

An Introduction to Torrance Theology is an excellent introduction that does just what it says, introducing people to the rich resources offered in the theology of Tom and James Torrance. It deserves to be distributed widely and read thoughtfully.

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**A CRITICAL STUDY ON T. F. TORRANCE'S
THEOLOGY OF INCARNATION**

Man Kei Ho

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Since his death in late 2007 a steady stream of literature on Thomas Torrance's theology has made its way off the presses. Much of the secondary literature on Torrance has, to date, focused on his contributions to science or on his epistemology, with his actual theological contributions receiving relatively little attention. This, thankfully, is starting to change, with Man Kei Ho's work being one of the latest contributions to critically examine Torrance's theology of the incarnation.

Ho is currently an adjunct lecturer at the Canadian Chinese School of Theology at Tyndale Seminary, Toronto, and the present work is his PhD thesis, completed at the University of Wales under the supervision of Professor Tom O'Loughlin.

The aim of Ho's study is to critically examine Torrance's understanding of the incarnation and to expose it as being inconsistent, incoherent, and finally inadequate. Ho lays special emphasis upon the way he believes Torrance unsuccessfully tries to incorporate dualist ways of knowing into a unitary way of thinking, his supposed reversal on the role of natural theology, and finally on the fact that Torrance was unable and unwilling to address the issue of divine kenosis (a claim never substantiated in the book). To those familiar with Torrance's theology, each of these criticisms will immediately strike one as being unusual and misguided.



After a brief introduction, six chapters canvass Torrance's theology: his theological method (chapter 2), the incarnation (chapter 3), the Trinity (chapter 4), incarnation as revelation (chapter 5), and kenosis (chapter 6). A brief conclusion follows. Throughout, Ho takes a decidedly contrary stance to Torrance's theology, something he seems to believe has not been attempted before, and at each point he finds Torrance's theology wanting.

In chapter 2, on "Theological Method" Ho attempts to outline Torrance's basic epistemology and define his hermeneutics and scientific theology, laying special emphasis and critique upon Torrance's understanding of dialectic and unitary ways of knowing. Throughout this and the other chapters, Ho brings Torrance into dialogue with Karl Barth in order to show both continuities and discontinuities. Ho shows a distinct propensity for ambiguity in his writing, along with some very unusual ways of laying out his argument. For example, under his discussion of hermeneutics (pp. 5–19) he argues that Barth learned hermeneutics from his father and Torrance from his mother, as if these were the sole sources of their respective understandings or even their primary ones. Ho goes on to mention that Torrance advocates indwelling the text of Scripture in Polanyian style; yet he never identifies Polanyi as one of Torrance's influences and mistakenly thinks we "dwell in the Scriptures" (p. 7) rather than indwell them. This sort of imprecision mars the work throughout.

Another example of Ho's imprecision comes when he seeks to find the cause for Torrance's preference for word over sight. According to Ho this is simply a Torrancean proclivity and a misguided one at that (pp. 8–9). But Ho fails to consider the wider framework of Torrance's theology of the threefold Word of God (Barth), that Jesus is the eternal and incarnate Word of God, and thus Word does have priority over sight. He also fails to address Torrance's exegesis of those texts in Scripture where sight and word are synonymous, so that "seeing" is equivalent to "knowing."

Ho does correctly show how Torrance's depth exegesis works in general (although he never identifies it as "depth exegesis" as Torrance does himself), and yet he concludes that this forces Torrance into a "vicious circle" in hermeneutics whereby the believer becomes the sole arbiter of meaning (pp. 12–13). Finally, in this section on hermeneutics Ho accuses Torrance of not following the Reformed confessions that stress the inerrancy of Scripture, and Ho argues instead for

a fundamentalist doctrine of Scripture according to a correspondence theory of truth (pp. 16–18). In the process Ho argues that Torrance’s hermeneutics are misguided ultimately because he does not regard “Scripture as divine.” Ho writes, “Unless the Scripture itself is divine, it cannot point beyond itself to the divine reality” (p. 17). Ho’s logic is thus: Scripture is divine; Torrance does not believe Scripture is divine; thus Torrance is wrong. I have never seen it argued before in academic works that Scripture is “divine.” If this were true then we would not believe in a Trinity but in a Quaternary — Father, Son, Spirit, and Scripture! This sort of argumentation is typical throughout chapter 2 and the rest of the book. For instance, in discussing how Torrance uses natural theology, the place of faith in scientific endeavor, and the role of God’s self-revelation, Ho comes to the conclusion that “Torrance’s theological science is simply another fancy name for a personal belief which is totally independent of science” (p. 25). One wonders how you can read Torrance’s scientific theology and come to such a conclusion.

