“I SAW THE LORD”:
OBSERVATIONS ON THE
CHRISTIAN RECEPTION
HISTORY OF ISAIAH 6

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In the pages to follow I shall examine exegetical, doctrinal, hymnographic, and iconographic productions that illustrate the rich reception history of Isa 6 in early Christianity. It appears that the earliest, Christological interpretation of this text was superseded by a Trinitarian one and that the exegetical shift occurred first in doctrinal and exegetical writings, while hymnography and iconography proved more conservative. In the second part of this article, I argue that the current scholarly concepts fail to distinguish properly between the various types of exegesis involved in each of these cases and that this failure is especially obvious in the case of the earliest and most enduring Christian exegesis of Old Testament theophanies.

ISAIAH 6: CHRIST AND THE TWO SERAPHIM

The details of Isaiah’s vision correspond, quite transparently, to the furnishings of the Temple: the throne is the visionary counterpart of the ark of the covenant, the living seraphim correspond to the two cherubim on the mercy seat, and the enthroned Lord unveils to the prophetic gaze the otherwise invisible divine presence above the mercy seat. The thunderous noise causing the Temple to shake and the dense smoke (6:4) and glory (6:1) filling it recall the phenomena at Sinai, which are implicitly interpreted as caused by angelic praise and by a superabundance of
(presumably luminous) “glory.” In short, to use Jon Levenson’s inspired characterization, in Isa 6 “art became the reality to which it pointed” and “the Temple mythos came alive.”¹

What did the prophet see? The Gospel of John identifies the kyrios in Isaiah’s vision with the kyrios of Christian worship: “[Isaiah] saw his glory” (John 12:41), just as “we have seen his glory” (John 1:14).² Moreover, the book of Revelation seems to extend the thrice-holy hymn sung by Isaiah’s seraphim to the Son.³ This Christological interpretation is echoed by prominent writers of the pre-Nicene era such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, and Clement of Alexandria.⁴ Since Isaiah calls the Lord


3. In Rev 4:6–9, the four living creatures—a fusion of Isaiah’s seraphim and Ezekiel cherubim—“give glory and honor and thanks” to God by singing a version of the thrice-holy: “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!” In the next chapter, however, worship and praise seems to be directed both to “Him who sits on the throne” and to the Lamb bearing the seven spirits (5:8–14). Cf. 7:10 (God and the Lamb receive the acclamation of the martyrs); 14:4 (God and the Lamb receive the self-offering of the martyrs as “first fruits” of humankind); 20:6 (God and Christ receive priestly service from those who are worthy, and reign together with them); 21:22–23; and 22:5 (the Lamb is or embodies the divine glory and light).

4. Irenaeus, Haer 4.20.8 (SC 100:650): “according to this invisible manner, therefore, did they [the OT prophets] see God, as also Isaiah says, ‘My eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.’” But Irenaeus is very clear about patriarchs and prophets having been graced with visions of the Son (Haer 3.6.1–2 [SC 211:64, 66, 68, 70]), whom he refers to as “the visible of the Father” (4.6.6 [SC 100:450]). Clement of Alexandria (Pedagogue 1.7.56–60) identifies the Logos, “our pedagogue, the holy God Jesus” (ὁ δὲ ἡμέτερος παιδαγωγὸς ἅγιος θεὸς Ἰησοῦς) with the “Lord” who spoke to the prophets, in the course of such theophanies as are recorded in Isa 6 and Jer 1.
κύριος σαβαωθ (6:3) and describes him as enthroned (6:1, καθήμενον ἐπὶ θρόνου), it is noteworthy that Justin Martyr, citing Ps 98:1–7, and Irenaeus, citing Ps 79:2, “both interpret the phrase from the LXX Psalter, ὁ καθήμενος ἐπὶ τῶν χερουβίων, as a reference to the Word.” Needless to say, the identification of Jesus with the God who guided Israel in the pillar of fire, gave the covenant, reigns in Zion, and rides upon the cherubic throne was bound to appear blasphemous to Trypho and his teachers.

Eusebius of Caesarea retains the Christological interpretation of Ps 79:2 (he connects it with the cherubim of Exod 25 and the visions of Ezek 1 and 10), as does Ambrose of Milan in the opening of his hymn: “Intende, qui regis Israel super cherubim qui sedes.” As a matter of fact, the Christological reading of Isaiah continues unabated during the conciliar era, in the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem, Eusebius of Caesarea,


6. Trypho appeals to his teachers, who have apparently already warned the community against such blasphemous promotion of Jesus as “Lord” (Dial. 38.1). For an in-depth discussion, see Bogdan G. Bucur, “Justin Martyr’s Exegesis of Old Testament Theophanies and the Parting of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism,” Theological Studies 75 (2014), 34–51.


8. Cyril of Jerusalem, Cat 14.27: “And this throne the Prophet Isaiah having beheld before the incarnate coming of the Savior, says, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the rest. For the Father no man hath seen at any time, and He who then appeared to the Prophet was the Son.”

9. Eusebius, Comm. Isa. 1.41 (GCS 55:36–38): the Lord Sabaoth of Isa 6 could not have been the God and Father, since Scripture states that “nobody has ever seen God” (John 1:18) or “the Father” (John 6:46); “whom, then, did the prophet see [ Isa 6:1] if not ‘the only begotten Son who is in the bosom of the Father’ [John 1:18]. . . ? Thus also ‘the Lord appeared to Abraham’ [refers to Gen 12:7, 17:1, and 18:1]. . . . He was seen by Abraham, having been fashioned in human form, and was under a tree and had his feet washed and shared in a meal. Likewise, he was presented as a man wrestling with him . . . the prophet [i.e., Isaiah] testifies that he saw his glory, that is to say, he saw the glory of our Savior Jesus Christ. . . . It was the glory of the Word which Ezekiel saw as through a glass darkly. . . . Although the vision of the prophet Isaiah was different from that of Moses and Ezekiel, he too saw the glory of our Savior.” All these theophanies anticipate the Incarnation, since in all of them the Son descends from his own greatness, “making himself small” (σμικρύνων τε αὐτὸν) so as to become visible and perceptible by human (GCS 55:36). In fact, Eusebius interprets the “dialogue” between the seraphim as an exclamation of their stupor at the future descent of the Word of God to the humble realities of human life (Com. Isa 1.41, GCS 55:39). See also Eusebius, Dem. Ev. 7.1 (GCS 23:297–98): before delivering his prophecy of the virginal birth (Isa 7:14), Isaiah bears witness of his glorious vision of Christ’s divinity by writing: “I saw the Lord sitting upon a high and lofty throne, etc. (Isa 6:1)” Dem. Ev. 9.16 (GCS 23:438). “Notice how Saint John proceeds saying, ‘These things said Isaias, when he saw his glory, and spoke of him.’ As the prophet had seen the Christ and the glory of Christ in the vision in which he said, ‘I saw the Lord of Sabaoth sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up,’ and that which follows.”
Jerome,\textsuperscript{10} John Chrysostom,\textsuperscript{11} (Ps?-) Asterius the Sophist,\textsuperscript{12} and the Ps-Macarian Homilies.\textsuperscript{13}

