Sinai, Zion, and Tabor:
An Entry into the Christian Bible

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Abstract — Building on the insights of Jon Levenson's work, Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible, this article endeavors to show that a similar approach, which could be labeled “theophanic,” has traditionally guided the Christian—perhaps especially the Eastern Orthodox—entry into the Bible. Relating the Sinai theophany and the transfiguration on Tabor was crucially important for early Christian theology. It underlay their appropriation of the Scriptures of Israel as “OT,” it lent itself to polemical use against dualism and monarchianism, and it was eventually absorbed into Byzantine festal hymnography and thereby into the mainstream of theology as performed and experienced in liturgy. Similar interpretive strategies are at work in early Christian works and later Byzantine festal hymns and icons that take up theophanies centering on God's throne in Zion. After discussing hymns and icons dealing with Sinai, Zion, and Tabor, I argue that this type of exegesis is difficult to frame within the categories commonly used to describe patristic exegesis and that a more suitable category would be that of “rewritten Bible,” current among scholars of the OT pseudepigrapha. I then examine the relationship between the Christology emerging from the hymns under discussion and the normative conciliar Christology. Finally, I sketch a few ways in which today’s readers can benefit, both exegetically and theologically, from Byzantine hymnographic and iconographic exegesis.

Key Words — theophany, Byzantine, hymnography, transfiguration, Septuagint, rewritten Bible, hymnographic exegesis, allegory, typology

Jon Levenson’s beautiful and influential book Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible has taught us much about how to enter Scripture in a manner that does justice to the Jewish tradition. In the article to follow, I endeavor to show that a similar approach, which I would label “theophanic,”

also allows Christian readers to rediscover forgotten elements of their own tradition. A “theophanic” approach such as this has traditionally guided the Orthodox East’s entry into the Bible.

SINAI AND TABOR

It is generally acknowledged that the scriptural theme of the transfiguration is viewed as crucially important in the Christian East, irresistibly commanding the gaze of the iconographer, the ready pen of the hymnographer, the amazing tales of the hagiographer, and constituting, one can say, the focal point of Orthodoxy’s “mystical theology.” This point is made convincingly by John McGuckin and, more recently, by Andreas Andreopoulos, whose studies are nearly exhaustive in illustrating the rich reception history that the transfiguration account has had in patristic literature, of the East and West. McGuckin distinguishes three strands of interpretation: transfiguration as theophany, transfiguration as a soteriological event, and transfiguration as epiphany of the New Age. He finds that the great themes in the history of patristic interpretation are the Christological one (“the vision of Christ’s radiance as a manifestation of his own essential deity”), the soteriological one (more specifically, transfiguration’s depiction of the human being deified in via), and the eschatological one (transfiguration as epiphany of the resurrection glory in patria).

Less explored in scholarship, and somewhat muted in the studies of McGuckin and Andreopoulos, is a strand in the reception history of the Synoptic transfiguration accounts that views the latter not simply as a vision that the disciples have of Christ but as a vision of Christ granted Moses and Elijah, witnessed by the disciples. Early representatives of this approach are Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen, who link Tabor with Sinai, specifically with Exod 33:20. According to the Septuagint, in response to Moses’ request to see God’s glory more intimately (δεῖξόν μοι τὴν σεαυτοῦ δόξαν, Exod 33:18), God states (Exod 33:19) that he will indeed manifest himself to Moses—by parading in his glory (παρελεύσομαι πρότερός σου τῇ δόξῃ μου) and proclaiming the divine name (κύριος) before the prophet, and showing him his back parts (τὰ ὀπίσω μου)—but insists on the impossibility of a more com-

2. For a more extensive treatment of this topic, see my “Matt 17:1–9 as a Vision of a Vision: A Neglected Strand in the Patristic Reception of the Transfiguration Account,” *Neotestamentica* 44 (forthcoming).


5. Ibid., 125, 117, 122.
plete revelation: οὐ δυνήσῃ ἰδεῖν μου τὸ πρόσωπον; τὸ δὲ πρόσωπόν μου οὐκ ὄφθησεται σοι (Exod 33:20, 23).⁶

Some early Christians interpreted this to mean that the vision face to face, refused to Moses, was postponed for a later time. Irenaeus of Lyon, for instance, writes:

[Exodus 33:20–22] signifies two things, namely that it is impossible for man to see God, and that man will see Him in the latter times on the summit of rock, thanks to God’s wisdom: that is in His coming as man. And it is for this reason that He conferred with him face to face on the top of the mountain [at transfiguration], while Elijah was also present (as the Gospel relates), thus fulfilling in the end the ancient promise (restituens in fine pristinam repromissionem, ἀποκαταστήσας ἐν τῷ τέλει τὴν πρότεραν ἐπαγγελίαν).⁷

Evidently, Tabor “fulfils the ancient promise” only on the assumption that the Christ on Tabor is the very one who summoned Moses on Sinai. The same holds true for Elijah, of course, whose theophanic experience on Horeb/Sinai Irenaeus mentions immediately after that of Moses.⁸

