

The Senses of Scripture in Patristic Exegesis, with Particular Reference to the Burning Bush Pericope (Ex 3:1-14)¹

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摘要：本文闡述了聖經在教父釋經傳統中的四種含意：字面、歷史的意義，預像、靈性的意義，寓意、倫理的意義和未來、末世性的意義。作者也解釋了聖經的更豐富含意。作者首先介紹每種聖經意義的意思，然後再說明教父怎樣運用這些聖經意義去解釋天主在燃燒的荊棘向梅瑟顯現的選段（出3:1-14）。作者引用的教父包括奧力振、克萊孟亞歷山大、卡帕多細亞的額我略·納祥和額我略·尼撒，達瑪森人若望，希拉利，盎博羅修，奧思定和熱羅尼莫。根據筆者，教父靈性的釋經指出天主奧秘在聖經中的揭示是為要豐富信眾們的精神生活。

¹ This paper is the fruit of a Licentiate seminar, “*L’Esegesi Patristica: Metodo e Contributo*,” conducted by Fr. Joseph Carola S.J. at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome. The author, who participated in this seminar in 2011, wishes to thank Fr. Carola for his enlightening teaching, which has inculcated in her a love for patristic theology.

Introduction

The Gospel of John ends with a claim that if all that Jesus has done were written, the world could not have contained all the books (cf. Jn 21:25). This means for Augustine that whatever was written down as Scripture “seemed to suffice for the salvation of believers.”² The teleological end of Scripture is salvific. The Church Fathers, with their proximity to the origin of salvation—the person and event of Jesus Christ—consider exegesis of the Word the source and summit of their theological endeavour. They “have drawn out from the totality of Scripture the basic orientations which shaped the doctrinal tradition of the Church, ... for the instruction and spiritual sustenance of the faithful.”³

According to Augustine, Scripture is often obscure as it “bear[s] as many senses as there is diversity of those who understand them.”⁴ In interpreting Scripture, the Fathers have exhibited differing exegetical traits. The exegesis of Justin, in his dialogue with the Jews, broadens the typological understanding of the Old Testament, and that of Irenaeus, in his refutation of the gnostics, emphasises the unbroken progression between the Old Testament and the New Testament.⁵ Origen in *On First Principles* IV, 2, 4 distinguishes the literal sense, the spiritual/typological sense and the moral/psychological sense of

interpretation,⁶ and his spiritual exegesis has been well-utilised by the Cappadocian Gregory of Nyssa.⁷ While Augustine also prefers a spiritual to a literal interpretation of Scripture, it is John Cassian who adds the anagogical sense to the customary three senses, resulting in the tradition of the four senses Scripture.⁸

Among the Fathers, there is in fact not a strict uniformity in distinguishing between the spiritual and the moral (often called “allegorical”) senses. Yet it is clear that the literal and spiritual senses are not substitutes but complements. De Lubac finds the literal meaning “the instrument and the servant of the spirit,” while the spiritual meaning serves “to remove the veil from the letter.”⁹ The spiritual meaning is not merely a “new literal meaning,”¹⁰ but something essentially higher. Christian allegories are fundamentally different from pagan allegories for they carry “traces of the living Word, personal, incarnate, life-giving.”¹¹ This essay shall seek to discuss and illustrate the traditional four senses plus the fuller sense of patristic scriptural interpretation using the burning bush pericope (Ex 3:1-14). *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* has been used to source the patristic exegesis of this pericope.¹² Note that putting one particular exegesis in one category does not exclude it from possibly belonging to another.

2 Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 49, 1, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [NPNF], I/7, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. John Gibb (reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), p. 270.

3 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), p. 95.

4 Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 49, 12: NPNF I/7, p. 274.

5 Manlio Simonetti, “Exegesis, Patristics,” in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, vol. 1, ed. Angelo Di Berardino (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), p. 898.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 899. Cf. Origen, “On First Principles: Book IV,” in *Origen, The Classics of Western Spirituality* [CWS], trans. Rowman A. Greer (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 182.

7 Simonetti, “Exegesis, Patristics,” p. 900.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 902.

9 Henri de Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, trans. Luke O’Neill (New York: Herder and Herder, 2000), p. 87.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 160.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 169.

12 Joseph T. Lienhard, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament III: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), pp. 9-24.

I) Literal – Historical Sense

The Biblical Commission defines the literal sense of Scripture as what is “expressed directly by the inspired human authors.”¹³ This is the primary sense of Scripture—to be understood as it is plainly recorded. Scripture is God’s Word, his self-communication to humanity. It tells of God’s intervention in history from creation to the Fall, the event of Christ, and the end of the apostolic age. The history of the people of Israel and the new Israel is recounted with an emphasis on how over and over again God would show his compassion and mercy to his people despite their obstinacy, sinfulness and lack of faith. It is the story of God’s presence in the world, accompanying his chosen people on their pilgrimage from creation towards the eschaton when God’s promise shall be completed.

Each and every word of the love letter from God is of paramount importance. Augustine takes the words in Scripture as absolute truth not to be put at the slightest level of doubt. This truth “is no question at all! For, if a useful lie has once been admitted into so lofty a peak of authority, no section of those books will remain that will not ... be attributed by the same most deadly rule to the plan and purpose of a lying author.”¹⁴ Even its translation should be done with great care. Augustine has a strong preference for a literal rather than literary translation. One should “get hold of translations which have been the

mostly strictly literal, word for word, renderings of the original.”¹⁵ For Augustine, the Greek LXX is divinely inspired, for its translators were able to come up with exact same translations despite working independently.