10. In Ep. 18A 4.1 (CSEL 54:78), Jerome ascribes the Origenian view to several, most erudite 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 Isa 3.6.1–8 (CCSL 73:83–90). Jerome repeats his fundamental view twice (CCSL 73:84, and again at 73:87): “visus est autem Filius in regnantis habitu.” Nevertheless, he finds it important to state that the vision of the Son does not imply an intrinsic visibility of the \textit{natura} of the Son, as opposed to that of the Father (John 1:20; Exod 33:20); rather, he insists, the \textit{divinitas} of the Son remains inaccessible to Isaiah, since “una in Trinitate natura est.” Ultimately, the theophany is a matter not of divine nature but of divine will: “Ergo Dei natura non cernitur, sed uidetur hominibus ut voluerit” (CCSL 73:85). It should be said that Jerome’s Christological interpretation of Isa 6 is thoroughly wedded to a Trinitarian one. He starts by placing “seeing the Lord (i.e., Christ) as he reigns in majesty” in apposition to “knowing the mysteries of the Trinity” (CCSL 73:84); later, he finds in the triple sanctus of the seraphim a demonstration of the “mysterium Trinitatis in una diuinitate” (CCSL 73:86); finally, he takes the plural in Isa 6:8 (“who will go for \textit{us}?”) to mean that “Domino iubente, Trinitas imperat” (CCSL 73:90). Nevertheless, Jerome is emphatic in his rejection of the older Trinitarian reading: he rejects the “impious” suggestion of “some” (i.e., Origen) who understood the seraphim as the Son and the Spirit, and prefers the view—actually, his own (Ep. 84, CSEL 55:123–24)—that the two represent the old and the new covenant (CCSL 73:87).


12. A beautiful Paschal homily (Hom. 16.15) ascribed to Asterius calls on the believers to join in the angelic praise of the risen and ascended Christ, and thus to fulfill together with their heavenly counterparts the prophecy of Ps 8:2 (“Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained perfect praise”). The heavenly pattern of worship is a tapestry of biblical passages including, predictably, Isa 6:3, along with Ezek 3:12 and Ps 23:7. In a similar passage (Hom. 29.9–10), the psalm verse “The heavens declare the glory of God” (Ps 18:2) is interpreted as a reference to the perpetual worship offered by the angelic hosts, culminating with the cherubim of Ezek 3:12 and the seraphim of Isa 6:3. The object of their worship becomes clear when the long list of patriarchs, prophets, and apostles who have also “declared the glory of God” is brought to completion by quotations that point to Christ: John 1:14 (“we have seen his glory”) and Titus 2:13 (“the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus”). The Greek text for the homilies is from Marcel Richard, \textit{Asterii Sophistae commentariorum in Psalmos quae supersunt} (Oslo: Brogger, 1956), 115, 232–33. Analysis in Hansjörg Auf der Maur, \textit{Die Osterhomilien des Asterius Sophistes} (Trier: Paulinus, 1967), 83–94. The identification of the author as Asterius of Amasea has been disputed by Wolfram Kinzig, \textit{In Search of Asterius: Studies on the Authorship of Homilies on the Psalms} (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1990), who argues that the homilies are the work of an unknown pro-Nicene theologian in the area of Antioch.

13. For example, Ps-Macarius, Hom. 4.13, a passage strikingly similar to Eusebius’s Comm Isa 1.41 (GCS 55:39): “Thus he appeared to each of the holy fathers, exactly as He wished and as it seemed helpful to them. In one manner he appeared to Abraham, in another to Isaac, in another to Jacob, in another to Noah, Daniel, David, Solomon, Isaiah, and to each of the holy prophets. Still in another way to Elijah and again differently to Moses. . . . To each of the saints, likewise, God appeared as he wished (ὡς ἠθέλησεν ὁ θεός) . . . And when it pleases him, he diminishes himself (ὡς θέλει σμικρύνων ἑαυτὸν) by taking on a bodily form. He transforms himself to become present to the eyes of those who love him, showing himself in an unapproachable glory of light.” Greek text in \textit{Die 50 geistlichen Homilien des Makarios}, ed. Hermann Dörries, Erich Klostermann, and Matthias Kröger (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag,
A different reading became prevalent among early Christians in Alexandria, prompted by the influence of Philo. Consider the following passage from Philo’s homily On the Godhead, preserved only in Armenian:

After this it is said: Three men stood above him (Gen 18:2). . . . This [Creator] appears to his own disciple and righteous pupil surrounded on either side by his powers, the heads of armies and archangels, who all worship the Chief Leader in the midst of them (Isa 6:1–3). The One in their midst is called Being; this name, “Being,” is not his own and proper name, for he himself is unnamable and beyond expression, as being incomprehensible. . . . Of his two bodyguards on either side, one is God, the other Lord, the former being the symbol of the creative, the latter of the royal virtue. Concerning the three men, it seems to me that this oracle of God has been written in the Law: I will speak to you from above the mercy seat, from between the two Cherubim (Exod 25:21). As these powers are winged, they fittingly throne on a winged chariot [Ezek 1] over the whole cosmos. . . . In the midst of whom he is found [the text] shows clearly by calling them “cherubim.” One of these is ascribed to the creative power and is rightly called God; the other to the sovereign and royal virtue and is called Lord. . . . This vision woke up the prophet Isaiah and caused him to rise.14

This text identifies the central figure among Abraham’s three visitors as ὁ ὤν (Exod 3:14, LXX), while the other two powers (ποιητική and βασιλική, also known as θεός and κύριος), represented by the two cherubim of Exod 25:22 (LXX 25:21)—compare Cherub. 27–28, discussed earlier—and the two seraphim of Isa 6:3. This connection, inasmuch as it became known to the church, especially at Alexandria, opens up the biblical imagery of the ark as well as Isaiah’s throne theophany to the same kind of theological reflection as Gen 18.

