

## Christological Exegesis of Theophanies and the Making of Early Christian Theology

Bogdan G. Bucur

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

One way in which Christians read the Hebrew Bible as a coherent narrative leading from Genesis to Jesus—in which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as Moses and the prophets are deemed, according to Justin Martyr, “men of Christ,”<sup>2</sup> and in which the readers are invited to inscribe themselves—was the identification of “the Lord God of Israel” in biblical theophanies with “the Lord Jesus” of Christian worship.<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon, which I term “christophanic exegesis,” gained prominence in the second century and maintained its importance for polemical engagement, doctrinal construction, and liturgical expression along the entire first Christian millennium. In what follows, I intend to present a survey of the available data on the christological exegesis of theophanies during the first Christian millennium, highlighting the existence of a puzzling blind spot on this topic in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Abbreviations: ANF = *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994); CCCM = *Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio mediaevalis* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969–); CCSL = *Corpus Christianorum: Series latina*, 168 vols. (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 1953–); CSEL = *Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum latinorum* (Vienna: Hoelder-Pichler-Tempsky, n.d.); FaCh = *Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1947–); GCS = *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller* (Leipzig: Hinrich, 1891–); NPNF<sup>2</sup> = *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Second Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952–1957); PG = *Patrologia cursus completus: Series graeca*, 162 vols., ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris: Migne, 1857–1886); SC = *Sources chrétiennes* (Paris: Cerf, 1943–). WSA = Edmund Hill and John E. Rotelle, eds., *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the Twenty-first Century* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990–).

<sup>2</sup> The phrase “men of Christ” in reference to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses, occurs in Justin, *Apol.* 63.17 (Greek text and English translation in *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies*, ed. Denis Minns and Paul Parvis [New York: Oxford University, 2009], 248/249).

<sup>3</sup> Examples of biblical theophanies include God walking in the garden of Eden, conversing with Abraham at Mamre, appearing to Jacob in the dream of the ladder and wrestling with him at Peniel, and appearing to Moses in the burning bush; the anthropomorphic “glory,” “angel,” “fire,” “pillar,” “cloud,” and “glory” on Sinai, which guided the Israelites out of Egypt, tabernacled in the tent of meeting and, later, in the temple; the “commander of the army of the Lord” seen by Joshua; the anthropomorphic glory seated on Ezekiel’s chariot-throne and the enthroned “Lord of hosts” in Isaiah; Daniel’s “Ancient of Days” and “Son of Man”; and the God seen “between the two living beings” in the LXX of Habbakuk 3 (Genesis 3; Gen 18:1; 28:12–13; 32:24–30; Exod 3:1–15; 13:21–22; 14:19–20; 24:10–17; 34:5–8; Josh 5:13–15; Ezek 1:26–28; Isa 6:1–3; Dan 7:10–13; Hab 3:2 LXX).

---

Bogdan G. Bucur is associate professor of patristics at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary. He can be contacted at [bucur@svots.edu](mailto:bucur@svots.edu).

field of early Christian studies, and speculating about what appears to be the theological bias behind this blind spot.

### Christophanic Exegesis in Patristic Literature

The established scholarly position was, until relatively recently, that the so-called “argument from theophanies” was forged by Justin of Neapolis in the heat of his engagement against Marcion. More specifically, according to Oskar Skarsaune, Justin would have fused the traditional *testimonia*-argument in favor of two Lords (e.g., Gen 19:24, “the Lord rained . . . fire from the Lord out of heaven”; Ps 109:1, “The Lord said to my Lord”) with his own original argument about theophanies as christophanies.<sup>4</sup>

This view has been shown to be untenable by scholars working in the field of Christian origins, who have documented the presence, in the writings of the New Testament, of what is often termed “YHWH Christology” or “Christology of Divine Identity.”<sup>5</sup> According to these scholars, the cultic worship of Jesus as God and Son

---

<sup>4</sup> Oskar Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr’s Proof-Text Tradition: Text-Type, Provenance, Theological Profile* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 208–209, 211–212. For the same position, see Benedict Kominiak, *The Theophanies of the Old Testament in the Writings of St. Justin* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1948), 4; Demetrios C. Trakatellis, *The Pre-existence of Christ in the Writings of Justin Martyr: An Exegetical Study with Reference to the Humiliation and Exaltation Christology* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars, 1976), 59, 85. Unless otherwise marked, all Scripture quotations follow the LXX numbering and are taken from the Brenton translation.

<sup>5</sup> David B. Capes, *Old Testament Yahweh Texts in Paul’s Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992); Jarl E. Fossum, “Kyrios Jesus as the Angel of the Lord in Jude 5–7,” and “In the Beginning Was the Name: Onomatology as the Key to Johannine Christology,” both in Jarl E. Fossum, *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg, 1995), 41–69, 109–133; Charles A. Gieschen, *Angelomorphic Christology: Antecedents and Early Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 51–123, 187–200; Gieschen, “The Real Presence of the Son before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology,” *CTQ* 68 (2004): 105–126; C. C. Newman, J. R. Davila, G. S. Lewis, eds., *The Jewish Roots of Christological Monotheism: Papers from the St. Andrews Conference on the Historical Origins of the Worship of Jesus* (Leiden: Brill, 1999); C. K. Rowe, “Romans 10:13: What Is the Name of the Lord?” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 22 (2000): 135–173; Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003); Walther Binni and Bernardo G. Boschi, *Cristologia primitiva: Dalla teofania del Sinai all’Io sono giovanneo* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 2004); Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament’s Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Simon J. Gathercole, *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006); Sean M. McDonough, *Christ as Creator: Origins of a New Testament Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University, 2009); Chris Tilling, *Paul’s Divine Christology* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012); Randy Rheaume, *An Exegetical and Theological Analysis of the Son’s Relationship to the Father in John’s Gospel: God’s Equal and Subordinate*

of God occurred very early on, spread rapidly, and was the very marker of Christianity's emergence from the complex matrix of first-century Judaism. A probable explanation for the fusion between Jewish monotheism and the worship of Jesus is that the first generation of disciples had, in Hurtado's words, "revelatory experiences" which persuaded them that the God of Israel mandated the worship of Christ—more specifically, according to Christopher Barina Kaiser, "kyriocentric visions" in which Jesus was the subject of Old Testament throne theophanies.<sup>6</sup>

In a richly documented study of Jude 5–7 published in 1987, Jarl Fossum concluded that "weighing all the evidence, it would seem that Jude, *some fifty years before Justin Martyr*, was the first to use 'Jesus' as a name of the Son also in his preexistence."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Jude 5 is straightforward and radical in its identification of "the Lord" with Jesus: "Jesus, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe." This reading is now also offered by the latest critical editions, NA 28/GNT 5/SBLGNT<sup>8</sup>: Ἰησοῦς λαὸν ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου σώσας τὸ δεύτερον τοὺς μὴ πιστεύσαντας ἀπώλεσεν. Since Justin Martyr simply assumes this very idea,<sup>9</sup> it appears that the "argument from theophany" did not derive from second-century anti-dualistic polemics, but was the extension to such purpose of a

---

(Lewiston: Mellen, 2014); Crispin Fletcher-Louis, *Jesus Monotheism, Volume 1: Christological Origins: The Emerging Consensus and Beyond* (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade, 2015).

<sup>6</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 70–74, 180–204; Hurtado, "Religious Experience and Religious Innovation in the New Testament," *Journal of Religion* 80 (2000): 183–205; Christopher Barina Kaiser, *Seeing the Lord's Glory: Kyriocentric Visions and the Dilemma of Early Christology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014); "YHWH Texts in the New Testament and Early Judaism: Disjunctive or Doxological?" *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 64 (2020): 27–70.

<sup>7</sup> Fossum, "Kyrios Jesus as the Angel of the Lord in Jude 5–7," 69 (originally published in *New Testament Studies* 33 [1987]: 226–243).

<sup>8</sup> Eberhard Nestle, Erwin Nestle, Barbara Aland, Holger Strutwolf, and Rudolf Kassühlke, eds., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013); Barbara Aland, Kurt Aland, Iōannēs D. Karavidopoulos, Carlo Maria Martini, Bruce M. Metzger, and Holger Strutwolf, eds., *The Greek New Testament*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2014); Michael W. Holmes, ed., *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> See Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 120.3 (Bobichon 1:506; trans. Falls-Slusser, 180): "He speaks therefore in the passage relating to Judah: 'A prince shall not fail from Judah, nor a ruler from his thighs, till that which is laid up for him come; and He shall be the expectation of the nations.' And it is plain that this was spoken not of Judah, but of Christ. For all we out of all nations do expect not Judah, but *Jesus, who led your fathers out of Egypt*." One should note that the *Dialogue with Trypho* itself seems to hint at the fact that Justin is not articulating anything new. Trypho invokes his own "teachers" who have *already* been warning the community against holding conversation with Christians, as these would ensnare the people into worshipping Jesus, alleging him to be the God of the exodus (*Dial.* 38.1 [Bobichon, 58]). For the *Dialogue with Trypho*, I have used Philippe Bobichon, ed. and trans., *Justin Martyr: Dialogue avec Tryphon* (Fribourg: Academic, 2003) and Thomas B. Falls, trans., and Michael Slusser, ed., *St. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

much older exegetical tradition belonging to the internal Christian discourse in the context of worship and celebration.

As a matter of fact, the same view is expressed by Theophilus of Antioch and Melito of Sardis. Theophilus affirms that it was not “the God and Father of the universe” who was present in paradise and conversed with Adam, but “the Logos of God, who is also his Son”<sup>10</sup>—and one can assume that the same logic applies to other theophanies. As for Melito, he quite explicitly identifies the one who guided Israel in a pillar of fire, fed his people manna from heaven and water from the rock, and gave the law on Horeb, with the Son, the firstborn of God, the Crucified One.<sup>11</sup>

One generation after Justin, Irenaeus of Lyon refers to most if not all the same theophanic passages as his predecessors, both in his little handbook for insiders—the *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*—and in his massive *Against Heresies*. Irenaeus is quite clear about the visionary component of theophanies: the Son “appeared to Abraham”; Jacob “sees him in a dream”; “he did appear to those seeing Him”; “things were revealed and shown to them”; “the things they saw.”<sup>12</sup> Although theophanies are *partial* visions,<sup>13</sup> adapted to and varied in accordance with the capacity of the visionaries,<sup>14</sup> and the incarnation marks a qualitative advancement,

---

<sup>10</sup> Theophilus of Antioch, *Ad Autolyicum* 2.22, trans. Robert M. Grant (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 62/63, 64/65.

<sup>11</sup> Melito, *Peri Pascha* 84–85 (SC 123:108; English translation in Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *Melito of Sardis on Pascha and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans* [Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001], 61): “He it was who led you into Egypt, and guarded you there and sustained you [Gen 46:3–4]. He it was who lit up your way with a pillar, and sheltered you with a cloud [Exod 13:21; Ps 77:14; 104:39]. He cut the Red Sea open and led you through [Exodus 14–15; Ps 135:13–14] and destroyed the enemy [Ps 135:15]. He it is who gave you manna from heaven [Exod 16:4–35], who gave you drink from a rock [Exod 17:4–7; Ps 135:16], who gave you the law at Horeb.”

