1. SCHOLARSHIP ON THE OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS OF TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Blind Spots and Blurred Vision

Introduction

In what follows, I offer two critical observations on scholarly treatments of the emergence of Trinitarian theology in early Christianity. I discuss, first, the hypothesis that the early Christian appropriation of the Old Testament, especially of biblical theophanies, led, in a first stage, to the formation of "binitarian monotheism," followed later by the full-blown Trinitarianism that would constitute the classic position of the church. It seems to me that this account is emblematic for the type of problems associated with the entire project of giving a scholarly account of early Trinitarian doctrine. The second part of the essay will examine some of the biblical texts that have played an important role in the articulation of early Trinitarian theology—namely, Genesis 18, Isaiah 6, and Habakkuk 3:2 (LXX). My thesis is that the exegetical, doctrinal, hymnographic, and iconographic productions that illustrate the reception history of these texts offer a variety of exegetical approaches, which, however, are not adequately distinguished by the current scholarly concepts.
Is Binitarian Monotheism a First Step toward Trinitarian Theology?

Scholars of early Christianity such as Gilles Quispel, Jarl Fossum, Alan Segal, Larry Hurtado, Daniel Boyarin, and Richard Bauckham often note that Christian worship and theological reflection in the early centuries are characterized by a “binitarian” pattern. Although the terms vary in scholarship—“relative dualism,” “binitarian dualism,” “complementary dualism,” “Jewish ‘two-power’ traditions,” “heterodox Jewish binitarianism,” or, more recently, “dyadic devotional pattern”—the point is to conceptualize the early Christian worship of Jesus as Lord and God within the context of continued exclusive devotion to the Lord God of Israel. The defining mark of the emerging Jesus movement would be that, while similar to the “two-power” theology characteristic of the prerabbinic or nonrabbinic forms of Judaism (e.g., Philo’s language of Logos as “second God”; the memra-theology of the Targums), it views the “second power,” the Logos, as having “become flesh and lived among us” (Jn 1:14) and being set forth to be worshipped as “Lord and God” (Jn 20:28) in a cultic setting.

But “binitarian”/“binitarianism” is an older coinage. In an 1898 encyclopedia article on Christology, Friedrich Loofs first used “binitarischer Monotheismus” to designate an early stage of Christian reflection at which the heavenly reality of Christ was thought of not in terms of a preexistent Logos, but rather as a πνεῦμα whose distinction from God begins only at the indwelling of the man Jesus.

As such, binitarianism is associated with Geistchristologie—another favorite Loosian term, designating the inability to account theologically for a distinction between Pneuma and Logos. Loofs’s concept of “binitarianism” entered Adolf von Harnack’s Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte, starting with the fourth edition, in 1909. Since then, a large group of early Christian writers have been diagnosed with Geistchristologie and binitarianism, and the combination of the two is generally viewed as a sort of growing pains in the maturation of early Trinitarian theology.

The discussion of the pre-Nicene Trinitarian deficiency and the problems it raises for classical definitions of faith is a much older one, however, already

in full swing in the seventeenth century. I have in mind a treatise published in 1700, bearing the title *Platonism Unveiled, or an Essay Concerning the Notions and Opinions of Plato and Some Ancient and Modern Divines, His Followers, in Relation to the Logos, or Word, in Particular, and the Doctrine of the Trinity in General.* The author, Matthieu Souverain (1656–1700), who was a master of many languages and well versed in both patristic and rabbinic literature, argued that the scriptural references to the second and third persons of the Trinity were initially meant in reference to God's *Shekinah.* That early Christians misunderstood this circumlocution for God himself is only due to the growing influence of Greek thought over their theology—hence, Souverain's stated intention of unveiling the source of "the doctrine of Trinity in general": Platonism! One step back from Souverain's sophisticated discourse and it becomes abundantly clear that the same ideas were put forth by Unitarian theologians at war with the early church's "absurd," "monstrous," "heathen," "horrible" fabrication—the doctrine of the Trinity. This sort of anti-Trinitarian controversy literature found that the pure tradition of the apostles had been corrupted by "Platonism" and often points to Justin Martyr as a prime example of the phenomenon. This is not without irony, since the mantra of scholarship in the past century has been that Justin is not a good enough Trinitarian!

It is clear that in the original (Loofsian) setting, *Geistchristologie* and "binitarianism" are not objective descriptors of an early Christian phenomenon, but notions carrying significant theological freight. Less obvious—or at least less discussed—are the theological assumptions that undergird the more recent use of "binitarian" and "binitarianism." It is true that Loofs and his followers write about the early church's attempts at altering an originally low view of Jesus of Nazareth by positing his preexistence in terms of "spirit" and, later, by articulating a Logos doctrine of Hellenic import, while the more recent scholars mentioned previously are concerned with the emergence of a very early high Christology. Nevertheless, we are dealing in both cases with scholarly descriptions of a first stage in the development that led, eventually, to full Trinitarian theology. It is significant in this respect that Segal authored an essay entitled, "'Two Powers in Heaven' and Early Christian Trinitarian Thinking," and that Hurtado quotes approvingly Darryl Hannah's view that the *Ascension of Isaiah* reflects "a primitive effort at what later became Trinitarian doctrine" and himself speaks of "the struggle to work out doctri-
nal formulations that could express in some coherent way this peculiar view of God as ‘one’ and yet somehow comprising ‘the Father’ and Jesus, *thereafter also including the Spirit as the third ‘Person’ of the Trinity.* It seems, then, that the characterization of earliest Christian devotion as binitarian or dyadic—a form of “two powers in heaven”—includes the anticipation of a later “triadic” stage—let’s call it “three powers in heaven”—that is identified with the classical Christian Trinitarian doctrine.

