O οὐν εὐλογητὸς Χριστὸς ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν:

OBSERVATIONS ON THE EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE BURNING BUSH SCENE

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Résumé

Un aperçu des productions exégétiques, doctrinales, hymnographiques et iconographiques dans la riche histoire de la réception d’Exode 3 au cours du premier millénaire de notre ère conduit à la conclusion que la lecture chrétienne la plus ancienne, la plus répandue et la plus constante de ce texte a été son interprétation comme manifestation du Logos incarnaturum, comme « Christophanie ». Les termes couramment utilisés dans la littérature savante pour rendre compte de cette approche exégétique sont insatisfaisants, car ils ne parviennent pas à saisir la dimension épiphanique du texte, tel qu’il a été lu par de nombreux exégètes chrétiens anciens. Cet article examine aussi – et rejette – la proposition récente d’évaluer la relation directe entre le Christ et le O οὐν d’Exode 3,14 comme un exemple de la « Bible réécrite ».

Summary

A survey of the exegetical, doctrinal, hymnographic, and iconographic productions illustrating the rich reception history of Exodus 3 during the first millennium CE leads to the conclusion that the earliest, most widespread and enduring Christian reading of this text was its interpretation as a manifestation of the Logos-to-be-incarnate: a “Christophany”. The terms currently employed in scholarship to account for this exegetical approach are unsatisfactory because they fail to capture the epiphanic dimension of the text as...
read by many early Christian exegetes. The article also examines — and rejects — the recent proposal to see the straightforward equation of Christ with the Ὁ ὤν of Exodus 3:14 as an example of “rewritten Bible”.

Introduction

The Jewish and Christian writers of the early centuries CE put forth many considerations in their reflection on the famous episode of the burning bush. This paper contributes to the discussion by focusing on an under-researched strand in the history of interpretation of this text, namely its christological exegesis, as expressed in early Christian exegetical, doctrinal, hymnographic, and iconographic materials. After a detailed survey of the relevant texts and a discussion of the theological intentions underlying the relationship between Christ and the Ὁ ὤν of Exodus 3:14, I argue that scholars have generally failed to distinguish adequately the christological exegesis from other strands of interpretation, and to recognize the theological importance of this earliest, most widespread and influential reading of the burning bush episode.

1. Who is He-Who-Is?

1.1. The First and Second Centuries

The New Testament references to the divine Ἰησοῦς Χριστός of Exodus 3:14 are not difficult to find. The Book of Revelation, as Charles Gieschen has shown extensively, attributes the divine Name to the Son.¹ This is especially noteworthy of the designations at Rev 1:8 (“I am the Alpha and the Omega, says the Lord God, He-Who-Is [Ὁ ὤν] and He-Who-was and He-who-is-to-come, the Almighty”), derived from three variations of the divine name, namely Iaô/YHWH Elohim, and YHWH Sabaoth.² In the Gospel of John, Christ affirms about himself, Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was

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glad (...) before Abraham was Εγώ εἰμι” (John 8:56.58) and, to the guards enquiring about his identity, “Εγώ εἰμι” followed by the significant theological comment, “When Jesus said to them, ‘Εγώ εἰμι’ they stepped back and fell to the ground” (John 18:5–6). In these and other emphatic statements (e.g. John 6:20, “Εγώ εἰμι, do not be afraid”; John 8:24, “Unless you believe that ἐγώ εἰμι, you will die in your sins”; John 8:28, “Jesus said, When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that ἐγώ εἰμι”), the echo of Exodus 3:14 appears refracted through the prism of Isaiah: “I, God, am first, and for the things that are coming, ἐγώ εἰμι” (Isaiah 41:4); “Be my witnesses; I too am a witness, says the Lord God, and the servant whom I have chosen so that you may know and believe and understand that ἐγώ εἰμι” (Isaiah 43:10); “ἐγώ εἰμι, ἐγώ εἰμι the one who blots out your acts of lawlessness, and I will not remember them at all” (Isaiah 43:25); “I am the first, and I am forever” (Isaiah 48:12). 3

In its retelling of the burning bush episode, Acts 7 retains ὅραμα (Acts 7:31; Exodus 3:3) but changes ἄγγελος κυρίου (Exodus 3:2) to ἄγγελος (Acts 7:30) and κύριος (Exodus 3:4) to φωνὴ κυρίου (Acts 7:31). These slight modifications are probably inconsequential. A few verses later, the text states that Moses was sent on his mission σὺν χειρὶ ἀγγέλου τοῦ ὀφθέντος αὐτῷ ἐν τῇ βάτῳ (Acts 7:35). The identification between the one who appears to Moses at the burning bush and the luminous entity (pillar of light/angel) leading Israel through the desert raises the question of the relationship between this angelic (or angelomorphic) character and YHWH. Given the sparse information, however, any solution must remain conjectural. 4

4. A. T. Hanson, Jesus Christ in the Old Testament (Eugene, OR, 2011) 86-88, who notes first that Acts 7 offers (no more than) “a hint that it was Christ who appeared to Moses” (86), but then overstates his case and concludes that “the only meaning that Stephen can have intended to convey is that the angel was the Son” (88). By contrast, Jude 5 seems quite straightforward and radical in its identification of “the Lord” of the Exodus account with Jesus: Ἰησοῦς λαὸν ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου σώσας τὸ δεύτερον τοὺς μὴ πιστεύσαντας ἀπώλεσεν (ESV: “Jesus, who saved
The Christians of the second century understood the burning bush episode as a theophany (or rather, more specifically, a manifestation of the Logos-to-be-incarnate, a “Christophany”), identifying Moses’ interlocutor on Sinai with the Logos or Son of God. This is the very heart of Justin Martyr’s theology, expressed both in the apologetic treatise addressed to the Senate and Emperor in Rome and in his direct engagement with Judaism. Writing a generation after Justin, and probably very indebted to him, Irenaeus articulated the same christological interpretation of the burning scene both in his Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching, a simple catechetical work addressed to his flock in Gaul, and in the more sophisticated Against Heresies.

a people out of the land of Egypt, afterward destroyed those who did not believe”). This reading, which is now offered by the latest critical editions (NA 28/ GNT 5/ SBLGNT), was previously rejected in favor of another textual variant (“the Lord saved the people out of Egypt”) because, according to Metzger’s Textual Commentary, the majority of the Committee found the mention of Jesus in a statement about the redemption out of Egypt “strange and unparalleled” and therefore “difficult to the point of impossibility”. B. M. METZGER, A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament, Second Edition a Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament (2nd ed.; London/New York, 1994) 657.


6. Irenaeus, epid. 44-46; Irenaeus, haer. 4.10.1 (A. ROUSSEAU [ed.], Irénée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies livre IV, tome I et II, [Sources Chrétiennes 100; Paris, 1965] 492). Note, however, Irenaeus haer. 3.6.2 (A. ROUSSEAU – L. DOUTRELEAU [ed.] Irénée de Lyon, Contre les hérésies livre, tome II. Livre III: Edition critique, texte et traduction, [Sources Chrétiennes 211; Paris,1974] 68-70): “no other is named as God, or is called Lord, except Him who is God and Lord of all, who also said to Moses ‘I am that I am’ and ‘thus shall you say to the children of Israel: He-Who-Is, has sent me unto you’ and His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who makes those that believe in His name the sons of God. And again, when the Son speaks to Moses, he says, ‘I have come down to deliver this people’ (Exod 3:8); for it is He who descended and ascended for
One generation after Irenaeus, the argument from theophanies occurs in the writing of Tertullian and Clement of Alexandria. In Carthage the theology of theophanies retains the centrality it had in Justin and Irenaeus. Indeed, Tertullian’s argument, in *Adversus Praxeum*, that the Son and the Father are distinct, relies on the traditional affirmation that it is the Son of God who preexisted the Incarnation, since it is he who “called to Moses out of the burning bush,” and “appeared to the prophets and the patriarchs, as also to Moses indeed himself.” To be sure, the Son’s apparitions to patriarchs and prophets, including Moses, were always somewhat veiled and imperfect — *in speculo et aenigmate et visione et somnio*. The reason is that they occurred “according to the faculties of men, not in accordance with the full glory of the Godhead (*secundum hominum capacitates, non secundum plenitudinem divinitatis*) since “the Son (…), considered in himself (*suo nomine*), is invisible, in that He is God and the Word and Spirit of God.” The Old Testament theophanies are revelations from the Father worked, in anticipation of the Incarnation, by the Word-to-be-made-flesh (*sermo qui caro erit futuro*). A more perfect vision of the Face of God — i.e., of the Son — than was available to Moses on Sinai (or for Isaiah and Ezekiel in Zion or its heavenly representation) was reserved for Tabor.

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In Alexandria, Clement is clearly aware of the old theology of theophanies. In his *Paedagoge*, “our pedagogue, the holy God Jesus” (ὁ δὲ ἡμέτερος παιδαγωγὸς ἅγιος θεὸς Ἰησοῦς) is explicitly identified with the “Lord” who led Israel out of Egypt (ὁ ἐξαγαγὼν σε ἐκ γῆς Αἰγύπτου) and led the people (ἡγεὶν αὐτούς) through the desert, who gave the Law through his servant Moses (Exod 20:2; Deut 32:10–12). The difference between the *Logos* present in the 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; τίκτεται). Nevertheless, Clement seems to have viewed the christological exegesis of theophanies as part of the “lower,” preliminary, exposition of Christian doctrine. Speaking about Exodus 3, he connects the manifestation of the *Logos* at the burning bush with the crown of thorns worn by the incarnate *Logos*. This, he explains, is “a mystical meaning” of the crown, which he adduces by ascending from the *paedagogic* exposition of basic Christian teaching, to the *didaskalic* — more advanced — doctrinal exposition.\(^{11}\)

Origen is generally more interested in speculating about the participation of beings in the Existing One, that is, the relationship between the divine ὁ ὤν and the created ὄντες, and the status of what is “nonexistent”.\(^{12}\) Specific New Testament passages (Mark 10:17; Matt 22:32; Rom 4:17; Rom 12:3; Eph 1:10)


are ingeniously connected to Exod 3:14 in an exegesis designed to support the notion of creaturely participation in Him Who Is. Yet, the Alexandrian master is not ready to abandon the traditional christological interpretation of the burning bush. To substantiate his central thesis that “the Savior has become a man to men and an angel to angels”, Origen identifies Jesus with “the angel of the Lord” (Exod 3:2) in the burning bush scene.