For Tertullian also, the “face of God” that Moses desires to see is, in fact, the Son. Indeed, it is the Son of God who “was visible before the days of his flesh,” and “appeared to the prophets and the patriarchs, as also to Moses indeed himself.”⁹ To be sure, Tertullian explains, the Son’s apparitions to patriarchs and prophets, including Moses, were always somewhat veiled and imperfect—in speculo et aeignumate et visione et somnio. The reason is that they occurred “according to the faculties of men, not in accordance with the full glory of the Godhead (secundum bonomin capacitates, non secundum plenitudinem divinitatis)” since “the Son . . . considered in himself (suo nomine), is invisible, in that He is God and the Word and Spirit of God.”¹⁰

A more perfect vision of the face of God—that is, of the Son—than was available to Moses on Sinai (or for Isaiah and Ezekiel in Zion or its heavenly representation) was reserved for Tabor:

He reserves to some future time (servat . . . in futurum) his presence and speech face to face with Moses—for this was afterwards fulfilled (adimpletum est) in the retirement of the mount [of transfiguration], as we read in the Gospel, “Moses appeared, talking with him.”¹¹

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6. I am using the LXX because the patristic writers I will discuss were citing the Greek Bible.
8. Ibid., 4.20.10–11.
10. Ibid., 14.2, 14.6, 14.7.
11. Ibid., 14.7.
Elsewhere, Tertullian offers the same interpretation: Exod 33 is a promise given on Sinai, which is fulfilled on Tabor, when Moses finally contemplates the face of God, the Son, in the glory of the transfiguration. Origen echoes this view—only briefly, however, before moving on to other, “more mystical,” considerations.

This reading of Sinai and Tabor should not be treated condescendingly, as naive early Christian exegesis made obsolete by Augustine’s bold move to reinterpret theophanies as created, evanescent manifestations. Regardless of the theological evaluation of Augustine on this point—and here we have a typical East-West disagreement—it is important to stress that the pre-Augustinian view, which I have described so far, continues in orations and hymns of the transfiguration. Two examples of this are the sermons on the transfiguration by Pseudo-Leo of Rome and Pseudo-Ephrem. The former have already been discussed by McGuckin. As for Pseudo-Ephrem’s “Sermon on the transfiguration,” one reads there that Moses and Elijah

12. Idem, Against Marcion 4.22.14–15:
And if we call to mind the promise (commemoremur promotionis) to Moses, here it will be seen fulfilled. For when Moses asked to have sight of the Lord, and said, If now I have found grace in thy sight, manifest thyself to me, that I may knowledgeably see thee [Exod 33:13] what he looked for was that aspect in which he was to live his human life, which as a prophet he was aware of—but God’s face, he had already been told, no man shall see and live—and God answered, This word also with which thou hast spoken, I will do it for thee [Exod 33:20]. And again Moses said, Shew me thy glory: and the Lord answered, concerning the future, as before, I will go before thee in my glory [Exod 33:18–19] and what follows. And at the end, And thou shalt see then my later parts [Exod 33:23] not meaning his loins or the calves of his legs, but the glory he had asked to see, though it was to be revealed to him in later times. In this glory he had promised to be visible to him face to face, when he said to Aaron, And if there shall be a prophet among you, I shall be known to him in a vision, and shall speak to him in a vision, not as to Moses: to him I shall speak mouth to mouth, in full appearance, the full appearance of that manhood which he was to take upon him, and not in an enigma [Num 12:6–8]. (Ernest Evans, ed. and trans., Tertullian: Against Marcion [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972], 384–85)

13. Origen, Commentary on Matthew 12.43: “But consider whether you could also say this about these details of the text, that the disciples had understood that the Son of God had been speaking with Moses and [realized] that it was he who had said, ‘Man shall not see my face and live.’”


16. For the Greek text, see Οσίου Ἐφραίμ τοῦ Σύρου Ἐργα (ed. K. G. Phrantzolas; 7 vols; Thessaloniki: Το Περιβόλι της Παναγιάς, 1998), 7:13–30. An English translation by Ephrem Lash is available online at www.anastasis.org.uk/on_the_transfiguration.htm (accessed February 5, 2010). Lash notes, “The numbering of the sections is my own, for ease of reference. It is clear that the present form of the text cannot go back to the fourth century. Sections 13, 16 and 17 use the technical language of Chalcedon in 451 and the long section 15 is also redolent...
“rejoiced when they saw his humanity, which they had not known,” just as “the apostles also rejoiced when they saw the glory of his divinity, which they had not known.”17 This juxtaposition assumes that the Lord who revealed himself to Moses and Elijah on Sinai is the same Lord who summoned Peter, James, and John to join him on Tabor. In unambiguous terms, “on it [the mountain] Jesus united the two covenants . . . and made known to us that he is the giver of the two.” Pseudo-Ephrem then expands on the coming together of the prophets and apostles:

