



# SCRIPTURE AS REAL PRESENCE



Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church

HANS BOERSMA

SCRIPTURE AS  
REAL PRESENCE



Sacramental Exegesis in the Early Church

HANS BOERSMA

**B**  
**Baker Academic**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

© 2017 by Hans Boersma

Published by Baker Academic  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakeracademic.com

Paperback edition published 2018  
ISBN 978-1-5409-6102-0

Printed in the United States of America

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—for example, electronic, photocopy, recording—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Names: Boersma, Hans, 1961– author.

Title: Scripture as real presence : sacramental exegesis in the early church / Hans Boersma.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Academic, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016029670 | ISBN 9780801017032 (cloth)

Subjects: LCSH: Bble. Old Testament—Criticism, interpretation, etc.—History—Early church, ca. 30–600. | Sacraments—History of doctrines—Early church, ca. 30–600.

Classification: LCC B5511.3 .B653 2017 | DDC 220.609/015—dc23

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. ESV Text Edition: 2011

Scripture quotations labeled RSV are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright 1952 [2nd edition, 1971] by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

18 19 20 21 22 23 24      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with biblical principles of creation stewardship, Baker Publishing Group advocates the responsible use of our natural resources. As a member of the Green Press Initiative, our company uses recycled paper when possible. The text paper of this book is composed in part of post-consumer waste.



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

# CONTENTS

- Preface xi
- Abbreviations xix
1. Patristic Reading 1
- The Church Fathers on Sacramental Reading of Scripture*
- Scripture as Sacrament
  - Metaphysics and Hermeneutics: Origen, Hobbes, and Spinoza
  - Sacramental Reading in Origen: Discerning Heavenly Patterns
  - Irenaeus's Recapitulation as Sacramental Reading
  - Retrieving Sacramental Reading: Meaning, Virtue, Progress, and Providence
  - Conclusion
2. Literal Reading 27
- Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine on the Creation Accounts of Genesis*
- Patristic Interest in Reading by the Letter
  - Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man*
  - Gregory's Literal Reading as Theological
  - Augustine's Turn to Literal Exegesis
  - Theological Literalism in Saint Augustine
  - Conclusion
3. Hospitable Reading 56
- Origen and Chrysostom on the Theophany of Genesis 18*
- Interpretation as Hospitality
  - Origen: The Son of God at Mamre

- Origen: Hospitality as Allegory  
 Chrysostom: Divine Condescension at Mamre and in Scripture  
 Chrysostom: Hospitality as Interpersonal Moral Virtue  
 Conclusion
4. Other Reading 81  
*Melito of Sardis and Origen on the Passover of Exodus 12*  
 The Exodus: Allegory as Arbitrary Reading?  
 Typology in Scripture  
 Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*  
 Origen, *Treatise on the Passover*  
 Conclusion
5. Incarnational Reading 105  
*Origen on the Historical Narrative of Joshua*  
 Allegory and Event  
 Origen's Polemical Context  
 Scripture as Incarnate Logos  
*Mysterii video sacramentum*  
 History's Rightful Place  
 From History to Spirit: Biblical Rationale  
 Conclusion
6. Harmonious Reading 131  
*Clement of Alexandria, Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine on the Music of the Psalms*  
 Tuning People with the Psalms  
 Harmony in the Platonic Tradition  
 Harmony in the Early Church  
 Restoring Harmony: Virtue and Emotions in the Psalms  
 Harmony with the Voice of Christ  
 Gregory of Nyssa on the Order of the Psalms  
 Conclusion
7. Doctrinal Reading 159  
*Athanasius and Gregory of Nyssa on the Wisdom of Proverbs 8*  
 Spiritual Interpretation and Christian Doctrine  
 From Origen to Eusebius  
 Athanasius: Interpretive Strategies  
 Athanasius: Exegesis 1 and 2  
 Gregory of Nyssa: Turning the Peacock  
 Gregory of Nyssa: Christ Created, Established, and Born in Us  
 Reading Wisdom Sacramentally  
 Conclusion

8. Nuptial Reading 187  
*Hippolytus, Origen, and Ambrose on the Bridal Couple of the Song of Songs*  
 Contemporary Readings of the Song of Songs  
 Hippolytus: Allegory and Economy  
 Origen: Ecclesial and Personal Readings  
 Ambrose: Ecclesial Asceticism  
 Conclusion
9. Prophetic Reading 219  
*Irenaeus, Cyril of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine on the Servant Songs of Isaiah*  
 Prophecy and Fulfillment: A Sacramental Bond  
 Edward Pusey's Sacramental Typology  
 Looking for Christ in Isaiah's Prophecies  
 Christ as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53  
 Christological Reading and the *Wirkungsgeschichte* of the Text  
 Christological Mystery Hidden in the Servant Songs  
 Wounded by Love: Associations of the Chosen Arrow (Isa. 49:2)  
 Conclusion
10. Beatific Reading 249  
*Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and Leo the Great on the Beatitudes of Matthew 5*  
 Spiritual Interpretation of the New Testament  
 Interpreting between Cave and Mountain  
 Gregory of Nyssa and Multiplicity of Meaning  
 Virtue and Salvation  
 Virtue and Interpretation  
 Numbering the Steps of Virtue  
 Conclusion
- Conclusion 273
- Bibliography 280
- Name Index 299
- Ancient and Medieval Writings Index 303
- Scripture Index 309
- Subject Index 313

# 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 analogical: 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.