

***Lifting the Veil:
Reading Scripture in the Orthodox Tradition***

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This essay is offered in honour of Archimandrite Ephrem (Lash), who, more than anyone, knew that the way to lift the veil of Scripture is through the letters of the text, studied in detail, rather than seeking something else, and communicated this infectiously.

The gospel, the Apostle proclaims, is not of man, but of God: it has come 'through a revelation of Jesus Christ' (through an *apocalypse* of Jesus Christ, Gal. 1:11–12). It is not a better way of doing things, devised by human ingenuity here below, but a revelation from on high, through an apocalypse of Jesus Christ. We all know this; but what I would like to examine here is just *how* this is so, what does it mean, and what are its implications for us in our reading of Scripture, as that was reflected upon by the early Church and practised thereafter in the Eastern Orthodox tradition.

The Gospel: Apocalypse of Cross through Scripture

Paul uses similar language in the concluding lines of his Epistle to the Romans:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the apocalypse of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now made manifest and made known through the prophetic writings [κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν μυστηρίου χρόνοις αἰωνίοις σεσιγημένου φανερωθέντος δὲ νῦν διὰ τε γραφῶν προφητικῶν ... γνωρισθέντος], according to the command of the eternal God, to all the nations, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory for evermore. (Rom. 16:25–7)

The gospel is preached as a mystery, hidden throughout the ages in the writings of Scripture, but now apocalyptically revealed. The revelation of this mystery, this apocalypse, is nothing less than the turn of the

ages, marking out two distinct eras, distinct not in content, but in terms of clarity: the revelation of what had been hidden.

The connection between the Scriptures, the gospel and Christ is further illumined by Paul's words in 2 Cor. 3–4, where he describes how Moses put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendour as he descended from his encounter with God upon the mountain. This same veil, he says, remains to this day when they read the Scriptures, for that veil is only lifted by Christ himself, so that 'to this day, whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds'. But when we turn to the Lord, the veil is removed, and we, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, we are changed into his likeness, from one degree of glory to another. But then, he continues, our gospel is also veiled: veiled from those who are perishing, those whose minds have been blinded by the god of this world, such that they are not able to see 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God'.

For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 3:12–4:6).

That the veil was removed by Christ means that it is only in Christ that the glory of God is revealed and that we can discern the true meaning of Scripture, and that these two aspects are inseparable. The identity between Moses the man and Moses the text, whose face and meaning were hidden by the same veil, is paralleled by the identity between Christ, in whose face is revealed the glory of God, and the gospel which proclaims this. So, behind the veil is nothing other than 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ', himself the image of God, though this remains 'veiled' to those who reject the gospel. The revelation, the apocalypse, of God in Christ comes through the unveiling of the Scriptures, and the unveiling of our minds, blinded as they are, so that we can see the glory of God in Christ.

There is, then, an intrinsic connection between the revelation, the apocalypse, of God in Christ, and the prophetic writings, the Scriptures. From the first, the gospel is proclaimed by reference to the Scriptures, what we now call, somewhat misleadingly, the Old

Testament. So important was this scriptural context, that, in one of the earliest proclamations of the gospel that we have, the apostle Paul appeals to it twice in one sentence: 'I delivered to you, as of first importance, what I also received, that Christ died in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried and rose on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3-4). This appeal remains fundamental even in the creeds of later centuries; when the Creed of Nicaea specifies that Christ 'rose in accordance with the Scripture', it is to the same Scripture, the Old Testament, not the Gospels, that reference is made.

The formula that Paul uses in 1 Cor. 15—'I delivered (tradition) what I received'—is a technical formula, used only twice by the Apostle. The other occasion is a few chapters earlier, when he speaks about the celebration of the Lord's meal, and here he specifies that what he traditions is what he received from the Lord himself (1 Cor. 11:23). Luke, the disciple of Paul, brings these together in his account of the encounter with the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus. It is only when Christ 'interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself', specifically that 'Moses and all the prophets' had spoken of how 'it was necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory', that the disciples' hearts were set on fire, so that they were able to recognize him 'in the breaking of bread' (Luke 24:25-35).