Pericope Ex 3:1-14

In the pericope of Moses at the burning bush, it is first and above all a narration of how God called Moses to his mission and communicated through him to the people of Israel who He is. The story began with an angel of Yahweh appearing to Moses in a flame amidst a bush (Ex 3:2). Mysteriously and miraculously, the bush was burnt but not consumed. Moses was not only told to take off his shoes but was also told that God is the God of the patriarchs (cf. Ex 3:6) and that His name is Yahweh—“I am who I am” (Ex 3:14).¹⁶ The story concluded with a mandate to Moses, to announce to his fellow Israelites that Yahweh had sent him to them (Ex 3:15). The literal sense of this episode lies in the historical significance of this call of Moses towards the entire history of the people of the Jews. This scene marked the birth of a leader of a people that God would free from the slavery of the Egyptians and choose as his own. Despite the many possible senses of scriptural interpretation, the historicity of this episode should never be denied or forgotten. It was the beginning of the climax of the Old Testament drama of the Exodus of Israelites from servitude to freedom.

13 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, p. 79.

14 Augustine, *Letter 28*, 3, 3, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* [WSA], II/1, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2001), p. 93.

15 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* II, 13, 19, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/11, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (4th reprint, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), p. 138.

16 Citations from Scripture are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

Because of some “supernatural” elements in this drama, the Fathers are not in complete accord regarding the details of this pericope. Is the angel real? Why is the bush burnt but not consumed? Why is it that “the angel of the Lord appeared” (Ex 3:2) but it is God Himself who talks to Moses (cf. Ex 3:4)? For Augustine, there are two ways of looking at who the angel is—one literal, one Christological. If the angel really is an angel (i.e. a creature), then it “must be required to explain why he was called the Lord ... it is rightly said to be an angel because it is, and to be the Lord because of God dwelling in him.”¹⁷ It is possible that God “did not appear through his own self, but through a visible creature ... such as can be perceived by our bodies.”¹⁸ If so, “the angel itself ... was God’s temple ... So here, when the angel speaks, God is said to speak.”¹⁹ Hilary of Poitiers explains that “He who is an angel of God when He is seen is the same one who is the Lord when He is heard ... When He is called the angel of God, it is revealed that this is not His true nature, and that He is not alone, for He is the angel of God. When He is called the Lord and God, He is proclaimed as possessing the glory and name of His own nature.”²⁰ The apparent contradiction of an angel appearing but God speaking is resolved by taking heed of the literal description of the event. Hilary further understands God’s

self-declaration of “I am who I am” (Ex 3:14) as literally describing God’s incomprehensible existence. “It is known that there is nothing more characteristic of God than to be, ... the eternity of God will not be untrue to itself in anything.”²¹

II) Typological – Spiritual Sense

The spiritual sense is “the meaning expressed by the biblical text when read, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery of Christ and of the new life which flows from it.”²² Henri de Lubac speaks much of this spiritual meaning in *Scripture in the Tradition*. The inter-relation between the Old and New Testaments is for him the key to patristic exegesis which he calls “spiritual,” preferring it to “allegorical” and “typological,” as it carries “a signification which relates to salvation.”²³ The person of Christ causes a “Christian transposition”²⁴ that is entirely different from the metamorphoses in the spiritual understanding of Scripture in the Old Testament times. Christ incarnated has once and for all taken away the Old Testament veil between man and God. Now, “all Scripture is transfigured by Christ.”²⁵ Patristic exegesis thus has its point of departure from the “newness of Christ.”²⁶ But the revelation of God in the Old Testament is a seed for the New, one nourished by the continual revelation of God through creation, through the prophets, and finally

17 Augustine, *Sermon 7, 5*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/1, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990), pp. 235-236.

18 Augustine, *Sermon 6, 1*, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/1, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1990), p. 227.

19 *Ibid.* 6, 2, WSA III/1, p. 228.

20 Hilary of Poitiers, *The Trinity IV*, 32, in *The Fathers of the Church [FC]*, vol. 25, trans. Stephen McKenna (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2002), p. 120.

21 *Ibid.* I, 5: FC 25, p. 6.

22 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, p. 82.

23 De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, p. 14.

24 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 22.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

through the incarnation of himself. But this revelation of Christ is the ultimate and definitive revelation of God in humanity. It is not a “gradual progression” from the Old Testament but a “sudden change,” “total transference.”²⁷ Yet this discontinuity results from more than an evolution but less than a rupture. There is a progression in the sense of a leap. In fact, typology already existed within the Old Testament itself. And between the Old Testament type and the New Testament fulfilment, there is a “contrast parallelism,” for “at the very moment that the gift of the New Testament creates the contrast, it suppresses it.”²⁸ Jesus the Christ is the newness that contrasts the two Testaments. Yet he suppresses that contrast, for he is the fulfilment, the eschaton. De Lubac stresses that “the doctrine of the four meanings of Scripture (history, allegory, tropology, anagoge) is fulfilled and finds its unity in traditional eschatology.”²⁹

The fourth-century exegete Tyconius finds that one must utilise not only the particular but also the general interpretation of Scripture. That is, one must see not only the literal but also the spiritual meaning of Scripture, for Scripture is “the mysteries of heavenly wisdom in relation to the teaching of the Holy Spirit”³⁰ beyond what is reported as historical and factual. Augustine reminds his readers “to beware of taking a figurative expression literally,” for “*The letter kills, but*

the spirit gives life (2 Cor 3:6).”³¹ “The one and only method” to tell whether a passage is figurative is to check whether through it one is “making progress in the love of God and neighbor, and in the knowledge of them.”³² The statement must be figurative if its literal sense is not worthy of God, “if it seems to command infamy or crime, or to forbid usefulness or kindness.”³³

a) Prophetic Sense

There are many possible spiritual senses of Scripture. The prophetic sense is one. Justin in *Dialogue with Trypho* apologetically claims that truth is delivered to Christians through the prophets which “in their writings they gave no proof at the time of their statements ...; but the happenings that have taken place and are now taking place force you to believe their words.”³⁴ Christ is prefigured by the prophets and the historical events in Christ’s life—his paschal mystery was hidden in the Old Testament which the Jews have read but have been ignorant about. Using the example of “a virgin shall conceive” (cf. Is 7:14), Justin asserts that the choice of the word “virgin” is a translation of the LXX made by the seventy elders of the Jews.³⁵ It is not the Christians who make up the phrase. The “virgin” is in fact well within the tradition of the Jewish people themselves. But because the Jewish people understand this phrase as “a young woman shall conceive,”

27 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

28 *Ibid.*, pp. 116-117.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 217.

