

SCRIPTURE AS  
REAL PRESENCE



Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church

HANS BOERSMA

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To Matthew Levering,  
through participatory reading,  
a contemporary of the church fathers

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# PREFACE

The past several decades have witnessed a remarkable and growing interest in theological interpretation of Scripture. General introductions to theological interpretation, biblical-theological commentaries, and anthologies of patristic exegesis have appeared on the market, and also theological journals, conferences, and seminary courses are devoting themselves to this latest trend in biblical interpretation. In broad terms, the increasing appreciation for theological interpretation stems from the influence both of Karl Barth, via the Yale school, on North American theological scholarship, and of the *nouvelle théologie* movement in France, most notably Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou, not only in Catholicism but also among Protestants. To my mind, this two-pronged (ecumenical) impact on biblical exegesis has great promise, as it may mark both a renaissance in biblical studies and a genuine rapprochement between biblical and theological studies.

Advocates of theological interpretation are by no means unanimous, however, on *how* to reappropriate theological (or spiritual) interpretation. We don't need to dig far under the surface to find disagreement about what constitutes theological interpretation of Scripture. Kevin Vanhoozer distinguishes three distinct emphases, and although he adds that they are "more complementary than contradictory," it is probably fair to suggest that they lead to a fair bit of disagreement in practice.<sup>1</sup> Noting divergent attitudes to historical criticism along with ecclesial fragmentation, R. R. Reno is forced to acknowledge in the series preface to the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible that "the Nicene tradition, *in all its diversity and controversy*, provides the proper

1. Vanhoozer, "Introduction," 23.

basis for the interpretation of the Bible” and that “we cannot say in advance how doctrine helps the Christian reader assemble the mosaic of scripture.”<sup>2</sup> The general editor’s modesty with regard to the series’ homogeneity illustrates the wide range of approaches in theological interpretation. Clearly, we are in need of continuing discussion about the nature of theological interpretation.

Indeed, the term “theological interpretation” is not without its drawbacks. As I just noted, the term is a catchall for a variety of approaches to the Scriptures, not all of which are compatible with each other. What is more, by speaking of “theological interpretation,” we may give the impression that other kinds of interpretation (such as “historical exegesis”) approach the biblical text simply from a different angle and that both are equally independent and equally valid. To be sure, the Christian faith is rooted in history, and historical exegesis is indispensable for a proper understanding of the Scriptures. However, historical reading is never *purely* historical, as if there were a purely natural or factual substructure on which one would subsequently build a separate or distinct theological reading. As I will make clear throughout this book (particularly in chap. 2), the church fathers understood even a literal reading of the text theologically. That is to say, historiography is always theologically shaped—or, to put it perhaps better, the writing of history is itself undergirded by Jesus Christ, whom we have come to know in faith through the proclamation of the Word. Just as there is no pure nature (*pura natura*), so there is also no pure history (*pura historia*). Although I will use the term “theological interpretation” both in this preface and elsewhere in the book, I mean by that simply a reading of Scripture *as Scripture*, that is to say, as the book of the church that is meant as a sacramental guide on the journey of salvation—and one aspect of reading Scripture as Scripture is to take history seriously as anchored in Jesus Christ, who is the Alpha and the Omega of history (Rev. 1:8; 21:6; 22:13).<sup>3</sup>

This book is meant as a contribution to such a discussion on the nature of biblical interpretation. It presents my own approach and does so through interaction with patristic sources. Apart from the first chapter, the book simply follows the canonical sequencing of the biblical books as most Christian readers will be familiar with it. In each chapter, I take a portion (or portions) of Scripture and look at how various church fathers approached the Scriptures in their reading of a certain passage or biblical book. Each of the chapters makes a distinct argument and can, in principle, be read and understood on its own terms. At the same time, it is the cumulative effect of the chapters

2. Reno, “Series Preface” (emphasis added).

3. For these insights, I am particularly indebted to correspondence with Fr. John Behr.

together that lends credence to the overall argument of the book, namely, *that the church fathers were deeply invested in reading the Old Testament Scriptures as a sacrament, whose historical basis or surface level participates in the mystery of the New Testament reality of the Christ event.* The underlying message of my argument is that this sacramental approach to reading the Scriptures is of timeless import and that it is worthy of retrieval today. The chapter titles are more or less playful references to various “kinds” of reading (e.g., “Hospitable Reading,” “Harmonious Reading”). In each case, I attempt to show that the kind of reading discussed in that chapter is sacramental in nature. In other words, I attempt to show how it is that the hospitable reading, harmonious reading, and so on, all give some indication of what it means for biblical reading to be sacramental in character.

This advocacy of sacramental reading is not without its predecessors. Most notably, mid-twentieth-century patristics scholar Henri de Lubac tirelessly promoted an understanding of “spiritual interpretation” that focused on the biblical text as being sacramental in character: “The entire New Testament is a great mystery hidden within this sacrament, or signifies by means of this sacrament which is the Old Testament.”<sup>4</sup> Andrew Louth defends particularly the use of allegory, with an appeal to participation and to mystery: “Allegory is a way of holding us before the mystery which is the ultimate ‘difficulty’ of the Scriptures—a difficulty, a mystery, which challenges us to revise our understanding of what might be meant by meaning.”<sup>5</sup> And Matthew Levering suggests: “Time or history as understood biblically, as Christologically and metaphysically participatory, challenges the modern understanding of eisegesis by understanding biblical realities from within their ongoing ‘conversation’ with God.”<sup>6</sup> Each of these authors has been deeply influential in shaping my own reading of Scripture. This book will betray my debt to them on pretty much every page.

My turn to the patristic practice of reading Scripture sacramentally represents a fairly major shift in my thinking, one that has taken place gradually over the past fifteen years. The confessional Reformed tradition in which I grew up taught me to read the Scriptures historically, though always with a view to Christ. Our preachers loved the Old Testament inasmuch as it witnesses to Christ’s coming. Twentieth-century Dutch theologians such as Benne Holwerda and Klaas Schilder emphasized the need for thorough grammatical-historical exegesis, reading against the backdrop of the original

4. De Lubac, *Medieval Exegesis*, 22. See also H. Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 149–90.

5. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 111.

6. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 35.

context, and carefully taking into account the literary genre of the passage under consideration. The so-called redemptive-historical method of Holwerda and others staunchly opposed the moralizing and fragmentary use of the Old Testament that they encountered in “exemplaric” preaching, in which the *dramatis personae* of the Old Testament were reduced to the function of positive or negative role models. Over against this approach, the redemptive-historical method took as its starting point the centrality of history in the narrative of salvation: in Old Testament narratives God shows us how he prepares Israel and the world for the coming of the Christ.<sup>7</sup> The result of Holwerda’s approach was thoroughly Christocentric preaching without a whiff of moralism (but also, some complained, without real concern for personal application). Every Old Testament text was analyzed in terms of its historical relationship to Jesus Christ.

For several years I served as a pastor in this denominational tradition, and during this time I became acquainted with N. T. Wright’s theology. I devoured his books, which advocate the so-called new perspective on Paul.<sup>8</sup> Although at crucial points Wright’s theology is incompatible with the Reformed tradition (notably in the way he treats the doctrines of predestination and justification), at the same time his hermeneutic is “redemptive historical” in the very same sense as advocated by the Dutch Reformed tradition of Holwerda and Schilder—only more emphatically so (and, as I think of it now, more reductively so). For Wright—and for an increasingly large number of evangelical biblical scholars—exegesis is primarily a historical discipline, one that escapes the “abstract” and “timeless” theology of Western, Platonized Christianity.

One of the greatest pastoral drawbacks of both the redemptive-historical method and the new perspective on Paul is that it’s hard to see how, with these approaches, readers of the Old Testament are able to relate the historical narrative to their own lives. It seems that in both these hermeneutical frameworks, the only way to arrive at a personal appropriation is by moving *from* the Old Testament, *via* Christ, *to* the situation of today. In the end, one is forced to leave the Old Testament behind. For example, on Wright’s understanding of exile, if one preaches on an Old Testament exilic text—say, one of Jeremiah’s warnings regarding the impending Babylonian invasion—the interpreter will first carefully read the text in a (grammatical-)historical manner and then move *from* Jeremiah *to* Christ as the one who, as the new Israel, took the exilic curse upon himself. By traversing six hundred years, from Jeremiah to the life of Christ and the origin of the church, we discover at the end of the journey

7. For the foregoing, see Greidanus, *Sola Scriptura*, 131–37.

8. The impact of N. T. Wright is obvious in my book *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*.

that in and through Christ the exile has now come to an end, and we have been placed into the freedom of the children of God. On this understanding, the book of Jeremiah is of significance today only inasmuch as we leave the prophet (and the exile he announced) behind us in the historical record of the book that bears his name. Strictly historical readings of Scripture separate the reader from the original event described in the biblical text.

I won't gainsay the important exegetical insights that such historical approaches yield. The weakness of historical exegesis, however, is that it doesn't treat the Old Testament as a sacrament (*sacramentum*) that *already contains* the New Testament reality (*res*) of Christ. Or, as Irenaeus and others would have put it, strictly historical exegesis doesn't see Christ as the treasure hidden in the field of the Old Testament (Matt. 13:44) and, therefore, as already really present within it.<sup>9</sup> The fathers detected this presence of Christ throughout the Old Testament, and perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the Old Testament theophanies (divine appearances). The burning bush (Exod. 3), for instance, was typically interpreted as Christ manifesting himself to Moses. As the cover of this book makes clear, this reading continued into the Middle Ages, when around the year 1210 the Psalter of Ingeborg of Denmark, the Queen of France, depicted Moses as contemplating Christ in front of the burning bush. These kinds of interpretations directly result from a sacramental approach to reading the Scriptures.