<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus, *Epid.* 24; 45 (John Behr, trans., *St Irenaeus of Lyon: On the Apostolic Preaching* [Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1997], 55, 70); *Adv. haer.* 4.20.11 (SC 100/2:660); *Adv. haer.* 4.11.1 (SC 100/2:498): “How do the Scriptures testify of Him, unless all things had ever been revealed and shown (*revelata et ostensa*) to believers by one and the same God through the Word; He at one time conferring with His creature, and at another propounding His law; at one time, again, reproving, at another exhorting, and then setting free His servant, and adopting him as a son; and, at the proper time, bestowing an incorruptible inheritance, for the purpose of bringing man to perfection?” (emphasis added).

<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.11 (SC 100/2:660): “Neither Moses, nor Elias, nor Ezekiel, who had all many celestial visions, saw God; but if what they did see were similitudes of the splendor of the Lord, and prophecies of things to come . . . not in one figure, nor in one character, did He appear to those seeing Him, but according to the reasons and effects aimed at in His dispensations.”

<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.10 (SC 100/2:656): “The prophets, therefore, did not openly behold the actual face of God, but [they saw] the dispensations and the mysteries through which man should afterwards see God.”

it is the same Christ who is contemplated “in a prophetic manner”<sup>15</sup> in the Old Testament, and “openly” in the New Testament, by the Word’s own incarnated manifestation.<sup>16</sup> In other words, the prophets’ interaction with the Logos in theophanies anticipates, in a limited but real and transformative way, the full experience of glorification made possible by the Logos becoming man.<sup>17</sup>

Readers of Irenaeus seem to have remained faithful to the inherited exegesis of theophanies. Tertullian makes it an explicit part of his rule of faith:

Now, with regard to this rule of faith—that we may from this point acknowledge what it is which we defend—it is, you must know, that which prescribes the belief that there is one only God, and that He is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through His own Word, first of all sent forth; that this Word is called His Son, and, under the name of God, was seen in diverse manners by the patriarchs, heard at all times in the prophets (*id uerbum filium eius appellatum in nomine Dei uarie uisum a patriarchis, in prophetis semper auditum*), at last brought down by the

<sup>15</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.20.5: “propheticæ”; 4.36.8: “per propheticum Spiritum.”

<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.36.8: “per suum aduentum”; 4.20.9: “manifeste.”

<sup>17</sup> Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 4.36.8 (SC 100/2:914, 916): “Then, again, this truth was clearly shown forth by the parable of the fig-tree, of which the Lord says, ‘Behold, now these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig-tree, but I find none’ (Luke 13:6), pointing onwards, by the prophets, to His advent [*per prophetas aduentum suum significans*], by whom [*per quos*] He came from time to time (*aliquoties*) seeking the fruit of righteousness from them, which he did not find. . . . And, without using a parable, the Lord said to Jerusalem, ‘O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets, and stone those that are sent unto you; how often would I have gathered your children together, as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house shall be left unto you desolate’ (Luke 13:34; Matt 23:37). . . . For that which had been said in the parable, ‘Behold, for three years I come seeking fruit,’ and in clear terms, again, [where he says], ‘How often would I have gathered your children together,’ shall be [found] a falsehood, if we do not understand His advent, which is [announced] by the prophets [*per prophetas*]—if, in fact, He came to them but once, and then for the first time. . . . He who chose the patriarchs and those [who lived under the first covenant], is the same Word of God who did both visit them through the prophetic Spirit [*visitans per propheticum Spiritum*] and us also who have been called together from all quarters by His advent [*per suum aduentum*]”; *Adv. haer.* 4.20.8 (SC 100/2:650; emphasis added): “[I]t necessarily behooved those through whose instrumentality future things were announced, to see God, whom they intimated as to be seen by men; in order that God, and the Son of God, and the Son, and the Father, should *not only be prophetically announced, but that He should also be seen* by all His members who are sanctified and instructed in the things of God, *that man might be disciplined beforehand and previously exercised for a reception into that glory which shall afterwards be revealed* in those who love God. For *the prophets used not to prophesy in word alone, but in visions also*, and in their mode of life, and in the actions which they performed, according to the suggestions of the Spirit. *After this invisible manner, therefore, did they see God*, as also Esaias says, I have seen with my eyes the King, the Lord of hosts, Isaiah 6:5 pointing out that man should behold God with his eyes, and hear His voice . . . Moreover, [with regard to] the other arrangements concerning the summing up that He should make, some of these *they beheld through visions*, others they proclaimed *by word*, while others they indicated typically by means of [outward] action, seeing visibly [*visibiliter videntes*] those things which were to be seen.”

Spirit and Power of the Father into the Virgin Mary, was made flesh in her womb, and, being born of her, went forth as Jesus Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, it is the Son of God who “was visible before the incarnation” (*ante carnem*) inasmuch as he “was seen . . . by prophets and patriarchs and Moses himself.”<sup>19</sup> As a matter of fact, Tertullian’s interpretation of Exodus 33:18–22, where Moses asked to see God’s glory and was denied (an interpretation lifted from Irenaeus and repeated both against Marcion and against Praxeas!), is that the vision of divine glory was not strictly denied, but postponed to some later time, and later fulfilled at the transfiguration, when *the same Son of God* who had appeared and spoken on Sinai meets Moses *again* on Tabor.<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, the Son’s apparitions to patriarchs and prophets, including Moses, were always somewhat veiled and imperfect—“in a mirror and enigma and vision and dream.” The reason these apparitions were veiled is because they occurred “according to men’s capacity, not according with the fullness of his divinity (*secundum hominum capacitates, non secundum plenitudinem divinitatis*),” since “the Son also on his own account (*suo nomine*), is, as Word and Spirit, invisible even now by the quality of his substance (*ex substantiae conditione*).”<sup>21</sup> In reaction to the Valentinians, who held that Christ displayed some kind of “heavenly flesh” or “body” both in theophanies and in the incarnation,<sup>22</sup> Tertullian is particularly insistent on the carnality of theophanies—although he describes the “flesh” of theophanic appearances as not having been born (*sine nativitate*) and therefore not subject to change and mortality. It is not the natural self-manifestation of the

<sup>18</sup> Tertullian, *Prescription* 13.1–3 (trans. ANF; SC 46:106).

<sup>19</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 14 (Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., *Q. Septimii Florentis Tertulliani Adversus Praxean liber: Tertullian’s Treatise Against Praxeas* [London: SPCK, 1948], 106/150).

<sup>20</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 4.22.14–15 (Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., *Tertullian: Adversus Marcionem*, 2 vols. [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972], 2:382/383–384/385); *Adv. prax.* 14 (Evans, 105/150). For a discussion of the exegetical tradition of Exodus 33 as a promise fulfilled on Tabor, see Bogdan G. Bucur, *Scripture Re-envisioned* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 124–136.

<sup>21</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Prax.* 14 (Evans, 104/149, 106/150).

<sup>22</sup> *Adamantius* 5.851c–d, e (GCS 4:176; English translation in Robert A. Pretty, trans., *Adamantius, Dialogue on the True Faith in God: De recta in Deum fide* [Leuven: Peeters, 1997], 150): “Adamantius asserts that Christ assumed earthly flesh—that is, from us, but Marinus is emphatic that he took heavenly flesh.” The subsequent exchange (GCS 4:178; Pretty, *Adamantius*, 151) concerns the “substance in heaven having flesh and bones” which constitutes Christ’s “heavenly flesh.” *Adamantius* 5.851e (GCS 4:180, 182; Pretty, *Adamantius*, 152; 153): “We say that Christ assumed a body in appearance (*δοχήσει*). Just as the angels appeared to Abraham, and ate and drank with him, thus also he appeared”; “I believe that just as the angels appeared to Abraham, and ate and drank and conversed with him, so Christ appeared to humans.”

visionary subject (*carnem non propriam*)—whether angels or God—but merely its manifestation in a bodily appearance (*in carnis habitu*) assumed for the occasion.<sup>23</sup>

Shifting our focus to Alexandria, we see that, although Clement and Origen do not seem focused on the christological exegesis of theophanies to the same extent as Justin, Irenaeus, or Tertullian, they remain, nevertheless, committed to the tradition of “christophanies.” In a large section of his *Pedagogue*, Clement explicitly identifies the Logos, “our pedagogue, the holy God Jesus” (ὁ δὲ ἡμέτερος παιδαγωγὸς ἅγιος θεὸς Ἰησοῦς) with the “Lord” who appeared to Abraham (Gen 17:1), who appeared to Jacob on top of the ladder and in the night struggle (Gen 28; 32), who led Israel out of Egypt (ὁ ἐξαγαγὼν σε ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου) and led the people (ἤγαγεν αὐτούς) through the desert, who gave the law through his servant Moses (Exod 20:2; Deut 32:10–12),<sup>24</sup> who enjoined Israel to “fear God” (Deut 6:2), and who spoke to the prophets, in the course of such theophanies as are recorded in Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1.<sup>25</sup> It is the epiphany in the flesh of the same Logos, the Existing One and Preexisting One (ἡ ἐπιφάνεια . . . τοῦ ἐν ἀρχῇ ὄντος καὶ προόντος λόγου), who made all things and moulded humans, which “now” constitutes the “new song.”<sup>26</sup> The difference between the Logos present in Old Testament theophanies as “that hidden angel, Jesus” (ὁ μυστικός ἐκεῖνος ἄγγελος Ἰησοῦς) and the incarnate Logos is, quite simply, that the incarnate Logos was born (γεγέννηται; τίκτεται).<sup>27</sup>

This theology represents the common tradition to which Clement felt bound. Nevertheless, within the framework of Clement’s mystagogical curriculum, this discussion of theophanies in the *Paedagogue* represents a “lower,” preliminary exposition, which acquires greater depth and precision with the advanced-level decoding of biblical theophanies in the *Stromata*, the *Eclogues*, and the *Adumbrationes*.<sup>28</sup> These observations also apply to Origen, who best exemplifies theological speculations in the vein of Philo’s “noetic exegesis.” Still, there are numerous instances in which Origen finds it useful to articulate this correct but

<sup>23</sup> Tertullian, *Adv. Marc.* 3.9.6 (Evans, 1:196/197); cf. Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* 6.7 (Latin text and English translation in Ernest Evans, *Tertullian’s Treatise on the Incarnation: The Text Edited with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary* [London: SPCK, 1956], 24/25).

<sup>24</sup> Clement exploits the lexical connection between παιδαγωγός, ἐξαγαγὼν (Exod 20:2) and ἤγαγεν (Deut 32:10–12) in the biblical passages.

<sup>25</sup> Clement, *Paed.* 1.7.56–57–1.7.60.1 (SC 70:210, 212, 214, 216).

<sup>26</sup> Clement, *Protr.* 1.7.3 (SC 2bis:61): Τοῦτό ἐστι τὸ ἄσμα τὸ καινόν, ἡ ἐπιφάνεια ἢ νῦν ἐκλάμψασα ἐν ἡμῖν τοῦ ἐν ἀρχῇ ὄντος καὶ προόντος λόγου· ἐπεφάνη δὲ ἐναγχος ὁ προὖν σωτήρ, ἐπεφάνη ὁ ἐν τῷ ὄντι ὢν, ὅτι “ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν,” διδάσκαλος, ἐπεφάνη ὡς πάντα δεδημιούργηται λόγος· καὶ τὸ ζῆν ἐν ἀρχῇ μετὰ τοῦ πλάσαι παρασχὼν ὡς δημιουργός, τὸ εὖ ζῆν ἐδίδαξεν ἐπιφανείς ὡς διδάσκαλος, ἵνα τὸ αἰεὶ ζῆν ὕστερον ὡς θεὸς χορηγήσῃ.

<sup>27</sup> Clement, *Paed.* 1.7.59.1 (SC 70:214, 216).

