

## Patristic Interpretation and Real Presence<sup>1</sup>

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### I. INTRODUCTION: SCRIPTURE AS SACRAMENT

This essay is an attempt to explain (and, to some extent, defend) what I believe lies at the heart of patristic readings of Scripture, namely, a pervasive sense of sacramentality. The church fathers saw the Scriptures as a sacrament and read them accordingly. Remarkably, perhaps, theologians such as Saint Augustine use the term “sacrament” in a much broader sense than we commonly tend to do. He uses it 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>2</sup> Moreover, he regularly refers to scriptural texts as *sacramenta*.<sup>3</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>4</sup> At the same time, the early

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<sup>1</sup>This chapter was first published in chapter 1 of my book, *Scripture as Real Presence: Sacramental Presence in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

<sup>2</sup>Cutrone, “Sacraments,” in *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan Fitzgerald and John C. Cavadini (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 742.

<sup>3</sup>Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 147–59. I owe this reference to Lewis Ayres.

<sup>4</sup>The Catholic *Catechism* distinguishes the seven sacraments from “sacramentals”: “These are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects,

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 would not 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.

## II. METAPHYSICS & HERMENEUTICS: ORIGEN, HOBBS, 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 does not 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>5</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>6</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>7</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

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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*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2000), par. 1667, (p. 415).

<sup>5</sup>Origen, *Commentary on the Canticle of Canticles*, trans. R. P. Lawson, in *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, ed. R. P. Lawson, Ancient Christian Writers 26 (New York: Newman, 1957), 3.12 (p. 218).

<sup>6</sup>Ibid. Here and throughout, unless otherwise indicated, Latin and Greek terms in round brackets are my own addition.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 3.12 (p. 219).

(cf., Matt 13:31).<sup>8</sup> Origen observes that though it is 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>9</sup> For Origen, it seems, a mustard seed does not 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>10</sup> Here King Solomon lists many 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>11</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>12</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>13</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>14</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” (Wisdom 7:20), Origen turns to Paul’s language of “winds of

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<sup>8</sup>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.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 3.12 (p. 220). I have changed the translation of *formas* from “shapes” to “forms.”

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid. The Greek text speaks of *krypta kai emphanē*. I have left out the italics that Lawson uses to render Origen’s biblical quotations.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 3.12 (pp. 220–21).

<sup>14</sup>The numbering of the psalms follows the Septuagint. Modern (Hebrew) numbering is given in brackets.

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>15</sup> 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>16</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 are 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>17</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.

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<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.12 (p. 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 does not 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.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.12 (p. 223).

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*

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 are equipped to do once we have 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 (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>18</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, does not 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>19</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 does not mean that they contain patterns (*exemplaria*) of heavenly things sustaining their creaturely individuality, as Origen would have thought of it. Ockham's

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<sup>18</sup>Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 26–27, 45–72.

<sup>19</sup>Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy*, Interventions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 290.

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>20</sup> These became manifest most clearly in the seventeenth century with Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677).<sup>21</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>22</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>23</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>24</sup> We rely on political authorities—not on universal, Aristotelian truth claims—to determine right and wrong.<sup>25</sup> According to Hobbes, had the Christian tradition simply followed Scripture instead of Aristotle, the church would

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<sup>20</sup>I give a more extended discussion in Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 79–81.

<sup>21</sup>For the following account, I am indebted particularly to Matthew Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis: A Theology of Biblical Interpretation* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 108–18, and to Scott W. Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible: The Roots of Historical Criticism and the Secularization of Scripture 1300–1700* (New York: Herder & Herder/Crossroad, 2013), 285–393.

<sup>22</sup>Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. G. A. J. Rogers and Karl Schuhmann, 2 vols. (London: Continuum, 2005), 4.46 (pp. 533–36).

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.4 (p. 28). Cf., Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 108–9; Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 301–2.

<sup>24</sup>“But whatsoever is the object of any man’s 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; for 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).

