

REVIEW ARTICLE

BY WAY OF APOLOGY:
DAWSON, EDWARDS, ORIGEN¹

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Erich Auerbach has suggested that there is an

antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning, an antagonism which permeates the early, and indeed the whole, Christian view of reality ... The total content of their sacred writings was placed in an exegetic context which often removed the thing told very far from its sensory base, in that the reader or listener was forced to turn his attention away from the sensory occurrence and toward its meaning.²

I would like to go beyond Auerbach here to suggest that in the case of Origen, allegoresis should not be understood as an aleatory imposition of Christian meaning on a biblical text that does not suffer such interpretation gladly. Origen's interpretation theory (and practice) should be seen rather as an attempt to answer the question of the possibility of interpretative knowledge itself.

Frequently we find Origen described as if a prior commitment to Platonic philosophy drove his theological enterprise and thus 'distorted' his Christian theology, as well as his interpretative practice. I am suggesting that we think of this relationship differently, in a nearly opposite fashion: Platonism provided a framework within which Origen could think about the question of how we interpret, and Christian *Logos* theology provided a solution to problems left unsolved by Platonism precisely in that crucial area of epistemological theory, as well. Allegory is not some bastard love child or stepbrother of interpretation, something marginal and bizarre, but the very archetype of interpretation, its purest form. Another way of saying this is that all interpretation is allegorical in the sense that it says

¹ This review essay is a first attempt to adumbrate some ideas that are intended, *Deo volente*, to be incorporated in a book tentatively entitled *Logocentrism and the Reading of Midrash: a Revision*. Early versions of the text have been 'tried out' in Swarthmore (where I had the privilege of David Dawson's generous response and conversation), Vancouver, Berkeley, and South Bend. I wish to thank the following for their responses, Virginia Burrus, Catherine Conybeare, Hindy Najman, Paul Meier. Even less than usually, none of them are to be held in any way responsible for the infelicities of this first stab.

² E. Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Garden City, N.Y. 1953) 48.

implicitly: This is the text and this is its meaning, but only the interpretation that men call allegorical does so frankly and openly, laying bare, as it were, the device.

Dawson's Supersession

John David Dawson's *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* raises serious questions about both Paul and Origen — or rather about my Origenist Paul and Pauline Origen.³ His writing has jolted me into thinking again about Origen. His description of the ontological realms of the non-sensible spiritual realities (τὰ νοητά) and the sensible realm of material realities (τὰ αἰσθητά) as interpenetrating and deeply connected⁴ is a compelling and powerful corrective to my own schematic presentation of them in structuralist terms as opposing. Moreover, his discovery of Origen's articulation of 'ungrammaticalities' in the biblical text as a signpost for the attentive reader to seek deeper (allegorical) meaning shows us that Origen has anticipated the most sophisticated of modern literary theorists.⁵ Finally, Dawson's lucid and lovely account of allegorical reading of Scripture itself as 'not a disembodiment through interpretation but instead a consumption of a body through reading,' and thus an observance of the Paschal sacrifice is moving, true, and religiously (as well as theoretically) rich.

I must begin, however, with a disavowal: Dawson to the contrary, I never said or implied that 'Origen replaces authentic scriptural meanings with alien Platonic abstractions.'⁶ If I had to rephrase what I did say, it would be more like: Origen replaces the concrete authentic scriptural text with equally authentic (and what could be inauthentic in this context?)

³ J. D. Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading* (Berkeley, California 2002). Let me say what a deep pleasure and honor I feel in having — I might say almost for the first time — had my work taken so seriously (although this pleasure was somewhat tempered by realizing that I was being included as a 'twentieth-century thinker' with two quite dead men). In one aspect, this book is surely one of the two or three that have led me to a deep reconsideration of my earlier characterization of Origen's reading practices. So let me begin with praise for the book. In my earlier work, I did naively and somewhat crudely read Origen as a 'Platonist.' *Pace* Dawson, this was not intended as a condemnation of Origen, but in its crude assumptions about Plato and Platonism and thus about Origen's alleged Platonism, it may have indeed, appeared an (unintentional) caricature. I have read much Plato since those days and much more Origen as well, and my current project is, as already confessed above, an attempt at a corrective to that crudity. The insight that drives my current way of understanding Origen was afforded, moreover, by earlier work of Dawson's.

⁴ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 59.

⁵ For example, M. Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry*, *Advances in Semiotics* (Bloomington, Indiana 1978) 82.

⁶ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 53.

Christian theological abstractions. Accordingly, my interpretation of Origen, actually meant to be loving and appreciative, if critical, as well, bears no relation to the polemics of inauthenticity leveled against him, whether by the Reformation or anti-Origenist patristic writers⁷ or by twentieth-century critics, either.⁸ What I proposed was that the very concept of a meaning that is beyond, behind, or outside the text is possible only within a broadly Platonic understanding of reality as composed of a material and an immaterial ontological level. Nor would I dream of ruling out a relationship between the material realities, whether of world, body, or text, and the immaterial materials held by, for example, Origen, to be related to them. Surely that is the whole point of Plato's understanding of the ratio of a beautiful boy to the Form of Beauty — not that they are radically unrelated to each other, but that they are deeply related in a relation of binary opposition of real to ideal.⁹

Binary opposition is not an ontological or ethical antagonism, but a *relation* within which two entities (or signs) divide up between them some aspect of reality exclusively and completely. To say that male and female are in binary opposition, for instance, is not to say that there is no relation between men and women, nor surely to imply an antagonism. The question here, however, is not — should not even appear to be — whether Dawson is right or whether I am right, but how such different visions of Origen, generated from different subject positions, can dwell together in one basket, as the talmudic phrase would have it. In a passage of his commentary on Canticles, Origen writes:¹⁰

So, as we said at the beginning, all the things in the visible category can be related to the invisible, the corporeal to the incorporeal, and the manifest to those that are hidden; so that the creation of the world itself, fashioned in this wise as it is, can be understood through the divine wisdom, which from actual things and copies teaches us things unseen by means of those that are seen, and carries us over from earthly things to heavenly.

But this relationship does not obtain only with creatures; the Divine Scripture itself is written with wisdom of a rather similar sort. Because of certain mystical and

⁷ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 53. In a future installment of the present project, I plan, *Deo volente*, to revisit the question of Eros and Agape in Plato and Christianity, as raised by Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 54 and M. J. Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*, Ashgate Studies in Philosophy & Theology in Late Antiquity (Aldershot, Hants, England; Burlington, Vermont 2002) 146. This essay in progress is entitled 'What Do We Talk About When We Talk About (Platonic) Love?'

⁸ See below, discussion of Mark Edwards' work.

⁹ See now D. Boyarin, 'Why is Rabbi Yohanan a Woman?: Platonic Love in the Talmud,' ed. M. Jordan, *Authorizing Marriage? Canon, Tradition, and Critique in the Blessing of Same-Sex Unions* (forthcoming 2005).

¹⁰ Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, *Ancient Christian Writers* 26 (Westminster, Md. 1957) 223.

hidden 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 likenesses of certain hidden things. And you will find this correspondence not only in the Old Testament Scriptures, but also in the actions of Our Lord and Saviour that are related in the Gospels.

If, therefore, in accordance with the principles that we have now established all things that are in the open stand in some sort of relation to others that are hidden, it undoubtedly follows that the visible hart and roe mentioned in the Song of Songs are related to some patterns of incorporeal realities, in accordance with the character borne by their bodily nature. And this must be in such wise that we ought to be able to furnish a fitting interpretation of what is said about the Lord perfecting the harts, by reference to those harts that are unseen and hidden.

Dawson comments quite rightly that 'Origen undermines any suggestion of radical separation of inner from outer by emphasizing the relation of a visible roe [hart, in the translation cited] to 'the patterns of incorporeal realities' to which it is related.'¹¹ Dawson details the analogous relation and the fact that it has to do with a visceral fluid present in the hart that improves eyesight and 'the vision that Christ both has and affords.' Now, the crux:¹²

Although a Platonic worldview is a congenial context for such an analogy, there is nothing specifically Platonic about its details. Indeed, at the root of the analogy is specifically Christian theological reflection on the Son's capacity to know the Father and afford knowledge of the Father to others.

Thus, what I had claimed was also something that Dawson concedes here, although, to be sure, I had claimed it much more strongly: that Platonism was not merely a *congenial* context, but a necessary enabling one for such analogical interpretative methods, not that the results of the analogy are Platonic and not, therefore, authentically 'Christian.'

I am now going to go further and argue for a deeper connection between the actual content of Origen's comment and a 'Platonic' problematic — reversing, as I've already mentioned, the usual anti-Origenist polemical direction of that imputed connection and rendering it instead celebratory, à la Daniélou or Crouzel, of the profundity of Origen's thinking about the epistemology of interpretation itself, for knowing the Father and affording knowledge are the very essence of a hermeneutical dilemma, perhaps *the* hermeneutical dilemma.

Instead of adhering to the claim that commitment to a Platonic universe drove Christianity or Christian interpretative practice, I am going to propose

¹¹ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 53.