<sup>28</sup> See Bogdan G. Bucur, “Clement of Alexandria’s Exegesis of Old Testament Theophanies,” *Phronema* 29 (2014): 63–81.

lower-level “christophanic” exegesis as the starting point for deeper exploration of the Logos.

In his *Commentary on John*, to substantiate his central thesis that “the Savior has become a man to men and an angel to angels,” Origen identified Jesus with “the angel of the Lord” (Exod 3:2) in the burning bush scene (as well as “the angel of great counsel” at Isa 9:5, LXX);<sup>29</sup> in the *Commentary to the Song of Songs*, too, he speaks of the presence in the bush as the Logos in angelomorphic guise;<sup>30</sup> and in his well-known discussion of the transfiguration in his *Commentary on Matthew*, although he is obviously more interested in other matters (e.g., the Scriptures as garments of the Word), Origen explicitly mentions the interpretation of Exodus 33 as a promise fulfilled on Tabor.<sup>31</sup>

Recourse to “christophanic exegesis” is perhaps especially useful to early Christian writers engaged in anti-“Modalistic” polemics. I have already referred to Tertullian’s *Against Praxeas*. As for Origen, in his successful disputation with Beryllus of Bostra, the Alexandrian refutes the view “that our Savior and Lord did not subsist beforehand according to his own circumscribed essence (μὴ προῦφεστάναι κατ’ ἴδιαν οὐσίας περιγραφῆν) before his arrival among human beings, and that he does not have his own divinity (θεότητα ἰδίαν), but only the Father’s [divinity], which had taken up residence in him.”<sup>32</sup> Origen’s own position, as expressed in the *Commentary on John*, is perfectly in line with his refutation of Beryllus’s Modalistic position: contrary to those who “think the Son of God is an expression (προφορὰν) of the Father occurring in syllables” and who, “in accordance with this view . . . do not give him substance (ὑπόστασιν) nor do they elucidate his essence (οὐσίαν),”<sup>33</sup> Origen holds that the Logos subsists preeternally and must be thought of as having *ousia* or *hypostasis*.<sup>34</sup> The advent of the Logos in the flesh—

<sup>29</sup> Origen, *Comm. In Io.* 1.218 (SC 120:166).

<sup>30</sup> Origen, *Comm. in Cant.* 2.8.8 (SC 375:410): “Hoc erat et in Exodo, cum angelus Domini dicitur in flamma ignis apparuisse Moysi in rubo. Continuo autem in subsequentibus Dominus et Deus loqui in angelo scribitur, et ipse esse Deus Abraham et Deus Isaac et Deus Iacob designatur.”

<sup>31</sup> Origen, *Comm. Mat.* 12.42–43 (GCS 40:166–167, trans. ANF 10:473): “But perhaps the voice from the cloud says to Moses and Elijah, ‘This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased, hear Him,’ as they were desirous to see the Son of man, and to hear Him, and to behold Him as He was in glory. . . . The disciples, *having understood that the Son of God had been holding conference with Moses*, and that it was He who said, ‘A man shall not see My face and live’ [Exod 33:20] . . . humbled themselves under the mighty hand of God” (emphasis added).

<sup>32</sup> Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.33.1 (SC 41:135; Jeremy M. Schott, trans., *Eusebius of Caesarea, The History of the Church: A New Translation* [Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019], 315).

<sup>33</sup> Origen, *Comm. in Io.* 1.24.151 (FaCh 80:64; SC 120:136).

<sup>34</sup> *Comm. in Io.* 1.125, 151–152 (SC 120:126, 136, 138; FaCh 80:59, 64–65): “I frequently marvel when I consider the things said about the Christ by some who wish to believe in him. Why in the

occurring simultaneously with his angelic advent to the varied ranks of bodiless powers<sup>35</sup>—is merely the last stage of his theophanic advent to the patriarchs and prophets. As Origen explains, “Christ came spiritually even before he came in a body. He came to the more perfect . . . for example the patriarchs and Moses the servant and the prophets who contemplated the glory of Christ [τοιῖς τεθεαμένοις Χριστοῦ τὴν δόξαν προφήταις] . . . Christ visited the perfect before his sojourn which was visible and bodily.”<sup>36</sup> Origen makes it clear that the theophanies to patriarchs and prophets are real and transformative encounters with the glory of Christ: since the prophets *contemplated the glory of Christ*, their experience corresponds to that of Christians (Jn 1:14, ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ).

Turning now to the *Epistle of the Six Bishops*, an unambiguous theological ultimatum delivered to Paul of Samosata some time prior to his condemnation and deposition in 268/269, we find, yet again, that the “christophanic” approach to theophanies represented a nonnegotiable datum of tradition and functioned as a litmus test for christological orthodoxy. Indeed, the largest self-contained section of the document returns to the same christological interpretation of Genesis 18, 22, 32, and Exodus 3 and 33 encountered in Justin, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement, and Origen, and it is on this point, too, that the Samosatene is challenged “to think and to teach” in concert with the signatories, and reminded that “all catholic churches join us in thinking this way.”<sup>37</sup>

---

world, when countless names are applied to our Savior, do they pass by most of them in silence? Even if they should perhaps remember them, they do not interpret them in their proper sense, but say that these name him [not properly but] figuratively (οὐ κυρίως ἀλλὰ τροπικῶς). On the other hand they stop in the case of the title ‘Word’ alone, as if they say that the Christ of God is ‘Word’ alone . . . in the case of this one they believe they have a clear answer to what the Son of God is, when he is named Word . . . they think the Son of God is an expression of the Father (προφορὰν πατρικὴν) occurring in syllables. And in accordance with this view they do not give him substance (ὑπόστασιν) nor do they elucidate his essence (οὐσίαν). . . . Let them declare to us that God the Word is such a word, having life in himself, and either is not separated from the Father (κεχωρισμένον τοῦ πατρὸς) and, in accordance with this position, does not subsist (μὴ ὑφίστασθαι), nor is he a son, or is both separated and invested with substance (καὶ κεχωρισμένον καὶ οὐσιωμένον).” Cf. *Comm. in Io.* 1.291–292 (SC 120:206; FaCh 80:29): “the Word has his own individuality (ἰδίαν περιγραφὴν), that is, lives according to himself . . . the Christ will be understood to be the ‘Word’—although the reason which is in us has no individuality apart from us (οὐκ ἔστι κατὰ περιγραφὴν ἐκτὸς ἡμῶν)—possessing substance (ὑπόστασιν) ‘in the beginning.’”

<sup>35</sup> Origen, *Comm. in Io.* 1.217 (SC 120:166; FaCh 80:76): “The Savior, therefore, in a way much more divine than Paul, has become ‘all things to all,’ that he might either gain or perfect all things. He has clearly become a man to men and an angel to angels.”

<sup>36</sup> Origen, *Comm. in Io.* 1.37, 38 (SC 120:80; FaCh 80:41–42).

<sup>37</sup> For the Greek text, see Eduard Schwartz, *Eine fingierte Korrespondenz mit Paulus dem Samosatener* (Munich: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1927), 42–46; English translation mine: “We affirm that it was he who came down and showed himself to Abraham as one of three *near the oak of Mambre* (Gen 18:1) to whom the patriarch addressed himself as ‘Lord’ and ‘judge,’ inasmuch as he had received all judgment from the Father, according

The anti-Modalistic polemics of the second and third centuries, flowing organically into the Arian crisis of the fourth century, brings us into the new imperial and conciliar context for “doing theology.” A key figure for the transition into the new context is Eusebius of Caesarea, in whose writing “christophanic exegesis” looms large, “a privileged place of conjunction between the polemical tradition stemming from Justin and the Alexandrian scholarly tradition of Philo and Origen.” In fact, according to Sébastien Morlet, “Eusebius appears to be the last representative of pre-Nicene theology: still a stranger to preoccupations that would only emerge after the council of Nicaea, he offers in the *Proof of the Gospel* and, earlier, in the *Prophetic Extracts*, the longest, most elaborate, and certainly richest reflection that any pre-Nicene author had ever consecrated to the question of ancient theophanies.”<sup>38</sup>

The Arian controversy and the conflict with Marcellus of Ancyra led Eusebius to, as it were, “recycle” his already established interpretation of theophanies,<sup>39</sup> and

---

to what is written, *the Lord rained down on Sodom and Gomorrah fire and brimstone from the Lord out of heaven* (Gen 19:24). He is the one who, carrying out the paternal will, showed himself to the patriarchs and spoke with them, being confessed, in the very same passages and chapters, sometimes as *angel*, sometimes as *Lord*, and sometimes as *God*. . . . For we also have been taught this through Moses: *Now an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a fire of flame out of the bush and so on; Now when the Lord saw that he was drawing near to see, the Lord called him from the bush* (Exod 3:2–3). . . . And elsewhere, *Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Even this word that you have spoken, I will do for you.’ And he says, ‘Show me your own glory!’ And he said, ‘I will pass by before you in my glory, and I will call by my name “Lord” before you. And I will have mercy on whomever I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I have compassion’* (Exod 33:17, 18–19) . . . he who, [in the passage] above, passed by as he had promised, is the Son of God, the ‘Lord,’ and he is called by the name of the ‘Lord,’ the Father. This is he who confirmed this by saying, ‘*Not that anyone has seen the Father except he who is from God; he has seen the Father*’ (John 6:46)” (43–45). “Whoever fights against the Son of God, refusing to believe and confess that he is God before the creation of the world, claiming that, if the Son of God is preached, two gods would thereby be proclaimed—we hold such a one as foreign to the canon of the Church; and all catholic churches join us in thinking this way” (42). “Now that, from a host of considerations, we have drawn up this summary of a few points, we want to learn [from you] if you hold and teach these same points together with us, and [we ask] that you give written notice of whether or not you agree with the text above” (46; emphasis added).

<sup>38</sup> Sébastien Morlet, *La “Démonstration évangélique” d’Eusèbe de Césarée: Étude sur l’apologétique chrétienne à l’époque de Constantin* (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2009), 440–441.

<sup>39</sup> Like Justin Martyr, Eusebius calls the Logos *δεύτερος θεός* (*Extracts* 1.12 [PG 22:1068 C]; *Dem. ev.* 5.30 [PG 22:409 D; Ferrar 1:271]; he emphatically rejects the interpretation of theophanies as mere angelic apparitions and instead understands theophanies as manifestations of the Logos (*Hist. eccl.* 1.2.10 [SC 31:8]; *Dem. ev.* 5.9 [GCS 23:231–232]; *Eccl. Theol.* 2.21 [GCS 14:130]; *Ecl. proph.* 3 [PG 22:1028–1036]; *Comm. Isa.* 1.41 [GCS 55:37]; *Comm. Ps.* 79 [PG 23:952C]; *Extracts* 1.10 [PG 22:1056 B]; *Extracts* 1.12 [PG 22:1068 C]). The revelational manifestations of the Logos “concerning himself with the work of mankind’s salvation even before the Incarnation” (*Extracts* 1.10 [PG 22:1056A]) offer the doctrinal foundation for a qualified reception of “Barbarian

redirect it against his opponent. Even though, however, the argument is different, the exegetical solution remains the same tradition of “christophanies”: it was undoubtedly the Son of God who spoke to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3), he who appeared to Abraham at Mamre (Gen 18), who told Moses that he had manifested himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 6:2–3), who later proclaimed himself to “be” before Abraham “was” (Jn 8:56), since he was the mediator (Gal 3:20) “even before the assumption of the flesh” (πρὶν ἢ τὴν σάρκα ἀναλαβεῖν).<sup>40</sup>

The same “christophanic” reading of the Old Testament forms the bedrock underneath the metaphysical considerations about the *ὁμοούσιον* articulated by the great champion of Nicaea, Athanasius. In *Contra Arianos*, for instance, Athanasius states, quite clearly, that “Moses beheld God,” more specifically the Logos, just as the same Logos interacted with Jacob and Abraham.<sup>41</sup> He has no hesitation in rehearsing the pre-Nicene argument for the divinity of the Son: Christ is preexistent and divine and, as such, always already the object of human and angelic worship, because Abraham worships him in his tent (Genesis 18), Moses worships him at the burning bush (Exodus 3), and Daniel sees him as the Ancient of Days, seated on the divine throne and attended by thousands upon thousands of angelic ministers (Dan 7:9–10).<sup>42</sup> The same exegesis of theophanies occurs in Athanasius’s *De synodis* 52.<sup>43</sup> It is noteworthy that the traditional christophanic exegesis defended by Athanasius in *De synodis* 52 is upheld by the “Arian” opponents lambasted a few chapters earlier, in *De synodis* 26–27:

We . . . regard Him not as simply God’s pronounced word or mental, but as Living God and Word, existing in Himself, and Son of God and Christ . . . For He it is, to whom the Father said, *Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness*, who also was seen in His own Person by the patriarchs, gave the law, spoke by the prophets, and at last, became man, and manifested His own Father to all men, and reigns to never-ending ages.

