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# Patristic Exegesis: Reading Scripture in the Eucharistic Gathering

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## I. An Enlightened Reading?

"Hunting truth is no easy task; we must look everywhere for its tracks."[1] With these words, Basil, the fourth-century bishop of Caesarea, introduces his work *On the Holy Spirit*. These words reveal a hermeneutic that guides Basil's approach to the Spirit's divinity and governs his reading of the Scriptures. Theological truth is neither something the ignorant stumble upon by accident, nor an obvious object that everyone recognizes. Rather, theological truth must be hunted. The hunter is neither an unbiased observer nor a disinterested spectator. The skilled hunter already knows what he seeks; he enters the woods with a definite prejudice, that is, with a preconceived notion of what to look for in the hunt. The skilled hunter knows not only his prey—its shape, color, and form—but also the signs and patterns of its existence. He recognizes the impressions in his surroundings that signify its hidden presence. For Basil of Caesarea, the reading of the Scriptures will bear no fruit unless the reader's senses have been trained in what to look for in the Scriptures.

Basil's statement caused no controversy in the fourth century; indeed, such a perspective was taken for granted in the ancient church by both orthodox and heretical readers. Basil's statement does, however, express precisely the kind of perspective that has received severe critique among modernist readers.[2] Beginning with the Enlightenment, the reading of the Scriptures has been subjected to a scientific discipline, and above all else the scientific method has sought to eliminate the biases and prejudices of

[1] St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. David Anderson (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980), 16.

[2] Cf. especially Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983); Peter Schouls, *The Imposition of Method* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980); Isaiah Berlin, *The Great Ages of Western Philosophy*, vol. 4: *The Age of Enlightenment* (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1957).

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the scientist. At the heart of the Enlightenment was the conviction that the scientific method is the one and only way to a firm, unshakable, and secure truth. The scientific method grounds this truth in the object of its study and, therefore, claims to offer an "objective truth." The adjective "objective" refers to the kind of truth that consists in those facts that reside in the object itself—its substance and its observable existence. The scientific method offers a distinctly material truth—one that can be measured, quantified, and systematized; it offers a truth that is independent of any observation and external to all human engagement. The scientist claims to be a *tabula rasa*, one who has cleansed his senses—the tools that enable scientific observation—of all preconceptions and prejudices in order to allow the object to speak for itself.

The scientific method began as a necessity for the natural sciences and for the study of objects that existed outside of humanity. It is, however, the distinctive character of the Enlightenment that the method of discovery in the natural sciences became the method of choice for the discovery of all truth in every area of study, whether in other sciences or in the humanities.[3] The causes of this rise to prominence are perhaps many;[4] a chief cause, however, must be a distrust of church hierarchies and the apparatus of tradition as a viable avenue for the delivery of truth. For Enlightenment thinkers, tradition consisted in a prejudice that prevented objects from speaking for themselves; tradition was the means by which objective data had been distorted by biased, self-serving, and unenlightened interpreters. This assumption was well received by many Protestant theologians, for whom the language of tradition betrayed Romanist sympathies.[5]

The Enlightenment's rejection of tradition, however, was more profound than that of most Protestant reformers. The Lutheran articulation of *sola scriptura* was originally an attempt to preserve the ancient and authentic tradition of the early church. For the early Lutherans, the true tradition consisted in the person of Christ himself, who was handed over by the Father, in the Spirit, for the salvation of the world. The true tradition

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[3] For this discussion, I am indebted to Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*.

[4] Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 8, mentions the simple seductiveness of scientific success.

[5] Cf. Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, trans. Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 268–281. Here Harnack offers a mainly positive evaluation of Protestantism, especially its rejection of "all formal and external authority in religion . . . all traditional arrangements for public worship, all ritualism" (278), and finally, "sacramentalism" (279). Harnack's search for the original element of Jesus' message is clearly colored by an anti-catholic, anti-tradition prejudice.

is identified precisely with the gospel itself enacted at the church's font, pulpit, and altar. In other words, while specific teachings of the medieval church were rejected, tradition as an avenue or method by which truth is transmitted remained largely intact.

