

Clement of Alexandria's Exegesis of Old Testament Theophanies

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***Abstract:** The interpretation of Old Testament theophanies was crucial for early Christianity's theological appropriation of the sacred history of Israel, and figured significantly in the anti-Jewish, anti-dualistic, and anti-monarchian polemics of the second and third centuries. A Christian continuator of Philo's "noetic exegesis," Clement of Alexandria inaugurates an approach to theophanies that is different from that of some of his predecessors and contemporaries, but no less important from a reception-historical perspective, inasmuch as it laid the groundwork for the valorisation of theophanies for Christian spirituality.*

Despite being an understudied topic in biblical or patristic scholarship, the exegesis of Old Testament theophanies is a crucial element in early Christianity's process of theological self-definition. It figured significantly in a catechetical manual such as Irenaeus' *Demonstration*; it contributed significantly to Justin Martyr's articulation of the Christian faith in opposition to contemporary Judaism;¹ it was part of the anti-dualistic arsenal deployed by Irenaeus and Tertullian; it was the crucial argument used by Tertullian and Hippolytus against Monarchians, and later by Eusebius against Marcellus, and by Homoians against the "modalistic" theology of Photinus. The exegesis of theophanic texts such as Genesis 18, 28 and 32, Exodus 3, 19, 24, 33, Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1, or Habakkuk 3:2 LXX was, by the end of the first millennium,

¹ See my article, 'Justin Martyr's Exegesis of Old Testament Theophanies and the Parting of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism,' *Theological Studies* 75 (2014) 34-51.

inextricably linked to Christianity as performed and experienced in liturgy, irresistibly commanding the gaze of the iconographer, the ready pen of the hymnographer, and the amazing tales of the hagiographer. It is no surprise to find, if we fast forward to fourteenth-century Byzantium, that it was yet again the exegesis of biblical theophanies that provided the exegetical infrastructure for the Hesychast controversy. In short, the exegesis of biblical theophanies is an important “ingredient” in the gradual crystallisation of a distinct Christian exegesis, doctrine, liturgy, and spirituality until well into the fifth century and, in the case of hymnography and iconography, until the ninth and the fifteenth century, respectively.

Writing at the end of the second and the beginning of the third century, Clement of Alexandria inaugurates an approach to theophanies that is different from that of some of his predecessors and contemporaries, but no less important from a reception-historical perspective, inasmuch as it laid the groundwork for the valorisation of theophanies for Christian spirituality.

Clement of Alexandria on Theophanies

The overall impression one receives by reading the Alexandrian is that, unlike Justin or Tertullian, who use and reuse the same treasured theophanic passages against Judaism, against dualism, and against monarchianism, Clement's theological heart seems to lie elsewhere.

This is not to say, of course, that Clement is unaware or not committed to the “traditional” – i.e., christological – interpretation of biblical theophanies. In the *Paedagogue*, Book 1, sections 56-61, Clement explicitly identifies the Logos, “our pedagogue, the holy God Jesus” (ὁ δὲ ἡμέτερος παιδαγωγὸς ἅγιος θεὸς Ἰησοῦς) with the “Lord” who appeared to Abraham (Gen 17:1), who appeared to Jacob on top of the ladder and in the nightly struggle (Gen 28; 32), who led Israel out of Egypt (ὁ ἐξαγαγὼν σε ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου) and led the people (ἤγαγεν αὐτοὺς) through the desert, who gave the Law through his servant Moses (Exod 20:2; Deut 32:10-

12),² who enjoined Israel to “fear God” (Deut 6:2), and who spoke to the prophets, in the course of such theophanies as are recorded in Isaiah 6 and Jeremiah 1.³ The difference between the Logos present in Old Testament theophanies as “that hidden angel, Jesus” (ὁ μυστικὸς ἐκεῖνος ἄγγελος Ἰησοῦς), and the incarnate Logos is, quite simply, that the incarnate Logos was born (γεγέννηται; τίκεται).⁴ This theology, which obviously represents the common tradition to which Clement felt bound, is then used, in the very next section (*Paed* 1.8.62.1-74.4) as an argument against “those who believe that the just [God] is not the good [God].”⁵

At first sight, then, Clement appears fully traditional in his approach to theophanies. At closer inspection, however, things are a bit more nuanced.

Theophanies and the Curriculum

Clement of Alexandria’s writings seem to be organised in accordance with principles of intellectual and spiritual formation. Following the pattern established by the *οἰκονομία* of the Logos (*Paed.* 3.1.2.1; *Strom.* 7.9.52.1-2), the Gnostic teacher “follows the Logos in addressing a wide variety of students and in adapting his teaching to the capabilities and the readiness of each one. Like the divine teacher he designs an orderly progression through the sacred curriculum.”⁶ Many scholars believe that the three stages of what Clement calls the “dispensation” (*οἰκονομία*) of

² Clement exploits the lexical connection between *παιδαγωγός, ἐξαγωγών* (Exod 20:2), and *ἤγγεν* (Deut 32:10-12) in the biblical passages.

³ Clement, *Paed.* 1.7.56-57-1.7.60.1 (SC 70, 210, 212, 214, 216).

⁴ Clement, *Paed.* 1.7.59.1 (SC 70, 214, 216).