Whosoever shall say that Abraham saw, not the Son, but the Ingenerate God or part of Him, be he anathema! Whosoever shall say that with Jacob, not the Son as man, but the Ingenerate God or part of Him, has wrestled, be he anathema! Whosoever shall explain “The Lord rained fire from the Lord” not

---

philosophies” (Eusebius, *Extracts* 1.12 [PG 22:1068 C]; *Dem. ev.* 5.30 [PG 22:409 D; William John Ferrar, trans., *The Proof of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 1:271]).

<sup>40</sup> Eusebius, *Eccl. Theol.* 2.21.4 (GCS 14:130; FaCh 135:265).

<sup>41</sup> Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 3.25.13–14 (*Athanasius Werke* I.1, 3:322–323; trans. *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 4).

<sup>42</sup> Athanasius, *Contra Arianos* 1.38.5; 2.13.1 (*Athanasius Werke* I.1, 2:148, 189; trans. *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 4).

<sup>43</sup> Athanasius, *Syn.* 52 (*Athanasius Werke* II.6:275–276; trans. *NPNF*<sup>2</sup> 4).

of the Father and the Son, and says that He rained from Himself, be he anathema. For the Son, being Lord, rained from the Father Who is Lord.<sup>44</sup>

The target in both texts is the modalistic doctrine of Marcellus and Photinus (“Scotinus” to his adversaries): “those who make a pretence of saying that He is but the mere word of God and unexisting, having His being in another—now as if pronounced, as some speak, now as mental . . . Such are the disciples of Marcellus and Scotinus of Galatian Ancyra, who, equally with Jews, negate Christ’s existence before ages, and His Godhead, and unending Kingdom, upon pretence of supporting the divine Monarchy.”<sup>45</sup>

In subsequent decades, the argument, articulated earlier by Marcellus, Basil of Ancyra, and Athanasius, that the strict separation between *ὁ ὢν* (“He who is”) and *ὁ τοῦ ὄντος ἄγγελος* (“The Angel of Him who is”) amounts to equating the Son to a *μὴ ὢν* (“he who is not”), was reprised by Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. Basil buttresses his affirmation about Christ as “the truly Existing One” and “the source of being for all beings” with an exegesis of Exodus 3:14 in which “the angel,” “the Lord,” and “God” all refer to the Son:

Please stop saying that he does not exist when he is the one who truly exists, the one who is the source of life, and the one who produces being for all that exists. Didn’t he find a designation well-suited for himself and fitting for his own eternity when he named himself *He Who Is* in his oracle to Moses his servant? He said: I am He Who Is [Exod 3:14]. . . . It is written that the angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in the bush burning with fire. After mentioning the angel at the outset of the narrative, scripture introduces the voice of God when it says that he said to Moses: *I am the God of your father Abraham* [Exod 3:6]. A little further on, the same one said: *I am He Who Is* [Exod 3:14]. So, then, who is this one who is both angel and God alike? Isn’t it he whom we have learned is called by the name *the angel of great counsel* [Isa 9:5]? . . . when he named himself *He Who Is* before Moses, he is understood to be none other than God the Word, who *was in the beginning with God* [John 1:2].<sup>46</sup>

Like Basil, the Nyssen knows that “the one who made himself known by the title, ‘He who is,’ (cf. Ex 3.13–14) is the Only-begotten God,” so that one must either subscribe to the untenable position that “the Only-begotten God never appeared to

<sup>44</sup> *Ekthesis Makrostichos*, Anathema 6 (= Athanasius, *Syn.* 26.VI; *Athanasius Werke* II.6:253, trans. *NPNE*<sup>2</sup> 4); *First Council of Sirmium*, Anathemas 15–17 (= Athanasius, *Syn.* 27.XV–XVII [*Athanasius Werke* II.6:255, trans. *NPNE*<sup>2</sup> 4]).

<sup>45</sup> *Ekthesis Makrostichos*, Anathema 6 (= Athanasius, *Syn.* 26.VI; *Athanasius Werke* II.6:253, trans. *NPNE*<sup>2</sup> 4).

<sup>46</sup> Basil, *Adv. Eun.* 2.18 (SC 305:70, 72; trans. FaCh 122:155–156).

Moses,” or concede that “He that is, from whom the word comes to the Servant, is himself the Son.”<sup>47</sup> In Gregory of Nyssa, too, metaphysical speculation on “being” and “non-being” is welded to the exegesis of biblical theophanies. Gregory takes the divine Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν [“I am the One who is”] and the Ἐγὼ εἰμι [“I am”] statements in Isaiah as the scriptural “mark of the true Godhead” and, simply *assuming* the traditional identification of Christ as Moses’ interlocutor on Sinai, concludes that Eunomian theology—“the sophisticated fabrication about the non-existence at some time of Him Who truly is”—is nonscriptural, a departure from Christianity, a turning to idolatry.<sup>48</sup> It should be noted, however, that, when Gregory of Nyssa reaffirms his belief that the theophany to Moses (ἐν τῇ γενομένῃ Μωϋσσεὶ θεοφανείᾳ) was a manifestation of the Son who both appeared (i.e., as with the angel of the Lord) and declared himself to be ὁ ὢν, he assumes that Eunomius is familiar with the underlying christological exegesis of Exodus 3!<sup>49</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa also uses theophanies on a second theological front, namely, in his anti-Apollinarian polemics. In the *Letter to Theophilus*, for instance, which sets out to counter Apollinarius’s critique of the alleged “two sons” doctrine as “absurd and utterly impious,”<sup>50</sup> Gregory argues that the incarnation (ἐπιφάνεια) of the Son does not imply a duality of sons any more than the multiplicity of Old Testament theophanies would imply a multiplicity of sons.<sup>51</sup> It is quite clear that

<sup>47</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 3.9.35 (Gregorii Nysseni Opera 2:277; trans. S. G. Hall, in *Contra Eunomium II: An English Version with Supporting Studies*, ed. Karfiková Lenka and Johannes Zachhuber, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 82 [Leiden: Brill, 2007], 211).

<sup>48</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* 3.6.3, 4, 6 (Gregorii Nysseni Opera 2:186–189, trans. S.G. Hall, 153–154): “The word of holy scripture suggests one way of knowing true godhead, which Moses is taught by the heavenly voice, when he hears him who said, ‘I am he who is’ (Ex 3.14). We therefore think that that alone should truly be considered divine, which is deemed to be in existence eternally and infinitely, and every thing attributed to it is always the same, without addition or subtraction. So if any one says of God that formerly he was, but now is not, or that he now is, but formerly was not, we judge either statement equally godless. . . . the argument that the one who really is, once was not, is a denial and rejection of true godhead. Consider: the one who through light revealed his existence to Moses, named himself as being, when he said, ‘I am he that is’ (Ex 3.14); and Isaiah, becoming a kind of instrument for the one who spoke in him, says in the person of him who is, ‘I am first and I am hereafter’ (Is 44.6), thereby making known by each thought the eternity of God . . . we who have regard to that which is, classify those who put together that which is not with that which is, and say that it once was not, with the worshippers of idols.”

<sup>49</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Refut.* 29 (Gregorii Nysseni Opera 2:323; trans., *Against Eunomius* 2.4 NPNF<sup>2</sup> 5:105): “Real existence (τὸ ὄντως ὄν) is opposed to unreal existence (τὸ μὴ ὄντως ὄν). . . . But if they do not deny the existence of the Maker of all things, let them be content not to deprive of real existence Him Who is, Who in the Divine appearance to Moses gave Himself the name of Existing, when He said, ‘I am that I am’ even as Eunomius in his later argument agrees with this, saying that it was He Who appeared to Moses.”

<sup>50</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Theoph.* (Gregorii Nysseni Opera 3/1:119–128, at 120–121; FaCh 131:260).

<sup>51</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Theoph.* (FaCh 131:261–262; Gregorii Nysseni Opera 3/1:119–128, at 121–122).

Gregory bases his argumentation on the traditional theology of theophanies as christophanies, building on the undisputed assumption that the one and the same Son appeared to the patriarchs and prophets of old and, later, appeared in the flesh and revealed his divine identity to his disciples.

There are many more texts that could be brought into the discussion. Among Greek-speaking sources, one may quote Cyril of Jerusalem,<sup>52</sup> Epiphanius,<sup>53</sup> John Chrysostom,<sup>54</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus,<sup>55</sup> and the *Apostolic Constitution*;<sup>56</sup> among Latin

---

<sup>52</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 14.27 (PG 33:861 A; FaCh 64:50), arguing for the Son's natural and eternal divinity ("He did not gain His throne by way of advancement"): "The prophet Isaiah, having beheld this throne before the coming of the Savior in the flesh says, *I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne*. For the Father *no man has at any time seen*, and He who then appeared to the prophet was the Son."

<sup>53</sup> Epiphanius, *Ancoratus* 29.5 (GCS 25:38; FaCh 128:103) on the Mamre theophany: "that he might point out the one God and the two others following him, his angels"; 39.4 (GCS 25:49; FaCh 128:118): "the Son of God who came from above with two angels."

<sup>54</sup> Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 42.2 (PG 54:387): "In Abraham's tent both the angels and their master (καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι, καὶ ὁ τούτων Δεσπότης) were seen at the same time"; *Theatr.* 3 (PG 56:546): "Christ appeared to you, O wondrous one, flanked by two angels; and through [your] care for strangers (διὰ φιλοξενίας) you became a messmate to God and angels (Θεῶ καὶ ἀγγέλοις ὁμόσκηνος). O, blessed tent (σκηνή), which by condescension (δι' οἰκονομίαν) housed God accompanied by angels! Christ appeared to you in human form (ἐν ἀνθρώπου σχήματι), disclosing to you the mystery of the divine advent of himself and [his] salvation." *Contra Anomoeos* 11 (SC 396:304–306): Isaiah 6, together with Daniel 7 and 1 Kings 22:19–23 (3 Kings 22:19–23, LXX) are invoked as proof texts for the Son's divinity, expressed visually by his being seated on the divine throne.