I've been emphasizing this unveiling of the Scriptures as the means, as it were, of the revelation, the apocalypse, of the gospel of Christ, because it must indeed be emphasized; it has significant implications for our understanding of Scripture and how it is read. The encounter with Christ, through the unveiling of Scripture is fundamental. Irenaeus of Lyons, in the latter part of the second century, makes this point forcefully. Christ, he says, is the treasure hidden in the field of the Scriptures (Matt. 13:38, 44), 'indicated by means of types and parables, which could not be understood by human beings prior to the consummation of those things which had been predicted, that is, the advent of the Lord'.¹ For this reason, Irenaeus

¹ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* (=haer.) 4.26.1; translated in ANF 1, modified.

continues, it was said to Daniel the prophet, 'Shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the consummation, until many learn and knowledge abounds. For, when the dispersion shall be accomplished, they shall know all these things' (Dan. 12:4, 7), and likewise by Jeremiah, 'In the last days they shall understand these things' (Jer. 23:20). So, Irenaeus concludes:

Every prophecy, before its fulfilment, is nothing but an enigma and ambiguity to human beings; but when the time has arrived, and the prediction has come to pass, then it has an exact exposition [ἐξήγησις]. And for this reason, when at this present time the Law is read by the Jews, it is like a myth, for they do not possess the explanation [ἐξήγησις] of all things which pertain to the human advent of the Son of God; but when it is read by Christians, it is a treasure, hid in a field, but brought to light by the cross of Christ.

When read in this apocalyptic fashion, with the veil being lifted at the end of times, he continues, Scripture glorifies the reader 'to such an extent, that others will not be able to behold his glorious countenance' (cf. Exod. 34:30-33; 2 Cor. 3:7-18). The books are sealed, and what they speak about, the treasure they contain—Christ himself—cannot be understood until they are opened by the cross; if they are not read in this apocalyptic manner, they will be read as nothing more than myths and fables (even if they are historically true). What the books contain cannot be understood until the last days, when the time of their accomplishment is present and the book unsealed. And now unveiled, those who read the same Scriptures through a proper exegesis are themselves transfigured, to become like Moses in his descent from the mountain after his encounter with God, themselves shining with the glory of God.

That the Scriptures are unveiled by the cross has further significant implications for how we understand the Scriptures themselves. Scripture read in this way is, to use Irenaeus image, like a mosaic depicting the face of the king, which the heretics have rearranged to form the image of a dog or fox.² Scripture is a thesaurus, a treasury of images and words used to proclaim Christ in the gospel,

² *Haer.* 1.8.1.

or, in the analogy used by Joel Marcus, drawing from E. Gässer, it is a 'paint-box' used by the evangelists in their depiction of Christ.³ Richard Hays comes to very much the same conclusion in reflecting on Paul's words in 2 Cor. 3:12–4.6, regarding the unveiling of Moses for those who turn to Lord to see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ. In Hays' words, this means that 'Scripture becomes—in Paul's reading—a metaphor, a vast trope that signifies and illuminates the gospel of Jesus Christ'.⁴ The proclamation of the death and resurrection of Christ is not straightforwardly derivable from Scripture; rather, the death and resurrection of Christ acts as a catalyst: because God has acted in Christ in a definitive, and unexpected, manner, making everything new, Scripture itself must be read anew. The 'word of the cross', the preaching of 'Christ crucified' may be a scandal for the Jews and folly for the Gentiles, but it alone is the 'power of God' making known 'the wisdom of God' (1 Cor. 1:18–25). This preaching, the *kerygma*, provides what Hays describes as 'the eschatological *apokalypsis* of the cross', a hermeneutical lens, through which Scripture can now be refracted with 'a profound new symbolic coherence'.⁵

From Gospel to Gospels

This is a very different way of reading Scripture than has become customary over recent centuries, when theological reflection, both scriptural exegesis and systematic exposition, has worked in a historical key, rather than within an apocalyptic framework, and when we begin with the narratives of the Gospels, rather than the preaching of *the* gospel in accordance with the Scriptures. Today, the primary horizon for Christian reading of Scripture is almost invariably that of *Heilsgeschichte*, a 'salvation history' that moves from the narratives of the Old Testament to those of the New Testament, where the Gospels are primarily read as biographies of Jesus followed by the

³ Joel Marcus, *The Way of the Lord: Christological Exegesis of the Old Testament in the Gospel of Mark* (London: T&T Clark, 1992), 2.