⁵ Clement, *Paed* 1.8.62.1-74.4 (SC 70, 222-42).

⁶ Judith L. Kovacs, ‘Divine Pedagogy and the Gnostic Teacher According to Clement of Alexandria,’ *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9 (2001): 3-25 at 17, 25. Similarly, Ulrich Neymeyr, *Die christlichen Lehrer im zweiten Jahrhundert: Ihre Lehrtätigkeit, ihr Selbstverständnis und ihre Geschichte* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 64-65; Henny Fiska Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 141, 143; John Behr, *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 133-34.

the Logos – first exhorting (προτρέπων), then training (παιδαγωγῶν), and finally teaching (ἐκδιδασκῶν)⁷ – find their counterpart in Clement's own writings: the *Exhortation*, the *Paedagogue*, and ... something that would correspond to the *Teacher*.⁸ Even though the debate over which writings correspond to the divine Logos as *Teacher* is ongoing in scholarship – the *Stromata* as a whole? the eighth *Stromateus*? the lost *Hypotyposes*, preserved fragmentarily in the *Excerpta*, the *Prophetic Eclogues*, and the *Adumbrationes* – there is general agreement on the fact that the *Stromata*, the *Excerpta* (*Exc.*), the *Prophetic Eclogues* (*EP*), and the *Adumbrationes* (*Adumbr.*) contain a “higher,” more advanced, level of initiation into Christian truth, than the *Exhortation* and the *Paedagogue*.⁹

Later guardians of Orthodoxy perceived this difference in much the same way, for their criticism of Clement's theology grows in direct proportion to the same ascension along his curriculum. The Clementine corpus was judged by Photius of Constantinople to contain a mixture of wheat and tares, with the useful elements dominating in the *Paedagogue*, the *Stromata* already afflicted with “unsound” ideas, and the *Hypotyposes*

⁷ Clement, *Paed.* 1.1.3; 3.12.97.

⁸ For a convenient summary of scholarly proposals, see Bogdan Bucur, ‘The Place of the *Hypotyposes* in the Clementine Corpus: An Apology for “The Other Clement of Alexandria”’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2009): 313-35, and Marco Rizzi, ‘The Literary Problem in Clement of Alexandria: A Reconsideration,’ *Adamantius* 17 (2011): 154-63.

⁹ André Méhat, *Étude sur les “Stromates” de Clément d’Alexandrie* (Paris: Seuil, 1966), 521-22: “si la gnose est essentiellement du domaine de la ‘physique,’ les *Hypotyposes* devaient en regorger, en quoi elles tenaient en grande partie les promesses des *Stromates*”; see also Pierre Nautin, ‘La fin des *Stromates* et les *Hypotyposes* de Clément d’Alexandrie,’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 30 (1976): 268-302, esp. 297-98. Even though Rizzi rejects the threefold partition of Clement's work in favor of a distinction between writings addressed to a general audience (*Protreptic*, *Paedagogue*, *Quis dives*) and “scholarly” works designed to give written expression to his oral teaching (*Stromata*, *Excerpta ex Theodoto*), he retains the conviction that the *Paedagogue* contains a “lower” exposition of Christian doctrine than the *Stromata*. See also Marco Rizzi, ‘The End of *Stromateis* VII and Clement's Literary Project,’ in *The Seventh Book of the Stromateis: Proceedings of the Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria, Olomouc, October 21-23, 2010* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012), 299-314.

replete with “impieties,” “fables,” and “blasphemous nonsense.”¹⁰ This evaluation offers an important insight into the hierarchical organisation of the Clementine writings. Even though Photius reverses the value of the Clementine hierarchy, such that the summit of theology becomes the abyss of heresy, his evaluation lends credence to the scholarly hypothesis that the *Hypotyposes* were designed for advanced readers, and represented, within the program of Clementine works, the highest exposition of the Christian doctrine.

Progression from one level to the next is a matter of biblical exegesis. In *Paed.* 3.12.97 Clement states explicitly: “we need a διδασκαλος for the interpretation (εις τὴν ἐξήγησιν) of those sacred words.” This can be exemplified with another passage from the *Paedagogue*. At one point, while pondering whether Christians should crown themselves with flowers, Clement ventures into what he calls “a mystical meaning” of the issue, and connects the manifestation of the Logos in the burning bush – “the bush is a thorny plant” he explains – with the crown of thorns worn by the incarnate Logos. He then refers to this excursus of mystical exegesis in the following way: “I have departed from the *paedagogic* manner of speech, introducing the *didaskalic* one. I return accordingly to my subject.”¹¹

¹⁰ Photius, *Cod.* 109 (Photius, *Bibliothèque* [ed. and trans. René Henry; 9 vols. Paris: Belles lettres, 1960], 2:80). The Photian evaluation of Clement’s theology has been much discussed in scholarship: Robert P. Casey, ‘Clement and the Two Divine Logoi,’ *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1923): 43-56; Salvatore R. C. Lilla, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Platonism and Gnosticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 199-212; Colin Duckworth and Eric Osborn, ‘Clement of Alexandria’s Hypotyposes: A French Eighteenth-Century Sighting,’ *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 36 (1985): 77-83; M. J. Edwards, ‘Clement of Alexandria and His Doctrine of the Logos,’ *Vigiliae Christianae* 54 (2000): 159-77 at 168-71; Christoph Marksches, “‘Die wunderliche Mär von zwei Logoi’”: Clemens Alexandrinus, Fragment 23 – Zeugnis eines Arius ante Arium oder des arianischen Streits selbst?’, in *Logos: FS Luise Abramowski* (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1993), 193-219. For a detailed overview of scholarly positions, see Oleh Kindiy, *Christos Didaskalos: The Christology of Clement of Alexandria* (Saarbrücken: VDM, 2008), 57-117.