<sup>55</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus, *Qu. 70 on Genesis (Quaestiones in Octateuchum)*, trans. Robert C. Hill [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007], 144): the three visitors, who only appear to be eating, were two angels accompanying the Master ("they and their Lord," αὐτοὶ καὶ ὁ τούτων δεσπότης).

<sup>56</sup> *Apos. Con.* 5.20.5 (SC 329:278; trans. ANF7): "He is the Christ of God . . . To Him did Moses bear witness, and said: *The Lord received fire from the Lord, and rained it down* (Gen 19.24); Him did Jacob see as a man, and said: *I have seen God face to face, and my soul is preserved*; Him did Abraham entertain, and acknowledge to be the Judge, and his Lord; Him did Moses see in the bush; . . . Him did Joshua the son of Nun see, as the captain of the Lord's host (Josh 5:14); . . . Him Daniel describes as the Son of man coming to the Father, and receiving all judgment and honour from Him; and as the stone cut out of the mountain without hands." Similarly, the Anaphora suggests that Abraham's call consisted of a vision of the Messiah by which God delivered him from idolatry (Σὺ εἶ ὁ . . . ἐμφανίσας αὐτῷ τὸν Χριστὸν σοῦ [*Apos. Con.* 8.12.18–27; SC 336:188]).

writers, Novatian,<sup>57</sup> Gregory of Elvira,<sup>58</sup> Phoebadius,<sup>59</sup> Ambrose of Milan,<sup>60</sup> Hilary of Poitiers,<sup>61</sup> and Jerome<sup>62</sup>; among Syriac writers, Jacob of Serugh.<sup>63</sup> In addition to these, one should also consider the ascription of later pseudepigraphic writings to fourth-century luminaries such as Cyril of Jerusalem, Asterius, or “blessed papa Athanasius.”<sup>64</sup> A fifth-century homily on the Meeting of the Lord ascribed to Cyril of Jerusalem,<sup>65</sup> for instance, delights in the paradoxical identification of the fragile baby Jesus in the arms of Symeon with the Lord of the exodus and omnipotent Ancient of Days. For Ps.-Cyril, “it is this child who, of old, parted the sea for Israel, and drowned Pharaoh, and gave the Law to the Israelites, and rained down manna,

<sup>57</sup> Novatian, *Trin.* 18.11–17 (CCSL 4:45–46).

<sup>58</sup> Gregory of Elvira, *De fide* 80–90 (CCSL 69:242–244): a list of christologically interpreted theophanies associated with Abraham, Jacob/Israel, and Moses; *Tractates on the Books of Holy Scripture* 2.10–11 (CCSL 69:11–12).

<sup>59</sup> Phoebadius of Agen (*Contra Arianos* 16.7–17.3; FC 38:130, 132) first ascribes Exodus 3:14 to the Father (16.7), then states that the Son, being the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), could not have come into being at a later point, and, finally, reaches the conclusion that the one who spoke to Moses was the Son (17.2).

<sup>60</sup> Ambrose, *De fide* 1.13.83 (CSEL 78:36): “Non pater in rubo, non pater in eremo, sed filius est Moysi locutus . . . Hic est ergo qui legem dedit . . . Hic est ergo deus patriarcharum, hic est deus profetarum.” Cf. *De fide* 5.1.26 (CSEL 78:225–226): the *qui est* of Exodus 3:14 establishes the eternity of Christ (*semper est*) as opposed to the created existence of angels (“erat Gabriel, erat Raphael, erant angeli . . . qui aliquando non fuerint”). See also the opening of Ambrose’s hymn, “Intende, qui regis Israel, super cherubim qui sedes.” For the biblical exegesis of Ambrose’s hymn, see Édouard Cothenet, “L’arrière-plan biblique de l’hymne de St. Ambroise ‘Intende, qui regis Israel,’” in *L’Hymnographie: Conférences Saint-Serge XLVIe Semaine d’études liturgiques, Paris, 29 juin–2 juillet 1999*, ed. A. M. Triacca and A. Pistoia (Rome: Edizioni Liturgiche, 2000), 153–160.

<sup>61</sup> Hilary of Poitiers, *Trin.* 4.23–34 (SC 448:56–76): a discussion of theophanic texts (Genesis 16; 18–19; 28; 32; Exodus 3) to prove the divinity of the Son, identified as the “angel of the Lord.”

<sup>62</sup> Jerome, *Comm. in Esa.* 18.65.1 (CCSL 73A:744), in a casual remark that Exodus 3:14, as well as several other Old Testament theophanies, refers to the Son; *Comm. in Mat.* 2.14.27 (CCSL 77:124), where *ego sum* at the burning bush is linked to *ego sum* in Matthew 14:27 (implying identity of subject); *Comm. in Mc.* 1 (CCSL 78:452), where connecting John 1:1 with Exodus 3:14 offers proof for the eternity and divinity of the Son, who always “was” (ἦν) as opposed to John the Baptist, who came to be (ἐγένετο). In *Ep.* 18A 4.1 (CSEL 54:78), Jerome ascribes the Origenian view (the enthroned figure as the Father, and the two seraphim as the Son and the Spirit) to unnamed earlier interpreters, both Greek and Latin. His dissent from their opinion is exegetical: judging from John 12:39–41 and Acts 28:25–27, the enthroned figure was Christ, who therefore cannot be identified with one of the seraphim. The same exegesis is set forth, this time in a more strident polemical tone, in *Comm. in Esa.* 3.6.1–8 (CCSL 73:83–90). Jerome repeats his fundamental view twice (CSEL 73:84 and again at 73:87): “visus est autem Filius in regnantis habitu.”

<sup>63</sup> See Alexander Golitzin, “The Image and Glory of God in Jacob of Serugh’s Homily, On That Chariot That Ezekiel the Prophet Saw,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 46 (2003): 323–364.

<sup>64</sup> Epiphanius, *Pan.* 72.4.4 (GCS 47:259).

<sup>65</sup> Ps.-Cyril of Jerusalem, *Homilia in occursum domini* (PG 33:1183–1204). This homily was probably written around 450 (Michel Aubineau, *Les homélies festales d’Hésychius de Jérusalem*, 2 vols. [Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1978], 1:4n2). See the translation and thorough discussion of the text by Ellen Alex, “Die Homilie *In occursum domini* des Ps-Cyrrill von Jerusalem: Übersetzung und Kommentar” (MA thesis, University of Regensburg, 2012).

and led the Hebrew nation by a pillar of fire, and rent the rock asunder, and kept the bush unconsumed in a flame of dewy fire.”<sup>66</sup> A nativity homily ascribed to Athanasius revolves around the same paradox by invoking the burning bush theophany and Daniel’s vision:

I behold a strange mystery: in place of the sun, the Sun of Righteousness placed in the Virgin in an uncircumscribed manner . . . Today God, He-Who-Is and preexists, becomes what he was not; for being God, he becomes a human being without stepping out of his being God. . . . The Ancient of Days is born as a child.<sup>67</sup>

The convergence of so many geographically and theologically diverse sources on the christological interpretation of theophanies indicates that, although perceived as insufficient and rendered obsolete *for the articulation of doctrine* by the development of a more sophisticated and precise technical glossary and argumentation, christophanic exegesis continued to be widely recognized as an element of shared tradition, and functioned as a polemical aid to fourth-century anti-Jewish, anti-Arian, anti-Modalistic, and anti-Apollinarian argumentation. The writings of “divinely-inspired clarions of Orthodoxy” like Ephrem Syrus and Gregory Nazianzen exerted a strong influence over the great Byzantine hymnographers Romanos the Melodist, John Damascene, and Cosmas of Maiuma.<sup>68</sup> It comes as no surprise, then, to find that recourse to christophanies abounds in the hagiographical, hymnographical, and iconographical productions that flourished in the Christian East and West during the second half of the millennium and beyond.<sup>69</sup>

Indeed, Byzantine festal hymns discern the luminous face of Christ in *all* theophanies of the Old Testament. The paradoxical identification of Jesus of Nazareth as the Lord of Paradise, the God of our fathers, of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, He-Who-Is, who spoke to Moses in the burning bush and gave the Law on

<sup>66</sup> Ps-Cyril of Jerusalem, *De occursu* 12 (PG 33:1200 AB), my translation.

<sup>67</sup> Μυστήριον ξένον βλέπω, ἀντί ἡλίου τὸν ἡλίον τῆς δικαιοσύνης ἀπεριγράπτως χωρήσαντα ἐν τῇ Παρθένῳ. . . . Θεὸς σήμερον ὁ ὢν καὶ προὖν γίνεται ὅπερ οὐκ ἦν· ὢν γὰρ Θεός, γίνεται ἄνθρωπος, οὐκ ἐκστὰς τοῦ εἶναι Θεός. . . . Ὁ Παλαιὸς τῶν ἡμερῶν παιδίον γέγονεν (PG 28:960A–961A).

<sup>68</sup> Peter Karavites, “Gregory Nazianzinos and Byzantine Hymnography,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 113 (1993): 81–98; William L. Petersen, “The Dependence of Romanos the Melodist upon the Syriac Ephrem: Its Importance for the Origin of the Kontakion,” *Vigiliae christianae* 39 (1985): 171–187; William L. Petersen, *The Diatessaron and Ephrem Syrus as Sources of Romanos the Melodist* (Louvain: Peeters, 1985).

<sup>69</sup> Bogdan G. Bucur, “Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies in Byzantine Hymnography: Rewritten Bible?,” *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 92–112; Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007); François Boespflug, *Les théophanies bibliques dans l’art médiéval d’Occident et d’Orient* (Geneva: Droz, 2012).

Sinai, the Lord whom Ezekiel saw riding upon the cherubim, whom Isaiah saw enthroned and worshiped by the seraphim, whom Daniel discerned in the characters of both Son of Man *and* Ancient of Days, the Glory of his people, the Holy One of Israel—all of these occur in the hymns of Lent, Holy Week, and Pascha, of Annunciation, Nativity, Circumcision, Presentation, Baptism, and Transfiguration.

For instance in the celebration of the Transfiguration the hymns bring together Christ's manifestation on Tabor with his earlier apparition to deliver the Law to Moses on Sinai,<sup>70</sup> and present Christ, who "today ineffably has shone forth in light on Mount Tabor" as the same one who "led Israel in the wilderness with the pillar of fire and the cloud."<sup>71</sup> What Moses once saw in darkness, he now sees, on Tabor, in the blazing light of the Transfiguration: the same glory, the same "most pure feet," the same Lord.<sup>72</sup> The hymns of the Presentation are also replete with the same Christological reading of the divine manifestation on Sinai,<sup>73</sup> and the same occurs in the hymns of Epiphany: the Baptist is shaken with awe, knowing that he is to

---

<sup>70</sup> "In the past, Christ led Israel in the wilderness with the pillar of fire and the cloud [Exod 14:19]; and today ineffably He has shone forth in light upon Mount Tabor" (First Canon of Transfiguration: Ode 3 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 484]); "The mountain that was once gloomy and veiled in smoke has now become venerable and holy, since Your feet, O Lord, have stood upon it . . ." (Great Vespers of Transfiguration, Sticheron at *Lord I have cried* [*Menaion*, 471]). Cf. First Canon of Transfiguration: Ode 4 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 486].

<sup>71</sup> First Canon of Transfiguration: Ode 3 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 485].

<sup>72</sup> "You have appeared to Moses both on the Mountain of the Law and on Tabor: of old in darkness, but now in the unapproachable light of the Godhead" (Second Canon of Transfiguration, Ode 1 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 483]); "He who once spoke through symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, 'I am He who is' [Exod 3:14] was transfigured today upon Mount Tabor before the disciples . . ." (Great Vespers of Transfiguration, Apostichon [*Menaion*, 476]).