This sacramental mode of interpretation has rich spiritual and pastoral implications. After all, if it is true that the mystery, or the New Testament reality, of the Christ event is already present in the historical basis or surface level of the Old Testament, then this allows the Old Testament to speak directly into the lives of believers today—both personally and corporately. While in some way believers today may be separated from the Old Testament by several millennia, they are also actually present in the hidden dimension of the Old Testament. If Christ is genuinely present in the Old Testament, then believers—who are “in Christ”—are as well. Because believers are “in Christ,” when they locate his real presence in the Old Testament, they also find their own lives and realities reflected there. Put differently, when Christian readers find the treasure in the field, they discover themselves—their own

9. Throughout this book I refer to the Hebrew Scriptures as the “Old Testament,” even though this is a somewhat anachronistic designation, since the church fathers only knew of the “Scriptures.” Cf. Allert, *High View of Scripture?* Still, the term “Hebrew Scriptures” is unsuitable because the church fathers often used the Septuagint or a Latin translation as their Scriptures, and so for the sake of easy reference I have thought it best simply to use the term “Old Testament.”

identity—within the treasure. Why? Because it is in finding the presence of Christ that we most deeply come to know ourselves.

Although the theological direction advocated in this book has been percolating in my mind for years, its more immediate origin is a course on patristic exegesis that I started teaching at Regent College in Vancouver in 2010. I have very much enjoyed reading and discussing patristic commentaries and sermons together with my students; none of the material in this book would have seen the light of day were it not for their love for the Scriptures and their eagerness to read them with Spirit-filled passion and skill. I am grateful to Alec Arnold, Lewis Ayres, Fr. John Behr, Corine Boersma, Gerald Boersma, Silvanne Aspray, Norm Klassen, Peter Martens, Tracy Russell, Karl Shuve, Matthew Thomas, and George Westhaver for the numerous insightful comments and corrections they offered on the manuscript. I also appreciate the hard work and efficiency of my research assistants: Phillip Hussey not only read the manuscript but also put together the bibliography, and Austin Stevenson put together an excellent set of indexes.

I put the finishing touches on this book during the early stages of my appointment as the Danforth Visiting Chair in Theological Studies at Saint Louis University (2015–2016). I am indebted to the president and board of Regent College for granting me an extended leave of absence. I want to thank my colleagues in the Department of Theological Studies at SLU both for the honor of inviting me to spend a year in their midst and for their gracious hospitality. It was a particular pleasure to deliver the Danforth Lecture, which subsequently has turned into chapter 3, “Hospitable Reading.”

Many additional opportunities to present and discuss the ideas in this book have helped to improve its contents. I’d like to thank George Westhaver for inviting me twice to speak at Pusey House, Oxford. George introduced me to Edward Pusey’s work on biblical interpretation, from which I have benefited greatly. I also thank Ephraim Radner for asking me to do a presentation at Wycliffe College in Toronto; Joseph Clair for the opportunity to try out some of my ideas at the William Penn Honors Program at George Fox University; Jens Zimmermann for inviting me to be part of his lecture series “Scripture, Theology and Culture” at Trinity Western University; Craig Hovey and Cyrus Olsen for organizing a panel on “The Hermeneutics of Tradition” at the American Academy of Religion; George Kalantzis and Dan Williams for organizing a colloquium on evangelical *ressourcement* at Wheaton College; and Bill Wilder and Fitz Green for asking me to speak at the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, Virginia.

It has been a real pleasure to work once again with Dave Nelson, Eric Salo, and their colleagues at Baker Academic. I thank them for their confidence

in the project and for the kind support they have shown at every stage of its development. I also would like to acknowledge the permission to republish my articles from the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, *Calvin Theological Journal*, the *Canadian Theological Review*, and *Crux* (2012), as well as chapters from *Imagination and Interpretation: Christian Perspectives* (Regent College Publishing) and from *Living Waters from Ancient Springs: Essays in Honor of Cornelis Van Dam* (Pickwick). Each of these articles and chapters are mentioned in the bibliography.

Finally, my wife, Linda, has lovingly treasured me for many years; she is, in turn, a treasure whose riches I'm still only learning to discover as she makes Christ really present in my life.

# ABBREVIATIONS

ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i>
CA	Athanasius, <i>Orationes contra Arianos</i>
CSEL	Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum
FC	Fathers of the Church
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
NPNF <sup>1</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 1
NPNF <sup>2</sup>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers</i> , Series 2
WGRW	Writings from the Greco-Roman World
WSA	The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century (Hyde Park, NY: New City)

# 1

## PATRISTIC READING

### The Church Fathers on Sacramental Reading of Scripture

#### Scripture as Sacrament

This book is about the church fathers' sacramental reading of Scripture. The main argument is that they saw the Scriptures as a sacrament and read them accordingly. In this introductory chapter I want to explain in broad terms what this claim entails. I have long been convinced that the notion of sacrament should not be limited to the ecclesial rites of baptism and Eucharist. My Christian Platonist convictions persuade me that everything around us is sacramental, in the sense that everything God has created both points to him and makes him present. Robin Parry, in his recent book *The Biblical Cosmos*, makes exactly this point, arguing that for the Old Testament everything in creation is in some way sacramental. Everything that God has made, explains Parry, participates in his life: "Creation participates in this divine Life just as it participates in Being, Beauty, Truth, and Goodness. So in some *analogical* sense all things, even rocks, have some sharing in life, albeit at a very far remove from the divine Source."<sup>1</sup> I will elaborate on this in a moment in connection with Origen, but for now this is enough to explain that, in some sense, everything created is sacramental in character.

1. Parry, *Biblical Cosmos*, 205 (emphasis original).

To be sure, we do need to make a distinction between such “general” sacramentality and the sacraments of the church. The distinction between general and special revelation, between nature and grace, between world and church, is by no means theologically inconsequential.<sup>2</sup> But also when it comes to the church and to the gift of new life through the Spirit, it doesn’t seem quite right to limit the language of “sacrament” to the two rites of baptism and Eucharist—or to the seven rites that count as sacraments in the Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> Saint Augustine uses the term to describe liturgical feasts (such as Easter and Pentecost), ecclesial rites (including exorcisms and penance), worship activities (singing, reading, prayer, the sign of the cross, bowing of the head), and objects used in church (such as penitential garments, the font, and salt).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, he regularly refers to scriptural texts as *sacramenta*, much as I will do throughout this book.<sup>5</sup> I do not mean to suggest that there is no difference between such sacraments and, say, baptism and Eucharist. Clearly, there is. Throughout the church’s history, these latter two rites have been recognized as central to the church’s life and as making the grace of God present in a unique way—they are authoritatively given by Christ himself for the renewal of his people.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the early church’s fluidity with regard to the term “sacrament” is helpful in reminding us that God uses not only baptism and Eucharist but also many other activities, rites, objects, people, and celebrations to fill the church’s saints with grace. It wouldn’t seem out of place, therefore, to add to Augustine’s list of ecclesial sacraments the Scriptures themselves. Holy Scripture too is a sacrament, inasmuch as it renders Christ present to us—but more about that anon.

2. Upon reading my book *Heavenly Participation*, some have wondered whether I believe this distinction matters at all. The book presents a plea for a reintegration of nature and the supernatural, which may of course fuel the objection: if everything is a sacrament, then nothing is a sacrament. I don’t think the book undermines the unique way in which God makes his grace available through the church—it has an entire chapter on the centrality of the Eucharist—but I do want to be on record as noting that the distinction (as opposed to separation) between nature and the supernatural is crucially important.

3. Twentieth-century Catholic scholar Marie-Dominique Chenu lamented the limitation of the number of the sacraments to merely seven, arguing that this twelfth-century “operation of delimiting the seven major sacraments manifested a desacralizing tendency.” *Nature, Man, and Society*, 127. For similar criticism, see Brown, “Sacramental World,” 605.

4. Cutrone, “Sacraments,” 742.

5. See Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 147–59. I owe this reference to Lewis Ayres.

6. The Catholic *Catechism* distinguishes the seven sacraments from “sacramentals”: “These are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, par. 1667 (p. 415).

## Metaphysics and Hermeneutics: Origen, Hobbes, and Spinoza

The brilliant third-century biblical interpreter Origen (ca. 185–ca. 254) pauses in book 3 of his *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles* to explain what he believes allegorical interpretation is all about. Interestingly, he doesn't begin by talking about exegesis at all. Instead, he starts off with a lengthy discussion of metaphysics—Paul's teaching “that the invisible things of God are understood by means of things that are visible and that the things that are not seen are beheld through their relationship and likeness to things seen” (cf. Rom. 1:20; 2 Cor. 4:18).<sup>7</sup> Origen clarifies how he views this relationship between the visible and the invisible. “God,” he writes, “thus shows that this visible world teaches us about that which is invisible, and that this earthly scene contains certain patterns (*exemplaria*) of things heavenly. Thus it is to be possible for us to mount up (*ascendere*) from things below to things above, and to perceive and understand from the things we see on earth the things that belong to heaven.”<sup>8</sup> Origen maintains that earthly things contain patterns (*exemplaria*) of heavenly things, and it is their purpose to enable us to go up (*ascendere*). Origen has in mind that in an important sense not just human beings are created in God's image and as such have a divine character stamped upon them. Other creatures, he insists, must also have something in heaven whose image and likeness they bear.<sup>9</sup> Even the smallest of creatures, a mustard seed, has a likeness to heavenly things; in this case the prototype is nothing less than the kingdom of heaven itself (cf. Matt. 13:31).<sup>10</sup> Origen observes that though it's true that flora and fauna “do serve the bodily needs of men,” they also have the “forms and likenesses” (*formas et imagines*) of incorporeal things, so that the soul can be taught by them “how to contemplate those other things that are invisible and heavenly.”<sup>11</sup> For Origen, it seems, a mustard seed doesn't just point to the kingdom of heaven as something far away; it contains the very pattern of the kingdom and in some way already makes it present.