13. In Origen, *Princ. 1.3.6-7* (H. Crouzel – M. Simonetti [ed.], *Origène, Traité des principes*, tome I. Livres I et II: Introduction, texte critique de la version de Rufin, traduction [Sources Chrétiennes 252; Paris, 1978] 154-160), for instance, Exod 3:14 is applied to the Father, as the one in whom all existent creatures participate, whereas participation in the Logos is restricted only to rational creatures, and participation in the Spirit is characteristic only of “the saints.” See also Origen, *Comm. In Jo. 2.94-96* (C. Blanc [ed.], *Origène, Anonyme apocryphes, Commentaire sur Saint Jean*, tome I. Livre I-IV [Sources Chrétiennes 120bis; Paris, 1966] 270, 272), where, in order to clarify the status of οὐδὲν — since he reads this verse as χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲν (rather than οὐδὲ ἕν) — Origen invokes Exod 3:14 alongside Mark 10:17 (God is the only “good one”).

Exe. 4:17 (A. Pietersman – B. G. Wright [ed.], *A New English Translation of Septuagint*, [Oxford/New York, 2007] 22: “O Lord, do not surrender your scepter to those who don’t exist [τοῖς μὴ οὖσι]”) and Rom 4:17 (God calling τὰ μὴ ὄντα ὡς ὄντα) in support of his thesis that “those things that are not” refers not to realities that have never existed, but to realities that are evil because of their separation from God, the One-Who-Is, the Good One. Similarly, texts such as Rom 12:3 (Δέω γὰρ (…) παντὶ τῷ ὄντι ἐν ὑμῖν), Eph 1:1 (τοῖς ἁγίοις τοῖς οὖσιν), and Matt 22:32 (θεὸς ζώντων) are read in connection to Exod 3:14 so as to support the same notion of participation in Him-Who-Is. See Origen, *Comm. Rom. 9.2.1* (H. Bonnel – M. Fédou – L. Brésard [ed.], *Origène, Commentaire sur l’Épître aux Romains*, tome 4: Livres IX-X [Sources Chrétiennes 555; Paris, 2012] 80; D. J. McGonagle [ed.], *Origen: Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 6-10* [The Fathers of the Church 104; Paris, 2002] 198): “Those are not who are not partakers of him who truly is, who said to Moses (…) ‘He-Who-Is, sent me to you!’”; Origen, *Comm. Matthew* 17.36 (E. Klostermann – E. Benz [ed.], *Origenes Matthäuserklärung* [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte 40; Leipzig, 2015] 700-701): θεὸς ζώντων (Matt 22:32) is synonymous to θεὸς ὄντων, and defines those who “live” and truly “are” as participants in the divine grace; Origen, *Comm. In Eph. 1:1* see J. A. F. Gregg, “The Commentary of Origen Upon the Epistle to the Ephesians,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 3 (1902) 233-244, 398-420, 554-576, esp. 235; R. Heine, *The Commentaries of Origen and Jerome on St Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians* (Oxford, 2002) 80: “Consider, then, if not as in Exodus he who utters the words ‘He-Who-Is’ to Moses speaks his own name, so those who participate in ‘the one who is’ become those ‘who are’ called, as it were, from ‘not being’ into ‘being’.”
(as well as “the angel of great counsel” in Isa 9:5 [LXX]). As a matter of fact, in the same Commentary on Romans referred to above for the fanciful exegetical linking of Rom 12:3 and Exod 3:14, Origen, basing himself on the pseudo-exegesis of the name Jesse as “to me he is”, gives voice to his very traditional faith:

So, then, at the coming of Christ, all who believed in him appropriately said: To me, he is; for Moses himself said of him, “He-Who-Is has sent me to you.” (…) And he is the very one who rose from the root of Jesse, and in him the Gentiles will hope. 15

1.2. “Miahypostatic” and “Dyohypostatic” Theologies and the Exegesis of Exodus 3

In the third and fourth centuries, the christological reading of Exodus 3 is invoked as part of the battle between “miahypostatic” (or “modalistic”) and “dyohypostatic” theologies. Aside from Tertullian’s Against Praxeas, discussed above, other examples are a letter signed by six bishops (under the presidency of Hymenaeus of Jerusalem) and addressed to Paul of Samosata, the complex disputes among Marcellus of Ancyra, Asterius, and Eusebius of Caesarea, and the critique of Paul of Samosata and Marcellus of Ancyra in the opening section of an anti-Homoian letter penned in 359 by Basil of Ancyra / George of Laodicea. 16


In the *Letter of the Six Bishops*, written some time prior to the condemnation and deposition of the Samosatene in 268, Paul is challenged “to think and to teach” in concert with the signatories on a few points (ταῦτα ἀπὸ πλεῖστων ὀλίγα). Part of the doctrinal litmus test is the christological interpretation of theophanies, including that of Exodus 3, which takes up an entire section of the letter. What is evident throughout is the conviction of the bishops that the “christophanic” approach to the burning bush is a non-negotiable *datum* of tradition:

We say that he was the one who descended and showed himself to Abraham at the oak of Mamre as one of the three, with whom, as ‘lord’ and ‘judge,’ the patriarch held converse. (...) He is the one who, fulfilling the design of the Father, appeared and spoke to the patriarchs (...) being confessed sometimes as ‘angel,’ sometimes as ‘lord,’ and sometimes as ‘God’ (...) we know no mediator between God and mankind other than him. For we have been taught this through Moses: ‘Now an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a fire of flame out of the bush’ (...); ‘Now when the Lord saw that he was drawing near to see, the Lord called him from the bush’. And again: ‘when you leave you shall assemble the elders’ council of the sons of Israel, and you shall say to them, the Lord, the God of your fathers, has appeared to me, God of Abraam and God of Isaak and God of Iakob (...)’

Eusebius of Caesarea and Marcellus of Ancyra share in the venerable tradition of viewing Old Testament theophanies as manifestations of the Word of God but understand the presence of the Logos at the burning bush in very different ways. Eusebius explicitly identifies the Logos with the *Tetragrammaton* and,

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18. The *Logos* speaking to Moses was ὁ Κύριος ὁ (...) διὰ τοῦ τετραγράμμου δηλούμενος, Eusebius, *Extracts* 1.10-12 (J. P. Migne [ed.], *Eusebii Pamphili, Opera Omnia quae extant* [Patrologia graeca 22; Paris, 1857] 1053D; 1056C; 1065 A, C; 1068A]). There are many passages in which Eusebius identified YHWH with the Son, although an identification with the Father also occurs. See S. Morlet, “Mentions et interprétations du tétragramme chez Eusèbe de Césaré”, *Revue d'études augustinienes et patristiques* 60 (2014) 213-252, esp. 226-227, 242-247.
like Justin, refers to the Logos as δεύτερος θεός. However, Eusebius also introduces a disjunction between the visionary and the auditory aspects of the episode: the same Logos who appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, later spoke to Moses without himself appearing to him, but rather by using the visual manifestation of an angel (Exod 3:2) as an external instrument. It is important

19. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.2.6, 13 (E. Schwartz – T. Mommsen, – F. Winkelmann [ed.], *Eusebius, Die Kirchengeschichte* [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte 6; Leipzig, 1999] 12, 18; English translation: P. Schaff – H. Wace [ed.], *Eusebius Pamphilius: Church History, Life of Constantine, Oration in Praise of Constantine* [Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Series II: Vol. 1; Grand Rapids, MI, 2013]): “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. For the Scripture says in the same words and with reference to the same one, When the Lord saw that he drew near to see, the Lord called to him out of the bush and said (...)” For the Logos as δεύτερος θεός, see Eusebius, *Extracts* 1.12 (J. P. Migne [ed.], *Eusebii Pamphili, Opera Omnia quae extant* [Patrologia graeca 22; Paris, 1857] 1068 C); Eusebius *Dem. ev.* 5.30 (J. P. Migne [ed.], *Eusebii Pamphili, Opera Omnia quae extant* [Patrologia graeca 22; Paris, 1857] 409 D; W. J. Ferrar [tr.], *Eusebius, Demonstratio evangelica* [London, 1920] 271).

20. The relationship between the Lord and the angel, and the “mechanics” of revelation are described by carefully distinguishing the verbs: the Lord commanding, the angel ministering (Eusebius, *Extracts* 1.9, J. P. Migne [ed.], *Eusebii Pamphili, Opera Omnia quae extant*, [Patrologia graeca 22; Paris, 1857] 1052 A): Κύριος μὲν (...) ὁ διαταττόμενος, ἄγγελος δὲ ὁ (…) διακονούμενος. Eusebius describes the relationship between the Lord and the angel by drawing an analogy with 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 ἂν δι’ ὀργάνου θεσπίζων) so also at the burning bush: the angel appears, but it is the Word who speaks to Moses, and he is using the angel as an instrument, διὰ τοῦ φανέντος ἀγγέλου τὰ προκείμενα θεσπίζει; Eusebius, *Dem. ev.* 5.13, (I. Heikel [ed.], *Eusebius, Die Demonstratio Evangelica* [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte 23; Leipzig 1913] 239; W. J. Ferrar [tr.], *Eusebius, Demonstratio evangelica* [London, 1920], 257-258]). Cf. Eusebius, *Dem. ev.* 5.13 (I. Heikel [ed.], *Eusebius, Die Demonstratio Evangelica* [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte 23; Leipzig 1913] 239; W. J. Ferrar [tr.], *Eusebius, Demonstratio evangelica* [London, 1920] 258-258): διὰ τοῦ φανέντος ἀγγέλου τὰ προκείμενα θεσπίζει; Eusebius, *Extracts* 1.9 (J. P. Migne [ed.], *Eusebii Pamphili, Opera Omnia quae*
to note that Eusebius did not develop his exegesis of Exodus 3 in
the course of his engagement with Marcellus but recycled views
he had articulated much earlier, before the Arian controversy,
probably as part of an anti-Jewish strategy.21

Marcellus’ understanding of the burning bush episode, as re-
lected in his criticism of Asterius and the latter’s defense by
Eusebius, is quite different. On the assumption that God is an
undivided monad,22 Marcellus argues that the “angel of the Lord”
who appears (Exod 3:2) — called ἄγγελος because he appeared
in order to announce (ἵνα ἀναγγείλῃ) to Moses the reality and
unicity of God — is none other than the Logos who uttered “I
am He-Who-Is” (Exod 3:14).