One Christian continuation of Philo’s “noetic exegesis” of Isa 6 occurs in Clement of Alexandria.15 Like the later Alexandrian liturgical tradition, Clement identifies the seraphim of Isa 6 (which he calls τὰ ζῴα τὰ δοξολόγα) with the cherubim of the ark in Exod 25 (which he calls τὰ πνεῦματα τὰ δοξολόγα) and with the two ζῶα found in the peculiar


LXX reading of Hab 3:2, “you will be known between the two ζῷα.” His main point, however, is that the seraphim and the cherubim should be decoded allegorically as references to the life of the perfected soul. For him, it is the “Gnostic” who “rests” in a state of ceaseless contemplation and perpetual praise of God. Elsewhere, Clement speaks of deification as a transformation into one of the “first-created” angels or “gods.” This “interiorization” of the liturgical and apocalyptic imagery of Isa 6, later pursued by Origen, Didymus, and Evagrius, will accompany the main threads—Christological and Trinitarian—of the history of interpretation.

16. See the Anaphora of Serapion and that of the Liturgy of Saint Mark, quoted below. On the reception history of Hab 3:2 LXX, see Bogdan G. Bucur and Elijah N. Mueller, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Reading of Habakkuk 3:2 and Its Reception: A Lesson from Byzantine Scripture Exegesis,” Pro Ecclesia 21 (2011): 86–103. The main interpretation of the verse is Christological: “God known between the two living beings” is interpreted as Christ on Tabor, appearing between Moses and Elijah (Tertullian, Ps.-Leo of Rome, Anastasius the Sinaite, the Venerable Bede), or Christ on Golgotha, crucified between the two thieves (Hesychius of Jerusalem, Anastasius the Sinaite, the Venerable Bede), or Christ as a newborn baby between the ox and the ass (Gospel of Ps.-Matthew, Cyril of Alexandria, Eleutherius of Tournai, Symeon the New Theologian), or Christ between his earthly life and his life after the Resurrection (Cyril of Jerusalem), or Christ between the human and the divine natures (Eusebius of Caesarea), or Christ between the Old Testament and New Testament (Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, Jerome), or and Christ between the present life and future life (Theodoret). The Christological reading of Hab 3:2 LXX is further reflected in its liturgical use in connection with the celebration of the Resurrection (Gregory of Nazianzus, John Damascene) and in its iconography. The latter shows Christ enthroned, similarly to representations of Isa 6, but with Habakkuk and Ezekiel as recipients of the vision; alternatively, it shows a luminous, often angelomorphic Christ, escorted by two angels, by the four cherubim of Ezekiel/Revelation, or by an entire angelic court. By contrast, Origen’s Trinitarian reading (Peri Archon 1.3.4: “we think that that expression also which occurs in the hymn of Habakkuk . . . ought to be understood of Christ and of the Holy Spirit”) has failed to capture the exegetical imagination of early Christianity. This is not without irony, given the rich reception of his work on Isa 6, which occurs in same passage of On First Principles 1.3.4.

17. It has been noted that, although “Clement seems to reflect a Philonic influence,” he “develops the theme in such a different way that he seems here to be essentially independent; echoes may reflect only a broadly common tradition.” Anniewies Van den Hoek, *Clement of Alexandria and His Use of Philo in the Stromateis: An Early Christian Reshaping of a Jewish Model* (Leiden: Brill, 1988), 134.

18. Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 5.6.36.3–4 (SC 278:84): “He [the Gnostic] all day and night, speaking and doing the Lord’s commands, rejoices exceedingly . . . and is ever giving thanks to God, like the living creatures who give glory (τὰ ζώα τὰ δοξολόγια), figuratively spoken of by Isaiah (διὰ Ἡσαΐου ἀλληγορούμενα).” Strom. 7.12.80.4 (SC 428:246): “[The ark] signifies the repose which dwells with the spirits who give glory (ἀνάπαυσιν . . . τὴν μετὰ τὸν δοξολόγων πνευμάτων), which the cherubim represent darkly (αἱ αἰνίσσεται Χερουβίμ). . . . But the face is a symbol of the rational soul, and the wings are the lofty ministers and energies of powers right and left; and the voice is delightsome glory in ceaseless contemplation (ἡ φωνὴ δὲ δόξα εὐχάριστος ἐν ἀκαταπάυστῳ θεωρίᾳ).”

19. Clement of Alexandria, Strom. 7.3.13.1–2; 7.10.56–57 (SC 428:68, 184, 186); Prophetic Eclogues 56.5, 57.5 (GCS 17:153–54). For a detailed analysis of these and other relevant passages, their background and possible connections, see Bucur, Angelomorphic Pneumatology, *Clement of Alexandrian and Other Early Christian Witnesses* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 42–51.

The Trinitarian exegesis of Isa 6 occurred quite early. According to Darrell Hannah, “already by the end of the first century or, at the latest, in the opening decades of the second, Christians were reading the vision of the sixth chapter of Isaiah in a ‘trinitarian’ manner.”21 In the mid-second-century 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 (Asclsa 10.2–6). Obviously, the “Father” corresponds to the enthroned Lord in Isa 6:1, while the angelomorphic Son and Spirit correspond to the two seraphim. Moreover, Mar. Asc. Isa. 9 speaks about the worship that God receives from his two attendants, called the angel of the Logos and the angel of the Holy Spirit. Even if the two are not explicitly termed “seraphim,” the fact that this text is an implicit commentary on Isa 6 leads to the identification of Son and Spirit with the two seraphim.