While Protestant reformers sought to correct false traditions, the Enlightenment took a more pessimistic view and sought a more wholesale rejection of tradition itself. Tradition as the act of transmission in which Christ is handed over by the Father in the Spirit through the *kerygmatic* and sacramental life of the church was hopelessly biased. Tradition as an avenue for truth was tainted by human involvement and could not be trusted; the church's catechesis could claim no objectivity and, therefore, no scientific validity. If the authentic meaning of the Scriptures was to be discovered, then original texts had to be quarantined from the prejudices of the church's sacramental life and subjected to a more objective and scientific reading. Historical criticism claimed to offer just such a reading. Tradition as the path by which scriptural meaning is carried from the past into the present was replaced by a "scientific" method. Instead of the transmission of truth through the church's mystagogy, historical criticism claimed the ability to access ancient texts without the biased mediation of the church.

The development of a scientific method by which ancient documents and cultures could be studied encouraged the study of the Bible apart from the church's sacramental life. The Bible was moved from the lectern, pulpit, and altar into the library and lecture hall of academia. Scientific methods promised to expose the objective meanings hidden in ancient texts and to define the "kernel" of Christian truth.[6] Such a "kernel" of truth could only be exposed if the superfluous husk were stripped and cast aside. Miracles, supernatural events, authoritative doctrines, and mystical rituals were all victims of the historical critic's shucking of the Christian cob. For such modernist readers, the miraculous narrative of the Bible was merely a metaphor authored by an ancient, non-scientific, and superstitious humanity. The modernist reader sought to use scientific methods to trace metaphorical literature to the natural religious "feeling" that lay within the consciousness of the author. Through the historical-

[6] Cf. Harnack, *What is Christianity?*, 55, who emphasizes the importance of "the historian's task of distinguishing between what is traditional and what is peculiar, between kernel and husk." The kernel Harnack seeks is that which is peculiar to Jesus' message, while the traditional is the external husk that can be discarded.

critical method, the reader sought to accomplish an "imaginative leap"[7] over the wall of ecclesial tradition into the mind of first-century authors hopelessly in bondage to unenlightened ways of thinking.

The influence of the Enlightenment is revealed not only in the historical critic, but also in the fundamentalist, whose critique usually points to the naturalism of modernist readers as itself a prejudice producing a biased interpretation. In other words, it could be said that, for fundamentalists, the historical-critical reading is not "scientific" enough. Despite their disagreements, historical-critical and fundamentalist readers share an important assumption. Seduced by the successes of the natural sciences, they both value the scientific method and seek to employ it in their reading of the Bible. Both seek to uncover an "objective truth" that inheres in the material text—a truth independent of the reader and visible to anyone, whether pagan or Christian. For the fundamentalist, the objective truth is limited to the text itself and the historicity of the events it narrates. Such an objective, material, and historical truth can be defined and summarized by any reader regardless of personal faith. A relationship to the church or engagement with its tradition is no longer necessary to read and understand the Bible. Fundamentalists thus tend to restrict the inspiration of the Scriptures to the original author and the production of the text, while for the New Testament and the early fathers the doctrine of the Spirit's inspiration applied more broadly to both the production of the text and its reception in the church.[8] For fundamentalist readers, inspiration allows the text to be seen as an immediate revelation of God independent of the subjectivity of its transmission through human writers and hearers. Inspiration functions as a way of protecting sacred texts from tradition, that is, from the unenlightened prejudices of its original hearers.

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[7] Cf. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 12–35, where he uses this language to describe the Romantic method for interpreting ancient cultures. Louth roots this method in Voltaire and Spinoza. Voltaire's "good sense" (*le bon sens*) accepted what was credible according to modern man's sensibilities, but rejected the incredible. Spinoza, however, calls the reader to refrain from a hasty rejection of the incredible. Louth writes, "Spinoza called for an act of imaginative conjecture whereby we try to see the world through the eyes of the ancients who describe a world that seems so strange to us" (12). Thus, for Spinoza, when one encounters what is credible to our modern sensibilities, it can simply be accepted. When, however, one encounters what is incredible (miracles, etc.), then the reader, rather than discard it immediately, attempts to imagine the natural religious feeling or idea that underlies the metaphor. For Louth, this progression continues in the Romantics, who applied Spinoza's "imaginative leap" to every text and author regardless of its credibility.