¹² Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 53.

a reading of this relation in which a much subtler, finer, and more interesting relationship inheres between Christianity — say Origen — and Platonism, or, more generally speaking, the philosophical tradition which is, as we know, footnotes to Plato. This reading reverses the previously imagined relation and makes philosophy the beneficiary of Christianity, and not its benefactor. Rather than Platonism controlling and distorting (or even aiding) Christian theologizing, I am suggesting that Christian theology provided significant answers to philosophical problems. Before I do that, however, I shall need to justify my enterprise, *tout court*, in the light of a powerful indictment of it by Dawson.

The crux of the matter is this: for Dawson, I am simply asking the wrong question when I ask about Paul and Origen as theorists of interpretation. Dawson contrasts the question that modernist/postmodernist theorists ask with what he alleges would have been asked by early Christian readers. For him, such readers would ask only 'about the intelligibility of a divine performance' and never about 'texts and meanings.' As he writes:

I want to de-privilege at the outset the peculiarly modernist and postmodernist assumptions we contemporary readers are apt to bring to any account of Christian figural reading. Whether we still think naively that texts 'have' their meanings, or — with more sophistication or readerly effort — that textual meaning is forever distanced and deferred — we still instinctively bring to Christian figural reading the assumption that, whatever else it may be about, it must concern texts and meanings. The question about the intelligibility of a divine performance is something we would rather not consider, for the idea that the prophet Isaiah had, in his own right and not only as a consequence of some later reader's strange interpretation, once referred in some oblique fashion to the person of Jesus who had not yet appeared in history and, in so doing, sought to render *intelligible* a certain divine performance, is, for most of us, historiographically absurd; it is, in fact, the height of *unintelligibility*. Yet any effort to understand Christian figural reading as fundamentally a matter of texts and the presence or absence of meaning, rather than a matter of rendering God's historical performances intelligible, is doomed to theological irrelevance, however much contemporary theoretical sense it might make.¹³

These allegations need some assiduous unpacking. Dawson, insofar as we understand him to be engaged in a rational discourse here and not only making a dogmatic claim, would seem to be arguing that precisely on post-structuralist canons of interpretative theory that evacuate the opposition between literal and figurative, and certainly between original and latterly imposed 'meanings,' we could just as easily assert that Isaiah was referring to a Jesus who would not live for half a millenium as to an Israel that subsisted all around him. Both interpretations would have an equal claim to

¹³ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 6.

legitimacy at that theoretical level. Dawson would undoubtedly, on the evidence of the paragraph that I have quoted, deny this reading of his words, but I don't think he can escape the assertion that someone, sometime, had to *say* that the text, when it says, 'suffering servant,' means 'Jesus,' just as someone else, at some time, said that it means 'Israel,' whether or not the actual word *meaning* figured in their utterances. They may be divine performances indeed, but divine performances that are given to us in texts and therefore demand interpretations — or at least readings — and are subject to theoretical, as well as historical, interrogation.

Speaking for the moment from a very unpostmodern position, I would claim that the reading of Isaiah as referring to Israel precedes the reading of Isaiah as referring to Jesus by more than half a millennium, and, therefore, the latter *interpretation* supersedes, or seeks to, the earlier reading. (Note that this claim is entirely independent of the hermeneutical status of any discussion of what Isaiah 'speaking in his own right' might have 'meant.')

This supersession has had, moreover, devastating consequences in real history, as well, and many contemporary Christian thinkers (including Dawson) are highly sensitive to those consequences.

To claim, however, that an approach such as mine renders Jewish voices theologically irrelevant is dangerously close to suggesting, once more, that Jewish bodies are theologically irrelevant in a Christian symbolic economy. Disallowing, a priori, a critical reading that comes from outside, a reading that seeks to criticize itself and its discourse as well as to criticize from its outside subject position threatens another kind of theological irrelevance.

Dawson is well aware of this danger, one that he assiduously wishes to avoid:¹⁴

Any Christian claim that Boyarin has misconstrued Paul's intention runs the considerable risk of simply repeating Paul's indictment against his own Jewish contemporaries — that they cannot understand Paul because they refuse to entertain as a real possibility the very conclusion that his argument advances.¹⁵ In the counterreadings I offer in order to highlight the presuppositions of Boyarin's reading, I point out ways in which Boyarin's approach to Paul does systematically deny one possible conclusion to Paul's argument. As a consequence, by reading Paul at his theoretically most accessible, Boyarin fails to read him at his theologically strongest.

But, of course, that is precisely my project, to read Paul (as I read my own Rabbis) at his theoretically most accessible and thus to make sense of the

¹⁴ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 20.

¹⁵ I can understand well Dawson's dilemma, as well as his frustration. It is not dissimilar to the frustration of the critic of Mel Gibson's film who is sure that his critique simply reinforces the very message of the film over and over again.

implications of his texts for those who 'refuse to entertain as a real possibility the very conclusion that [Paul's] argument advances.'

My question, quite an obvious one I would think, is what can we learn from Paul if we do not believe Christian theological claims, per se, do not accept the 'Trinity,' the 'Incarnation,' or the apparent abrogation of Torah law. Dawson claims that *ignoring* the claim that Isaiah 'in his own right' referred to Jesus, or indeed understanding Paul and Origen as being about signs and meanings at all, is what leads Boyarin 'to misunderstand what figural reading is about,' and, also, 'to open the practice to the charge of supersessionism.' But not to do so is surely, from my own subject position, simply to acquiesce in my own being superseded. This is true whether I choose to embrace or ignore Christianity, rather than, as I do, engaging it. In other words, to take Origen seriously, I *must* read him as supersessionist (because he is), but to do so is not to lay a charge against him, nor to dismiss him, but precisely to engage him. If there is anything postmodern about this claim, it is in the insistence that reading is always the product of subject positions (mine, Dawson's, Origen's). The Platonism lies in denying that.

It is a misreading of my intentions, as well as of my text, to take them as condemnatory of either Paul or Origen. They are not, as Dawson is correct in pointing out, supersessionist on their own accounts of themselves (contrast, for instance, Justin Martyr who explicitly claims that Old Israel has been rejected and a New Israel — the Israel of the faithful Gentiles — constituted). Nevertheless, from outside Pauline discourse, even Paul's position is phenomenally supersessionist: The way you have always read the text and understood your existence and performed your lives is wrong. Now we know the true way. By disallowing this critical reading from outside, Dawson thus effectively disallows, a priori, any critical reading of Paul either from within or from without.¹⁶

¹⁶ Robin Darling Young makes a very interesting claim in her review of Dawson (R. D. Young, 'Review of John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity*,' *Studia Philonica Annual* XV [2003] 171-72) that I wish, nevertheless, to challenge here. She argues that Dawson's error is in not disputing me sufficiently: 'This book asks whether the rabbinic scholar Daniel Boyarin is right in asserting that the allegorical interpretation found in the letters of Paul, and in the exegetical works of Philo and Origen is destructive of Judaism. . . . [H]e does not address a fundamental error of Boyarin's. The latter judges that Paul's thought represents a sharp opposition between spiritual Christianity and carnal Israel, where Paul conceives of himself and his followers as spiritual and, of course, Christian. In the fifties of the first century, as even more the case during Philo's career, there was little opposition between literalist Jews and spiritual Christians — no Gnostics had yet begun to write, and many followers of Christ apparently still thought of themselves as Messiah-followers among a Jewish community allowing different interpretation of Law, righteousness and cult. Boyarin has

Similarly, Dawson argues that¹⁷

Just as Platonic *erôs* can be understood as a striving of the world of particulars for the forms of the Good and the Beautiful that would complete them, so allegorical reading can be seen as the striving of a reader confronted with incomplete or 'thin' literal readings for the fuller or deeper meanings that would extend and complete them. Origen argues that allegorical readers should look for the spiritual (which is to say the *real*) import of the letter, rather than a meaning *in place* of the letter.

But if I understand myself and history and practice to be in the letter and find that letter thick and saturated with meaning, then I shall find troubling the obliteration of their significance, and this cannot be questioned vis-à-vis Origen for the practice, at any rate.

Origen writes: 'It is also the task of this wisdom to contemplate the things established by law concerning foods, which are symbols of the things which will maintain and strengthen our souls there.'¹⁸ Symbols yes, but governing regulations concerning the meats that we will eat or not —

himself proposed that there were no separate bodies 'Judaism' and 'Christianity' in the first century, and many would accept that this was the case before 70. . . . But a different view of Paul, as a Marcionite *avant le lettre*, prevails when he is contrasted with a rabbinic Judaism that develops a century and a half after Paul's career.'