extant [Patrologia graeca 22; Paris, 1857] 1052A): ὁ Κύριος δι’ αὐτοῦ
χρηματίζων. At Extracts 1.9 (J. P. Migne [ed.], Eusebii Pamphili, Op-
era Omnia quae extant [Patrologia graeca 22; Paris, 1857] 1049 C) he
also adds another analogy: “the Lord dispenses his teaching as through
an interpreter” (δι’ οὗ [scil. ἄγγέλου] καὶ ὁ Κύριος ὡς περὶ δι’ ἑρμηνείας
χρηματίζων διδάσκει). On Eusebius’ views about biblical inspiration, see

21. Eusebius’ exegesis of Exodus 3 is merely one aspect of his pecu-
liar theory that Moses was spiritually inferior to the patriarchs, a mere
beginner, “not fit for aught than angelic visions”, Eusebius, Dem. ev.
5.13 (I. Heikel [ed.], Eusebius, Die Demonstratio Evangelica [Die grie-
chischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte 23; Leipzig
1913]; W. J. Ferrar [tr.], Eusebius, Demonstratio evangelica [London,
1920] 240, 258). In fact, Eusebius observes, throughout all of Scripture
God is not even once said to have appeared to Moses as, by contrast, he is
said to have appeared to the patriarchs (Eusebius, Extracts 1.9, Eusebius,
Extracts 1.9, J. P. Migne [ed.], Eusebii Pamphili, Opera Omnia quae extant
[Patrologia graeca 22; Paris, 1857] 1052 A); Extracts 1.12, J. P.
Migne [ed.], Eusebii Pamphili, Opera Omnia quae extant [Patrologia
graeca 22; Paris, 1857] 1061A). The meticulous “demotion” of Moses by
means of exegesis focused on passages such as Exodus 19:24, and 33, and
Numbers 12, and the reference to the views of other exegetes (Eusebius,
Extracts 1.12, J. P. Migne [ed.], Eusebii Pamphili, Opera Omnia quae extant
[Patrologia graeca 22; Paris, 1857] 1061 A, ὡς νομίσεις τῷ; ὡς
ὁιρεῖν ἄν τις) suggests that he is attempting to counter an established
Jewish tradition affirming the spiritual primacy of the Jews over the
Gentiles. See B. G. Bucur, “God Never Appeared to Moses: Eusebius of
Caesarea’s Peculiar Exegesis of the Burning Bush Theophany,” Journal

[rev.], Eusebius Werke 4: Gegen Marcell. Über die kirchliche Theologie.
Die Fragmente Marcell [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der
“Who, then, was the one who said ‘I am He-Who-Is’ — the Son or the Father?” Marcellus’ intention in asking this question is to highlight the absurdity, but especially the “impiety,” of viewing the Father and the Son as two hypostases. To say that it was the Father who appeared at the burning bush would imply that the Father is truly existent in contradistinction to the Son; and this would, therefore, deny of the divinity of the Son. Indeed, God and his Word cannot be distinguished any more than one distinguishes a human person from its voice, and a person’s will, speech, and action from its exercise of reasoning. To say, therefore, that the Word appears and proclaims, “I am He-Who-Is” expresses the theological notion of the Father speaking through the Word: λέγει μὲν τῷ Μωσεί ὁ πατήρ, λέγει δὲ δηλονότι διὰ τοῦ λόγου. Briefly put, for Marcellus theophanies are always “by the Father through the Word.”

Later polemical exchanges continued to explore the connection, made clear in the debate between Eusebius and Marcellus, between (i) dyohypostatic theology, (ii) the refusal of ascribing of ὁ ὤν to the Son, and (iii) the supposed transformation of the latter into a non-existent. The anti-Homoian letter by Basil of Ancyra/George of Laodicea takes issue with the Marcellan interpretation of the burning bush (which it ascribes to both Paul


26. Marcellus, Against Marcellus 2.2, 11; Eccl. Theol. 1.17 (H. Klostermann – G. C. Hansen [rev.], Eusebius Werke 4: Gegen Marcell. Über die kirchliche Theologie. Die Fragmente Marcells, [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte 14; Berlin 1991] 40, 77, 112): “Just as all creatures are made by the Father through the Word (ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς διὰ τοῦ λόγου γέγονεν), so also are all utterances made by the Father through the Word (ὑπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς διὰ τοῦ λόγου σημαίνεται)”; “For whatever the Father says is always expressed by means of the Word’s act of speaking (πάντα γὰρ ὅσα ἄν ὁ πατήρ λέγη, ταῦτα πανταχοῦ διὰ τοῦ λόγου λέγων φαίνεται).
of Samosata and Marcellus of Ancyra), faulting it for reducing the Logos to a mere verbal utterance or verbal operation. By contrast, the letter states that the Son, too, is “He-Who-Is” and, therefore, not a mere ῥῆμα, but ὑπόστασις or οὐσία.27 The same reasoning is used by Athanasius against those who hold that the Son is born from the Father, but refuse the formula of Nicaea “out of the Father’s essence”: they would be reducing “Father” to something devoid of essence, “something around him” (οὐκ οὐσίαν (...) ἀλλ’ ἐτερόν τι περὶ αὐτόν), and “Logos” or “Son” to a mere name, devoid of essence (οὐκ οὐσίαν, ἀλλ’ ὄνομα μόνον) and, thus, of reality.28


28. Athanasius, Syn. 34.4 (H. G. OPITZ – A. MARTIN – X. MORALES [ed.], Athanase d’Alexandrie. Lettre sur les synodes de Rimini et de Séleucie d’Isaurie, [Source Chretiennes 563; Paris 2013] 300); cf. Athanasius, Decr. 22.2 (J. P. MIGNE, Athanasius, Opera omnia quae extant [Patrologia Graeca 25; Paris 1857] 456 A): since whatever God is, he is something simple, when saying “God” and naming the Father, “we do not name anything, as it were, around him, but are, rather, pointing to his very essence,” οὐδέν τι ὡς περὶ αὐτὸν ὀνομάζομεν, ἀλλ’ αὐτὴν τὴν οὐσίαν αὐτοῦ σημαίνομεν. Cf. Ps.-Athanasius, CA 4.1 (M. VINZENT, “Pseudo-Athanasius, Contra Arianos IV: Eine Schrift gegen Asterius von Kappadokien, Eusebius von Cäsarea, Markell von Ankyra und Photin von Sirmium,” Vigiliae Christianae 36 [1997] 142): the divine Logos is “essential [οὐσίωδης] Logos and essential Wisdom,” because God does not have this Logos similarly to human weakness — specifically, unlike human reason, not “merely an indicative sound” [ἅπλως φωνὴ σημαντική]; CA 4.2 (M. VINZENT, “Pseudo-Athanasius, Contra Arianos IV: Eine Schrift gegen Asterius von Kappadokien, Eusebius von Cäsarea, Markell von Ankyra und Photin von Sirmium”, Vigiliae Christianae 36, [1997] 431-444), which also attacks the error, ascribed to Sabellius, of viewing the Word/Son/Wisdom not as real existence but as “mere name” (ὄνομα μόνον), “empty names” (οὐχ ὑφεστήκεν (...)
1.3. Athanasius of Alexandria

During the Arian controversy, the use of the non-biblical term οὐσία came to be justified by reference to the ὁ ὤν of Exod 3:14. It was, apparently, Athanasius who originated this rich exegetical tradition.29 Behind this speculative, metaphysical recourse to Exodus 3, however, lies the bedrock of the “christophanic” reading of the text, a tradition that Athanasius shares and, on occasion, articulates without reservations. In Contra Arianos, for instance, Athanasius has no hesitation in rehearsing the pre-Nicene argument for the divinity of the Son: He is preexistent and divine and, as such, always already the object of human and angelic worship, because Abraham worships him in his tent (Genesis 18), Moses worships him at the burning bush (Exodus 3), and myriads of angels worship him in Daniel’s vision (Daniel 7).30

Athanasius’ theological position is, quite clearly, that “Moses beheld God” just as “to Abraham appeared God,” more specifically the Logos, since “what God speaks, it is very plain He speaks through the Word, and not through another”.31 At


CA 3.25.14, however, he seems to take seriously Eusebius of Caesarea’s view that God occasionally appears and speaks (to Abraham and Moses) through angels as through the pillar of cloud:

But if at any time, when the Angel was seen, he who saw it heard God’s voice, as took place at the bush (...) yet was not the Angel the God of Abraham, but in the Angel God spoke. And what was seen was an Angel; but God spoke in him. For as He spoke to Moses in the pillar of a cloud in the tabernacle, so also God appears and speaks in Angels.32

Athanasius accepts 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; he maintains, nevertheless, that the auditory component is to be ascribed to the Logos, and that the Logos is not, like the angel, an instrument of God, but God’s very own expression. Athanasius establishes that an angelic manifestation (as per Eusebius’ exegesis) would not convey perfectly the divine source and content of the revelation. His reasoning is that no creature is able to convey the revelational work of God, because “being works, they cannot work what God works”; even the angels are separate and divided (κεχωρισμένοι καὶ διεστηκότες) from the only God in nature. Unlike creatures, the Logos is “not separate (οὐ κεχωρισμένος) from the Father, nor unlike and foreign to the Father’s Essence”, so that “what He works, those are the Father’s works” and “what the Son gives, that is the Father’s gift”.33 It follows, then, that only the Son can convey the Father’s visual and auditory revelation perfectly: seeing the Son, one sees the Father; hearing the Word, one hears the Father; receiving what the Son works and gives, one receives the Father’s works (ἔργα) and gift (δόσις).


1.4. Pro-Nicene Appeal to Exodus 3

In subsequent decades, despite their sharp theological opposition, pro-Nicenes and Eunomians continue to share the assumption that Moses’ interlocutor was Christ. In fact, considered strictly as exegetes of Exodus 3, Eunomius sounds remarkably like Eusebius of Caesarea, while Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa sound like Marcellus and Athanasius. Indeed, Eunomius affirms that “[t]he one that sent Moses was He-Who-Is, while the one through whom he sent and spoke, is the angel of Him Who Is, but God of everything else, which is what he calls the Lord”, whereas the argument, articulated by Marcellus, Basil of Ancyra, and Athanasius, that the strict separation between ὁ ὤν and ὁ τοῦ ὄντος ἄγγελος amounts to equating the Son to a μὴ ὤν, is now made by Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. The

34. See, for instance, Gregory of Nyssa, Refut. 29 (GNO 2:323; P. Schaff – H. Wace [ed.], Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic treatises, etc. [Post-Nicene Fathers of Christian Church 5; Grand Rapids, MI, 1892]).


older exegetical connection between the language of “angel” at Exod 3:2 and Isa 9:5, and the distinction between the function and the nature of the character also remain important, both among Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking writers.

in good part because, as S. G. Hall notes (211 n. 187), “Exodus is itself confusing and repetitive, and Gregory quotes passages out of order”. What is eminently clear, however, is Gregory’s theological conviction that, if Exodus 3 speaks of Moses encountering Him-Who-Is, a Christian reading can only affirm that “the one who made himself known by the title ‘He-Who-Is’, is the Only-begotten God (3.35) (...) either the Only-begotten God never appeared to Moses, or He that is, from whom the word comes to the Servant [i.e., Moses, my observation], is himself the Son (3.36).”