⁴ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 149.

⁵ Hays, *Echoes*, 169.

acts of the apostles and their epistles. In this overarching narrative, one begins with God and his act of creation; the falling away of human beings; and then the long, slow, and patient work of God through the messiness of human history, in a gradually unfolding plan, preparing the way for the advent of Christ, the Incarnation of the Word, which is understood as no more than, in Rowan Williams's haunting phrase, 'an episode in the biography of the Word'.⁶

However, as J. Louis Martyn points out, for the evangelist John, the link between the Scriptures and the gospel—so important that Christ, in the Gospel of John, can affirm that, for instance, Isaiah saw the day of Jesus and beheld his glory (John 8.56 and 12.41)—is *not* understood as a linear movement from the Scriptures to the gospel:

the fundamental arrow in the link joining Scripture and gospel points from the gospel story to Scripture and not from Scripture to the gospel story. In a word, with Jesus' glorification, belief in Scripture *comes into being*, by acquiring an indelible link to belief in Jesus' words and deeds. ...we have simply to note in the Gospel of John the absence of a linear sacred history that flows out of Scripture into the gospel story. Indeed the redemptive-historical perspective is more than absent; it is a perspective against which John is waging a battle.⁷

The cross constitutes the writings of Moses and the prophets *as Scripture*. Martyn makes a similar point for Paul: 'Paul did not make his way *from* Isaiah's words about God destroying the discernment of the discerning *to* the foolish word of the crucified Messiah. His hermeneutic worked exactly the other way around, from the previously unknown and foolish gospel of the cross to the previously known and previously misunderstood scripture'.⁸ What brought Paul to be a zealous apostle of the gospel was not his former studies of the Scripture, but rather when God revealed (or 'apocalypsed') his Son to

⁶ Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, 2nd edn (London: Dartman, Longman and Todd, 1987), 244.

⁷ J. Louis Martyn, 'John and Paul on the Subject of Gospel and Scripture', in *ibid.*, *Theological Issues in the Letters of Paul* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 209–30, at 216–17.

⁸ Martyn, 'John and Paul', 221.

him, or rather, in him (Gal. 2:16). It is, in fact, Paul's opponents in Galatia, the 'teachers', as Martyn styles them, who, as with John's opponents, moved from the Law to the gospel (in the manner of our 'salvation history') rather than from the gospel to the Scriptures in an apocalyptic unveiling of previously unknown depths.⁹ The gospel is not simply the culminating point of a 'salvation history', as Martyn rightly argues, but neither is it a proclamation separable from Scripture, as Martyn implies: it is always bound up with the apocalyptic unveiling of Scripture to reveal 'the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ who is the likeness of God' (2 Cor. 4:4), with Scripture providing the words and images through which the gospel is, from the first, proclaimed.¹⁰

But there is more: the 'indelible link' between the Scriptures and the gospel story is not simply that of links between two sets of narratives, but much more fundamentally and profoundly arises from the fact that the narratives in the Gospels are already proclaimed in accordance with Scripture: Scripture provides the tiles of the mosaic, in Irenaeus' image, it is the 'thesaurus' for expounding the mystery, or the 'paint-box' as Joel Marcus puts it, by which the image of Christ is depicted by the Evangelists. It is this Christ, the crucified and exalted Lord proclaimed in accordance with the Scriptures, who is fleshed out by the evangelists in their Gospels, and theologians following them thereafter, by an apocalyptic reading of Scripture on the basis of the cross. Within the Gospels, this is sometimes done explicitly, and occasionally Christ himself is presented as using the words of Scripture to explain who he is and what work he has come to fulfil. For instance, in the Gospel of John, Christ himself says: 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life' (John 3:14–15). The reference here is to the book of Numbers, where the Israelites were complaining to Moses that it was folly to remain in the desert: that is, the wisdom of the world was arguing that it is preferable to go back to Egypt, where, even if they were slaves, at least they had food and shelter (Num. 21:4–9). In return, God

⁹ J. Louis Martyn, *Galatians*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 117–26.