<sup>73</sup> Receive, O Simeon, Him whom Moses once beheld in darkness, granting the Law on Sinai, and who has now become a babe subject to the Law, yet this is the One who spoke through the law! . . ." (Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at *Lord I have cried* [*Menaion*, 408]); "The Ancient of Days, who in times past gave Moses the Law on Sinai, appears this day as a babe. As Maker of the Law, He fulfills the Law, and according to the Law He is brought into the temple . . ." (Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at the Lity [*Menaion*, 412]); "Today Simeon takes in his arms the Lord of Glory whom Moses saw of old in the darkness, when on Mount Sinai he received the tables of the Law . . ." (Presentation of the Lord: Sticheron at the Lity [*Menaion*, 413]). See also the following: "Today He who once gave the Law to Moses on Sinai submits Himself to the ordinances of the Law, in His compassion becoming for our sakes as we are . . ." (Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at the Lity [*Menaion*, 412]); "Today the holy Mother, who is higher than any temple, has come into the temple, disclosing to the world the Maker of the world and Giver of the Law" (Small Vespers of the Presentation: *Glory* Sticheron [*Menaion*, 407]).

baptize the Creator of Adam,<sup>74</sup> the God of Jacob,<sup>75</sup> the God of Moses,<sup>76</sup> the Lord who drowned the Egyptian army in the Red Sea.<sup>77</sup> On the Eve of Nativity, Byzantine hymns composed in the second half of the first millennium proclaim that “He who rained manna down on the people in the wilderness is fed on milk from His Mother’s breast”;<sup>78</sup> and, on Good Friday, that the one hanging on the cross is none other than “He who hung the earth upon the waters,” “the Lord who divided the sea . . . smote Egypt with plagues . . . rained down manna.”<sup>79</sup>

In all these hymns, one encounters the very same reading of biblical theophanies, and, by way of consequence, the same type of “YHWH Christology,” which, even though marginalized during the great christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries in favor of a more precise and nuanced “technical” vocabulary, had become ubiquitous in the worship and spirituality of the first-millennium church.

### Christophanic Exegesis in Patristic Scholarship

In stark contrast with the importance that early Christians ascribed to Old Testament theophanies, the vast majority of manuals, patrologies, dictionaries,

<sup>74</sup> “The Maker saw the man whom He had formed with His own hand, held in the obscurity of sin, in bonds that knew no escape. Raising him up, He laid him on His shoulders [Luke 15:5], and now in abundant floods He washes him clean from the ancient shame of Adam’s sinfulness” (Second Canon of Theophany: Ode 5 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 372–373]); “Thus spoke the Lord to John: ‘O Prophet, come and baptize Me who created you, for I enlighten all by grace and cleanse them. Touch my divine head and do not doubt’” (Eve of Theophany: Sticheron at the Sixth Royal Hour [*Menaion*, 327]).

<sup>75</sup> “Today the prophecy of the psalms swiftly approaches its fulfillment: the sea looked and fled, Jordan was driven back before the face of the Lord, before the face of the God of Jacob [Ps 113/114:3–7], when He came to receive baptism from His servant” (Eve of Theophany: Sticheron at the Sixth Royal Hour [*Menaion*, 327]).

<sup>76</sup> [John the Baptist speaking to Jesus]: “Moses, when he came upon You, displayed the holy reverence that he felt: perceiving that it was Your voice that spoke from the bush, he forthwith turned away his gaze [Exod 3:6]. How then shall I behold You openly? How shall I lay my hand upon You?” (First Canon of Theophany: Ode 4 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 370]); “If I baptize You, I shall have as my accusers the mountain that smoked with fire [Exod 19:8], the sea which fled on either side, and this same Jordan which turned back [Ps 113/114:5]” (First Canon of Theophany: Ode 4 Sticheron [*Menaion*, 370]).

<sup>77</sup> “He who in ancient times hid the pursuing tyrant beneath the waves of the sea, now is cloaked and hidden in the stream of Jordan” (Forefeast of Theophany Canon: Ode 1 Irmos [*Menaion*, 297]). Compare: “He who in ancient times hid the pursuing tyrant beneath the waves of the sea, is hidden in a manger and Herod seeks to kill Him” (Forefeast of the Nativity: Compline Canon, Ode 1 Irmos [*Menaion*, 204]).

<sup>78</sup> Ninth Hour of the Eve of Nativity: *Glory* Sticheron, in *The Lenten Triodion* (trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware; London/Boston: Faber&Faber, 1977), 587.

<sup>79</sup> Good Friday: Antiphon 15; Antiphon 6 [*Triodion*, 577].

encyclopedias, and large monographs on early Christianity barely mention the christological exegesis of theophanies. It is generally viewed as the province of pre-Nicene writers such as Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, and assumed to hold very little significance for the history of dogma during the conciliar era. Nobody seems to notice that overlooking the continued appeal to theophanies across much of the fourth-century theological spectrum leaves unexplained the pervasive and insistent references to theophanies in later Byzantine hymnography (which is due not to some retrieval of pre-Nicene theology, but to the reception of the “Holy Fathers” of the fourth and fifth centuries).

It is not only patristics scholars who seem to have difficulty integrating the early Christian tradition of christophanic exegesis. It is quite telling that, despite Fossum’s 1987 study of Jude 5, which concluded that “Jude . . . was the first to use ‘Jesus’ as a name of the Son also in his preexistence,” the reading “*Jesus*, who saved a people out of the land of Egypt” was moved from the footnotes into the critical text only in 2005, with the *Editio Critica Maior* of 2 and 3 John and Jude,<sup>80</sup> and then in 2012 (NA 28). In almost all English translations, therefore, one continues to read that “*the Lord* saved the people out of Egypt.” The weight of textual witnesses and the strict application of text-critical principles would have required the adoption of the reading “Jesus” in earlier editions; but, as Metzger’s *Textual Commentary* explains, “a majority of the Committee was of the opinion that the reading was difficult to the point of impossibility.”<sup>81</sup> Since the committee acknowledges “the weighty attestation supporting Ἰησοῦς (A B 33 81 322 323 424c 665 1241 1739 1881 2298 2344 vg cop, bo eth Origen Cyril Jerome Bede; ὁ Ἰησοῦς 88 915)” and later notes “the strange and unparalleled mention of Jesus in a statement about the redemption out of Egypt,” the difficulty seems to have been a *theological* one: “The reading Ἰησοῦς is deemed too hard by several scholars, *since it involves the notion of Jesus acting in the early history of the nation Israel.*”<sup>82</sup> Of course, as I noted earlier, “the notion of Jesus acting in the early history of the nation Israel,” which so gravely scandalized the committee, does not seem to have appeared too “hard” or “strange” to Justin and the vast majority of early Christians.

Returning to patristics, the important change in the evaluation of Justin Martyr—from viewing him as the first Christian author to articulate “the argument

---

<sup>80</sup> *Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior. Vol. IV/4: Catholic Letters: The Second and Third Letter of John. The Letter of Jude*, ed. B. Aland, K. Aland†, G. Mink, H. Strutwolf, and K. Wachtel (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2005).

<sup>81</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament, 2nd ed.* (London: UBS, 1994), 657.

<sup>82</sup> Daniel Wallace, footnote *ad locum* in the apparatus of the NET Bible (joined only by the ESV in adopting the reading “Jesus”). *NET Bible: A New Approach to Translation, Thoroughly Documented with 60,932 Notes* (Spokane, Wash.: Biblical Studies Press, 2005) (emphasis added).

from theophanies,” to understanding that he, in fact, “did not originate the basic idea that the preincarnate Jesus could be found active in certain Old Testament passages” but “reflects an approach to the Old Testament that had been a feature of devotion to Jesus during the first decades of the Christian movement”<sup>83</sup>—is a very recent development for which credit is due to Larry Hurtado’s study of “early high Christology” rather than to traditional patristics scholarship.

Even Irenaeus’s understanding of theophanies is deemed “an open question in scholarship.”<sup>84</sup> The view I find most compelling constitutes, in fact, a rejection of widespread scholarly narrative about a significant *difference* between Justin and Irenaeus on the question of theophanies.<sup>85</sup> “Irenaeus,” writes the French historian of dogma Jules Lebreton, made “enormous progress” over Justin.<sup>86</sup> Adolf Harnack, too, notes “a striking advance that Irenaeus has made beyond Justin” as far as the Christian appropriation to the Old Testament.<sup>87</sup> Time and again, one reads that the bishop of Lyon “exalts the prophetic value of ancient theophanies,” insisting “on the figurative and prophetic character of these visions,” and interprets theophanies as “preludes to the Incarnation”: a series of “preparations” and “portents” or “promises” and “outlines,” in themselves partial and imperfect, “of the great revelation.”<sup>88</sup> John Behr radicalizes the “prophetic turn” in Irenaeus’s interpretation of theophanies—for Irenaeus “*all* scriptural theophanies and visions are prophetic, pointing forward to Christ”<sup>89</sup>—and rejects the idea that Irenaeus would have understood Jesus as in some way visible in Old Testament theophanies; rather, “his preexistence and eternity is scriptural.”<sup>90</sup> Moreover, he understands the sharp

<sup>83</sup> Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 577.

<sup>84</sup> Jackson Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 129n149.

<sup>85</sup> See Bogdan G. Bucur, “Scholarly Frameworks for Reading Irenaeus: The Question of Theophanies,” *Vigilae Christianae* 72 (2018): 250–282.

<sup>86</sup> Jules Lebreton, *Histoire du dogme de la Trinité des origines au Concile de Nicée*, 2 vols. (Paris: Beauchesne, 1928), 2:597.

<sup>87</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan (New York: Dover Publications, 1961), 2:304–305.

<sup>88</sup> Gervais Aeby, *Les missions divines de Saint Justin à Origène*, Paradosis: Études de littérature et de théologie anciennes 12 (Fribourg: Editions universitaires, 1958), 45; A. Houssiau, *La christologie de Saint Irénée* (Louvain: Publications universitaires de Louvain, 1955), 92; Lebreton, *Histoire du dogme de la Trinité*, 467, 596, 597. For a more extensive discussion, see Aeby, *Les missions divines*, 44–49; Houssiau, *La christologie*, 80–104.

<sup>89</sup> John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 114 (emphasis added).

<sup>90</sup> Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 115, 230, 239. One is left wondering about what exactly is affirmed and what is excluded by the conception of the Logos’s “scriptural preexistence” and “scriptural eternity.” Perhaps “exegetical preexistence” would be a more fitting term, since “for Irenaeus, the crucified Jesus Christ, the Gospel of the apostles, was present prior to the Passion as the veiled content of the Scripture” (Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 119–120). Lashier also speaks about “the literary

opposition between Justin and Irenaeus in terms of heresy (Justin) and orthodoxy (Irenaeus): “the contrast between Justin and Irenaeus regarding the relationship between the Word and God in many ways parallels that between Arius and the Council of Nicaea.”<sup>91</sup> To a large extent, the scholarly disagreement over the interpretation of Irenaeus is a matter of placing the bishop of Lyon in the proper theological context. In my view, the “christophanic” reading simply makes better sense of Irenaeus’s early Christian context.

