed. Gotthard Lechler (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1869), 238–39: "Sed ut loquar strictius, notanda est tibi aequivocatio de *scriptura*. *Primo* enim scriptura sacra signat Jesum Christum librum vitae, in quo omnis veritas est inscripta, juxta illud Johannis x: 'non potest solvi scriptura, quem Pater sanctificavit et misit in mundum.' *Secundo modo* signat veritates in ipso libro vitae inscriptas, sive sint rationes exemplares aeternae sive veritates aliae temporales. Et *tertio modo* famosius quo ad vulgus signat aggregatum ex codicibus legis Dei et ex veritate quam Deus ipsis imponit; sed hoc nudum scriptum materiale non didici vocare scripturam sacram, quia illi codices non sunt sacri, nisi illis assit sententia sacra."

to the universals existing in the individual subject (*universale in re*), since these are "the truths that must be believed in their genus, which according to existence or effect are inscribed in the Book of Life." Level four, which is "an aggregate abstracted from actions and truths of the third level," corresponds to the universals existing *in mente*, here called "intention or species." These are the conceptual universals abstracted from particulars (*universale post rem*). The fifth and lowest level consists of the written or vocal signs formed on the basis of these concepts. And bear in mind that the manuscripts i.e., the fifth level of Scripture, are only called Scripture in an equivocal sense, just as his lowest level of universal is only called such equivocally. In fact, both are specifically compared to the portrait of a man bearing only the likeness of the real person. For this *universale repraesentatione* is but a sign of the prior universals.

With regard to the later threefold version of Scripture, one can chart the correspondence in the following way: the first level is the divine intellect; while on the second level he locates the "exemplar reasons" (*universale ante rem*), as well as the "temporal truths," namely the universals subsisting in individual subjects (*universale in re*). And the last level corresponds to the signs formed from those abstracted universals which exist in the mind (*universale post rem*). The first level in this later version is still that of the earlier, while the second level now compresses levels two and three of the earlier version. The lowest levels are the same in each, though level four of the earlier version, namely the universal existing *in mente*, is now implicit in the lowest level of the later version, since the level of signification presupposes a mental concept. Either way, this level refers to the *universale post rem*.

Unless I am very much mistaken, therefore, the connection between these two Scriptural outlines and his threefold universal is so close as to be the intentional product of a carefully conceived presentation of the relationship between the structure of divine revelation and that of the cosmic order.

## CONCLUSION

Minnis had said that Wyclif did not regard Scripture as "a book *per se*." This is undoubtedly true, for Wyclif grants to Scripture a genuine personhood, that of Christ the Word. Scripture thus assumes the role that a 'mere book' cannot, namely that of living Savior. It is precisely the personhood of Scripture which gives it the dynamic quality that distinguishes it from a static volume of immutable laws. The truth of Scripture is grounded not in laws, but in a person. Scripture is true because Christ is true. Christ is the Truth, the source and content of divine revelation through the Old and New Testaments. Yet as the person of Christ, Scripture also performs its salvific function as a 'book,' since it is the immutable truth revealed in the flesh

of the sensible parchment, proclaiming the highest level of saving gospel. The parchment and ink present the Word to the senses much as the flesh and blood of Christ present the Second Person of the Trinity. Just as the principle of unity in the person of Christ is the person of the Word, which thus provides the foundation for the hypostatic union, so the highest level of Scripture is the locus of truth for the lower levels. And yet Wyclif's account of Scripture in its different levels bears not only a Christological character, but speaks to the way in which the Second Person of the Trinity interacts with the Third Person, who adorns the work of the former. The Word is the Book of Life sent into the world, and it is the Holy Spirit who preserves and testifies to the truth of the Word in his 'humanity' by protecting those corrected manuscripts which attest to the highest level of eternal truth. Wyclif cannot think of Scripture apart from Christology and Trinitarianism, precisely because he is a creedal theologian, with his eye on the entirety of sacred tradition. The Church testifies to what the Truth proclaims: the inseparability of the Godhead and the insoluble union of the person of Christ.