First, let me sort out some misconceptions here. Of course, I never claimed that Paul understood himself as anything but a Jew, surely not that the name 'Christian' was available to him, nor that there were — as Young notes — separate communities of Jews and Christians in his time. Furthermore, insofar as groups following Jesus continued to observe the Law (in subtly or sharply differing ways), they remain simply Jews. Indeed, this is the basis for my argument that Judaism and Christianity remain significantly unseparated until the fourth century or so. I do claim, and continue to do so, that we have no evidence for other Jewish thinkers or groups who argued for the significant abrogation of the practices of the Law before Paul, except perhaps for those individuals that Philo condemns in *Migr.* 89-93 as cited in the text here. Well, then, what about the last sentence in the passage cited from Young? Is there evidence that Jewish folk kept the literal Law before the Rabbis? Perhaps spiritualizing it and obviating its physical observance was the general way of Jews in Paul's time and only the Rabbis invented the notion that Jews ought to actually eat kosher, circumcize their children, and refrain from labor on the Sabbath? I suppose it is possible to imagine this possibility, in which case the Rabbis would be entirely the supersessionists (and not only partially so, in their reinterpretation of much *halakha*). Maybe only Pharisees and Saducees actually kept the Law physically. Qumran could be a protohalakhic group. But what about Paul's own Jesus-following opponents who clearly observe the carnal law throughout the Letters? What shall we do with them? What about the Jesus community, at least according to Matthew, who clearly observe the Sabbath and Kashruth (although disagreeing with some pharisaic innovations)? I think finally we dishonor Paul if we do not pay sufficient attention to the radical change that he introduces in Jewish religious history, but surely not a Marcionite one.

¹⁷ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 54.

¹⁸ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. R. E. Heine, *Fathers of the Church* (Washington, D.C. 1989) 10.85 and see the discussion in Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 68.

no. If someone says it is not necessary to eat kosher food because this is the spiritual import of that textualized commandment, that practice, the letter, is being displaced, for good or for ill. (For what it is worth, this parallels Philo's critique of those Jewish allegorists in his own time who, upon discovering the symbolic meaning of the laws, abandoned their observance. As he says, 'Nay, we should look on all these outward observances as resembling the body, and their inner meanings as resembling the soul. It follows that, exactly as we have to take thought for the body, because it is the abode of the soul, so we must pay heed to the letter of the laws.'¹⁹) Thus it is not the existence of a nonliteral meaning as *extension* of the literal that I claim as damaging to Jewish bodies, *pace* Dawson, but only one that *displaces* the literal, which, again *pace* Dawson, I claim that Origen's does.²⁰

This is not to deny or impugn the religious or hermeneutical legitimacy or ethical good faith of Origen. My reading is no more a 'condemnation' of Origen than a condemnation of Paul and of allegorical reading.²¹ The 'figure' does, however, 'refuse to accept its own dissolution,' to use Cardinal Daniélou's terms.²² What Daniélou seems to remember is that the 'figure' is not words on a page, but living, breathing, worshipping, circumcising, circumcised, kosher-eating, mikvah-dipping human beings. And I think that a contemporary Jew who does not accept the truth claims of Paul's reading strategy, and it is just that, has a right to protest and challenge Christian theology to find a way to make her contemporary Jewish self theologically relevant. And I level the same critical lens, *mutatis mutandis*, at my own orthodox Judaism, as tending to read the 'Goyim' as simply irrelevant. It is this critique that gives my own work any possible claim to relevancy to those who are not always/already orthodox Jews. The consequence of Dawson's claim, read out to its implications, would be to render all Christian writing unintelligible and irrelevant to all but Christian orthodox believers — whether Athanasian or Arian, to use Dawson's language. Finally, let us not forget the opinion of which Origen delivers himself in *Contra Celsum* when he writes, 'For they committed a crime of the most unhalloved kind, in conspiring against the Saviour of the human race in that city where they offered up to God a worship containing the symbols of mighty mysteries [that pesky 'symbol' again]. It accordingly behooved that city where Jesus underwent these sufferings to perish utterly, and the Jewish nation to be overthrown' (4.22). Not supersession? I don't think so.

¹⁹ *Migr.* 89–93, PLCL vol. 4, 183–185. Incidentally, *pace* Edwards *Origen* 129, this indicates that the representation of the *hermêneia* of the text as its body and the *dianoia* as its soul precedes Porphyry by centuries.

²⁰ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 208–09.

²¹ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 10.

²² As cited by Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 9.

Were it indeed a precondition for reading Origen that one accept 'the idea that the prophet Isaiah had, in his own right and not only as a consequence of some later reader's strange interpretation, once referred in some oblique fashion to the person of Jesus who had not yet appeared in history,' then Origen, too, would be rendered unintelligible and irrelevant. Fortunately, however, for once with fine postpostmodernist conviction, I think that Dawson is wrong on this point and can be falsified from Origen's own writings.²³

Origen's Philo-logia

It is precisely 'texts and meanings' that exercise the Christian Father of reading, at least as much as the intelligibility of divine performances, and his thoughts on texts and meanings, as well as his textual practice, have much to teach us when read at their most theoretically accessible points. I am sure that much is lost when we do not read Origen or Paul at their 'theologically strongest' points, which are tantamount to what are entirely contained within a believing Christian's discourse, but I would submit that even more is lost when we read them only that way. In a very interesting passage, Origen connects the theoretical problem of 'true' interpretation with the general problem of epistemology. He finds a hermeneutics ungrounded in the *Logos* to be the source of disagreement within 'Judaism,' disagreement analogous to the problematic of philosophy itself:²⁴

Any teaching which has had a serious origin, and is beneficial to life, has caused different sects. For since medicine is beneficial and essential to mankind, and there are many problems in it as to the method of curing bodies, on this account, several sects in medicine are admittedly found among the Greeks, and, I believe, also among the barbarians such as profess to practice medicine. And again, since philosophy which professes to possess the truth and knowledge of realities instructs us how we ought to live and tries to teach what is beneficial to our race, and since the problems discussed allow of considerable diversity of opinion, on this account very many sects indeed have come into existence, some of which are well known, while others are not. Moreover, there was in Judaism a factor which caused sects to begin, which was the variety of the interpretations of the writings of Moses and the sayings of the prophets.

For Origen, obviously the written word alone gives rise to multiple interpretations and thus to multiple religious opinions and even sects, all in

²³ Actually, truth be told, Dawson's own text is ambiguous as to whether it is meant only to refer to Paul, in which case it is problematically placed in the introduction to his book, or to both Paul and Origen, in which case it is contradicted by his own discussions of Origen further on in the body of the book. But my goal here is not to win or lose points with Dawson, but to struggle together with him for deeper understandings of Paul, Origen, and each other.

²⁴ H. Chadwick, trans. and ed., *Origen: Contra Celsum* (Cambridge 1965) 135.

good faith, similar to the good-faith disagreement and sectarianism of physicians and philosophers. What needs to be noted here is the non-polemical and non-pejorative cast of Origen's characterization of Jewish sectarianism. It is no more fraught — but no less so, too — than the sectarianism of philosophy itself. Because there is no criterion with which to determine truth in interpretation, sectarianism must arise in all good faith.

The problem of interpretation is, accordingly, an epistemological problem, and a very ancient one, indeed, by the time of Origen. A remarkable fragment from the time just prior to Plato may help us win some insight into a non-Platonic or even (metaleptically) anti-Platonic mode of thinking about language. I refer to the extraordinary text by Gorgias of Leontini, which has come down to us under the title 'On That Which Is Not; or, On Nature.' Gorgias's tenets in this text are traditionally described as three-fold: 'First of all, nothing exists. Second: Even if something existed, it could not be known. Third: Even if it could be known, it could not be articulated or explained.'²⁵

In an excellent discussion, historian of rhetoric Richard Enos has interpreted these seemingly nonsensical statements.²⁶ It would seem, at first glance, that Gorgias is denying the existence of the empirical, physical world, but not only would this be an absurd position, it would contradict everything else we know about his thought. In fact, however, it seems that Gorgias is asserting that there is nothing but the physical world. According to Enos's account, what Gorgias is denying is precisely exists in the philosophical (that is Parmenidean, thus Platonic) sense — essences, ideas, or forms that enable speech about essences. Gorgias claims that no essences exist, but only the physical reality that we see and touch.²⁷

Platonic notions of ontological 'essences' ... were absurdities to Gorgias. He viewed humans as functioning in an ever changing world and manufacturing ideas that lose their 'existence' the instant they pass from the mind of the thinker. Accordingly, ideals attain existence only through the extrapolations of the mind and are dependent upon the referential perceptions of their creator. As such, they cannot exist without a manufactured antithesis or anti-model. By their very nature, they can form no ideal at all since each individual predicated ideals based on personal experiences.

The latter two points are closely related to the first. Based on his fundamental sensibility or understanding that the only objects of human cognition are sense perceptions, Gorgias simply argues that even if there were some essence or idealities, there is no way that humans could perceive and

²⁵ Slightly modified from version in R. L. Enos, *Greek Rhetoric Before Aristotle* (Prospect Heights, Illinois 1993) 81.

²⁶ Taken as nonsensical or 'sophistry' by most historians of philosophy until quite recently.

²⁷ Enos, *Greek Rhetoric*, 81–82.

understand them. In other words, we have here a statement of the limitations of human knowing because of the 'human media of understanding — sense perceptions.'²⁸ Beyond the positive experience of humans lie only the extrapolations of the mind, once again a system of representation or signification in which nothing exists except by virtue of what it is not (Saussure before Saussure). Gorgias's third tenet, then, is simply a further statement about the inability of human language to communicate even sense perceptions, let alone whatever truths about reality that it might have been able (again contrary to plausibility) to divine.

As must be obvious, Gorgias's rhetorical, or Sophistic, thought leads us in very different directions from the thought of philosophy. Plato desired to discover, and believed he could, truths that would be always true without reference to speakers, hearers, or situations. Gorgias's thought leads us to understand that we must allow 'for the contingencies of interpretation and human nature that are inherent in any social circumstances, which inherently lack 'ideal' or universally affirmed premises.'²⁹ Gorgias's views clearly reflect a strong theoretical opposition to philosophy.