[8] 1 Cor 2:6–16 is an example of a text in which the Spirit is as active in its hearing as he is in its production.

While fundamentalist readers are content with the text itself, liberal readers recognize the human subjectivity, prejudice, and bias inherent in the Bible. Historical-critical readers recognize that scriptural texts exist as acts of tradition, which colors their form and meaning. In order to access the truly scientific kernel of the Christian message, a kernel independent of the prejudices of an unenlightened humanity, the historical critic seeks to move behind texts to the religious feeling or consciousness of the writer. Both historical-critical and conservative readers thus employ the scientific method to acquire an objective meaning in the Bible. This objective meaning is defined in two ways. First, it is untainted by human subjectivity and the apparatus of tradition. Both parties possess a fundamental distrust of the later church, treating its councils, traditions, and rituals as external husks that hide the pure kernel of the Christian message. Second, the objective meaning is independent of the reader. For both critics and conservatives, the meaning of the text is confined to the past; meaning is located in the purity of the text's original production. The discovery of such an original meaning demands a reader with a blank slate, a reader emptied of biases who can let the original message speak for itself.

Much more could be said about the effects of the Enlightenment on the reading of the Bible. Our brief journey can be summarized in two points. First, the scientific conquest of the humanities and the reading of sacred texts changed the ontology of the Bible itself. Since the Enlightenment, the Bible ceased to be the living communication of God for his church and was interpreted as a material artifact testifying to the religious sensibilities of an ancient culture. Second, the application of the scientific method to the reading of the Scriptures has changed the position and role of the reader. The scientific method depends upon the objective and external position of the scientist, and so its adoption places the reader outside the text; the meaning of the Bible is objective in the sense that the reader has no involvement or engagement with it. The enlightened exegete purges his eyes of all prejudices and sees only what is objective, historical, and sure; mystical, spiritual, and devotional readings are excluded *a priori*.

## II. Patristic Exegesis: Eucharist as Natural Habitat for the Bible

For the early Christians, the reading of the Bible was a liturgical act. The gathering of the church in a certain place to enact the Eucharist was *the* condition for the reading of the Bible.[9] "And on the day called Sunday,"

[9] The church defined dynamically as the gathering of the baptized for the Eucharist is a hallmark of early Christian literature. See 1 Cor 11:17–20, 33; *Didache* 9.4; and Ignatius of Antioch, *Eph.* 4–5; *Magn.* 7; *Phld.* 8.

writes Justin Martyr, "all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits. . . ." (*1 Apol.* 67). For Justin, Baptism incorporated one into that gathering where the Scriptures were read and the Eucharist was given. As the condition for the reading of the Bible, the ecclesial gathering established a fundamental unity between the reading of the Scriptures and the administration of the Lord's Supper. Neither the Eucharist nor the Scriptures could be engaged properly without the other. This interdependence is evident at the end of Luke's Gospel. In Luke 24, Jesus' "opening" (διανοίγω) of the Scriptures (24:32) is associated with the "opening" of the disciples' eyes (24:31) in the breaking of the bread so that they can see Jesus; it also accompanies the "opening" of the disciples' minds (24:45) so that they can understand the Scriptures.[10] The gathering of the church is the assembly of the baptized—those whose minds and eyes have been opened by the Spirit.