Aside from Irenaeus of Lyon’s appropriation and “correction” of this imagery, we find the same passage in the Ascension lurking behind the well-known passage in Peri Archon.22 Origin writes, “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’ [Isa 6.1] were to be understood of the only-begotten Son of God and of the Holy Spirit.”23 Origen is not simply reporting the opinions of his “Hebrew master”—that is, a Jewish-Christian teacher—as is evident from his homilies on Isaiah and Ezekiel:

These seraphim which stand around God, which only mentally say “holy, holy, holy,” guard the mystery of the Trinity because they themselves

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22. Irenaeus, Dem. 10 (trans. Behr, 46): “This God, then, is glorified by His Word, who is His Son, continually, and by the Holy Spirit, who is the Wisdom of the Father of all. And the power(s), of this Word and of Wisdom, who are called Cherubim and Seraphim, glorify God with unceasing voices.” The theological corrective is very significant: the two cherubim/seraphim are no longer identified with, but instead subordinated to, the Son and the Spirit. See Georg Kretschmar, Studien zur frühchristlichen Trinitäts-theologie (Tübingen: Mohr, 1956), 66–67, 73; Jean Daniélou, The Theology of Jewish Christianity (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1964 [1958]), 134–40; Emmanuel Lanne, “Chérubim et séraphim: Essai d’interprétation du chap. X de la Démonstration de s. Irénée,” Recherches de science religieuse 43 (1955): 524–35.
are holy.” . . . Who are these two seraphim? My Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit. . . . [about the seraph who touches the prophet’s mouth with a living coal:] this seraph was my Lord Jesus Christ, who is sent by the Father to take away our sins. . . . He came that you might know the unity of the divine Trinity. . . . Whoever believes in one person of the Trinity believes in all three persons.24

In his Contra Celsum, Origen again presupposes the Trinitarian interpretation of Isa 6, as he claims that the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel are the source of the enigmatic triad of Ps-Plato’s Second Epistle (king of all—the second things—the third things).25 Even though he had himself translated these homilies into Latin, Jerome later deemed this Trinitarian interpretation heretical, most likely because of its subordinationist connotations.26

Indeed, pro-Nicene theology would consecrate a different type of Trinitarian interpretation of Isa 6. Following Origen’s lead (“the seraphim . . . guard the mystery of the Trinity”), writers such as Gregory of Nyssa, Basil of Caesarea, Evagrius and John Chrysostom 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 Trinity.27 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.28 Gregory of Nazianzus makes it clear that the single object of worship, the “God” addressed by the angelic hymn, is Father, Son, and Spirit: “When I say “God” I mean Father and Son and Holy Spirit. . . . This then is the Holy of Holies, which is veiled by the seraphim and glorified with a threefold ‘holy,’ converging in one lordship and divinity, which another who preceded us has explained

24. Hom in Isa 1.2 (GCS 8.244). Cf. Hom Isa 1, 5 (247); 4, 1 (257); Hom Ezek 14, 2 (452).
25. Origen, Cels 6.18 (GCS 2.88.28).
26. Jerome, Ep. 61.2 (CSEL 54:577; English trans. in NPNF): “Origen is a heretic, true; but what does that take from me who do not deny that on very many points he is heretical? He has erred concerning the resurrection of the body, he has erred concerning the condition of souls, he has erred by supposing it possible that the devil may repent, and—an error more important than these—he has declared in his commentary upon Isaiah that the Seraphim mentioned by the prophet are the divine Son and the Holy Spirit.”
27. Gregory of Nyssa, C. Eun 1.23.310–12 (SC 524:118): through those whom Isaiah calls seraphim, “the mystery of the Trinity was proclaimed with clarity” (ἐναργῶς τὸ τῆς τριάδος ἐκηρύχθη μυστήριον). Basil of Caesarea, Eun. 3.3 (SC 305:154): “I think also that Isaiah wrote that the seraphim were crying out ‘Holy!’ three times for this reason: because holiness in nature is observed in three hypostases” (ἐν τρισὶ ταῖς υποστάσεσιν ὁ κατὰ φύσιν ἁγιασμός θεωρεῖται). Evagrius, De Seraphim (Muyldermans, 373–74); Chrysostom, Commentary on Isaiah 6:3 (SC 304:268): the seraphic hymn is addressed to the Trinity (τῇ Τριάδι τῶν ὕμνων ἀναφέρουσα) and expresses the accuracy of the dogmas.
28. Cf. Basil of Caesarea, Spir. 16.38 (SC 17bis: 384): the seraphim require instruction and direction in their performance of the Trisagion, and this is provided them by the “choirmaster”—the Holy Spirit! Cf. Cyril of Alexandria, Twelfth Festal Letter (12.2 [SC 434:42, 44]), where Isaiah’s seraphim are introduced precisely to emphasize the subordination of angelic beings in relation to the Creator.
in a most beautiful and exalted way.” 29 The Trinitarian exegesis of Isa 6 (directed against the subordinationism of the “Arians”) is continued and refined by Cyril of Alexandria and Theodoret of Cyrus, whose formulations are sometimes very similar. For Theodoret, the triple exclamation, “holy, holy, holy,” is a clear reference to the Trinity, while the singular “Lord Sabaoth” indicates the oneness of the divine nature. 30 Cyril also notes that the threefold sanctification of God ends in unity (“holy, holy, holy is the Lord”). 31 Nevertheless, his position on Isa 6 is more ambiguous and illustrates well the transition between Christological and Trinitarian interpretations of the text. Even though, as we have seen, he can refer to the angelic Trisagion as somehow pointing to the Trinity, in the same commentary on Isaiah he also affirms the traditional Christological interpretation. 32 Most interesting is his treatment of Isa 6 in his Dialogues on the Trinity: in arguing for the divinity of the Son, he begins by offering the traditional exegesis of the biblical passage, which he then modifies so as to affirm that the Son shares the very divine unity and lordship denoted by the singular “Lord Sabaoth.”