Gorgias's three challenges to Parmenides and thus to philosophy raise the fundamental problems that a Judaeo-Christian theory of hermeneutics sets out to solve. Whatever Platonic or non-Platonic particular philosophical tenets we wish to ascribe to Origen, it seems to me absolutely clear that his quest for certainty in interpretative as well as theological knowledge puts him into the epistemological camp of Parmenides and not Gorgias, of philosophy and not of rhetoric. But Gorgias's challenges had to be answered, implicitly or explicitly.

Origen's Jewish Alexandrian predecessor Philo had understood the theoretical problem and also had proposed a solution to it. For Philo, something, of course, exists for sure, namely, God and his *Logos*. Philo explicitly expressed a theory of what we can call the 'magic language'³⁰ of the *Logos* and its possible recovery.

A useful description of the philosophical point at issue in a theory of interpretation can perhaps be hazarded using the terms of language philosopher Samuel Wheeler III, who has directly addressed this issue. In his work, Wheeler articulates the undertaking of a (surprising) joint project in the philosophy of language between Jacques Derrida and the American analytical philosopher, Donald Davidson.³¹

²⁸ Enos, *Greek Rhetoric*, 82 [emphasis original].

²⁹ Enos, *Greek Rhetoric*, 73.

³⁰ The term is Samuel Wheeler's in S. Wheeler, *Deconstruction as Analytic Philosophy, Cultural Memory in the Present* (Stanford, California 2000) 117–20.

³¹ Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. & introd. by G. W. Butterworth, introd. by Henri de Lubac (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), 277.

The fundamental point of agreement between Derrida and Davidson, as well as other thinkers in the analytic tradition, such as Quine and Wittgenstein, is their denial of what I call the 'magic language.' This is the language of *nous*, a language that is, in Wittgenstein's terms, self-interpreting. The magic language is the language in which we know what we mean, think our thoughts, and form intentions. There is no question of interpreting sentences in the magic language, since the magic language is what interpretation is interpreted into. Furthermore, there is no question of discovering what the terms of the magic language mean, since the terms of the magic language are nothing but the meanings expressed by words of natural languages.

The philosophy of the 'magic language' is essentially Platonism, according to Derrida,³² and for Middle Platonists, such as Philo, it is the *Logos*, the Word of God. For Philo, only prelapsarian Adam among men had had direct access to the *Logos*. He had 'been able to see the nature of each thing' (*Ebr.* 167) and had, therefore, been able to name everything with its perfect name, the name that corresponds perfectly to the language of *nous* or *Logos*. For Philo, God's language is entirely different from the language of humans:

For this reason, whereas the voice of mortals is judged by hearing, the sacred oracles intimate that the words of God (τοὺς τοῦ θεοῦ λόγους) are seen as light is seen, for we are told that all of the people *saw the Voice* (Ex. 20:18), not that they heard it; for what was happening was not an impact of air made by the organs of mouth and tongue, but the radiating splendour of virtue indistinguishable from a fountain of reason ... But the voice of God which is not that of verbs and names yet seen by the eye of the soul, he [Moses] rightly introduces as 'visible.' (*Migr.* 47–48)

In his prior book on allegorical readers in Alexandria, Dawson explains that although human language is inadequate for describing reality, one human, Moses, had the capacity for accurate knowledge of what he wished to say,

³² Paul Franks has contributed the following comment (of which I only quote part here), 'To say that both Davidson and Derrida deny 'the magic language' is an understatement, or perhaps a way of saying something deeper: that any respectable — I use the word advisedly — philosopher, in either the analytic or the continental tradition, would reject such a notion or, better, understand the philosophical problems of language to be precisely those problems that tempt us to appeal to magic, which would be no response to the problems at all, but only a way of characterizing the problems that masquerades as a response. In other words, to appeal to 'magic language' would be to lose respectability by the terms of either tradition. Hence it's a mode of criticism to argue that someone is in effect appealing to magic language, on the assumption that this is not something that the one being criticized can merely acknowledge. Such criticisms are made of, for example, Jerry Fodor's 'language of thought' hypothesis, where the 'magic language' is not divine but innate to humans, 'innate' in a sense that is meant to be compatible with some eventual evolutionary account.'

I am grateful to Prof. Franks for these comments and for permission to publish them here. I hope, *Deo volente*, to take on his entire intervention as well as those of other thoughtful readers (Hindy Najman and Robin Darling Young) more fully in future iterations of this analysis.

however much ordinary language might interfere with transmitting the insights of 'magic language':³³

But Moses is not like 'most men,' because his perceptions are superior to the language at his disposal. His name-giving flows from an accurate 'knowledge that has to do with things'; consequently, he 'is in the habit of using names that are perfectly apt and expressive' (*Agr.* 1–2). Even so, Moses is forced to use ordinary language to express his extraordinary insights. As a result, his message is always clear and determinate once it is perceived, but it lies hidden in the very indirect linguistic expressions marked by various forms of semantic indeterminacy.

The role of the interpreter — necessarily, then, an allegorist — is to perceive and then describe this clear and determinate message. The allegorist reaches this level of interpretation through a process of contemplation, as described in Philo's *On the Contemplative Life*.³⁴ Thus, too, for Origen: 'Even while we remain on earth the Christian life is grounded in a faithful and assiduous perusal of the Scriptures, the depths of which cannot be mined unless we make use of the spiritual as well as carnal senses.'³⁵ Or as Dawson has, once again, well put it, 'Origen's imagination [as well, I would add, as his theoretical passion] is captured by Moses' ability to see God without a veil and by Moses' transformation in body no less than in spirit by virtue of his direct knowledge of the divine.'³⁶ For Origen, as well, the biblical author(s) see God by 'understanding him with the vision of the heart and the perception of the mind.'³⁷

Philo was an important model for Origen, but a problematic one.³⁸ As Mark Edwards has written, 'From Paul to Clement allegory had been an

³³ J. D. Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley, California 1992) 92.

³⁴ D. Winston, ed. and trans., *Philo of Alexandria: The Contemplative Life, the Giants, and Selections*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York 1981); D. Winston, 'Philo and the Contemplative Life,' in A. Green, ed. *Jewish Spirituality from the Bible Through the Middle Ages*, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest 13 (New York 1988) 198–231.

³⁵ Edwards, *Origen*, 111.

³⁶ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 32.

³⁷ Origen, *On First Principles*, 2.4.3 and see Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 57.

³⁸ I think, sometimes, it is undervalued how much Origen draws from Philo. Thus, in an otherwise compelling analysis of Origen's doctrine of the two humans, insisting that it derives from an 'overly literal' reading of the doubled creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2 and is not, therefore, grafted artificially on to the biblical tradition, Edwards seemingly ignores the evident fact that Origen's doctrine and interpretation were drawn from Philo (Edwards, *Origen*, 89), which does not, of course, vitiate his point at all. The citation from Origen's *Homilies on Genesis*, offered on p.104, is practically word for word a quotation from Philo's own *On the Creation*. For discussion, see D. Boyarin, 'On the History of the Early Phallus,' in S. Farmer and C. Pasternack, edd. *Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003) 3–44.

indispensable tool for Christian expositors, all of whom, including Origen, were bound to hold that Philo's canon was incomplete and that no interpretation of the Prophets could be authoritative unless it yielded testimony to Christ.³⁹ Philo, of course, was also an allegorist, so where can the incompleteness be (unless we simply say that what was incomplete in Philo was simply that he was not a Christian — a weak answer in my opinion)? What seems to me lacking in Philo's thought, the 'incompletion' — following out the implications of Dawson's account of Philo — is a way of accounting for the fact that he, via interpretation, claims to accomplish what Moses himself could not: Philo, in short, seems to be claiming that in his interpretations, necessarily, of course, themselves in ordinary human language, that he can communicate the precise divine truth perceived by Moses but the communication of which eludes Moses owing to the limitations of human language. Or, we might say, for Moses the first two of Gorgias's challenges are not true: There is something, and he can know it, but the third remains a problem: He cannot communicate it to others. But Philo, it seems, can, and this seems to me a paradox or even an aporia in Philo's theory.

Christian theories of the *Logos* in flesh seem better equipped to address this issue. For Christians, the magic language has appeared on earth and spoken itself, thus answering to Philo's aporia. The prologue to the Gospel of John makes this point in its utterance that through the Torah it had proved impossible to communicate *Logos* to humans and that only through the *Logos*'s actual taking on of human flesh was God made knowable to people.

Christian revisions of Philo's theory of the text and of interpretation thus had another answer than Philo's to the question of the source of knowledge of allegorical meaning. The 'congenial context' that Platonism is for allegorical interpretation, according to Dawson, is actually much more than that — following what we learn from Dawson's earlier work: the problem of the Son's knowing of the Father and the question of how the Father can be made known to humans is a Christian formulation of a general fundamental problem in epistemology and language theory and also a brilliant Christian solution to that problem. The Platonism and the Christianity of Origen's harts and roe deers are much more tightly bound than Dawson would have it, but also much more complexly and nuancedly integral to each other than my earlier account would have had it, as well. A coincidence, perhaps, of the elaboration of a Jewish theory of the Divine Word, the *Logos* as the given-to-know-and-be-known, when met with Greek thinking about language, *Logos*, provided very happy theoretical results in the imaginability of interpretation.