¹¹ Clement, *Paed.* 2.8.76.

Returning to Clement's treatment of theophanies, it is noteworthy that the extensive rehearsal of theophanic texts discussed above occurs in the first book of the *Paedagogue*. This forces us to view Clement's exegesis of theophanies in a more nuanced manner. Concretely, that which Justin, or Irenaeus, or Tertullian seem to have regarded as quite central to Christian doctrine, Clement places in the lower segments of the curriculum, as prolegomena for a higher doctrinal exposition.

Theophanies and the Prophetic Inspiration

A further difficulty resides in the fact that a clearer understanding of theophanies emerges after consulting Clement's exposition on the noetic cosmos, its relation to Israel and the Church, and the "mechanism" of prophetic inspiration.

Clement claims to be committing to writing certain oral traditions inherited from earlier authoritative, even charismatic, teachers, which he refers to as "the elders."¹² It is on the basis of these older sources that

¹² "Now, the elders would not write, because they did not want to undermine their preoccupation with the teaching of the tradition by another, namely writing (it) down; nor did they want to expend on writing the time dedicated to pondering what was to be said. But, convinced perhaps that getting the composition right, and the substance of the teaching are entirely separate matters, they deferred to others naturally endowed (as writers) [...] but that which will be repeatedly consulted by those who have access to it [i.e., the book] is worth even the utmost effort, and is, as it were, the written confirmation of the instruction and of the voice so transmitted to (our) descendants by means of the (written) composition. Speaking in writing, the elders' 'circulating deposit' uses the writer for the purpose of a transmission that leads to the salvation of those who are to read. So, just like a magnet, which repels all substance and only attracts iron, on account of affinity, books also attract only those who are capable of understanding them, even though there are many who engage them [...]. As for jealousy – far be it from the Gnostic! This is actually why he seeks (to determine) whether it be worse to give to the unworthy or not to hand down to the worthy; and out of (so) much love he runs the risk of sharing (knowledge) not only with the person fit (for such teaching), but – as it sometimes happens – also with some unworthy person that entreats him slickly" (*EP* 27.1-7); "Now this work of mine in writing is [...] truly an image and outline of those vigorous and animated discourses which I was privileged to hear, and of blessed and truly remarkable men" (*Strom.* 1.11.1); "The writing

Clement furnishes, especially in *EP* 51-52, *ET* 10, 11, and 27, and some of the *Adumbrationes*, a detailed description of the hierarchical structure of the spiritual universe.¹³ This worldview is presented in a somewhat more veiled manner at *Strom.* 7.2.9.3 (SC 428, 60):

For on one original first principle, which acts according to the [Father's] will, the first, and the second, and the third depend; then at the highest extremity of the visible world is the blessed abode of the angels (*μακαρία ἀγγελοθεσία*); and coming down to us there are ranged, one [level] under the other (*ἄλλοι ὑπ' ἄλλοις*), those who, from One and by One, both are saved and save (*σώζομενοι τε καὶ σώζοντες*).

The description is fleshed out in great detail in *Exc.* 10, 11, and 27 and *EP* 56–57. The “celestial hierarchy” features, in descending order, the Logos, the seven first-created angels (*protocists*), the archangels, and the angels.¹⁴

of these memoranda of mine, I well know, is weak when compared with that spirit, full of grace, which I was privileged to hear. But it will be an image to recall the archetype to him who was struck with the thyrsus” (*Strom.* 1.14.1). Cf. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Eccl. Hist.* 6.13.9 (NPNF): Clement “[i]n his book *On the Passover* he acknowledges that he had been urged by his friends to commit to writing, for posterity, the traditions which he had heard from the ancient presbyters...”

¹³ The fact that Clement’s strictly hierarchical universe goes back to earlier tradition has been demonstrated by older research: Paul Collomp, ‘Une source de Clément d’Alexandrie et des Homélie Pseudo – Clémentines,’ *Revue de philologie de littérature et d’histoire anciennes* 37 (1913): 19-46; W. Bousset, *Jüdisch-christlicher Schulbetrieb in Alexandria und Rom: Literarische Untersuchungen zu Philo und Clemens von Alexandria, Justin und Irenäus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1915). Despite the pertinent critique of some of Bousset’s conclusions (J. Munck, *Untersuchungen über Klemens von Alexandria* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933], 127-204), the thesis of a literary source behind Clement of Alexandria and the Ps.-Clementine *Homilies* remains solidly established (see G. Kretschmar, *Studien zur frühchristlichen Trinitätstheologie* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1956] 68 n. 3); M. Pellegrino-Roncaglia, ‘Pantène et le Didascalée d’Alexandrie: du judéo-christianisme au christianisme hellénistique,’ in R. H. Fischer (ed.), *A Tribute to Arthur Vööbus: Studies in Early Christian Literature and its Environment, Primarily in the Syrian East* (Chicago: The Lutheran School of Theology, 1977), 211-33.