They looked to one another: the prophets to the apostles and the apostles to the prophets. There the authors of the Old Covenant saw the authors of the new. Holy Moses saw Simon the sanctified; the steward of the Father saw the administrator of the Son. The former divided the sea for the people to walk in the middle of the waves; the latter raised a tent for the building of the Church. The virgin of the Old Covenant saw the virgin of the New (Elias and John); the one who mounted on the chariot of fire and the one who leaned on the breast of the flame [John 13:25; 21:20].18

Echoes of this passage can be detected in John of Damascus’s oration on the transfiguration. The Damascene depicts Peter as learning on Tabor that the ancient revelation on Sinai, I am He-Who-Is, coincides with his own confession, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God:

Today, the great prince of the New Covenant [Peter], who clearly proclaimed that Christ was the Son of the living God, saw the leader of the Old Covenant [Moses] standing beside Him [Christ] who set the law of both; and he gave a piercing cry: “This is He-Who-Is, who raised me up as prophet and sent me out as a man and a prince of the new people.”19

This point—Christ “setting the law of both covenants” and being both the one who revealed himself to Moses as “He-Who-Is” and the one confessed by Peter as Messiah and Son of God—is further developed by the Damascene:

You were seen by Moses on the mountain of the Law and again on Tabor; formerly in the darkness but now in the unapproachable light of godhead.20

17. Ἐργα 7:18–19 (= §9 in Lash’s translation).
18. Ibid., 7:19 (= §9 in Lash’s translation).
He who once spoke through symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, “I am He who is” [Exod 3:14] was transfigured today upon Mount Tabor before the disciples.21

This cannot be a marginal strand of interpretation. The passages I have just quoted, penned by Cosmas of Maiuma and John Damascene, soon became part of the Byzantine Church’s festal hymnography. None of the Fathers has been read so extensively and with such unconditional acceptance as these hymns, which have been (and continue to be) chanted, listened to, and called to mind by believers from almost all times and places. In fact, the Latin “O Antiphons” of Advent and the 9th-century hymn Veni Immanuel are part of the same exegetical tradition.22

It is now clear that, for an important segment of patristic exegesis, the Transfiguration is not only a vision that the disciples have of Christ, but, so to speak, a vision of a vision—a vision granted to Moses and Elijah, witnessed to by the disciples—and that Moses and Elijah appear on Tabor, beholding Jesus, because they have gazed upon him before on Sinai. In fact, the exegetical connection between Sinai and Tabor is also reflected in the readings assigned for the Feast of Transfiguration: the texts selected to explicate Christ’s appearance on Tabor are Exod 24 (the anthropomorphic appearance of the Lord to the 70 elders on Sinai), Exod 33 (“the promise”), and 3 Rgns/1 Kgs 19 (Elijah at Horeb).

This Christological reading of the divine manifestation on Sinai was absorbed into Byzantine festal hymnography, thus becoming widespread and theologically normative. The hymnography of the presentation, for instance, is replete with it, stating that it is the very Lawgiver who thundered on Sinai that is now brought to the temple:

Today Simeon takes in his arms the Lord of Glory whom Moses saw of old in the darkness, when on Mount Sinai he received the tables of the Law.23

21. Great Vespers of Transfiguration, Apostichon (Menaion, 476). Except where indicated, the English translation of the hymns is taken from The Festal Menaion (trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware; London: Faber & Faber, 1969) and The Lenten Triodion (trans. Mother Mary and Kallistos Ware; London: Faber & Faber, 1977), modified only to conform to contemporary use of pronouns and verbs. For biblical references, in cases of divergence between biblical books or between the numbering of chapters or verses in the LXX and the MT, the first abbreviation and number refers to the LXX, the second to the MT.

22. Antiphon for December 18: “Lord and Ruler (Adonai et Dux) of the house of Israel, who appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and gave him the law in Sinai, come to redeem us with an outstretched arm!” Veni Immanuel: Veni, veni Adonai qui populo in Sinai legem dedisti vertice in majestate gloriae, with its well-known English rendering, “O come, O come, Thou Lord of might / who to Thy tribes on Sinai’s height / in ancient times didst give the Law / in cloud, and majesty, and awe.”

