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“God Never Appeared to Moses:” Eusebius of Caesarea’s Peculiar Exegesis of the Burning Bush Theophany

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Abstract: The exegesis of the burning bush theophany set forth in Eusebius of Caesarea’s Prophetic Extracts and Proof of the Gospel adds a distinctive and original voice to the rich chorus of Jewish and Christian interpreters of Exodus 3. Eusebius posits a disjunction between the visual and the auditory aspects of the theophany – the angel appears, the Lord speaks – and departs from the mainstream of Jewish and Christian tradition by depicting Moses as a spiritual neophyte whose attunement to God ranks much lower than that of the patriarchs of old. Even though scholars point to the overall anti-Jewish context of this exegesis, it is difficult to find satisfactory terms of comparison for some of its details. It appears, therefore, that Eusebius’ understudied Prophetic Extracts and Proof of the Gospel offer a surprisingly original interpretation that should enrich the scholarly account of the Wirkungsgeschichte of the famous burning bush episode.

Keywords: Eusebius; theophanies; Sinai; Moses; reception.

1 Introduction

Scholarship dedicated to the Wirkungsgeschichte of the famous “burning bush” episode has already charted many of the exegetical avenues followed by Jewish and Christian writers of the early centuries.1 This article contributes to the


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discussion by analyzing a surprisingly original exegesis of Exodus 3 found in some Eusebius of Caesarea’s under-studied writings, the Prophetic Extracts and the Proof of the Gospel.

Eusebius carries on the christological interpretation of theophanies, which is generally acknowledged to be a distinctive feature of pre-Nicene theology, while also marking the transition towards the more mature and technically precise articulation of doctrine by councils and theologians within the new socio-political frame of a Christian Empire.

An eminent specialist on Eusebius notes the following:

Eusebius’ use of theophanies is [...] a privileged place of conjunction between the polemical tradition stemming from Justin and the Alexandrian scholarly tradition of Philo and Origen.

The argument from theophanies in Eusebius has never been the object of thorough examination. Those few authors who have shown some interest in this topic have not guessed its riches and importance in the history of doctrines. Eusebius’ thought intervenes, nevertheless, at a moment, after the death of Origen and before the beginning of the Arian crisis. Arian recourse to the ancient theophanies has led later theologians to distance themselves from the argument. Here just as elsewhere, Eusebius appears to be the last representative

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of pre-Nicene theology: still a stranger to preoccupations that would only emerge after the council of Nicaea, he offers in the *Proof of the Gospel* and, earlier, in the *Prophetic Extracts*, the longest, most elaborate, and certainly richest reflection of any pre-Nicene author had ever consecrated to the question of ancient theophanies.4

2 Eusebius as Traditional Exegete of Theophanies

In his interpretation of theophanies, Eusebius of Caesarea stands in undeniable continuity with earlier tradition. Like his predecessors, he finds in theophanies the doctrinal foundation for the qualified reception of wisdom traditions outside of Israel; like Justin Martyr he calls the Logos δεύτερος θεός,5 identifies the Logos with the Tetragrammaton,6 and understands theophanies as manifestations of the Logos “concerning himself with the work of mankind’s salvation even before the Incarnation.”7 Eusebius interprets Genesis 18 (the Mamre theophany), Genesis 22 (the Peniel theophany), Isaiah 6, and so on, as scriptural reports about the manifestations of the Son or Logos of God,8 and emphatically rejects the notion of theophanies as mere angelic apparitions.9


5 For example, Eusebius, *Extracts* 1.12 (PG 22:1068 C); *Dem. ev.* 5.30 (PG 22:409 D; Ferrar, 271).


9 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.2.10 (SC 31:8); *Dem. ev.* 5.9 (GCS 23:231–32); *Eccl. Theol.* 2.21 (GCS 14:130); *Ecl. proph.* 3 (PG 22:1028–36); *Comm Isa* 1.41 (GCS 55:37); *Comm Ps.* 79 (PG 23:952C). See also *Extracts* 1.10 (PG 22:1056 B), on the Lord (Logos/Son) manifesting himself directly [κατός δι’ ἑαυτοῦ], not by angelic mediation [δι’ ἄγγελου] and *Extracts* 1.12 (PG 22:1068 C), which declares theophanies to be, undisputedly, neither manifestations of the Father, nor of some angelic power, but apparitions of the divine Logos, the “second God” [ἀναμφιλέτως οὕτω τὸν ὄλων Θεός, οὕτω ἀγγελική τις δύναμις ἢν ἢ χρηστικότερα τῷ Μωσεί, κατός δὲ ὁ θεὸς Λόγος, ὃν ἀκριβῶς πεπιστεύκαμεν μετὰ τὸν τῶν ὄλων Πατέρα καὶ Κύριον δεύτερον εἶναι τῶν ἀπάντων Θεόν τε καὶ Κύριον].
Twice in his *Church History* Eusebius states that the “Lord God” mentioned in Genesis 18 was none other than “Christ himself, the Word of God.”\(^{10}\) The same christological interpretation of the Mamre theophany also occurs twice in the *Life of Constantine*: once in a statement by Eusebius himself, and the second time in a letter addressed by the Emperor Constantine to the civilian and ecclesiastical authorities of Palestine – hence also to Eusebius – mandating the destruction of the local shrine, the eradication of all practices deemed “sacrilegious abominations” at Mamre, and the building of a magnificent church.\(^{11}\) Indeed, the place was, at that time, a lively inter-religious pilgrimage site attracting Jews, pagans, and Christians.\(^{12}\) In the *Proof of the Gospel*, Eusebius even mentions having seen a cultic artifact at Mamre, which depicted the scene of the three visitors enjoying Abraham’s hospitality, and notes that “he in the midst surpasses them in honour. *This would be our Lord and Saviour.*”\(^ {13}\) Similarly, at Peniel, “He that was seen by