Both the two-step evolutionary process leading from a binitarian to a Trinitarian pattern of worship and the assumed theoretical framework for thinking God as Trinity are problematic. Let me start with the latter and appeal to the witness of Gregory of Nazianzus, the champion of classic Trinitarian theology. Addressing those who possess a theology of the divine Son but refuse to grant the same status to the Spirit, Gregory writes (*Orat. 31.13–14*):

Though ... you are in revolt from the Spirit, you worship the Son. What right have you, to accuse us of tritheism—are you not ditheists (τί θέτε τοῖς τριείς τόιμοι υμῖν ... ὑμεῖς δὲ τὰ διείςτατα)? ... If you do revere the Son ... we shall put a question to you: What defense would you make, were you charged with ditheism? ... The very arguments you can use to rebut the accusation will suffice for us against the charge of tritheism.

It is obvious that “ditheism” is used here as a rhetorical put-down of his adversaries. Their accusation—adding a third term to the divinity amounts to “tritheism”—applies to their own addition of the Son to the “one God” of scripture, and they know full well that such a charge is refuted by stating that the distinction of the hypostases does not preclude the fundamental oneness of the divinity. They are, indeed, “ditheists”—that is, they believe in distinct “powers,” which happen to be two—and Gregory’s accusation corresponds to the rabbinic charge against those who worship “two powers in heaven” and thereby also to the scholarly notion of “binitarianism.” By contrast, Gregory’s own theology is not “tritheistic” according to the same logic, since it does not count several powers but, as he states repeatedly, “the one single Godhead and Power.” In short, the Christian worship of God as Trinity, at least as defended

by Nazianzen, is not triadic. This is why it is problematic to state that the binitarian pattern of worship characteristic of earliest Christianity constitutes “a primitive effort at what later became Trinitarian doctrine.”

Some hesitation about the notion that the first-century worship of Jesus “at the right hand of God” (Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; Rom 8:34; Acts 7:55–56; 1 Pt 3:22; Mk 16:19/Mt 26:64/Lk 22:69) can be described as “binitarian” or “dyadic” is also warranted. For early Christians the Holy Spirit is not so much a “third power in heaven” as the very condition for the possibility of a confession of Jesus as Lord. We are all indebted to Hurtado for his insistence on the factor of “religious experience” as the medium and catalyst of the fusion between Jewish monotheism and early Christian worship of Jesus. It is this “religious experience,” usually called “being in the Spirit” (Rv 1:10) or being “filled with the Spirit,” that makes possible “binitarian monotheism”—the worship of Jesus—and that is retained by Trinitarian formulas of faith. Thus, Paul states that the earliest and fundamental proclamation of Christological monotheism—“Jesus is Lord”—was a confession made ἐν πνεύματι ἄγιῳ (1 Cor 12:3); similarly, before stating that Stephen saw the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God and that he prayed to him (Acts 7:59–60, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit ... Lord, do not hold this sin against them”), the author of Acts describes Stephen as “filled with the Holy Spirit,” ὑπάρχων πλήρης πνεύματος ἄγιον (Acts 7:55–56). In the book of Revelation the indicators of divine status (the divine Name, the divine throne, the fact of receiving worship) point to God and, associated to God, the Son or Lamb, with no third entity enthroned and worshipped together with the Father and the Son. The Spirit is described in angelomorphic fashion (“the seven holy spirits before the throne”), indissolubly linked to the worshiped second person (“seven horns of the Lamb,” “seven eyes of the Lord,” “seven stars in the Lord’s hand”). If we describe this as “binitarianism,” we overlook the text’s claim that John the Divine received his “binitarian” revelation ἐν πνεύματι on a Sunday, presumably in the course of worship.

A possible objection may be raised on the basis of some early Christian texts that seem perfect examples of “three powers in heaven” theology. In Ascension of Isaiah (8.18; 9.27–40), for example, after an explicit reference to “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” the visionary seems to worship each of the three distinctly and then reports on God receiving the worship of the angel identified
as “my Lord” (e.g., Christ) and “the angel of the Holy Spirit.” Very similar passages occur in Irenaeus (Epid. 10) and Origen (princ. 1.3.4.). Yet, even in these passages, the angelomorphic Spirit is first and foremost “the angel of the Holy Spirit who has spoken in you and also in the other righteous” (Asc. Isa. 9.36), and, for Origen, the ground of all theogony. In other words, the Spirit is the guide, the enabler, and the interpreter of the prophetic and visionary experience of worshipping Jesus alongside God.