¹⁴ Since God is neither an accident (*συμβεβηκός*), nor described by anything accidental (*Strom.* 5.12.81), he is beyond the hierarchy, and should not be

The orienting principle (ἀρχή) of the hierarchy is the “Face of God.” That “the Face of God” is the Son (*Exc.* 10.6) is nothing new: Clement says as much in *Paed.* 1.57.2., by drawing upon the theophany as “Face of God”/ Εἶδος Θεοῦ/Peniël in Genesis 32:30. What is new is the rich and detailed description of the principles governing the hierarchy: there is a continual propagation of the Face’s light from one level of the hierarchy to the next down to the lowest level of existence; each rank of spiritual entities is “moved” by the one above it, and will, in turn, “move” the immediately lower level. The purpose of the hierarchy consists in the spiritual progress, or “advancement” (προκοπή) of each of the spiritual levels (τάξεις) along the hierarchy. This ascent leads to the progressive transformation of one level into the next, because, as most clearly expressed by Jean Daniélou, “[t]he different degrees of the hierarchy are not immutable natures, but rather degrees of a spiritual ascent, so that it is possible to pass from one order to the next.”¹⁵

(A brief explanation is necessary at this juncture. Although to speak of “hierarchy” in the case of early Jewish or Christian texts is, *stricto sensu*, anachronistic, because this term was coined only in the late fifth century by Ps-Dionysius the Areopagite, “hierarchy” is simply a very convenient designation for the multi-storied cosmos characteristic of apocalyptic writings such as the *Ascension of Isaiah*, *2 Enoch* or the *Epistula Apostolorum*. In fact, the sixth-century scholiast of the Corpus Dionysiacum, John of Scythopolis was well aware of the similarities,

counted as the first of five hierarchical levels. To designate the Father, Clement repeatedly alludes to the famous Platonic “beyond ousia” (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, *Rep.* 509b), which had been already appropriated by Justin (ἐπέκεινα πάσης οὐσίας, *Dial.* 4.1). God is one and beyond the one and the monad (*Paed.* 1.8.71), and beyond cause (τὸ ἐπέκεινα αἰτίου, *Strom.* 7.2.2).

¹⁵ Jean Daniélou, ‘Les traditions secrètes des Apôtres,’ *Eranos Jahrbuch* 31 (1962): 199-215 at 207; similarly, C. Nardi, ‘Note di Clemente Alessandrino al Salmo 18: *EP* 51-63,’ *Vivens homo* 6 (1995): 9-42, esp. 14-15, 19. Nardi notes that Clement does not see an essential difference between humans, angels, and protoplasts (19). For a more detailed discussion, see Collomp, ‘Une source,’ 23-24; Christian Oeyen, *Eine frühchristliche Engelpneumatologie bei Klemens von Alexandrien* (Erweiterter Separatdruck aus der Internationalen Kirchlichen Zeitschrift; Bern, 1966), 8-9, 12.

on this point, between Clement and Ps.-Dionysius, and convinced of their essential harmony.¹⁶ Moreover, the centrality of the hierarchically ordered universe and its denizens was an important “archaising” feature of the Ps.-Dionysian work, subordinated to one of the likely goals of this “New Testament pseudepigraphon” – namely the subversion of similar apocalyptic imagery and associated doctrines among competing groups in Christianity.¹⁷)

The first level of celestial entities contemplating the Face is first mentioned in *Strom.* 6.16.142–143: Clement informs us that “the first-born princes of the angels (πρωτόγονοι ἀγγέλων ἄρχοντες), who have the greatest power, are seven.” Elsewhere they are called “first created (beings),” πρωτόκτιστοι, seven in number but having “their liturgy common

¹⁶ See the discussion in Bogdan Bucur, *Angelomorphic Pneumatology: Clement of Alexandria and Other Early Christian Witnesses* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 32–35. In his scholion on the *Divine Names* 2:9, where the text had mentioned “the premier among the oldest angels” (τῷ πρωτίστῳ τῶν πρεσβυτάτων ἀγγέλων), John of Scythopolis writes: “Note how he says that certain angels are oldest (πρεσβυτάτους ἀγγέλους εἶναι τινας) and that one of them is premier (πρώτον αὐτῶν). The divine John speaks of elder angels in the Apocalypse, and we read in Tobit as well as in the fifth book of Clement’s *Hypotyposes* that the premier angels are seven (ἑπτὰ εἶναι τοὺς πρώτους). He [Dionysius] was wont to call the three highest orders ‘the oldest angels’ (πρεσβυτάτους ἀγγέλους) – Thrones, Seraphim, and Cherubim – as he often signifies in his treatise *The Celestial Hierarchy*.” The Greek text is taken from PG 4, 225, 228; the English translation is, with slight modifications, that of Paul Rorem, John. C. Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 198.