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10 Eusebius, *Hist eccl.* 1.2.7; 1.4.12 (SC 31:7; 20).
11 Eusebius, *Vit Const.* 3.51.1 (SC 559:416): “Having heard that the self-same Saviour who erewhile had appeared on earth had in ages long since past afforded a manifestation of his Divine presence to holy men of Palestine near the oak of Mambre, he ordered that a house of prayer should be built there also in honor of the God who had thus appeared”; *Vit Const.* 3.53.3 (SC 559: 420): “There first the Savior himself, with the two angels, vouchsafed to Abraham a manifestation of his presence.”
12 See Eusebius, *Vit Const.* 3.51–53. A vivid description of the place is given by Sozomen (*Hist. eccl.* 2.4.2–3 [SC 306:246; trans. NPNF]): “Here the inhabitants of the country and of the regions round Palestine, the Phœnicians, and the Arabians, assemble annually during the summer season to keep a brilliant feast; and many others, both buyers and sellers, resort there on account of the fair. Indeed, this feast is diligently frequented by all nations: by the Jews, because they boast of their descent from the patriarch Abraham; by the Pagans, because angels there appeared to men; and by Christians, because He who for the salvation of mankind was born of a virgin, afterwards manifested Himself there to a godly man. This place was moreover honored fittingly with religious exercises. Here some prayed to the God of all; some called upon the angels, poured out wine, burnt incense, or offered an ox, or he-goat, a sheep, or a cock.”
13 Eusebius, *Dem ev* 5.9 (GCS 23:232; trans. Ferrar 1:254, emphasis added): “they who were entertained by Abraham, as represented in the picture (ἐπὶ γραϕῆς ἀνακείμενοι), sit one on each side, and he in the midst surpasses them in honour. This would be our Lord and Saviour, Whom though men knew Him not they worshipped, confirming the Holy Scriptures. He then thus in person from that time sowed the seeds of holiness among men, putting on a human form and shape [ἀνθρώπειον ... εἰδός τε καὶ σχῆμα], and revealed to the godly ancestor Abraham Who He was, and shewed him the mind of His Father.” As it happens, archaeology has turned up a fifth-century mould for stamping ritual cakes, with, on one side, the image of three angels seated at table and the inscription “May the angels be merciful to me,” and, on the other, an image of Aphrodite Ourania, perhaps assimilated with the Virgin Mary, with the inscription “Rejoicing, I receive the heavenly one [goddess].” The middle figure on the mould is clearly distinguished among the three. If the mould is a Christian artifact, its imagery concurs with Eusebius’ report and with his view that Abraham’s visitors were the Son of God and two accompanying angels. For image and descriptions, see Margaret English Frazer, “A Syncretistic Pilgrim’s Mould from Mamre(?),” *Gesta* 18 (1979): 137–45.
Jacob was none other than the Word of God,” and, in Daniel 7, the Son of Man represents the Logos, God’s First-Born, Wisdom, and Divine Offspring, “called ‘the Son of man’ because of his final appearance in the flesh,” and foreseen as end-time universal judge. In his Commentary on Isaiah, while presenting his christological interpretation of Isaiah 6, Eusebius revisits all previous theophanies and ascribes them to one and the same agent: the Logos.

It is therefore a very traditional exegesis of theophanies that one encounters in Eusebius, with only very exceptions. As Jörg Ulrich observes, Eusebius’s

14 Eusebius, Dem. ev. 7.2 (trans. Ferrar, 2.83; see also, less developed, Dem. ev. 4.16, trans. Ferrar 1.210): “it is the God that dwells therein, Who was seen by Jacob in human form and shape, wherefore he was deemed worthy of the name, Seer of God, for such is the translation of his name. And I have established in the early part of this work that He that was seen by Jacob was none other than the Word of God.”

15 Eusebius, CH 1.2.24–26 (SC 1:12–3); Prophetic Extracts 1.44 (PG 22: 1173 CD).

16 Eusebius, Comm. Esa. 1.41: since “nobody has ever seen God” (John 1:18) or “the Father” (John 6:46), “the Lord of hosts who appeared to the prophet was another than the unbegotten and invisible and incomprehensible divinity. And who could this be but ‘the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father’ [John 1:18], who stepped down from his own exalted position, made himself visible and comprehensible to humanity? [Eusebius now rehearses the most important theophanies to Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Ezekiel] […] He assumed a certain form before Abraham and was seen in the figure of a man when Abraham was ‘by the oak’ and ‘washed the feet’ and shared a table with the divine stranger […] And Jacob also said concerning this, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and my life has been preserved.’ And the present prophet [scil. Isaiah] saw and also witnessed glory. Thus, as we discussed above, he saw the glory of our Savior Jesus Christ. Thus it was for Moses and for Ezekiel too” (GCS 55:36–37; Trans. in Commentary on Isaiah. Eusebius of Caesarea. Translated with an introduction and notes by Jonathan J. Armstrong, edited by Joel C. Elowsky [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015], 27–28). All these theophanies anticipate the Incarnation, since in all of them the Son descends from his own greatness “making himself small” [σμικρύνων] so as to become visible and perceptible by humans (GCS 55:36). See also Eusebius, Dem. ev. 7.1 (GCS 23: 297–298): 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)”;

17 One such exception is Eusebius’ fine analysis of Hab 3:2 LXX [ἐν μέσῳ δῶν ζωῶν γνωσθῆσθαι], which leads him to part ways with the exegesis of his predecessors, to whom he ascribes the reading “living beings.” See Eusebius of Caesarea, Dem. ev. 6.15 9 (GCS 23: 270; trans. Ferrar 2:21): “Our Lord and Saviour, too, the Word of God Himself, ‘was known between two lives.’ The word ζωῶν is plural and accented with circumflex on the last syllable as the plural of the singular noun ζωή [life]. It is not ζωῶν accented acute on the penultimate from ζῶν [a living creature], but with circumflex on the last syllable [ζωῶν] from nominative plural ζωαί [lives]. He says, therefore, He was known between two lives. One life is that according to God, the other that according to man; the one mortal, the other eternal. And the Lord having experienced both is rightly said to have been made known between two lives in the LXX translation. Aquila translates
consistent interpretation of Old Testament theophanies as manifestations of the Logos simply follows Christian exegetical tradition on this point.18 His exegesis of the burning bush scene, however, is in many ways very peculiar.