¹⁰ Marcus, *Way of the Lord*, 108.

punished them and their murmuring tongues by inflicting a plague of serpents with equally poisonous tongues, and simultaneously provided a remedy, the bronze serpent which, when lifted up upon a pole, enabled the people to regain life. The inter-play of imagery here also recalls Paul's words to those in his Corinthian community who were seduced by the wisdom of the world, that the folly of God (Christ lifted on the cross, as the bronze snake was lifted on the pole) overcomes the wisdom of the world, and, as such, Christ is the true power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:22–5).

This imagery, moreover, harkens further back to that other snake on the tree in the opening chapters of Genesis, promising life yet unable to deliver it, but who instead brings death upon those who tasted of its fruit (Gen. 3): Christ, upon the tree of the cross, is the true wisdom of God, contrasted with the wisdom of the world offered by the snake upon the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This interplay of imagery also comes to be depicted visually. The earliest representations of the crucifixion, such as in the sixth-century Rabbula Gospels, depict Christ upright and with his eyes open, not because of any shame in depicting him dead, but because this is the Living One, conquering death by his death. When, in the following centuries, the unity of this paschal Christ was refracted into separate images of a dead Christ upon the cross and that of the resurrected Christ, the dead Christ is then depicted with his body in a slumped, serpentine, posture. It is also, incidentally, striking how this image, at the heart of the gospel and its most distinctive proclamation, is in fact an image that was widely and readily known in the ancient world, for it is none other than the image of Asklepios, the god of medicine and healing; his distinctive symbol, a snake wound round a pole, continues even to the present day in the red and white striped pole of modern barbers, whose forebears were the blood-letters, the doctors of times past.

As the evangelists fleshed out Christ in their Gospels, it is striking that they too kept the turning point of revelation of Christ hinged upon the cross. It is not only the Scriptures that are veiled—not understood—until their apocalyptic unveiling, but also the work of Christ and even Christ himself. In the Gospels, the disciples continually fail to understand who he is and what he is doing. As John says of Christ's entry into Jerusalem: 'His disciples did not understand this at first; but when Jesus was glorified, then they remembered that

this had been written of him and had been done to him' (John 12.16; Zech. 9.9). The disciples did not simply remember more clearly 'what really happened'. Rather, it is a passage from Zechariah that they remembered and that clarified for them what he had done; their memory is scripturally mediated, as it were, after the Passion.

That Christ is only known in this way is shown in reverse by the one exception—the exception which proves the rule—when one of the disciples makes a confession of faith before the Passion: when Peter makes his confession in Matthew 16, he is told by Christ that this was not revealed ('apocalysped' again) by flesh and blood, but by the Father—it is not known by physical perception of the physical properties of Jesus Christ—what can be seen with the eyes of flesh; but then when Christ reveals that he must go to Jerusalem to suffer, Peter's response, that this should not happen, gets the sharpest rebuke possible: 'Get behind me Satan' (Matt. 16:13–23). The only disciple to make a confession of faith before the Cross is the only one to be called Satan—by Christ himself! Satan is the one who stands between Christ and the cross. Yet, when Christ is on the cross, the disciples run in fear (in John it is different, and we will return to that scene later); when they see the empty tomb, they don't understand (an empty tomb is after all ambiguous: has someone stolen the body?); and when they see the risen Christ, they don't initially recognize him. It is, in a real sense, not about 'seeing' at all—what we see is ambiguous. It is, rather, only when the Scriptures are opened and the bread broken that they recognize the risen Lord Christ, and he simultaneously disappears from their sight.

The Epistemology of Cross

There is one further epistemological point to be drawn from this relationship between the cross and Scripture. When Paul says that we no longer know Christ, as we once did, 'according to the flesh' (2 Cor. 15:16–17), that is, knowing Christ on the basis of sense perception, the contrast to this is not a 'spiritual perception', as might be supposed from his earlier words (cf. 1 Cor. 2:6–16). As Martyn points out, it is his opponents, the spiritual enthusiasts in Corinth who were claiming a 'spiritual perception' by which they have seen God, perhaps even face to face. Paul had resorted to such an appeal in his first letter to the