The key passage for Origen is Wisdom 7:17–21, which he says “perhaps” refers to just the kind of thing he has in mind.<sup>12</sup> Here King Solomon lists many

7. Origen, *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles* 3.12 (ACW 26:218).

8. Ibid. Here and throughout, unless otherwise indicated, Latin and Greek terms in round brackets are my own addition.

9. Ibid., 3.12 (ACW 26:219).

10. Origen observes that the mustard seed is also a likeness or image of perfect faith (cf. Matt. 17:20), so that it is possible to bear the likeness of heavenly things in several respects. Ibid.

11. Ibid., 3.12 (ACW 26:220). I have changed the translation of *formas* from “shapes” to “forms.”

12. Ibid.

aspects of the world around him, about which God has given him knowledge, and the king ends the list with “all such things as are hid and manifest (*occulta et manifesta*).”<sup>13</sup> Origen takes the phrase as applying to each of the foregoing items in the list, for the expression shows, so he claims, that everything visible or “manifest” on earth has its invisible or “hidden” complement in heaven: “He who made all things in wisdom so created all the species of visible things upon earth, that He placed in them some teaching and knowledge of things invisible and heavenly, whereby the human mind might mount (*ascenderet*) to spiritual understanding (*spiritalem intelligentiam*) and seek the grounds of things in heaven.”<sup>14</sup> Created things, for Origen, contain heavenly teaching and knowledge, and the human mind is meant to go up to discover what this spiritual or heavenly knowledge is that God has placed in created things.

Origen goes through each of the items in Solomon’s list, showing from Scripture how each is a copy of a heavenly exemplar and so contains heavenly knowledge.<sup>15</sup> A few examples will suffice to illustrate what the theologian from Alexandria has in mind. When the Book of Wisdom mentions that Solomon knows “the natures of animals and the rages of beasts” (Wis. 7:20), Origen points out that in Scripture human beings are referred to as a “fox” (Luke 13:32), as a “brood of vipers” (Matt. 3:7), as “stallions” (Jer. 5:8), as “senseless beasts” (Ps. 48:13 [49:12]), and as a “deaf adder” (Ps. 57:5 [58:4]).<sup>16</sup> Origen’s point seems to be that when, with our physical eyes, we see animals acting in certain ways, we can then mentally transfer these characteristics to human beings. Similarly, when Solomon claims he knows “the forces of the winds” (Wis. 7:20), Origen turns to Paul’s language of “winds of doctrine” (Eph. 4:14) to make clear that on the visible side there are “winds and breezes of the air,” while on the invisible side there are “forces of the unclean spirits.”<sup>17</sup>

13. Ibid. The Greek text speaks of *krypta kai emphanē*. I have left out the italics that Lawson uses to render Origen’s biblical quotations.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid., 3.12 (ACW 26:220–21).

16. The numbering of the psalms follows the Septuagint. Modern (Hebrew) numbering is given in brackets.

17. Origen, *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles* 3.12 (ACW 26:222). The first set of metaphors (where Origen moves from animals to human beings) is different from the second (where he actually moves from sensible to spiritual realities). Origen doesn’t elaborate on the difference; I suspect his point is that a metaphor, in its very nature, takes a characteristic observed with the senses and then mentally applies it to a different object. The difference between the two kinds of metaphors is important, however, in connection with patristic exegesis. Here one of the questions is whether historical types in the Old Testament only point forward to future historical antitypes (like visible animals metaphorically representing visible human beings) or whether they also point upward to eternal realities (like sensible wind pointing up to the spiritual reality of “winds of doctrine”). Origen’s exegesis sees Old Testament types functioning in both ways, as we will see.

Origen concludes from his discussion that God’s wisdom teaches us “from actual things and copies” (*rebus ipsis et exemplis*), “things unseen by means of those that are seen,” and that in this way God “carries us over” (*transferat*) from earthly to heavenly things.<sup>18</sup>

It is at this point that Origen finally moves from metaphysics to hermeneutics. Until now—and it has occupied by far the longest part of his discussion of allegorizing—all he has dealt with is metaphysics: the question of the relationship between visible and invisible things. (To be sure, it is clearly a *theological* metaphysic that he advocates, one that he believes is both taught and assumed in the Scriptures.) Origen obviously believes that attention paid to metaphysics is time well spent: good metaphysics leads to good hermeneutics. Metaphysics prepares us, Origen thinks, to grasp how we should read the Song of Songs (and, for Origen, much of the rest of Scripture as well):

But this relationship [between earthly and heavenly things] does not obtain only with creatures; the Divine Scripture itself is written with wisdom of a rather similar sort. Because of certain mystical and hidden (*occulta et mystica*) things the people is visibly led forth from the terrestrial Egypt and journeys through the desert, where there was a biting serpent, and a scorpion, and thirst, and where all the other happenings took place that are recorded. All these events, as we have said, have the aspects and likeness (*formas et imagines*) of certain hidden things (*occultorum*).<sup>19</sup>

What biblical interpretation does, on Origen’s explanation of it here, is to move from the visible event to the “mystical and hidden things.” The events in the desert did occur—Origen displays no suspicion about the historical narrative—but they did so in order to portray hidden, mystical things. And it is these hidden, mystical things that we are particularly concerned with in our reading of the Scriptures.

I have chosen this passage from Origen because it illustrates that he regards metaphysics and biblical interpretation as closely connected. The way we think about the relationship between God and the world is immediately tied up with the way we read Scripture. This is something easily lost sight of, yet of crucial significance. I suspect we often treat biblical interpretation as a relatively value-free endeavor, as something we’re equipped to do once we’ve acquired both the proper tools (biblical languages, an understanding of how grammar and syntax work, the ability to navigate concordances and computer programs, etc.) and a solid understanding of the right method

18. *Ibid.*, 3.12 (ACW 26:223).

19. *Ibid.*

(establishing the original text and translating it, determining authorship and original audience, studying historical and cultural context, figuring out the literary genre of the passage, and looking for themes and applicability). Such an approach, even when it does recognize the interpreter's dependence upon the Spirit's guidance, treats the process of interpretation as patterned on the hard sciences.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the assumption is that the way to read the Bible is by following certain exegetical rules, which in turn are not affected by the way we think of how God and the world relate to each other. Metaphysics, on this assumption, doesn't affect interpretation. In fact, many will see in the way Origen links metaphysics and exegesis the root cause of why his exegesis is wrongheaded: the Bible ought to be read on its own terms, without an alien, philosophically derived metaphysical scheme being imposed on it.

For Origen, metaphysics does affect one's interpretation, and it seems to me that he gives us much food for thought, whereas modern attempts to separate biblical interpretation from metaphysics appear to me misguided. Historically, it is clear that changes in metaphysics and hermeneutics have gone hand in hand. The separation between nature and the supernatural—or, we might say, between visible and invisible things—first philosophically advocated by William of Ockham (ca. 1287–ca. 1347), led to attempts to isolate biblical interpretation from metaphysics. On Ockham's understanding, individual things are not related to other things through their common source of origin. Adrian Pabst, in his fascinating book *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy*, comments that, with Ockham, “relations between individual things are severed from relations with God. Things entertain real (extra-mental) relations between one another, not in virtue of a common source to which they are ordered, but on the basis of an intrinsic similarity.”<sup>21</sup> For Ockham, visible things may be like one another (e.g., the similarity that a variety of cats have to each other), but this doesn't mean that they contain patterns (*exemplaria*) of heavenly things sustaining their creaturely individuality, as Origen would have thought of it. Ockham's philosophy decisively abandons the earlier Christian Platonist assumption of eternal patterns or “forms” expressing themselves within the objects of the empirical world around us.

Ockham's philosophical position, commonly known as nominalism, was to have profound consequences for biblical interpretation.<sup>22</sup> These became manifest most clearly in the seventeenth century with Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

20. Louth, *Discerning the Mystery*, 26–27, 45–72.

21. Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 290.

22. I give a somewhat more extended discussion in H. Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, 79–81.

and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677).<sup>23</sup> Hobbes’s book *Leviathan* (1651) suggests that the underlying cause of the wars of religion was a slavish following of Aristotle over Scripture. Aristotle’s claim that “being” and “essence” have real existence lies at the root of the problem, according to Hobbes.<sup>24</sup> He counters Aristotelian philosophy by insisting that universal notions are just words and that we should treat them accordingly. Though we employ such notions—“man,” “horse,” and “tree”—Hobbes urges his readers to keep in mind that these are merely names “of divers particular things; in respect of all which together, it is called an Universall; there being nothing in the world Universall but Names; for the things named, are every one of them Individuall and Singular.”<sup>25</sup> Put differently, Hobbes’s metaphysics follows that of Ockham: both reject the notion that visible things have real relations to invisible things.