An unexpected witness to similar views can be found at the very heart of Justin Martyr’s theology (Dial. 61.1), although scholars have time and again been labeled it “binitarian”:

I shall now show you the Scriptures that God has begotten of himself as a Beginning before all creatures. The Holy Spirit indicates this power by various titles, sometimes the Glory of the Lord, at other times Son, or Wisdom, or Angel, or God, or Lord, or Word. He even called himself Commander-in-chief when he appeared in human guise to Joshua, the son of Nun. Indeed, he can justly lay claim to all these titles from the fact that he performs the Father’s will and that he was begotten by an act of the Father’s will.

Scholars who find in this passage a strong confession of Justin’s all-encompassing Logos theory, which precludes the articulation of a robust pneumatology and thus a fully Trinitarian theology, overlook or minimize the fact that the identification of the second power as such is a function of the Holy Spirit: the Glory, the Lord, Son, or Logos is proclaimed as such by the Holy Spirit (ὑπὸ τοῦ πνεύματος τοῦ ἀγίου καλεῖται).

Let me return to my question: is binitarian monotheism the first step to Christian Trinitarian theology? In my opinion, “binitarianism” is less an early Christian phenomenon than it is a scholarly phenomenon: a term that alerts us to a built-in blind spot in the academic approach to sacred texts. From a methodological perspective, the problem arises from the discontinuity between the implied readers of much of early Christian literature and the actual readers in academia. The texts that exemplify early Christian binitarianism typically claim to be rooted in a pneumatic religious experience that the readers are exhorted to emulate beginning with the very act of reading. Indeed, early Christians understood their sacred texts as divine revelation, dispensed pedagogically by heavenly agents to be appropriated mystagogically by the community of initiates. The scholarly reading of these texts is by definition
one that maintains a critical distance to the text. We approach these texts not through liturgical mediation and not with the expectation that they should continually transform and perfect us as members of a worshipping community; we approach them rather through the mediation of critical scholarship (critical editions, academically annotated translations, historical and exegetical studies), within the framework of an academic guild that does not venerate the texts it studies as guides to the God worshiped by their ancient authors. Here also, it is the perspective that creates the phenomenon: when the mystagogical approach of early Christian texts is set aside—a matter of professional necessity in academia—the ancient writers are often found to lack explicit references to the Holy Spirit and are thus labeled “binitarian.”

From Theophany to Trinitarian Symbolism: Three Test Cases

Genesis 18, Isaiah 6, and Habakkuk 3:2 (LXX) are biblical texts whose history of interpretation is intertwined, in early Christianity, with the articulation of Trinitarian theology. Even though the reception history of these verses is certainly not an untrodden path in scholarship, I think that the current scholarly concepts fail to distinguish properly between the various types of exegesis proposed along the centuries. This failure is especially obvious in the case of the earliest and most enduring Christian exegesis of Old Testament theophanies.

Genesis 18: The Lord and His Two Angels

Early Christian exegetes generally see in the three visitors the Son of God and his two angelic assistants. Their main interpretive move echoes the famous Johannine affirmation “before Abraham was, I am … Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad” (Jn 8:53, 56), and consists in the identification of “the Lord” of Genesis 18 with “the Lord” of Christian worship—the angelomorphic Son of God. This interpretation is exemplified by major writers of the second and third centuries, such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian, and Origen, who deployed it as a valuable weapon in a variety of polemical (anti-Jewish, antidualistic, antimodalistic) contexts. This Christological reading of the Mamre theophany remains normative for later
authors, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, Athanasius of Alexandria, and some of his Arian adversaries: Novatian, Hilary of Poitiers, the *Apostolic Constitutions*, Theodoret of Cyrus, and John Chrysostom. The convergence of so many theologically diverse sources on the Christological interpretation of Genesis 18 suggests that we are dealing here with a venerable and widespread tradition.\(^3\)

The early centuries also know of an alternative exegetical tradition. Even though Origen speaks of the three visitors as the Logos and his angels, for him this received tradition is merely a springboard for deeper theological speculation. This strand of interpretation, later exemplified by Evagrius and Ambrose, is interested in the spiritual significance of all details of the account: the time of the apparition (Abraham receiving God at “noon” indicates the resplendent light of the intelligence and purity of heart; Lot, by contrast, receives the angels “in the evening”), the number of visitors (three for Abraham, two for Lot), the location of the vision (“outside the tent” signifies withdrawal from carnal thoughts), and the type of bread served to the visitors (Abraham provides the “mystical” bread made of finer flour than Lot).

It is this tradition that gives rise to a Trinitarian reorientation of the interpretation of Genesis 18. The three visitors and three measures of flour suggest to Origen and his many theological heirs that Genesis 18 intends to communicate something about the mystery of the Trinity. The idea that “Abraham saw three, but worshipped only one,” which becomes an oft-recurring formula by the end of the fourth century, can, however, mean different things to different writers. Hilary of Poitiers, for instance, argues that, even though three men are present, the eyes of faith direct Abraham to worship only *one of the three*, inasmuch as he was able to discern in him the mystery of the incarnation to come; Ambrose, by contrast, although sometimes espousing the traditional (Christological) view, pivots toward a Trinitarian interpretation of the formula: at Mamre, Abraham “saw the Trinity in figure.”

With Cyril of Alexandria and Augustine, the earlier Christological interpretation of Genesis 18 seems indeed to have been abandoned in favor of a Trinitarian reading. (This exegetical move is motivated, in the case of Augus-

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tine, by his dissatisfaction with the subordinationist vulnerability of the Christological interpretation of theophanies and further complicated by his revolutionary proposal to speak of theophanies such as Abraham's three visitors as created manifestations of the Trinity.) At any rate, by the time of Maximus the Confessor, the Trinitarian interpretation has acquired normative status.

