

# *The Early Christian Reception of Genesis 18: From Theophany to Trinitarian Symbolism*

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The reception history of the theophany in Genesis 18 records a transition from the christological interpretation of the passage, widespread in earlier centuries, to a Trinitarian reading, dominant after the fifth century. This exegetical shift occurred first in doctrinal and exegetical writings, and only significantly later in hymnography and iconography. The current scholarly concepts fail to distinguish properly between the various types of exegesis involved in each of these cases, and obscure the importance of the earliest and most enduring Christian exegesis of Old Testament theophanies.

## INTRODUCTION

The pages to follow discuss exegetical, doctrinal, hymnographic, and iconographic productions that illustrate the early Christian reception of Genesis 18—the famous episode of Abraham’s hospitality—and the ways in which current scholarship accounts for the exegetical phenomena at play. Before discussing the history of its interpretation, let us first note that this text is not composite, but stems from a single source.<sup>1</sup> All the more

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1. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox, 1973), 204; Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50* (Dallas: Word, 2002), 44: “according to traditional source analysis . . . chaps. 18–19 are almost pure J. More precisely, all of 18:1–19:38 except 19:29 (P) is conventionally ascribed to J.” See also John Skinner, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, 2d ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1930), 298–99; Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 199 n.7; for an exceptionally thorough and insightful study of the religious context for the Mamre theophany, see Sommer, *Bodies of God*, 38–57, 198–213.

remarkable, therefore, is the alternation of singular and plural referents in the story: *the Lord* appeared to Abraham (18.1); Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw *three men* (18.2); “my *Lord*” (18.3);<sup>2</sup> “wash *yourselves* and rest *yourselves*” (18.4); *the men* turned away (18.22); *the Lord* departed (Gen 18.33). From a narrative point of view, this alternation reflects a constant change of the viewpoint from which the story is recounted.<sup>3</sup> Thus, from the “objective” perspective shared by the narrator and the reader, “*the Lord* appeared”; seen through the eyes of the patriarch, however, are *three men* whose sudden apparition is a test of hospitality.

What or whom did Abraham see? The history of interpretation, both Jewish and Christian, offers several answers.<sup>4</sup>

### GENESIS 18: THE LORD AND HIS TWO ANGELS

Philo sees in the mysterious guests “the Father of the universe” (πατὴρ τῶν ὀλῶν) and his accompanying two powers, the creative (ποιητική) power and the royal one (βασιλική)—in scriptural terms, He-Who-Is (ὁ ὢν), “God”

2. Gen 18.3 (LXX): κύριε. Pointing the Hebrew of Gen 18.3 is itself an exegetical endeavor. If pointed יְיָ (“my lord”), the greeting conveys respect to the foreigner, and Abraham is most likely unaware of the angelic or divine identity of the visitors. If pointed יְיָ, Abraham’s interlocutor is God, the “Lord,” and the patriarch is implicitly recognizing the visitation as a theophany. Finally, if pointed יְיָ (“sirs”), Abraham is addressing all three visitors in the plural (just as Lot addresses the two angels in Gen 19.2). The latter is the option of the Samaritan Pentateuch. See Skinner, *Genesis*, 299; von Rad, *Genesis*, 206.

3. See Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 45: “*The LORD appeared* reflects the narrator’s standpoint: the identity of his visitors was not immediately apparent to Abraham. As v. 2 makes clear, he at first thought they were simply men. . . . What we know from the start about the identity of the visitors Abraham only gradually discovers in the course of conversation. . . . *Noticed three men standing by him*: The storyline suddenly switches to describing events through Abraham’s eyes.”

4. Among the notable contributions to the study of the reception history of Genesis 18, see Adhémar d’Alès, “La théophanie de Mambré devant la tradition des Pères,” *RSR* 20 (1930): 150–60; Lars Thunberg, “Early Christian Interpretation of the *Three Angels* in Gen. 18,” *SP 7/TU 92* (1966): 560–70; Günter Stemberger, “Die Patriarchenbilder der Katakomben in der Via Latina im Lichte der jüdischen Tradition,” *Kairos* 16 (1974): 19–78, esp. 21–33 (Rabbinic exegesis of the episode); Marie-Odile Boulnois, “Trois hommes et un Seigneur: lectures trinitaires de la théophanie de Mambré dans l’exégèse et l’iconographie,” *SP* 39 (2006): 194–201; Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2007); Andrew Louth, “The Oak of Mamre, the Fathers and St. Andrei Rublev: Patristic Interpretation of the Hospitality of Abraham and Rublev’s Icon of the Trinity,” in *The Trinity-Sergius Lavra in Russian History and Culture*, ed. Vladimir Tsurikov (Jordanville, NY: Holy Trinity Seminary Press, 2005), 90–100; Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, “Abraham’s Angels: Jewish and Christian Exegesis of

(θεός) and “Lord” (κύριος).<sup>5</sup> It is clear, however, that these are not distinct entities, but rather aspects of the one ineffable divinity, and that the alternation between singular (“Lord”) and plural (“three men”) teaches the attentive exegete about the higher and lower modes of spiritual perception.<sup>6</sup>

Genesis 18–19,” in *The Exegetical Encounter Between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*, eds. E. Grypeou and H. Spurling (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 181–202.

5. Philo, *Abr.* 24.121 (SC 20:72). Elsewhere these powers are called “beneficent” (εὐεργέτης) and “governing” (ἀρχική) or “chastising” (κολαστήριος) (*Abr.* 124, 146 [SC 20:74, 82]); “goodness” (ἀγαθότης) and “authority” (ἐξουσία) (*Cherub.* 27–28 [SC 3:30]); “sovereignty” (ἀρχή) and “goodness” (ἀγαθότης) (*Sacr.* 15.59 [SC 4:122]). Note Philo’s wording, “God escorted (δορυφορούμενος, “escorted,” “carried aloft”) by the two powers: δορυφορούμενος ὑπὸ δυεῖν τῶν ἀνωτάτω δυνάμεων (*Sacr.* 15.59 [SC 4:122]); δορυφορούμενος ὑφ’ ἑκατέρας τῶν δυνάμεων (*Abr.* 24.122 [SC 20:72–74]). On this topic, see Fred Strickert, “Philo on the Cherubim,” *Studia Philonica* 8 (1996): 40–57. Even though the background for the two “spear-bearers” escorting God may be the Persian court (Folker Siegert, *Philo von Alexandrien, Über die Gottesbezeichnung ‘wohltätig verzehrendes Feuer’ (De Deo): Rückübersetzung des Fragments aus dem Armenischen, deutsche Übersetzung und Kommentar* [Tübingen: Mohr, 1988], 71–73), its context more readily suggests the biblical throne-imagery—the ark, the mercy-seat, and the two cherubim. Indeed, Philo (*Cherub.* 27–28 [SC 3:30–32]) takes the cherubim on the mercy-seat as symbols of these powers.