¹⁷ See Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita* (Minneapolis, MN: Cistercian, 2013), 11–13.

and undivided.”¹⁸ Evidently, Clement echoes here Jewish and Christian traditions about the sevenfold highest angelic company.¹⁹

¹⁸ “As for the *protocists*, even while they are distinct in number, and individually defined and circumscribed, the similarity (*ὁμοιότης*) of their deeds nevertheless points to [their] unity, equality and being alike (*ὁμοιότητα*). Among the seven, there has not been given more to the one and less to the other; nor is any of them lacking in advancement; [they] have received perfection from the beginning, at the first [moment of their] coming into being, from God through the Son” (*Exc.* 10.3-4); “And each of the spiritual beings has, on the one hand, both its proper power and its individual dispensation; but, on the other hand, given that the *protocists* have come to be and have received [their] perfection at the same time, their liturgy is common and undivided” (*Exc.* 11.4); “They are those who ‘always look upon the Face of the Father.’ But the Face of the Father is the Son, through whom the Father is known [...] So, when the Lord said: ‘Do not despise any of these little ones. Truly I tell you: their angels continually look upon the Face of the Father,’ [he meant that] as the model is, so will also be the elect, receiving the perfect advancement. For ‘blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God’” (*Exc.* 10.6-11.1).

¹⁹ Passages featuring the group of seven heavenly beings are Ezekiel 9:2-3 (seven angelic beings, of which the seventh is more important than the other six); Tobit 12:15 (seven “holy angels” who have access before the Glory, where they present the prayers of “the saints”); *1 En.* (ch. 20, seven archangels; ch. 90.21, “the seven first snow-white ones”); *Test. Levi* 7.4-8.3 (seven men in white clothing, vesting Levi with the [sevenfold] priestly apparel); *2 En.* 19.6 (seven phoenixes, seven cherubim, and seven seraphim, all singing in unison). The notion of “first created” is important to the author of *Jubilees*: the angels of the presence are said to be circumcised from their creation on the second day, thus possessing a certain perfection and functioning as heavenly models and final destination of the people of Israel (*Jub.* 2.2; 15.27). According to the *Prayer of Joseph*, dated to the first century C.E., Israel is a heavenly being – called indistinctly both *ἄγγελος θεοῦ* and *πνεῦμα ἀρχικόν* – who ranks higher than the seven archangels, as chief captain and first minister before the face of God. See also the discussion of heptadic traditions in Second Temple Judaism in W. F. Smelik, ‘On Mystical Transformation of the Righteous into Light in Judaism,’ *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 26 (1995): 131-41; Rachel Elijor, *The Three Temples: On the Emergence of Jewish Mysticism* (Oxford and Portland: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2005), 77-81. Note also the alternative tradition of four archangels (e.g., *1 En.* 10.1-9); for the relation between the seven-based pattern and the fourfold/twelvefold pattern (four archangels, four faces of the sacred creatures, twelve heavenly gates, months, signs of the zodiac, tribes, etc, see Elijor, *Three Temples*, 57-58). As far as Christian texts are concerned, Revelation mentions seven spirits/angels before the divine throne (Rev 1:4; 3:1; 4:5; 5:6; 8:2), and the *Shepherd of*

These *protoctists* are, on the one hand, numbered with the angels and archangels, their subordinates,²⁰ and equated with “the seven eyes of the Lord” (Zech 3:9; 4:10; Rev 5:6), the “thrones” (Col 1:16), and the “angels ever contemplating the Face of God” (Matt 18:10).²¹ On the other hand, they are bearers of the divine Name, and as such they are called “gods.”²² In relation to Christ, the *protoctists* present the prayers ascending from below (*Exc.* 27.2); in relation to the subordinate levels

Hermas knows of a group of seven consisting of the six “first created ones” (πρώτοι κτισθέντες) who accompany the Son of God as their seventh (*Herm. Vis.* 3.4.1; *Herm. Sim.* 5.5.3). See also the sermon *De centesima, sexagesima, tricesima* (whose dating ranges, among scholars, from late second to the fourth century), which states that God first created seven angelic princes out of fire, and later made one of the seven into his Son. For the text, see R. Reitzenstein, ‘Eine frühchristliche Schrift von den dreierlei Früchten des christlichen Lebens,’ *ZNW* 15 (1914): 60-90 at 82. Among later Jewish writings, *3 En.* 10.2-6 mentions that Metatron is exalted above the “eight great princes” who bear the divine Name. *Pirkê de Rabbi Eliezer*, a work composed around 750 C.E. but incorporating material going back to the Pseudepigrapha, speaks about “the seven angels which were created first,” who are said to minister before God within the Pargod (*The Chapters of Rabbi Eliezer the Great According to the Text of the Manuscript Belonging to Abraham Epstein of Vienna* [tr. G. Friedländer; New York: Hermon 1965], iv, 23).

²⁰ *Hae namque primitivae virtutes ac primo creatae* (rendering πρώτογονοι καὶ πρωτόκτιστοι δυνάμεις), *immobiles existentes secundum substantiam, cum subiectis angelis et archangelis* (*Adumbr.* 1 John 2:1). Stählin’s critical edition introduces a comma between *immobiles* and *existentes*. I prefer to revert to Zahn’s text (*Forschungen* 3:88), which has no comma. Thus, I take *immobiles existentes secundum substantiam* to mean that their substance is immovable according to substance, i.e., does not undergo change.