3 Eusebius on the Burning Bush

Whom or what did Moses meet on Sinai, when an angel appeared to him in a fiery flame out of the burning but unconsumed bush (3:2), and the prophet drew near to see that “great sight” (3:3, τὸ ὀραμα τὸ μέγα τοῦτο), and heard a divine voice addressing him (3:4)? Eusebius answers differently in different places. In his Church History Eusebius puts forth the conventional view:

The great servant Moses and before him in the first place Abraham and his children, and as many righteous men and prophets as afterward appeared, have contemplated him with the pure eyes of the mind, and have recognized him and offered to him the worship which is due him as Son of God [...] You will perceive also from the same words that this was no other than he who talked with Moses.19

Elsewhere, however – namely in the Prophetic Extracts, which predate the Church History – Eusebius emphatically states that “throughout all of Scripture God is not even once said to have appeared to Moses” as he is said to have appeared to the patriarchs.20 This statement is difficult to reconcile with the numerous biblical passages stating that God disclosed himself to Moses in a more direct and intense
way than to others. What about Exodus 6, Exodus 33, Numbers 12? And what about the burning bush?

3.1 The Angel Appeared, the Lord Spoke

Eusebius takes the wording of Exod 3:2 literally – “Now an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a fire of flame out of the bush” – and repeats, again and again, “it was not the Lord, but an angel who appeared.” This is not, however, a demotion of the burning bush theophany to “mere” angelophany. What Eusebius means is that the undeniable presence of the Lord is conveyed initially through an angelic apparition, which then gives way to the verbal interaction with the Logos.

The sharp distinction between the visual and the auditory components of the theophany at the burning bush is actually best articulated in his discussion of the Sinai theophany of Exodus 19, where Eusebius distinguishes between divine παρουσία and angelic ὀπτασία. There is no question that the subject of the theophany is, according to Eusebius, “not some subordinate power that is being put to use, but the Lord himself, He-Who-Is;” the visual phenomenon, however, is not the Lord’s but that of angelic conveyers of the divine presence.

23 Eusebius, Extracts 9, PG 22:1052D: παρουσία μὲν ἐγέρθης τοῦ Κυρίου ὀπτασία δὲ, οὐκ αὐτοῦ, ἀλλὰ δῆλον ὅτι τῶν ἄμφι αὐτών δορυφόρον ἄγγελον, δι’ ὅν τραχύσας καὶ θεολογικὴν ἐποίησας τὴν ὀπτασίαν.
explains, the same Logos appears to the patriarchs, to Moses, and to the people, but the mode [τρόπος] of the apparition differs: to Moses and the people, who were more “material,” the presence of the Logos was mediated by angel, pillar, cloud, and voice, whereas to the patriarchs, who did not need all of these veils, he appears himself and in a more direct manner, “simply,” “nakedly” and “clearly” [ἀπλῶς, γυμνῶς τρανῶς].

The relationship between the Lord and the angel, and the “mechanics” of revelation are described by careful distinguishing the verbs used: the Lord commanding, the angel ministering. Both in the Extracts and in the Proof of the Gospel Eusebius uses the analogy to prophetic inspiration: as in the cases of Isaiah or Jeremiah, a man was seen, but it was God who would be delivering the prophetic oracle by using the prophet as an instrument [ὡς ἄν δι’ ὀργάνου θεσπίζων], so also at the burning bush. In the Extracts, he also provides another analogy: “the Lord dispenses his teaching as through an interpreter.”

### 3.2 Demotion of Moses

Eusebius’ exegesis of Exodus 3 is an aspect of his peculiar theory that Moses was spiritually inferior to the patriarchs, a mere beginner, “not fit for aught than

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25 Eusebius, *Extracts* 9 (PG 22:1053 C): οὖν ἂν ἀγγελικὴ τῆς δύναμις ἢ διὰ τῆς νεφέλης χρηματίζονσα, ἀλλ’ τοῦτο ὁ Θεός; cf. Eusebius, *Extracts* (PG 22:1068 C), where theophanies are, undisputedly, neither manifestations of the Father, nor of some angelic power, but manifestation of the divine Logos, the “second God” [ἀνομίας λέκτως οὐ ὁ τῶν διῶν Θεός, οὐτε ἀγγελικὴ τῆς δύναμις ἂν ἢ χρηματίζονσα τῷ Μωσεί, αὐτότις δὲ ὁ θείος Λόγος, ἢ ἄκριβας πεπιστευκαμεν μετὰ τόν τῶν διῶν Πατέρα καὶ Κύριον δεύτερον εἶναι τῶν ἀπάντων Θεὸν τε καὶ Κύριον].


angelic visions” [μηδὲν πλέον ἀγγελικὴς ὀπτοσίας χωροῦντι], spiritually inferior to the patriarchs of old, who were “worthy of a superior insight,” because they were better and more perfect, they saw God “nakedly” and “clearly;” therefore, to them it was the Word himself who appeared, while Moses saw not the Lord but an angel.

In the Proof of the Gospel Eusebius draws a contrast between Jacob’s nightly fight at Peniel and Moses’ divine encounter at the burning bush. In the case of Jacob, Eusebius writes, “if we were to suppose that he saw an angel […] we should clearly be wrong;” at Sinai, however, “an angel appears to Moses” whereby the speaker of the words is “no longer an angel” but the Lord, “the Word of God before the ages.” The same distinction is evident between Moses and his successor, Joshua: God speaks to Joshua through the captain of his power – the Logos – whereas he speaks to Moses through an angelic appearance.

Sébastien Morlet signals two interesting differences between the Extracts and the Proof of the Gospel, which offers “a polemical redrafting of the reflexions in the Prophetic Extracts.” First, the Proof of the Gospel adds a prophetic dimension to theophanies, such that theophanies become foreshadowings of the Incarnation, “an idea which had been absent in the Prophetic Extracts;” second, in the Extracts Eusebius restricts direct apparitions of the Logos to the patriarchs, as warranted by the biblical occurrence of ὤφθη, while in the Proof of the Gospel he extends vision of God to all the “fathers.”