30 Tyconius, *The Book of Rules*, in *Society of Biblical Literature Texts and Translations* 31, *Early Christian Literature Series* 7, ed. Robert L. Wilken and William R. Schoedel, trans. William S. Babcock (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 55.

31 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* III, 5, 9: WSA I/11, p. 173.

32 *Ibid.*, III, 10, 14: WSA I/11, p. 176.

33 *Ibid.*, III, 16, 24: WSA I/11, p. 180.

34 *Ibid.*, Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 7, 2, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 3, trans. Thomas B. Falls (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), p. 14.

35 *Ibid.* 68, 7: FC 3, p. 106.

they refer this prophecy to King Hezekiah as the son borne, when in fact “this prophecy applies to him whom we profess as our Christ.”³⁶ But Christianity is “superior” to Judaism as prophecies like Is 7:14 is fulfilled by the former but not the latter. Jerome goes further to say that Isaiah is a book about Christ. The prophet Isaiah “seems to compose not a prophecy but a gospel.”³⁷ Augustine draws a parallel between Jacob’s use of three striped rods to bring forth a new breed of striped animals and the Jews endowing their spiritual heritage to the Gentiles. “The first preachers of the gospel were all from the one nation of the Jews; but for many nations to be begotten through the gospel, they had to conceive and give birth to variegated offspring.”³⁸ The Old Testament can thus be read as a prophecy of the New.

Pericope Ex 3:1-14

Gregory of Nyssa sees the mystery of the bush blazing but not burnt as a prophecy of the virgin birth. “The light of divinity which through birth shone from her into human life did not consume the burning bush, even as the flower of her virginity was not withered by giving birth.”³⁹ John Damascene reads God’s command to Moses to take off his shoes on holy ground a prophecy of Mary’s holiness.

36 *Ibid.* 43, 8: FC 3, p. 66.

37 Jerome, *Letter 53*, 8 in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II/6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W.G. Martley (reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 101.

38 Augustine, *Sermon-Dolbeau 22*, 23 in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/11, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill (3rd reprint, Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013), p. 302.

39 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses II*, 21, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), p. 59.

“The [burning] bush is an image of the Divine Mother, and God said to Moses when he was about to approach it, ‘Loose the sandals from your feet ...’ If, therefore, the ground on which the image of the Mother of God was seen by Moses is holy ground, how much more is the image itself? For not only holy, but, dare I say it, also the holy of holies.”⁴⁰

b) Christological – Trinitarian Sense

The Old Testament not only prophesies about the New, it speaks about Christ, who has made all things anew. If Mosaic Law is the essence of Scripture for the Jews, with Christ’s incarnation, Christ himself has become the “proof” and the “criterion” for scriptural inspiration. According to Origen, “the coming of Christ makes clear that what [the prediction of the prophets or the Law of Moses] had said was true and divinely inspired, since before that it might have been held as uncertain whether the conclusion of what had been predicted would be fulfilled.”⁴¹ The diffusion of Scripture of Hebraic origin in the Hellenistic world is for Origen strong evidence that Scripture is divine. While teachers of Scripture “are neither very capable nor very namely, nevertheless, this word is preached throughout the whole world ... Because of this it cannot be doubted that it is not because of human powers or abilities.”⁴² All of Scripture can thus be interpreted in the light of Christ. Augustine, for instance, understands all the Psalms in a Christological manner. If

40 John Damascene, *On the Divine Images II*, 20, in *Three Treatises on the Divine Images*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), p. 75.

41 Origen, *On First Principles IV*, 1, 6: CWS, p. 176. There is no volume number for the CWS series; the page number denotes the page number in volume of the work cited.

42 *Ibid.* IV, 1, 2: CWS, p. 172.

doing so results in certain seeming Christological contradictions, one only has to take note that some phrases in Scripture refers to Christ the Son of Man, while other phrases Christ the Son of God. “If you accept a certain rule in the scriptures, that very light will make everything clear to you. Wherever you find the Son called equal to the Father, take it as being according to a certain essence of divinity. Wherever you find him less, take it as being according to the form of the servant he took on.”⁴³ And this Christ, who in mutual love with the Father breathes forth the Spirit, thus also invites Scripture to be interpreted in a Trinitarian sense.

Pericope Ex 3:1-14

While Augustine acknowledges that the angel who appears to Moses could be real, he also speaks of a Christological-Trinitarian interpretation. “‘Angel’ is only a Greek word meaning in English ‘announcer’ or ‘messenger.’ But we find the Lord Jesus Christ being quite unmistakably called *angel of great counsel* by the prophet (Is 9:6, Septuagint). In themselves, of course, both the Holy Spirit and the Son of God are each God and the Lord of angels.”⁴⁴ Catholic faith holds that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are one in substance; each person of the Triune God is invisible in his proper nature. Thus, the fire that God seems to have appeared in is not God, but only indicates God. “If we bear this in mind, we may safely believe that it could have been the Son who appeared to Moses and was called both Lord and angel of

the Lord,”⁴⁵ for Christ is the “messenger” who announces the kingdom of heaven.⁴⁶

For Origen, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob who appeared to Moses is also the Saviour whose name is “first and last, not that he is not what lies between, but it is stated in terms of the extremities to show that he himself has become ‘all things.’”⁴⁷ Furthermore, “this is the same God the Savior honors when he says, ‘No one is good except the one God, the Father.’ ‘The one who is good,’ therefore, is the same as ‘the one who is.’”⁴⁸ The work of God is manifested in all rational beings who partake of the word and Christ the Word; “I am who I am” alludes to a universal participation in God the Father; and God breathed the Spirit of life into man to make him a living soul—all humanity thus participates in the life of the Triune God.⁴⁹

Gregory of Nyssa limits the theophany to a Christophany. Moses saw that “the bush was burning, yet it was not consumed” (Ex 3:2). The blazing flame lights up the bush. And God is light. Now God has “made himself visible to us in the flesh ... light which has reached down even to human nature.”⁵⁰ That blazing light is thus Christ incarnated. Christ, though not yet born as man at the time of Moses, is undoubtedly present in the burning bush pericope.