6. Gen 18.1–2 illustrates the general truth that God summons before the spiritually seeing soul (τῇ ὁρατικῇ ψυχῇ, *Sacr.* 15.60 [SC 4:124]) or mind (τῇ ὁρατικῇ διανοίᾳ, *Abr.* 24.122 [SC 20:74]) three appearances (τριτάς φαντασίας ἐνεργάζετο, *Sacr.* 15.60 [SC 4:124]), or an appearance sometimes of one, sometimes of three (τοτέ μὲν ἑνὸς τοτέ δὲ τριῶν φαντασίαν (*Abr.* 24.122 [SC 20:74])). See also *QG* 4.2 (SC 34b:152; trans. Ralph Marcus in *Philo Supplement I* [Loeb, 271]): “when counted with the chief powers, the creative and kingly, He makes the appearance of three to the human mind. For this cannot be so keen of sight that it can see Him who is above the powers that belong to Him, (namely) God, distinct from anything else. For so soon as one sets eyes upon God, there also appear, together with His being, the ministering powers, so that in place of one He makes the appearance of a triad”; *Abr.* 24.119–124 (SC 20:72–74; trans. F. H. Colson in *Philo* 6 [Loeb, 62; 64]): “[119] When, then, as at noon-tide (ἐν μεσημβρίᾳ) God shines around the soul, and the light of the mind fills it through and through and the shadows are driven from it by the rays which pour all around it, the single object presents to it a triple vision, one representing the reality, the other two the shadows reflected from it. . . . [122] So the central Being with each of its potencies as His squire presents to the mind which has vision the appearance sometimes of one, sometimes of three: of one when that mind is highly purified . . . of three, when, as yet uninitiated into the highest mysteries . . . and unable to apprehend the Existent alone by Itself and apart from all else, but only through its actions, as either creative or ruling (ἢ κτίζον ἢ ἄρχον). [124] There are three classes of human temperaments, each of them so constituted that the vision presents itself in the middle form, that of the essentially existent (τοῦ ὄντως ὄντος); to the next best in that which stands on the right, the beneficent (τὴν εὐεργέτην), which bears the name of ‘God’; to the third, in that of the left, the governing (τὴν ἀρχικὴν), which is called ‘Lord’”; *QC* 4.4 (SC 34b:158; trans. Marcus [Loeb, 275]): “Now his mind clearly forms an impression with more open eyes and more lucid vision, not roaming about

Other Jewish interpretations of the episode<sup>7</sup> tend to distinguish between the apparition of God (18.1) and that of the three visitors (18.2), in order to draw out Abraham's bold choice of hospitality as supreme religious duty, and God's approval of this choice.<sup>8</sup> The angelic visitors are treated as distinct characters entrusted with individual missions. Older sources leave them unnamed,<sup>9</sup> while more recent ones hold them to be Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael.<sup>10</sup>

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nor wandering off with the triad, and being attracted thereto by quantity and plurality, but running toward the one. And He manifested Himself without the powers that belong to Him, so that He saw His oneness directly before him, as he had known it earlier in the likeness of a triad."

7. A detailed survey and analysis is provided by Stemberger, "Patriarchenbilder," 21–33. For the references and quotations below, I have used Michael Maher, trans., *Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: Genesis* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992); *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino, 1935–1948); *Midrash Rabbah* (London: Soncino, 1939).

8. See *Cant. Rab.* 1.59: "He was clasped between the Shekinah and an angel, as it says, 'And when he saw he ran to meet them' (Gen 18.2). 'He saw' the divine presence, and 'he ran' to the angel." In *Tg. Ps.-J.*, Abraham entreats God, who had appeared to him (Gen 18.1), "I beseech you, O Lord, if now I have found favor before you, let not the Glory of your Shekinah go up from your servant until I have received these travelers." Cf. *Shabb.* 127a: "Rab Judah said in Rab's name: Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the presence of the Shekinah, for it is written, *And he said, My lord, if now I have found favor in thy sight, pass not away, etc.* R. Eleazar said: Come and observe how the conduct of the Holy One, blessed be He, is not like that of mortals. The conduct of mortals [is such that] an inferior person cannot say to a great[er] man, Wait for me until I come to you; whereas in the case of the Holy One, blessed be He, it is written, and he said, My Lord, if now I have found, etc." In other words, Abraham showed the importance of hospitality by boldly asking God to wait until he would care for the three guests. The distinction between the theophany at Gen 18.1 and the angelophany at Gen 18.2 is also Trypho's exegetical option in Justin Martyr's *Dial.* 56.5: "God appeared to him, before the vision of the three men. Furthermore, those three whom the Word calls men were angels. Two of them were sent to destroy Sodom, while the third was sent to impart the good news to Sarah that she was to have a son and, having fulfilled his mission, he departed" (*Justin Martyr: Dialogue avec Tryphon*, ed. and trans. Philippe Bobichon, 2 vols. [Fribourg: Academic Press, 2003], 1:322; English translation in Thomas B. Falls, trans., *St. Justin Martyr, Dialogue with Trypho*, revised and with a new introduction by Thomas P. Halton; ed. Michael Slusser [Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2003], 82). See also the discussion in my article, "Justin Martyr's Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies and the Parting of the Ways Between Christianity and Judaism," *TS* 75 (2014).

9. *Tg. Neof.* Gen 18.1 and *Tg. Ps.-J.* Gen 18.2 both refer to the principle that "it is impossible for a ministering angel to be sent for more than one thing" and state that one angel came to announce the future birth of Isaac, the second to rescue Lot, and the third to destroy the cities. Stemberger ("Patriarchenbilder," 26) notes that the lack of names for the three angels indicates the high age of this tradition. On

As for early Christian exegetes, they generally—if we leave aside those instances in which the theophanic aspect of Genesis 18 is overshadowed by other, more stringent, interests (e.g., exhortation to hospitality<sup>11</sup> or to mystical contemplation<sup>12</sup>)—see in the three visitors the Son of God and his two angelic assistants. This interpretation echoes the famous Johannine affirmations, “before Abraham was, I am . . . Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day; he saw it and was glad . . . before Abraham was I am” (John 8.53, 56, 58). Whatever the Fourth Gospel had intended in these verses, it was subsequently read as an identification of “the Lord” of Genesis 18 with “the Lord” of Christian worship—the angelomorphic

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the principle of angels being given names in more recent layers of the tradition, see Camilla Helena von Heijne, *The Messenger of the Lord in Early Jewish Interpretations of Genesis* (Berlin/New York: de Gruyter, 2010), 139–41.

10. *B. Mezia* 86b: “Who were the three men? Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael. Michael came to bring the tidings to Sarah [of Isaac’s birth]; Raphael, to heal Abraham; and Gabriel, to overturn Sodom.” The *Genesis Rabbah* also notes the rabbinic opinion that the angels were Michael, Rafael, and Gabriel (*Gen. Rab.* 48.10), expands on their respective missions (*Gen. Rab.* 50.2: “Michael announced his tidings [to Abraham] and departed; Gabriel was sent to overturn Sodom, and Rafael to rescue Lot”), and even offers details about their appearance: “R. Levi said: One appeared to him in the guise of a Saracen, the second in the guise of a Nabatean, and the third in the guise of an Arab” (*Gen. Rab.* 48.10). Cf. *T. Ab.* 6.4–6 (long recension); 6.10–11 (short recension): Abraham’s main interlocutor is the archangel Michael. This work was produced by Egyptian Jews some time before 115–117 c.e., and revised in the course of several centuries by Christian. Greek text in Michael E. Stone, *The Testament of Abraham: The Greek Recensions* (Missoula, MT: University Press, 1972); for the latest translation and an ample discussion of the text’s origin, date, and relation with early Judaism and Christianity, see Dale C. Allison, *The Testament of Abraham* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003).