In my view, the prophetic turn in the use of theophanies is a question of emphasis rather. The christological interpretation of theophanies, even when not explicitly connected to the Incarnation, implies this connection by its very “location,” since the “Word” as subject of theophanies is always (for proto-orthodox Christian writers from Justin onwards) the Word-who-was-to-become-man. At any

30 Eusebius, Dem ev. 5.13 (GCS 23:240; Ferrar 258).
31 Eusebius, Extracts 1.9 (PG 22:1049D).
32 Eusebius, Extracts 1.12 (PG 22:1061 B): ὤφθη αὐτῷ … ἐκεῖνος μὲν γὰρ γυμνῶς καὶ τρανῶς ἀνευ τινὸς εἴδους ὄρθεις ἀναχράσσεται.
34 Eusebius, Dem ev 5.11 (GCS 23:237; Ferrar 255–6).
35 Eusebius, Dem ev 5.12 (GCS 23: 238; Ferrar 256).
37 Morlet, La Démonstration évangélique d’Eusèbe, 456.
38 Morlet, La Démonstration évangélique d’Eusèbe, 448, 450.
39 Eusebius, Extracts 1.7 (PG 22:1041C).
rate, neither of these two differences between the *Extracts* and the *Proof* alter the problem at hand: the apparent demotion of God’s initiate, prophet, and lawgiver to a mere neophyte.

Eusebius compares the Sinai theophany in Exodus 19, which grants Israel the vision of God’s glory, with the more direct visions granted to the patriarchs.40 The Law was delivered by angels, as if through pedagogues and administrators, because it was given to a people that was spiritually immature, barely beginning its path of initiation [ἐἰσαγομένους]41 – just like Moses, also characterized as ἐἰσαγόμενος “one who is being initiated”! Moses, in other words, is placed in the same category as the people, and juxtaposed to the patriarchs. Needless to say, this position is at odds with the biblical passages mentioned earlier and with the mainstream of Jewish and Christian tradition. Yet, Eusebius manages to dismantle any suggestion of Mosaic superiority over the patriarchs.

Commenting on Exod 33:9–23, Eusebius notes that the episode where Moses entreats God to see his glory does not illustrate the prophet’s supposed spiritual advancement.42 Quite the opposite, in fact: if Moses asks to see God’s glory, and God tells Moses that he cannot gaze upon the divine πρόσωπον, it is because Moses had never before had that experience. Moreover, speaking to God ἐνώπιος ἐνοπτίῳ is not quite the same as an encounter πρόσωπον πρός πρόσωπον;43 besides, Eusebius reminds us, Scripture never says, *not even once*, that the Lord appeared to Moses!44 In fact, ἐνώπιος ἐνοπτίῳ is precisely the opposite of a face-to-face encounter such as that of Jacob as Peniel: even if [we read that] “the Lord spoke to him face to face, he still spoke to him through [the mediation of] the cloud.”45

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For Eusebius, “the glory of the Lord,” the fire, the cloud, and all elements of theophanic imagery designate the mediated manifestation of the Lord to Moses or the Israelites: not the Lord himself, but his visionary manifestation (οὐκ αὐτὸς ὁ Κύριος, ἀλλ’ εἶδος Κυρίου). When Numbers 12 is read through the aforementioned lens it loses all of its force: to say that Moses sees the glory of the Lord is, precisely, to say that he does not see not the Lord himself, but a veiled manifestation ἐν εἴδει τῆς Λ. Eusebius also invokes Deut 5:3–4, a text where God is said to have spoken to the people πρόσωπον κατὰ πρόσωπον, and equates the latter with the phrase στόμα κατὰ στόμα in Numbers 12. In this way, Eusebius relativizes Moses’ experience, which is no longer upheld as uniquely privileged before God, becoming, rather, more or less equivalent to the experience of the other Israelites: “Do not be amazed,” Eusebius tells his readers, “that God manifested himself to Moses and to the people in the very same way.” Moreover, reading yet again against the grain, Eusebius twists “[n]ot with your fathers” into an affirmation that the experience of the Israelites (including Moses) is, precisely, unlike that of the patriarchs – οὐ μήν … ὁμοίως τοῖς πατράσιν ἐφόρακε – since Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were granted access to the Lord himself, “nakedly” [γυμνῶς]; unscreened by cloud and fire [ἄνευ ἐπικαλυμμάτων τοῦ διὰ νεφέλης ἢ πυρὸς]; devoid of the appearance of the fire and the cloud [ἀνεύ τοῦ διὰ πυρὸς καὶ νεφέλης εἴδους]; more distinctly and purely [τρανότερον καὶ καθαρότερον]; not mediated by veils [μηκέτι μὲν δι᾽ ἐπικαλυμμάτων], without “alien,” that is to say, angelic, ministration [μὴ δὲ ύπὸ διακόνων ἔτερον].

In his exegesis of Exod 6:3, which states that the divine name, which was being revealed to Moses, had not previously been revealed to the patriarchs, Eusebius suggests a paraphrase of the verse; a rhetorical trick that gives his interpretation the aura of divine pronouncement. Eusebius’ midrash-like reading of

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46 Eusebius, Extracts 1.12 (PG 22:1061C): Σαρώς οὖν διὰ τούτων τὸ θεωρούμενον τῷ Μωσεί λέγεται εἶναι οὐκ αὐτὸς ὁ Κύριος, ἀλλ’ εἶδος Κυρίου καὶ νεφέλη καὶ πῦρ, ἢ καὶ δύσαν Κυρίου ὄνομαζε ο λόγος.


48 οὐχὶ τοῖς πατράσιν ὑμῶν διέθετο κύριος τὴν διαθήκην ταύτην, ἀλλ’ ἡ πῦρ ὑμᾶς, ὑμεῖς ὁδε πάντες ζῶντες σήμερον πρόσωπον κατὰ πρόσωπον ἐλάλησεν κύριος πῦρ ὑμᾶς ἐν τῷ ὄρει ἐκ μέσου τοῦ πυρὸς


50 Eusebius, Extracts 12 (1064 B-C).
Exod 6:3 exalts the patriarchs and demotes Moses: “I am the Lord; to your fathers I did not disclose my name, even though they were worthy of greater insight!”