For the early Christians, the Eucharist reverses the first sin and challenges the devil's claim that his food will open the eyes of humanity. Early Christians noted the role of the physical senses in the fall of mankind. In turning his face toward the devil, Adam experienced a dulling of the senses; he had eyes but could not see, ears but could not hear. It was as if sinful man could only see in two dimensions; the spiritual, divine dimension could no longer be sensed, seen, or experienced. As Maximus the Confessor, a seventh-century defender of Chalcedon, puts it:

> Adam did not pay attention to God with the eye of the soul, he neglected this light, and willingly, in the manner of a blind man, felt the rubbish of matter with both his hands in the darkness of ignorance, and inclined and surrendered the whole of himself to the senses alone. Through this he took into himself the corruptive venom of the most bitter of wild beasts, and did not benefit from his senses apart from God. (*Difficulty* 10.28)

For the early Christians, the eucharistic gathering of the baptized consisted in those whose senses had been retrained to see and hear the theological, christological, and spiritual dimensions present in, with, and under the Scriptures. The baptismal and eucharistic life was thus indispensable for

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[10] In Luke 24, three "openings" occur. First, in 24:31, the eyes of the Emmaus disciples are opened in the breaking of the bread. Second, in 24:32, the Emmaus disciples comment on how their hearts burned as Jesus "opened" the Scriptures to them. Finally, in 24:45, Jesus "opened their minds to understand the Scriptures." For Luke, the opening of the tomb is only recognized in the church, where Christ is revealed in the Scriptures and the meal to open-minded disciples. It is perhaps significant that the opening of the eyes in the meal precedes the understanding of the Scriptures.

the reading of the Scriptures and was intended to shape the way such texts were heard. Conversely, the Scriptures were likewise indispensable for the church's participation in the Lord's Supper and were meant to influence the way it was received.[11]

How did the reading of the Bible and the administration of the Lord's Supper affect one another within the liturgical gathering of the church? For the ancient church, the eucharistic gathering was the place in which the Scriptures could live and move and have their being. The sanctuary was the habitat in which the Bible could roam most naturally, in prayer, praise, love, and eucharistic fellowship. Reading the Scriptures in the academy is like observing wild animals behind bars in the safety of a zoo. Reading the Scriptures in the liturgical assembly, on the other hand, is like interacting with the same animals on safari. In the manmade prison, the lion can be observed without fear of consequence; it can be studied objectively; even little children turn their backs on such a lion and happily walk away. On safari, however, in its natural habitat, the lion is engaged on a completely different level; the lion is experienced in accordance with the fear, awe, and humility it inspires. The observer cannot remain objective, but must be conscious of his own vulnerability. In the same way, the historical critic reads the Bible in the classroom objectively, that is, without personal engagement. In the academy, the Bible loses its teeth and its danger; it can be read without fear and without consequence to one's life. In contrast, the eucharistic assembly allows the Bible free rein to rebuke, inspire, correct, judge, and create. Such a gathering, therefore, is the context in which the Scriptures are heard properly and according to their true purpose. In other words, the eucharistic gathering is the home in which the Scriptures can be themselves—the living Word of the Father received in the Spirit.

### III. Irenaeus: Baptism, Virgin Birth, and the Ebionites

What is new about the New Testament? What precisely is the change that is effected between the covenant made with Moses and the new

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[11] It is the eucharistic assembly as the condition for the reading of the Scriptures that allows Ignatius of Antioch to make his famous rebuke. Some Judaizing opponents were saying that "they do not believe it in the Gospel unless it is found in the archives [OT]." Ignatius retorts, "But for me, the archives [OT] are Jesus Christ and the inviolable archives are his cross and death and resurrection and the faith that comes through him" (*Phld.* 8). Two components are expressed in Ignatius's statement. First, the Scriptures are identified with Christ himself; second, they are identified with the evangelical narrative of Christ's passion. The Scriptures thus have both ontological and narrative dimensions, which for Ignatius are rooted in the eucharistic gathering where the Scriptures are read (narrative dimension) and the Lord's Supper is administered (ontological dimension).

covenant in Jesus' blood? These questions express the fundamental issue that confronted early Christians. Yet the struggle to answer such questions was not limited to the realm of hermeneutical theory or philosophical discussion; rather, such questions were felt at the very heart of the church's life and consisted in her struggle to understand her own Christian identity. No one could undergo Baptism in the ancient world without experiencing a fundamental break with his past—his family, his pagan or Jewish heritage. Yet how was such a break, the experience of such a discontinuity, to be understood?