³⁹ Edwards, *Origen*, 36–37.

Mark Edwards against Plato

In a recent book, Mark Julian Edwards claims that not only was Origen no exponent of Platonism, he was an opponent thereof.⁴⁰ Edwards, admirably, makes both the scope and the stakes of his claim crystal clear. The book is an apology (not an insulting or belittling term as I see it) for Origen against charges of heresy ancient and modern. The claim of Platonism is understood as a charge, which it frequently enough is. Platonism itself is defined in the crude terms of that charge, and Origen is absolved of it.⁴¹ However, for Edwards,⁴² one can be properly called 'Platonist' only if Platonism is understood as antonym to Christianity. On the contrary, I take Platonism to be the commitment to an absolute realm of truth, to existents, necessarily beyond the sensible — that is, as I have said above, the commitment to *what is*, the antithesis of Gorgias's *On What Is Not*.

Platonism in this sense, whether rough or refined, as a dual structure of the material and the spiritual, was essential to Christian theology, and perhaps to theology per se, understood as a necessarily Platonistic practice. This, too, is not a charge. In a sense, it becomes significant only when we see the Rabbis articulating themselves as the antonym of such Platonism. Edwards himself writes: 'There was some contention in Clement's time as to whether Christ assumed the 'psychic' flesh that all men receive from Adam or the spiritual flesh of the resurrection; even those who held the first position on the grounds that only a 'psychic' Christ would be truly human, would not have taught that the measure of humanity is the despotism of the alimentary canal.'⁴³ But this, I stipulate — having defended the point elsewhere — is precisely what the Rabbis would have taught, and did.

Edwards's chapter on 'The Interpretation of Scripture'⁴⁴ begins, as others

⁴⁰ Edwards, *Origen*, (see n.7). Even if I grant that Edwards is right, in terms of the project that he has set himself, absolving Origen of the charge that he is not an authentic Christian (or even that he is a heretic) owing to an alleged crude Platonism, I am hardly prepared to abandon my interpretation of Origen as Platonist. On my definition, Platonism is surely not the privation of Christian theology and hermeneutics, but its necessary condition. Edwards, it should be specified, makes no mention of my work; this is *not* a complaint on my part, just to make clear that what I say in this section, at least, cannot be construed as defensive in the same way as with respect to Dawson's work. Incidentally, Edwards himself marks the compatibility between his work and that of Dawson's (*Origen*, (n. 35)153, to be sure to Dawson's first book, not the second, but no matter.)

⁴¹ The best summary and index of Edwards's position is his own *Origen*, 159–61.

⁴² Edwards, *Origen*, 22.

⁴³ Edwards, *Origen*, 23.

⁴⁴ Edwards, *Origen*, 123–58. Edwards's book, like Dawson's is so rich, so smart, so exciting, that I am not even attempting to do justice to it, still less reviewing it here. I am just going after some point where I think his formulations obscure some matters that

do, by making the apologetic stance of the book absolutely clear: 'The strongest condemnations of Origen in the twentieth century have been prompted by his handling of the Scriptures.'⁴⁵ Edwards sets out to mount a vigorous defense of Origen against that charge. For my money, the best defense would have been that allegoresis is no crime. The claim that Origen is an allegorist may be a condemnation in some hands, but it need not be. Let us see how this plays itself out. I should emphasize that my responses to Edwards's defense do not constitute the case for the prosecution. There is too much at stake for this not to be said, and said clearly and often.

Edwards makes the following very smart remark:⁴⁶

For his modern critics, Origen's reading of the Scriptures becomes an exercise in cryptology when it ought to be an audience with Christ. Since it is unthinkable that Holy Writ should offer any ground or warrant for such unfavoured practices, they are traced to Origen's Platonism, and thus he becomes a cautionary example of a pious mind seduced by the transient wisdom of the world. Here as elsewhere, he declares his independence of the philosophers in his use and exposition of the principles that he holds in common with them. The modern scholars who disown these principles share with Origen the task of making the text speak for itself; if they are free from prejudice, they can scarcely fail to admire the assiduity and tact with which he engages the clearer passages as midwives to bring out a meaning from the more obscure.

Let me gloss this paragraph somewhat idiosyncratically. For the modern scholars (and presumably heresiologists of antiquity and Protestants of the Reformation), Origen's practice of interpretation is in bad faith insofar as it is an attempt to force the text to yield to Platonist philosophy in its meanings. Edwards, however, entirely justly asserts what Dawson also shows, that Origen's interpretative practice is not a 'gadfly' 'driving the words hither and thither,' but a compelling and powerful tool for exegesis in which Origen simply follows the sound hermeneutical practice of interpreting Bible with Bible, the obscure with the clear(er), as he himself asserts. (Not incidentally, but as we shall see, somewhat misleadingly, this seems to make his practice seem more midrash-like.) Finally, Edwards says that Origen's principles resemble Platonism, but are not really Platonic; he shares principles with the philosophers but uses and exposes their positions *ganz anders*. My feeling is that Edwards is getting all the answers right; it is the questions that seem slightly off.⁴⁷

concern me.

⁴⁵ Edwards, *Origen*, 23.

⁴⁶ Edwards, *Origen*, 123.

⁴⁷ What seems to me a bit odd in both the books I am reading here is the extent to which they portray Origen as under attack and in need of defense, and, not coincidentally the extent to which that defense is portrayed in specifically Christian theological terms, to the point of arguing that one can not get Origen without accepting the truth claims of his

He helps me get to those questions: 'Scholars, preachers and critics are one in their inability to frame a definition of the term [allegory] that is broad enough to cover everything of relevance, yet excludes the more conventional — or as some would say, more natural — modes of reading.'⁴⁸ I couldn't agree more. With this sentence, Edwards is effectively supporting the position that conventional modes of reading — all European interpretative practices — are indeed allegorical. I'm surely not the first to adopt this position,⁴⁹ but it seems a difference that makes no distinction unless there are some other conventions of reading that are not allegorical. I believe there are, and it will be no surprise if it is midrash — better put, a certain kind or part of midrash — that I will adduce. For Edwards, 'allegory is generally contrasted not with the surface of the text, but with the 'literal sense'.⁵⁰ But what, then, shall we make of a hermeneutics of the surface of the text, a hermeneutics such as midrash — at least some kinds of midrash? This distinction is necessarily the difference between Platonic and non-Platonic ways of thinking.⁵¹

The Origins of Christian Allegory

Edwards grants that Origen is ready to 'discern the face of Christ in every chapter of the Old Testament' and that for Origen, 'allegory is not so much a property in texts as a hermeneutic lens through which one seeks the universal in the particular.'⁵² Given the ways in which Israel is the particular of which Christ (the Church) is the universal, discerning the face of Christ in the narrative of Israel lays open the essential allegorical structure at the heart of Origen's theological reading. Edwards, like Dawson, insists that the spiritual meaning discovered by Origen is not at war with the so-called literal one:⁵³

He holds that the very sanctity of the Scriptures authorizes and indeed entails the use of allegory, as surely as the organic unity of the human self bespeaks the presence

theology. As we have seen, Dawson is quite explicit in this, while in Edwards it is implicit.

⁴⁸ Edwards, *Origen*, 123.

⁴⁹ It is, perhaps, most usually associated with the name of N. Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York 1982). The extraordinary A. J. S. Fletcher, *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode* (Ithaca, New York 1964) is surely also relevant here.

⁵⁰ Edwards, *Origen*, 124.

⁵¹ By the end of this essay I shall, moreover, advance a highly speculative account of why and how the Rabbis might have in the end come to reject Platonism, thus also indicating something of what is at stake religiously in the passage.

⁵² Edwards, *Origen*, 125.

⁵³ Edwards, *Origen*, 126.

of a soul. As the conative centre of the agent, soul is the mate of spirit on the higher plane and of body on the lower; in the same way, allegory as Origen conceives it is the instrument that mediates between the corporeal parsing of the text, which some would term the literal reading, and the spiritual divination of its mysteries, which is otherwise called typology. And just as souls and bodies do not dwell in parallel worlds, but one is immanent in the other as the source and pilot of its vital functions, so the allegorical sense is not at war with the literal, but on the contrary endows it with the coherence and vitality of truth.

In the immortal words of Miss Clavell, something is not quite right. At least on the theoretical level, it just is not entirely so that souls and bodies do not inhabit separate planes, and, therefore, since the analogy between anthropology and hermeneutics is Origen's own, neither do the claims about the theory of Origen's practice entirely hold, either (which is not to say that they entirely do not hold, of course). Origen can define men, at least sometimes, as 'souls that make use of bodies.' So, too, at least sometimes, both at the theoretical and practical level, the allegorical simply evacuates the corporeal meaning — especially at those moments of the Torah having to do with 'the alimentary canal.'