²¹ *Exc.* 10; *EP* 57.1. For a synthetic presentation of the *protoctists*, see Le Boulluec, “Commentaire” (SC 279, 143); J. Barbel, *Christos Angelos: Die Anschauung von Christus als Bote und Engel in der gelehrten and volkstümlichen Literatur des christlichen Altertums. Zugleich ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Ursprungs und der Fortdauer des Arianismus* (Bonn: Peter Hannstein, 1941), 198-202; Bucur, *Angelomorphic Pneumatology*, 38-41; Monika Recinová, ‘Clement’s Angelological Doctrines: Between Jewish Models and Philosophic-Religious Streams of Late Antiquity,’ in *The Seventh Book of the Stromateis*, 93-112, esp. 101-2.

²² *Strom.* 7.3.13.-1-2; 7.10.56-57; *EP* 56.5, 57.5; *Adumbr.* Jude 5:24. For a detailed analysis of these and other relevant passages, see Bucur, *Angelomorphic Pneumatology*, 42-51.

of reality, they function as “high priests” with regard to the archangels, just as the archangels are “high priests” to the angels (*Exc.* 27.2). In their unceasing contemplation of the Face of God, the *protoclists* represent the model (προκέντημα) of perfected souls (*Exc.* 10.6; 11.1).

The cosmic ladder provides the framework for a discussion of prophetic inspiration, which, in turn, illuminates Clement’s understanding of theophanies. In the hierarchical worldview described above, prophecy occurs when the Logos moves the first rank of the *protoclists*, and this movement is transmitted down the angelic hierarchy to the lowest angelic rank, who then transmits it to the prophet. Through a sort of telescoping effect, the first mover – the Logos – is simultaneously far removed from the effect of prophecy and immediately present. This principle of “mediated immediacy” becomes evident when Clement says that Jude refers the action of a lower angel (“an angel near us”) to a superior angelic entity, the archangel Michael;²³ or when “Moses calls on the power of the angel Michael through an angel near to himself and of the lowest degree (*vicinum sibi et infimum*).” Ultimately, the action of inspiration must be referred to the original mover, the Logos, since Clement also applies the outlined theory of angelic mediation to the prophetic call of Samuel (1 Sam 3), where the text repeatedly mentions the Lord or the voice of the Lord.²⁴

In conclusion, the prophet experiences the presence and message of the Logos in the “in-working” of the proximate angel – once again, an idea that anticipates Ps.-Dionysius.²⁵

²³ “‘When the archangel Michael, disputing with the devil, was arguing over the body of Moses.’ This confirms the *Assumption of Moses*. ‘Michael’ here designates the one who argued with the devil through an angel close to us” (*Adumbr.* Jude 9).

²⁴ *Adumbr.* 1 John 2:1.

²⁵ Clement’s explanation of biblical passages reporting an interaction between humans and a higher angelic being (e.g., the archangel Michael), rather than an angel of “lower” degree, is strikingly similar to the Ps.-Dionysian explanation of Isaiah 6:1, which states that Isaiah was “initiated” by a seraph rather than an angel (*CH* 13.1).

Clement on Theophanies: Philonic Heritage

In what follows, I will use as test-cases those passages in which Clement refers to Genesis 18 and Isaiah 6. Aside from the fact that these passages are some of the most relevant for a study of early Christian exegesis of theophanies, they are also crucially important to Philo, whose writings Clement mined so effectively.

For Philo, Abraham's three visitors are not three distinct entities, but rather aspects of the one ineffable divinity; and the alternation between singular ("Lord") and plural ("three men") teaches the attentive exegete about the higher and lower modes of spiritual perception.²⁶ The triadic manifestation represents God, "the Father of the universe" (πατήρ τῶν ὄλων), and his accompanying two powers, the creative (ποιητική) power and the royal one (βασιλική) – in scriptural terms, He-Who-Is (ὁ ὢν), "God"

²⁶ Philo, *Abr.* 24.119-124: "[119] When, then, as at noon-tide (ἐν μεσημβρίᾳ) God shines around the soul, and the light of the mind fills it through and through and the shadows are driven from it by the rays which pour all around it, the single object presents to it a triple vision, one representing the reality, the other two the shadows reflected from it. [...] [122] So the central Being with each of its potencies as His squire presents to the mind which has vision the appearance sometimes of one, sometimes of three: of one when that mind is highly purified [...] of three, when, as yet uninitiated into the highest mysteries [...] and unable to apprehend the Existent alone by Itself and apart from all else, but only through its actions, as either creative or ruling (ἢ κτίζον ἢ ἄρχον). [124] There are three classes of human temperaments, each of them so constituted that the vision presents itself in the middle form, that of the essentially existent (τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος); to the next best in that which stands on the right, the beneficent (τὴν εὐεργέτιν), which bears the names of 'God'; to the third, in that of the left, the governing (τὴν ἀρχικὴν), which is called 'Lord.'" (English tr. F. H. Colson in *Philo 6* [Loeb, 62; 64]). See also *Questions and Answers in Genesis* 4.4: "Now his mind clearly forms an impression with more open eyes and more lucid vision, not roaming about nor wandering off with the triad, and being attracted thereto by quantity and plurality, but running toward the one. And He manifested Himself without the powers that belong to Him, so that He saw His oneness directly before him, as he had known it earlier in the likeness of a triad." (tr. R. Marcus; *Philo Supplement I*, Loeb, 275).