4 Tradition and Innovation in Eusebius’ Exegesis of the Burning Bush

It may be useful to sum up our findings so far. In the first place, Eusebius introduces a disjunction between the visual and the auditory aspects of the Sinai theophanies, and maintains that, to Moses and the people, the presence of the Logos is conveyed by angelic mediation. Secondly, he demotes Moses from the privileged position that Jewish and Christian tradition ascribes to him, and argues that the same Logos who appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, later spoke to Moses without appearing to him, using instead the visual manifestation of an angel as an external instrument.

These two components of Eusebius’ interpretation of Exodus 3 seem to have had diverging and opposite trajectories of utilization: the disjunction between angel-who-appears and the Lord-who-speaks was maintained and confirmed as useful in the Marcellan controversy, and later absorbed into Procopius’ biblical

51 Eusebius, Extracts 9 (1049D): τοῖς δὲ σοῖς πατράσιν τὸ μὲν ὄνομα μου οὐκ ἐδήλωσα, καί μειζόνος γὰρ ἀξίω τῆς τοιώτης γνώσεως ἑτύχους ὄντες· αὐτὸς δὲ ὡφθην αὐτοῖς καὶ δι’ ἑαυτοῦ (ἐμαυτοῦ) τὴν διαθήκην μου πρὸς αὐτοὺς ἔστησα (emphasis mine).

52 On the assumption that God is an undivided monad (Fr. 91/77 = Eccl. Theol. 2.19 [GCS 14:124]), Marcellus’ argues that the “angel of the Lord” is one and the same as the Logos who uttered “I am He Who Is” (Exod 3:14), that the divine Logos cannot be distinguished from the Father “with respect to hypostasis” any more than one can distinguish hypostatically between a person and that person’s verbal utterance, and that a strict separation between ὁ ὄν and ὁ τοῦ ὄντος ἄγγελος would amount to equating the Son to a non-existent [μὴ ὄν] (Marcellus, Fr. 87/61 = Against Marcellus 2.2; Eccl. Theol. 1.17 [GCS 14:40; 77]). By contrast, Asterius and Eusebius affirm a disjunction between the angel-who-appears and the Word who speaks, as a guarantee that the latter is affirmed as a real entity and properly distinguished from the Father (Marcellus, Fr. 86/64 = Eccl. Theol. 2.19 [GCS 14:123]). Eusebius also insists on the traditional view: it was undoubtedly the Son of God who spoke to Moses at the burning bush, he who appeared to Abraham at Mamre (Genesis 18), who told Moses that he had manifested himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exod 6:2–3), who later proclaimed himself to “be” before Abraham “was” (John 8:56), since he was the “mediator” (Gal 3:20) even before the Incarnation, πρὶν ἦ τὴν σάρκα ἀναλαβεῖν (Eusebius, Eccl. Theol. 2.21.1 [GCS 14:130]). The fragments of Marcellus are given two numbers, corresponding to Markus Vinzent, Die Fragmente. Der Brief an Julius von Rom (Leiden: Brill, 1997) and the GCS critical edition: Eusebius Werke 4: Gegen Marcell. Über die kirchliche Theologie. Die Fragmente Marcellis (GCS 14; 3rd edn; Heinrich Klostermann, revised by Günther Christian Hansen; Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1991).
commentary;\(^{53}\) by contrast, the demotion of Moses plays no role in that debate and, in fact, seems to have been abandoned by the time Eusebius wrote his *Church History*.\(^{54}\)

### 4.1 Anti-Jewish Polemics and the Demotion of Moses

The meticulous “demotion” of Moses by means of Scripture exegesis and the reference to the views of other unnamed interpreters\(^{55}\) suggests that Eusebius is attempting to counter an established Jewish tradition that affirmed Moses’ spiritual excellence as a tenet of faith, upheld by reference to passages such as Exodus 3, 6, 19, 33–4, and Numbers 12. It is perhaps not too far-fetched to see Eusebius as undermining the kind of “exalted Moses” traditions that scholars of Second Temple Judaism identify in writings such as the *Exagoge of Moses*, Philo’s *Life of Moses*, or the *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* – especially since the *Exagoge* was well-known to Eusebius and, indeed, preserved only thanks to his extensive quotation. We would have, in other words, a faint echo (and reutilization) of earlier intra-Jewish polemics opposing the exalted patriarchs of the “Enochic” tradition (Melchizedek, Noah, and Enoch) to the exalted Moses.\(^{56}\)

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\(^{53}\) Procopius of Gaza’s *Commentary* (PG 87:524–5).

\(^{54}\) Nevertheless, Eusebius’ view of Moses as a less-than-ideal figure not devoid of certain limits and ambiguities, has interesting consequences for the interpretation of his analogy between Emperor Constantine and Moses the prophet-king. Whether that analogy was actually introduced by Eusebius or by Constantine himself (with the Christian bishop deftly exploiting the ambiguity of the biblical character in order to establish certain limits to the new Christian leader’s propaganda), Eusebius entered the ring of political theology with an *already formed* view of Moses as inferior to the patriarchs. For the discussion of the Moses-Constantine analogy, see Michael Hollerich, “The Comparison of Moses and Constantine in Eusebius of Caesarea’s *Life of Constantine,*” *SP* 19 (1989): 80–5; Sabine Inowlocki, “Eusebius’s appropriation of Moses in an Apologetic Context,” in *Moses in Biblical and Extra-Biblical Traditions*, eds. A. Graupner and M. Wolter (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), 241–55; Finn Damgaard, “Propaganda Against Propaganda: Revisiting Eusebius’ Use of the Figure of Moses in the *Life of Constantine,*” in *Eusebius of Caesarea: Tradition and Innovations*, eds. A. Johnson and J. Schott (Washington, DC and Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 115–32.