23. Presentation of the Lord: Sticheron at the Lity (Menaion, 413).
Receive, O Simeon, Him whom Moses once beheld in darkness, granting the Law on Sinai, and who has now become a babe subject to the Law, yet this is the One who spoke through the law!24

The Ancient of Days, who in times past gave Moses the Law on Sinai, appears this day as a babe. As Maker of the Law, He fulfills the Law, and according to the Law He is brought into the temple.25

The same perspective occurs in the hymns celebrating the baptism of the Lord. The Baptist is petrified, because it is no less than the OT Lord revealed to Moses on Sinai who now condescends to be baptized:

Moses, when he came upon You, displayed the holy reverence that he felt: perceiving that it was Your voice that spoke from the bush, he forthwith turned away his gaze [Exod 3:6]. How then shall I behold You openly? How shall I lay my hand upon You?26

If I baptize You, I shall have as my accusers the mountain that smoked with fire [Exod 19:8], the sea which fled on either side, and this same Jordan which turned back [Ps 113(114):5].27

Aside from its reception into Christian hymnography, the Christological reading of the theophany on Sinai has also had a strong iconographic echo. Examples can be adduced from the 11th-century *Ripoll Bible* (Vat. Bib. Apost., Cod. Lat. 5729, fol. 6 verso) and *Aelfric Paraphrase* (Cotton Ms. Claudius B IV, fol. 105v), the 12th century *Winchester Bible* (fol. 5 recto), and the 13th-century *Palatine Psalter* (Cod. Pal. Gr. 381b, fol. 172 recto). In all these manuscript illuminations, Moses receives the Law from Jesus (see fig. 1).28

**Zion and Tabor**

If, as Levenson says beautifully, “Sinai is the mountain of Israel’s infancy, of the days of Moses, when the nation, as the story has it, was but a few

24. Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at *Lord I have cried* (*Menaion*, 408).
25. Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at the Lity (*Menaion*, 412). See also: “Today He who once gave the Law to Moses on Sinai submits Himself to the ordinances of the Law, in His compassion becoming for our sakes as we are” (Great Vespers of the Presentation: Sticheron at the Lity, *Menaion*, 412); “Today the holy Mother, who is higher than any temple, has come into the temple, disclosing to the world the Maker of the world and Giver of the Law” (Small Vespers of the Presentation: *Glory* Sticheron (*Menaion*, 407)).
27. Ibid.
28. See also the late 6th-century illuminated *Ashburnham Pentateuch* (fol. 76 recto). On the *Ashburnham Pentateuch*, see Dorothy Verkerk, *Early Medieval Bible Illumination and the Ashburnham Pentateuch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The upper register of fol. 76 recto depicts Moses with hands outstretched toward the luminous cloud of glory, inside which a human face is clearly discernable. The accompanying inscription reads “the Lord in the clouds”; Verkerk identifies the Lord with the Father.
generations old,” later on “the traditions of Yhwh’s theophany, his earth-shattering apparition . . . [were] transferred from Sinai to Zion.”29 “The One of Sinai” (Ps 67:9, 18) came to be known as “he who dwells on Mount Zion” (Isa 8:18), because “the Lord chose Zion and desired it as a dwelling place for himself” (Ps 131:13), so that his presence no longer makes Sinai quake and tremble but instead shines forth from Zion (Ps 49:2). In this more mature phase of Israel’s religion, God takes his dwelling first in a tent and then in a temple, which are constructed following the sacred heavenly pattern revealed on Sinai (Exod 25:8, 40; 1 Chr 28:11–13): there, in the holy of holies, he manifests himself enthroned above the mercy seat (Exod 25:22; 2 Rgns/2 Sam 6:2; 4 Rgns/2 Kgs 19:15; 1 Chr 13:6; Pss 79[80]:1; 98[99]:1; Isa 37:16).

29. Levenson, Sinai and Zion, 89, 91.
For the religious imagination of Israel, Sinai and Zion are, fundamentally, the same mountain of theophany, inasmuch as the same Lord manifests himself enthroned on Sinai (Exod 24:10) and, later, in the temple. Long before the advent of Christianity, exegetical and liturgical traditions associated with the celebration of Shavuot were connecting the Sinai theophany with the vision of Ezek 1 (“Zion”) and with the depictions of the bridegroom in the Song of Songs. Briefly put, if the Sinai theophany depicts the giving of the Law (Exod 19) and hints only briefly at the anthropomorphic appearance of the Lawgiver (Exod 24), the throne-visions of Isaiah and, especially, Ezekiel, fill out the picture of God’s humanlike manifestation on the likeness of a throne, while the Song of Songs offers an even more detailed portrayal of the divine king and bridegroom.

The centrality of the connection between Sinai and Tabor in early Christian and later Byzantine exegesis is confirmed by the hymnographic exegesis of the OT theophanies in Zion. Like Jewish tradition, Christian tradition takes Sinai and Zion together: the Lord who descends on Sinai is the same Lord who fills the temple in Jerusalem, whom Isaiah and Ezekiel see enthroned (and the same one is the mysterious lover addressed by the Song of Songs). What is new, or distinctively Christian, is the identity of this “Lord.”