Anti-Eunomian polemics brought to the fore a distinct emphasis on the paradox that Isa 6 is both an overwhelming visionary experience and an experience in which the ultimate reality of God is not exhausted, but strictly denied. In Against Eunomius, for instance, Basil of Caesarea is at pains to show that even as the prophet was allowed a contemplation of the divine glory (ἐν θεωρίᾳ τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ γενόμενος), God’s οὐσία remained utterly inaccessible to him. 34 John Chrysostom will proceed similarly, as will Theodoret of Cyrus—the latter using the same pair of οὐσία and δόξα alongside φύσις and σχῆμα to distinguish the transcendent and the immanent element in divine theophanies. 35

32. Cyril of Alexandria, Comm. Isa. 1.4 (PG 70:172, 176): “No one can deny that the prophet saw the Son in the glory of God the Father, as John said: ‘Isaiah said this because he saw his glory and spoke of him’”; “In announcing that the whole earth is full of his glory, the seraphim are predicting the mystery of the economy . . . when the Only Begotten Word of God became human, the entire earth was filled with his glory.”
35. Chrysostom, On the Incomprehensibility of God, Hom 3:155–66 (SC 28bis:200): the anthropomorphic appearance in Isa 6:1 is not a vision of the divine οὐσία, but a matter of “condescension” (συνκατάβασις). Commentary on Isaiah 6.1 (SC 304:256, 258): Isaiah did not see what God is (ὁ οὐσία γεμινή); rather God descended as much as the prophet could ascend, allowing him to contemplate God as he appeared in a
Finally, the trinitarian reading of Isaiah 6 is further complicated by the fact that, around 400 CE, Augustine had come to understand the σχῆμα / species of theophanic phenomena as created, evanescent manifestations, which do not offer a transformational encounter with God, but are merely “symbols” and “signs” (similitudines, signa) of the trinitarian res. According to the threefold hierarchy of vision discussed in Gen. litt. 12, theophanies exemplify either the bodily vision (e.g., Exodus 19; 33; Acts 10.10-12), or the spiritual vision (e.g., Isa 6.1-3; Rev 1.13-20); they do not grant the higher, intellectual, vision. Understood as a second-level (spiritual) vision, Isaiah 6 is relegated from the top to the bottom of the ladder leading to the vision of God, and from the center to the periphery of Christian theology.36

ISAIAH 6 IN HYMNOGRAPHY AND ICONOGRAPHY

The hymnographic exegesis of Isa 6 has known a shift from the Christological to the Trinitarian perspective. Romanos the Melodist, who flourished in the sixth century, reads Isa 6 Christologically, as do some of the Byzantine festal hymns.

Come forth, you nations . . . and look today on the King of Heaven on a humble colt as on a lofty throne treading the path to Jerusalem. . . . look on the one whom Isaias saw who has come for our sake in flesh;

How shall He whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is the earth, be held in the womb of a woman? He upon whom the six-winged seraphim and the many-eyed cherubim cannot gaze has been pleased at a single word to be made flesh of this His creature . . .;

You, who ride on the cherubim and are praised by the seraphim, mounted like David on a colt, O loving Lord. And children sang your praise in a manner fitting God;

form (σχηματισθέντα); in conclusion, the vision was a “condescension” (συνκατάβασις). Theodoret, Comm. Isa. 3:35, 41–42 (SC 276: 256, 258); Eranistes 1.49–52 (Greek text in Theodoret of Cyrus, Eranistes. Critical text and prolegomena by Gerard H. Ettlinger [Oxford: Clarendon, 1975], 74–76).

“Isaias was cleansed when he received the coal from the seraphim,” cried the Elder to God’s Mother; “You, with your hands as with tongs, make me resplendent as you give me the one you carry—Lord of the light that knows no evening and Lord of peace; Christ, the burning coal foreseen by godly Isaias, in the hands of the Mother of God, as in a pair of tongs, is now given to the Elder.  

By contrast, the hymns of the Sunday Midnight Office, composed in the ninth century by Metrophanes of Smyrna, popularized a Trinitarian reading of the passage:

The seraphim glorify the one source in three hypostases, without beginning, eternal, maker of all things, incomprehensible, whom every tongue faithfully honors in songs.

With mouths unsullied, cherubim and seraphim glorify You, the one God of threefold light, with equal-matching glory; with them, Lord, also accept us sinners, who magnify your might.

Isaias when he saw in image (εἰκονικῶς) the one lordship, God in three persons, being glorified by the unsullied voices of the seraphim, was sent to go and proclaim the Being with triple light and the Unity with triple sun.

When Isaias saw You seated upon a lofty throne, being praised with thrice-holy hymns, he came to know the triple substance of the one Deity.

The seraphim glorify the one source in three hypostases, without beginning, eternal, maker of all things, incomprehensible, whom every tongue faithfully honors in songs.

With mouths unsullied, cherubim and seraphim glorify You, the one God of threefold light, with equal-matching glory; with them, Lord, also accept us sinners, who magnify your might.

Isaias when he saw in image (εἰκονικῶς) the one lordship, God in three persons, being glorified by the unsullied voices of the seraphim, was sent to go and proclaim the Being with triple light and the Unity with triple sun.

When Isaias saw You seated upon a lofty throne, being praised with thrice-holy hymns, he came to know the triple substance of the one Deity.

The iconographic depiction of Isaiah’s vision shows a man, explicitly identified as Jesus Christ, seated on the “high and lofty throne” of Isa 6:1. Below (and on page 320) are two of the most representative examples of Isaiah’s Vision:

The visual exegesis of Isaiah 6 shows a human figure, seated on the “high and lofty throne” and flanked by two seraphim. Note, however, in the second manuscript illumination, the conflation of Isaiah 6 with Ezekiel 1 (which mentions four rather than two heavenly creatures), and Daniel 7 (which depicts the enthroned figure as having white hair). One of the seraphim is depicted a second time to illustrate Isaiah 6:6-7 (“one of the seraphim flew to me, holding a live coal . . . touched my mouth with it and said . . .”), and it is noteworthy that in interacting with the prophet, to whom he “administers” the living coal, the seraphim has become anthropomorphic.

The figure on the throne is explicitly identified as Jesus Christ (note the inscription IC XC, right and left of the halo). It follows that not only Isaiah’s prophetic gaze is deciphered christologically, but also the object of the

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37. Palm Sunday Matins: Sticheron at the Praises; Great Vespers of the Annunciation: Glory Sticheron at Lord I have cried; Palm Sunday Vespers: Apostichon; Canon of Presentation, Ode 5; Small Vespers of Presentation, Apostichon. English translation by Ephrem Lash, online at www.anastasis.org.uk.

38. Canon of Midnight Office for Sunday Tone 1, Ode 1, troparion 1; Tone 5, Ode 9, troparion 2; Tone 3, Ode 5, troparion 1; Tone 4, Ode 6, troparion 2. English translation by Ephrem Lash, www.anastasis.org.uk.