Incarnational theology was crucial in the development of Origen's hermeneutical/allegorical theory and thus arguably for text interpretation in the West altogether. In Origen's hermeneutical theory, *Logos* theology functions in two ways. In his *First Principles*, Book IV, we can find one version of his three-fold theory of interpretation. The 'obvious interpretation' is called the flesh of the Scripture, but there are two more levels, the 'soul' and the 'spiritual law': 'For just as man consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does the Scripture.'⁵⁴ The existence of allegory as a hermeneutical theory is thus made dependent on a Platonic universe of correspondences (not antagonisms) between things seen and things unseen, copies and originals, just as it had been in Philo's work, as well.⁵⁵ There is nothing new in *this* aspect of Origen's theory of interpretation other than

⁵⁴ Origen, *On First Principles*, 276.

⁵⁵ For the richest and most developed version of this argument for allegory in general, see Fletcher *Allegory*, a work that has had an enormous, formative impact on my thinking from the moment I read it in the mid-1980s. It should be emphasized, moreover, that in speaking of Origen's Platonism here, I am *not* referring to those aspects of his theology allegedly derived from Plato, as disputed in Edwards, *Origen*, but rather to a general understanding of the reality as doubled in structure. In this sense, I would agree with Edwards (19) that 'Paul was as much a Platonist as Clement' — or Origen. There is much to be added on another day. The question is surely not then whether 'whatever Origen learned from the Platonists it was not the art of commentary' (Edwards *Origen* 145) but whether the Origenist art of commentary itself is subtended by Platonistic structures of understanding of world and word. Edwards does, however, raise the question of whence Origen learned the 'art of commentary,' a question that, in part, the present research seeks to investigate.

the clarity of its articulation.⁵⁶ For Origen, as for Philo, the external words of Scripture are 'copies' of words and meanings in the 'magic language.'

Some version of this ontology of language makes possible all thought of interpretation as translation, and not only those methods that we would term allegory proper. Interpretation is always dependent on some articulated or post-articulated *Logos*. The ultimate figure for the ontotheological structure of Scripture is the Incarnation. In the words of R. P. Lawson: 'If the *Logos* in His Incarnation is God-Man, so, too, in the mind of Origen the incarnation of the Pneuma in Holy Scripture is divine-human.'⁵⁷ There is a virtual doubled Incarnation, then, in Origen's thinking. The *Logos* is incarnate in Jesus Christ and in Scripture, as well.⁵⁸

However, *Logos* theology, and in particular the notion of Christ as the Incarnation of the Word, do more work for Origen.⁵⁹ One could imagine an ontological structure to both world and Word that would provide theoretically for the presence of a spiritual sense, but not guarantee that anyone has access to that sense, as is virtually the case for Philo. However, as Karen Torjesen has written, for Origen,⁶⁰

it is the power of the words of the *Logos* that makes the progression possible. It is the effect of his teaching which causes progress in the soul. If the word of the *Logos* were not effective, or he were not present teaching, then the steps of the progression would be an empty scaffolding into which the soul could gaze, but not climb.

Not only, therefore, does Origen's *Logos* provide a theological structure and a hermeneutical horizon for understanding the nature of Scripture and its dual and triple levels of meaning, but *Logos* Incarnate in the actual 'person' of Jesus, born in the cradle and on the cross, also provides Origen with a theoretical answer to the question of the source of allegorical knowing.

It will take some reading, however, before this point can be made in full. The first step is to show that Origen was aware of the epistemological problem that I attribute to him:⁶¹

⁵⁶ R. Göglér, *Zur Theologie des biblischen Wortes bei Origenes* (Düsseldorf 1963) 263.

⁵⁷ R. P. Lawson, 'Introduction,' in *Origen, The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, Ancient Christian Writers 26 (Westminster, Md. 1957) 9.

⁵⁸ Göglér, *Theologie*, 263.

⁵⁹ For the transitions between Word Theology and later trinitarian formulae within which the Word is primarily figured as Son of God, see P. Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford 1994) and see now especially V. Burrus, 'Begotten, Not Made': *Conceiving Manhood in Late Antiquity*, *Figurae* (Stanford, California 2000).

⁶⁰ K. J. Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis*, *Patristische Texte und Studien* (Berlin 1986) 137.

⁶¹ Origen, *On First Principles*, 282.

This being so, we must outline what seems to us to be the marks of a true understanding of the Scriptures. And in the first place we must point out that the aim of the Spirit who, by the providence of God through the Word who was 'in the beginning with God', enlightened the servants of the truth, that is, the prophets and apostles, was pre-eminently concerned with the unspeakable mysteries connected with the affairs of men — and by men I mean at the present moment souls that make use of bodies — his purpose being that the man who is capable of being taught might by 'searching out' and devoting himself to the 'deep things' revealed in the spiritual meaning of the words become partaker of all the doctrines of the Spirit's counsel.

Origen explicitly addresses the implicit problematic of Philo's theory: how may it be possible for a human writer to write in such a way that spiritual truths are, indeed, communicated. How, we might put it once again, can Origen hope to do better than Moses? Origen exposes this issue in another place when he writes:⁶²

As to the secret meaning which these things contain, however, and the teaching that these strange words labor to express, let us pray the Father of the Almighty Word and Bridegroom, that He Himself will open to us the gates of this mystery, whereby we may be enlightened not only for the understanding of these things, but also for the propagation of them, and may receive also a portion of spiritual eloquence, according to the capacity of those who are to be our readers.

I am taking this, of course, as more than just a pious wish for divine assistance such as any religious writer might invoke, but rather as a specific plea for the Father through the Word to solve a theoretical problem in Origen's hermeneutical theology. In yet another work, Origen articulates this clearly: 'May you help with your prayers, that the *Logos* of God may be present with us and deign himself to be the leader of our discourse.'⁶³ Of course, I have not yet established any role for the Incarnation in this meditation — except, perhaps, in the wording 'deign' — but it is the *Logos* present with us as the leader of our discourse who would guarantee us truth and insight in our interpretations.

While I readily concede that other passages in Origen, or even the corpus as a whole, might lead us in somewhat different directions in understanding his hermeneutical theology, for the nonce it can be emphasized that there is at least one very rich passage that suggests an explicit understanding of Christ's Incarnation as an answer to the question of interpretative knowledge:⁶⁴

⁶² Origen *Song* 151.

⁶³ Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, D.C. 1982) 228.

⁶⁴ *Hom. in Jesu Nave* 9. 8., cited R. Heine, 'Reading the Bible with Origen,' in P. M. Blowers, ed. *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity*, (Notre Dame, Indiana 1997) 142.

In this way, we can understand the Law correctly, if Jesus reads it to us, so that, as he reads, we may receive his 'mind' and understanding. Or is it not to be thought that he understood 'mind' from this, who said, 'But we have the mind of Christ, that we may know the things which have been given to us by God, which things also we speak'? And [did not] those [have the same understanding] who said, 'Was not our heart burning within us when he opened the Scriptures to us in this way?' when he read everything to them, beginning from the Law of Moses up to the prophets, and revealed the things which had been written about himself.

In this extract, the question of correct understanding of the Law is explicitly broached, disabling interpretations of Origen that would claim that the issue of correct interpretation is always far from his concern. Origen, moreover, mobilizes two verses from the New Testament, from Paul and Luke, respectively, that themselves broach the question of knowledge and interpretation. This key passage for Origen's hermeneutical theory needs to be read in the context of these citations. The first is, of course, from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians and the second from the Gospel of Luke. In the second chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul explains the difference between Christian knowledge and that of Jews previous to him:

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified, and I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Cor. 2:1-2)

Paul continues a bit further on in the chapter:

God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit. (1 Cor. 2:10-13)

And finally Paul completes the argument with the verse crucial for Origen's reading:

'For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Cor. 2:16, Isa. 40:13. See also Rom 11:34.)

It seems to me entirely plausible to read Paul's reference to 'gifts' here as an allusion to the Torah, and he is, therefore, producing the earliest version of a Christian hermeneutical theory of allegorical reading, one that insists that Scripture can be interpreted only with the direct aid of the Holy Spirit,

identified with the mind of Christ, who alone knows the mind of the Lord and can, therefore, interpret the Torah as 'a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification.'

Even more crucial, however, is the amazing narrative in the last chapter of Luke:⁶⁵

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scripture the things concerning himself. ... They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures?' (Luke 24:27, 32)

These two passages together, gave Origen everything he needed to 'solve' the hermeneutical/epistemological problem that interpretation presented.⁶⁶ The Spirit of God, identified in Paul's testimony with the mind of Christ, is, for any Christian *Logos* theologian, necessarily the *Logos* himself.⁶⁷ The passage in Luke provides Origen with an actual correlative for Paul's claim. Both the incarnate *Logos* before the Crucifixion and the resurrected, but embodied, *Logos* afterward provided the disciples with the only possible and true interpretation of Scripture.⁶⁸

Torjesen argues for three forms of the mediating activity of the *Logos* in Origen: the pre-incarnate activity of revelation to the Old Testament saints and prophets, the Incarnation itself, and the 'present activity of the *Logos*, which is the disclosure of himself to us through the spiritual sense of Scripture.'⁶⁹ While the general tenor of Origen's writing goes strongly in the

⁶⁵ For discussion of this passage not directly with reference to Origen, see Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 4–5.