(θεός) and “Lord” (κύριος).²⁷ The most interesting text occurs in his homily *On the Godhead*:

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) [...]. 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.” [...] This vision woke up the prophet Isaiah and caused him to rise...²⁸

Here Philo sees the two powers as represented by the two cherubim of Exodus 25:22 and by the two seraphim of Isaiah 6:3. This connection, inasmuch as it became known to the Church, especially at Alexandria, opens up this cluster of biblical passages (Gen 18, Ex 25, Isa 6, Ezek 1) to Clement's theological speculation in the *Stromata* and the *Hypotyposes*. We

²⁷ Philo, *Abr.* 24.121. Elsewhere these powers are called “beneficent” (εὐεργέτις) and “governing” (ἀρχική) or “chastising” (κολαστήριος) (*Abr.* 124, 146); “goodness” (ἀγαθότης) and “authority” (ἐξουσία) (*Cherub.* 27-28); “sovereignty” (ἀρχή) and “goodness” (ἀγαθότης) (*Sacr.* 15.59). Note Philo's wording, “God escorted by the two powers: δορυφορούμενος ὑπὸ δυεῖν τῶν ἀνωτάτω δυνάμεων (*Sacr.* 15.59); δορυφορούμενος ὑφ' ἑκατέρας τῶν δυνάμεων (*Abr.* 24.122). On this topic, see Fred Strickert, ‘Philo on the Cherubim,’ *Studia Philonica* 8 (1996): 40-57. Even though the background for the two “spear-bearers” escorting God may be the Persian court (Folker Siegert, *Philo von Alexandrien, Über die Gottesbezeichnung ‘wohltätig verzehrendes Feuer’ (De Deo): Rückübersetzung des Fragments aus dem Armenischen, deutsche Übersetzung und Kommentar* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1988], 71-73), its context more readily suggests the biblical throne-imagery – the ark, the mercy-seat, and the two cherubim. Indeed, Philo (*Cherub.* 27-28) takes the cherubim on the mercy-seat as symbols of these powers.

²⁸ Text and discussion in Folker Siegert, ‘The Philonian Fragment *De Deo*: First English Translation,’ *Studia Philonica* 10 (1998): 1-33. The Greek terms are taken from Siegert's Greek retroversion in his original publication, *Wohltätig verzehrendes Feuer*, quoted above. See also Francesca Calabi, *God's Acting, Man's Acting: Tradition and Philosophy in Philo of Alexandria* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 73-110.

are now ready to move beyond the *Paedagogue*'s rehearsal of the tradition about Abraham and Isaiah encountering Jesus, as "that mystical angel."

Clement on Abraham and Isaiah

When Clement discusses the theophanic aspect of Abraham's encounter with God,²⁹ he writes:

On looking up to heaven, whether it was that he saw the Son in the Spirit, as some explain, or a glorious angel, or in any other way recognized God to be superior to the creation [...] he receives in addition the Alpha, the knowledge of the one and only God, and is called Abraham, having, instead of a natural philosopher, become wise, and a lover of God.³⁰

The text suggests Clement's disagreement with other exegetes, who posit a direct manifestation of the Logos. In light of the theory of prophecy discussed above, the choice between Abraham seeing the Logos, and Abraham conversing with an angel represents, indeed, a false alternative. How should we understand Abraham's encounter with "that hidden angel, Jesus"? What Abraham saw was neither the Logos as such, nor a glorious angel, but rather the Logos 'channeled' by the angelic hierarchy, while Abraham was being initiated into the vision.³¹

²⁹ In his beautiful book on Rublev's Trinity icon, which includes a very substantial study of the patristic and later Byzantine reception history of Genesis 18, Bunge claims that the Alexandrian master exemplifies the "purely angelological" interpretation of the passage (Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity* [Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2007], 46). However, the relevant passage (*Strom* 4.19.123.1) is, similarly to Hebrews 13:12, concerned with ethical behavior. Clement invokes Genesis 18 not for its theophanic content, but in order to highlight Sarah's humility and hospitality: like the daughter of Cleobulus the Sage, who did not mind washing the feet of her father's guest, so did Sarah not refuse Abraham's command to bake the cakes with her own hands. That the cakes were "for angels" is obviously not the thrust of Clement's text.

³⁰ *Strom.* 5.1.8.

³¹ Oeyen discusses this passage in *Engelpneumatologie*, 18-19.

Writing about Isaiah 6, Clement shows himself a worthy Christian continuator of what Eric Osborn called Philo's "noetic exegesis."³²

[The ark] signifies the repose which dwells with the spirits who give glory (ἀνάπαυσιν [...] τὴν μετὰ τῶν δοξολόγων πνευμάτων), which the cherubim represent darkly (ἃ 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 delightful glory in ceaseless contemplation (ἡ φωνὴ δὲ δόξα εὐχάριστος ἐν ἀκαταπαύστῳ θεωρίᾳ);

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 ζῶα τὰ δοξολόγα), figuratively spoken of by Isaiah (διὰ Ἡσαΐου ἀλληγορούμενα).³³

Like the later Alexandrian liturgical tradition (*Anaphora of Serapion*; *Anaphora of the Liturgy of Saint Mark*),³⁴ Clement identifies the seraphim

³² Eric Osborn, 'Philo and Clement: Quiet Conversion and Noetic Exegesis,' *Studia Philonica* 10 (1998): 108-24.