<sup>25</sup>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 Country, 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).

never have been able to override the proper authority of the king.<sup>26</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>27</sup> It is obvious that this “proper reading” was politically motivated. Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker suggest that Hobbes’s exegesis “was, first to last, entirely politicized, offering a nearly endless arsenal of support for the subordination of every aspect of Scripture, from canon to interpretation, to the arbitrary authority of the civil sovereign.”<sup>28</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>29</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>30</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>31</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>32</sup> Human reason has the ability to investigate history, and so Scripture should be read historically rather than

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<sup>26</sup>Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 109–10.

<sup>27</sup>*Ibid.*, 109. See Hobbes, *Leviathan* 3.33 (p. 306).

<sup>28</sup>Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 336.

<sup>29</sup>See Noel Malcolm, “*Leviathan*, the Pentateuch, and the Origins of Modern Biblical Criticism,” in “*Leviathan*” after 350 Years, ed. Tom Sorell and Luc Foisneau (Oxford: Clarendon, 2004), 241–64.

<sup>30</sup>Hahn and Wiker, *Politicizing the Bible*, 381.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 375–77, 388–90.

<sup>32</sup>Roy A. Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture: Baruch Spinoza to Brevard Childs*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 40.

allegorically.<sup>33</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>34</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 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>35</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>36</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 are not aware of it, we still do metaphysics.

<sup>33</sup>Craig G. Bartholomew, *Reading Ecclesiastes: Old Testament Exegesis and Hermeneutical Theory*, *Analecta Biblica* 139 (Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1998), 10.

<sup>34</sup>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.

<sup>35</sup>Levering, *Participatory Biblical Exegesis*, 115.

<sup>36</sup>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 identification of the two.

### III. 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 is 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, 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 (Wisdom 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 does not 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 do not 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 does not 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>37</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, does not 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>38</sup>

Even if what I have argued so far is true, some may still object that Origen's approach does not 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 does not make the latter lose their splendor; and just because spiritual meaning is of a higher kind than historical meaning, that does not leave the latter without significance. Perhaps by valuing visible things less than invisible things, the church fathers actually accurately captured the significance of both. (While I will

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<sup>37</sup>Pabst, *Metaphysics*, 32.

<sup>38</sup>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* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 51–134, esp. 93.

not 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>39</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>40</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, we can see this sacramental ontology at work in patristic biblical interpretation. My main argument, therefore, is 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 *oculta* 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>41</sup>

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.

By speaking of a “sacramental hermeneutic,” I do not mean to oppose this expression to commonly used terms in connection with

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<sup>39</sup>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 Hans Boersma, “Reconnecting the Threads: Theology as Sacramental Tapestry,” *Cruce* 47, no. 3 (2011), 29–37, at 33.

<sup>40</sup>See Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and idem., *Heavenly Participation*. My recent book on Gregory of Nyssa (*Embodiment and Virtue in Gregory of Nyssa: An Analogical Approach*, Oxford Early Christian Studies [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013]) studies his participatory metaphysic, drawing a great deal from his biblical exegesis.

<sup>41</sup>See my interaction with N. T. Wright on this point in Hans Boersma, “Sacramental Interpretation: On the Need for Theological Grounding of Narrational History,” in *Exile: A Conversation with N. T. Wright*, ed. James M. Scott (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 255–72.

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 about the propriety of distinguishing between typology and allegory.<sup>42</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>43</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.

#### IV. 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>44</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 nominalism in Western Christian theology, through which the sensible and intelligible realms, history and eternity, were thrust away from each

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<sup>42</sup>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 Peter W. Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 16 (2008), 283–317.

<sup>43</sup>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.

<sup>44</sup>John B. Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 19.

other, and creaturely forms (language, action, institutions) denied any capacity to indicate the presence and activity of the transcendent God.”<sup>45</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>46</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.

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 19–20.

<sup>46</sup>John J. O’Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), 88.

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