In fact, rabbinc tradition also speaks about Moses as “a novice in prophecy” (so that God must make provisions for his spiritual limitation, by first using the voice of Moses’ father and only later revealing himself as the God of his father) and a novice in the interpretation of the Law (clearly overwhelmed by the mysteries of his Torah, which had remained veiled to him, but were being disclosed in Rabbi Akiva’s classroom).57

Yet, perhaps Eusebius was targeting Jewish traditions that were simply asserting a spiritual primacy of the Jews over the Gentiles. I second here the observations of Aaron Johnson:

Significantly, Eusebius overturns the biblical ordering, ‘first to the Jews, then to the nations,’ with the bold claim that God had first called the nations and only secondly the Jews, or “the circumcision” (540C): ‘For before there was Israel there were the nations, and it was to the nations first that the oracles of God and theophanies were given, when the Israelitic name was not yet even present among men. For Enoch, being uncircumcised, was a gentle (ἐθνικός) [...] and Noah [...] was deemed worthy of receiving oracles from God, though he, too, was uncircumcised; and Melchizedek was more ancient than the people of the circumcision [...] and Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were deemed worthy of oracles from God [...] And Job was an Idumean [...]’ (Commentary on Luke, 540CD). The nation of the Jews, on the other hand, feigned obedience to God, but were deemed

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57 Exod Rab 3.1: “R. Joshua the priest, son of Nehemiah, said: ‘When God revealed Himself to Moses, Moses was a novice in prophecy; hence God thought’: ‘If I reveal Myself to him in a loud voice, I will terrify him, and if in a soft voice he will think lightly of prophecy.’ So what did He do? He revealed Himself in the voice of his father. Moses thereupon said: ‘Here am I; what does my father desire?’ Then God said: ‘I am not thy father, but THE GOD OF THY FATHER; I have come unto thee gently so that thou be not afraid.’” See also, for the subordination of Moses to Rabbi Akiva to personify the notion of Scripture woven into the sophisticated tapestry of later rabbinc interpretation, BT Men 29b: “Rav Yehuda quoted Rav: When Moses ascended to the heights [to receive the Torah] he found God sitting and drawing crowns upon the letters. Moses said to God, ‘Master of the Universe, what is staying Your hand [from giving me the Torah unadorned]?’ God replied, ‘There is a man who will arise many generations in the future, his name is Akiva ben Yosef. He will interpret mound upon mound of halachot (laws) from each and every marking.’ Moses requested, Master of the Universe, show him to me. God said, ‘Turn backwards [and you will see him].’ Moses [found himself in R. Akiva’s classroom where he] sat at the back of the eighth row. He didn’t understand what they were talking about and felt weak. Then, they came to a matter about which the students asked Akiva, Rabbi, how do you know this? He told them, ‘It is the [oral] law given to Moses at Sinai.’ Moses felt relieved. He returned to God and said, ‘Master of the Universe, you have a person like this and [still You choose to] give the Torah through my hands?’ God replied, ‘Silence! This is according to My plan.’”
unworthy of higher forms of revelation and ultimately rejected his fullest theophany (541AB).58

Placing Moses in the same category as the people of Israel, as spiritually inferior to the patriarchs, is part of Eusebius’ grand project of establishing the church as the heir of the spiritually advanced “Hebrews” of old59 – as opposed to the


59 Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.4.6, 10, 15 (SC 31:19, 20): “If the line be traced back from Abraham to the first man, anyone who should describe those who have obtained a good testimony for righteousness, as Christians in fact, if not in name would not shoot wide of the truth […] it is clearly necessary to consider that religion, which has lately been preached to all nations through the teaching of Christ, the first and most ancient of all religions, and the one discovered by those divinely favoured men in the age of Abraham […] What then should prevent the confession that we who are of Christ practice one and the same mode of life and have one and the same religion as those divinely favoured men of old? Whence it is evident that the perfect religion committed to us by the teaching of Christ is not new and strange, but, if the truth must be spoken, it is the first and the true religion.” Cf. *Dem. Ev.* 1.5 (PG 22:45 C; Ferrar 1.26): “If then the teaching of Christ has bidden all nations now to worship no other God but Him whom the men of old and the pre-Mosaic saints believed in, we are clearly partakers of the religion of these men of old time. And if we partake of their religion we shall surely share their blessing. Yes, and equally with us they knew and bore witness to the Word of God, Whom we love to call Christ. They were thought worthy in very remarkable ways of beholding His actual presence and theophany.”

60 According to Eusebius, the pure religion of the ante- and post-diluvian “Hebrews” (Noah, Enoch, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job) revealed by the divine Logos and plagiarized by all pagan wisdom, is neither Jewish nor Greek, but “the third form of religion [θεοσέβεια], midway between Judaism and Hellenism” (*Dem. ev.* 1.2 [PG 22:25A; Ferrar 1.9]); those saintly “Hebrews” have no part in the Mosaic legislation – they do not keep the Sabbath, are not circumcised (this applies to Melchizedek, Noah, and Enoch), and do not distinguish clean from unclean food – and are declared to be “living a distinctly Christian rather than Jewish life” (PG 22:49; Ferrar 1.29). As such, the “Hebrews” offer the perfect pattern for Christianity, which is also “neither a form of Hellenism, nor of Judaism” but “a religion [θεοσέβεια] with its own characteristic stamp,” “nor new neither original,” but “of great antiquity” (*Dem. Ev.* 1.2 [PG 22:24A; Ferrar 1.7]). Opposed to this spiritual filiation, Eusebius establishes a second one, inaugurated by Moses: the spiritual decay brought about by Israel’s slavery in Egypt made necessary the Mosaic legislation, which was “a constitution adapted to their (low) moral condition:” this is the beginning of the Jewish nation and of the “Old Covenant.” See Eusebius, *Prep Ev* 7.8.37–41 (SC 215:196, 198); *Dem ev* 1.6.13–7 (PG 22:49–57; Ferrar 1.28–34). On Eusebius’ understanding of the term “old covenant” see his remarks at *Dem ev* 1.6 (PG 22:64B; Ferrar, 1.39): “Do not allow the covenant of the
“nation of the Jews,” whose low spiritual condition determines the pedagogical limitation of the Mosaic Law as befitting weaklings and sinners.\(^6\) As for Moses himself, although he is “a Hebrew of Hebrews,”\(^6\) he is presented as “something of a lone Hebrew who had seen more of God than the Jewish nation but less than his ancestors.”\(^6\) Needless to say, this is a major departure from the biblical and post-biblical tradition in which Moses appears as, precisely, \textit{different} and \textit{better} than his contemporaries.