The shift from a Christological to a Trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 18 can also be observed in hymnography and iconography. Not surprisingly for these more conservative areas of Christian reflection, the change occurs significantly later. Romanos the Melodist, for instance, writing in the first half of the sixth century, still views the Mamre theophany as a Christophany. It is only later that the Trinitarian exegesis of Genesis 18, which had become widespread from the fifth century onward, is enshrined as canonical by being taken up in the hymns of the Sunday Midnight Office, ascribed to the ninth-century writer Metrophanes of Smyrna. Through this hymnography, spread over a huge area and recited on a weekly basis for over a millennium, devout Christians were taught that God appeared to Abraham "in human form," revealing "in figure" the pure doctrine of the three-hypostatic godhead.

As for the iconographic exegesis of Genesis 18, the majority of mosaics, icons, and manuscript illuminations depict a central figure, more important than the other two, and explicitly or implicitly identify it as Jesus Christ. Around the turn of the millennium, icons of Abraham's hospitality begin to be labeled "The Holy Trinity," even though the central figure is clearly marked as Jesus Christ. Finally, around the middle of the second millennium and especially with Rublev's famous "Trinity," the transition from Christological to Trinitarian signification was complete. It is significant, however, that this icon, painted for the Trinity-Sergius monastery, was mounted on the iconostasis as the first icon to the right of the royal doors—that is, it was displayed as an icon of Christ!

Isaiah 6: The Lord and the Two Seraphim

Two broad avenues for the exegesis of Isaiah 6 can be distinguished. The first one is a reading of the theophany as a "Christophany," characteristic of the widespread early Christian identification of the Logos-to-be-incarnate as subject of all Old Testament theophanies. This is the earliest Christian interpretation of Isaiah 6 and, judging from its presence in hymnography and iconogra-
phy, the more popular one. The second reading, with roots in second-century Alexandria, discerns in the three characters of the narrative—the enthroned Lord and the two seraphim—a symbolic image of the Holy Trinity.*

The Gospel of John identifies the kyrios in Isaiah’s vision with the kyrios of Christian worship: “[Isaiah] saw his glory” (Jn 12:41; recall Isaiah: “I saw the Lord ... the house was full of his glory”), just as “we have seen his glory” (Jn 1:14). Moreover, in the book of Revelation the “holy, holy, holy” sung by heavenly creatures is also addressed to the Lamb (Rv 4:6–9; 5:8–14). This Christological interpretation is echoed by prominent writers of the pre-Nicene era such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, and Clement of Alexandria and in later centuries in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Pseudo-Asterius the Sophist, and the Pseudo-Macarian Homilies.

A different reading started to spread in the opening decades of the second century. In the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah, the prophet gazes upon a triad composed of “the glorious one” or “the Father of the Lord,” whose glory it is impossible to behold, and his two attendants, the Lord Jesus and the angel of the Holy Spirit (Asc. Isa. 10.2–6). Obviously, the “Father” corresponds to the enthroned Lord in Isaiah 6:1, while the angelomorphic Son and Spirit, referred to earlier (Mar. Asc. Isa. 9) as “the angel of the Logos” and “the angel of the Holy Spirit,” correspond to the two seraphim. Irenaeus (Epid. 10) will appropriate this imagery, but apply a significant theological corrective: the two cherubim/seraphim are no longer identified with, but subordinated to, the Son and the Spirit. Origen (princ. 1.3.4; Hom. Isa. 1.2), by contrast, will invoke the authority of a “Hebrew teacher” in support of his identification of the two seraphim with the Son and the Spirit. Even though he had himself translated Origen’s homilies on Isaiah into Latin, Jerome would later criticize this exegesis as heretical because of its subordinationistic connotations.

The fourth century will consecrate the Trinitarian interpretation of Isaiah 6. Following Origen’s lead (“the seraphim ... guard the mystery of the Trinity”), but leaving behind any trace of subordinationism, Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, and Gregory of Nazianzus take the threefold cry of the seraphim (and perhaps the triadic structure of the vision—God and two seraphim) as in some way suggesting or adumbrating the mystery of the Trini-

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ty. Their point is that the seraphs are distinct from the Persons of the Trinity, uttering their thrice-holy song as angelic powers, subordinated to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Gregory of Nazianzus makes it clear that the single object of worship, the “God” addressed by the angelic hymn, is Father, Son, and Spirit.

The Trinitarian exegesis of Isaiah 6, together with its antisubordinationist connotations, is continued and refined by Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrus. Although theological adversaries, their exegesis of Isaiah 6 is identical: both take the triple exclamation “holy, holy holy” as a reference to the Trinity, while the singular “Lord Sabaoth” points to the oneness of the divine nature.

The anti-Eunomian polemics brought to the fore a distinct emphasis on the paradox that Isaiah 6 is both an overwhelming visionary experience and an experience in which the ultimate reality of God is not exhausted. Basil of Caesarea, for instance, is at pains to show that even as the prophet was allowed a contemplation of the divine glory, God’s ousia remained utterly inaccessible to him. Similarly, John Chrysostom explains that the throne-vision is not a vision of the divine ousia, but a matter of “condescension” (sunkatabasis).