43 Augustine, *Sermon Dolbeau 22*, 17: WSA III/11, p. 296.

44 Augustine, *The Trinity II*, 13, 23, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/5, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, 2nd ed. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), p. 118.

45 Augustine, *Sermon 7*, 5: WSA III/1, p. 235.

46 *Ibid.* 7, 3: WSA III/1, p. 234.

47 Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John I*, 219, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 80, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), p. 77.

48 *Ibid.* II, 96: FC 80, p. 119. Cf. Mk 10:18.

49 Origen, *On First Principles I*, 3, 6, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, trans. Frederick Crombie (reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), p. 253.

50 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses II*, 20: CWS, p. 59.

c) Soteriological Sense

One cannot separate the identity of Christ with his function. A Christological interpretation of Scripture necessarily leads to a soteriological reading. Irenaeus sees human history as a salvation history which tends towards a recapitulation in Christ. The disobedience of Adam is recapitulated by the obedience of Christ, the second Adam; the rebelliousness of Eve is recapitulated by the docility of Mary, the second Eve. “It was necessary that Adam should be summed up in Christ ... and Eve summed up in Mary.”⁵¹ The Christian way of life does not contradict but fulfil and add newness to the old way of the Law. “The law was fulfilled in Christ—but would have them live in newness by the Word, through faith in the Son of God and love.”⁵² This is a radical newness, with no possibility or desire of going back. The Old Testament is a Scripture about Christ. The figure of Christ is pre-figured in the Old Testament, and the faith of Abraham has gotten its full significance in the New Testament with Christ’s justification. “God has summed up again for Himself in us the faith of Abraham.”⁵³ Abraham is not only the father of faith, but also is a seeker of faith—one who seeks God in eagerness, in humbleness and in faith. He goes “all about the world, searching where God is, and failed to find out; God took pity on him who alone was silently seeking Him.”⁵⁴ All who share this faith of Abraham shall also share in his salvation by faith through Christ.

51 Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 33, in *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching: A Theological Commentary and Translation*, Iain M. Mackenzie, trans. J. Armitage Robinson (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), p. 11.

52 *Ibid.* 89; Mackenzie, p. 25.

53 *Ibid.* 95; Mackenzie, p. 27.

54 *Ibid.* 24; Mackenzie, p. 8.

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Augustine comments that God’s name as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is “a name of mercy.”⁵⁵ God is willing to adapt himself to different generations so that “we are able to seek God and track down him who is.”⁵⁶ “While God is indeed unchangeable, he has done everything out of mercy, and so the Son of God himself was prepared to take on changeable flesh and thereby to come to man’s rescue while remaining what he is as the Word of God.”⁵⁷ Augustine notes that there are other patriarchs. But why does God not call himself, for example, the God of Noah? Augustine calls that a “sublime mystery,”⁵⁸ just as the incarnation of the Son of God to save mankind is an ineffable mystery.

Clement of Alexandria parallels the bush, which is a thorny plant, to Christ’s saving crown of thorns. God began to legislate the world through His Word by descending onto the thorny bush to reveal Himself to Moses. When the Word was ending his legislation and earthly dwelling, he was again crowned with thorns. “Returning to the place from which He had descended, the Word renewed that by which He had first come, appearing first in the bush of thorns, and later being surrounded with thorns that He might show that all was the work of the same one power. He is one and His Father is one, the eternal beginning and end.”⁵⁹

55 Augustine, *Sermon* 7, 7: WSA III/1, p. 237.

56 *Ibid.* 7, 3: WSA III/1, p. 238.

57 Augustine, *Sermon* 6, 5: WSA III/1, p. 229.

58 Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 11, 7: NPNF I/7, p. 77.

59 Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator* II, 8, 75, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 23, trans. Simon P. Wood (New York: Fathers of the Church Inc., 1954), p. 158.

III) Allegorical – Moral Sense

No one could claim mastery of the use of allegorical interpretation like Origen. He deems that just as literal observance of the Mosaic Law is at times nonsensical, as in remaining in the same lying position on Sabbath till evening,⁶⁰ it is unwise to restrict Scripture to its bare letters, for there are scriptural passages with no straightforward bodily sense. Divine wisdom has inserted apparent stumbling blocks in Scripture,⁶¹ to help people see that God is beyond human comprehension. In such instances we ought to seek another way, for a “higher and loftier road,” in search for the inner meaning of Scripture which is worthy of God.⁶² The right way to interpret Scripture is thus threefold, in the senses of the body, soul and spirit respectively, “just as a human being is said to be made up of body, soul, and spirit.” The sense of the flesh (literal sense) is for edification of the simple people; the sense of the soul (transcendental sense) is for those who “have begun to make some progress;” and the sense of the spirit is for “those who are perfect” seeking edification in spiritual wisdom.⁶³ One may think of Origen’s senses of the soul and spirit as allegorical, in the moral sense and mystical sense respectively.

a) Moral – Psychological Sense

According to Augustine, this might be the most important sense of Scripture, for the ultimate criterion of interpretation is the end of enjoying God, who is Absolute Goodness. Scripture is a means towards

an end of living a life of love, and many in the desert have in fact done so “without books.”⁶⁴ “So if it seems to you that you have understood the divine scriptures, or any part of them, in such a way that by this understanding you do not build up this twin love of God and neighbor, then you have not yet understood them.”⁶⁵

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“I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob” (Ex 3:6). Origen finds this self-declaration of God’s identity analogous to the threefold structure of philosophy. “Abraham expounds moral philosophy through obedience; ... Isaac holds the place of natural philosophy, since he dug wells and explored the depths of things. Moreover, Jacob receives the subject of contemplation, since he was named Israel because of the contemplation of divine things and since he saw the encampments of heaven and gazed at the house of God and the paths of the angels, the ladders that stretched from earth to heaven.”⁶⁶ The attainment of moral virtues requires the practice of natural, moral, and contemplative philosophy. Gregory Nazianzen sees in the names of the patriarchs the three common names of God. “The Name of the God of Vengeance governs fear, and that of the God of Salvation our hope, and that of the God of Virtues our practice.”⁶⁷ Moral life is one in which the Lord

60 Origen, *On First Principles* IV, 3, 2: CWS, pp. 190-191.

61 *Ibid.* IV, 2, 9: CWS, p. 187.

