

**Johannes Grössl and Klaus von Stosch, eds.**  
***Impeccability and Temptation: Understanding Christ's  
Divine and Human Will.* Routledge Studies in Analytic  
and Systematic Theology. London: Routledge, 2021.  
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R. Lucas Stamps  
Anderson University

E. L. Mascall (1946, 37) once quipped, “It is both ridiculous and irreverent to ask what it feels like to be God incarnate.” And yet, Christian faith compels us to risk such ridiculousness, as proverbial fools who rush in where angels fear to tread (cf. 1 Peter 1:12), but hopefully with at least some measure of reverence for the monumental Subject with whom we have to do. The biblical text itself and twenty centuries of Christian reflection force upon us questions about the identity and experience of Jesus of Nazareth, whom faith receives as the eternally-begotten and incarnate Son of God. Conciliar Christology confesses Jesus as a single person (indeed, as a divine person, “one of the Holy Trinity,” as the Fifth Ecumenical Council has it), but with two natures and thus two wills (as the Sixth Ecumenical Council insists). But how does this conciliar portrait of Jesus account for his experience of temptation? Can a divine person sin? Can a divine person even be tempted? Was Jesus sinless or impeccable? Was he both or neither? If he was impeccable, how could his temptations be genuine? Further, given impeccability, how could he be genuinely free (and therefore morally praiseworthy) in his decision making? These questions are not new, but they do receive fresh treatment in this collection of essays compiled by Grössl and von Stosch. The book emerged from a three-year research project and workshop hosted and attended by a diverse, international group of scholars. An added interest to this volume is that it is the first installment in a new series, Routledge Studies in Analytic and Systematic Theology, edited by James Turner, Thomas McCall, and Jordan Wessling.

The book is divided into three main parts. The first part consists of five chapters on “exegetical and historical approaches” to the question of Christ’s sinlessness. The first three chapters are focused on the biblical material. Jeffrey Siker suggests that the historical Jesus was not actually sinless and that the notion of his sinlessness emerged as a piece of “retrospective theology” in order to account for his atoning death as the spotless lamb of God. Angelika Strotmann likewise rejects the idea that Christ was sinless, pointing especially to his submission to John’s “baptism of repentance” as evidence. Lena Lütticke and Hans-Ulrich Weidemann examine texts related to Christ’s temptation both in the synoptic gospels and in the book of Hebrews. Next are two chapters specifically devoted to historical approaches to the questions raised in the volume (though historical references litter the rest of the volume as well). Cornelia Dockter explores the Antiochene Christology of Theodore of Mopsuestia and how it might help to avoid the eclipse of Christ’s Spirit-empowered humanity. Timothy Pawl rounds out the first part with a detailed analysis of the problem that impeccability raises for the genuineness

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of Christ's temptations, drawing on the ancient councils, Thomas Aquinas, and John of Damascus along the way.

The second part of the book includes six chapters on "systematical approaches" to the question of Christ's impeccability. John McKinley raises a series of questions "ingredient to Jesus Christ's temptation." Among the highlights: he concludes that compatibilism fares better than libertarianism for securing Christ's impeccability, and he develops a version of Spirit Christology to account for precisely how Christ refused temptation. Thomas Schärtl provides a sophisticated analysis of three possible analogies for understanding Christ's impeccability and of how one's soteriological approach influences which is preferable. R. T. Mullins asserts that no metaphysical account of the hypostatic union has yet to emerge that avoids the "two sons worry" associated with Nestorianism. Dominikus Kraschl examines several available options for maintaining both Christ's sinlessness and his libertarian free will, opting for a "backwards constitution model" based on Christ's completion of a sinless life. Oliver Crisp engages the "neo-monothelite" arguments of several evangelical philosophers, pointing out their weaknesses and highlighting the abiding appeal of a dyothelite approach. Finally, Johannes Grössl proposes a model that can underwrite Christ's libertarian freedom by means of a created human consciousness that is progressively divinized.