Irenaeus entered this struggle for Christian identity in the latter half of the second century. He engaged this theological debate with an impressive pedigree: he was catechized by the famed martyr Polycarp, who was himself a disciple of the apostle John. Following a violent and brutal persecution around AD 177, Irenaeus became the new bishop of Lyons and governed its congregations through the end of the second century. His episcopal tenure was defined principally by his struggle with the heresies of Valentinus and his successors. In his *magnum opus*, however, the five books collected under the title *Adversus Haereses*, Irenaeus engages not only Valentinian and Marcionite teachings but also the distinctive character of the Ebionite perspective.[12]

The Ebionites were the second-century children of Paul's opponents; they represented a Christian Judaism that refused to ascribe any change or development to the Mosaic Law. The Ebionites preached Christ as a repristinating figure who restored the Torah to its pristine purity. In this context, the Ebionite hostility toward the virgin birth becomes understandable. The Ebionites asserted the generation of Jesus in the normal way through the natural union of Joseph and Mary. The Ebionite rejection of the virgin birth, however, proceeded not from a skeptical mind, but from a larger theological agenda. The virgin birth represented a fundamental change, and therefore distortion, of God's original intent manifested in creation, marriage, and natural generation.[13] From the

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[12] This work has come down to us chiefly in Latin translation, only isolated fragments remaining in the original Greek, to which I have referred here wherever possible. The translation used is that of Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, 1885–1887 (Repr. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), vol. 1.

[13] Cf. the insightful discussion of Peter Brown, *The Body and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 61–64. Brown points out that in the second century, Judaism and Christianity were experiencing "an irreparable parting of the ways," a

Ebionite perspective, humanity was defined in its original purity as a stable genealogy, in which fathers generate children through women. Humanity is intended by God to proceed from the marital union and its procreative power.[14] The Ebionites rejected the virgin birth because it contradicted the early chapters of Genesis. Their rejection amounted to a stubborn refusal to ascribe any change to God's original relationship with humanity or any real newness to the New Testament.

On the other hand, the Valentinian interpretation of the virgin birth followed a fundamentally different path. While Ebionite teaching refused to allow any newness to infiltrate the natural order of human generation, Valentinians and Marcionites employed the virgin birth to exclude the material flesh from Christ's spiritual identity. Thus, Irenaeus describes such interpreters as those "who allege that he (the Word) took nothing from the Virgin" (μηδὲν εἰληφέναι ἐκ τῆς παρθένου).[15] The virgin birth represented a spiritual birth that transcended the flesh, abrogated marriage, and repudiated the material generation that belongs to the inferior realm of the Old Testament God. At one extreme, the Ebionites rejected the virgin birth and the discontinuity between Christianity and the Torah it implied. At the other extreme, Valentinians and Marcionites used the virgin birth to proclaim the radical newness of Christ, a newness that excluded marriage and its fleshly generation from the Gnostics' spiritual identity.

In this polemical context, Irenaeus seeks to accomplish two goals in his interpretation of the virgin birth. First, against his Valentinian and Marcionite opponents, Irenaeus must demonstrate that the virgin birth supports a real, fleshly continuity between Christ and Adam. Irenaeus

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divergence which, Brown maintains, surrounded "the issue of marriage and continence" (61).

[14] Brown cites *Babylonian Talmud: Yebamoth* 63b, trans. W. Slotki (New York: Traditional Press, 1983), 426: "He who does not engage in procreation of the race is as though he sheds human blood," and *Midrash Rabba: Genesis* 21.9, trans. H. Freedman (London: Soncino Press, 1939), 179: "When Adam saw that his offspring were fated [through his fall] to be consigned to Gehenna, he refrained from procreation. But when he saw that . . . Israel would accept the Law, he applied himself to producing descendents" (cited in Brown, *Body and Society*, 63). Following the destruction of the temple, rabbis rose to prominence defining Judaism as a religion of the book and placing Jewish communities on the stable foundation of marriage, procreation, and the Law. These currents flowing from Jewish rabbis also coursed through Ebionite communities and informed their reading of Scripture.