62 *Ibid.* IV, 2, 9: CWS, p. 188.

63 *Ibid.* IV, 2, 4: CWS, p. 182.

64 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* I, 39, 43: WSA I/11, p. 125.

65 *Ibid.* I, 36, 40: WSA I/11, p. 124.

66 Origen, *The Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs*, in Origen, *The Classics of Western Spirituality*, trans. Rowman A. Greer (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1979), p. 235.

67 Gregory Nazianzen, *Fourth Theological Oration* 19, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, III/7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow (reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 316.

is feared, salvation is hoped for, and virtues are practised. The three patriarchs also indicate that God is Trinitarian. “The Proper Name of the Unoriginate is Father, and that of the unoriginately Begotten is Son, and that of the unbegottenly Proceeding or going forth is The Holy Ghost.”⁶⁸ It is thus possible to see in the same verse of Scripture a moral and a Trinitarian sense at the same time.

The moral sense of Scripture calls for an internal ascent towards God. “And Moses said, ‘I will turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt’” (Ex 3:3). The phrase “I will turn aside” in the Revised Standard Version, translated as “I must go across” in the New Jerusalem Bible, is significant. Origen suggests that it means more than crossing over earthly mountains. Instead, one “ought to ascend to a higher life and cross over to better things than those in which he was.”⁶⁹ The Lord said to Moses: “Put off your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5). According to Origen, shoes refer to one’s material needs. But Jesus, who is the Way, calls his followers to walk the narrow way. “He who travels this way is instructed to carry nothing on him since it provides bread and the items necessary for life; he has no need for a staff because enemies can do nothing on this way, and since it is holy, there is no need for sandals.”⁷⁰

Like Origen, Ambrose relates taking off the shoes as an allegory for interior conversion. “For if it is said to Moses when he was desiring

68 *Ibid.*

69 Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 12, 2, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 71, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1981), p. 178.

70 Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John* VI, 107: FC 80, pp. 198-199.

to draw nearer: ‘Put off thy shoes from off thy feet,’ how much more must we free the feet of our soul from the bonds of the body, and clear our steps from all connection with this world.”⁷¹ Yet, this interior ascent is hopeful. Ambrose finds courage in his discourse when he realises that God had not looked down on the bush and was willing to condescend to assume himself in it. “God did not despise the bush, and would He might give light also to my thorns.”⁷²

b) Mystical Sense

Gregory of Nyssa is famed as a mystic. He urges Christians to search for the deeper significance of God’s law in Scripture, a meaning “that is worthy of the greatness of the Lawgiver,” so as to learn from God—“the Revealer of hidden mysteries”⁷³—in order to live a perfect life. De Lubac considers Gregory of Nyssa the watershed upon which spiritual exegesis began to focus more on the individual soul, as *The Life of Moses* shows—“the spiritual meaning of Scripture becomes the special preserve of the contemplative.”⁷⁴ Actually, the purpose of the spiritual ascent is ultimate union with God in the eschaton, so this mystical sense in fact tends towards the anagogical sense.

71 Ambrose, *Concerning Repentance* II, 107, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II/10, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin, and H.T.F. Duckworth (reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 358-359. Cf. David L. Jeffrey, ed., “Burning Bush,” in *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 115.

72 Ambrose, *Concerning Virgins* I, 1, 2, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II/10, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. H. de Romestin, E. de Romestin, and H.T.F. Duckworth (reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 363.

73 Gregory of Nyssa, preface to *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, *Writings from the Greco-Roman World*, vol. 13, trans. Richard A. Norris Jr. (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), p. 9.

74 De Lubac, *Scripture in the Tradition*, p. 50.

Gregory of Nyssa calls for a life of asceticism. “The philosophical life, although outwardly austere and unpleasant, is yet full of good hopes when it ripens.”⁷⁵ Earthly gratification is the greatest enemy of a holy life. “Of the many passions which afflict men’s thinking there is none so strong as the disease of pleasure.”⁷⁶ Using a mystical interpretation of Scripture, Gregory of Nyssa understands the physical climb of Moses up Mount Sinai as the upward movement of a soul. “Hope always draws the soul from the beauty which is seen to what is beyond.”⁷⁷ The appreciation of a spiritual life beyond what is earthly means striving one’s best to be a servant of God.⁷⁸ Yet Jesus says he shall no longer call us servants but friends. So the goal of spiritual ascent is a life that counts “becoming God’s friend the only thing worthy of honor and desire.”⁷⁹ This spiritual ascent requires perseverance and is without finite limit.⁸⁰ What counts more is the process, our attitude, our attempt, more than where we end up on that spiritual mountain. “The perfect life was such that no description of its perfection hinders its progress; the continual development of life to what is better is the soul’s way to perfection.”⁸¹

Pericope Ex 3:1-14

The sandaled feet of Moses in front of the burning bush is an allegory of what blocks a soul from reaching perfection according to Gregory of Nyssa. “Sandaled feet cannot ascend that height

75 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* II, 193: CWS, p. 104.

76 *Ibid.* II, 301: CWS, p. 131.

77 *Ibid.* II, 231: CWS, p. 114.

78 *Ibid.* II, 317: CWS, p. 136.

79 *Ibid.* II, 320: CWS, p. 137.