Within patristic scholarship proper, the christophanic exegesis of the Alexandrians Clement or Origen is rarely discussed, even though it is quite clear that the latter’s anti-Modalistic stance cannot be divorced from it. Another document I have mentioned, the *Epistle of the Six Bishops* against Paul of Samosata, is not even translated into English, French, or German, and the reference to theophanies—its largest section and, quite evidently, its strongest theological corrective to the Samosatene—is strangely marginalized in the literature. As for Eusebius, here is the judgment of an eminent specialist: “The argument from theophanies in Eusebius has never been the object of thorough examination. Those few authors who have shown some interest in this topic have not guessed its riches and importance in the history of doctrines.”<sup>92</sup> The same can be said of fourth-century Christian writers, generally. It is exceedingly rare and unusual that authoritative scholarly treatments of Nicene and post-Nicene patristic literature should dedicate an excursus, let alone a chapter, to the question of theophanies.<sup>93</sup> The continued appeal to theophanies across much of the fourth-century theological spectrum is more or less invisible.

It seems that a blind spot exists, which hides this early Christian tradition from the lights of modern scholarship, making it almost invisible and inconsequential. The story has older roots, however, since an explicit rejection of christophanic exegesis and a relegation of theophanies to the periphery of theological reflection (or, in a vertical perspective, to the bottom of a ladder leading to the vision of God) first occurred in a certain strand of early Christianity. Indeed, within this massive

---

character” of theophanic visions, by which he means that “insofar as Christ is ‘seen’ in his fullness prior to the incarnation, he is ‘seen’ in the scripture that testifies about him” (Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 127, 128).

<sup>91</sup> Behr, *Way to Nicaea*, 239. Cf. 104: The difference between Justin and Irenaeus “would be played out a couple of centuries later between the Arians . . . and Athanasius” (cf. 106n27); John Behr, *The Nicene Faith* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2004), 1:16n48: “contrasts between Justin and Irenaeus similar to those between the non-Nicenes and Nicenes are noted.”

<sup>92</sup> Morlet, *La “Démonstration évangélique” d’Eusèbe de Césarée*, 440–441.

<sup>93</sup> A notable exception: Manlio Simonetti, *La crisi ariana nel IV secolo* (Rome: Augustinianum, 1975), 506–511 (“Le teofanie”).

strand of tradition, the distinct voice of Augustine of Hippo marks a turning point in the exegesis of theophanies.<sup>94</sup>

### Augustine and the New Perspective on Theophanies

Briefly put, Augustine views those biblical passages traditionally assumed to be angelomorphic manifestations of the Logos as manifestations of the Trinity through angels—either visions of real, created angels,<sup>95</sup> or visions of some preexisting material reality, in which angelic manipulation brings about “a change of some kind” (e.g., the rock from which Moses draws water).<sup>96</sup> As a third and more spectacular possibility, Augustine also mentions the vision of a material reality that the divine will creates spontaneously for the occasion, and which is then “discarded when its mission is accomplished.”<sup>97</sup> These “symbols” and “signs” (*similitudines, signa*) of the trinitarian realities (*res*) are created, sensible, and evanescent;<sup>98</sup> and the

---

<sup>94</sup> On Augustine’s theology of theophanies, see Jules Lebreton, “Saint Augustin, théologien de la Trinité: Son exégèse des théophanies,” *Miscellanea Augustiniana* 2 (1931): 821–836; Laurens Johan van der Lof, “L’exégèse exacte et objective des théophanies de l’Ancien Testament dans le ‘De Trinitate,’” *Augustiniana: Tijdschrift voor de studie van Sint Augustinus en de Augustijnenorde* 14 (1964): 485–499; Jean-Louis Maier, *Les missions divines selon Saint Augustin* (Fribourg: Librairie de l’Université, 1960); Basil Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese Augustins: Untersuchung zu einem Ambrosius-Zitat in der Schrift ‘De Videndo Deo’* (Rome: Herder, 1971); Michel René Barnes, “Exegesis and Polemic in Augustine’s *De Trinitate* I,” *Augustinian Studies* 30 (1999): 43–60; Michel René Barnes, “The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology of 400,” *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 329–356; Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation, and the Vision of God: Augustine’s Transformation of Early Christian Theophany Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

<sup>95</sup> Augustine had already mentioned the possibility that theophanies be in fact “angelophanies” in Book 2. First he presents this as a hypothetical case (a situation in which “one of many angels . . . by some dispensation represented the person of his Lord,” but then he seems to take this possibility as a matter of fact: “it is not sufficiently clear which person of the Trinity that angel represented” (*Trin.* 2.13.23 [CCSL 50:110], FaCh 45:79; italics mine).

<sup>96</sup> Augustine, *Trin.* 3.10.19 (CCSL 50:146; FaCh 45:115).

<sup>97</sup> Augustine, *Trin.* 3.10.19 (CCSL 50:146; FaCh 45:115). Augustine (*Trin.* 2.6.11 [CCSL 50:96; FaCh 45:66]) lists the following here: the form of a dove at the Jordan Baptism, which had not existed before, but came into being “suddenly” (Lk 3:22); the tongues of fire (Acts 2:3); the burning bush (Exod 3:2); the pillar of fire (Exod 13:21); the lightning and thunder on Sinai (Exod 19:16). The same applies to the visions of Adam (in Eden), Abraham, or Moses (Augustine, *Trin.* 2.10.17 [CCSL 50:102–103; FaCh 45:71]).

<sup>98</sup> “These things appeared . . . as a creature serving the Creator”; “the material form of those things came into being . . . to signify something and then pass away” (2.6.11 [CCSL 50:94, 96; FaCh 45:64, 66]); “All these tangible signs were displayed through a creature that has been made subject (*per subiectam . . . creaturam*) in order to signify the invisible and intelligible God” (*Trin.* 2.15.25 [CCSL 50:114; FaCh 45:82]); “those visions were wrought by a changeable creature (*per creaturam commutabilem*) . . . they do not reveal God as he properly is, but signify his presence by . . . signs” (*Trin.* 2.17.32 [CCSL 50:123; FaCh 45:90]); “some form of a creature was made for the occasion

divine presence in such phenomena is indirect, inasmuch as the angel speaks in the persona of God (*ex persona dei*),<sup>99</sup> which is, says Augustine, “a manner of speaking in which the effect is attributed to the cause [*significatur per efficientem id quod efficitur*].”<sup>100</sup>

The first thing to consider is the polemical context of Augustine’s new theology of theophanies.<sup>101</sup> More specifically, Augustine’s take on theophanies constitutes an effective response to a three-sided conflict that opposes the “Modalist” theologians, with their very limited distinction of the Logos within the divine monad; the “Homoians,” who exploit the anti-Modalistic use of theophanies to also extract a subordinationistic Christology;<sup>102</sup> and the pro-Nicenes, who hold on to both christophanic exegesis and *homoousios*. The pro-Nicenes argue that the subordinationist “extension” of christophanic exegesis is unwarranted because the Son is invisible *according to nature*, and manifested in theophanies only *according to his will*, the latter producing a certain adaptive visual appearance (*species*) that foreshadows the incarnation. Augustine’s response to the Homoians completely changes the terms of the debate: he dispenses altogether with the idea that theophanies are manifestations of the Logos, thereby cutting off the main exegetical and theological supply for subordinationist Christology.

Augustine’s revolutionary view of theophanies as created manifestations of the Trinity is not only a matter of polemical expediency; it is also intimately linked to his eschatological “transference” of the vision of God, which, naturally, relegated theophanies to the bottom of the ladder leading to the vision of God, and to the periphery of Christian reflection. If theophanies (whether those in the Old or the New Testaments, or in the lives of the saints) do not confer a direct experience of

---

(*facta est enim quaedam creaturae species ex tempore*), in order that the Holy Spirit might be visibly manifested by means of it” (*Trin.* 2.5.10 [CCSL 50:93; FaCh 45:62]).

<sup>99</sup> Augustine, *Trin.* 3.10.20 (CCSL 50:146; FaCh 45:116).

<sup>100</sup> Augustine, *Trin.* 3.11.25 (CCSL 50:155; FaCh 45:124). Cf. Marie-Odile Boulnois, “L’exégèse de la théophanie de Mambré dans le *De Trinitate* d’Augustin: enjeux et ruptures,” in *Le De Trinitate de saint Augustin. Exégèse, logique et noétique*, ed. E. Bermon and G. O’Daly (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 2012), 35–65, at 65 (emphasis added): “c’est Dieu qui parle et qui est présent dans la créature, mais il n’agit pas directement. . . . Figure, signification, nous sommes dans le registre de la représentation et non plus de la manifestation.”

<sup>101</sup> Even though a rough map of the theological debate (“Arians” versus “Modalists”) was offered by earlier studies, such as those by Lebreton and van der Lof, the precise identification of the historical parties involved in the conflict is due to Studer and Barnes.

<sup>102</sup> Their argument is that, since the Son is manifested in theophanies, he must be inherently visible in a way that the Father is not and therefore be of a different nature from the Father. See Augustine, *Trin.* 2.9.14–16 (CCSL 50:98–101; FaCh 45:68–70); 2.16.27 (CCSL 50:116; FaCh 45:83); Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese Augustins*, 8; Barnes, “Visible Christ,” 341.

the divine, it is because, for the bishop of Hippo, “that vision is promised to the saints in the next life.”<sup>103</sup> According to Michel Barnes,

[B]y the year 400, Augustine had come to understand that in this life we were incapable of a vision of God—that we were now incapable of direct knowledge of the truth . . . Augustine had also come to understand something else about such visions: fundamentally, there was no virtue to them . . . Augustine had a new understanding not simply of the (im)possibility of a vision of God in this life, but of the significance of any such vision: . . . no salvation in or from that vision. Salvation came from faith—this is faith’s “utility.”<sup>104</sup>

According to the threefold (corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual) hierarchy of vision, which Augustine presents in *De Genesi ad litteram* 12, theophanies exemplify either the bodily vision (the pillar of cloud, the Sinai theophany, Isa 6:1–3; Rev 1:13–20), or the spiritual vision (Exodus 19; 33).<sup>105</sup> At any rate, they do not grant the higher “intellectual vision,” the true vision of God. In theophanies, “God deigned to appear to certain persons, such as Abraham, Isaiah, and others like them, though not in his nature but in the form in which he willed to appear [*non in sua natura, sed in qua voluit specie*].”<sup>106</sup> For a theology in which the theophanic manifestation or “role” and the bearer of the role are one and the same—the Logos—the occasional occurrence of “created” and “creature” is simply loose language meant to convey the adaptive character of the apparent form (*species*), which is undoubtedly “owned” by the Logos. For Augustine, by contrast, the adaptive *species* is “created” in a strict sense: a created revelatory instrument of the Trinity, ontologically other than the divine nature.<sup>107</sup> In theophanies, the visionaries encounter created manifestations of God, whereas the vision of God refers to “gazing upon the substance by which he is what he is.”<sup>108</sup> This is the first main difference between theophanies and the proper vision of God (*visio intellectualis*). The second difference is that theophanies take place in the embodied and fallen state of this age, whereas the vision of God is eschatological.<sup>109</sup>

<sup>103</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 147.8.20 (CSEL 44:293, 294; WSA 2/2:329).

<sup>104</sup> Barnes, “Visible Christ,” 342.

<sup>105</sup> Augustine, *Gen. litt.* 12.26.54; 34.67 (CSEL 44:420, 432; WSA 1/13:495, 504).

<sup>106</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 147.6.18; 10.23 (CSEL 44:289, 297; WSA 2/2:327, 331).

<sup>107</sup> Augustine, *Gen. litt.* 12.4.9 (CSEL 28/1:384; Hill, 467): “the difference between the very substance of God and the visible creature in [theophanies]”; *Gen. litt.* 12.27.55 (CSEL 28/1:420; Hill, 495): “to see God . . . in his very substance as, without any bodily creature being assumed.”