Throne imagery is ancient. Following a general Near Eastern pattern, the Bible depicts the God of Israel as the ruler of a heavenly world: seated on a fiery throne of cherubim in the innermost sanctum of a heavenly temple and attended by thousands upon thousands of angels, who perform their celestial liturgies according to precisely appointed times and rules. The use of throne imagery in the theophanies of Exod 24, Isa 6, and Ezek 1 offered the basis for rich developments in the apocalyptic literature of Second Temple Judaism. The numerous elements of continuity between Jewish apocalyptic speculation about the heavenly temple and the possibility of ascending to join in the angelic worship before the


throne of God, on the one hand, and developments in later Jewish Merkavah mysticism—that is, “mysticism of the chariot throne”—on the other, are quite clear.\(^{33}\) Given that Second Temple Judaism is the common matrix of rabbinic Judaism and Christianity, it is not surprising that throne imagery also looms large in early Christian literature.\(^{34}\) The same applies to Byzantine festal hymns, which proclaim Jesus Christ as the very rider of the *merkavah*:

Be glad, O Bethlehem! . . . for from you comes forth, before the sight of all, the Shepherd who tends Israel, He that is seated upon the cherubim, even Christ.\(^{35}\)

O You who ride on the cherubim and are praised by the seraphim, You have sat, O gracious Lord, like David on a foal, and the children honored You with praise fitting for God.\(^{36}\)

All have taken palms into their hands and spread their garments before Him, knowing that He is our God, to whom the cherubim sing without ceasing: Hosanna in the highest!\(^{37}\)

[How shall He whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is the earth [Isa 66:1], be held in the womb of a woman? He upon whom


\(^{35}\) Second Canon of the Nativity: Ode 3 Sticheron (*Menaion*, 271).

\(^{36}\) Palm Sunday Vespers: Apostichon (*Triodion*, 492).

\(^{37}\) Ibid.
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!38 Christian iconography, naturally, reflects the same view of Christ as the enthroned Lord seen by Isaiah or Ezekiel (see fig. 2).

Habakkuk’s Vision of the Enthroned Christ

Scholars have perhaps not paid enough attention to the connection between the throne-visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah, on the one hand, and the vision of Habakkuk, on the other.39 Things seem to have been quite different in rabbinic and Christian tradition. The Talmud (b. Meg. 31a) considers the vision of Habakkuk and the vision of Ezekiel as equally valid readings for Shavuot—in other words, equally valid visual representations of the Sinai theophany. Similarly, the famous mosaic in the Hosios David church of the Latomos monastery (fifth century), as well as its medieval Serbian copy at the Poganovo monastery (now at the Bulgarian National Museum in Sofia), depict Ezekiel and Habakkuk as visionaries of the same Christ on the merkavah. The vision of the two prophets is replete with details

38. Great Vespers of the Annunciation: Glory Sticheron at Lord I have cried (Menaion, 440).
39. For a more extensive treatment of this topic, see Bogdan C. Bucur and Elijah Mueller, “Gregory Nazianzen’s Exegesis of Hab 3:2 (LXX) and Its Reception: A Lesson from Byzantine Scripture Exegesis,” Pro Ecclesia 19 (forthcoming).
from the prophecy of Ezekiel (e.g., the four creatures bearing the throne, 
Ezek 1:5–21; the rainbow, Ezek 1:28), and even the scroll that Habakkuk 
holds contains a fragment from Ezekiel: “Son of Man, eat this scroll!” 
(Ezek 3:1; see fig. 3).

For readers accustomed to the Hebrew Bible and its translations, it is 
difficult to see how these iconographic representations are justifiable as 
an exegesis of Habakkuk, because there is no throne vision of Habakkuk 
in the Hebrew Bible. The exegetical imagination of the Christian East, 
however, is nourished by the LXX of Hab 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”), which differs from the MT 
(“O Lord, I have heard the report of you, and your work, O Lord, do I
fear. In the midst of the years renew it; in the midst of the years make it
known; in wrath, remember mercy”). This text has had a rich reception 
history. The various interpretations can be grouped into two categories, 
one Christological, the other trinitarian. The Trinitarian reading is es-
poused by Origen and later also by Jerome. Perhaps using older writings,
such as Irenaeus’s *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* and the *Ascen-
sion of Isaiah*, but surely echoing the oral instruction of a Jewish-Christian 
teacher, Origen uses the Habakkuk text in conjunction with the vision 
of Isa 6 (the prophet sees God enthroned and attended by seraphim) and 
Exod 25:17 (the ark of the covenant—God’s throne or footstool—between 
the two cherubim). Thus, for him, God in the midst of the two living be-
ings is the Father between the Son and the Spirit.40

Aside from Origen’s Trinitarian exegesis, later deemed heretical by 
Jerome, most likely because of its subordinationistic connotations,41 the 
main interpretation of Hab 3:2 (LXX) is christological: “God known be-

40. Origen, *First Principles* 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.” Cf. Origen, 
sanctus.” See also Irenaeus, *Epid.* 10 (God is glorified by the Logos and the Spirit, who are
identified with or in charge of “their powers”—the cherubim and seraphim); *Martyrdom and
Ascension of Isaiah* 9 (God is worshiped by the angel of the Logos and the angel of the Holy
Spirit). For a discussion of these passages in conjunction with Origen, see Georg Kretschmar, 
*Studien zur frühchristlichen Trinitätstheologie* (BHT 21; Tübingen: Mohr, 1956), 64–67, 73; Jean
[1958]), 134–40. See also, for connections with Philo, Emmanuel Lanne, “Chérubim et séra-
phim: Essai d’interprétation du chap. X de la *Démonstration* de s. Irénée,” *Recherches de science