80 *Ibid.* II, 239: CWS, p. 116.

81 *Ibid.* II, 306: CWS, p. 133.

where the light of truth is seen, but the dead and earthly covering of skins ... must be removed from the feet of the soul.”⁸² So Moses must take off his shoes, so that all that separates him from God’s intimacy is removed. Only in doing so can he prepare himself to become the leader of an almost impossible feat—to lead the Israelites from the oppressive power of Pharaoh to the salvation of the Promised Land. “Moses ... divests himself of the earthly covering and looks to the light shining from the bramble bush, that is, to the Radiance which shines upon us through this thorny flesh and which is ... the true light and the truth itself. A person like this becomes able to help others to salvation.”⁸³

IV) Anagogical – Eschatological Sense

Origen’s concept of true understanding of Scripture consists of three aspects. First, the Holy Spirit enlightens human souls through Scripture to help us reach perfection of knowledge.⁸⁴ Second, the mysteries about God are concealed in the ordinary language of scriptural narratives to reflect the ineffable nature of God.⁸⁵ Third, Scripture has an eschatological dimension, with an aim “to keep the logical order of the spiritual meaning in either what is bound to happen or in what has already taken place.”⁸⁶ This “already but not yet” fulfilment of Scripture in Christ makes it necessary for Scripture to have certain elements beyond the ordinary, perhaps to go into the realm of the seemingly absurd, to show that though Christ has come, the history of salvation

82 *Ibid.* II, 22: CWS, p. 35.

83 *Ibid.* II, 26: CWS, pp. 60-61.

84 Origen, *On First Principles* IV, 2, 7: CWS, p. 186.

85 *Ibid.* IV, 2, 8: CWS, p. 187.

86 *Ibid.* IV, 2, 9: CWS, p. 188.

is not completely fulfilled yet—for Christ will come again—only then will we be able to see him face to face and understand his Word in its entirety.

Pericope Ex 3:1-14

Love of God and neighbour is Augustine's criterion of scriptural interpretation. This love shall lead the seeker to the "City of God." Moses is to lead his fellow men to "a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3:8). Augustine understands this land as "a visible sacrament, designed to lead people who had understood God's wonderful deeds to invisible grace and the kingdom of heaven," and that "we too are bound to set little store by that temporal kingdom and to love the free Jerusalem in heaven, our mother, holding her alone to be truly desirable."⁸⁷ While Abraham, Isaac and Jacob represent the one people of Israel, "in the Jewish people was figured the Christian people ... To the Old Testament belong the lovers of temporal things, the lovers of the world: to the New Testament belong the lovers of eternal life. Hence, that Jerusalem on earth was the shadow of the heavenly Jerusalem."⁸⁸ The heavenly Jerusalem is the spiritual and real Promised Land.

V) The Fuller Sense

Besides appreciating the literal, typological, allegorical and anagogical senses of Scripture, it is often an enriching experience to interpret Scripture in its fuller sense. "The fuller sense is defined as a

87 Augustine, *Exposition of Psalm 105*, 22, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/19, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2003), p. 214.

88 Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 11, 8: NPNF I/7, p. 77.

deeper meaning of the text, intended by God but not clearly expressed by the human author. Its existence in the biblical text comes to be known when one studies the text in the light of other biblical texts which utilize it or in its relationship with the internal development of revelation."⁸⁹

a) Canonical Sense

According to the Biblical Commission, Scripture "takes on a deeper meaning when it becomes part of the canon as a whole. The exegetical task includes therefore bringing out the truth of Augustine's dictum: ... 'The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old becomes clear in the New.'"⁹⁰ *Dei Verbum* 12 gives the same attention to reading Scripture as a unity: "holy scripture requires to be read and interpreted in the light of the same Spirit through whom it was written. Consequently, a right understanding of the sacred texts demands attention ... to the content and coherence of scripture as a whole."⁹¹ Pope Benedict XVI hails patristic exegesis as more integral and alive than the historical-critical method, which he finds indispensable but inadequate. He prefers "canonical exegesis," which brings forth the historical-critical interpretation "in an organic way toward becoming theology in the proper sense."⁹² Exegesis should ultimately be salvific in purpose—it is to be centred upon the person of Christ, and this is in fact the criterion of interpretation of the Fathers.

89 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, p. 83.

90 *Ibid.*, p. 103.

91 Pope Paul VI, *Dei Verbum* 12, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed & Ward; Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), p. 976.

92 Pope Benedict XVI, foreword to *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), p. xix.

Irenaeus notes that heresies of Valentinus, Ptolemaeus, or Basilides⁹³ arise as a result of Scripture being examined with mere human reason, going beyond interpreting Scripture with Scripture, with a false certainty that humans are able to reach perfect knowledge of God. Tyconius tells the importance of recapitulation, which, Augustine explains, means that “the narrative is being imperceptibly turned back to earlier events that had been left out.”⁹⁴ A canonical reading is called for, so as not to miss what has been recapitulated. One should not read Scripture out of context. Augustine warns, “Don’t cut God up into pieces.”⁹⁵ The Bishop of Hippo claims that explaining obscure Scripture with mere reason is risky, but “there is no risk if they can all be shown from other places of the holy scriptures to correspond with the truth.”⁹⁶ “It is really much safer to walk along with the divine scriptures.”⁹⁷