The result is that, for Hobbes, good and evil are simply words that we assign to the objects of our desire and hatred, respectively.<sup>26</sup> We rely on political authorities—not on universal, Aristotelian truth claims—to determine right and wrong.<sup>27</sup> According to Hobbes, had the Christian tradition simply followed Scripture instead of Aristotle, the church would never have been able to override the proper authority of the king.<sup>28</sup> Hobbes therefore suggests that there is but one solution to restoring the proper role of the king vis-à-vis papal power: “a proper reading of Scripture,” under the authority of the royal sovereign, who alone has the authority to determine what it is that Scripture demands.<sup>29</sup> It is obvious that this “proper reading” was politically motivated. Hobbes’s exegesis, suggest Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, “was, first to last, entirely politicized, offering a nearly endless arsenal of support

23. For the following account, I am indebted particularly to Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 108–18, and to Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 285–393.

24. Hobbes, *Leviathan* 4.46 (pp. 533–36).

25. *Ibid.*, 1.4 (p. 28). Cf. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 108–9; Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 301–2.

26. “But whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill*; And of his Contempt, *Vile*, and *Inconsiderable*. For these words of Good, Evill, and Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the Person of the man (where there is no Common-wealth;) or, (in a Common-wealth,) from the Person that representeth it; or from an Arbitrator or Judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up, and make his sentence the Rule thereof.” Hobbes, *Leviathan* 1.6 (p. 44).

27. According to Hobbes, it is the notion of “separated essences,” “built on the Vain Philosophy of Aristotle,” that “would fright them from Obeying the Laws of their Countrey, with empty names; as men fright Birds from the Corn with an empty doublet, a hat, and a crooked stick.” *Ibid.*, 4.46 (p. 536).

28. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 109–10.

29. *Ibid.*, 109. See Hobbes, *Leviathan* 3.33 (p. 306).

for the subordination of every aspect of Scripture, from canon to interpretation, to the arbitrary authority of the civil sovereign.<sup>30</sup> For Hobbes, then, a proper reading of Scripture is one that is freed from ecclesial constraints and one that abandons the metaphysical notion that earthly things are linked to heavenly things. Having rejected the sacramental link between heaven and earth, Hobbes turned the reading of Scripture into a purely natural exercise of historical scholarship.<sup>31</sup>

Spinoza, much like Hobbes, was concerned with the recent past of religious violence, and he too reconfigured biblical interpretation so as to serve political ends. In his *Tractatus theologico-politicus* (1670), Spinoza outlined a pantheistic view of reality, which had the effect of placing the methods of natural science in control of biblical exegesis. God was not so much shut out from the natural order (as in Hobbes's understanding) as he was simply equated with it. As Hahn and Wiker put it: "What Hobbes achieved by *excluding* God from his amoral mathematical-mechanical account of nature, Spinoza obtained by *identifying* God with his amoral mathematical account of nature."<sup>32</sup> The effect was similar: biblical scholarship became a purely natural, empirical endeavor that served political aims—in Spinoza's case, the establishment of a tolerant, peaceful, liberal democratic system, in which it is fine for the plebs to be governed by revealed religion, imagination, opinion, and ignorance, while scholarly elites go about finding the truth, establishing the historical origins of Scripture's original sources.<sup>33</sup>

According to Spinoza, therefore, the scholarly task was to establish the true meaning of Scripture. This was to be accomplished by reason—not ecclesial authority.<sup>34</sup> Human reason has the ability to investigate history, and so Scripture should be read historically rather than allegorically.<sup>35</sup> As a result, Spinoza claimed that Scripture must be treated like any other ordinary, visible thing: it must be analyzed empirically, and one must not allow higher, invisible realities to determine one's natural understanding of the Bible.<sup>36</sup> Matthew Levering describes the basis of Spinoza's interpretive approach as follows: "Separated from metaphysical judgment, Scripture can be evaluated on its own terms. The difference with patristic-medieval interpretation thus begins

30. Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 336.

31. See Malcolm, "Leviathan," 241–64.

32. Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 381.

33. *Ibid.*, 375–77, 388–90.

34. Harrisville and Sundberg, *Bible in Modern Culture*, 40.

35. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes*, 10.

36. Harrisville and Sundberg comment: "Spinoza reduces the rationality of Scripture—that is, its truth—to what agrees with the understanding of the autonomous biblical critic free of dogmatic commitments." *Bible in Modern Culture*, 39.

with a different understanding of ‘nature’: for the patristic-medieval tradition, nature is a created participatory reality that signifies its Creator and possesses a teleological order; for Spinoza nature simply yields empirical data within the linear time-space continuum.”<sup>37</sup> Spinoza, in other words, came to reject the kind of connection between visible and invisible things that Origen had posited as real; Spinoza could no longer see the universe as sacramental. Interpretation, therefore, was no longer driven by the search for (participatory) correspondences between things that are manifest and those that are hidden. Spinoza was among the first instead to look behind the biblical text for historical origins, arriving at positions that adumbrated viewpoints commonly associated with the later higher biblical criticism of nineteenth-century German scholarship.

Both Hobbes and Spinoza recognized that there is, in fact, a close link between metaphysics and interpretation, and that treating interpretation of Scripture as a historical investigation of empirical (visible) realities by means of purely natural, rational abilities has inescapable metaphysical implications. It is only possible to pull off such a drastic restriction of interpretation to visible things by denying their sacramental connection to heavenly, invisible realities—in Hobbes’s case by excluding the latter, and in Spinoza’s case by radically immanentizing them. Put differently, modern hermeneutics in the tradition of Hobbes and Spinoza is predicated on a radical dichotomizing between visible and invisible things, between heaven and earth—or, we could also say, between nature and the supernatural.<sup>38</sup> The notion that the Bible can—perhaps even ought to—be read without metaphysical assumptions seems to me seriously mistaken. Today’s heirs of Hobbes and Spinoza—for all their clamoring about “objectivity”—are unable to escape metaphysical assumptions when interpreting Scripture. Even when we’re not aware of it, we still do metaphysics.

### Sacramental Reading in Origen: Discerning Heavenly Patterns

Let’s return to Origen’s explanation of biblical interpretation. I have argued that, on his understanding, there’s a close connection between earthly and heavenly things. But is Origen consistent in affirming such an intimate, relational unity of the two? After all, there is little doubt that he treats invisible,

37. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 115.

38. Spinoza, of course, did not dichotomize visible and invisible things; he identified them in pantheistic fashion. Modern biblical scholarship, it seems to me, has more commonly followed the trajectory of Hobbes’s exclusion of God from nature than Spinoza’s merging of the two.

spiritual realities as far more significant than visible, material things. Origen's logic is unmistakably anagogical: he believes that we are to "mount up" (*ascendere*) from the created order. The language of ascent (*anagōgē*) is dear to the Alexandrian theologian. We must be carried over (*transfere*) from earth to heaven, from visible things to invisible things. The distinction he draws between visible and invisible things, or between manifest and hidden things (Wis. 7:21), underscores the sense of duality that characterizes Origen's thinking. This distinction between visible and invisible things (along with the priority of the latter) is something Origen has in common with the Platonic tradition, and some may suspect him of falling prey to a Platonic dualism that runs counter to the holistic biblical understanding of reality.

It seems to me, however, that this would be a misreading of Origen. It is true that his use of the distinction between *manifesta* and *occulta*—or between visible and invisible things—is congenial to his Platonic metaphysical assumptions. But Origen gives numerous indications that he doesn't regard invisible things as separate from visible things. As we have seen, he maintains that "this earthly scene contains certain patterns (*exemplaria*) of things heavenly." It is only because the heavenly *exemplaria* are present in earthly things and events that it is possible for us to "mount up" and experience union with God. Repeatedly, therefore, Origen insists that we can contemplate heavenly things *by means of* their "forms and likenesses" as they appear in visible things. It is *by means of* "actual things and copies" (*rebus ipsis et exemplis*) that we can move on to heaven itself.

Origen's metaphysics in no way dichotomizes visible and invisible things. He believes it is possible to move from the letter to the spirit in biblical interpretation precisely because (1) there is a letter from which to ascend, and (2) the letter contains patterns of the spirit, which we can find only by paying careful attention to the letter. The reason we can discover eternal patterns of the spirit in the letter goes back to the Platonic notion of participation (*methexis* or *metousia*). Participation assumes that this-worldly objects are related to eternal forms or ideas, also called universals. Cats, for instance, despite their bewildering variety in terms of size, shape, and color, all share a common essence, an eternal idea that is often called "felineity." This sharing (participating) of numerous cats in a single eternal form means that, *in a real sense*, all cats are related. They don't just happen to look alike (perhaps as the result of some arbitrary divine joke); instead, their similarity is the result of their common participation in an eternal form. Eternal forms, on Plato's understanding, have real existence; in fact, they are more real than the individual cats that we see around us with our physical eyes. It doesn't require a great deal of imagination to realize that the Platonic notion of participation

means that visible things (say, individual cats) are closely linked to invisible things (such as the idea of felinity).