[15] *Haer.* 3.22.1; cf. *Haer.* 3.16.1, where Irenaeus describes the Valentinian perspective on the virgin birth in terms of Jesus being he "who passed through Mary (*qui per Mariam transierit*)."

expresses this continuity in a truly imaginative and creative reading of Genesis 2.

> For as by one man's disobedience sin entered, and death took possession through sin; so also by the obedience of one man, righteousness having been introduced, shall cause life to fructify (*vitam fructificet*) in those who in times past were dead. And as the first-formed (*protoplastus*), Adam himself, had his substance (*substantiam*) from untilled and as yet virgin soil (*de rudi terra et de adhuc virgine*), "for God had not yet sent rain, and man had not tilled the ground. . . ." So he who is the Word, recapitulating Adam in himself (*recapitulans in se Adam*), rightly received a birth from Mary, who was yet a virgin. (*Haer.* 3.21.10)

In this passage, Irenaeus's typical way of interpreting the Scriptures is on display. For most modern exegetes, Irenaeus's reading seems dubious because it is difficult to imagine that Moses intends the "untilled soil" mentioned in Genesis 2 to be a prophecy of the virgin birth. For Irenaeus, however, the meaning of the text is not located simply in the original intent of the author but in Christ and the fourfold Gospel that narrates the salvific economy of his passion. Irenaeus thus starts with the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and allows these accounts to enlighten aspects of the Old Testament previously unnoticed.

Irenaeus's reading of Genesis 2 certainly roots the virgin birth in the earthy soil of creation against Valentinian and Marcionite teachers, yet it also challenges the Ebionite rejection of the virgin birth as something foreign to the Mosaic Law. Irenaeus continues:

> If, then, the first Adam had a man for his father, and was born of human seed (ἐκ σπέρματος ἐγεννήθη), it were reasonable to say that the second Adam was begotten of Joseph. But if the former was taken from the dust (ἐκ γῆς ἐλήφθη), and God was his Maker (πλάστης), it was incumbent that the latter also, making a recapitulation in himself, should be formed as man by God, to have a likeness of generation (τῆς γεννήσεως ἔχειν ὁμοιότητα) with the former. Why, then, did God not take dust again, but worked so that the formation (τὴν πλάσιν) should be made of Mary? It was that there might not be another formation called into being, nor any other which should be saved, but that the very same formation should be recapitulated, preserving the likeness (τηρουμένης τῆς ὁμοιότητος). (*Haer.* 3.21.10)

For Irenaeus, Jesus' substantial unity with Adam is revealed in the "likeness" of their origins. Against the Ebionites, who define humanity as a natural, paternal genealogy, Irenaeus demonstrates that Adam himself—the very icon of what it means to be human—was brought forth without a

human father. Thus, the virgin birth neither undermines the reality of Jesus' humanity, nor is it a generation that is alien to the ancient Torah.

For Irenaeus, the Ebionites' idolization of the beginning—Genesis, marriage, and its generative power—prevents them from ascribing any real newness to the Christian life. Marriage, procreation, and the Torah must neither be repudiated as belonging to an inferior god, nor idolized as an end in itself. Irenaeus's reading of the virgin birth demonstrates not only a substantial continuity between the testaments, but also a real change or growth from the old to the new.

These two emphases—continuity and newness—are certainly evident in Irenaeus's interpretation of the virgin birth. While maintaining a real continuity on the level of substance, Irenaeus asserts the fundamental newness of birth manifested in Jesus' generation from Mary.