Vision of Isaiah. Codex Athos Vatopediou 760, fol 280 v (eleventh century)
seraphic acclamation, “holy, holy, holy!”: YHWH Tsebaoth/ Kyrios Sabaoth, the warrior-king of Israel commanding multitudes of (angelic) armies.

As in the hymns quoted above, this type of exegesis of Old Testament passages expresses an identification of the Lord of Christian worship—Jesus Christ—with the Lord of patriarchs and prophets, the Lord God of Israel.

Whether because of the obvious difficulty of producing a Trinitarian visual representation or because of a certain theological conservatism, Byzantine iconography seems never to have moved beyond the Christological interpretation.

The element that lent itself most naturally to a liturgical and hymnographic usage is the angelic chant, “holy, holy, holy is the Lord Sabaoth!” Indeed, both rabbinic and Christian exegesis (as well as liturgical texts at Qumran and Gnostic texts) understood it as a human appropriation of the angelic pattern of worship revealed in Isa 6. The oldest Christian interpretation of “holy, holy, holy” was, in Syria-Palestine, Christological. Liturgically, the Christological understanding of the Trisagion is echoed in the exclamation “one is holy, one is Lord: Jesus Christ to the glory of God the Father.” By contrast, Alexandria inherited the tradition of Philo, Ascension of Isaiah, and Origen. It is clear that the terrible clashes between Chalcedonians and anti-Chalcedonians with respect to the addition “crucified for us” to the Trisagion were actually bringing out an older disagreement in the exegesis of Isa 6. Kretschmar notes that “when the trinitarian interpretation of the Sanctus starts to enter Syria—with Theodore of Mopsuestia—the ‘one is holy’ is immediately expanded into ‘one is holy: the Father; one is holy: the Son; one is holy: the Spirit.’”

The analysis of the Trinitarian interpretation of Isa 6 in early Christianity requires, I believe, a further distinction. The Eucharistic prayer of Sarapion of Thmuis and the Anaphoras in the Apostolic Constitutions and in the Liturgy of Saint Mark seem to come closer to the Ascension of Isaiah and Irenaeus: God the Father is worshipped by all ranks of heavenly powers, culminating with the worship offered by the Son and Spirit. The latter seem to be identified with the two living beings of Hab 3:2 LXX, as well as with the cherubim/seraphim of Isaiah and Ezekiel. By contrast, in the

40. Eucharistic Prayer of Bishop Sarapion. Greek text and English translation in Maxwell E. Johnson, The Prayers of Sarapion of Thmuis: A Literary, Liturgical, and Theological Analysis (Rome: PIO, 1995), 46-47: “Let the Lord Jesus speak in us and let holy Spirit also hymn you through us. For you are above all rule and authority and power and dominion and every name being named, not only in this age but also in the coming one. Beside you stand a thousand thousands [Dan 7:10] and myriad myriads of angels, archangels, thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers. Beside you stand the two most-honored six-winged seraphim (τὰ δύο τιμιώτατα σεραφεῖμ). With two wings they cover the face, and with two the feet, and with two they fly; sanctifying. With them receive also our sanctification as we say: Holy, holy, holy, Lord of Sabaoth; heaven and earth are full of your glory.” Liturgy of Saint Mark: “Before you stand thousands and ten thousand times ten thousand armies of holy angels
Byzantine Liturgy of John Chrysostom, worship is given by the angels, culminating with the cherubim/seraphim, to God as Trinity.41

JESUS AS THE LORD OF ISAIAH 6: WHAT KIND OF EXEGESIS?

From the materials presented in the foregoing pages, it seems clear that two broad exegetical avenues can be distinguished in the Christian reception of Isa 6. 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.42 This is the earliest Christian interpretation of Isa 6, 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 of the narrative—the enthroned Lord and the two seraphim—a symbolic image of the Trinity.

My concern in this article 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 does not afford a grasp of how the text came to be read in that way. It is my contention the current scholarly concepts fail to adequately grasp the distinctiveness of this exegesis and that they thereby obscure

and archangels. Before you stand your two most honorable creatures (τα δύο τιμιώτατα σου ζώα), the many-eyed Cherubim and the six-winged Seraphim (τα πολυόμματα Χερουβεὶμ καὶ τα ἑξαπτέρυγα Σεραφεὶμ; with to they cover their feet, etc.” Apostolic Constitutions 8.12.27 (SC 336:192): “You are worshipped by every bodiless and holy order; you are worshipped by the Paraclete; but especially your holy servant Jesus the Christ—our Lord and God, your angel and the captain of your host, and the eternal and unending high priest: the well-ordered hosts of angels and archangels worship you . . . the cherubim and the six-winged seraphim . . . together with thousand thousands of archangels, and ten thousand times ten thousand of angels, incessantly, and with constant and loud voices they cry; and let all the people say with them: Holy, holy, holy, etc.”

41. Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom: “You are God, ineffable, incomprehensible, invisible, inconceivable, ever existing, eternally the same; you and your only-begotten Son and your Holy Spirit. . . . We thank you also for this liturgy which you have been pleased to accept from our hands, though there stand around you thousands of Archangels and tens of thousands of Angels, the Cherubim and the Seraphim, six-winged and many-eyed (τα χερουβεὶμ καὶ τα σεραφεὶμ, ἑξαπτέρυγα, πολυόμματα), soaring aloft upon their wings, (aloud) singing, crying, shouting the triumphal hymn, and saying: Holy, holy, holy, etc.”

the importance of the earliest and most enduring Christian exegesis of Old Testament theophanies.

Current State of Affairs

In his study of 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 Isa 6 as Christophany. Once the conceptual equipment of “allegory vs. typology” and “Alexandrian vs. Antiochian” is discarded, the blind spot disappears, and a scholar such as Jörg Ulrich is able to discern the theophanic dimension of Eusebius’s exegesis—that is, his consistent and fully traditional interpretation of theophanies as manifestations of the Logos. What Ulrich does not provide, however, is a name for this particular type of exegesis.