Corinthians, but now realized that he could not do so again. He appeals to the new creation, but, as Martyn points out, 'he is careful ... to imply that the opposite of the old-age way of knowing is not that of the new age—this point must be emphasized—but rather the way of knowing which is granted at the juncture of the ages'.¹¹ He does not speak of seeing the face of God, nor of knowing by the Spirit, for he, as everyone else, does not yet live in the new age. As Martyn puts it, 'the implied opposite of knowing by the norm of the flesh is not knowing by the norm of the Spirit, but rather knowing *kata stauron* ('by the cross')'.¹² Until we are, in actuality, raised with Christ in the new age,

knowing by the Spirit can occur only in the form of knowing by the power of the cross. For until the parousia, the cross is and remains the epistemological crisis, and thus the norm by which one knows that the Spirit is none other than the Spirit of the crucified Christ. ... The cross is the epistemological crisis for the simple reason that while it is in one sense followed by the resurrection, it is not replaced by the resurrection.¹³

The old has indeed passed away, and the new has indeed come, but this is only seen through the faith, the new eyes, of those standing at the juncture of the ages. A new community is being formed, not by knowledge but by active love, as the body of Christ. '*Christ* defines the difference between the two ways of knowing, doing that precisely in his cross'.¹⁴

Origen

The Gospels, then, are always the gospel, in each and every part. The first person to examine what is in fact meant by the term 'gospel' was Origen, and he concludes that a gospel is not primarily 'the narrative of the deeds, suffering and words of Jesus', but rather all the writings

¹¹ J. Louis Martyn, 'Epistemology at the Turn of the Ages', in *Theological Issues*, 89–110, at 107.

¹² Martyn, 'Epistemology', 108.

¹³ Martyn, 'Epistemology', 108–9.

¹⁴ Martyn, 'Epistemology', 110.

which 'present the sojourn [ἐπιδημία] of Christ and prepare for his coming [παρουσία] and produce it in the souls of those who are willing to receive the Word of God who stands at the door and knocks and wishes to enter their souls'.¹⁵ The gospel thus is an 'exhortatory address', presenting the Word of God to the hearers in such a way that they receive the Word, who then dwells in them.¹⁶

And, moreover, if this is what a gospel is, it is a definition that can also be applied to the writings of the Law and the Prophets, but only retrospectively. As Origen put it:

Before the sojourn of Christ, the Law and the Prophets did not contain the proclamation which belongs to the definition of the gospel, since he who explained the mysteries in them had not yet come. But since the Saviour has come and has caused the gospel to be embodied, he has by the gospel made all things as gospel.¹⁷

He qualifies this a little later, saying that when Christ explained the mysteries hidden in the writings of the Law and the Prophets, he revealed the spiritual sense of Scripture, and as the true meaning of their words this is, according to Origen, the meaning truly intended by those who wrote the Scriptures. So, Origen claims, they already 'spoke or wrote about God as Father in secret and not in a manner intelligible to all, so that they might not anticipate the grace that is poured out to all the world through Jesus, who calls all people to adoption so that he may declare the name of God to his brothers and praise the Father in the midst of the assembly in accordance with what has been written'.¹⁸ That is, if Moses and the Prophets already knew God as Father, this knowledge is nevertheless dependent upon the grace granted only through Jesus.

One of the great loci for examining the relation between gospel and Scripture is the transfiguration on Mount Tabor, when Jesus appears between Moses (Law) and Elijah (the prophets) transfigured

¹⁵ Origen, *Commentary on John* (= *ComJn*), 1.20, 26; trans. R. E. Heine, *Fathers of the Church*, 80, 89 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989, 93).

¹⁶ *ComJn* 1.18

¹⁷ *ComJn* 1.33

¹⁸ *ComJn* 19.28

in speaking about the 'exodus' he is to accomplish in Jerusalem (cf. Luke 9:31). Again according to Origen (though he is followed in this by many others including Maximus the Confessor) when the disciples saw the Son of God on the mountain speaking with Moses, and then understood that it was he who said 'A man shall not see my face and live' (Exod. 33:20), they were unable to endure the radiance of the Word, and so fell on their faces, humbling themselves under the hand of God. However, he continues,

after the touch of the Word, lifting up their eyes they saw Jesus only and no other. Moses, the Law, and Elijah, the prophetic element [ἡ προφητεία], became one only with the gospel of Jesus; and they did not remain three as they formerly were, but the three became one.¹⁹

Not only are the Law and the Prophets seen by the disciples as nothing other than the gospel of Jesus, but this very vision is what it is to behold the transfigured Jesus himself.