41. Jerome, *Epist.* 61.2 (To Vigilantius): “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.”
between the two living beings” is the newborn Jesus between the ox and the
ass (Cyril of Alexandria, Symeon the New Theologian, the Gospel of Pseudo-
Matthew, Eleutherius of Tournai) or the transfigured Christ between Moses
and Elijah (Tertullian, Bede), or Christ crucified between the two thieves
(Hesychius of Jerusalem, Bede) 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)42 or Christ between the OT
and NT (Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, Jerome) or Christ between the
present life and future life (Theodoret). Augustine and Jerome rehearse all
these interpretations.43

42. Eusebius argues that one should read ζωῶν (genitive plural of ζωή, “life”) rather than
ζῶων (genitive plural of ζῶον, “living creature”).

43. Eusebius of Caesarea, Dem. ev. 6.15; Cyril of Jerusalem, Catechesis 12.20; Hesychius,
Scholion on Ode 3, in Commentarius in Odas (Vatroslav Jagic, Supplementum psalterii Bononien-
dύο λῃστάς, τοὺς σταυρωθέντας σὺν αὐτῷ; Cyril of Alexandria, Scholia on the Incarnation of the
Only Begotten 30 (PG 75: 1403; see the translation and note of John McGuckin, Saint Cyril
of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy [Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary
Press, 2004], 325 n. 13); Ps.-Mt. 14; Augustine, Civ. 18.32; Jerome, Commentarius Hab. 2.49 (PL
25:1309CD); Pseudo-Leo of Rome, De Transfiguratione Domini / Sermo 20.4 (PL 54:322C); Eleu-
therius of Tournai, Sermo de Nativitate Domini (PL 65:95B); Symeon the New Theologian, Third
Ethical Discourse (SC 122:407); Bede, In Habacuc (CCSL 119B:383; ET, Sean Connolly, Bede on
Tobot and on the Canticle of Habakkuk [Dublin: Four Courts, 1997], 68). One should also note the
It is this Christological interpretation that is retained in the iconographic tradition (for example, Codex Taphou 14, fol. 9 recto): the risen Christ, luminous, between the two angels. And even though the LXX speaks of the Lord standing between two living beings (Hab 2:1), not enthroned between them, one also finds depictions of Christ surrounded by angels that form a living throne (Cod. Dionysiou 61, fol. 4 recto), or even enthroned on a platform that is upheld by four creatures (Sinai cod. gr. 339, fol. 9 verso; see figs. 4–5). Icons of Habakkuk’s vision such as these could very well pass for depicting Ezekiel, were it not for Gregory Nazianzen, who seems to be explaining to Habakkuk just what it is that his vision signifies. This inclusion of Gregory in the depiction of Habakkuk’s vision owes to a passage in Nazianzen’s Second Paschal Oration. Here is the passage in question:

I will stand upon my watch and mount upon the rock [Hab 2:1], says the venerable Habakkuk; and I will take my stand beside him today, on the authority and observation which was given me of the Spirit; and I will look forth and observe what shall be said to me. 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 [Hab 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! Christ is returned again to himself, let all return! Christ is freed from the tomb, be freed from the bond of sin. The gates of hell are opened, and death

is annihilated, and the old Adam is put aside, and the new is fulfilled.
If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: be all renewed!" 44

We have, in other words, a biblical text—Habakkuk—surrounded by two layers of exegesis: Gregory’s oration and the icon. It is noteworthy that the icon furnishes not only a depiction of the text but also a depiction of what exegesis is about and what it means to be a Christian exegete of OT visions. 45

With Hab 3:2, I return to my initial point of entry into the Bible—the transfiguration—as understood by Tertullian:

44. Gregory of Nazianzus, Or. 45.1.  
45. In fact, there is a further layer of exegesis: Gregory’s homily is taken over by John Damascene in his Paschal Canon (Ode 4): “May the divinely speaking Habakkuk now stand with us in holy vigil, and let him show forth a shining angel, saying with a piercing voice: Today salvation has come to the world, for Christ is risen as almighty!” For a discussion of the way in which Gregory of Nazianzus was appropriated by later hymnography, see the exhaustive study of Peter Karavites, “Gregory Nazianzinos and Byzantine Hymnography,” Journal of Hellenic Studies 113 (1993): 81–98.
We find also in Habakkuk the complete outline of this vision (*habitum visionis istius*), where the Spirit speaks in the person of the apostles (*ex persona apostolorum*) sometime to be, “Lord, I have heard thy hearing and was afraid” (Hab 3:2). What hearing, other than of that voice from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, hear him” (Luke 9:35)? “I considered thy works and was astounded” (Hab 3:2): when else than when Peter saw his glory and “knew not what he said” (Luke 9:33)? “In the midst of two living creatures—Moses and Elijah—thou shalt be known” (Hab 3:2). . . . And once more, Habakkuk again, “His virtue covered the heavens, with that cloud, and his glory will be as the light” (Hab 3:3–4) the light with which even his garments glistened. And if we call to mind the promise to Moses (Exodus 33), here it will be seen fulfilled.46