Adrian Pabst, in his book *Metaphysics*, argues at length that it is the notion of participation that prevents the kind of dualism with which Platonism is often charged: “The Socratic and Platonist revolution was to discern the presence of perennial structures in ephemeral phenomena and to theorize this presence in terms of the participation of particular things in universal forms.”<sup>39</sup> Metaphysical dualism occurs when visible and invisible things are separated. Plato—and on this point, at least, Origen was in wholehearted agreement—used the distinction between visible and invisible things not to separate them but to show that they are joined by means of a participatory link that enables one to move from visible to invisible things. Underlying Origen’s exegesis, therefore, is a metaphysic that is profoundly participatory in character. For Origen, just as visible things participate in invisible things, so the letter participates in the spirit. Anagogy or ascent is possible, he believes, precisely because heavenly, invisible realities are *not* separate from earthly, visible things.

The charge of dualism, commonly leveled against patristic metaphysics and exegesis, doesn’t stick precisely because of the Platonic notion of participation. It is the modern historical schools of interpretation—Hobbes and his heirs—to which the charge of dualism properly does apply. After all, it is a modern, nominalist metaphysic that truly separates visible from invisible realities (at times by simply denying the latter, resulting in a lapse from dualism into materialist monism).<sup>40</sup>

Even if what I have argued so far is true, some may still object that Origen’s approach doesn’t yield a very exalted role either for visible things (in metaphysics) or for the letter of the text (in Scripture). After all, even if the *visibilia* are indispensable, our aim is always to move beyond them toward heavenly things. How does such a view allow us to revel in the wonders of the created order and savor the intricacies of the historical narrative of Scripture? There is no denying the anagogical character of Origen’s approach: his purpose—in metaphysics and in biblical interpretation—is to ascend. However, just because heavenly things are more glorious than earthly things, that doesn’t make the latter lose their splendor; and just because spiritual meaning is of a higher kind than historical meaning, that doesn’t leave the latter without significance. Perhaps by valuing visible things less than invisible things, the

39. Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 32.

40. George Steiner, though he focuses on the nineteenth century, refers to this same dichotomy when he speaks of the “broken contract” between word and world. *Real Presences*, 51–134, esp. 93.

church fathers actually accurately captured the significance of both. (While I won't press the point here, I am convinced that it is by denying the presence of *exemplaria* within visible things that we trivialize the latter, since we reduce them to what makes them empirically observable.)<sup>41</sup>

I have made the case for a participatory view of the relationship between nature and the supernatural—or between visible and invisible things—in some of my earlier work.<sup>42</sup> I usually refer to this Christian Platonist understanding of reality as “sacramental ontology,” by which I mean that eternal realities are really present in visible things. Since metaphysics and interpretation are two sides of the same coin, I want to explore in this book the way in which we can see this sacramental ontology at work in patristic biblical interpretation. My main argument, therefore, will be that patristic exegesis treated the letter of the Old Testament text (what Origen calls the *manifesta*, and what in sacramental language we may call the *sacramentum*) as containing the treasure of a “hidden” meaning (the *occulta* mentioned above, or the reality or *res* in sacramental discourse), which one can discover in and through God's salvific self-revelation in Jesus Christ.<sup>43</sup>

This book will make clear that the church fathers were convinced of a close (participatory) link between this-worldly sacrament (*sacramentum*) and otherworldly reality (*res*). For the church fathers, the hidden presence of the reality was finally revealed at the fullness of time, in the Christ event—along with everything that this event entails: Christ's own person and work; the church's origin; the believers' new, Spirit-filled lives in Christ; and the eschatological renewal of all things in and through Christ. The church fathers saw this entire new-covenant reality as the hidden treasure already present in the Old Testament. In other words, the reason the church fathers practiced typology, allegory, and so on is that they were convinced that the reality of the Christ event was already present (sacramentally) within the history described within the Old Testament narrative. To speak of a sacramental hermeneutic, therefore, is to allude to the recognition of the real presence of the new Christ-reality hidden within the outward sacrament of the biblical text.

41. It seems to me no coincidence, for example, that environmental mismanagement has become such a tremendous problem in the modern world: if the natural order is strictly autonomous and has no link to anything transcendent, we treat it as we see it—a collection of purely quantifiable objects, whose goodness and beauty reach no further than themselves. See H. Boersma, “Reconnecting the Threads,” 33.

42. See H. Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, and H. Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*. My recent book on Gregory of Nyssa (*Embodiment and Virtue*) studies his participatory metaphysic, drawing a great deal from his biblical exegesis.

43. See my interaction with N. T. Wright on this point in H. Boersma, “Sacramental Interpretation.”

By speaking of a “sacramental hermeneutic,” I do not mean to oppose this expression to commonly used terms in connection with patristic exegesis, such as allegory, typology, *theōria*, anagogy, and the like. Each of these terms carries its own particular connotations and functions within a distinct web of meaning with regard to its use (or rejection) both in the early church and in contemporary scholarly discussion. The variation in terminology does have a certain kind of usefulness—though it is notoriously difficult to distinguish the various terms from each other, as is clear, for instance, from contemporary debates with regard to the propriety of distinguishing between typology and allegory.<sup>44</sup> The interconnectedness of these terms stems, in my opinion, from the fact that a sacramental mindset—influenced by Christian Platonist convictions—affected the exegesis of the church fathers.<sup>45</sup> To speak, therefore, of a “sacramental hermeneutic” is not to reject other, perhaps more common labels but rather to allude to the shared metaphysical grounding of these various exegetical approaches.

### Irenaeus’s Recapitulation as Sacramental Reading

What did the sacramental hermeneutic of the church fathers look like in practice? There is ultimately only one way to find out, and that is by reading them. In this book, therefore, I study the actual exegesis of the fathers to see what it is that they are doing and to analyze how we can discern the sacramental metaphysics undergirding their exegesis. Each of the chapters zeroes in on a different portion of Scripture and looks at how various church fathers treat the biblical text. By no means do I elide individual particularities or differences between various schools of thought. Throughout this book, I will repeatedly highlight the unique features of the interpreters. It is nonetheless clear to me that we can detect throughout their exegetical corpus a shared sacramental sensibility.

44. Following Jean Daniélou, twentieth-century scholarship often distinguished between typology and allegory by insisting that the former is grounded within history and is biblically based, while the latter is arbitrary and rooted in Philo and in the Platonic tradition. Henri de Lubac convincingly debunked any sharp distinction between the two and demonstrated the christological basis for typological/allegorical exegesis. See H. Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 180–90. For an excellent recent account of the distinction, see Martens, “Allegory/Typology Distinction.” Cf. below in chap. 4, sec. “Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*.”

45. Both typology and allegory move from *manifesta* to *occulta*; both do so on the sacramental understanding that the latter are present in the former; and—most significantly—allegory no less than typology looks for the *occulta* in the divinely revealed reality of Christ and the church. As I will explain below, the reason twentieth-century scholarship commonly (and erroneously) divided the two is that it failed to take seriously the grounding of typology in eternal, divine providence.

Although in this book I do not deal with Saint Irenaeus in any detail, it is nonetheless to this second-century opponent of gnosticism that we need to turn for an understanding of the origin of the sacramental matrix of patristic interpretation. Doing so will also give us a first impression of what the sacramental reading of the church fathers looked like. Irenaeus is known particularly for his understanding of redemption as recapitulation.<sup>46</sup> Thus, we associate the term “recapitulation” with atonement theology and with the doctrine of salvation. Recapitulation means that Christ repeated or retraced the life, death, and resurrection of fallen humanity and, in the process of his faithful and obedient nonidentical repetition, restored and perfected humanity.<sup>47</sup> But recapitulation doesn’t only speak of Christ’s redemption of humanity; it also implies an approach to interpretation that we may characterize as sacramental in character.

It is of crucial importance, for an understanding both of Irenaeus’s approach and of that of the later church fathers, that recapitulation takes its starting point in the climactic salvation-historical events that took place in Jesus Christ—as he was proclaimed by the apostles in accordance with the Scriptures.<sup>48</sup> Irenaeus saw Christ as recapitulating all of human history. He notes that there are four covenants in history: “one, prior to the deluge, under Adam; the second, that after the deluge, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law, under Moses; the fourth, that which renovates man, and sums up (*recapitulat*) all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom.”<sup>49</sup> And, just as the Son of God summed up or recapitulated all of history, so he also recapitulated every age level of human beings, from the very young to the very old.<sup>50</sup> Finally, and most importantly, Christ recapitulated Adam’s life: “For as by the disobedience of the one man who was originally moulded from virgin soil, the many were made sinners, and forfeited life; so it was necessary that, by the obedience of one man, who was originally born from a virgin, many would be justified and receive salvation.”<sup>51</sup> Adam was a “type of the future” (*typus futuri*).<sup>52</sup>

46. See H. Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 121–26.

47. The term “recapitulation” goes back to Eph. 1:10, where we read that God would “unite (*anakephalaïōsasthai*) all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

48. This last clause makes clear that Irenaeus (following the New Testament Scriptures) did not understand Christ’s recapitulation of history without recourse to the Old Testament. Christ is the one who recapitulated history precisely because the Scriptures proclaimed that this is who he was and what he did.

49. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.8 (ANF 1:429).

50. *Ibid.*, 2.22.4 (ANF 1:391).

51. *Ibid.*, 3.18.7 (ANF 1:448).

52. Nielsen, *Adam and Christ*, 62. Cf. Irenaeus’s comment: “For inasmuch as He [i.e., the Son of God] had a pre-existence as a saving Being, it was necessary that what might be saved

Throughout his writings, Irenaeus appeals to Christ as the one who recapitulated what had gone before and as the one who thus brought about salvation.