The Scripture, the Law and the Prophets, are not made redundant by the proclamation of the gospel, nor is the gospel arbitrarily imposed as the true meaning of Scripture. The Law and the Prophets are the 'basic elements' (στοιχείωσις), without the knowledge of which it is impossible to understand the gospel. Yet, when exegeted properly and understood fully, they lead 'to the perfect comprehension of the gospel and all the meaning [νοῦν] of the words and acts of Jesus Christ'.²⁰ Origen continues his analysis of the transfiguration account by pointing out that Jesus commanded his disciples not to speak of this vision until the Son of Man is raised from the dead (Matt. 17:9). According to Origen, this indicates that Christ's glorified state in the resurrection is akin (συγγενές) to that of the transfiguration, in which Jesus became one with his gospel.²¹ Though anticipated in the transfiguration, the full revelation of the gospel is nevertheless only accomplished through the Passion, the Cross. By pivoting theological

¹⁹ Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* (= *ComMatt*) 12.43; partial Eng. trans. in ANF 10.

²⁰ *ComMatt* 10.10.

²¹ *ComMatt* 12.43.

reflection around this turning point, Origen secures two fundamental points. First, that it is the humanity of the Saviour which creates the very possibility for the Word of God to be made known. Second, that it is this crux which ensures the eternal, unchanging, identity of the Word of God: 'Jesus is proved to be the Son of God both before and after his incarnation'.²²

The Presence of Christ

The preaching of the gospel of Christ in accordance with the Scriptures in this apocalyptic (rather than historical or *heilsgeschichtliche*) manner, as a mystery hidden from all eternity (though known to the prophets) and revealed at the end gives a much greater scope to the presence of Christ to Moses and the Prophets, sojourning in them and teaching them about God: Moses wrote of me, says Christ in John, and so too Isaiah saw my day. Yet, just as it is only possible to see the Law and the Prophets as referring to Christ once they have been expounded by Christ himself in his bodily sojourn, so also the spiritual sojourn of Christ amongst the righteous of old is a consequence of the universal import of his bodily incarnation. It is important to maintain this order, so preserving both the distinctiveness of Christ's incarnation and its paradigmatic function. It is in this way that Origen describes the sojourn of the Word of God with Moses and the prophets on the basis of the incarnation of the Word from Mary:

As in 'the last days', the Word of God, which was clothed with the flesh from Mary, proceeded into this world, and what was seen in him was one thing, and what was understood was another—for the sight of his flesh was open for all to see, but the knowledge of his divinity was given to the few, to the elect—so also, when the Word of God was brought to humans through the Prophets and the Lawgiver, it was not brought without proper clothing. For just as there it was covered with the veil of the flesh, so here with the veil

²² Origen, *Against Celsus* 3.14; trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

of the letter, so that indeed the letter is seen as flesh but the spiritual sense hiding within is perceived as divinity.²³

The Word of God is 'incarnate' in the writings of the Law and the Prophets. Although the words of Scripture veil the Word of God, yet at the same time they alone provide the means by which the Word is known. And so, only through the words of Scripture can we arrive at the spiritual sense it contains; in his scriptural exegesis, Origen always begins with the literal or lexical sense (τὸ ῥητόν), before exploring its spiritual sense. And, as we have seen, the veiled content of Scripture is identical to the truth taught by Christ, which is Christ himself.

It is important, therefore, that our reading of Scripture should not remain at the level of the letter, or our theological reflection (if one can separate that from the reading of Scripture) should also not remain at the level of the flesh. As Origen just pointed out, it is not enough to see the flesh of Christ to see his divinity; all one would see is Jesus of Nazareth, the son of the carpenter. Or as Origen puts it in his *Homilies on Luke*:

The apostles themselves saw the Word, not because they had beheld the body of our Lord and Saviour, but because they had seen the Word. If seeing Jesus' body meant seeing God's Word, then Pilate, who condemned Jesus, saw God's Word; so did Judas the traitor, and all those who cried out, 'crucify him, crucify him, remove such a one from the earth'. But far be it that any unbeliever should see God's Word. Seeing God's Word means what the Saviour says, 'He who has seen me has also seen the Father who sent me'.²⁴

Origen is concerned that the Word of God should not be reduced to the flesh which he assumed to make himself known, through his salvific death, nor that his presence should be restricted in this way to the past.