<sup>108</sup> Augustine, *Ep.* 147.8.20 (CSEL 44:293; WSA 2/2:329).

<sup>109</sup> Augustine declares Moses and Paul to be exceptions to the rule that the vision of God occurs in the life to come. According to Barnes (“Visible Christ,” 352n48), “the most accurate description of Augustine’s judgment about the possibility of a vision of God in this life is that it cannot happen, but it sometimes does anyway”—namely, in extraordinary cases such as those of

### Augustine's New Lenses and the Scholarly Blind Spot

Even though, East of the Adriatic, Christians continued to view theophanies as manifestations of God the Word himself, and even if the pre-Augustinian view continued to be affirmed in hymns such as the Good Friday Reproaches,<sup>110</sup> the O Antiphons of Advent,<sup>111</sup> the ninth-century hymn “Veni Immanuel,” and numerous manuscript illuminations,<sup>112</sup> Augustine’s view of theophanies as created and evanescent manifestations gradually imposed itself as normative in Latin-speaking Christianity. It had certainly acquired this status by the time of John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century,<sup>113</sup> and remained unchallenged in subsequent centuries in Western Christianity. As the ancient hymns and orations and manuscript illuminations were increasingly perceived as somehow belonging to a different “realm” than doctrinal reflection, systematization, and teaching, the theological framework of the second millennium was erected largely without the corrective these sources could have provided. The question of theophanies should perhaps be considered as a part of the major theological and devotional shift described by Yves Congar as happening at the hinge of the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In his words, “between the ends of the eleventh and thirteenth centuries everything changes . . . But the shift takes place only in the West.”<sup>114</sup>

---

Moses and the apostle Paul. Moreover, a number of statements in writings covering Augustine’s entire lifespan seem to imply or even affirm explicitly that some among the apostles—*other than Paul!*—were granted this vision and that it continues to occur, quite often in mystical rapture. For relevant texts and their discussion, see Roland J. Teske, “St. Augustine and the Vision of God,” in *Augustine Mystic and Mystagogue*, ed. F. van Fleteren et al. (New York: Peter Lang, 1996), 287–308. These texts witness, in my view, to the tension between the inherited theological tradition and the logic of Augustine’s bold and innovative thought.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. *Lutheran Service Book: Altar Book* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006), 518–521.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. *LSB* 357 appendix. Quotations marked *LSB* are from *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2006).

<sup>112</sup> Antiphon for December 18: “Lord and Ruler (*Adonai et Dux*) of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and gave him the law in Sinai, come to redeem us with an outstretched arm!”; “Veni Immanuel”: “Veni, veni Adonai qui populo in Sinai legem dedisti vertice in majestate gloriae,” with its well-known English rendering “O come, O come, Thou Lord of might / Who to Thy tribes on Sinai’s height / In ancient times didst give the Law / In cloud and majesty and awe” (*LSB* 357:3). For the persistence of christophanic exegesis in the visual arts, see Boespflug, *Les théophanies*.

<sup>113</sup> Eriugena assumes, based on *beatus Augustinus*, that in theophanies God appears “in some creature made subservient [*in aliqua subiecta creatura*]” (*Commentary on John* 25 [SC 180:120]), so that Isaiah, for instance, saw “not His [God’s] Essence . . . but something created by Him” (*Periphyseon* 1, CCCM 161:9; John J. O’Meara, ed., *Periphyseon: The Division of Nature*, trans. I.P. Sheldon-Williams [Montréal: Bellarmin, 1987], 31). This Augustinian notion of created theophanies functions as the unacknowledged interpretive lens even when Eriugena reads Ps.-Dionysius. See Bogdan G. Bucur, “Dionysius East and West: Unities, Differentiations and the Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies,” *Dionysius* 26 (2008): 115–138, esp. 133–136.

<sup>114</sup> Yves Congar, *After Nine Hundred Years: The Background of the Schism between the Eastern and Western Churches* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1959), 38–39, referring to André

The Augustinian de-centering of theophanies and explicit rejection of christophanic exegesis is an important aspect of the theological formation of those learned clergymen to whom we owe its birth, development, and flourishing of scholarly editions and studies of the church fathers (e.g., the Benedictines of St. Maur, the circle of the Oxford Movement, the Jesuits and Dominicans of the *Nouvelle Theologie*); it remains “baked into” the project of early Christian studies, undisturbed by the change of paradigm from patristics to early Christian studies.<sup>115</sup> Much of this scholarship regards christophanic exegesis as, simply, the background against which the bishop of Hippo’s view on the created manifestations of the Trinity shines brilliantly. Consider, for instance, John Henry Newman’s observations on this topic:

[T]he Ante-nicene Fathers . . . speak of the Angelic visions in the Old Testament as if they were appearances of the Son; but St. Augustine introduced the explicit doctrine, which has been received since his date, that they were simply Angels. . . . This indeed is the only interpretation which the Ante-nicene statements admitted, as soon as reason began to examine what they did mean. They could not mean that the Eternal God could really be seen by bodily eyes; if anything was seen, that must have been some created glory or other symbol, by which it pleased the Almighty to signify His Presence. . . . The earlier Fathers spoke as if there were no medium interposed between the Creator and the creature, and so they seemed to make the Eternal Son the medium; what it really was, they had not determined. St. Augustine ruled, and his ruling has been accepted in later times.<sup>116</sup>

---

Wilmart, *Auteurs spirituels et textes dévots du moyen âge latin. Études d'histoire littéraire* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1932) 59–60, 62, 506: “Dom Wilmart, a profound student of ancient texts, has written that a Christian of the Fourth or Fifth Century would have felt less bewildered by the forms of piety current in the Eleventh Century than would his counterpart of the Eleventh Century in the forms of the Twelfth. The great break occurred in the transition from the one to the other century. This change took place only in the West where, sometime between the end of the Eleventh and the end of the Twelfth Century, everything was somehow transformed. This profound alteration of view did not take place in the East where, in some respects, Christian matters are still today what they were then and what they were in the West before the end of the Eleventh Century. This is a statement that becomes clearer the better one knows the facts. It is indeed very serious, for it concerns precisely the moment when the schism asserted itself in a way that has been without a true remedy up to now. It seems impossible that this be a purely exterior and fortuitous coincidence.”

<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, “From Patristics to Early Christian Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. S. A. Harvey and D. G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7–41.

<sup>116</sup> See John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Pickering, 1878), 136–137.

It is quite clear that, for Newman, Augustine's judgment is to be preferred to that of his predecessors because it offers a reasonable alternative to their confused notions. The emphatic statement about Augustine's "ruling" on theophanies having been "received since his date" implies that an obvious theological consensus exists—evidently, a "consensus" that is wittingly or unwittingly leaving out four centuries of pre-Augustinian authors, but also the writers in the Christian East.<sup>117</sup>

It is noteworthy that Lebreton's article on Augustine's exegesis of theophanies constituted a response to the theological challenge launched by the publication of a voluminous dossier of passages illustrating the christological understanding of theophanies in the first five centuries, at the end of which the author, dom Georges Legeay, had made clear his preference for "the sentiment that was nearly unanimous in the fathers of the first four centuries of the Church" over against the views of Augustine.<sup>118</sup> Such explicit theological bias is still present in Basil Studer's fundamental study, where one reads about Irenaeus's "*much too* realistic understanding of theophanies," or that Hilary "ascribed *too* great of a reality to the theophanies of the Son," or that "they [the Nicenes] reserved the manifestations *too* exclusively for the Son and at the same time saw them as being in *too much* of a continuity with the Incarnation."<sup>119</sup>

The theological assumptions inherited from Augustine, transmitted through academic and theological formation, are still operative in both ecclesiastical and academic circles. Perhaps this explains why a tradition as ancient, widespread, adaptable, and resilient as that of christophanic exegesis is almost invisible in scholarship; why, among authoritative scholarly treatments of the fourth and fifth centuries, it is usually only studies of Augustine that pay any attention to

---

<sup>117</sup> Alexander Golitzin, "The Form of God and Vision of the Glory: Some Thoughts on the Anthropomorphic Controversy of 399 AD," Seminar on Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism, Marquette University, accessed November 18, 2021, <http://www.marquette.edu/maqom/morphe.html>; Romanian translation: "Forma lui Dumnezeu' și 'vederea Slavei'. Reflecții asupra controversei 'antropomorfită' din anul 399 d. Hr.," trans. I. Ica Jr., in *Mistagogia: Experientia lui Dumnezeu in Ortodoxie* (Sibiu: Deisis, 1998), 184–267, at 204: "his [Augustine's] treatment [of the theophanies] is strikingly different again and, indeed, marks a genuine revolution, if not an actual rupture, with regard to prior traditions in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Numidia, Palestine, Syria, and Greece."

<sup>118</sup> "Il nous est, ce semble, permis de préférer, à l'opinion de saint Augustin, le sentiment à peu près unanime des Pères des quatre premiers siècles de l'Eglise." Georges Legeay, "L'Ange et les théophanies dans l'Écriture Sainte d'après la doctrine des Pères," *Revue Thomiste* 10 (1902): 138–158, 405–424; 11 (1903): 46–69, 125–154. The quotation is from *Revue Thomiste* 10 (1902): 405.

<sup>119</sup> "*allzu* realistisches Verständnis der Theophanien"; "schrieb den Theophanien des Sohnes eine *zu* grosse Wirklichkeit zu"; "diese [Nizäner] die Erscheinungen *zu* ausschliesslich dem Sohne vorbehalten und sie zugleich mit der Menschwerdung *zu* sehr in einer Kontinuität sahen." Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese Augustins*, 82, 37 (emphasis added).

christophanic exegesis—and then only to discuss how this theological Neanderthal was driven to extinction by the massive paradigm change coming from Hippo.

### Conclusions

I hope that the foregoing pages have highlighted a problem worth our attention. Christophanic exegesis is not a second-century creation, shaped by polemical necessity, but an expression of the religious experience and witness of the earliest Christians (“the Lord is Jesus, Jesus is the Lord”); it has lent itself to being effectively “weaponized” in a variety of polemical contexts along the centuries (anti-Jewish, anti-pagan, anti-dualistic, anti-monarchian, anti-subordinationistic); it has proved capable of surviving past the fourth century and was then disseminated in the hymnography, iconography, and hagiography of the Christian commonwealth.

If, despite its presence in a vast number of diverse Christian sources, the christological exegesis of biblical theophanies seems to have vanished from the sight of scholarship, it is because the discipline of patristics was conceived among scholars who had been shaped by Augustine, and was born wearing Augustine’s reading lenses. The effect of these lenses was that the theological gaze moved away from theophanies, so that the latter only registered in the margins of the spectrum of relevance.

“Missing theophanies” in scholarly accounts of the Christian theological tradition has serious consequences. One such consequence is that the insistent recourse to theophanies in so much of Byzantine festal hymnography and some Western hymnody and liturgy appears as a somewhat bizarre, archaizing feature, implausibly resuscitating the interests of Justin or Irenaeus in the compositions of Romanos the Melodist and John Damascene. More importantly, however, a dissonance obtains between the patristic authors and their scholarly interpreters in the field of patristics. Removing Augustine’s lenses and retrieving this significant part of the unbroken Christian tradition would help recover and strengthen the conviction that Christian dogmatics is anchored in the living experience of Israel’s walk with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the Lawgiver and “God of our fathers.” With face turned toward theophany, biblical exegesis can once again become mystagogy: an account of and a guide into the experience of God.