11. Heb 13.2; Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 4.19.123.1 (SC 463:260); Aphrahat, *Dem.* 20.17 (PS 1:924; SC 359:805); Evagrius, *Eulogios* 24.26 (Robert E. Sinkewicz, ed. and trans., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003], 327); Cassian, *Coll.* 14.4.2 (SC 54bis:360); Theodoret of Cyrus, *History of the Monks in Syria*: Jacob 1.1 (SC 234:160); Abraham 17.7 (SC 234:44).

12. Origen, *Hom. Cant.* 1.8 (SC 37bis: 96), connecting “noonday” in Gen 18.1 with Cant 8.5: *angeli meridie Abrahamae suscipiuntur hospitio. . . . Quaere et invenies scripturam divinam non frustra et fortuitu unumquemque usurpare sermonem. Quis putas est dngus e nobis ut at meridiem usque perveniat et videat ubi pascat, ubi cubet sponsus in meridie.* The focus here, obviously, is not the three visitors, but the “noonday” as an indicator of spiritual awareness. But in his Commentary on the Song of Songs, still insisting on the importance of “noonday,” Origen speaks, first, about an apparition of God (*Comm. Cant.* 2.4.27; 29 [SC 375:344, 346]), and then states (*Comm. Cant.* 2.8.8 [SC 375:410]) that the angelic appearance (*angelorum species*) in Gen 18.2 suggests more than mere angelic service (*plus aliquid quam angelicum ostenderit ministerium*), namely the *Trinitatis mysterium*.

Son of God.<sup>13</sup> This interpretation is exemplified by major writers of the second and third centuries, such as Justin Martyr,<sup>14</sup> Irenaeus of Lyon,<sup>15</sup> Tertullian,<sup>16</sup> Clement of Alexandria,<sup>17</sup> and Origen,<sup>18</sup> and the *Letter of the Six*

13. A minority voice among Johannine scholars interprets the John 8.53–58 as “a vision of the preincarnate Word.” See Nils A. Dahl, “The Johannine Church and History,” *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation*, ed. W. Klassen (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 124–42, esp. 154–57; E. D. Freed, “Who or what was before Abraham in John 8.58?,” *JSNT* 17 (1983): 52–59; A. T. Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 126–29, 241, 261, 338.

14. Justin, *Dial.* 56.1, 58.3, 59.1 (ed. Bobichon, 1:322, 338, 342; trans. Falls, 83, 89, 91): “Moses, then, that faithful and blessed servant of God, tells us that He who appeared to Abraham under the oak tree of Mamre is God, sent, with the two accompanying angels, to judge Sodom by another who forever abides in the supra-celestial regions . . .”; “Moses states in Scripture that He who is termed *God*, and who appeared to the patriarchs is also called *Angel* and *Lord*, in order that by these expressions you may recognize him as the minister of the Father of all things”; “this very Person (ὁ αὐτὸς οὗτος) who was at the same time [*Angel*] and *God* and *Lord* and *Man*, and who was seen by Abraham and Jacob, also appeared and talked to Moses from the flame of the fiery bush.” See also *Dial.* 126–27, *passim*.

15. Irenaeus of Lyon, *Epid.* 44 (PO 12.5:693–94; John Behr, trans., *St Irenaeus of Lyon: On the Apostolic Preaching* [Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1997], 69): “And again Moses says that the Son of God drew near to speak with Abraham: *And God appeared unto him by the oak of Mamre at midday, and raising his eyes he saw, and behold, three men were standing over him. . .* Now two of the three were angels; but one was the Son of God, with whom Abraham spoke, pleading on behalf of the inhabitants of Sodom”; *Haer.* 3.6.1 (SC 211:66): “Referring to the destruction of the Sodomites, the Scripture says, ‘Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah fire and brimstone from the Lord out of heaven’ (Gen 19:24). For it here points out that the Son, who had also been talking with Abraham, had received power to judge the Sodomites for their wickedness”; *Haer.* 4.10.1 (SC 100:492): “The Son of God is implanted everywhere throughout his writings: at one time, indeed, speaking with Abraham, when about to eat with him; at another time . . . bringing down judgment upon the Sodomites; and again when He becomes visible and directs Jacob on his journey, and speaks with Moses from the bush.”

16. Tertullian, *Carn. Chr.* 6.6–7 (SC 216:236): *inter angelos illos ipse Dominus* [in context, clearly, *Christus*] *apparuit, sine nativitate, cum carne*; Marc. 3.9.6 (SC 399:104): *Ideoque et ipse cum angelis tunc apud Abraham in ueritate quidem carnis apparuit, sed nondum natae quia nondum moriturae, sed et discentis iam inter homines conuersari*; *Prax.* 16.6 (FC 34:180).

17. Clement of Alexandria, *Paed.* 1.7.56–57–1.7.60.1 (SC 70:210, 212, 214, 216): in this compact block of text Clement explicitly identifies the Logos, “our pedagogue, the holy God Jesus” (ὁ δὲ ἡμέτερος παιδαγωγὸς ἅγιος θεὸς Ἰησοῦς) with the “Lord” who, among many other theophanies, appeared to Abraham (Gen 17.1) and later to Jacob on top the ladder and in the nightly struggle (Gen 28 and 32). For a more extensive discussion, see my article, “Clement of Alexandria’s Exegesis of Old Testament Theophanies,” *Phronema* 29 (2014): 61–79.

18. Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 4.1 (SC 7bis:146): *Abraham cum duobus angelis etiam Dominus adfuit.*

*Bishops* addressed to Paul of Samosata,<sup>19</sup> who not only bear witness to the received catechetical tradition, but also deploy it as a valuable weapon in a variety of polemical (anti-Jewish, anti-dualistic, anti-modalistic) contexts.

The christological reading of the Mamre theophany remains normative for later authors. We encounter it in Novatian,<sup>20</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea,<sup>21</sup> Emperor Constantine,<sup>22</sup> Athanasius,<sup>23</sup> Gregory of Elvira,<sup>24</sup>

19. In the letter addressed to Paul of Samosata by six bishops (under the presidency of Hymenaeus of Jerusalem) some time prior to his condemnation and deposition in 268, Paul is challenged “to think and to teach” in concert with the signatories on a few points (ταῦτα ἀπὸ πλείστων ὀλίγα). Part of the doctrinal litmus test is the christological interpretation of Genesis 18, 22, 32 and Exodus 3 and 33, which takes up an entire section (5) of the letter. The first theophanic text to be mentioned is Genesis 18: “We say that he was the one who descended and showed himself to Abraham at the oak of Mamre as one of the three, with whom, as ‘lord’ and ‘judge,’ the patriarch held converse.” For the Greek text and a discussion of the theological controversy echoed in the letter, see the recent book by Patricio de Navascués (the most detailed and informed study of the Samosatene to date), *Pablo de Samosata y sus adversaries: Estudio histórico-teológico del cristianismo antioqueno en el s. III*. (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 2004) 66–70 (text) and 29–32, 229–232 (discussion); also John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001) 220–24.