²³ Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, 1.1; trans. Gary Wayne Barkley, FC 83 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1990).

²⁴ Origen, *Homilies on Luke*, 1.4; trans. Joseph T. Lienhard FC 94 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1996).

Origen extends the paradigm of the Incarnation not only backwards but forwards, so that there is a third aspect to the sojourn of the Word. These three dimensions are brought together in a striking passage from his *Homilies on Jeremiah*:

According to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ as narratively told [κατὰ μὲν τὴν ιστορουμένην παρουσίαν], his sojourn [ἐπιδημία] was bodily and something universal, illumining the whole world, for 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' [John 1:14]. 'He was the true light that enlightens every man who comes into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own, and his own received him not' [John 1:9–11]. However, it is also necessary to know that he was also sojourning prior to this, though not bodily, in each of the holy ones, and that after this visible sojourn of his, he again sojourns in us. ... It is necessary for us to know these things, because there is a sojourn of the Word with each, especially for those who would benefit from it. For what benefit is it to me, if the Word has sojourned in the world and I do not have him?²⁵

The coming of Jesus Christ, his apocalyptic manifestation to us through his Passion, thus extends to the sojourn of the Word in the righteous of old and is continued *now* in those who now turn to the Word.

To see the sojourning of the Word in such universal terms clearly takes us beyond the flesh of Christ himself, the Incarnate Word, just as it takes us beyond the literal or lexical (τὸ ῥητόν) sense of the four Gospels. But, Origen points out, there are so many discrepancies in the accounts presented by the Gospels, that one must admit that their truth does not lie in their literal sense.²⁶ The four evangelists, according to Origen, even allowed a certain degree of distortion in

²⁵ Origen, *HomJer* 9.1; trans. John Clark Smith, FC 97 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998).

²⁶ Cf. *ComJn* 10.14. In *On First Principles* 4.2.9 Origen suggests in Scripture there are certain 'stumbling-blocks', placed there providentially by the Word of God, to make it clear that they possess a deeper meaning beyond the literal sense, and that the Spirit dealt in like manner with the gospels and writings of the apostles.

their accounts of Jesus, in order to present the spiritual truth where it was not possible to speak the truth both materially and spiritually.²⁷ It is thus necessary to 'adapt the events of the narrative account [τὰ τῆς ιστορίας]', if we are to preserve 'the good things given once for all to the saints' (Jude 3) and so maintain 'the harmony of the exposition [τὴν συμφωνίαν τῆς διηγήσεως] of the Scriptures from beginning to end'.²⁸ So, just as the humanity of Christ and his human story needs to be interpreted (through the unveiling of Scripture) to see in it (not elsewhere) the divinity of the Word of God, so also it is necessary to interpret the words of the Gospels.

It is certainly necessary to begin with the humanity of Christ as recorded in the letters of the Gospels, for it is in and through this that his divinity is revealed. But we cannot remain at the level of the flesh, otherwise we will never contemplate his divinity nor will our reading produce the sojourn of the Word in the believer, an effect which, as we have seen, lies at the heart of the definition of the 'gospel'. The veiling and unveiling of Scripture is thus intimately tied up with the veiling and unveiling of Christ himself. This understanding of Incarnation of the Word, in Scripture and in Jesus Christ, veiled in letters and the flesh, opens out to a much broader understanding of Incarnation and reading of Scripture than we usually think. Theology begins and ends with Jesus, who, as crucified and risen, is the Word of God, for he reveals the mysteries contained in Scripture, explaining how they refer to himself and so clothing himself with its words, an investiture or enfleshing which continues in the apostolic depiction of Christ.

Beginning with the flesh that Christ assumes in Scripture to make himself known, we are led to the point where we can see in the flesh of the literal sense, rather than elsewhere, the eternal Word of God. Christ is thus present throughout Scripture, and continues to be present in those who devote themselves to the Word and follow him. This is the 'eternal gospel' or the 'spiritual gospel',²⁹ found most clearly in the loftiest of the four Gospels, that of John:

²⁷ *ComJn* 10.18–20: 'The spiritual truth is often preserved in the material falsehood, so to speak'.