The angelic hymn “holy, holy, holy is the Lord Sabaoth!” in Isaiah 6 proved an indispensable building block for liturgical compositions. The older exegesis of “holy, holy, holy” was, in Syria-Palestine, Christological. The Trinitarian readings of Isaiah 6 eventually find liturgical expression in the Eucharistic prayer of Scapion of Thmuis, the Liturgy of St. Mark, and the Apostolic Constitutions (with a subordinationist tendency: God the Father is worshipped by all ranks of heavenly powers, culminating with the worship offered by the Son and Spirit) and by the Byzantine Liturgy of John Chrysostom, where worship is given by the angels, culminating with the cherubim/seraphim, to God as Trinity.

Hymnography also displays a shift from the Christological to the Trinitarian interpretation of Isaiah 6. Romanos the Melodist, for instance, reads the text Christologically, as do some of the Byzantine festal hymns. A hymn of Palm Sunday Matins, for instance, exhorts its hearers to “look on the one whom Isaiah saw, who has come for our sake in flesh!” By contrast, the hymns of the Sunday Midnight Office, composed in the ninth century by Metrophanes of Smyrna, popularized a Trinitarian reading of Isaiah 6.
The iconography of Isaiah 6, however, seems to have never moved beyond the Christological interpretation of Isaiah 6, in conjunction with the older hymns of the church, which are also Christological.

Habakkuk 3:2 (LXX)

The Septuagint version of Habakkuk 3:2 ("Lord, I have heard report of you, and was afraid: I considered your works, and was amazed: you will be known between the two living creatures") is significantly different from its correspondent in the Masoretic text ("O LORD, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O LORD, of your work. In our own time revive it; in our own time make it known; in wrath may you remember mercy"). In Latin-speaking Christianity, despite the Vulgate's option for the Hebrew version of Habakkuk 3:2, the Old Itala, which followed the LXX (in medio duorum animalium innotecseris), remained popular. One of the main reasons for this type of conservatism is the ongoing liturgical use of Habakkuk 3 ("the prayer of Habakkuk") as part of the so-called biblical odes, a series of biblical hymns that became part of the Daily Office of both Eastern and Western Christianity.

Scholars have discussed at length the difficulties of the Hebrew text, offering various and conflicting reconstructions of the pre-Masoretic text and analyzing the puzzling divergences between the Greek and the Hebrew. It is now generally assumed that the translators had in front of them a Hebrew Vorlage slightly different from that of the Masoretic Text, which they understood and vocalized in a peculiar manner. In any case, the occurrence of the "two living beings" in the LXX version is not so much a matter of philology as of theology: the translator made an interpretative choice under the inevitable influence of the imagery of Exodus 25 (God's appearance between the two cherubim) and Isaiah 6 (God's appearance between the two seraphim). For Christian exegesis, the connection of Habakkuk with Isaiah and Ezekiel was natural: the (two) ζώα of Habakkuk 3:2 quite naturally suggested a relation with the two cherubim on the mercy-seat (Ex 25:22; Nm 7:89), the two seraphim of Isaiah 6:3, and the four ζώα in Ezekiel 1 (reinterpreted in light of Revelation 4).

The most widespread interpretation of Habakkuk 3:2 LXX is Christologi-

cal. It occurs in Tertullian (God known between the two living beings is Christ between Moses and Elijah, at the Transfiguration), Cyril of Alexandria, and Symeon the New Theologian, and in Latin, *The Gospel of Ps.-Mt.14* (the newborn Jesus between the ox and the ass), Hesychius of Jerusalem (Christ crucified between the two thieves), Cyril of Jerusalem (Christ between his earthly life and his life after the resurrection), Eusebius of Caesarea (Christ between the human and the divine natures). There is then also Christ between the Old Testament and New Testament (Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, and Jerome) and Christ between the present life and future life (Theodoret). Augustine and Jerome rehearse all these interpretations.

Origen set forth a highly speculative version of this Christological reading. In his *Commentary on Romans* (3.8.2–8), he combines Habakkuk 3:2 with Exodus 25:22 ("There I will meet with you, and from above the θιαστήριον, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant") and Romans 3:25 (God set Christ forth as the θιαστήριον), and proposed the following exegesis: (1) The two living beings in Habakkuk 3:2 are the two cherubim between which God makes himself known in theophany above the mercy-seat; (2) The mercy seat (θιαστήριον) is the human soul of Jesus, in whom the Word and Spirit dwell perpetually, and it covers the ark, which represents Jesus' flesh; (3) The statement in Habakkuk 3:2 ("God will be known between the two living beings") applies "to any saint who is a servant of God: God does not become known from any other place ... except from that propitiatory, which we have expounded above" (Hb 3.8.8)—in other words, the locus of theognosy is Jesus, in whom dwell the Spirit and the Logos.