20. Novatian, *Trin.* 18.11–17 (CCSL 4:45–46).

21. Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 1.2.7; 1.4.12 (SC 31:7, 20)—and note Eusebius’ emphatic rejection of the interpretation of biblical theophanies as mere angelic apparitions at *Hist. eccl.* 1.2.10 (SC 31:8); *Dem. ev.* 5.9 (GCS 23:231–32); *Eccl. Theol.* 2.21 (GCS 14:130); *Ecl. proph.* 3 (PG 22:1028–36); *Comm. Isa.* 1.41 (GCS 55:37); *Comm. Ps.* 79 (PG 23:952C). On Eusebius’ exegesis of theophanies, see Jean Sirinelli, *Les vues historiques d’Eusèbe de Césarée durant la période prénicéenne* (Dakar: Mâcon, 1961) 259–92; Sébastien Morlet, *La ‘Démonstration évangélique’ d’Eusèbe de Césarée: Étude sur l’apologétique chrétienne à l’époque de Constantin* (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2009), 442–57.

22. The relevant text is found in a letter addressed to the civilian and ecclesiastical authorities of Palestine—hence also to Eusebius—by which Constantine mandates the building of a church at Mamre: “You are surely aware that there first God the Lord of the universe both appeared to Abraham and spoke with him. It was there . . . that the Saviour himself with the two angels first vouchsafed the manifestation of himself to Abraham . . .” (Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 3.52.3. [GCS 7:100–101]; Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall, trans., *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1999], 142).

23. Athanasius, *Four Discourses against the Arians* 1.38 (*Athanasius Werke* 1/1: 148): “[I]f now promoted, how did He before rejoice in the presence of the Father [Prov 8.30]? And, if He received His worship after dying, how is Abraham seen to worship Him in the tent [Gen 18:1], and Moses in the bush [Exod 3.2]? And, as Daniel saw, myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands were ministering unto Him [Dan 7.10]?”; 2.13; 3.14.

24. Gregory of Elvira, *On Faith* 80 (CCSL 69:242–43), in a list of christologically interpreted theophanies associated with Abraham, Jacob/Israel, and Moses; *Tractates on the Books of Holy Scripture* 2.10–11 (CCSL 69:11–12).

Hilary of Poitiers,<sup>25</sup> Chromatius of Aquileia,<sup>26</sup> the *Apostolic Constitutions*,<sup>27</sup> Sozomen,<sup>28</sup> Theodoret of Cyrus,<sup>29</sup> and John Chrysostom.<sup>30</sup> It is noteworthy that the same exegesis of theophanies occurs in Athanasius's *De synodis* 52<sup>31</sup> and in Athanasius's "Arian" opponents lambasted in *De synodis*

25. Hilary of Poitiers, *Trin.* 4.25 (SC 448:60).

26. Although ultimately interested in a more speculative use of Genesis 18, Chromatius's *Sermon on the Washing of the Feet* is built on the theological assumption that Abraham's "Lord" is Christ. See *Sermon* 15.2–3 (SC 154:250–52): by washing the feet of his disciples, Christ rewards the hospitality shown him by their forefather Abraham; the darkness at the sixth hour on the day of Crucifixion (Matt 27.45) offers refreshment from the heat of sin as a reward for Abraham's hospitality at noonday; the multiplication of the loaves rewards the three cakes (Gen 18.6). The connection between, on the one hand, Abraham's sheltering his guests in the shade of his home and washing their feet and, on the one hand, the shade of Cross and Jesus' washing the feet of disciples, goes back to Gregory of Elvira, *Tractates* 2.8, 15 (CCSL 69:14; 15–16) and Novatian, *Trin.* 18.14 (CCSL 4:46).

27. *Apos. Con.* 5.20.5 (SC 329:278; trans. ANF 7:448): "He is the Christ of God. . . . To Him did Moses bear witness, and said: *The Lord received fire from the Lord, and rained it down* (Gen 19.24); Him did Jacob see as a man, and said: *I have seen God face to face, and my soul is preserved*; Him did Abraham entertain, and acknowledge to be the Judge, and his Lord; Him did Moses see in the bush; . . . Him did Joshua the son of Nun see, as the captain of the Lord's host (Josh 5.14) . . . Him Daniel describes as the Son of man coming to the Father, and receiving all judgment and honour from Him; and as the stone cut out of the mountain without hands. . . ." Similarly, the Anaphora (*Apos. Con.* 8.12.18–27) suggests that Abraham's call consisted of a vision of the Messiah by which God delivered him from idolatry (Σὺ εἶ ὁ . . . ἐμφανίσσας αὐτῷ τὸν Χριστὸν σοῦ [SC 336:188]).

28. Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.* 2.4.2–3 (SC 306:246; trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup> 2:261): "It is recorded that here [i.e., at Mamre] the Son of God appeared (φανῆναι) to Abraham with two angels . . . then there appeared (ἐπεφάνη) to the godly man he who in later times showed himself clearly (φανερῶς ἑαυτὸν ἐπιδείξας) of a virgin for the salvation of the human race."

29. Theodoret of Cyrus, *Qu. 70 on Genesis* (Robert C. Hill, ed. and trans., *The Questions on the Octateuch* [CUA Press, 2007], 144): the three visitors, who only appear to be eating, were two angels accompanying the master ("they and their Lord," αὐτοὶ καὶ ὁ τοῦτων δεσπότης).

30. Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 41.3 (PG 53:379): Abraham "was found worthy to receive the master of all, together with his angels (τὸν τῶν ὄλων δεσπότην . . . μετὰ τῶν ἀγγέλων αὐτοῦ)"; *Hom. Gen.* 42.2 (PG 54:387): "in Abraham's tent both the angels and their master (καὶ οἱ ἄγγελοι, καὶ ὁ τοῦτων δεσπότης) were seen at the same time"; *Theatr.* 3 (PG 56:546): "Christ appeared to you, O wondrous one, flanked by two angels; and through [your] care for strangers (διὰ φιλοξενίας) you became a messmate to God and angels (Θεῷ καὶ ἀγγέλοις ὁμόσκηρος). O, blessed tent (σκηνή), which by condescension (δὲ' οἰκονομία) housed God accompanied by angels! Christ appeared to you in human form (ἐν ἀνθρώπου σχήματι), disclosing to you the mystery of the divine advent of himself and [his] salvation."

31. SC 563:354; trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup> 4:478: "[We] understand the oneness of the Son with the Father to be . . . according to essence and in truth (κατὰ τὴν οὐσίαν καὶ ἀληθεία) . . . there being but one Form of Godhead (εἶδους θεότητος), as the Light

26–27.<sup>32</sup> The convergence of so many theologically diverse sources on the christological interpretation of Genesis 18 indicates that we are dealing here with a venerable and widespread tradition.