> But again, those who assert that he was merely human, generated from Joseph, persevering in the bondage of the old disobedience, are in a state of death, not commingling with the Word of God the Father (*nondum commixti Verbo Dei Patris*). . . . Not receiving the incorruptible Word, they persevere in mortal flesh (*perseverant in carne mortali*) and are debtors to death, refusing the antidote of life (*antidotum vitae*). . . . Such ones [Ebionites] do not accept the gift of sonship (τὴν δωρεὰν τῆς υἱοθεσίας), but despise the fleshly character of the pure generation of the Word of God (σάρκωσιν τῆς καθαρᾶς γεννήσεως τοῦ λόγου τοῦ Θεοῦ), defraud humanity of the ascending way into God (τῆς εἰς Θεὸν ἀνόδου), and become ungrateful (ἀχαριστοῦντας) to the Word of God, who on their behalf became flesh. For to this end, the Word of God became human and the Son of God was made the Son of man, in order that humanity having passed into the Word (τὸν λόγον χωρήσας) and receiving sonship might become a son of God. (*Haer.* 3.19.1)

For Irenaeus, the virgin birth is more than merely an event in the historical narrative of Jesus; it is a theological sign that manifests the essence of the gospel and God's will for the human race. The Ebionite rejection of the virgin birth means that they choose to "persevere" in that old generation that stems from Adam and his sin.[16] For Irenaeus, the virgin birth manifests a fundamentally new kind of generation that is now opened up

[16] Irenaeus makes the same point in *Haer.* 5.1.3: "Vain also are the Ebionites, who do not receive by faith into their soul the union of God and man, but who remain in the old leaven of natural birth." He continues his argument with eucharistic language: "Therefore do these men reject the commixture of heavenly wine, and wish it to be water of the world only, not receiving God so as to have union with him, but they remain in that Adam who had been conquered and was expelled from Paradise."

to the whole of humanity.[17] In the womb of Mary, human flesh and blood experiences something unprecedented. The virgin birth is the means by which humanity is assumed into an internal relationship with the Son of God. By denying the virgin birth, Irenaeus's opponents are denying not only God's birth from a human mother, but also humanity's birth from the divine Father.

Irenaeus's interpretation of the virgin birth is intimately connected to his experience of Baptism. The virgin birth represents a new mode of generation in which the church now lives and moves and has her being. On the level of substance, it is certainly one and the same humanity that is brought forth from virgin soil in the beginning and from Mary's womb in the end; through the virgin birth, however, human flesh and blood experiences a fundamentally new and absolutely unprecedented relationship to God. In creation, humanity was generated by the will of God; in the fall, humanity was generated from Adam's sinful will and subjected to corruption. In the virgin birth, however, humanity is incorporated into the divine Logos himself, shares in his divine generation from the Father, and experiences a new mode of existence that conquers the grave. Irenaeus writes:

> He (the Christian) will judge also the Ebionites; for how can they be saved unless it was God who wrought out their salvation upon earth? Or how shall man pass into God (*homo transiet in Deum*), unless God has passed into man? And how shall he escape from the generation subject to death (*mortis generationem*), if not by means of a new generation (*novam generationem*), given in a wonderful and unexpected manner (but as a sign of salvation) by God—that regeneration which flows from the virgin through faith (*ex Virgine per fidem regenerationem*)? Or how shall they receive sonship from God if they remain in this kind of generation (*permanent in hoc genesi*), which is naturally possessed by man in this world? (*Haer.* 4.33.4)

For Irenaeus, the virgin birth is not a solitary event limited to the past; rather, through the virgin birth, God has inaugurated a new kind of generation that continues to be experienced in the church's baptismal life. In this way, the virgin birth gives Irenaeus's understanding of Baptism a horizontal and narrative dimension, and the sacrament of Baptism gives his interpretation of the virgin birth a vertical, mystical, and ecclesial significance.

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[17] Another parallel to the above passage revealing the sacramental interpretation of the virgin birth is found in *Haer.* 4.33.11. Here Irenaeus describes the virgin birth as "the pure one opening purely that pure womb which regenerates men unto God and which he himself made pure."

Interpreting the virgin birth as a baptismal narrative compels Irenaeus to describe Jesus' generation from Mary as a regeneration of the human race. It is this baptismal perspective that leads Irenaeus to offer a unique and truly creative interpretation of Luke's genealogy.