In short, for Tertullian, Habakkuk’s exclamation, “O Lord, I have heard the report of You and was afraid” (Hab 3:2), is actually uttered *ex persona apostolorum*. Most importantly, the vision of the Lord, in his luminous glory, between the two living beings (Hab 3:2) is a vision of the transfigured Christ between Moses and Elijah.

**Further Notes on the Exegesis of Theophanies**

*Exegesis of Theophanies between “Allegory” and “Typology”*

Byzantine festal hymns, certain strands of Latin hymnography, as well as the iconographic depictions East and West, share a tradition of Christological exegesis of theophanies: the “Lord” on Sinai and Zion—who led Israel out of Egypt, who fed his people in the desert, and gave the Law on Sinai, who later ruled from Zion the Lord and is beheld in visions by Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Habakkuk—is identified as Jesus Christ. What sort of exegesis is this? It is useless to enter into a discussion about “allegory,” “typology,” “typological allegory,” “figural,” figurative”—although it is an interesting one to have, especially with respect to Byzantine hymnography as a whole—because the hymns that I am concerned with simply do not fit any of these categories.47

With respect to one of the transfiguration hymns (*He who once spoke through symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, “I am He who is” [Exod 3:14] was transfigured today upon Mount Tabor before the disciples*), McGuckin notes the following: “Exod 3:14—the revelation in the burning bush at Horeb which in its illuminated radiance is taken as a *type* of Jesus’ radiance on Thabor.”48 Andreopoulos also refers to the connection between Sinai and

Tabor in patristic exegesis as “fulfillment of typology.” In my opinion, this verdict does not do justice to the above-mentioned interpretation of Scripture. In the case of a “type”-“antitype” relation, one would expect the hymns to acknowledge a nonallegorical, non-Christological level of the text (for example, the historical event of Exodus, or the giving of the Law), and then posit a second—Christological—level as the “fulfillment” of the OT “types.” Yet, the hymns discussed in this article do not conceive of the exodus as a “type” or a “foreshadowing” of Christ or the church. Christ is not signified typologically but is straightforwardly identified with the “Lord” or “Angel of the Lord” in the OT narrative.

A more illuminating category would be “rewritten Bible,” a term coined by Geza Vermes in 1961 and widely utilized since then to designate biblical interpretation ranging from rabbinic midrash, back to the Palestinian Targum, Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities*, Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*, and OT pseudopigrapha such as the *Book of the Watchers*, the *Book of Giants*, or *Jubilees*. For Wis 10–11, for instance, the heavenly agent at work in Paradise, in the patriarchal stories, and in the exodus event, was neither an angel nor the Lord himself, but Lady Wisdom. According to other texts, Moses received the Law in the course of a heavenly journey, from the Angel of the Presence (in *Jubilees*), or from Enoch Metatron (3 *En.* 48D). Similarly, in the Qurʾān’s rewriting of the exodus, he received it from Allah (Sura 2.40 ff.). It seems to me that the “logic” of the Christian proclamation in the hymns and icons mentioned in this essay is precisely that of “rewritten Bible”—rewritten, in this case, in Christological key: Moses received the law from Jesus, Israel was led out of Egypt by Jesus, Isaiah and Ezekiel saw Jesus on the merkabah throne.

Exegesis of Theophanies and “Alternative Christology”

The hymns appear to develop a sort of “alternative” Christology. Instead of “defining” Christ in terms of *hypostasis, prosopon, ousia, thelema, energeia*, and so forth—“that extraordinary panoply of polysyllabic Greek abstractions which we meet in the Greek Fathers, and which modern Orthodox theologians, God bless them!, are so anxious to invoke”—the hymns offer a Christological exegesis of theophanies. The ensuing “Yhwh” Christology is coupled with a clear affirmation of his humanity: the glorious OT “Lord” is wrapped in swaddling cloths, suckled like a baby, humili-

ated, slandered, sentenced unjustly, scourged and beaten bloody; and he learns to die the death of fallen Adam.