37. Gregory of Nyssa stresses the fact that the “angel” at Exod 3:1 cannot be a “real” angel. The term ἄγγελος, rather, derives from the revelatory work of the Logos in relation to the Father (ἐνέργεια τῆς ἀγγελίας), which is analogous to that of a human utterance in relation to the mind. See Eun. 3.9.37 (GNO 2:278; trans. S. G. Hall, 212): “Just as our word becomes the indicator and messenger of the movements of the mind, so too, we say, the true Word, who was in the beginning, as he announces the purpose of his Father, is named after the action with the message and called a messenger” (ὡσπερ ὁ ἡμέτερος λόγος τῶν τοῦ νοῦ κινημάτων μηνυτής τε καὶ ἄγγελος γίνεται, οὕτω φαμέν καὶ τὸν ἰδίου πατρὸς τὴν βουλὴν τῇ ἐνεργείᾳ τῆς ἀγγελίας ἐπονομαζόμενον ἄγγελον λέγεσθαι). Cf. Justin Martyr, I Apol. 63.2 (C. Munier, Justin martyr, Apologie pour les chrétiens [Sources Chrétiennes 507; Paris 2006] 294, 296). This point is further clarified by the observation that the famous “angel of great counsel” in Isa 9:5 qualified “a child has been given to us” and indicates, therefore, not an angelic state but the human economy (Gregory of Nyssa, Eun. 3.9.39, [GNO 2:278; trans. S. G. Hall, 212]). Gregory even discerns a certain divine pedagogy at the burning bush: similarly to John 1:1, where we have Logos first, then God, so also at Exodus 3 “angel” is mentioned first “so that the mystery relating to Christ (τὸ περὶ τοῦ Χριστοῦ μυστήριον) might first be openly announced” (i.e., “the Word who expounds the Father’s purpose”) while “He-Who-Is” is mentioned immediately afterwards to indicate “the affinity of nature (φυσικὴ οἰκειότης) as to his actual being between the Son and the Father” (3.9.38 [GNO 2:278; trans. S. G. Hall, 212]).

38. E.g., Hilary of Poitiers, Trin. 5.22 (C. Morel – G.-M. de Durand – G. Pelland – P. Smulders, Hilaire de Poitiers, La Trinité tome II (livre IV-VIII) [Sources Chrétiennes 448; Paris, 2000] 134): the designation “angel” is a matter of dispensatio, indicating not the nature of the angel, but the function, namely “the mystery of mankind’s salvation in the Son” (sacramentum humanae salutis in Filio). This view is noted and analyzed attentively by Augustine. See, for instance, Sermo de vetere testamento 7.3-5 (C. Lambot, Augustinus, Sermones de vetere testamento
The metaphysical turn given to the exegesis of Exodus 3 by Athanasius is further exploited by pro-Nicene theologians. For Gregory of Nyssa, the utterly transcendent reality indicated by ὁ ὤν is one of which one can only say that he exists (ὅτι ἔστιν) and refrain from inquiring what he is or how he exists (ὅπως ἐστὶν), lest the theological discourse be immediately nullified falsehood. Neither ὁ ὤν (Exod 3:14) nor τὸ ὄνομα (in the baptismal formula) point to a “name” as such; neither can they be equated with the appellation (κλῆσις) of Father, or Son, or Spirit, since these merely indicate hypostatic relation (σχέσις). “He-Who-Is”, the unnamable name (τὸ ἀκατονόμαστον ὄνομα) corresponds, rather, to the uncreated divine nature (ἡ ἄκτιστος φύσις), which, on the one hand, transcends all conceptual signification (κρείττων πάσης ἐστὶν ὀνοματικῆς σημασίας) and, on the other, is grasped by faith in (ἐν) the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and is therefore applied alike to each of the three.

There are, however, other passages in which the equation of the theophanic agent with Christ is made in a simpler way, similarly to the way in which it had been customary before the Arian crisis. I mentioned earlier that Gregory of Nyssa was probably the first Greek-speaking writer to see in the burning bush an intimation of the Marian mystery. Nevertheless, his statement to this effect presupposes a christological interpretation of the theophany, and, in fact, follows immediately after a christological interpretation of Exodus 3. At some point in the Against Eunomius, Gregory equates the luminous theophany at the burning bush with the Johannine reference to Christ as “the true light” (John 1:9) and the declaration “I am Jesus” in Paul’s “first theophany” (Acts

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40. See Gregory of Nyssa, Refut. 14-16 (GNO 2:318-319; P. Schaff – H. Wace [ed.], Gregory of Nyssa: Dogmatic treatise, etc. [Post-Nicene Fathers of Christian Church V; Grand Rapids, MI, 1892]).
41. At Vit Moys 2.19-20 (GNO 7/1:39; J. Daniélou, Grégoire de Nyssse, Vie de Moïse: un Traité de la perfection en matière de vertu [Sources Chrétiennes 1; Paris, 1942] 116, 118) Gregory invokes John 8:12 and 14:6 so that the “truth made manifest” and the “light” coming from an “earthly bush” teach about “the God who has shown himself to us through the flesh.”
Of course, the “metaphysical” and the “christological” need not be thought of as separate approaches to Exodus 3. Gregory can sometimes provide a robust christological interpretation of the burning bush theophany whose force is only amplified by the philosophical considerations about “being” and “non-being.” He takes the divine ‘Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὤν and the ‘Ἐγώ εἰμι statements in Deutero-Isaiah as the scriptural “mark of the true Godhead” and, simply assuming the traditional identification of Christ as Moses’ interlocutor on Sinai, concludes that Eunomian theology — “the sophistical fabrication about the non-existence at some time of Him Who truly is” — is non-scriptural, a departure from Christianity, a turning to idolatry.

Gregory of Nyssa also uses theophanies on a second theological front, namely in his anti-Apollinarian polemics. In the Letter to Theophilus, for instance, which sets out to counter Apollinarius’ critique of the alleged “two sons” doctrine as “absurd and utterly impious”, he argues that the incarnation (ἐπιφάνεια) of the Son does not imply a duality of sons any more than the multiplicity of Old Testament theophanies would imply a multiplicity of sons. It is quite clear that Gregory bases his argumentation on the traditional theology of theophanies as christophanies, and reaffirms that it is one and the same Son who spoke to Abraham, Moses, and John.
who appeared to Isaac (Gen 26:1) and fought with Jacob, who manifested himself in diverse manners to Moses — in fire, in darkness, in the pillar of cloud, in the vision face-to-face and with the things behind — who fought alongside Moses’ successor, who addressed Job from a whirlwind, who appeared to Isaiah on a lofty throne and was given human shape in the account of Ezekiel, and who later [i.e., according to the New Testament] overthrew Paul by [his] light and shone on the mountain to Peter and his companions in an even greater glory. As scholars have noted, Gregory of Nyssa is here using testimonia used in older polemical contexts (anti-Jewish, anti-Arian) and repurposing them in a novel and “unexpected” way to argue for the unity of Christ.

Among third- and fourth-century writers who interpret the burning bush scene in a christological key one may include Phoeadius, Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory of Elvira, Ambrose of

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47. Phoeadius of Agen (*Contra Arianos* 16.7-17.3 [J. Ulrich, *Phoebadius, Contra Arrianos/ Streitschrift gegen die Arianer* [Freiburg, 1999] 130, 132]) first ascribes Exod 3:14 to the Father (16.7), then states that the Son, being the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), could not have come into being at a later point, and, finally, reaches the conclusion that the one who spoke to Moses was the Son (17.2).


50. Ambrose, De fide 1.13.83 (O. Faller [ed.], Ambrasius, De Fide [Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 78; Vienna, 1962] 36): Non pater in rubo, non pater in eremo, sed filius est Moysi locutus (...)
Hic est ergo qui legem dedit (...)
Hic est ergo deus patriarcharum, his est deus prophetarum. Cf. De fide 5.1.26 (O. Faller [ed.], Ambrosius, De Fide [Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 78; Vienna, 1962] 225-226): the qui est of Exod 3:14 establishes the eternity of Christ (semper est) as opposed to the created existence of angels (erat Gabriel erat Raphael, erant angel (... qui aliquando non fuerint).

Solum enim illud ὁν, semper ὁν, ὁ ὤν est.

52. Jerome, Comm. In Esa. 18.65.1 (M. Adriaen – G. Morin [ed.], Commentariorum in Esaiam libri XII-XVIII. In Esaiam parvula abbre-viatio [Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 73A; Turnhout, 1963] 744), in a casual remark that Exod 3:14, as well as several other Old Testament theophanies, refers to the Son; Jerome, Comm. In Mat. 2.14.27 (D. Hurst – M. Adriaen [ed.], Hieronymus, Commentariorum in Matheum libri IV [Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 77; Turnhout, 1969] 124), where ego sum at the burning bush is linked to ego sum in Mat 14:27 (implying identity of subject); Comm. In Mc. 1 ((D. Hurst – M. Adriaen [ed.], Hieronymus, Commentariorum in Matheum libri IV [Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 77; Turnhout, 1969] 452), where connecting John 1:1 with Exod 3:14 offers proof for the eternity and divinity of the Son, who always “was” (ἦν) as opposed to John the Baptist, who came to be (ἐγένετο).