³³ *Strom.* 7.12.80.4; *Strom.* 5.6.36.3-4.

³⁴ *Eucharistic Prayer of Bishop Serapion* (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 the 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 τιμώτατα 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 and archangels. Before you stand your two most honorable creatures (τὰ δύο τιμώτατα σου ζῶα), the many-eyed Cherubim and the six-winged Seraphim (τὰ πολυόμματα Χερουβείμ καὶ τὰ ἑξαπτέρυγα Σεραφεῖμ); with two they cover their feet, etc.; *Apostolic Constitutions* 8.12.27: "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

of Isaiah 6 (which he calls τὰ ζῶα τὰ δοξολόγια) with the cherubim of the ark in Exodus 25 (τὰ πνεύματα τὰ δοξολόγια) and with the two ζῶα found in the peculiar LXX reading of Habakkuk 3:2 (“you will be known between the two ζῶα”). His main point, however,³⁵ 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, as we have seen, Clement speaks of deification as a transformation into one of the “first-created” angels or “gods,” but proceeds to internalise the liturgical and apocalyptic imagery and the associated experience of ascent and transformation. All imagistic details, such as specific intervals of space or time are emptied of the literal meaning they had had in the apocalyptic cosmology. Whether “seven days,” or “seven heavens,” or “ark,” or “archangels,” “cherubim,” “seraphim,” or “*protoctists*,” the details of the cosmic-ladder imagery become images of an interior transformation. Ultimately, the relevance of theophanies is not doctrinal (christological) or polemical (anti-dualistic); for Clement, theophanies are important because they speak of the fundamental experience and aspirations of Clement’s advanced readers.

Conclusions

Clement’s famous predecessors and contemporaries (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian) practice an “epiphanic” way of re-reading texts such as Genesis 18 or Isaiah 6, which views the latter not simply as “foreshadowing” Christ or realities of the Church, but as actual, straightforward manifestations of the Logos to the patriarchs and prophets.

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...”

³⁵ It seems 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” (A. 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).

The Alexandrian master is aware of this tradition and participates in it. Nevertheless, the correct framework for approaching Clement's exegesis of theophanies is his mystagogical curriculum mirroring the universal pedagogy of the Logos. Within this framework, the treatment of theophanies in the *Paedagogue* appears as a "lower," preliminary exposition, which acquires greater depth and precision in the *Stromata*, the *Eclogues*, and *Adumbrationes*. Clement's advanced-level exegesis calls for an allegorical decoding of biblical theophanies. This approach is, obviously, a continuation of what Eric Osborn, speaking about Philo, called "noetic exegesis," and what others have termed "internalized apocalypticism."³⁶

It appears, in conclusion, that Clement of Alexandria's contribution is not unimportant for our understanding of the Christian reception history of Old Testament theophanies. After playing a central role in early Christianity's theological self-definition, and featuring in the most important theological battles of the first four centuries, the appeal to Old Testament theophanies gave way to a more technical arsenal of doctrinal arguments. During the second half of the first millennium, Clement's exegesis of theophanies, continued and refined by authors such as Origen, Didymus, or the Ps.-Areopagite, and "popularised" by the Cherubikon of the Byzantine Liturgies – οἱ τὰ Χερουβείμ μυστικῶς εἰκονίζοντες καὶ τῇ ἕωσποιῶ Τριάδι τὸν Τρισάγιον ὕμνον προσάδοντες ... – was key to the valorisation of theophanies for Christian spirituality.

Since Clement views Christian doctrine as divine revelation, dispensed pedagogically by the Logos in order to be appropriated mystagogically, and the teaching activity of the Gnostic as mirroring that of the Logos (*Paed.* 3.1.2.1; *Strom.* 7.9.52.1-2), we may assume that Clement expects the very act of reading the Scriptures to be an increasingly

³⁶ Bogdan Bucur, 'The Other Clement: Cosmic Hierarchy and Interiorized Apocalypticism,' *Vigiliae Christianae* 60 (2006): 251-68; Alexander Golitzin, 'Earthly Angels and Heavenly Men: The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Nicetas Stethatos, and the Tradition of Interiorized Apocalyptic in Eastern Christian Ascetical and Mystical Literature,' *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 125-53.

transformative experience. As part of this Christian mystagogical project, Clement's ideal readers are to assume not an "objective" perspective on the cosmic ladder, but a continuously shifting, ascensional, perspective, determined by the mystagogical transformation of the exegete according to the pattern laid out in the sacred text. This theological, ascetical, and liturgical interpretive context of the "celestial hierarchy" is, to a large extent, lost to us, and can only remain the object of scholarly reconstruction. I leave this enterprise for a future essay.³⁷

³⁷ For an attempt to apply this type of reading to Origen, see M. V. Niculescu, *The Spell of the Logos: Origen's Exegetic Pedagogy in the Contemporary Debate Regarding Logocentrism* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009).