Morlet states that the difference between the patriarchs and Moses reflects the “dichotomy between the Hebrews, who have seen the Word in person due to their spiritual perfection, and the Jews, who were incapable of seeing him other than through the intermediary of angels.”\(^6\) He believes, moreover, that Eusebius’ exploitation of theophanies, which provides “confirmation of the Jews’ spiritual inferiority to the Hebrews,” is an element of originality.\(^6\) What he does not clarify is whether casting Moses as a representative of the spiritually decadent Israel of the captivity is an original move on the part of Eusebius, or an element of received tradition.

It transpires that a clear precedent in earlier tradition cannot be established. Despite lingering uncertainty, Eusebius appears to have proposed an original exegesis.

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\(^{60}\) The expression “nation of the Jews” is often used in this context.


\(^{62}\) Johnson, “The Ends of Transfiguration.”

\(^{63}\) Morlet, \textit{La Démonstration évangélique d’Eusèbe}, 447.

\(^{64}\) Morlet, \textit{La Démonstration évangélique d’Eusèbe}, 445. Cf. Sirinelli’s passing remark (\textit{Les vues historiques d’Eusèbe}, 274) about the extensive argumentation for the inferiority of Moses as indicating that Eusebius was innovating on this point.
4.2 “The Angel Appeared, the Lord Spoke”

Eusebius’ disjunction between the visual and the auditory facets of the theophanies on Sinai, and the corresponding disjunction between divine presence and angelic vision, recall earlier Christian writings. One may think, perhaps, of the reading set forth by Trypho, Justin’s Jewish opponent in the Dialogue, who initially posits the presence of God and the angel at the burning bush, and eventually concedes that a single subject was present at the theophanies at Mamre, Peniel and the burning bush – an undefined agent, whom Trypho even accepts to call “God,” distinct from the supreme God.65 However, for Trypho, the agent “is called and perceived to be an angel of God the Creator of all” (Dial 60.3); while for Justin he “is called an angel, and is God” (Dial 60.4). In short, both see the theophanies as manifestations of an agent that is distinct (in number not will) from the supreme deity; but Trypho’s second power is angelic even though it may be called “God,” while Justin’s is divine and angelomorphic. Eusebius seems to echo Trypho’s initial disjunction between the divine and the angelic entities, but his insistence on the angel as a mode of veiling what is, undeniably, a Christophany, shows him to be closer to Justin’s interpretation in this regard. These parallels are unconvincing, however, as, unlike Eusebius, Justin equates the angel straightforwardly with the Logos and does not view Moses as inferior to the patriarchs.

The mystagogical and iconic reality of the angel is expressed beautifully by Origen, who states that “he who comes before an angel also sees God through an angel [δι’ ἀγγέλου],” so that “God was there in the angel being contemplated [ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῷ ἀγγέλῳ θεωροῦμενος].”66 But Eusebius differs from the great

65 Justin, Dial. 60.1, 3 (Bobichon, 344): [Trypho speaking]: “it was an angel who appeared in the flame of fire, but God who conversed with Moses; so that there were really two persons in company with each other, an angel and God, that appeared in that vision […] the God who communed with Moses from the bush was not the Maker of all things, but He who has been shown to have manifested Himself to Abraham and to Isaac and to Jacob; who also is called and is perceived to be the Angel of God the Maker of all things, because He publishes to men the commands of the Father and Maker of all things.”

66 See Origen, Hom. Jer. 16.3–4 (SC 238:138; FaC 97:169–70): “just as he has an opening through which is observed the back of God” so also “you will see the Law through Moses, and through Isaiah his prophecy, and through Jeremiah other words of God,” and so is also Zechariah’s “the angel who speaks in me” (Zech 4:1) to be understood as “I see God in an angelic way” [βλέπω ἀγγέλικος τὸν θεόν]. This is applicable to the burning bush scene, where “he who comes before an angel also sees God through an angel [δι’ ἀγγέλου] […] Thus God was there in the angel being contemplated [ὁ θεὸς ἐν τῷ ἀγγέλῳ θεωροῦμενος], as God is known through the rock and the opening which is in it.”
There is more similarity with Eusebius’ much younger contemporary, Ephrem of Nisibis, who envisions Moses being at first drawn in by an angelic manifestation, then addressed by God, and eventually subjected to an overwhelming vision of God by means of the angel. See Ephrem, Commentary on Exodus 3.1: "When Moses went to look at the bush that the fire did not consume, and as he approached, a simple vision of an angel appeared to him. As he came [closer], it was not the angel that [first] appeared to him that addressed him, but God who later appeared to him by means of an angel in an awesome vision, and said to him: Do not approach this spot as you would some common place. This is a holy place […] on account of God who dwells in the fire that burns in the bush […] Up to this point Moses proceeded without fear. But when he saw a sight that was more than his eyes [could bear], he hid his face out of fear of looking at God the way he looked at the angel" (CSCO 152/153: 129; trans. E.G. Matthews, Jr. and J. P. Amar in FaCh 91:231). Theodoret of Cyrus, Qu. Exod. 5 (LEC 1:226). Interestingly, Theodoret of Cyrus is the first writer to note the view of "some" that an angel appeared to Moses in the bush; in his own estimation, the entire context (ὅλον δὲ τὸ χωρίον) indicates to him that Moses’ interlocutor was the Only-Begotten Son. Theodoret takes “angel” as a designation of the distinct πρόσωπον of the Son (via “angel of great counsel,” Isa 9:5), while “I am who I am” and “God” indicate his divine οὐσία.