53. Apos. Con. 5.20.5 (M. Metzger, Anonyme, (Constitutions apostoliques) Les Constitutions apostoliques, tome II. Livres III-VI [Sources Chrétiennes 329; Paris 1969] 278; A. Roberts – J. Donaldons [ed.], The Clementine Homilies. The Apostolical Constitutions, [Ante Nicene Fathers 18; Edinburgh, 1870]): “He is the Christ of God (... Him did Moses see in the bush (...) Him did Joshua the son of Nun see, as the captain of the Lord’s host (Josh 5:14).”
Ps-Ephrem of Nisibis,\textsuperscript{54} John Chrysostom,\textsuperscript{55} and Epiphanius.\textsuperscript{56} A

\textsuperscript{54} In a verse homily on Mary ascribed to Ephrem, the connection between the burning bush and the Virgin Mary rests on the explicit identification between the God in the bush and Jesus, since Christians are exhorted to recognize in the Incarnation the same one that Moses wished to see on Sinai: “Moses wished to see his glory but was unable to see Him as he wished [Exod 33:18]; let us come and see Him today as He lies in the manger in swaddling clothes. (...) Moses depicted His symbols when he saw fire in the bush, the Magi fulfilled these symbols when they saw Fire in the swaddling clothes. A voice cried out of the bush to Moses that he loose his sandals from his feet; the silence of a star told the Magi to come to the sacred place. (...) The cave corresponds to the heavens, and Moses to the Magi (...) Just as the bush on Horeb bore God in the flame, so too did Mary bear Christ in her virginity” (Verse Homily on the Virgin Mary: Sermo 2, in S. Brock, \textit{Bride of Light: Hymns on Mary from the Syriac Churches} [Moran Etho 6; Piscataway, NJ, 2010] 157-158; E. Beck, \textit{Nachträge zu Ephraem Syrus} [Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium 363/364; Louvain, 1975] 39-40).


\textsuperscript{56} Epiphanius, \textit{Anoratus} 5.6 (Y. R. Kim [trans.], \textit{St. Epiphanius of Cyprus, Ancoratus} [The Fathers of the Church 128; Washington, D.C., 2014] 64-65; M. Bergherrmann – C. F. Collatz [ed.], \textit{Epiphanius. Band I Ancoratus und Panarion haer. 1-33} [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte, 10/1; Berlin, 2013] 11), in support of the affirmation that the Son is neither made nor strengthened but: “The Father is the one who is; the Son is the one who is. He is ‘the one who is with the one who is’ [cf. John 1:2], begotten from him, who is not a coalescence with the Father, who did not begin to exist, but <who is> always genuine Son with the Father, the Father always begetting the Son.” Epiphanius again invokes the burning bush scene when criticizing “the lovers of quarrels” for their allegorical interpretation of literal expressions such as “to have been begotten’, the very thing which is <in> him according to nature” and literal understanding of things said figuratively,
significant change in the interpretation of the burning bush occurs only with Augustine, as I will show presently.

1.5. A New View: Augustine of Hippo

In a manner similar to Gregory of Nazianzus, Ambrose, or John Chrysostom, Augustine makes frequent use of Exod 3:14 in his metaphysical ponderings on God’s eternity, immutability, limitlessness, and simplicity, and his meditations on the ontology of sinfulness and holiness. The present paper, however, is concerned such as the expression “to have been created,” which is alien from his divinity” (Ancoratus 53.2, Y. R. Kim [trans.], St. Epiphanius of Cyprus, Ancoratus [The Fathers of the Church 128; Washington, D.C., 2014]; M. Bergermann – C. F. Collatz [ed.], Epiphanius. Band 1 Ancoratus und Panarion haer. I-33 [Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten Jahrhunderte, 10/1; Berlin, 2013] 135; 61-62). Epiphanius’ point is that Exod 3:2 (“the Lord appeared to Moses”), as well as other theophanic passages (Isaiah 6, Genesis 18, Daniel 7, and Ezekiel 1), should be applied to Christ and given full weight.


with the exegesis proper of the burning bush episode, and it is on
that front that Augustine’s contribution is particularly innovative.
Augustine’s attempt to eliminate the subordinationist vulnerabil-
ity of the anti-modalistic exegesis of theophanies used by many
of his predecessors leads him to make a twofold change in the
interpretation of Old Testament theophanies. 59 The first exegetical
move is a decided shift away from the christological exegesis of his
predecessors and contemporaries, in favor of a trinitarian reading;
the second is a new emphasis on theophanies as created manifesta-
tions (either angels, or pre-existent physical bodies that undergo a
special [angelic] manipulation, or bodies produced ad hoc), which
offer not a transformational encounter with God, but “symbols”
and “signs” (similitudines, signa) of the trinitarian res.

Augustine is, of course, aware of the christological interpre-
tation of Exodus 3, and, in his Questions on the Heptateuch,

59. The Homoian appeal to theophanies against modalistic denials
of Christ’s preexistence — a traditional approach — also entailed an af-
firmation of the Son’s subordinate status: since the Son was manifested
in theophanies, he must be visible in a way that the Father is not, and
therefore is inferior to and not of the same nature with the Father. Pro-
Nicene writers struggled to affirm the reality of the manifestation of the
Logos in theophanies, while and at the same time denying that this sort
of visibility entails the Son’s inferiority to the Father. Unsatisfied with
the solutions of his predecessors (Hilary, Ambrose, Phoeadius), which
he probably perceived as incomplete or deficient, Augustine proposes a
revolutionary breakthrough: theophanic phenomena are created and eva-
scent, brought about by angelic manipulation of matter or by other
means. According to the threefold (corporeal, spiritual, and intellectual)
hierarchy of vision, which Augustine presents in De Genesi ad litteram 12,
theophanies exemplify either the bodily vision (Isa 6:1-3; Rev. 1:13-20),
or the spiritual vision (Exodus 19; 33). They do not, at any rate, grant
the higher, “intellectual,” vision, and are relegated from the top to the
bottom of the ladder leading to the vision of God, and from the center
to the periphery of Christian theology. See B. Studer, Zur Theophanie-
Exegese Augustins: Untersuchung zu einem Ambrosius-Zitat in der Schrift
‘De Videndo Deo’ (Rome, 1971); M. R. Barnes, “Exegesis and Polemic in
Augustine’s De Trinitate I,” Augustinian Studies 30 (1999): 43-60; M. R.
Barnes, “The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine’s
B. G. Bucur, “Theophanies and Vision of God in Augustine’s De Trinitate:
An Eastern Orthodox Perspective,” St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly 52
considers it as one possible exegetical option. In *De Trinitate*, however, Augustine’s most detailed reflection on the issue of theophanies, the presence of the Word of God at Sinai is a matter of exegesis and theological convention: the Word of God “was” in the angelic manifestation on Sinai in the sense that He was present in the decrees of the Law, and also in the sense that these theophanies “prepared and foretold” the Incarnation. Similarly, the rock which Moses struck in the desert “was a thing already created, and after the mode of its action was called by the name of Christ, whom it signified (...) a particular significative action was added to those already existing things”. Moses’ interlocutor at the burning bush is a real, created angelic being; the only abiding unclarity is “which person of the Trinity that angel represented”. The burning bush (Exod 3:2), the pillar of fire (Exod 13:21), and the lightning and thunder on Mount Sinai (Exod 19:16), together with the dove at the Jordan baptism (Luke 3:22) and the tongues of fire at Pentecost (Acts 2:3), are examples of material, visible, but ephemeral bodies “made for

60. Augustine, *Quaest. Exodi* 2:3 (J. Fraipont – D. De Bruyne [ed.], *Augustinus, Quaestiorum in Heptateuchum libri VII. Locutionum in Heptateuchum libri VII. De octo quaestionibus ex veteri testamento*, [Corpust Christianorum Series Latina 33; Turnhout, 1958] 71). Augustine notes the difficulty created by the juxtaposition of Exodus 3:2 (“the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a fire of flame out of the bush”) and Exod 3:4 (“the Lord called him from the bush”) and proposes either that Moses’ interlocutor was “the Lord in the angel” (*Dominus in angello*) or an angelomorphic appearance of the Lord (*Dominus, angelus ille qui dictus est: Magni consilii angelus et intellegitur Christus*). In the first instance, the angel functions as a vehicle for the divine presence; in the second, made possible by cross-referencing Isa 9:6 LXX (*μεγάλης βουλῆς ἄγγελος*), the sole presence in the bush is the Lord, who appears and is called “angel.” Moreover, if Moses interacts with the Lord in angelomorphic “disguise,” the Lord in question is Christ.


the occasion,” to signify something and then pass away, *ut aliquid significaret atque praeteriret*. Similarly, in the *City of God*, in the course of an argument about Mosaic influence over Plato — in other words, in a passage where the writer puts forth his views on Exodus without problematization, almost reflexively — Augustine writes: “When God’s words were brought to saintly Moses by an angel (...).”

East of the Adriatic the pre- and non-Augustinian view continued unabated, never repudiated or problematized. It is advocated by the *Apostolic Constitutions*,*66* Sozomen*67* as well as by Theodoret of Cyrus,*68* Cyril of

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*67.* Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.* 2.4.2-3 (B. Grillet – G. Sabbah – A. J. Festugière, *Sozomène, Histoire ecclésiastique, tome I. Livres I-II* [Sources Chrétiennes 306; Paris 1983] 246; P. Schaff – H. Wace, *Socrates and Sozomenus Ecclesiastical Histories* [Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers 2, Grand Rapids, MI, 1886]): “It is recorded that here [i.e., at Mamre] the Son of God appeared (φανῆναι) to Abraham with two angels (...) then there [i.e., at Sinai] appeared (ἐπεφάνη) to the godly man he who in later times showed himself clearly (φανερῶς ἑαυτὸν ἐπιδείξας) of a virgin for the salvation of the human race”.

tion the Lord or God — indicates to him that Moses’ interlocutor is the Only-Begotten Son. “Angel” is taken 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.

69. Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation of the Only Begotten* (G.-M. de Durand, *Cyrille d’Alexandrie, Deux dialogues christologiques* [Sources Chrétiennes ’77; Paris 1964] 218): When Christ declared (ἔφασκεν) “I am the Life” (John 14:6), he affirmed his eternal reality, as he had himself declared earlier to Moses (Μωυσεῖ ἔφασκεν αὐτός), “I am He-Who-Is” (Exod 3:14). An extensive interpretation of the burning bush scene occurs in *Glaphyra in Exod.* 1.9 (J. P. Migne [ed.], *S. Cyrilli opera quae reperiri potuerunt omnia, Tomus Secundus* [Patrologia Graeca 59; Paris 1864] 413, 416). After rehearsing his general view about Moses as pedagogue and the Law as shadow pointing to more perfect realities (413A), Cyril applies these principles to Exodus 3 and states that “through the vision of the burning bush Moses was instructed about the mystery of Christ” (413B). Thus, the fire signifies “the one who dwells in light unapproachable” (1 Tim 6:16); the presence of the fire in the bush signifies “the fullness of the godhead dwelling bodily” (Col. 2:9), that is, “the Logos from God” (ὁ ἐκ Θεοῦ Λόγος) dwelling in the temple assumed from the Virgin (τῷ ἐκ παρθένου ναῷ, 413C) and vivifying what has become his own temple (τὸν ἴδιον ἐζωποίει ναὸν, 413D); overall, the paradoxical coexistence of the fire and the wood signifies “the Mystery that occurred in Christ” (413D), namely the coexistence of the godhead (“God is devouring fire,” Deut 13:24; Heb 12:20) with fragile humanity (“man is like grass,” Ps 102:14) so that the latter experience not judgment but salvation (John 3:17, quoted at 416A). Even if Cyril’s exegesis is overwhelmingly allegorical — e.g., the loosening of the sandals is interpreted as the necessity to abandon the shadowy, pedagogical, and corruptible regulations of Old Testament worship (414CD) — its doctrinal assumption is that the theophany at the burning bush is a Christophany. See also 416B: “The waterless desert, bearing only prickly weeds (...) he calls ‘holy ground’ because any place whatsoever in which Christ appears is holy. It should be noted that Moses is initiated into the mystery of Christ by visual and verbal angelic manifestations: he beholds the luminous vision wrought by “a holy angel”, who seems distinct from the Logos: ἐν εἴδει γὰρ πυρὸς ἁγιος ἄγγελος ἐπλήρου το χρῆμα (413B); and the command to take of his sandals before treading on holy ground is issued by the same “blessed angel” speaking “as if on behalf of God” (ὡς ἐκ προσώπου τοῦ Θεοῦ, 416A).


Antioch\textsuperscript{72} — writers whose theological views are, in general, sharply divergent. Even such a sophisticated thinker as Ps.-Dionysius the Areopagite espouses the traditional understanding of Old Testament theophanies as christophanies.\textsuperscript{73} The most significant witness, however, to the popularity and influence of the interpretation of the burning bush scene as a Christophany remains undoubtedly its prominent presence in Byzantine hymnography and iconography.

1.6. Hymnography and Iconography

It is well established that Byzantine festal hymnography accorded central importance to the christological interpretation of the Old Testament theophanies.\textsuperscript{74} One should add, however, that the hymnographic compositions of the last quarter of the first Christian millennium neither innovated on this point, nor retrieved the “primitive” exegetical tradition of pre-Nicene writers such as Justin, Irenaeus, and Tertullian, but instead distilled more proximate theological sources — such “Holy Fathers” as Athanasius the Great, Basil the Great and his brother Gregory, Cyril of Alexandria and John the Golden-mouthed. What is somewhat particular to the festal hymns is the general avoidance of the glossary of technical theological terms coined during the conciliar period, and the very explicit and direct identification between Christ and YHWH.

In a homily on the Transfiguration, for instance, Anastasius the Sinaite establishes much more than a “typological” relation...
between Sinai and Tabor. Availing himself of the opportunity, 
in the Matthean account of the Transfiguration, of a verbal link 
between Matt 17:9 (τὸ ὅραμα) and Exod 3:3 (τὸ ὅραμα τὸ μέγα), 
he straightforwardly identifies the “Lord” of the Exodus narra-
tive with the “Lord” Jesus, who is said to have shown himself to 
Moses on Sinai, and later, in full glory, on Tabor. The following 
words are placed on the lips of the prophet:

Now I have seen you, the truly existing one (τὸν ὄντως ὄντα) 
(...) you, who said on the mountain, *I am He-Who-Is* [νῦν εἴδον σε 
τὸν ὄντως ὄντα (…) ἐν ὅραι εἰπόντα Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὄν [cf. Exod 3:14, 
εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς πρὸς Μωυσῆν Ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὄν] [247.11–16; 248.1–2]; 
It was you that came down upon the bush [Exodus 3] of old, 
and drowned the might of Pharaoh in the depths [248.14–15]; 
having traversed the darkness of the Law I have now seen *this 
great vision* [Exod 3:3], a vision truly great [250.9].

John of Damascus’s oration on the Transfiguration and his 
Canon of Transfiguration both identify the Lord at the burn-
ing bush on Sinai with the Lord on Mount Tabor and depict 
Peter as learning on Tabor that the ancient revelation on Sinai, 
*I am He-Who-Is*, coincides with his own confession, *You are the 
Christ, the Son of the living God*:

Today the chief of the New Covenant — the one who proclaimed 
Christ as Son of God most clearly, when he said “You are the 
Christ, the Son of the living God” — sees the leader of the Old 
Covenant standing next to the lawgiver of both, and he hears 
[Moses] announcing clearly, “This is the One Who Is (οὗτός 
ἐστιν ὁ ὄν) (…)” (…) The Father’s voice has come from the cloud 
of the Spirit: “This is my Son, the Beloved,” this is the visible 
man, the One Who Is (οὗτός ὁ ὄν) and who is also seen, the 
one who became man only yesterday (…);
He who once spoke through symbols to Moses on Mount Sinai, 
saying, “I am He-Who-Is” [Exod 3:14] was transfigured today 
upon Mount Tabor before the disciples (...)76

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75. Greek text in A. GUILLOU, “Le monastère de la Théotokos au 
Sinaï: Origines; épîclèse; mosaïque de la Transfiguration; homélie inédite 
d’Anastase le Sinaïte sur la Transfiguration (étude et texte critique),” 
76. John of Damascus, Oration on the Transfiguration 2; 18 (B. KOT-
TER, Johannes von Damaskos: Die Schriften, Band 5, Opera homiletica 
et hagiographica [Patristische Texte und Studien 29; Berlin, 1988] 437;
The same exegesis of Exodus 3 makes theological and doxological sense of the Jordan Baptism, where John the Baptist is depicted as shaken with awe as he finds himself about to baptize the Lord who spoke to Moses at the burning bush. A homily on the Nativity, ascribed erroneously to both Athanasius of Alexandria and John Chrysostom, emphasizes the paradoxical identity of Jesus even more: “I behold a strange mystery (...). Today God, He-Who-Is and preexists (ὁ ὤν καὶ προὼν), becomes what he was not; for being God, he becomes a human being without stepping out of his being God”. I should add that Latin compositions such as the Veni Emmanuel and the O Antiphons are also articulating this appropriation of the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture.

Ultimately, it is quite clear that when, sometime during the last quarter of the first Christian millennium, the services of Matins and Vespers acquired their concluding formula, Ὁ ὤν εὐλογητὸς Χριστὸς ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν, which gives the title of this


77. First Canon of Theophany: Ode 4 Sticheron (Festal Menaion, 370): “[John the Baptist speaking to Jesus]: ‘Moses, when he came upon You, displayed the holy reverence that he felt: perceiving that it was Your voice that spoke from the bush, he forthwith turned away his gaze [Exod 3:6]. How then shall I behold You openly? How shall I lay my hand upon You?’”.


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

80. The formula is derived from Rom 9:5, ὁ Χριστός τὸ κατὰ σάρκα ὁ ὄν ἐπὶ πάντων θεὸς εὐλογητός εἰς τοὺς αἰώνας, ἀμήν. For a thorough discussion of Rom 9:5 and a defense of the christological interpretation of “God above all” (which is the overwhelming consensus of early Christian interpreters), see G. Carraway, Christ is God Over All: Romans 9:5 in the Context of Romans 9-11 (London/New York, 2013).
article, YHWH Christology simply was the bedrock of Christian theology. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the vast majority of Byzantine portrayals of Christ feature the inscription Ο ὤν inside the aura of figures from the baby Jesus resting in his mother’s arms to Christ conquering hell.

The christological reading of the burning bush has also had a strong iconographic echo, although this seems to be an understudied topic in scholarship. Visual representations of the burning bush appear from the sixth century. For several centuries, they show the dextera Dei blessing Moses from the bush, or an angel flying towards Moses, or simply a fiery bush. Around the eleventh century East and West chose, for reasons that remain to be explored, distinctively different paths in their iconographic representation of the burning bush scene. In the Christian East, the typical depiction of bush was that of a “parthenophany” —


83. A number of very similar icons known as ἡ τῆς βάτου were produced in the early thirteenth century at or for the monastery of Saint Catherine on Sinai, in which the Virgin, attended by various intercessors (e.g., Prophet Isaiah, Saint Catherine, John the Baptist and Moses, etc.), is depicted frontally in orant pose, with the child Jesus suspended weightlessly in front of her bosom. In some cases (e.g., an icon in which the Virgin is flanked by four Sinaitic monks), the Theotokos is inscribed MP ΘΤΥ τῆς βάτου even though she is not otherwise associated iconographically with the burning bush; by contrast, one icon where this kind of inscription is not present shows the Virgin, flanked by Saint Catherine on her right, with Moses kneeling to take off his sandals while gazing upwards to the Theotokos who is surrounded by red branches of the burning bush. Around the same time, a Crusader icon of the Theotokos and child — part of a diptych whose left half depict Saint Procopius — produced in Venice on the basis of a Cypriot model, shows Mary in the center of the upper portion of the painted frame (a distinctive feature of Crusader icons), in orant position in the middle of the burning bush. See K. Weitzmann, “Icon Painting in the Crusader Kingdom,”
and this is, indeed, what is retained as normative in Dionysius of Fourna’s *Painter’s Manual*.\(^{84}\) The christological exegesis of the burning bush, although not unknown, was overshadowed by this “Marian turn” and remained marginal. The two copies of the burning bush illumination in the Kokkinobaphos manuscripts\(^{85}\)

\(^{84}\) P. Hetherington (trans.), *The Painter’s Manual of Dionysius of Fourna: An English Translation With Commentary of Cod. gr. 708 in the Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library, Leningrad* (Redondo Beach, CA, 1989 [1974]) 21: “Moses taking off his sandals with sheep around him; in front of him is a burning bush. In the middle of the bush is the Virgin in a circle holding her Child; to one side of her an angel looks towards Moses while on the other side of the bush Moses appears again with one hand outstretched and the other holding a rod.” See also, for the Marian icon called “The Prophets from above,” the following description of Moses: “Moses holds a bush and says on a scroll: ‘I have called thee a bush, virgin Mother of God, for I beheld a strange mystery in a bush’” (51).

are, as Boespflug writes, “one of the rare exceptions.”