The Christological reading of Habakkuk 3:2 was cemented by its liturgical use in connection with the celebration of the resurrection and by its iconography. "Habakkuk's vision" is found in manuscripts of Gregory of Nazianzus's orations, as an illustration of *Orat. 45.1*:

I will stand upon my watch and mount upon the rock" [Hb 2:1], says the venerable Habakkuk.... Well, I have taken my stand, and looked forth; and behold a man riding on the clouds and he is very high, and his countenance is like the countenance of an angel, and his vesture is like the brightness of piercing lightning [Hb 3:4]; and he lifts his hand toward the East, and cries with a piercing voice.... "Today salvation has come to the visible and to the invisible world. Christ is risen from the dead, rise all with Him!"
This very popular text, echoed by John Damascene's Canon of the Resurrection, interprets Habakkuk's vision as a vision of the risen Christ, hyperluminous and angelic in appearance. In a famous manuscript illumination (*Codex Taphou 14*), the two angels flanking Jesus indicate that Habakkuk 3:2 has been "filtered" through the Gospel of Peter, where "two men in great brightness" descend into the tomb and reascend with the risen Christ in their midst (Pt 9:35–10:40). In other cases (as in the fifth-century mosaic at the Lato-mos monastery in Thessaloniki and its fourteenth-century copy, the Pogano-vó icon) the vision of Habakkuk, merged with that of Ezekiel, becomes a throne-vision, with Christ seated on the merkabah, gazed upon by the two prophets.

So much for the Christological interpretation of Habakkuk 3:2. The "Trinitarian turn" we have by now come to expect of theophanic texts does, indeed, occur; and it does so, perhaps unsurprisingly, in Origen. *De principiis* (1.3.4), a text I have already mentioned in passing, uses Habakkuk 3:2 in conjunction with Isaiah 6 and explains:

My Hebrew master also used to say that those two seraphim in Isaiah, which are described as having each six wings, and calling to one another, and saying, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts" [Is 6:1] were to be understood of the only-begotten Son of God and of the Holy Spirit. And we think that that expression also which occurs in the hymn of Habakkuk ... ought to be understood of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. For all knowledge of the Father is obtained by revelation of the Son through the Holy Spirit, so that both of these beings which, according to the prophet, are called either "living things" or "lives," exist as the ground of the knowledge of God the Father.

As far as I am aware, Origen's Trinitarian interpretation of Habakkuk 3:2 has remained an isolated phenomenon. This is not without irony, given the rich reception of his work on Isaiah 6, which occurs in same passage of *princ.* 1.3.4. If Habakkuk 3:2 is not found among the theophanies to which the hymns of the Sunday Midnight Office gives a Trinitarian interpretation, it is perhaps because Metrophanes of Smyrna could not draw upon any predecessors.
What Kind of Exegesis?
Inadequacy of Scholarly Categories

It seems clear that two broad exegetical avenues can be distinguished in the Christian reception of Genesis 18, Isaiah 6, and Habakkuk 3:2 LXX. The first one is a reading of these biblical theophanies as "Christophanies," characteristic of the widespread early Christian identification of the Logos-to-be-incarnate as subject of all Old Testament theophanies. This is the earliest Christian interpretation of the texts under discussion and, judging from its adoption by later hymnography and iconography, also the more popular one. The second reading, with roots in second-century Alexandria, discerns in the three characters—the three visitors of Abraham, Isaiah's enthroned Lord, and the two seraphim and Habakkuk's vision of the Lord between two living beings—a symbolic image of the Trinity.

My concern here is mainly with the straightforward identification of the Septuagint kyrios with the New Testament's kyrios Jesus. To call this reading "Christological," although correct, only provides a category for understanding that the text was read with a specific doctrinal aim in sight, but no grasp of how the text came to be read in that way. The current scholarly concepts fail to adequately grasp the distinctiveness of this exegesis and they thereby obscure the importance of the earliest and most enduring Christian exegesis of Old Testament theophanies. This is not a trivial issue: without recognizing the phenomenon and crafting an appropriate concept to designate it (assuming the risk, of course, as with all scholarly concepts, of obscuring certain other elements), we fail to grasp an important factor in the development of early Christian theology.

In his almost exhaustive treatment of the Mamre theophany, Bunge writes, "This typological level of meaning, according to which an Old Testament event is understood as the type (image, figure, sketch) of the New Testament fulfillment, is, in our case [Genesis 18] Christological and Trinitarian." For him, "typological" accounts for the exegetical linking of the three men with the tri-hypostatic Christian God, but also for the exegetical linking of the "Lord" in the Genesis account with the "Lord" Jesus. Lars Thunberg also views the

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7. Bunge, Rublev Trinity, 47: Abraham's three visitors can be interpreted as "a type of the Trinity,"
Christological interpretation of Genesis 18 as “mainly of a typological character,” “based on a typological exegesis.”

Writing about Eusebius’s exegetical method in the Commentary on Isaiah, Michael Hollerich uses the problematic terms “allegory” and “typology” and the no-less-(in)famous distinction between Antioch (“typological”) and Alexandria (“allegorical”) — although the latter is helpfully nuanced, thanks to some insights gleaned from Jacques Guillet. In the end, Eusebius appears situated more or less in between the two alternative camps. Left out of the account — because the chosen conceptual lenses create a blind spot — is precisely Eusebius’s interpretation of Isaiah 6 as Christophany. Studies of the iconography of Isaiah 6 exhibit the same problem. “Christ himself is depicted in the illustration, showing the Christian belief in the prefiguring nature of this Old Testament vision,” writes Glenn Peers. “In this vision shared by both prophet and viewer, the viewer is made superior by his or her knowledge of the event’s typological significance since Christ is depicted enthroned as the Lord of the Old Covenant.”