Pericope Ex 3:1-14

In the burning bush episode, the bush is assumed to have many thorns. Augustine compares these thorns to sinners. The thorny bush represents sinful Jewish people. “The fire in the bush is like the law among the Jews; the thorns of the bush are like the sins of the Jews; just as the fire did not burn the thorns to ashes in this case, so in that one the law did not consume the sins.”⁹⁸ The Old Testament law by

itself cannot save the Jews from sins. One needs to look to another part of Scripture—the New Testament—to experience the salvific power of Christ, who, crowned with thorns, assumed the sins of humanity and delivered us from its bondage: “If that people were not represented by thorns, Christ would not be crowned by them with thorns.”⁹⁹ Yet people have always resisted the saving grace of Christ’s Spirit. “That’s why the bush was not being burned up, because the Spirit of flame was being resisted by the thorns of sinners. *You have always resisted the Holy Spirit.*”¹⁰⁰

b) Ecclesial Sense

Yves Congar in *Tradition and Traditions* mentions that while the Church Fathers see Scripture as primary and Christ as the criterion of scriptural interpretation, they tend to unite rather than separate Scripture, Tradition and the Church. “Scripture is only a sign of the Gospel, a document which bears witness to it. The Gospel is not principally a written text, but the power which works salvation, the manifestation and expression of grace.”¹⁰¹ Scripture must therefore be interpreted also in its ecclesial sense, for “the Bible is the privileged means which God uses yet again in our own day to shape the building up and the growth of the Church as the People of God.”¹⁰²

93 Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* II, 28, 9, in *Ancient Christian Writers* [ACW], no. 65, trans. Dominic J. Unger (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Newman Press, 2012), p. 92.

94 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* III, 36, 52: WSA I/11, p. 194. Cf. Tyconius, *The Book of Rules*, pp. 109-115.

95 Augustine, *Sermon Dolbeau* 22, 8: WSA III/11, p. 289.

96 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* III, 27, 38: WSA I/11, p. 186.

97 *Ibid.* III, 28, 39: WSA I/11, p. 186.

98 Augustine, *Sermon* 6, 3: WSA III/1, p. 228.

99 Augustine, *Sermon* 7, 2: WSA III/1, p. 234.

100 *Ibid.* 7, 6: WSA III/1, p. 236.

101 Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theology Essay*, trans. Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (London: Burns and Oates, 1966), p. 273.

102 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, p. 103.

In *The Life of Moses*, Gregory of Nyssa demonstrates that many images in the Book of Exodus are full of ecclesiological significance. Moses raised by the milk of his natural mother suggests the Christian need of nourishment from the Church.¹⁰³ The Israelites took the wealth of the Egyptians upon their departure and gave them to Moses signifies that “many bring to the Church of God their profane learning as a kind of gift.”¹⁰⁴ Jerome, who considers true gnosis as the Christian knowledge of the person of Christ, points out that Scripture can only be interpreted meaningfully in the context of the Church and the apostolic tradition. The two apostles Peter and John are both unskilled in speech but not ignorant in knowledge (cf. 2 Cor 11:6)¹⁰⁵ since Christ himself has personally taught them how to interpret Scripture. Others after them have to be taught by the apostles and their successors so that they can be enlightened. Even the holy eunuch in Acts 8:27 needs the guidance of the apostles, without which he was unable to know Christ, even though he “was so great a lover of the Law and of divine knowledge that he read the holy scriptures even in his chariot.”¹⁰⁶

Tyconius stresses that Christ himself is the head, his body is the Church. Scripture speaks about the advents of Christ. “Both comings must take place; but first there is the advent of the body, i.e., the church, which comes continuously in the same invisible glory, then the advent of the head, i.e., the Lord, in manifest glory.”¹⁰⁷ Scriptural interpretation ought to take into account not only the event of Christ but also the

history of salvation of the Church. The Church is bipartite with saints and sinners at the same time. But given his promise to Abraham, God cannot but reward the spiritual descendants of Abraham. “God was the debtor ... The worker can wish or not wish to receive his reward; but the reward cannot wish to be paid or not to be paid.”¹⁰⁸

Augustine in *Sermon Dolbeau 22* suggests that the third stage of Christ is “the whole Christ in the fullness of the Church.”¹⁰⁹ If Christ is the criterion of patristic exegesis, an ecclesial dimension ought not to be overlooked. “The whole Christ is predicated with reference to the Church; that is as head and body.”¹¹⁰ In *Exposition of Psalm 85*, Augustine reads “I am holy” (cf. Ps 86:2) as referring to the holiness of the Church. The Church is not a Church of the Jews, but the universal Church where all nations shall gather in the spiritual sonship of Christ the head (cf. Ps 86:9). Jesus, being the son of Mary the handmaiden of God, shall save the sons of the Church, which also acts as God’s handmaiden (cf. Ps 86:16). “Although ... a person is born of a pagan according to the flesh, he or she is spiritually a child of the Church.”¹¹¹ Furthermore, the canonicity of Scripture should be evaluated within an ecclesiastical context, based upon whether the books are “accepted by all the Catholic Churches.” Among the books that are not, accomplished scriptural scholars “will prefer those accepted by most of them, and by the greater ones among them.”¹¹²

103 Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses* II, 12: CWS, p. 57.

104 *Ibid.* II, 116: CWS, p. 81.

105 Jerome, *Letter 53*, 4: NPNF II/6, p. 98.

106 *Ibid.* 53, 5: NPNF II/6, p. 98.

107 Tyconius, *The Book of Rules*, p. 7.

108 *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 43.

109 Augustine, *Sermon Dolbeau 22*, 2: WSA III/11, p. 284.

110 *Ibid.* 22, 19: WSA III/11, p. 298.

111 Augustine, *Exposition of Psalm 85*, 22, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/18, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002), p. 242.

112 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* II, 8, 12: WSA I/11, p. 134.

Pericope Ex 3:1-14

Augustine sees a special significance of Moses' shoes in the burning bush scene. "What are the shoes? ... Leather from dead animals ... So what are we being ordered to do? To give up dead works ... There's no holier ground than the Church of God, is there? So as we stand in her let us take off our shoes, let us give up dead works."¹¹³ The Church is holy despite its being bipartite, thus interpreting Scripture within the living tradition of the Church is the safer and more secure path to take.

c) Dogmatic Sense / According to the Rule of Faith

Dei Verbum asserts that "we must acknowledge that the books of scripture teach firmly, faithfully and without error such truth as God, for the sake of our salvation, wished the biblical text to contain."¹¹⁴ The rule of faith and dogmatic definitions are guides and guards for scriptural interpretation. Thus, "a right understanding of the sacred texts demands ... taking into account the whole church's living tradition and the sense of perspective given by faith."¹¹⁵

Augustine warns that one should never understand Scripture "in a way which does not square with the rule of faith, with the rule of truth, with the rule of piety."¹¹⁶ In *Teaching Christianity*, he advises his

readers to clear up ambiguities in Scripture by referring to "the rule of faith" (III, 2, 2), and if none of the possible interpretations goes against faith, "the matter has to be settled by the context" (III, 2, 4), and if neither the rule of faith or the actual context favours one interpretation, the choice is then "left to the discretion of the reader" (III, 2, 5).