Chapter 3, “The Incarnate Son,” suffers from the same poor scholarship and misunderstanding of Torrance’s meaning, despite a few valid observations. For instance, Ho notes that Torrance applies the concept of the hypostatic union not only to the two natures of Christ but also to the three persons of the Trinity. Due to this rather idiosyncratic move of Torrance’s, Ho believes Torrance risks violating the Chalcedonian Formula, which states that each nature remains distinct, and that Torrance introduces a confusion between nature, person, and being. As a result, “Torrance risks a danger of creating four persons in the Godhead by implicating hypostatic union [sic] as a union of persons instead of natures” (p. 119). Despite this observation once again Ho shows a distinct lack of theological acumen and a general ignorance of the tradition; for instance, he critiques Torrance’s understanding that the hypostatic union endures forever, lumping it in with John Walvoord (a dispensationalist), as if this was an idiosyncratic feature of Torrance’s theology that should be dispensed with! On the basis of such critique Ho argues that Torrance’s doctrine of the atonement is rendered useless because it would deny Christ’s words from the cross recorded in John 19:30, that the work of atonement is “finished.” Such a thorough misunderstanding of Torrance’s theology is staggering. The chapter then concludes abruptly.

Chapter 4, “Triunity in Incarnation,” makes fewer fatal mistakes in interpretation than do the first few chapters, but only because this chapter settles for description

rather than detailed analysis. Ho surveys some features of Torrance's trinitarian theology as it relates to the incarnation and along the way continues to accuse him of incoherence and inconsistency. Ho correctly raises questions over Torrance's critique of God's impassibility and immutability, but he does not have the resources to navigate Torrance's mature thought on these topics or the ability to offer lucid critique of these and other doctrines. For much of this chapter Ho draws upon outdated scholarship and appears to be struggling to hold complex theological concepts together. This is evident, for instance, in his treatment of the *communicatio idiomatum* and the *filioque*, where Ho settles for general descriptions of Torrance's work and is thus unable to offer any significant insights or critique.

Chapter 5, "Incarnation is the Revelation" (whatever that may mean!), proceeds as the other chapters have done: with general description, ill-informed analysis, and illegitimate critique. What Ho does do in this chapter is raise the question of whether or not Torrance's doctrine of revelation is coherent; Ho clearly believes it is not. His main criticism is that in Torrance's theology the incarnation becomes the only revelation of God. If this is so, asks Ho, then what of the Old Testament? Drawing rather randomly upon such figures as J.I. Packer and Carl Henry, Ho maintains that "This is the danger in Torrance's theology of revelation that the relationship between God and man is determined by the knowledge of God through the incarnate revelation, this would deny the authenticity of personal relation between God and his chosen people prior to the incarnation, and also would jeopardize the saving activity of God in the Old Testament" (p. 223). In order to bolster his critique Ho draws upon the notion of propositional revelation as opposed to what he styles a "neo-orthodox" view of revelation, which Torrance in Ho's view subscribes to. The essence of Ho's critique throughout this chapter is his insistence upon objective and verifiable ways of knowing, which run counter to Torrance's epistemological commitments. Based on this a priori premise Ho mounts a challenge to Torrance's doctrine of revelation and labels it "fideistic" and "superficial." What is missing from Ho's analysis are those dimensions of revelation and faith that Torrance often speaks about — that it is logical (*logike latreia*), christological, prepared for through Israel — along with how Torrance constructively draws upon critical realism and dimensions of Michael Polanyi's notion of tacit knowledge and the indwelling of texts. Ho pays lip service to some of these features, but he does not adequately

define or analyze any of them. The final result is that Ho's opinions seem to be just that, opinions and assertions rather than informed critique based upon fair and rigorous analysis.

The final chapter, titled "Kenosis" is at once odd and interesting. It is odd in that nothing has really prepared the reader for this specific discussion. No rationale is given for why kenosis is to be a major theme of the study or as to how it fits here as the final chapter. It is interesting in that kenotic theories are perennially thorny issues for Christology and how any particular theologian interprets the doctrine provides something of a window into their theology and method. Unfortunately this chapter merely provides a cursory summary of kenosis theories from the perspective of Scripture, the patristic thinkers (which Ho repeatedly terms "patristic fathers"), and then Torrance himself. Ho's articulation of the trinitarian framework for Torrance's interpretation of the Word's kenosis is limited, and he all but ignores the christological rationale Torrance gives. One would have expected to see some discussion of Torrance's idea of the depth dimension of Scripture, of the *en-/an-hypostasis* theologumenon (this is covered earlier on pp. 91–98), and the vicarious humanity of Christ all considered here, but they aren't. This chapter reads more like a general survey of the topic with reference to Torrance than it does to what one would expect from a doctoral dissertation.

In addition to the faulty argumentation Ho offers throughout the work, the volume is marred by spelling and grammatical mistakes. For instance, chapter 2 has fifty-eight pages, and I counted at least sixty-four mistakes in the text. The series in which this work is published, the European University Studies Series by Peter Lang, publishes doctoral dissertations that are seemingly unedited versions of the original dissertations, and as such the series shows a wide diversity of quality and range. Torrance scholars will not find much in this work worth spending 76 Swiss Francs on, as it simply does not make a critical, informed, or articulate contribution to Torrance studies.

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