### GENESIS 18: MYSTERIUM TRINITATIS

The early centuries also know of an alternative exegetical tradition. Even though Origen speaks of the three visitors as the Logos and his angels, for him this received tradition is merely a springboard for deeper theological speculations in the vein of Philo (e.g., *Sacr.* 60; *QG* 4.1, 30; *Deo* 2–3).<sup>33</sup> This strand of interpretation is interested in the spiritual significance of all details of the account: the occurrence of the vision at “noonday” (μεσημβρία / *meridies*), at the entrance of the tent (σκηνή / *tabernaculum*); the three visitors, the three measures of flour, and the request that Sarah bake ἐγκρυφίας—cakes “hidden” under hot ashes, which exegetes read as “mystical” cakes.<sup>34</sup>

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and the Radiance. For this was seen by the Patriarch Jacob, as Scripture says, ‘The sun rose upon him when the Form of God (τὸ εἶδος τοῦ θεοῦ) passed by’ [Gen 32.3]. Beholding this, and understanding of whom He was Son and Image, the holy Prophets say, ‘The Word of the Lord came to me;’ and recognizing the Father, who was beheld and revealed in Him, they made bold to say, ‘The God of our fathers has appeared unto me, the God of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob’ [Exod 3.16]. This being so, wherefore scruple we to call coessential (ὁμοούσιον), according to likeness and oneness of godhead, Him who is one with the Father, and appears as does the Father (φαινόμενον ὡς ἔστι πατέρα)?”

32. First Council of Sirmium, Anathemas 15–16 (= Athanasius, *De Synodis* 27.3.15 [SC 563:274; trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup> 4:465]): “Whosoever shall say that Abraham saw, not the Son, but the Ingenerate God or part of Him, let him be anathema! Whosoever shall say that with Jacob, not the Son as man, but the Ingenerate God or part of Him, has wrestled, be he anathema”; *Ektthesis Makrostichos*, Anathema 5 (= Athanasius, *De Synodis* 26.5 [SC 563:264; trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup> 4:463]): “He it is, to whom the Father said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, after Our likeness’ [Gen 1:26], who also was seen in His own Person (αὐτοπροσώπως ὀφθείς) by the patriarchs, gave the Law, spoke by the prophets, and at last, became man. . . .” Both synods address the doctrines of Marcellus and Photinus, respectively—“those who make a pretence of saying that He is but the mere word of God and unexisting, having His being in another—now as if pronounced, as some speak, now as mental . . . Such are the disciples of Marcellus and Scotinus of Galatian Ancyra, who, equally with Jews, negate Christ’s existence before ages, and His Godhead, and unending Kingdom, upon pretence of supporting the divine Monarchy.”

33. Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 4.1 (SC 7bis:146, 148); Origen, *Comm. Cant.* 2.4.29–30 (SC 375:346); Origen, *Hom. Cant.* 1.8 (SC 37bis: 96); Origen, *Hom. Lev.* 13.3 (SC 287:208, 210).

34. See, among many others, Evagrius, *Ep.* 33 (Wilhelm Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus* [Berlin: Weidman, 1912], 589); Ambrose, *Jos.* 10.52 (CSEL 22/2:108); *Abr.*

It is this speculative approach that gives rise to a Trinitarian reorientation of the interpretation of Genesis 18. The fact that Abraham rushes to welcome three, but worships one (*tribus occurrit et unum adorat*), and the three measures of flour that are baked suggest to Origen that Genesis 18 intends to communicate “something greater”<sup>35</sup>; indeed, everything reported in the account is mystical and sacramental: *totum quod agit [Abraham] mysticum, totum sacramentis repletum*.<sup>36</sup> What is suggested here is, of course, the mystery of God as Trinity. The end of the homily, perhaps significantly, exhorts the hearers to seek the mystery of the Trinity (*sacramentum Trinitatis*) through the revelation of Christ.<sup>37</sup> The connection between the three angelic visitors and the *mysterium Trinitatis* is made explicit in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, possibly with a little help from Rufinus.<sup>38</sup>

“Abraham saw three, but worshipped only one,” Origen’s phrase, most likely of Philonic origin (cf. *Abr* 131: ἡ τριττὴ φαντασία δυνάμει ἑνός ἐστιν ὑποκειμένου) had become extremely popular by the end of the fourth century. It could, however, mean different things to different writers. Origen, as Bunge observes, “understood this ‘one’ as the Lord, that is, Christ and the two companions . . . as two angels.”<sup>39</sup> Similarly, when Hilary of Poitiers writes, in his treatise on the Trinity, *Abraham conspectis tribus unum adorat et Dominum confitetur*,<sup>40</sup> he means that, even though three men are present, and there is no distinction between them, the eyes of faith direct Abraham to worship only *one of the three*, inasmuch as he was able to discern in him the mystery of the Incarnation to come (*sacramentum futurae corporationis agnoscens*).<sup>41</sup>

Ambrose also knows the formula *tres uidit et unum dominum adpellauit*, by which he understands the Lord (Christ) and two angelic ministers.<sup>42</sup>

1.5.38 (CSEL 22/1:531); Gregory of Elvira, *Tractates* 2.7 (CCSL 69:14); Chromatius, *Sermon* 15.2, 3 (SC 154:248,252, 254).

35. Origen, *Hom. Cant.* 2 (SC 37bis:96).

36. Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 4.2 (SC 7bis:148).

37. Origen, *Hom. Gen.* 4.1–2, 6 (SC 7bis: 144–48, 160).

38. Origen, *Comm. Cant.* 2.8.8 (SC 375:410); *Licet illa angelorum species plus aliquid quam angelicum ostenderit ministerium, nam Trinitatis ibi mysterium prodebat.*

39. Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity*, 50.

40. Hilary of Poitiers, *Trin.* 4.25 (SC 448:60).

41. Hilary of Poitiers, *Trin.* 4.27 (SC 448:64). Cf. John Chrysostom, *Hom. Gen.* 41.4 (PG 53:380): “Do not be amazed that, while the guests are three, the just man says, ‘Lord’ (Κύριε) as if reaching out to one. Certainly, one of the visitors appeared more glorious (ἐπιδοξότερος) among those who had come.”

42. Ambrose, *Abr.* 1.36 (CSEL 32/1:530).

His exegesis of Genesis 18, however, has rightly been called “ambiguous” or “ambivalent.”<sup>43</sup> Sometimes he unequivocally espouses the traditional (christological) view, in which the “Lord” of Gen 18 is the Word, since God the Father does not appear in theophanies.<sup>44</sup> At other times, however, he deploys the formula “Abraham saw three and worshipped one,” and pivots towards a Trinitarian reading of the same, in order to express a robust pro-Nicene theology: at Mamre Abraham “saw the Trinity in figure” (*Trinitatem in typo vidit*), and understood that “there is one God, one Lord, and one Spirit. And so there is oneness of honor, because there is oneness of power.”<sup>45</sup> Moreover, *On Abraham* uses both readings: he writes, on the one hand, that Abraham entertained the Lord and two attending angels, while Lot only received the angels, Jesus being absent;<sup>46</sup> on the other hand, “the mystery of faith” communicated in the three visitors and the three measures of flour, is that of God as Trinity.<sup>47</sup>

A similarly “ambiguous” or “ambivalent” use of both the christological

43. Thunberg, “Three Angels in Gen. 18,” 567; Boulnois, “Trois hommes,” 195.

44. Ambrose, *Exp. Lc.* 1.25 (SC 45:59). See also *Fid. Grat.* 2.8.72 (CSEL 78:82; FC 47/2:300), where the traditional quotation from John 8:56 leads to the emphatic conclusion that it was certainly not the Father who appeared to Abraham, and whose feet were washed; *Fid. Grat.* 1.13.80–83 (CSEL 78:35–36; FC 47/1:202, 204, 206), where *tres uidit et unum adorauit* is applied to the Son, who is clearly distinguished, as superior, from the two accompanying angels. The “Lord” at Mamre is further identified with the “Son of God” who saved the three youths in the furnace, with the Son of God on mount Tabor, flanked by Moses and Elijah, with the “Lord” at the burning bush and in the Exodus narrative, and, generally, with the God of the patriarchs and prophets: *non pater in rubo, non pater in eremo, sed filius est Moysi locutus. . . . Hic est ergo deus patriarcharum, hic est deus prophetarum* (1.13.83 [CSEL 78:36; FC 47/1:206]).