As the survey of our three test cases shows, the exegesis of theophanies dominant in exegetical and doctrinal writings of the first four centuries (and dominant for an even longer time in hymnography and iconography) does not speak of Christ as somehow “foreshadowed” or “signified” by the characters and events recorded in the texts. In the case of a type-antitype relation, one would expect the exegete to acknowledge a nonallegorical, non-Christological level of the text and then posit a second Christological level as “fulfillment” of the Old Testament type. For the vast majority of early Christian writers, however, a non-Christological reality in the Mamre theophany or the vision of Isaiah simply does not exist: the central character of those narratives is Christ, and

in which case “on the typological level, we have... a representation of the Holy Trinity”; ibid., 51: “If the Lord, who appeared to Abraham, may also be understood as the Logos in his hidden presence, so can the threefold number of the visitors be equally interpreted as a reference to the threeeness of the persons.”


the “Lord” of Christian worship is straightforwardly identified with the Old Testament “Lord.”

It is one thing to say that the threeness of Abraham’s visitors offers an image of the modes of spiritual perception; it is another to say that Abraham’s three visitors set forth an image of the Holy Trinity; and it is quite another matter to say that Abraham encountered the word of God in a theophany that anticipates the incarnation of the Word. Similarly, it is one thing to say that the three characters in Isaiah 6 (the enthroned Lord and the two seraphim) provide an image of Philo’s triad (ὁ ὄν—θεὸς—κόσμος) or of the Christian Holy Trinity; it is another to say that the anthropomorphism of Isaiah 6 “foreshadows” the incarnation; and it another altogether to affirm that Isaiah encountered the Word of God in a theophany that also points to the Logos-to-be-made-man. There is need for better distinctions that would sharpen our focus.

A first distinction should be drawn between interpretations in which the connection between sign and signified does not presuppose and require a link between Old and New Testament and interpretations for which such a link is fundamental. It is this distinction that older scholarship (most famously Jean Daniélou) tried to bring out through a sharp opposition between “allegory” and “typology.” Even if most scholars today reject the opposition between the terms “typology” and “allegory” as historically unfounded, and therefore misleading, and prefer to view typological exegesis as a species of allegory, it is clear that the underlying distinction is real and must be expressed somehow.12

More important, however, is another distinction, drawn between the interpretation of Genesis 18, Isaiah 6, and Habakkuk 3:2 as “foreshadowing” the incarnation or presenting a symbolic image of the Trinity and the interpretation of Old Testament theophanies as Christophanies. In the latter case, everything turns on the strong claim to a real encounter or real “presence”; in the former, the divine presence is not an epiphanic self-evidence, but rather a “weaker” symbolic presence, a matter of exegetical and theological convention.

12. An excellent essay on this problem, Peter Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen,” Journal of Early Christian Studies 16 (2008): 283–317, concludes with the following recommendation: “first, that we discontinue using ‘typology’ and ‘allegory’ as labels for better and worse forms of nonliteral exegesis respectively; second, that we find alternative labels for these two forms of nonliteral interpretation; and third, that we develop a conversation around the criteria for successful nonliteral scriptural interpretation” (316).
Terms such as "typological" and "allegorical" do not account satisfactorily for the Christological interpretation of Genesis 18, Isaiah 6, and Habakkuk 3:2 LXX because they do not capture the epiphanic dimension of the text as read by many early Christian exegetes. Scholarship has rarely seized upon this aspect. In a book published in 1965, which met with undeserved neglect, A. T. Hanson pointed out the distinction between "real presence" and "typology" and argued that the former is typical of New Testament authors. His views were echoed four decades later by Charles Gieschen's essay on "the real presence of the Son before Christ" in pre-Nicene writers. Alexander Schmemann made very similar observations about liturgical symbolism. Today, Larry Hurtado provides the clearest distinction among three exegetical approaches to the Old Testament characteristic of "second-century proto-orthodox Christians" (e.g., Justin Martyr): first, "proof texts" drawn from the prophets; second, "a wider 'typological' reading of the Old Testament as filled with figures and events that foreshadow Jesus"; and, third, "the interpretation of Old Testament accounts of theophanies as manifestations of the pre-incarnate Son of God.

Given the ideological freight of terms like "symbolic," "typological," and "epiphanic"—to say nothing of "real presence"!—it might be more profitable to find a new conceptual tool. I have argued elsewhere that the exegesis of biblical theophanies in Byzantine hymnography often follows the logic of "re-