This principle of recapitulation means that for Irenaeus the proper way to read the Old Testament is with the question in mind: How does this passage speak about Christ? Some Old Testament passages do this, of course, by means of prophetic messianic announcement, so that the reader can discern a prophecy-fulfillment schema. But the Old Testament narratives generally do not have such a plainly intended future reference. Irenaeus nonetheless insists that also seemingly straightforward historical narratives have reference to Christ. For instance, by means of the tenth plague, God “saved the children of Israel, showing forth in a mystery the Passion of Christ, by the immolation of a spotless lamb, and by its blood, given as a guarantee of immunity to be smeared on the houses of the Hebrews.”<sup>53</sup> Christ “was sold with Joseph, and He guided Abraham; was bound along with Isaac, and wandered with Jacob; with Moses He was a Leader, and, respecting the people, Legislator. He preached in the prophets.”<sup>54</sup> For Irenaeus, the unity of the two Testaments—the result of the identity of the Father of Christ with the God of the Old Testament—demands that we see the presence of Christ in the Old Testament.

When Irenaeus insists on Christ’s presence in the Old Testament narratives, he does not mean that there is no difference between the Old and the New Testaments. Quite the contrary! As we shall see momentarily, the salvific events of the new covenant are climactic in the absolute sense of the term. What Irenaeus does by locating Christ in the Old Testament is simply to acknowledge the interpretive significance of Christ for the Old Testament. With the coming of Christ, it is no longer possible to regard the historical events of the Old Testament on the level of visible things only (the *manifesta* of Wis. 7:21). The coming of Christ is the hidden reality (the *occulta*) of the Old Testament narratives, invisible in the text of the Old Testament when it is read all by itself. In other words, Christ has now become the proper interpretive lens for reading the Old Testament.<sup>55</sup>

One of the questions facing typological interpretation is whether or not we should classify it as exegesis. Some will argue that it may be all right to

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should also be called into existence, in order that the Being who saves should not exist in vain.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.22.3 (ANF 1:455).

53. Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching* 25 (ACW 16:64).

54. Irenaeus, *Fragments from the Lost Writings* 54 (ANF 1:577).

55. In general terms, when the church fathers borrowed from Platonic metaphysics, we should not read this as an escape from the biblical narrative or as a failure of christological nerve. Throughout this book we will see that the fathers are boldly and robustly Christ centered in their hermeneutic and that it is, in fact, the salvation put into effect by the Christ event that drives their interpretation of the Old Testament.

draw parallels or similarities between aspects of the Old and the New Testaments, but that surely the search for such parallels or similarities should be regarded as a later stage of application to the lives of Christian believers, not actual exegesis or interpretation of the passage itself. In other words, some may allow for typology under the rubric of application rather than regard such typology as a form of legitimate exegesis. David L. Baker, for example, while by no means hostile to typology, insists: “Typology is not exegesis. The biblical text has only one meaning, its literal meaning, and this is to be found by means of grammatical-historical study. If the author intended a typical significance it will be clear in the text. And if we see a typical significance not perceived by the original author it must be consistent with the literal meaning. Typology is not an exegesis or interpretation of a text but the study of relationships between events, persons and institutions recorded in biblical texts.”<sup>56</sup> Baker is convinced that typology is not exegesis: a text can only have one (literal) meaning, and this meaning is identical to the authorial intent that we determine by means of grammatical-historical study.

It is certainly true that some interpretations are better than others and that some are flat wrong. But the assumption that the biblical text carries only one meaning, namely, the one intended by the author, seems to me rooted in an approach that models exegesis on the natural sciences<sup>57</sup> and, for all practical purposes, obviates the role of the Holy Spirit within the actual interpretive process. For Irenaeus, the principle of recapitulation implies that such a scientific approach to interpretation fails at a crucial point: it doesn’t look for the unity between the two Testaments or for the unity between the God of creation and the God of redemption, and as a result it doesn’t begin the interpretive process with Jesus Christ. In other words, for Irenaeus recapitulation is not just a neat, harmless device that people are free to use in order to apply the Old Testament Scriptures to their personal lives. Rather, he regards recapitulation as an essential tool for proper understanding of the Scriptures.

As a result, Irenaeus sharply assails his gnostic opponents for twisting the meaning of Scripture. He discusses in detail their mythological cosmology and their interpretation of Scripture, and he insists that they are “evil interpreters of the good word of revelation.”<sup>58</sup> The reason is that by dividing up the Scriptures they fail the ultimate hermeneutical test, that of recapitulation:

If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures with attention, he will find in them an account of Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling (*vocationis*). For

56. Baker, “Typology,” 149.

57. Cf. chap. 2, sec. “Gregory’s Literal Reading as Theological.”

58. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1, preface (ANF 1:315). Cf. Donovan, *One Right Reading?*, 57.

Christ is the treasure that was hid (*thesaurus absconditus*) in the field [Matt. 13:44], that is, in this world (for “the field is the world”); but the treasure hid in the Scriptures is Christ, since He was pointed out by means of types and parables. . . . When it [i.e., the law] is read by the Christians, it is a treasure, hid indeed in a field, but brought to light by the cross of Christ.<sup>59</sup>

Note that for Irenaeus Christ is already present in the field of the Old Testament and that we simply need to find him there. In other words, Irenaeus’s hermeneutic of recapitulation is not something that follows *after* the meaning has already been ascertained, whether by means of a grammatical-historical or a historical-critical method. Rather, his hermeneutic of recapitulation is instrumental in ascertaining the actual, divinely intended meaning. By reducing theological interpretation to an afterthought, we render ourselves subject to Irenaeus’s censure by failing to find the treasure hid in the field. For Irenaeus, the field of the Old Testament is a sacramental field, which hides the treasure of Jesus Christ.

### Retrieving Sacramental Reading: Meaning, Virtue, Progress, and Providence

It will be clear that this book is not a dispassionate study of early Christian thought. While I have tried to read the primary sources carefully, my aim is to make clear why patristic readings of Scripture continue to be relevant. At the same time, it is not the argument of this book that we should simply copy the church fathers’ exegetical choices—though in a number of cases it may be quite warranted to do so. I limit myself to the argument that a sacramental reading of Scripture lies at the heart of patristic interpretation, and it is this common patristic sensibility that I am convinced the church needs to retrieve today. Put differently, the conviction that Christ is the hidden treasure present in the *visibilia* of the Old Testament Scriptures seems to me something that carries over directly from the church fathers (via the Great Tradition of the church) to our situation today.<sup>60</sup> Over against the dualistic metaphysics of modernity, a sacramental reading of Scripture helps us recover an integrated vision of reality, one that is centered on Jesus Christ as the true reality (*res*), in which all created things (*sacramenta*) hold together.

59. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.26.1 (ANF 1:496). The first set of round brackets is original; I have added the second. For Irenaeus it is when Christ is no longer visible to physical eyes because of his passion that the Scriptures open up for us, that we can finally see Christ again, now in and through the apostolic preaching of the gospel. I owe this insight to Fr. John Behr.

60. I reflect in more detail on the question of nostalgia for an earlier time period in the epilogue of my book of sermons, *Sacramental Preaching*, 197–204.

It may be helpful to highlight some characteristics of this sacramental reading, seeing as they are central to patristic exegesis. I will limit myself to four features, which show the continuing significance of the sacramental character of patristic exegesis.<sup>61</sup> First, “meaning” is something different in the sacramental reading of the church fathers than in most contemporary historical interpretation. Though they are not indifferent to authorial intent, the fathers do not treat the meaning of Scripture as a historic artifact that we recover by means of exegesis. Stephen Fowl makes the observation that attempts to discover the one determinate meaning of the biblical text face a serious problem. This approach, comments Fowl, “must force Christians to view the overwhelming majority of the history of Christian biblical interpretation as a series of errors, of failed attempts to display the meaning of the text.”<sup>62</sup> Fowl seems to me exactly right. If throughout history exegetes simply attempted to find the one right meaning, this would imply that up to today, all of these attempts have ended in failure. Meaning, for the church fathers, functions differently: it is centered on Christ and the church. Though meaning is obviously connected to its historical origins, for the church fathers it is more forward looking than backward looking.

As a result, the church fathers show little interest in finding the one true meaning of the text.<sup>63</sup> In the following chapters we will see many examples of the fathers being open to multiple meanings of any given passage of Holy Scripture.<sup>64</sup> Brian Daley, in a wonderful essay on patristic interpretations of the psalms, quotes the following passage from Augustine’s *Confessions*: “So when one person has said ‘Moses thought what I say,’ and another ‘No, what I say,’ I think it more religious in spirit to say ‘Why not rather say both, if both are true?’ And if anyone sees a third or fourth and a further truth in these words, why not believe that Moses discerned all these things? For through him the one God has tempered the sacred books to the interpretation of many, who could come to see a diversity of truths.”<sup>65</sup> In Augustine’s high view of the

61. The four points that follow, therefore, do not simply form a general list of characteristics of patristic exegesis that I think are worth recovering. Such a list would surely include a focus on the ecclesial context and the rule of faith (confessional grounding) of our reading of Scripture. I draw attention to these matters in various places throughout this book. Here I am interested in the more restricted question of why it is that the sacramental character of patristic exegesis is worth retrieving.

62. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture*, 36.

63. Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutical concerns are in line with this earlier patristic approach. See chap. 9, sec. “Christological Reading and the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Text.”

64. See chap. 5, sec. “Scripture as Incarnate Logos,” and chap. 10, sec. “Gregory of Nyssa and Multiplicity of Meaning.”

65. Augustine, *Confessions* 12.31.42 (Chadwick, 270–71). Cf. Daley, “Patristic Exegesis,” 199.

divine origin of Scripture, a single interpretation cannot possibly exhaust the riches inhering in the biblical text.<sup>66</sup> In other words, since the christological reality of the sacrament displays the very character of God, we may expect biblical meaning to be infinite in its possibilities. To retrieve the sacramental exegesis of the church fathers, therefore, is to open ourselves to the infinite mystery of meaning that God invites us to explore in Christ.

Second, the forward-looking element of patristic exegesis implies that the church fathers were interested in how the biblical text can transform its readers. My recent explorations of Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 394) have made me keenly aware how important virtue (*aretē*) was for the fourth-century Cappadocian.<sup>67</sup> He doesn't treat virtue as just part of the application of the text that follows after we've carefully articulated its meaning. Saint Gregory knows of no such gap between exegesis and application. Rather, he regards virtue as (1) a prerequisite for good reading, (2) the proper contents of the biblical text, and (3) the aim of the exegetical process.<sup>68</sup>

How does Gregory see each of these three roles of virtue functioning? Not everyone, avers Gregory, is equally ready to read the Song of Songs and to grasp its intended message in its greatest depth, and so virtue is the skill that makes for better reading. After he has preached his first two homilies on the Song, he makes clear to his listeners that his intent with these first two sermons has been that the "sense contained in the words" might be "washed and scrubbed to remove the filth of the flesh," so that his listeners may now be ready to listen to the bridegroom's own voice in the third homily.<sup>69</sup> In other words, one needs virtue to be able to understand or appropriate the biblical text properly. Furthermore, for Nyssen, the very subject matter of the text is virtue. The ultimate reason for this is that he believes virtue, in its true

66. Commenting on this same passage in Augustine, Martin Irvine observes: "The biblical text is by nature polysemous, and multiple interpretations are, therefore, not a cause for anxiety but a result of the very nature of interpretation." *Making of Textual Culture*, 270. He further suggests that the "supreme Text," Scripture, "can never signify its totality—the sum of its productivity of meaning—in one temporally instantiated act of interpretation, but continuously promises and postpones this totality through dissemination in a limitless chain of interpretations in supplementary texts. This model of textuality implies that a variorum commentary on the Scriptures compiled at the end of the world would still be temporally closed, superseded by a signless, transcendental grammar." *Ibid.*, 271.

67. I have highlighted this throughout my book *Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa*, but particularly in the last chapter (211–46).

68. To be sure, the threat of moralism is a real one at this point. Thanks to his pervasive Christology and his doctrine of participation, Gregory escapes this danger, but history isn't without examples of theologians who use the biblical emphasis on virtue to advocate a self-help religion. See H. Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 215–21.

69. Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 3.71 (WGRW 13:79–81).

sense, should be spelled with a capital V, since God himself is virtue. Gregory explains in his *Homilies on the Beatitudes* that by enabling us to participate in virtue, God allows us to participate in himself.<sup>70</sup> Since the biblical text has God for its true subject matter, it has virtue for its subject matter. And finally, since it is our aim to share more deeply in the life of God, virtue is also the very aim of biblical interpretation. As we will see in a later chapter, Nyssen treats the five books of the Psalter as so many stages of growth in virtue.<sup>71</sup> The very contents of this biblical book are shaped, according to Gregory, by these various steps, and it is the reader's task to detect them and to follow along in this process of ascent, so that he may be transformed by the biblical text. The purpose of the Psalter, claims Gregory, is "not to teach us mere history, but to form our souls in accordance with God through virtue."<sup>72</sup>

This emphasis on virtue keeps us from treating Holy Scripture as if it were merely a book that presents us with fascinating literature from a bygone age or that gives us invaluable information for studying the history of religion. The notion that we ought to read Scripture as one would any other book—a notion that has gained remarkable traction ever since Benjamin Jowett proposed it in his 1860 essay, "On the Interpretation of Scripture"<sup>73</sup>—is problematic not just because it narrows our perspective on what constitutes exegesis but especially because it undermines piety and reverence with regard to Scripture as divine revelation and as a result hinders progress in virtue. Brian Daley makes the observation that early Christian exegetes often defended their exegetical choices by saying such choices are more "reverent" (*eusebēs*) or more "appropriate to God" (*theoprepēs*) than other options. He comments: "It might be possible, in fact, to characterize the dominant procedure of Scriptural interpretation in the early Church as a 'hermeneutic of piety': a sense that the ultimate test for the adequacy of any explanation of a Biblical passage's meaning is the degree to which that explanation fits with Christian 'religion,' with the Church's traditional understanding of the holiness and uniqueness of the God who reveals himself in the Biblical story, and with the holiness to which all the story's hearers are called in response."<sup>74</sup> Daley's point is that a "hermeneutic of piety" has a stance of reverence toward the Scriptures, which serves as a filter for what counts as proper interpretation.

70. See chap. 10, sec. "Gregory of Nyssa and Multiplicity of Meaning."

71. See chap. 6, sec. "Restoring Harmony: Virtue and Emotions in the Psalms."

72. Gregory of Nyssa, *Treatise on the Inscriptions* 2.117 (Heine, 164).

73. Jowett, "Interpretation of Scripture," 330–433. Cf. Moberly, "Interpret the Bible," 91–110.

74. Daley, "Patristic Exegesis," 202. Cf. also Daniel J. Treier, who treats "reading as piety" as one of the three main dimensions of precritical theological interpretation. *Introducing Theological Interpretation*, 41–45.

Third, and closely related to the previous point, different levels of maturity lead to different readings of Scripture. The Bible repeatedly warns its readers that as “infants” (*nēpioi*) or “fleshly people” (*sarkinoi*) they are only able to handle milk and aren’t ready yet for the solid food that “spiritual people” (*pneumatikoi*) eat (1 Cor. 3:1–3; Heb. 5:12). Such admonitions imply different levels of maturity among the readers of Scripture, with greater maturity implying better reading skills. This reality is something to which modern readers are often ill-attuned. The reason for this blind spot is the dichotomy to which I alluded earlier: most contemporary interpretation intentionally restricts itself to the natural level of historical cause-and-effect. By contrast, for ancient Christian readers, such passages were crucial inasmuch as they illustrate the principle that greater spiritual maturity implies a better understanding of the sacred text.<sup>75</sup>

Origen, in his book *On First Principles*, famously distinguishes three levels of reading: the first—the literal reading of the “flesh of the scripture”—is for the “simple”; the second—edification in line with the “soul of scripture”—is for people who have made “some progress”; and the third—which gives us the hidden mystery of the “spiritual law”—is for those who have become perfect.<sup>76</sup> “For,” writes Origen, “just as man consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does the scripture, which has been prepared by God to be given for man’s salvation.”<sup>77</sup> Karen Jo Torjesen has argued that Origen describes the three groups as three stages of an “upward trajectory” with “three stages of development.”<sup>78</sup> According to Torjesen, we are meant to map these three stages onto Origen’s well-known classification of the three books of Solomon—Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs—where the first presents us with morals or ethics by way of preliminary instruction, the second teaches us physics or natural knowledge, and the third introduces us to enoptics, “by which we go beyond things seen and contemplate somewhat of things divine and heavenly.”<sup>79</sup>

Seeing as these three books progressively lead us into the heavenly reality of union with Christ, the three dimensions of body, soul, and spirit too must be seen as steps in the process of salvation, explains Torjesen.<sup>80</sup> Accordingly, she argues, Origen’s distinction between body, soul, and spirit doesn’t describe an exegetical procedure or method that we are meant to apply to the biblical

75. See Clark, *Reading Renunciation*, 350–51.

76. Origen, *On First Principles* 4.2.4 (Butterworth, 275–76).

77. *Ibid.*, 4.2.4 (276).

78. Torjesen, “‘Body,’ ‘Soul,’ and ‘Spirit,’” 20.

79. Origen, *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles*, prologue (ACW 26:40).

80. Torjesen, “‘Body,’ ‘Soul,’ and ‘Spirit,’” 21.

passages we're explaining.<sup>81</sup> They are not three distinct senses or meanings as much as three different ways in which the exegete can edify the reader, depending on the spiritual progress the latter has made.<sup>82</sup> Origen is by no means interested in giving his reader a straightforward method for interpreting the Scriptures: "Body, soul, and spirit of Scripture do not designate three levels of meaning in the interpretation of texts but a threefold 'usefulness' of Scripture in ordering the doctrines that correspond pedagogically to the soul's progress."<sup>83</sup> Torjesen thus reminds us that Origen wants to turn his listeners from "fleshly people" into "spiritual people."