This Christology is just as ancient, universal, and well “received” in Christianity as the “technical” Christology of the councils. Yet, there is an important distinction to be made between hymnographic and conciliar Christologies. Leaving aside the special category of the “dogmatic hymns,” the hymns discussed in this essay are engaged not in demonstration, clarification, or polemics, but in worship; they do not address the adversaries of faith but express the spiritual intimacy between the Bride and the Bridegroom, constantly recalling their covenant recorded in the Scriptures. The identification of Jesus Christ as the “Lord” of the biblical revelation is, essentially, a Christological proclamation, whose Sitz im Leben is the community’s liturgical self-actualization. In the absence of heresies (which forced the church to express her faith in a more precise and technical language), doxology may very well have been the only Christology.52

The difference between hymnological and conciliar Christology may be understood by analogy with today’s concerns about Christian use of the language. According to Geoffrey Wainwright, “[I]t would be too simplistic to say that we must choose between ‘the language of Canaan’ and ‘the language of CNN.’ Christians may rightly use one ‘language’ for their internal discourse within the Church, and another for their external work in apologetics, evangelism, or dialogue.”53 In early Christianity, the philosophical jargon of the councils—the era’s “language of CNN”—was adopted precisely for the purpose of apologetics, evangelism, or dialogue; at the same time, “the language of Canaan” continued to be used “ad intra.” These two types of language have always coexisted. One finds a perfect illustration of this state of affairs in the persons of Sophronius, patriarch of Jerusalem (560–638), deeply involved in the monothelite controversy but also responsible for part of the Good Friday hymnography, or John of Damascus—hailed both as the author of the Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith and as an inspired hymnographer.

**Conclusions**

This essay has attempted to sketch out “an entry into the Orthodox Christian Bible” by discussing the way in which the Christian East has been reading the theophanies of Sinai, Zion, and Tabor. In my opinion, this approach to the Scriptures remains fertile for exegesis and for Christian theology in general.


To use Dale Allison’s formulation, it is, first of all, a call not to discriminate against our exegetical past. Patristic exegesis often “hits a target that we have missed,” so that if biblical scholars ignore the premoderns it does so at its own expense. Besides, biblical “commentaries should quote the Fathers regularly, because the Fathers often said the right things in ways that have not been surpassed. They constitute a rhetorical treasure.” Exegesis is recognized by its peculiar beauty, as when the disciples on the road to Emmaus remember their hearts burning with delight when they are led to discover Christ in the Scriptures. This is perhaps especially obvious when one considers the hymnographic and iconographic distillate of biblical exegesis.

Revisiting the ancient Christian reading of Sinai, Zion, and Tabor also offers a measuring stick with which to assess today’s state of affairs in Christianity: generally speaking, a theologically shallow or even inept hymnography, Christian worship and art that do not inform or sustain ascetic practice, biblical exegesis devoid of any sense of mystery, and a “spirituality” that is no longer nurtured and controlled by Scripture and liturgy. To overcome this situation, there is a certain mindset, a certain way of “doing theology,” that we can learn from Christian tradition. Just as the Hebrew Bible becomes “Tanak” in rabbinic tradition and is read as “Old Testament” in Christian tradition, so is the whole Christian Bible theologically meaningful only when considered in the stream of its reception history. If theology is, fundamentally, exegesis, and because the hymns and the icons are also theology, it is not too much to say that hymns and icons also perform Scripture exegesis. Exegesis, doctrine, ascetical practice, and liturgical celebration form a hermeneutical circle, in which each of these elements are mutually illumined and deepened. The mutual estrangement between these elements accounts for our sense of surprise when faced with icons and hymns that rewrite the OT in a Christological key.

The exegesis found in hymns and icons provides a wide horizon for ecumenism—namely, the horizon of a theological ecumenicity already given in the hymns. As scholars have often noted, “while churches of diverse confessions have waged the grimmest of battles with one another, the hymns of the churches have always transcended confessional lines, and thus accomplished a ‘concealed ecumenism.’” Aside from the common Scriptures

and the confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God, the common hymnographic tradition provides a specific theological method (doxological theology), a specific Scripture exegesis (Christological exegesis of theophanies), and a specific Christology (YHWH Christology). As long as these hymns are still accepted as Christian tradition (albeit a sterile element of tradition, because it no longer informs Christological doctrine), the main Christian bodies will still have the possibility to overcome their mutual estrangement by theological rapprochement with their own tradition.

Speaking specifically from an Eastern Orthodox point of view, I would argue for a theophanic recentering of the theological enterprise. Here, I am merely echoing Alexander Golitzin, who, in the manifesto of the so-called Theophaneia School, writes the following: “Theophany permeates Orthodox Tradition throughout, informing its dogmatic theology and its liturgy. That Jesus, Mary’s son, is the very One who appeared to Moses and the prophets—this is the consistent witness of the ante-Nicene Fathers, and remains foundational throughout the fourth century trinitarian controversies and the later Christological disputes.”57 Face turned toward the face of Christ in theophany: it is, indeed, in this way that is unveiled the beautiful truth of Scripture, the richness of the Liturgy, the hope “full of glory” of our Christian lives, the foundation and horizon of social *diakonia*. Entering the Bible in this manner provides an entry into the very heart of Christian mystery, as revealed in the course of liturgical worship of the Christ transfigured on Tabor, in expectation of our resurrection with him.