The third part of the book enlists the aid of three Islamic scholars, who consider the notion of human perfection and sinlessness in Islamic theology. Mohammad Haghani Fazl explores the Qur'anic evidence for *'iṣma*, especially in its Shi'i interpretation: the doctrine that certain prophets are, by God's grace, morally sinless. Muhammad Legenhausen examines the Shi'i concepts of human inerrancy (which is somewhat distinct from sinlessness) and exaggeration. In the last chapter, Vahid Mahdavi Mehr analyzes the concept of Imamate from a theological perspective rather than a stereotypically political one. The third part and the volume as a whole are concluded with an essay from von Stosch, who explores how these Islamic categories might inform a Christian conception of Christ's sinlessness and impeccability.

Considering the work as a whole, a few notable strengths stand out. First, the volume's disciplinary diversity points up the fact that the nettlesome issues raised in the book require comprehensive rather than narrowly parochial answers. Biblical criticism, historical theology, systematic theology, analytic philosophy, propositional logic, and even psychology and phenomenology each have a part to play in grappling with the mysteries of Christ's temptations and volitional life. Second, the chapters on Islamic theology make this volume unique. Dialogue with Shi'i notions of human perfection may help to illuminate certain aspects of the Christian doctrine of Christ's sinlessness, as von Stosch gestures toward in the conclusion. Third, several of the essays stand out as exceptional models of analytic theology, a logically rigorous and faith-seeking-understanding discipline. The chapters from Pawl, Schärtl, and Crisp are particularly helpful on this front.

As I have written elsewhere, postures toward Christian orthodoxy in the discipline of analytic theology (and in Christian theology more broadly) fall on a spectrum of views, from minimalist approaches (which ascribe either little value or else little authority to Christian tradition) to maximalist approaches (which take consensus Christian doctrines as a given starting point for meaningfully Christian theologizing). This volume contains a bit of both. Contributors like Pawl and Crisp take conciliar Christology as a given datum of Christian theology, though not in an obscurantist or naïve way. But other contributors are perfectly content to part ways with canonical and/or conciliar perspectives. Siker's and Strotmann's denials of Christ's sinlessness stand out in this regard. One need not reject the exegetical goods of biblical criticism in order to dissent here; biblical criticism can be integrated with a properly

theological interpretation of Scripture. As von Stosch points out in the conclusion, a fair reading of the biblical text and its sources might lead in another direction from Siker and Strotmann: “There is no narration of Jesus in the Bible that implies an incontrovertible argument for him being a sinner” (293). Another example of a minimalist approach is expressed in Mullins’ dismissal of Chalcedonian Christology. One need not deny the potential problems raised by Chalcedon’s three-part Christology (Pawl and Crisp certainly do not) in order to see the hypostatic union as a sophisticated, time-tested, and (in some sense) authoritative way of summarizing the biblical teaching on the person of Christ. Surely Mullins is too hasty to conclude that Chalcedon gives us a “disastrously ambiguous” model of the incarnation. One need only examine Cyril’s *On the Unity of Christ* (where he carefully distinguishes “union” from other kinds of relations) or medieval commentaries on the *Sentences* to appreciate that the hypostatic union as a model of the incarnation has metaphysical teeth, so to speak, and cannot be easily dismissed as ambiguous and undeveloped (though it remains, in healthy doses, apophatic).

No book or essay can include every relevant source or perspective on its subject matter, but at several turns, I thought the essays would have benefited from more detailed and sustained historical engagement. Maximus the Confessor receives some attention in the book, but he casts a long shadow on these debates and warranted more engagement. The medieval scholastics spilled much ink on these issues as well, but they receive somewhat subdued treatment in the volume. For example, the finer distinctions regarding Christ’s volitional life that we find in Lombard, the Victorines, and Bonaventure deserve a place at the table in these discussions. But overall, the volume is a fine introduction to many of the biblical, historical, theological, philosophical, and even ecumenical issues related to Christ’s two wills and the impeccability debate. It may be ridiculous to probe into the consciousness and experience of God incarnate, but a thoughtful engagement with these essays will hopefully help one to do so more reverently.

## References

Mascall, E. L. 1946. *Christ, the Christian and the Church*. Longmans Green & Co.