Of course, the notion of different levels of interpretation can cause elitism. This happens when we treat the various stages as compartments that are hermetically sealed off from one another, so that the stages no longer allow for the soul to progress from the one stage to the next. A related perennial temptation is for the "perfect" to look down on the "simple." In principle, however, the spiritual interpretation of the church fathers is not an exercise in elitism; there is no elitist hiding of spiritual truths from the majority of the Christian church. The intent is the opposite, namely, that as many as possible may come to recognize invisible things by means of visible things. Origen's *On First Principles* is intended to give pedagogical guidance on how to encourage people in their ascent to greater spiritual maturity and more in-depth reading of the Scriptures. Origen and others therefore preached their allegorical sermons freely to all, in hopes of advancing people's spiritual maturity and virtue as they grew closer to Christ. By contrast, as Harrisville and Sundberg point out, it is actually the principles of historical criticism, first introduced by Baruch Spinoza, that imply elitism inasmuch as only a small, academically trained group of people are properly equipped to do the work of historical exegesis. For Spinoza, "it is only an educated elite that is fit to judge what is and what is not reasonable. The true exposition of the Bible is confined exclusively to the intellectual class in society, not the masses."<sup>84</sup>

The fourth feature of sacramental reading that characterizes patristic exegesis is its grounding in divine providence—God's guidance of his people and of the world to their intended end. This importance of providence for early Christian exegesis stands out most clearly when we compare the allegorizing

81. *Ibid.*, 22.

82. *Ibid.*, 24. See also Byassee, *Praise Seeking Understanding*, 41–42.

83. Torjesen, "'Body,' 'Soul,' and 'Spirit,'" 24. Reno and O'Keefe refer to this pedagogical function as the "disciplining, ascetic logic" of the literal sense. The "literal sense of scripture," they argue, "like the bodily world created and governed by God, has an ascetic economy." *Sanctified Vision*, 135.

84. Harrisville and Sundberg, *Bible in Modern Culture*, 42.

in Hellenistic philosophy with that of Christian theologians. When ancient philosophers allegorized the Homeric myths, they did so in Homer's defense, since his descriptions of the violent passions of the gods appeared offensive when taken literally. R. P. C. Hanson mentions the example of Heraclitus's *Homeric Questions* in the first century AD, whose purpose, explains Hanson, was "to explain away anything that is theologically shocking." By allegorizing, therefore, Heraclitus turned Homer's embarrassing passages "into either psychological or scientific statements."<sup>85</sup> It will be clear that this philosophical practice of allegorizing had no need for divine providence. Divine providence, after all, presupposes a history that God faithfully sustains and governs.

In contrast to Hellenistic interpreters of Homer, the church fathers treated salvation history as indispensable. They recognized God as its author from the fact that he often acts in similar ways throughout history. Divine providence was recognized in the functioning of typology in Scripture.<sup>86</sup> The New Testament often discusses the salvation that God works in Christ through the Spirit in terms that remind one of events, people, or institutions mentioned in the Old Testament.<sup>87</sup> They thus function as types of New Testament realities. The relationship between Old Testament types and New Testament antitypes (or archetypes) is grounded within the biblical text. This recognition of typology within Scripture is by no means a patristic peculiarity. Twentieth-century Old Testament scholar Gerhard von Rad also draws our attention to it: "Not only in Paul and Hebrews, but in the Synoptic Gospels as well, the New Testament saving events are frequently regarded as the antitypes of events and institutions in the Old."<sup>88</sup> Von Rad concludes, therefore, that the Christ event of the New Testament sheds light on the contents of the Old. He comments that "we do not confine ourselves only to the Old Testament's own understanding of the texts, because we see them as part of a logical progression whose end lies in the future."<sup>89</sup> In other words, because within the progression of history we can see similarities between type and antitype, we are justified to recognize Christ within the Old Testament narrative.<sup>90</sup>

85. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 58.

86. Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer's comment: "The canonical connection between various types and antitypes (e.g., persons, things, events) finds its ground and justification in a belief in divine providence, in the continuity of God's plan as it unfolds in the history of redemption." "Providence," 644.

87. I discuss this in connection with the wilderness journey in chap. 4, sec. "Typology in Scripture."

88. Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:365.

89. *Ibid.*, 2:371.

90. For a helpful discussion of von Rad's approach to typology, see Nichols, *Lovely, Like Jerusalem*, 168–73.

In at least two ways, however, the church fathers moved beyond the kind of typology that I have just discussed—and the way in which they move beyond it illustrates why we shouldn't make a clear-cut distinction between typology and allegory. In the first place, the fathers did not restrict themselves to discerning typological relationships between the Old and New Testaments. They were convinced that the church is caught up in Christ's redemptive work, so that the archetype isn't just the person of Christ (and what he did) as an isolated figure; rather, the church, as his body, is included within the christological archetype. It is Christ *and* his church that are prefigured by a variety of types in the Old Testament. As twentieth-century patristics scholar Jean Daniélou makes clear, this means that the church's life—and in particular the liturgical practices of baptism and Eucharist—are God's miraculous acts of salvation (*mirabilia dei*) typologically foreshadowed in the Old Testament (and climactically fulfilled in Christ).<sup>91</sup> The church's own life, therefore, is included within the typological unfolding of salvation history.

Second, as mentioned above, the church fathers were convinced that the typological structuring of salvation history is grounded within divine providence. Because they believed both type and archetype to be anchored in eternal providence, there is a sense in which they thought of type and archetype as coinciding. The reason type and antitype (or archetype) look alike is, according to the fathers, that both participate in God's foreknowledge. Matthew Levering therefore speaks of "participatory exegesis" in his excellent book *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*. His main argument, as he writes at the outset of the book, is "that Christian biblical exegesis, in accord with the Christian and biblical understanding of reality, should envision history not only as a linear unfolding of individual moments, but also as an ongoing participation in God's active providence, both metaphysically and Christologically-pneumatologically."<sup>92</sup> Levering rightly argues that the doctrine of participation makes it possible for type and antitype to co-inhere. Using the terminology of this book, we may say that it is the sacramental linking of historical events to divine providence that allows us to recognize Christ (and the church) within the types of the Old Testament. It is the vertical, providential link between heaven and earth that enables us to see that eternal realities are made present—in the sacramental sense of "real presence"—within the historical events of the Old Testament narrative.

On this understanding, although the Christ event as the climactic event of salvation history follows chronologically after the Old Testament types that

91. For careful discussion of particular typological links, see Daniélou, *Bible and the Liturgy*, and Daniélou, *From Shadows to Reality*. Cf. the discussion in H. Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 168–80.

92. Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 1.

foreshadow it, theologically the Christ event is prior to the Old Testament types. As Jesus puts it in John 8:58: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” And because Christ precedes Abraham—and is, we could say, “really present” in Abraham—the patriarch becomes a sacrament, a *sacramentum futuri* as the church fathers would say. It is the christological fulfillment, therefore, that is the prototype or archetype on which the Old Testament types are patterned.<sup>93</sup> Typological exegesis is sacramental in character only when it doesn’t just take into account the chronological (horizontal) connection between similar events and people but also takes seriously their theological (vertical) interconnectedness. Christ, the archetype at the climactic point in salvation history, is at the same time the eternal archetype in which God’s providential plan of salvation originates. God’s providence isn’t an abstract, arbitrary determination of history’s unfolding made according to unfettered divine power (*potentia absoluta*); rather, it is God’s fitting, Christ-shaped plan that unfolds in line with God’s character, so that throughout history we can say: that’s typically the God we know in Jesus Christ. The basic reason typology and allegory cannot be sharply distinguished is that typology, properly understood, is not just a historically unfolding series of events; instead, typology, much like allegory, looks up from the types in history to their eternal archetype, the providential Word who has become incarnate in Christ.<sup>94</sup>

## Conclusion

The separation of visible from invisible things in the modern period means that we often fail to recognize how the unfolding of history is anchored in God’s providential care. Reformed theologian John Webster alludes to this when he comments that it has become difficult for us to affirm that “texts with a ‘natural history’ may function within the communicative divine economy.”<sup>95</sup> Within the dualism of the modern period, it becomes hard for us to affirm divine providence and, *a fortiori*, to affirm that divine providence has a bearing on how we read the Scriptures. The cultural ethos of the modern period tempts us to deny that God is intimately at work within the “natural history” that we see described on the surface of the biblical text. As Webster puts it: “Part of what lies behind this denial is the complex legacy of dualism and

93. This explains Edward Pusey’s predilection for the term “archetype” over “antitype.” See chap. 9, sec. “Edward Pusey’s Sacramental Typology.”

94. Again, it is Origen who clearly perceived that historical events carry a sacramental dimension because of their grounding in divine providence. See chap. 5, sec. “History’s Rightful Place.”

95. Webster, *Holy Scripture*, 19.

nominalism in Western Christian theology, through which the sensible and intelligible realms, history and eternity, were thrust away from each other, and creaturely forms (language, action, institutions) denied any capacity to indicate the presence and activity of the transcendent God.”<sup>96</sup> According to Webster, it is the dualism of the modern period that undermines a robust sense of divine providence.

The implications for biblical interpretation will be obvious. The loss of faith in providence implies a loss of faith in the sacramental typology of the church fathers. John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno describe this loss by saying that “we have trouble accepting the crossing of the Red Sea as connected in reality to the death of Jesus and Christian baptism. We regard it as present and real only in the imagination of the interpreter.” The reason for this, they rightly suggest, is “our profound lack of confidence in the patristic understanding of the divine economy”—in other words, our failure of nerve with regard to divine providence.<sup>97</sup> A sacramental understanding of the relationship between *visibilia* and *invisibilia*, between *manifesta* and *occulta*, results from a robust understanding of God’s providential guidance in history, which sees in Christ (as well as in the types that adumbrate his coming) the true expression of God’s providential plan of salvation.

96. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

97. O’Keefe and Reno, *Sanctified Vision*, 88.