Pericope Ex 3:1-14

In the early Church's debate regarding the identity of Christ and the Trinity, Jerome in his letter to Pope Damasus expresses his abhorrence towards speaking of God as three *hypostases* in the sense of three substances. Adhering to the rule of faith as laid down by the Nicene Creed (325), he uses God's "Yahweh" utterance to Moses at the burning bush to attest to the concept of the *homoousios*. "There is one nature of God and one only; and this, and this alone, truly is ... God alone who is eternal, that is to say, who has no beginning, really deserves to be called an essence. Therefore also He says to Moses from the bush, 'I am that I am.'"¹¹⁷ Gregory Nazianzen in the *Fourth Theological Oration* echoes that God's name reflects his unique nature. "He Who Is, and God, are the special names of His essence" — His is "a Nature Whose Being is absolute." The name Θεός (God) comes from ἔειν (to run) or αἶθειν (to blaze), from which God is also called a consuming fire (Deut 4:24).¹¹⁸ The etymology of the name of God thus

113 Augustine, *Sermon 101*, 7, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, III/4, ed. John E. Rojelle, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1992), p. 68.

114 Pope Paul VI, *Dei Verbum* 11, p. 976.

115 *Ibid.* 12, p. 976.

116 Augustine, *Sermon 7*, 3: WSA III/1, p. 234.

117 Jerome, *Letter 15*, 4, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II/6, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. W.H. Fremantle, G. Lewis, and W.G. Martley (reprint, Edinburgh: T&T Clark; Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989), p. 19. Following the decree of the Council of Alexandria (362), Jerome is also willing to accept the formula of God as three *hypostases* in the sense of three subsisting persons. Jerome, *Letter 15*, 3: NPNF II/6, p. 19.

118 Gregory Nazianzen, *Fourth Theological Oration* 18: NPNF II/7, p. 316.

aptly connects God with the burning bush episode at which he appeared and personally told Moses his name.

Augustine maintains that “I am who I am” implicates “the unchangeableness of God,”¹¹⁹ his being eternal,¹²⁰ and of “immutable and ineffable nature” that “only Is,” though given our own changeability “there is nothing false in our saying, both it was, and will be, and is.”¹²¹ This absolute ontological oneness of God revealed by “I am who I am” in fact “almost leads [Augustine] to agree that Plato was not unacquainted with the books of Scripture.”¹²² Indeed, the Fathers have dehellenised Hellenistic philosophy in depicting God as “the one who supremely and primordially is, being absolutely unchanging”¹²³ in Christian doctrines. “Perhaps it was too much even for Moses himself ... to understand the meaning for such words, ‘I am who am’ ... The Lord therefore put aside what man could not comprehend, and added ... ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ This thou canst comprehend.”¹²⁴ Using the rule of faith to interpret Scripture helps keep us orthodox while being able to comprehend, with the help of philosophy and perhaps with greater precision than Moses, who this “I am who I am” is.

119 Augustine, *Sermon 6*, 4: WSA III/1, p. 229.

120 Augustine, *Sermon 7*, 7: WSA III/1, p. 237.

121 Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 99, 5: NPNF I/7, p. 386.

122 Augustine, *The City of God* VII, 11, in *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, I/6, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. William Babcock (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), p. 256.

123 Augustine, *Teaching Christianity* I, 32, 35: WSA I/11, p. 121.

124 Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 38, 8: NPNF I/7, p. 220.

Conclusion

Patristic exegesis, though appearing at times archaic in the twenty-first century, has been an invaluable inheritance to the Church. “In their explanations of the Bible, the Fathers mix and weave together typological and allegorical interpretations in a virtually inextricable way. But they do so always for a pastoral and pedagogical purpose, convinced that everything that has been written, has been written for our instruction (cf 1 Cor 10:11).”¹²⁵ But despite its immeasurable richness, the Church Fathers have always been careful that one can never exhaust the understanding of God’s Word. Irenaeus recognises that not all verses of Scripture can be well understood by human reasoning. “So, if the Son was not ashamed to refer the knowledge of that day to the Father, but told the truth, neither should we be ashamed to leave to God the more important questions we encounter.”¹²⁶ Augustine uses an analogy of boys holding nuts in their hands as treasure though those nuts are still closed. “Perhaps you are such a feeble little boy that you can’t break it; just go on holding it and rejoicing, aware that you’re holding something full of meaning.”¹²⁷ Christians reading Scripture should have the same attitude as those boys.

At the same time, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob seeks out Moses and each of us through his Word. He is more eager to show himself to us than we are to know him. He is a God whose mystery is not to condemn us to silence but opens up the possibility for us to

125 Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, p. 97.

126 Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* II, 28, 6: ACW 65, p. 90.

127 Augustine, *Sermon Dolbeau* 22, 22: WSA III/11, p. 301.

participate in his unfathomable mystery. Kasper aptly claims that “the mystery of God is not the ultimate, still attainable but ever withdrawing horizon of our knowledge; rather, it is the foundational content of God’s revelation ... it is not a word that condemns us to silence, but a word that enables us to speak or, more accurately, to praise and honour God, to adore and glorify him.”¹²⁸ Spiritual exegesis of the Fathers is exactly a way to help Christians understand God’s mystery in that direction, a way to enrich and deepen our spiritual lives.

¹²⁸ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1984), p. 129.