As one would expect, Athanasius applies all necessary theological controls, in order to ultimately identify the “angel” as the Son/Logos (called “angel” for his

67 There is more similarity with Eusebius’ much younger contemporary, Ephrem of Nisibis, who envisions Moses being at first drawn in by an angelic manifestation, then addressed by God, and eventually subjected to an overwhelming vision of God by means of the angel. Athanasius of Alexandria also knows (perhaps by reading Eusebius) that the sacred text might impose a distinction between the visual and the auditory components of the theophany, and that the visual component is likely brought about through the mediation of an angelic presence:

But if at any time, when the Angel was seen, he who saw it heard God’s voice, as took place at the bush … [it was that] in the Angel God spoke. And what was seen was an Angel; but God spoke in him.69

68 Pace Doerfler (“Trinity Unawares,” 488 n. 5), who suggests that “[a] similar emphasis on Abraham as the primordial Jew, superseding Moses, can be found in other apologetic literature from the early Christian era” in Origen’s Contra Celsum 1.22. That text, however, while emphasizing Abraham’s universal reputation for holiness, does not compare the two biblical characters. See Origen’s Contra Celsum 1.22 (SC 132:132, tr. ANF): “And it is not Moses alone who mentions the name of Abraham, assigning to him great intimacy with God (οἰκεῖων συντόν θεῷ); but many also of those who give themselves to the practice of the conjuration of evil spirits, employ in their spells the expression God of Abraham, pointing out by the very name the friendship (that existed) between that just man and God (τὴν πρὸς τὸν δίκαιον τοῦ θεου οἰκείοτητα). And yet, while making use of the phrase ‘God of Abraham,’ they do not know who Abraham is! And the same remark applies to Isaac, and Jacob, and Israel; which names, although confessedly Hebrew, are frequently introduced by those Egyptians who profess to produce some wonderful result by means of their knowledge.”

69 Athanasius, CA 3.25.14 (Athanasius Werke I.1, 3:322; trans. NPNF).
role in revealing and announcing the Father\textsuperscript{70} and affirm his status not as an instrument of God, but God’s very own expression.\textsuperscript{71}

Among the later fourth-century writers, it is Eunomius who sounds remarkably like Eusebius in his exegesis of Exodus 3. Of course, he moves the Eusebian reading of the passage in the opposite direction of Athanasius: “The one that sent Moses was He Who Is, while the one through whom he sent and spoke, is the angel of Him Who Is.”\textsuperscript{72}

\section{5 Conclusion}

Eusebius of Caesarea’s exegesis of the burning bush theophany adds a distinct voice to the rich chorus of Jewish and Christian interpreters of this famous biblical text. This writer posits a disjunction between the visual and the auditory aspects of the theophany, arguing that the angel \textit{appears}, while the Lord \textit{speaks} to Moses; and he demotes the figure of the prophet by insisting that his spiritual attunement to God ranked much lower than that of the patriarchs of old.

It is difficult to find an entirely satisfactory term of comparison for this exegesis of the burning bush. It is clear that Eusebius stands in clear continuity with earlier exegetical tradition: he generally views theophanies as christophanies, unsurprisingly so, since, to quote Morlet, he is “the last representative of pre-Nicene theology,” and echoes Origen’s view about the mystagogical and iconic function of biblical “angels.” Nevertheless, granting real and independent

\textsuperscript{70} See Athanasius’ remarks, just a few lines earlier, about Jacob’s prayer for his grandsons (Gen 48:16, ὁ ἄγγελος ὁ ρουμένος με ἐκ τῶν κακῶν εὐλογήσαι τὰ παιδιά τοῦ): “But if it belong to none other than God to bless and to deliver, and none other was the deliverer of Jacob than the Lord Himself, and Him that delivered him the Patriarch besought for his grandsons, evidently none other did he join to God in his prayer than God’s Word, whom therefore he called Angel because it is He alone who reveals the Father.” (Athanasius, \textit{CA} 3.25.13 [\textit{AW} I.1, 3:322; trans. NPNF], emphasis added).

\textsuperscript{71} Athanasius, \textit{CA} 3.25.14 (\textit{AW} I.1, 3:322–23; trans. NPNF): “… But what God speaks, it is very plain He speaks through the Word, and not through another. And the Word, as being not separate from the Father, nor unlike and foreign to the Father’s Essence, what He works, those are the Father’s works […] And he who hears the Word, knows that he hears the Father; as he who is irradiated by the radiance, knows that he is enlightened by the sun.”

existence to the “angel” mentioned in Exod 3:2 differentiates Eusebius from his predecessors. The similarities with Eunomius and, especially, Ephrem of Nisibis require further analysis, which falls outside the scope of this article.

Eusebius’ interpretation of theophanies is clearly different from that of Augustine: the bishop of Hippo denied the real presence of the Logos in theophanies, and settled, at the mature stage of his reflection, on the notion of theophanies as created manifestations of the Trinity. For Eusebius, by contrast, even if the Sinai theophanies are mediated by angelic visual manifestation, that vision \([\text{optasia}]\) conveys a real presence \([\text{parousia}]\) of the Logos.

The exegesis of Exodus 3 is merely one aspect of Eusebius’ views about Moses as spiritually inferior to the patriarchs, which is, in turn, an integral part of Eusebius’ grand apology designed to carve out a space for the Church as \([\text{triton genos}]\), superior to the synagogue and more legitimately heir to the patriarchs. Still, the very daring “demotion” of Moses, in defiance of established Jewish and Christian tradition about the incomparable “prophet king,” \(^{73}\) remains puzzling.

Perhaps this puzzlement is a measure of the misguided but still prevailing assumption about Eusebius as a dutiful compiler of traditions, but mediocre and unoriginal theologian. It may be time to discard this assumption and read the (unfortunately under-studied) Prophetic Extracts and Proof of the Gospel with heightened expectations. Eusebius’ original exegesis should enrich the scholarly account of the \(Wirkungsgeschichte\) of Exodus 3.

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\(^{73}\) I am borrowing the phrase from Wayne Meeks, *The Prophet King: Moses Traditions and the Johannine Christology* (Leiden: Brill, 1967).


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