> Wherefore Luke points out . . . the pedigree which traces the generation of our Lord back to Adam. . . . And the prophet, too, indicates the same, saying, "Instead of fathers, children have been born unto you" (Ps 45:17). For the Lord, having been born (*natus*) "the first-begotten of the dead," and receiving into his bosom the ancient fathers (*in sinum suum recipiens pristinos patres*), has regenerated them into the life of God (*regeneravit eos in vitam Dei*), he having been made the beginning of those that live (*initium viventium*), as Adam became the beginning of those who die (*initium morientium*). Wherefore also Luke, commencing the genealogy with the Lord (*initium generationis a Domino*), carried it back to Adam, indicating that it was he who regenerated them into the Gospel of life (*in Evangelium vitae regeneravit*), and not they him. (*Haer.* 3.22.3–4)

Irenaeus recognizes that Luke's genealogy reverses the normal course of generation, which moves from father to son. This normal movement from father to son is the pattern followed in the book of Genesis and Matthew's Gospel; it is also the natural movement that fuels the theological vision of the Ebionites. Luke, however, reverses the movement, beginning with Christ and tracing the genealogy from son to father backwards to Adam. In addition, the fact that this genealogy occurs following Jesus' baptism suggests to Irenaeus that Luke is recording a genealogy of regeneration.

## IV. Conclusion

For early Christians, the sacraments are less like external rituals and more like internal organs that are essential to the body.[18] While one may move external appendages like fingers and feet according to personal will, internal organs, such as the heart, liver, or lungs, are not subject to individual choice. We may prefer to hold our breath for a moment or two, but soon the fundamental need of our humanity overwhelms our personal will. While one may survive the loss of fingers and toes, the activities of heart and lungs are more essential. Humanity exists precisely in and through the breathing of the lungs and the pumping of the heart. For early Christians, Baptism and the Eucharist are implicit to the church's very being. The church subsists in and with such activities. The sacraments are

[18] This analogy occurred to me when contemplating *Didache* 10:2. After partaking of the eucharistic bread, the church is instructed to give thanks to the Father "for your holy name which you have caused to dwell (κατεσκήνωσας) in our hearts." The word "dwell" suggests an internalizing of God's presence.

not merely ritual events the church chooses to perform from time to time; rather, they constitute a persistent and eternal relation to God in which the church has her subsistence. The sacraments cannot be removed without serious organic consequences for the Christian's inner identity.

Thus, the sacraments are simply implicit in Christians as they engage the Scriptures. The church's sacramental life allows the Bible to be heard within the economy of divine tradition. While the Scriptures can be studied by academia as an inert artifact of a dead past, the same Scriptures are heard by the baptized as the preaching of the Father that comes through the Son to be received in the Spirit. Thus, for the early church, the Eucharist thickened the meaning of the Bible, giving it a vertical and mystical dimension. On the horizontal level, the Scriptures were certainly historically true. For the church, however, the meaning of the Bible could not be flattened into mere objective facts about the past. Rather, the Eucharist demanded that the historical narrative be interpreted as a "sign" that reveals the mystery of God's own being manifested in Christ and his gift of the Spirit. Sacred texts were more than a record of historical events; they were the rhetorical proclamations of God revealing himself for his people through his Logos.

While the Eucharist provides the Bible with a mystical dimension, the Bible gives the Eucharist a historical and rational framework. Without the Scriptures, the sacraments can easily be reduced to mystical, ecstatic experiences of individuals lacking any rational content. Therefore, the liturgical reading of the Scriptures means that the God mysteriously present in the Eucharist is the God who has spoken, taught, and interacted with his people throughout history. The Christian God is as rational (*logikos*) as he is mystical. Thus, the flesh and blood that is received at the church's altar has a narrative dimension; it is precisely that flesh that was generated from the dust of Paradise, assumed from Mary by the Son of God, put to death under Pontius Pilate, and raised on the third day. The reading of the Bible compels Christians to experience the Eucharist as their participation in that humanity redeemed and perfected through the evangelical narrative of Christ's humiliation and exaltation. The eucharistic gathering held together the church's head and heart, her mystical experience and rational knowledge, her apostolic doctrine and life of prayer in one evangelical tradition.