Other rare exceptions are the fresco at the Lesnovo monastery and the no longer extant *aureus rubus* described by a German pilgrim to Mt. Sinai in 1217. In all three cases, the painter shows the figure of Christ in the burning bush, and two images of Moses (taking off his shoes and accepting his mission) on either side. As a matter of fact, scholarship has duly noted both the similarities between these three depictions of the burning bush and the similarities with the depictions of Christ in the burning bush that abound in Western visual art.

The Marian turn in the Byzantine iconography of Exodus 3 remains “rarissime” in the West, says Boespflug, until the famous painting by Nicolas Froment, around 1475; what dominates, instead, in Western art between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries is the depiction of Christ in the burning bush, as a

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88. *Magistri Thietmari Peregrenatio* 18: “Indeed the bush has been carried off and divided among the Christians for relics; however, a golden bush has been made out of gold sheets in the likeness of the real bush, with a golden image of the Lord above the bush, and a golden image of Moses standing to the right of the bush taking off his shoes. And there is another golden image of Moses to the left of the bush, showing him barefoot after he had removed his shoes” (*Rubus quidem sublatus est et inter Christianos pro reliquis distractus, ad instar autem illius rubi factus est aureus rubus ex laminis aureis, et ymago Domini aurea super rubum, et ymago Moysi aurea stans ad dexteram rubi, discalcians se. Stat et alia ymago Moysi aurea in sinistra parte rubi tamquam discalciata et nudis pedibus*). Latin text in J. C. MORITZ LAURENT (ed.), *Magistri Thietmari Peregrenatio* (Hamburg, 1857) 42; English translation in D. PRINGLE, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem* (3 vols; Cambridge, MA, 1998) 2:52b.

bust or full bodied. In a way, both Eastern and Western iconography of the burning bush innovate in the eleventh and twelfth centuries — the former by its “parthenophanic” turn, the latter with its visual representation of Christ in the burning bush. Both iconographic options find their counterpart in preexistent exegetical strands, although the christophanic depiction of the burning bush in Western manuscript illuminations is in line with the dominant interpretation of Exodus 3 in exegetical, homiletic-
cal, and hymnographic works. This more “conservative” approach was very likely aided by the rendering of Exod 3:2 in the Vulgate \textit{(apparuitque ei Dominus, rather than ἄγγελος κυρίου)}, which consolidated the Latin West’s option for a christological exegesis.

2. A Blind Spot in Scholarship

Despite its antiquity and near-ubiquity in early Christian literature and iconography, the “christophanic” interpretation of Exodus 3 is not accounted for properly by the current scholarly concepts. To be clearer, the problem is that scholarly analyses often fail to grasp the distinctiveness of this exegesis. To call the identification of the “Lord” or “angel of the Lord” at the burning bush with the “Lord Jesus” a “christological” interpretation, although certainly correct, only provides a category for understanding \textit{that} the text was read with a specific doctrinal aim in sight, but no grasp of \textit{how} the text came to be read in that way. To speak about the latter, scholars often resort to labeling this exegesis as “typological”, on the widespread understanding of “typology” as a form of exegesis in which persons or events from the Old Testament are recognized as “types” of corresponding New Testament realities.

Drandaki, for example, states that the iconography of Christ in the bush, described by Thietmar, “epitomises the Christian tradition in which the soteriological promise to Moses of the Exodus of the Jews is associated with the mystery of the Incarnation of the divine Word and thereby with the salvation of mankind”.\textsuperscript{91} Similarly, Linardou considers the burning bush scene in the Kokkinobathos manuscripts as “the most accurate and sophisticated rendering in pictorial terms of this biblical typology in relation to Mary, the virginal conception of her son, and the salvific meaning of the Incarnation. A prefiguration of the Mother of God has been manipulated in such a way that the soteriological/messianic aspect of Christ’s Incarnation through a virgin is highlighted”.\textsuperscript{92}


While it is certainly true that a “typological” relation between the burning bush and Mary Theotokos is assumed by the christological interpretation of Exodus 3, the relation between “the angel of the Lord/the Lord/God” at the bush and Jesus Christ is not “typological” in the way that the bush is a “typological image of Mary”. Early Christian exegetes, hymnographers, and iconographers, even when interested in rather abstract notions such as “the salvific meaning of the Incarnation”, remain anchored in their conviction that Moses experienced a real encounter with the Logos-to-be-incarnate, not as somehow “prefigured” or “foreshadowed,” but as present in the bush that was not consumed. Another misreading, in my judgment, is that of Grelier, who, writing about Gregory of Nyssa’s use of the argument from theophanies, identifies it with prophecy. But taking Old Testament verses as prophecy is distinct from both “typology” and “theophany,” because prophecy does not establish correspondences between persons or events from the Old Testament and the New Testament, and does not assume a “direct presence”.

I think that “typology”/“typological” and “prophecy” do not account satisfactorily for the straightforward identification of Jesus Christ with the “Lord” of the biblical narrative because these terms do not capture the epiphanic dimension of the text as read by many early Christian exegetes. The difficulty consists in understanding what kind of symbolization undergirds these various readings. The main distinction runs, I believe, between the interpretation of the burning bush as presenting an image of Israel (or the Church, or the Holy Trinity), or a “foreshadowing” of the incarnation, on the one hand, and the interpretation of Exodus 3 as a Christophany, on the other. In the former cases, the

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divine presence is a matter of exegetical and theological convention; in the latter case, by contrast, Christian exegesis sets forth an epiphanic self-evidence — or, as A. T. Hanson and Charles Gieschen understood very well, a “real presence”.

In a book published in 1965 and met with undeserved neglect, A. T. Hanson pointed out the distinction between what he called “real presence”, on the one hand, and “typology”, on the other, and argued that the former is typical of New Testament authors. His views were echoed four decades later by Charles Gieschen’s essay on “the real presence of the Son before Christ” in pre-Nicene writers. Today, Larry Hurtado provides the clearest distinction among three exegetical approaches to the Old Testament characteristic of “second-century proto-orthodox Christians” (e.g., Justin Martyr): first, “proof texts” drawn from the prophets; second, “a wider ‘typological’ reading of the Old Testament as filled with figures and events that foreshadow Jesus”; and, third, “the interpretation of Old Testament accounts of theophanies as manifestations of the pre-incarnate Son of God.”

3. Jesus on Sinai: Rewritten Bible?

In a series of papers I have proposed to consider “rewritten Bible” as a heuristically valuable term, which improves our grasp of this early Christian and later Byzantine approach to Scripture. This term was coined by Géza Vermes in 1961; and

99. See Vermes’ own account: G. Vermes, “The Genesis of the Concept of ‘Rewritten Bible’,” in J. Zsengeller (ed.), *Rewritten Bible after Fifty Years: Texts, Terms, or Techniques? A Last Dialogue with Géza Vermes* (Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism 166; Leiden, 2014) 3-9, esp. 8: “whereas it is perfectly legitimate to investigate the Dead Sea Scrolls within the framework of the ‘Rewritten Bible’, I believe it would be a gross mistake to restrict the area of investigation to
even though subsequent scholarship has, in Vermes’ own view, “moved the goalposts”100 by extending or restricting the applicability of the term, “rewritten Bible” is used generally by scholars dealing with Second Temple works (or portions thereof) such as the Book of the Watchers (in 1 Enoch), the Book of Jubilees, the Genesis Apocryphon, the Temple Scroll, the Targums, Philo’s Life of Moses, Josephus’ Jewish Antiquities 1–11, Pseudo-Philo’s Liber antiquitatum biblicarum, the Ascension of Isaiah, etc.101 It is not clear whether “rewritten Bible” stands for a literary genre or for an exegetical strategy. Vermes himself seems to have used it both ways, and notable scholars have since then chosen one direction or the other.102

documents from Qumran. A priceless mine of well-dated information is contained in the Antiquities of Josephus and in Pseudo-Philo’s Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum. And this may be the bee in my bonnet, the works gathered under the umbrella of the Palestinian Pentateuch Targum are ideal sources for the study of the ‘Rewritten Bible’.”


102. See the discussion in A. KLOSTERGAARD PETERSEN, “Rewritten Bible as a Borderline Phenomenon — Genre, Textual Strategy, or Canon-
If “rewritten Bible” is to be used for the Christian texts discussed above — some of which are doctrinal treatises, others exegetical writings, and others hymnographic and iconographic productions — the phrase can only refer to an exegetical strategy, displayed in works belonging to a variety of genres, and serving a variety of polemical, doctrinal, liturgical, and artistic aims. The argument I proposed in the aforementioned papers was that the Christian interpretation of theophanies (in the present case, the christophanic retelling of the burning bush episode) follows the logic of rewritten Bible literature: just as the *Wisdom of Solomon* identifies the heavenly agent at work in the Exodus events as Lady Wisdom, just as the *Book of Jubilees* has Moses receiving the Law from the Angel of the Presence, and Philo identifies the theophanic agent as the Logos, so also do numerous Christian exegetical, doctrinal, hymnographic, and iconographic works identify the central character in biblical theophanies as Jesus Christ. Despite the objection that “[i]n contrast to the familiar Christian claim to *supersede* the Sinaitic covenant with a *new* covenant (...) *Jubilees* invoked an archaic, pre-Sinaitic covenant, whose pre-eminence depends on its claim to *precede* Sinai,”103 patristic exegetes argued the superiority of Christ over Moses by arguing that Christ is Moses’ interlocutor at the burning bush, the very Lawgiver on Sinai.