⁶⁶ It may be, as Dawson remarks with respect to a similar passage in Acts 8:32–35 that 'the Ethiopian does not raise the sort of question debated by contemporary literary theorists concerned with textual meaning,' Dawson *Christian* 5. It is my claim, however, that Origen does do so.

⁶⁷ Lest we be tempted to make a distinction here between Christ who incarnates the *Logos* (second person of the Trinity) and Scripture as the incarnation of the spirit (third person), let us not forget that such fully developed trinitarian doctrine was yet to come. In other passages it is clear that for Origen it is precisely the *Logos* who is incarnate in Scripture as well:

As 'in the Last Days,' the Word of God, which was clothed with the flesh of Mary, proceeded into this world. What was seen in him was one thing; what was understood was something else. For the sight of his flesh was open for all to see, but the knowledge of his divinity was given to the few, even 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 flesh, so here with the veil of the letter.

Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, trans. G. W. Barkley, *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, D.C. 1990) 29. See discussion in Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 110.

⁶⁸ See on this point too the important observations of Edwards, *Origen*, 134–35.

⁶⁹ Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 114.

direction that Torjesen leads us in, the passage that I am discussing here would mandate a great emphasis on the privileged nature of the Incarnation insofar as that is the only moment when the living voice of the *Logos* is directly present on earth, thus providing through *Jesus's* pedagogy precisely the hermeneutical guide that enables the 'present activity of the *Logos*.' In other words, the Incarnation is not only the 'paradigm for this pedagogy,' as Torjesen would phrase it, but what makes it possible *because he taught how to read* Scripture.

It is not only that 'in the taking on of flesh the *Logos* makes himself comprehensible to all those who wear flesh,' a formulation that sounds almost Athanasian in its seeming automatic nature, but that in taking on flesh, he could speak the magic language directly to human flesh and thus make himself and his other incarnation in Scripture comprehensible to all those who speak human language, for he is the Divine, magic language made human language.⁷⁰ In the Incarnation, the *Logos* 'offered himself to be known,'⁷¹ in a way, I would add, that nothing but a physical body and voice *can* be known.

Let me pursue this point just a bit further, for it is perhaps too subtle a distinction. Torjesen remarks on the duality in which 'Scripture is both a mediating activity of the *Logos* and at the same time has doctrines of the *Logos* as its content.'⁷² I am suggesting that it is only the presence of the actual living *Logos* on earth in the incarnate form of the pedagogue Jesus that enables 'us' to discover the *Logos* as the content of Scripture. In this way, Origen answers the aporia that Philo's work presents.⁷³ Indeed,⁷⁴

The mediating activity of the *Logos* in his historical education of the saints provides the source for Scripture as a written document. What they wrote and what they understood originates from their own experience with the pedagogy of the *Logos*. They wrote by the Spirit what the *Logos* taught them in order to teach us the same truth. This is true for the New Testament writers as well as for the prophets.

The teaching of the New Testament writers has a special dispensation and precedence, for it was for them that the *Logos* directly and without

⁷⁰ Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 115.

⁷¹ Origen, *Song*, 153.

⁷² Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 119.

⁷³ Cf. Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 140: 'The *Logos* taught the saints the truths of himself in symbolic form, in the form of law, or of historical events. This pedagogy was designed for all those to whom it was delivered. But it was the saints alone who grasped the spiritual truth presented in this symbolic form. And they reported it again in symbolic form, this time writing in Scripture the symbolic forms of the universal truth, so that the succeeding generations might be able to grasp the spiritual truth through the medium of its symbolic form.'

⁷⁴ Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 119.

mediation, in his own voice through Jesus's human vocal mechanism, taught them (and thereby us) how to read Scripture as referring to him and him alone. 'The *Logos* announces himself, he is the subject matter of his own proclamation,'⁷⁵ most fully, however, when he is present on earth in the body of Jesus, as the Lukan text cited by Origen makes clear. It is because the *Logos* in the flesh has taught the apostles that the Scripture is the *Logos* made flesh, as well, that the *Logos* can be read (potentially by all) in the reading of Scripture.

I am not claiming, of course, to have uncovered a new interpretation of Origen different from or even supplemental to Torjesen's but only to be highlighting a particular element in Origen's hermeneutical thought that I find crucial for articulating the way that the particular form of incarnational Christology was to reveal itself as the ma(r)ker of difference between 'Judaism' and 'Christianity.' As Torjesen herself has put it, 'In the incarnation the *Logos* speaks with his own voice. In Scripture he speaks through the mouth of the prophets and saints.'⁷⁶ Given the universal Platonic understanding that the living voice of the teacher is superior to any 'inscription' of that voice, the Incarnation provides for Origen the guarantee of Christian allegorical access to truth, and the Incarnation is a hermeneutical moment of the full presence of meaning. This is why, again in Torjesen's words, 'In the Gospels the *Logos* is speaking directly to the hearer, not mediated through a history other than his own,'⁷⁷ but also equally not mediated through a text other than his own.

It seems plausible, then, that for Christian writers, the Incarnation of the Word, or the Holy Spirit, which provides direct access to the *Logos* as well, provides a solution to what must remain a problem for Philo the Jew's theory of allegorical interpretation. The presence on earth of the Word incarnate (or resurrected) in Jesus the spiritual reader who read Scriptures to the Christians and revealed the true interpretation has made possible for other Christians to reach the spiritual meaning themselves, thus answering the question that Philo's allegorical theory must leave unsolved: 'In the incarnation he has created the human conditions of his own perfect intelligibility for all time.'⁷⁸

A remarkable story in the Talmud, frequently read, but until now interpreted quite differently, can be now reread in this cultural context:⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 119. See *Comm. Joh.* XIII 28.

⁷⁶ Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 111.

⁷⁷ Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 133.

⁷⁸ Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 115.

⁷⁹ This and the next few paragraphs are being recycled from D. Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judaeo-Christianity*, *Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religions* (Philadelphia 2004) 165–67.

Rabbi Yehudah said that Rav said: In the hour that Moses ascended on high, he found the Holy Blessed One sitting and tying crowns for the letters [that is, adding the decorative serifs that appear on some letters in the written Torah scroll]. He said before him: 'Master of the Universe, What [lit. who] holds you back?' He said, 'There is one man who will be after several generations, and Akiva the son of Joseph is his name, who will derive from each and every stroke hills and hills of halakhot.' He said before him: 'Master of the Universe, show him to me.' He said to him: 'Turn around!' He went and sat at the back of eight rows [in the study house of Rabbi Akiva], and he didn't understand what they were saying. His strength became weak. When they reached a certain issue, the disciples said to him [to Akiva], 'From whence do you know this?' He said to them: 'It is a halakha given to Moses at Sinai.' [Moses's] spirit became settled.

He returned and came before the Holy Blessed One. He said to him: 'Master of the Universe, You have such a one and yet You give the Torah by my hand?!' He [God] said to him: 'Be silent! That is what has transpired in My thought.'

He said to Him: 'Master of the Universe: You have shown me his Torah, show me his reward.' He said to him: 'Turn around!' He turned around and saw that they were weighing the flesh of Rabbi Akiva in the market [after his martyrdom]. He said to Him: 'Master of the Universe, This is the Torah and this is its reward?!' He said to him: 'Be silent! That is what has transpired in My thought.' (Babylonian Talmud *Menahot* 29b)

Most interpretations take this story as being either a positive or ironic, even sarcastic, reflection on midrash. Such readings cannot be dismissed, of course, or even gainsaid, and it takes nothing away from their validity if I read the text in a wider discursive (and thus historical) context. To my mind, there is hardly a more powerful rendition of an apophatic hermeneutic, an apophatic Divine will, and an apophatic theodicy, all in this one highly compressed narrative, virtual myth, in which God will not, or perhaps even, as it were, cannot explain the modalities of interpretation of his word or his activities in the universe.

It should be emphasized how thoroughly this text contradicts one way of describing rabbinic culture, articulated by Menachem Fisch as one in which 'access to knowledge is not limited to members of any particular caste; in principle, anyone willing to make the effort can attain it. Second, the tools and methods for generating knowledge, and the criteria for judging knowledge claims, also all remain in the public domain.'⁸⁰ In this talmudic story, knowledge is thoroughly opaque in its form. No one, not even Moses himself, could possibly know what Rabbi Akiva knows. The only way that such knowledge could be achieved, moreover, is via access to the traditions of the particular community. To be sure, membership in that

⁸⁰ M. Fisch, *Rational Rabbits: Science and Talmudic Culture, Jewish Literature and Culture* (Bloomington, Indiana 1997) xv, referring as well to the work of Steinsalz and Funkenstein.

community is not limited to those of particular birth among male Jews, but it just as surely is not open to all and obviously not adjudicable by anyone who is not in the know.⁸¹ Who but an Akiva could know what is meant by jots, tittles, and decorations on letters? And how could we know other than by being his disciples? The difficulty of acquiring such knowledges, moreover, is articulated in multiple talmudic legends about this same Rabbi Akiva.⁸²

At about the same time that Moses was being told to be quiet and recognize that there is much that human beings cannot know, Gregory Nazianzen's Cappadocian colleague and friend, Gregory of Nyssa, was elaborating his theology of language and interpretation. Nyssa's great opponent was Eunomius, the representative of a late and radical form of 'Arian' insistence that the Son shared in no way the essence or substance of the Father. As Alden Mosshammer shows, according to Eunomius, humans could know God, for:⁸³

God himself, as the author of language, has guaranteed the accuracy of identity between ungeneracy and the true godhead. For God would not have commanded us to seek after his knowledge if such knowledge had not been given to man. God created the usage and granted to man the knowledge of names suitable to the essences they represent. Names denote essences, and for each distinct essence there can be only one proper name. For his own essence God has granted to man the knowledge of the name 'ungeneracy'.