45. Ambrose, *Spir.* 2, prol. 4 (CSEL 79:87–88); *Exc.* 2.96 (CSEL 73:302).

46. “When Abraham offered hospitality to the travelers, he received as his guests God and his angels (*deum atque angelis eius*)” (*Abr.* 1.35 [CSEL 32/1:529]); “he saw three and addressed one as Lord (*tres uidit et unum dominum adpellauit*), and of this one alone (*ipsius solius*) he made himself a servant. Then he turned to the other two whom he considered to be attendants (*ministros*) . . .” (*Abr.* 1.36 [CSEL 32/1:530]). Ambrose’s explanation for the presence of the two angels in Sodom assumes that the third one—the “Lord” who remains with Abraham—is Christ: “Where grace is to be extended, Christ is present; where severity is to be exercised, only the attendants (*ministri*) are present, Jesus is absent” (*Abr.* 1.50 [CSEL 32/1:536]).

47. *Abr.* 1.33 (CSEL 32/1:527): “Behold, first of all, the mystery of faith (*fidei mysterium*): God appeared to him, and he saw three—one to whom God shines bright sees the Trinity, not accepting the Father without the Son, nor confessing the Son without the Holy Spirit”; 1.38 [CSEL 32/1:] “Sarah teaches summarily the mystery of faith (*fidei mysterium*) by baking three measures from a single dough . . . affirming the Trinity of the godhead, worshipping the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit with the equal measures and with reverence. . . .”

and Trinitarian interpretations of Genesis 18 occurs in Prudentius.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, the treatise *On the Holy Trinity* ascribed to Athanasius stages a direct confrontation between the two readings.<sup>49</sup> The lively exchange between an “Orthodox” and a “Macedonian Pneumatomachian” rehearses all traditional elements of the christological interpretation, and then proceeds meticulously to take them apart. Even though the prize is, ultimately, a theological one—the demonstration of the divinity of the Spirit—the exegetical groundwork for the victory of the “Orthodox” is quite impressive. The author, probably at the end of the fourth century, has obviously moved beyond received tradition, and has made an attentive study of Genesis 18–19, similar to what one reads in Augustine’s *Against Maximinus* (more below).

In light of all the above, it is clearly not true that “the trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 18 cannot be found earlier than the fifth century.”<sup>50</sup> Of course, with Cyril of Alexandria and Pseudo-Gregory of Nyssa’s *Adversus Judaeos*,<sup>51</sup> and, more resolutely, with Augustine,<sup>52</sup> the earlier christological

48. In his *Apotheosis* 28–30 (CCSL 126:78) Prudentius rehearses the traditional exegesis of Genesis 18 as a Christophany, prefaced by an equally traditional theological justification (*Apotheosis* 22–27 [CCSL 126:77]), and continued by a similar reading to theophanies connected with Jacob and Moses (*Apotheosis* 31–60 [CCSL 126:77–79]). In the *Psychomachia*, however, Abraham received an angelic manifestation in the form of three men, and this *triformis angelorum trinitas* (*Psychomachia*, *Praef.* 45 [CSEL 126:150]) corresponds to the divine *Trinitas* (*Psychomachia*, *Praef.* 63 [CSEL 126:151]) in the same way that Melchizedek, as *sacerdos Dei*, corresponds to Christ, the *sacerdos verus* (*Psychomachia*, *Praef.* 40, 59 [CSEL 126:150–51]), and the bread and wine brought by Melchizedek correspond to the Eucharist (*Psychomachia*, *Praef.* 39, 61 [CSEL 126:150–51]). Ultimately, the episodes narrated in Genesis 14 and 18 offer an image of the Christian spiritual experience, in which “Christ himself, who is the true priest . . . will enter the humble abode of the pure heart and give it the privilege of entertaining the Trinity” (*Psychomachia*, *Praef.* 59, 61–62 [CSEL 126:151]). See the excellent analysis of Prudentius’ “typological allegory” by Marc Mastrangelo, *The Roman Self in Late Antiquity: Prudentius and the Poetics of the Soul* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 87–93.

49. Ps-Athanasius, *Dialogus de Sancta Trinitate* 3:9–14 (PG 28:1216–24).

50. Grypeou and Spurling, “Abraham’s Angels,” 195.

51. Cyril of Alexandria, *Contra Iulianum* 1.26 (SC 322:156, 158): Abraham sees God as three entities united by virtue of their consubstantiality (τρεις μὲν ὄντας καὶ ἰδιοσυστάτως ἕκαστον ὑπεσθηκότας, τῷ γε μὴν λόγῳ τῆς ὁμοουσιότητος εἰς ἓνα συνειλημμένους τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ὁμοουσιότητος συνειλημμένους). Not only the idea—in Genesis 18 “the holy Trinity quietly hints at its subsistence and consubstantiality” (τὴν ὑπόστασιν καὶ τὸ ὁμοούσιον αὐτῆς [τῆς ἁγίας Τριάδος])—but the wording also is very similar in Ps-Gregory: “he did not speak in turn as if to three, Lords (οὐχ ὡς τρισὶν εἰπεῖν Κύριοι) . . . he calls the three ‘Lord’ in the singular (Κύριον δὲ μοναδικῶς τοὺς τρεῖς ὀνομάζοντα) . . . See, then that those who appeared were three, each one subsisting as its own entity (ὑπεσθῶτας ἰδιοσυστάτως ἕκαστον), yet truly gathered together into one by the principle of consubstantiality (τῆς ὁμοουσιότητος λόγῳ)” (Martin C. Albl, *Pseudo-*

interpretation of Genesis 18 seems indeed to have been abandoned in favor of a Trinitarian reading. This exegetical move is motivated, in the case of Augustine, by his dissatisfaction with the subordinationist vulnerability of the christological interpretation of theophanies,<sup>53</sup> and further complicated

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Gregory of Nyssa, *Testimony Against the Jews* [Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2004], 6 and 8 [Greek], 7 and 9 [trans.]. Albl, *Pseudo-Gregory*, 90–91 notes the similarity between Cyril and Ps-Gregory of Nyssa, and concludes that, even though they have no direct literary relationship, they “clearly follow the same written exegetical tradition.”