Since there is significant overlap in the reception history of the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, it would certainly be informative to also consult Angela Christman’s study of the reception history of Ezek 1, noted earlier. Despite her very clear distinction between three strands of interpretation—“typological,” “allegorical,” and “moral”—an unfortunate confusion governs the understanding of theophanies. Christman uses the term “typology” to designate both “the Ezekiel-Christ typology” and the identification of the anthropomorphic figure on the throne with Christ, on the grounds that both readings assume that “the entire Bible is Christ.” Evidently, the overarching category of “typology” obscures the


45. “With Origen and the Alexandrians, Eusebius shares a strong sense of the unity of the scriptures—Isaiah as an apostle and evangelist. . . . Eusebius shared the Antiochene orientation to the historical and the empirical, and so the literal sense of Scripture. . . . In a word, Eusebius showed his Alexandrian breeding by his notion of how the prophets understood revelation, and his affinity with Antioch by his grasp of what they understood as revelation” (Hollerich, Eusebius of Caesarea’s Commentary on Isaiah, 100–101).


47. The “Ezekiel-Christ typology” is from Origen, HomEzech 1.4.1 (SC 352:58): Inasmuch as he is called “son of man” and is preaching in captivity, “[Ezekiel] typus erat Christi”;
distinction between understanding Jesus as the very rider of the *merkavah* and the understanding of Ezekiel as “type” of Jesus. This observation applies perfectly to the Christological reading of Isa 6.

Studies of the iconography of Isa 6 exhibit the same problem. For Kessler the vision of Isaiah in Vat. Gr. 699, fol. 72 v is a “typical” example of a visionary scene that “make typologies explicit.” As a matter of fact, Kessler uses “type,” “typology,” and “typological” throughout his article to designate “the most vivid pictorialization of the relationship between the Old Testament and the New” in the ninth-century manuscript of the Christian Topography. This refers to the depiction of Jesus in the vision of Isaiah, just as to “the annual blood sacrifice,” which is “the type of Jesus’ passion, or to the relationship between the world and the Mosaic tabernacle.” Taking all these cases as instances of the same exegetical phenomenon—“typology”—and its iconographic expression, Kessler concludes with “the analogy between artistic process and typology.” Similarly, for Glenn Peers “Christ himself is depicted in the illustration, showing the Christian belief in the prefiguring nature of this Old Testament vision”; this means, more specifically, that “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.”

A Critique of the Status Quaestionis

The terms “typology” and “typological” do not account satisfactorily for the straightforward identification of Jesus Christ with the “Lord” of the

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Origen, *Selecta in Ezechielum* 1 (PG 13:768 D): Ὁ Ἰεζεκιὴλ τύπον φέρει τοῦ Χριστοῦ κατὰ πολλά. Christman notes (What Did Ezekiel See?, 24) that “Origen is the first to articulate this typology.” The identification of the anthropomorphic figure on the throne with Christ would be “another reading of the vision that is typological” (Christman, What Did Ezekiel See?, 29 and 33).


biblical narrative, affirmed by so many early Christian writers. It is one thing to say that the three characters in Isa 6 (the enthroned Lord and the two seraphim) provide an image of Philo’s triad (ὁ ὄν—θεός—κύριος) or of the Christian Holy Trinity, it is another to say that the anthropomorphism of Isa 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 a need for better distinctions that would sharpen our focus.

A first distinction should be drawn between interpretations, such as Philo’s, in which the connection between sign and signified does not presuppose and require a link between Old Testament and New Testament, and the two other interpretations, for which such a link is fundamental. Older scholarship (most famously Jean Daniélou) tried to bring out this distinction through a sharp opposition between “allegory” and “typology.” Even if most scholars today reject the opposition between the terms 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. Some scholars do, indeed, propose other terms for the same distinction. More important, however, is another distinction, this one drawn between the interpretation of Isa 6 as either “foreshadowing” the Incarnation or presenting a symbolic image of the Trinity, on the one hand, and the interpretation of Isa 6 as a Christophany, on the other. 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.

In short, the terms “typology” and “typological” do not account satisfactorily for the Christological interpretation of Isa 6 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 and met with undeserved neglect, A. T. Hanson pointed out the distinction between what he called “real presence,” on the one hand, and “typology,” on the other, and argued that the former is typical of New Testament authors. His views were echoed four decades later in Charles Gieschen’s essay on “the real presence of the Son before Christ” in pre-Nicene writers. In a separate but related analysis of liturgical symbolism, Alexander Schmemann made very similar observations.

55. An excellent study of this problem by Peter Martens 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). Peter Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen,” Journal of Early Christian Studies 16 (2008): 283–317.

56. Dawson uses “figural” and “figurative,” and ranges Origen’s terms typos, hyponoia, and allegoria under the former. David Dawson, Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). Lewis Ayres distinguishes between grammatical and figurative readings. Acknowledging Dawson’s opposition of figural and figurative (he describes the latter as “an exegesis that begins with the plain text but loses the link with it” [38]), Ayres writes: “I prefer to speak more simply of figural and bad figural exegesis”—whereas the decision about what makes “good” or “bad” figural reading “is established within a tradition’s development and internal argument” (38). Lewis Ayres, Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 34–38.

59. 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), nor analogically (this ‘illustrates’ that), nor 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.
Today, Larry Hurtado provides the clearest distinction among three exegetical approaches to the Old Testament characteristic of “second-century proto-orthodox Christians” (such as 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.”

Jesus as the Kyrios of Isaiah 6: “Rewritten Bible,” “Performative Exegesis,” and the Mind of the Church

Given the ideological freight of terms like “symbolic,” “typological,” or “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 “rewritten Bible” literature. This term, coined by Geza Vermes in 1961, has since been used by scholars dealing mainly with Second Temple Pseudepigrapha such as the Book of the Watchers (in 1 Enoch), the Book of Jubilees, the Genesis Apocryphon, the Targums, Josephus’s Jewish Antiquities, or Pseudo-Philo’s Liber antiquitatum biblicarum. I submit that the Christological and “epiphanic” reading of Isa 6 documented above could be viewed as a form of “rewritten Bible.” Indeed, numerous early Christian texts (and images) identify the central character of the passage—“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 that the Book of Jubilees has Moses receive the law from the Angel of the Presence.

Vermes himself seems to have used “rewritten Bible” ambiguously, both for a literary genre and for an exegetical strategy, and notable scholars have since then chosen one direction or the other. My view is that, if


60. Larry Hurtado, Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 565–66.


63. I am indebted here to the astute and richly documented article by Anders Klostergaard Petersen, “Rewritten Bible as a Borderline Phenomenon—Genre, Textual Strategy, or Canonical Anachronism?,” in Flores Florentino: Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Early Jewish Studies,
it is to be used for the Christian texts discussed above—some of which are
doctrinal treatises, others exegetical writings, and others hymnographic
and iconographic productions—the phrase can only refer to an exegetical
strategy, displayed in works belonging to a variety of genres and serving
a variety of polemical, doctrinal, liturgical, and artistic aims.