More importantly, the christological exegesis of Exodus 3 is merely one example in a series of similar “retellings” of theophanic passages in the Hebrew Bible. The cumulative effect of applying a christological lens to all or most biblical theophanies — identifying Jesus as the “Lord” (accompanied by two angels) who meets Abraham at Mamre and wrestles with Jacob at Peniel, the Lawgiver on Sinai, the “Lord” seated on Isaiah’s “high and lofty throne”, the very rider of Ezekiel chariot-throne, the Son of Man and Ancient of Days in Daniel’s vision, etc.104


— is the appearance of a consistent christological narrative, “a christologically re-written Bible”. The following holds true not only of Justin Martyr in the mid-second century, but also of Byzantine festal hymnography, codified in the last quarter of the first millennium:

On an exegetical level, this interpretation of theophanies provides solutions — actually, the same christological solution, consistently — to biblical texts characterized by certain levels of ambiguity. Its main value, however, is that it produces a coherent narrative leading from Genesis to Jesus, a christologically re-written Bible in which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as Moses and the prophets are “men of Christ” (Justin, *Apol.* 63.17) and in which the readers are invited to inscribe themselves by following Justin’s own example.¹⁰⁵

Affirming that the early Christian interpretation of Exodus 3 as a “Christophany” follows the logic of “rewritten Bible” literature allows us to view the theological claims of Christian exegetes as related to those of the various Second Temple groups involved in the production of “rewritten Bible.” “[E]ven rabbinic scriptural commentary”, writes Steven Fraade,

notwithstanding its atomistic differentiation of scriptural lemma and midrashic comment, implicitly constructs (or may rest upon and hence masks) a continuous rewritten scriptural narrative;¹⁰⁶


sible Torah worlds, both nomian and narrative, is performatively maintained and perpetually reenacted (...) rather than simply experiencing their recitation of Deut. 6:4 as the repetition of Moses’ instructions to the Israelites at Moab, they now experience it as a performative reenactment and extension of the final dialogue between Jacob and his sons\textsuperscript{107} (...). The midrashic re-citing of the words of Deut. 6:4 to the narrative of Jacob’s death thereby solves a liturgical difficulty: How can Israel recite the Shema if it is addressed to Israel?\textsuperscript{108}

The performative aspect is especially evident in a text such as Anastasius the Sinaite’s Transfiguration homily, discussed above.\textsuperscript{109} To paraphrase Fraade, one could say that the Christian pilgrims on Tabor are engaged in a performative reenactment and extension of the burning bush episode, mediated and sustained by ritual, hymnography, and iconography. Guided by Anastasius’ mystagogical preaching, they recognize their liturgical chronotope as, simultaneously, Sinai, Zion, and Tabor, their pneumatic experience as the awesome manifestation before which Moses hid his face, and most importantly, they acknowledge and renew their participation in the spiritual “now” of the theophany (for them, a “Christophany”), as contemporaries of Moses and the three apostles. It is in this kind of environment that the Hebrew Bible (in our case, Exodus 3) was “re-read”, “re-written”, and appropriated as Christian Scripture.

4. Scripture Re-Envisioned, Not Rewritten

My proposal seems to have been well received in scholarship,\textsuperscript{110} and I remain convinced that current scholarly categories are not

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{108} S. D. Fraade, “Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary,” 68.
suited for an accurate description of the exegetical phenomenon under discussion. Nevertheless, I have changed my mind on the appropriateness of using the term “rewritten Bible”.

There are, of course, similarities between “rewritten Bible” and early Christian exegesis (and, for that matter, early Rabbinic exegesis). One such similarity would be the variety of more or less speculative solutions to the ambiguities of the text: the alternation of auditory and visual elements (Moses draws near fascinated by the sight, then hears a voice, and finally, presumably after a brief visual encounter with the divine effulgence, hides his face); the alternation between ἄγγελος κυρίου (3:2), κύριος (3:4), ὁ θεὸς (3:6; 3:11–18), and Κύριος ὁ θεὸς τῶν πατέρων υἱῶν (3:15); the juxtaposition between “Ὁ ὢν has sent me to you” (3:14) and “Κύριος ὁ θεὸς (...) has sent me to you” (3:15). For instance, Moses is said to have contemplated “the shekinah of the glory of God”, “the image of Him that is (εἰκόνα τοῦ ὄντος εἶναι)”, which can rightly be called “angel” or “the great archangel of many names”, but is none other than the Logos or Name or Power of God; or a real angel, clearly distinct from God; perhaps the archangels Michael or Gabriel; or God accommodating himself to Moses’ human limitations, even to the point of his father’s voice; or, in Christian exegesis, the angelomorphic Logos-to-be-made-flesh, or the Logos via an angel, or the Logos and an angel.

ties, we are following the growing trend of investigating its applicability to non-Jewish sources. (...) Perhaps the most outstanding example would be found in Bogdan Bucur’s treatment of Byzantine hymnography as Rewritten Scripture.”

This kind of exegesis occurs often in “rewritten Bible” literature. Moreover, my observations about the performative character of the christological interpretation of Old Testament theophanies are perfectly applicable to the burning bush episode, as I have explained above. In short, there is, indeed, similarity; there is, however, also significant dissimilarity. As Steven Fraade notes, “[i]n the course of comparing and contrasting the varied forms of early scriptural interpretation, one distinction has become increasingly important: between those writings which blur, if not efface, the boundary line between received scripture and its interpretive retelling, and those which maintain, even highlight, that line (...).”¹¹² It seems that “rewritten Bible” literature and Christian biblical exegesis fall on opposite sides of this dividing line. Even in the creative dialogical expansions of various biblical narratives, typical of Byzantine hymnography (e.g., Romanos the Melodist), the distinction between sacred text and its “re-envisioned” expression is never in doubt. In this respect, “christophanic exegesis” is rather more similar to rabbinic midrash — and midrash is not “rewritten Bible”.¹¹³


¹¹³ This is evident for classical midrash: “unlike rabbinic midrash, [in ‘rewritten Bible’ literature] the actual words of Scripture do not remain highlighted within the body of the text, either in the form of lemmata, or by the use of citation-formulae” (P. S. Alexander, “Retelling the Old Testament,” in D. A. Carson – H. G. M. Williamson (ed.), It is Written: Scripture Citing Scripture: Essays in Honour of Barnabas Lindars, SSF [Cambridge, MA, 1988] 116). It is true, as Fraade observes (S. D. Fraade, “Rewritten Bible and Rabbinic Midrash as Commentary,” in C. Bakhos (ed.), Current Trends in the Study of Midrash [Leiden, 2006] 62), that midrash “may be viewed as containing aspects of ‘rewritten Bible’ beneath its formal structure of scriptural commentary” (e.g., expansive paraphrase, filling in scriptural gaps, removing discomforting details, identifying anonymous with named persons and places). Nevertheless, the distinction between midrash and rewritten Bible remains true even of Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer, despite the latter’s many similarities with Jubilees or LAB. See R. Adelman, The Return of the Repressed: Pirque De-Rabbi Eliezer and the Pseudepigrapha (Leiden, 2009) 5-19; R. Adelman, “Can We Apply the Term ‘Rewritten Bible’ to Midrash? The Case of Pirque de-Rabbi Eliezer,” in J. Zsengeller (ed.), Rewritten Bible after Fifty...
If it is to retain any explanatory power, “rewritten Bible” must refer to the production of actual texts — “narratives following a sequential, chronological order,” which “cover a substantial portion of Scripture,” according to a widespread definition of the genre.\textsuperscript{114} Yet, in the case of the early Christian exegesis of Old Testament theophanies, the “rewriting” in question is a metaphor for “interpretation”: the christologically “rewritten” Old Testament episodes do not constitute a new text, but offer new readings of the existing ones. This erosion of the descriptive power of the concept derives from its metaphorization; the root problem is to have allowed “rewritten” to stand for “interpreted”.

Conclusions

This paper began by noting that, despite the fact that the reception history of Exodus 3 has received much scholarly attention, one particular strand in the history of interpretation remains under-researched: the christological exegesis of the burning bush scene, that is, the interpretation that straightforwardly equates the subject of the theophany with Jesus Christ.

I provided evidence that this was not a marginal strand of interpretation, and that Exod 3:14 was not, as has sometimes been said, the exclusive province of specialized theology, with little impact on the life of worship.\textsuperscript{115} As a matter of fact, the coherence and versatility of this exegetical tradition, which lent itself to doctrinal reflection, apologetics, theological polemics in a variety of contexts (anti-Jewish; anti-modalistic, anti-Apollinarian, anti-Eunomian), but also to worship is remarkable. The liturgical

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115. Pace M. Harl, “Citations et commentaires d’Exode 3,14 chez les Pères Grecs des quatre premiers siècles,” in P. Vignaux (ed.), \textit{Dieu et l’être. Exégèses d’Exode 3,14 et de Coran 20,11-24} (Paris, 1978) 87: “this verse is not cited frequently, it occurs almost exclusively in the specialized literature of theological controversies (...) it almost never intervenes in the grand streams that make the life of the Church, in catechesis, liturgy, moral or spiritual exhortation; one finds close to no traces in homilies, vitae, monastic texts.”
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formula quoted in the title expresses this kind of theology succinctly: Ὁ ὤν εὐλογητὸς Χριστὸς ὁ Θεὸς ἡμῶν.

After an extensive survey of the text’s early Christian reception history — despite only covering a fraction of the available material — I conclude that the interpretation of Exodus 3 as a Christophany constitutes the earliest, most widespread and enduring reading of this text and that it remained just as robust and theologically relevant in subsequent centuries. By virtue of its absorption into Byzantine festal hymnography and its visual exegesis in icons and manuscript illuminations, the christological exegesis of the burning bush became widespread and theologically normative.

It is clear that the straightforward identification of the “Lord” at the burning bush with the “Lord Jesus” of Christian worship cannot be labeled “prophetic,” “typological”, or “allegorical”. These terms are unsatisfactory because they fail to capture the epiphanic dimension of the text as read by many early Christian exegetes. The proposal to view the christological interpretation of Old Testament theophanies as “rewritten Bible” literature is also unconvincing. Although useful, inasmuch as it focuses our attention on the early Christian exegetes’ claim to a performative, experientially (liturgically) situated exegesis, and on the consistent christological exegesis of Old Testament theophanies, which amounts to a christologically rewritten Bible, it treats the “rewriting” in question metaphorically and thereby erodes the descriptive power of the very concept of “rewritten Bible.”

In short, christophanic exegesis does not designate the production of a new text, but a new reading of the existing text; if christophanic exegesis is a form of “rewritten Bible”, then so is midrash, and it becomes necessary to find yet another term to designate the kind of literature for which Vermes coined the term “rewritten Bible”: “a narrative that follows Scripture but includes a substantial amount of supplements and interpretative developments”.116

Since early Christian writers did not feel the need for a special term to describe their identification of the Old Testament “Lord” with Christ, one may wonder why it would be necessary or useful to introduce yet another scholarly label. The need arises, I believe,

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from the fact that scholarship has generally ignored this most fundamental theological assumption of a very large strand of early Christian literature and has often conflated and confused it with other exegetical phenomena. This is not a trivial issue: without recognizing the phenomenon and crafting an appropriate concept to designate it (assuming the risk, of course, as with all scholarly concepts, of obscuring certain other elements), we fail to grasp an important factor in the development of early Christian theology.