52. Augustine, *Civ.* 16.29 (CCSL 48:533–35). Rejecting the opinion that one of the three was the Son, Augustine finds it more likely (*credibilis*) that all three were angels, but that God was “in” them (*in eis esse Dominum*), so that Abraham and Lot “recognized” (*agnoscebant*) the Lord “in” the three (Abraham) or two (Lot) angels. In his debate with Maximinus, who used the traditional view (*Maxim.* 15.26 [PL 42: 739–40]), Augustine proposes the following exegesis of Genesis 18: Like Abraham who, with his bodily eyes, saw three angels in human shape, while with the eyes of his heart, “he saw, that is, he understood and knew God” (*vidit, id est, intellexit atque cognovit*), we should also perceive in the visitors a “visible trinity and intelligible unity” (*visibilis Trinitas et intellegibilis unitas*) designed to suggest to us (*ut nobis insinuaretur*) the threefold unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*Maxim.* 2.26.7 [PL 42:809]). In *Trin.* 2.10.19–12.22 and 4.19.26 (CCSL 50:105–9, 194–95), Augustine offers a detailed exegetical and theological critique of the christological interpretation of Genesis 18, and concludes that “the equality of the Trinity is intimated here by the visible creature, and the one and the same substance in the three persons” (*visibiliter insinuatam per creaturam visibilem Trinitatis aequalitatem atque in tribus Personis unam eamdemque substantiam*, 2.11.20).

53. The Homoian appeal to theophanies against modalistic denials of Christ’s preexistence—a traditional approach—also entailed an affirmation of the Son’s subordinate status: since the Son was manifested in theophanies, he must be visible in a way that the Father is not, and therefore inferior to and not of the same nature with the Father. Pro-Nicene writers struggled to affirm the reality of the manifestation of the Logos in theophanies, while and at the same time denying that this sort of visibility entails the Son’s inferiority to the Father. Unsatisfied with the solutions of his predecessors (Hilary, Ambrose, Phoebadius), which he probably perceived as incomplete or deficient, Augustine proposes a revolutionary breakthrough: theophanic phenomena are created and evanescent, brought about by angelic manipulation of matter or by other means. According to the threefold (bodily, spiritual, and intellectual) hierarchy of vision, which Augustine presents in *Gen. litt.* 12, theophanies exemplify either the bodily vision (Isa 6.1–3; Rev 1.13–20; and probably also Abraham’s vision of the three men: see *Gen. litt.* 12.10, 54, 67), or the spiritual vision (Exodus 19; 33; Acts 10.10–12). At any rate, theophanies do not grant the higher, “intellectual,” vision, and are relegated from the top to the bottom of the ladder leading to the vision of God, and from the center to the periphery of Christian theology. For Augustine’s theology of theophanies, its relation with earlier Christian exegesis, and its polemic context, see Jules Lebreton, “Saint Augustin, théologien de la Trinité: Son exégèse des théophanies,” *Miscellanea Augustiniana* 2 (1931): 821–36; Laurens Johan van der Lof, “L’exégèse exacte et objective des théophanies de l’Ancien Testament dans le ‘De Trinitate,’” *Augustiniana* 14 (1964): 485–99; Jean-Louis Maier, *Les missions divines selon Saint Augustin* (Fribourg: Librairie de l’Université, 1960); Basil Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese Augustins: Untersuchung zu einem Ambrosius-Zitat in der*

by his peculiar insistence on theophanies as *created*, evanescent manifestations,<sup>54</sup> which do not offer a transformational encounter with God, but are “symbols” and “signs” (*similitudines, signa*) of the Trinitarian *res*.<sup>55</sup>

A sixth-century homily by Caesarius of Arles synthesizes the spiritualizing and Trinitarian elements—Origen and Augustine, as it were—without the slightest need for emphasis or polemics against alternative readings: the noonday stands for the fullness of divine radiance, the threefold appearance indicates Abraham’s superior spiritual state, the tent is the abode of the soul receiving God, the mystery of Trinity is indicated by the three “hidden” cakes and, of course, by Abraham’s seeing three but worshipping only one.<sup>56</sup> A contemporary, Procopius of Gaza, describes a rather more fluid situation in the east: “Some take the three men as three angels; the Judaizers, however, say that one of the three is God, while the other two are angels; others still deem them to bear the type of the holy and consubstantial Trinity (τύπον ἔχειν τῆς ἁγίας καὶ ὁμοουσίου Τριάδος), who are addressed as ‘Lord’ in the singular.”<sup>57</sup> The witness of Maximus the Confessor<sup>58</sup> and of the catena on Genesis<sup>59</sup> suggest, however, that the Trinitar-

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*Schrift ‘De Videndo Deo’* (Rome: Herder, 1971); Michel René Barnes, “Exegesis and Polemic in Augustine’s De Trinitate I,” *AugSt* 30 (1999): 43–60; Barnes, “The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine’s Trinitarian Theology of 400,” *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 329–56; Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation, and the Vision of God: Augustine’s Transformation of Early Christian Theophany Interpretation* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

54. The “stuff” of the theophanic manifestations is the “form of a creature, made for the occasion” (*Trin.* 2.5.10); “these things appeared . . . as a creature serving the Creator” (2.6.11); “the material form of those things came into being . . . to signify something and then pass away” (2.6.11); “those corporeal forms were made visible in order to show what had to be shown . . . and afterwards ceased to be” (2.6.11).

55. Note, in the passages noted earlier, the consistent equation of Abraham’s “vision” with the “recognition,” “knowledge,” “understanding,” etc, of the Trinity. Hilary had spoken similarly (*Trin.* 4.27 [SC 448:64]) about the link between the theophany at Mamre and the incarnation. See in this respect Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 250–51.

56. Caesarius of Arles, *Sermon on Scripture* 83.2–5 (SC 447:114–22).

57. Procopius of Gaza, *Comm. Gen.* 18, PG 87/1:364B). Discussion in Grypeou and Spurling, “Abraham’s Angels,” 190–97.

58. Maximus Confessor, *Thal.* 28, lines 10–15, 18–19, 78–80 (SC 529:334, 336): Abraham was perfect in knowledge, completely removed from material realities, so that God appeared to him as a triad (τριάδικως, as opposed to δυϊκώς, in the case of Lot); God (18–19, SC 529:336) or the Trinity (74–75, SC 529:340) is manifested as three, but speaks as one (τριάδικως φαινόμενην καὶ μοναδικώς διαλεγόμενην).