There is much at stake for Christian theology in such an interpretation
of the Old Testament. Affirming that the early Christian interpretation of
Isaiah 6 as a “christophany” follows the logic of “rewritten Bible” literature
allows us also to view the theological claims of Christian exegetes as related
to those of the various Second Temple groups involved in the production
of such literature. Specifically, while scholars view the process of “rewrit-
ing” as an ongoing exegetical engagement with the text, driven by specific
theological and polemical agendas, the ancient authors would claim, by
contrast, the full reality—not simply a literary, exegetical reality—of the
narration.64 “Rewritten Bible” implies a strong claim to being the result of
“charismatic exegesis”: not one or the other type of biblical interpretation,
classifiable on the basis of its distinctive form, content, or function; but, as
David Aune put it, “essentially a hermeneutical ideology that provides divine
legitimation for a particular understanding of a sacred text.”65

In “epiphanic” readings of the sacred text, and especially in homiletic-
and hymnographic texts, the exegesis proposed to the hearers or read-
ers claimed to have been prompted by a prophetic-charismatic experience
mediated by liturgical performance.66 Thus, by reading or hearing the
biblical text of Isaiah 6 in conjunction with chanting about the prophet’s
encounter with Christ, contemplating the scene in icons and manuscript
illuminations, and partaking of the “live coal” in the Eucharist, Christians
were acknowledging and renewing their participation in the spiritual
“now” of the Body of Christ, as contemporaries of the prophet and his
saintly exegetes. It is this kind of environment that the Old Testament (in
our case, Isaiah 6) is “re-read” and appropriated as Christian Scripture.

in Honour of Florentino García Martínez, ed. Anthony Hiljorst, Emile Puech, and End Eibert
64. For polemical agendas of “rewritten Bible” literature in the Enochic tradition, see
Andrei Orlov, The Enoch-Metatron Tradition (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2005); for the comple-
mentarity of the various currents of Mosaic traditions, see Hindy Najman, Seconding Sinai:
The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism (Boston: Brill, 2003). For a
convincing argument regarding “religious experience” as a factor in the composition of
apocalyptic writings, see Michael Stone Ancient Judaism: New Visions and Views (Grand
Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), ch. 4: “Visions and Pseudepigraphy” (90-121); for the same
in early Christianity, Larry Hurtado, “Religious Experience and Religious Innovation in the
65. David E. Aune, “Charismatic Exegesis in Early Judaism and Early Christianity,” in
The Pseudepigrapha and Early Biblical Interpretation (ed. James H. Charlesworth and Craig A.
Evans; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993) 126-150, at 130.
66. I have discussed this in some detail in Bucur, “Exegesis and Intertextuality in Anasta-
“The temple myth come alive”: Levenson’s apt phrase about Isaiah’s vision and its relation to Temple worship, also reveals something about the mind of the Church at worship. John Chrysostom writes (On the Seraphim 6.3) expressed it as follows: “that altar is a type and image of this altar, that fire of this spiritual fire. But the seraphim did not dare touch it with their hands, but only with the tongs; you take it in your hands.” Indeed, by using the Trisagion hymn in their worship, early Christians, like their Jewish predecessors and contemporaries, claim to join in the heavenly worship and to praise God with words “borrowed” from the angels a number of early Christian writers—Ephrem of Nisibis, Theodore of Mopsuestia, Cyril of Alexandria, as well as the Liturgy of Saint James—identify “the fiery coal” with the Eucharist; the Greek term for the Eucharistic spoon is λαβίς, “tongs”—obviously alluding to Isa 6:7;67 and the Byzantine Liturgies prescribe that, upon partaking from the chalice, the priest exclaims, echoing the words of the seraph, “behold this has touched my lips, and shall purge away all my sins!” In short, early Christians viewed liturgy as a “coming alive” and “re-enactment” of Isaiah’s vision, with the Eucharistic mystery as a fuller, truer, and saving counterpart to the prophet’s visionary reception of the living coal, the priests acting the part of the seraph—hence, within the same interpretive framework, being greater than Isaiah—and the prophetic calling no longer reserved to rare individuals, but issued to all.

CONCLUSIONS

The rich reception history of Isa 6 in early Christianity is marked by a transition from a Christological interpretation to a Trinitarian one and, simultaneously, by a gradual move from an “epiphanic” reading of the text as a record of direct divine presence and action to a more speculative understanding of the text as signifying certain theological and spiritual realities. While the latter became dominant in doctrinal, polemical, and exegetical writings after the fourth century, hymnography and iconography generally continued to prefer the Christological interpretation.

The current scholarly concepts fail to distinguish properly between the types of exegesis involved in each of these cases. My concern in this article has been especially with one of the ways in which early Christians read Isa 6—namely, the straightforward identification of the prophet’s kyrios “on a high and lofty throne” with the kyrios Jesus exalted in Christian worship. Since early Christian writers did not feel the need for a spe-

67. Even though the communion spoon came into use towards the end of the first millennium, its designation as “tongs” presupposes the robust exegetical tradition which views the coal as a foreshadowing of the Eucharist.
cial term to describe their identification of the Old Testament “Lord” with Christ, one may wonder why it would be necessary or useful to introduce yet another scholarly label. The need arises, I believe, from the fact that scholarship has generally ignored this most fundamental theological assumption of a very large strand of early Christian literature and has often conflated and confused it with other exegetical phenomena. This is not a trivial issue: without recognizing the phenomenon and crafting an appropriate concept to designate it (as with all scholarly concepts, of course, assuming the risk of obscuring certain other elements), we fail to grasp an important factor in the development of early Christian theology.

I have argued that, to single out and name the identification of Jesus as the “Lord” of Isa 6, a distinction should be made within what is usually called “typological” or “figural” exegesis. An appropriate term to describe this strand of Christian exegesis of Isa 6 has yet to be found. I suggest, however, that the phrase “rewritten Bible,” current in the study of Second Temple Pseudepigrapha, may advance scholarship by refining our perception of the phenomenon under discussion, so as allow a closer integration between biblical exegesis, visionary experience, and liturgical expression.