By contrast, Nyssa insisted on the finitude of language and, therefore, on its ultimate inadequacy, whether as theology or as interpretation, to encompass fully the infinitude of God, to articulate the divine nature and the divine mind, inviting an endless hermeneutical activity that can have no *telos*, even as there is no 'end' to God.⁸⁴

⁸¹ It is not, I suggest, that Fisch is wrong, but his characterization of rabbinic culture is not, in my opinion, sufficiently responsive to historical differentiations within that culture.

⁸² See D. Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture*, The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics, vol. 25 (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1993) 136–56. Several details of that reading will have to be corrected in the light of recent research by Shamma Friedman (unpublished), but its major contours still stand, in my opinion.

⁸³ A. Mosshammer, 'Disclosing but not Disclosed: Gregory of Nyssa as Deconstructionist,' in *Studien zu Gregor von Nyssa und der Christliche Spätantike* (1990) 100.

⁸⁴ On this point, see as well R. P. Vaggione, *Eunomius of Cyzicus and the Nicene Revolution*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford–New York 2000) 169–71 and 237–65, whose interpretation of this controversy seems to me slightly different from (but perhaps compatible with) Mosshammer's. See, however: 'What they claimed [Eunomius and Aetius] was that their knowledge of God was *exactly* like his: that is not κατ' ἐπίνοιαν, not discursive. Thus ... the best way to honour the reality communicated by (ἀγέννητος) is silence,' Vaggione, *Eunomius*, 257–58.

Both Origen and his Cappadocian disciple Gregory of Nyssa thus well understood that given the conditions of human speech, however much Christian speech has been learned from the *Logos*, it will be imperfect and thus multiple. Martin Irvine has recently made this point well: 'The unity of the *Logos* is fragmented into a multiplicity of temporal discourses which simultaneously attempt and fail to return to its unity; no repetition or multiplication of *logoi* is *Logos*. The transcendental signified remains beyond the reach of all temporal sign relations yet is immanently manifest in all of them.'⁸⁵ And yet, on Dawson's own account, Origen 'identifies the consuming of the lamb with the allegorical reading of Scripture, which is contrasted with various deficient modes of reading, all of which have their subjective, experiential aspects.'⁸⁶ It is in that very drive for certainty, that desire to escape the subjective and the experiential, that we find the Platonic moment in Origen, precisely there. Such a moment can be grounded only in a two-tiered universe, which is not, I emphasize, again, necessarily a dualism of value.

For midrash, however, in its final development, *there is no transcendental signified*. God himself can only participate, as it were, in the process of unlimited semiosis and thus of limitless interpretation. The result will be not simply a multiplicity of interpretations that we cannot decide between, or even a plethora of interpretations that all stand in the Pleroma of divine meaning, but finally a rabbinic *askesis* that virtually eliminates the practice of interpretation entirely. Midrash, in its culminating avatar, not only eschews allegory and a discourse of the true meaning, but renounces 'interpretation' altogether and eats its Paschal lamb, to once more adopt an Origenist figure, raw.

The verse of the Torah says of the Paschal lamb, 'You shall not eat there-of anything raw or boiled in water, but only roasted with fire.' 'If the lamb is Christ and Christ is the *Logos*, what is the flesh of the divine words if not the divine Scriptures,' and what is eating them, if not studying the Torah? Origen understands by the three ways in which the Paschal lamb might be consumed three kinds of readers; the first, a literalist who, like unto an irrational animal, violates the Law by eating the text raw; the second, a 'flaccid, watery, limp' moralizing reader, who eats the Law boiled; and a third, the one who eats the Paschal text as it ought to be eaten, cooked in fire. Dawson writes beautifully of such a reader: 'The ancient Passover continues to be celebrated, then, in the allegorical reading of Scripture, which is not a disembodiment through interpretation but instead a consumption of a body

⁸⁵ M. Irvine, *The Making of Textual Culture: 'Grammatica' and Literary Theory*, 350–1100 (Cambridge 1994) 266.

⁸⁶ Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 72.

through reading.' And as for the one who reads the Torah cooked in fire:⁸⁷

Clearly, the best readers are those who 'roast' the meat of the lamb (Exod. 12:9a), that is, read the Word in Scripture 'with fire.' To read with fire means that the Word, through the reading of the text, becomes a speaker in the reader, and the reader receives the Word as the voice of God. For example, Jeremiah received the words of God, who says, 'Behold I have placed my words in your mouth as fire,' and those who receive the lamb through reading 'say, as Christ speaks in them' (2 Cor 13:3), 'our heart was burning in the way as he opened the Scriptures to us' (Luke 24:32).

This moment in Dawson's discussion opens into a stunning relation (not binary opposition) between Origen and midrash, a moment in which one could imagine Origen and Rabbi Yoḥanan recognizing passionately their deep affinities for each other and then bitterly disputing, nevertheless.

The Rabbis imagined their study of Torah in almost identical terms, as we read in the following story from the midrash on the Song of Songs:⁸⁸

Ben-Azzai was sitting and interpreting [making midrash], and fire was all around him. They went and told Rabbi Akiva, 'Rabbi, Ben-Azzai is sitting and interpreting, and fire is burning all around him.' He went to him and said to him, 'I heard that you were interpreting, and the fire burning all around you.' He said, 'Indeed.' He said, 'Perhaps you were engaged in the inner-rooms of the Chariot [theosophical speculation].' He said, 'No. I was sitting and stringing the words of Torah [to each other], and the Torah to the Prophets and the Prophets to the Writings, and the words were as radiant/joyful as when they were given from Sinai, and they were as sweet as at their original giving. Were they not originally given in fire, as it is written, 'And the mountain was burning with fire' (Deut. 4:11)?'

In this text, allusions to the Song of Songs are deployed very skillfully in order to describe the experience of midrashic reading. The Rabbi was interpreting the Torah in accordance with the methods of midrash, stringing text to text and building new text as he strung. While doing this, he and the listeners had a visual experience indicating communion with God. Rabbi Akiva becomes suspicious that perhaps his colleague was engaging in forbidden or dangerous theosophical speculation and comes to investigate. He phrases his investigative question in the language of Song of Songs 1:4, 'The King brought me into His chambers,' the verse that gave rise to the mystical practice known as 'being engaged in the inner-rooms of the Chariot.' But Ben-Azzai answers that it was not that verse, that is, not a verse and practice that relate to mystical speculation, that brought him into communion with God, but rather the application of another verse of the

same song, 'Your cheeks are lovely with jewels, your neck with beads' (1:10). The word for 'beads' means what is strung together into chains. Ben-Azzai's 'defense' accordingly is that he was engaged in precisely the same activity as that exemplified by Rabbi Akiva's midrash above — linking 'words of the Torah to words of the Holy Writings,' as Rabbi Akiva linked the words of Exodus to the words of the Song of Songs.

In order to recover the erotic visual communion that obtained between God and Israel at Mount Sinai, Ben-Azzai engages not in a mystical practice, but in a hermeneutic one, the practice of midrash. The essential moment of midrash is the stringing together of parts of the language of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Holy Writings, forming new linguistic strings out of the old, and thereby recovering the originary moment of Revelation itself. This practice is accompanied by the visual experience also beheld at the giving of the Torah, and particularly by the appearance of fire. This will be then a hermeneutics of recollected experience and visual perception.

In a striking — and perhaps not coincidental — convergence,⁸⁹ both the Rabbis and the Father imagine the practice of *lectio divina* as a moment of fiery encounter with God. Both imagine that through the properly intended study of the holy writ, direct contact with God the Father can be achieved, but oh, the differences are important, as well.

For the Rabbis what is found is the words themselves, not interpretations and not knowledge of truth, words as radiant, joyful, and sweet, as when given on Mount Sinai. For Origen, it is not finally the words, but the Word, and with it the Truth that is to be located in the otherwise so kindred a spiritual practice of reading. For Origen, those who find only the words and enjoy the words remain irrational beasts, and only those who strip the meanings of flesh off the bones of word and read the text *more allegorico*, which means in Christ, could ever even have hope for the experience of hot love that both he and his rabbinic interlocutor seek.

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⁸⁷ Dawson *Christian Figural Reading* 72.

⁸⁸ S. Dunsky, ed., *Song of Songs Rabbah* (Tel-Aviv 1980) 42 my translation.

⁸⁹ R. Kimelman, 'R. Yoḥanan and Origen on the Song of Songs: A Third-Century Jewish-Christian Disputation,' *HThR* 73 no. 3-4 (July-October 1980) 567-95; see now too R. Reissberg, 'A Tale of Two Cities: From Caesarea to Nisibis, the Christian Impact on Jewish Theology' (unpublished diss., University of California, Davis, 2003).