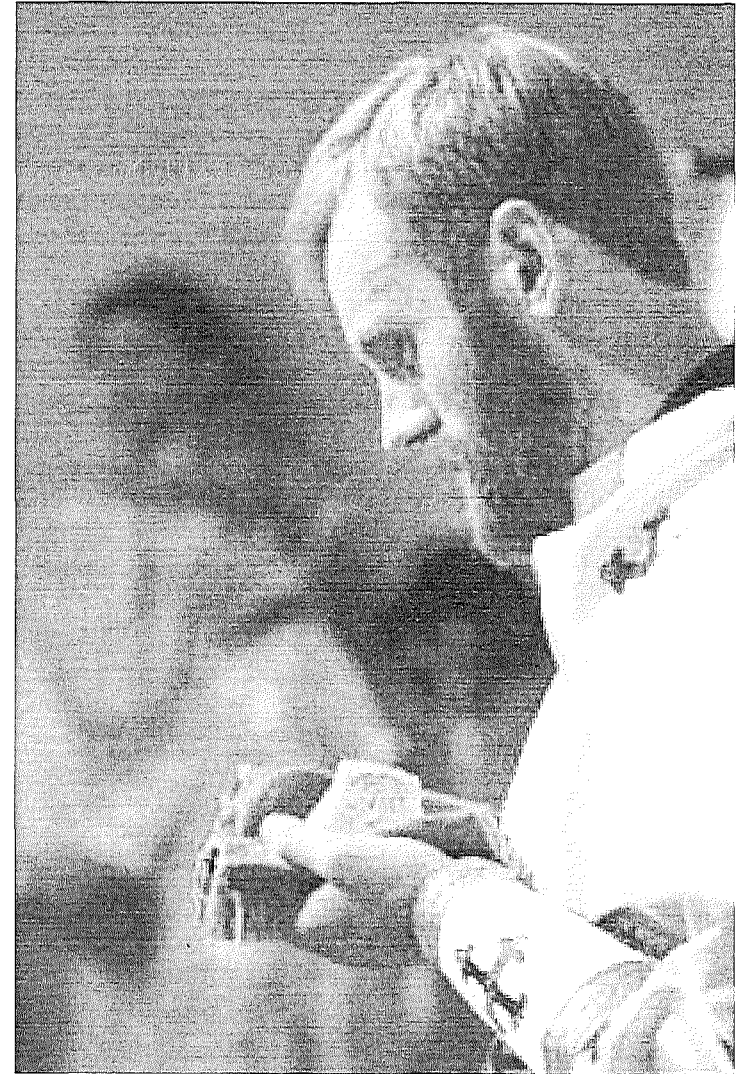
²⁸ *ComJn* 10.290.

²⁹ Rev. 14:6; cf. *ComJn* 1.40.

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We might dare say, then, that the Gospels are the first-fruits of all Scriptures, but that the first-fruits of the Gospels is that according to John, whose meaning no one can understand who has not leaned on Jesus' breast nor received Mary from Jesus to be his mother also. But he who would be another John must also become such as John, to be shown to be Jesus, so to speak. For if Mary had no son except Jesus, in accordance with those who hold a sound opinion of her, and Jesus says to his mother, 'Behold your son', and not, 'Behold, this man also is your son', he has said equally, 'Behold, this is Jesus whom you bore'. For indeed everyone who has been perfected 'no longer lives, but Christ lives in him', and since 'Christ lives' in him, it is said of him to Mary, 'Behold your son', the Christ.³⁰

The veiling and unveiling of Scripture, understood this way, extends the presence of Jesus Christ to all those who are devoted to the Word. This is ultimately not concluded until the *eschaton*, when those devoted to the Word will have reached the stature of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13), and so will no longer see the Father through the mediation of the Son, but 'will see the Father and the things with the Father as the Son sees them', when the Son delivers the kingdom to the Father, so that 'God becomes all in all'.³¹



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1977–2015

³⁰ *ComJn* 1.23; cf. John 19:26–27; Gal. 2:20.

³¹ *ComJn* 20.47–8; 1 Cor. 15:28.