15. Alexander Schmemann speaks of a shift from one type of symbolization to another: in his words, from symbol to symbolism, from "ontological/real/eschatological symbol" to "illustrative symbolism." In the older type of symbolization, "the empirical (or 'visible') and the spiritual ('invisible') are united not logically (this 'stands for' that), not analogically (this 'illustrates' that), not yet by cause and effect (this 'means' or 'generates' that), but epiphanically. One reality manifests and communicates the other, but ... only to the degree to which the symbol itself is a participant in the spiritual reality and is able or called upon to embody it." By contrast, "illustrative symbolism" is the sign of something that does not exist logically, but only by convention, just as there is no real water in the chemical symbol H₂O; see Schmemann, "Symbol and Symbolism in the Byzantine Liturgy: Liturgical Symbols and Their Theological Interpretation," in Liturgy and Tradition, ed. Thomas Fisch (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 115-28; compare Schmemann, The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1983), 38-39; see also Schmemann, For the Life of the World (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), 141: "In the early tradition, ... the relationship between the sign in the symbol (A) and that it 'signifies' (B) is neither a merely semantic one (A means B), not causal (A is the cause of B), nor representative (A represents B). We called this relationship epiphany."
written Bible” literature. This term, coined by Geza Vermes in 1961, has since been used by scholars dealing mainly with Second Temple pseudepigrapha. In the above-mentioned articles on Genesis 18, Isaiah 6, and Hab 3:2, LXX, I argued that the Christological and “epiphanic” readings of Genesis 18, Isaiah 6, and Habakkuk 3:2 LXX documented previously could be viewed as a form of “rewritten Bible.” Indeed, numerous early Christian texts (and images) identify the central character in Isaiah 6—“the Lord”—as Jesus Christ in the same way that the Wisdom of Solomon identifies the heavenly agent at work in the Exodus events as Lady Wisdom and the book of Jubilees has Moses receive the Law from the Angel of the Presence.

Nevertheless, I have changed my mind on this point. It is quite clear that, if it is to retain any explanatory power, “rewritten Bible” must refer to the production of actual texts—“narratives following a sequential, chronological order,” which “cover a substantial portion of Scripture,” according to a widespread definition of the genre. For Christian readers of the Old Testament, however, the rewriting in question is a metaphor for interpretation, since the Christologically rewritten Old Testament episodes do not constitute a new text, but offer new readings of the existing ones. There are, of course, similarities between “rewritten Bible” and early Christian exegesis, just as there are similarities between “rewritten Bible” and rabbinic midrash—yet, the latter is not considered “rewritten Bible.” If patristic “Christophanic exegesis” (the

20. This is evident for classical midrash: “Unlike rabbinic midrash, [in ‘rewritten Bible’ literature] the actual words of Scripture do not remain highlighted within the body of the text, either in the form of lemmata, or by the use of citation-formulae”; Alexander, “Retelling the Old Testament,” 116. It is true, as Steven D. Fraade observes (“Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary,” in *Current Trends in the Study of Midrash*, ed. Carol Bakhos (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 62) that midrash “may be viewed as containing aspects of ‘rewritten Bible’ beneath its formal structure of scriptural commentary” (e.g., expansive paraphrase, filling in scriptural gaps, removing discomfiting details, identifying anonymous with named persons and places). Nevertheless, the distinction between midrash and rewritten Bible remains true even of *Pirqe de-Rabbi Eliezer*, despite the latter’s many similarities with *Jubilees* or the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum*; see Rachel Adelman, *The Return of the Repressed: Pirque De-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 5-19; Adelman, “Can We Apply the Term ‘Rewritten Bible’ to
term I would myself propose) is accepted as a form of “rewritten Bible,” the same would apply to midrash. In this case, however, it would become necessary to find yet another, more specific term to designate the kind of literature for which Vermes coined the term “rewritten Bible” in the first place: “a narrative that follows Scripture but includes a substantial amount of supplements and interpretative developments.” This erosion of the descriptive power of the concept derives from its metaphorization; the root problem is to have allowed “rewritten” to stand for “interpreted.”

Conclusions

In the first part of my essay I have criticized the scholarly notion of early Christian “binitarian monotheism” as a first stage of development toward Trinitarian theology. The problems I noted are, first, the lack of acknowledgment of the significant theological freight that “Binitarianismus” has been carrying since the days of Loofs and Harnack and, second, the lack of acknowledgment of the inevitable distortion that occurs when texts are uprooted from their original performative and mystagogical contexts, flattened into mere letters on paper, and studied in a library. The second part of my essay has offered a survey of the history of interpretation of Genesis 18, Isaiah 6, and Habakkuk 3:2 LXX—three texts that have played a crucial role in the articulation of early Trinitarian theology—and a critique of what I regard as the inadequate conceptual equipment available to scholars who are reflecting on this topic today. Neither “allegory” nor “typology” nor “rewritten Bible” are adequate descriptors of what I would simply (?) call “Christophanic exegesis.”

My “airing of grievances” in these pages is not meant to disparage the contributions of the scholars I am criticizing—many of them true giants from decades past or giants among us. Ultimately, the “blurred vision” and “blind spots” to which I point in both sections of this essay are inherent to the project of giving a scholarly account of early Trinitarian doctrine. The relevant affirmations occur in texts claiming to narrate a transformational religious experience and aiming at refashioning their readers/hearers through the very act of

reading/hearing. By contrast, ours is a self-correcting scholarly analysis, deliberately detached from the liturgical-mystagogical context of the sacred texts and aimed at approximating a dispassionate account of how the ancients' handling biblical texts led to the formation of the Trinitarian doctrine. My intention, then, is simply to push the discussion forward by raising some questions and presenting my own difficulties with the subject matter, in the hope of provoking a discussion that will help me understand a little bit more and a little bit better.
THE BIBLE AND EARLY TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

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