59. In the catena we find εἰς τύπον τῆς ἁγίας τριάδος (fr. 1053); τῆς ἁγίας καὶ ὁμοουσίου τριάδος ἐπέχοντας τὸν τύπον (fr. 1054); τὰς τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις σημαίνουσι (fr. 1058). Text in Françoise Petit, *La chaîne sur la Genèse. Édition intégrale*, 3 vols. (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 3:107–8.

ian interpretation soon acquired normative status. By the tenth century, some could even imagine a more or less tritheistic scenario, in which the three visitors no longer “bear the type” of the Trinity, but, quite simply, are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.<sup>60</sup>

## GENESIS 18 IN HYMNOGRAPHY AND ICONOGRAPHY

The shift from a christological to a Trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 18 can also be observed in hymnography and iconography. It is not surprising, however, that the change occurs significantly later in these more conservative areas of Christian reflection. According to Romanos the Melodist, for instance—whose sixth-century compositions remain present, to this day, in much of the Byzantine festal hymnography—the theophany at Mamre was a puzzle and a shadow: God appeared (ᾤφθε) to Abraham, yet the patriarch did not really see (εἶδε) him, since God was only contemplated as an angel (ὡς ἄγγελος ἐθεωρήθη). By contrast, Christians see him “in his very person” (αὐτοπροσώπως), because the Word became flesh. Evidently, Romanos viewed the Mamre theophany as a christophany, assuming that Abraham saw the Word in veiled manner.<sup>61</sup>

The Trinitarian exegesis of Genesis 18, which had become widespread from the fifth century onwards, was enshrined as canonical by having been taken up in the hymns of the Sunday Midnight Office, and thereby popularized throughout a huge area and recited on a weekly basis for over a millennium. The author of these hymns, the ninth-century writer Metrophanes of Smyrna speaks about God appearing to Abraham in human form (ἐν σχήματι ἀνδρικῷ) and thus revealing “clearly” (σαφῶς), and yet “in figure” (τυπικῶς), the pure doctrine of the three-hypostatic godhead.<sup>62</sup>

60. The *Palaea historica* (a ninth- or tenth-century Byzantine retelling of and expansion on biblical stories from Genesis to Daniel and Habakkuk), a text bearing the title ἐμφάνησις τῆς ἀγίας Τριάδος, reports the event as follows: ἐμφάνησαν αὐτῷ [i.e., to Abraham] ὁ πατήρ καὶ ὁ υἱὸς καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα ὡς τρεῖς ἄνδρες ὁδοιποροῦντες ὡς ὁδοιπόροι ἐκ μακρᾶς ὁδοῦ ἐρχόμενοι (Afanasii Vassiliev, *Anecdota graeco-byzantina* [Moscow: Imperial University of Moscow, 1893], 188–292, at 214).

61. Romanos, *Second Hymn on Theophany* 4 (SC 110:274, 276). Cf. *On the Nativity of the Theotokos* 35.8 (in *Sancti Romani Melodi Cantica Genuina*, eds. P. Maas and C. A. Trypanis [Oxford: Clarendon], 279): Sarai received God and two archangels (θεὸν ὑπεδέξατο ἐν ἀνθρώπινῃ μορφῇ).

62. “God in three persons appeared to Abraham at the oak of Mambre, and through mercy he was given as reward for his hospitality Isaac: that God we now glorify as God of our Fathers”; “When you appeared to the Patriarch Abraham in human form (ἐν σχήματι ἀνδρικῷ), O triple Unity, you revealed the unchangeable nature of your loving kindness and dominion”; “Even that of old you might clearly reveal the triple hypostasis of the one Lordship, you appeared, my God, in human form (ἐν σχήματι

As for the iconography of Genesis 18, it is important to note, first, that Mamre had become a pilgrimage site attracting Jews, pagans, and later also Christians. Eusebius writes that in his day the place was “honored by those who live in the neighborhood as a sacred place in honor of those who appeared to Abraham, and the terebinth can still be seen there,” and his witness is confirmed and expanded by Sozomen’s vivid description of a deeply syncretistic pilgrimage and festival.<sup>63</sup> Regardless of whether Sozomen describes past realities or realities of his day, perhaps even experienced first-hand, it is doubtful that Constantine’s order to destroy the shrine at Mamre, to banish and all pagan practices deemed “sacrilegious abominations” and to build a church, led to a radical Christianization of the worship site.<sup>64</sup> Archaeology has turned up a fifth-century mold for stamping ritual cakes, with, on one side, the image of three angels seated at table and the inscription “May the angels be merciful to me,” and, on the other, an image of Aphrodite Ourania, perhaps assimilated with the Virgin Mary, with the inscription “Rejoicing, I receive the heavenly one

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ἀνθρώπων) to Abraham as he praised your single might”; “As an alien in a foreign land Abraham was counted worthy to welcome in figure (τυπικῶς) the single Lord beyond being in three persons, in human form”; “Of old as you appeared clearly to Abraham, triple in person and single by the nature of the Godhead, you revealed in figure (τυπικῶς) the pure doctrine of the Godhead, and faithfully we sing your praise, God the sole ruler of triple sun” (Canon of Midnight Office for Sunday, tone 3, ode 7, troparion 3; Tone 4, ode 3, troparion 2; Tone 5, ode 8, troparion 1; Tone 3, Ode 6, troparion 1; Tone 1, Ode 3, troparion 1). Since no critical edition exists for Metrophanes’ compositions, I have used the Greek text printed in all editions of *Oktoechos* and the best translation available, namely that of Ephrem Lash, current in the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain (online at [www.anastasis.org.uk](http://www.anastasis.org.uk)).

63. Eusebius, *Dem. ev.* 5.9 (GCS 23:232; W. J. Ferrar, trans., *The Proof of The Gospel, Being the Demonstratio Evangelica of Eusebius of Caesarea*, 2 vols. [London: SPCK/New York: Macmillan, 1920], 1:25); Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.* 2.4.2–3 (SC 306:246; trans. NPNF<sup>2</sup> 2:261): “It is recorded that here the Son of God appeared to Abraham, with two angels, who had been sent against Sodom, and foretold the birth of his son. Here the inhabitants of the country and of the regions round Palestine, the Phoenicians, and the Arabians, assemble annually during the summer season to keep a brilliant feast; and many others, both buyers and sellers, resort there on account of the fair. Indeed, this feast is diligently frequented by all nations: by the Jews, because they boast of their descent from the patriarch Abraham; by the Pagans, because angels there appeared to men; and by Christians, because He who for the salvation of mankind was born of a virgin, afterwards manifested Himself there to a godly man. This place was moreover honored fittingly with religious exercises. Here some prayed to the God of all; some called upon the angels, poured out wine, burnt incense, or offered an ox, or he-goat, a sheep, or a cock.”

64. For Constantine’s involvement at Mamre, see Eusebius, *Vit. Const.* 3.51–53 (noted above) and Sozomen, *Hist. eccl.* 2.4.6–8.

[goddess].”<sup>65</sup> The middle figure on the mold is clearly distinguished among the three. To borrow Frazer’s description of the image, “[t]he imperative gesture of the Lord sets a didactic tone which is reinforced by those of his companions, who, like schoolmasters, point with their staffs, but do not look at, the most significant objects, the calf and the well below.”<sup>66</sup> If the mold is a Christian artifact—Bunge denies it<sup>67</sup>—its imagery concurs with Eusebius’s report of having seen a cultic image at Mamre in which the middle angel was superior to the other two and greater in honor (ὁ κρείττων ὑπερέχων τῆ τυμῆ),<sup>68</sup> and with the view of both Eusebius and Sozomen that Abraham’s visitors were the Son of God and two accompanying angels.<sup>69</sup>

If we leave aside E. R. Goodenough’s claim that the three visitors of Genesis 18 can be identified in a fresco at the Dura Europos synagogue,<sup>70</sup> the oldest surviving Jewish representation of the scene occurs in a badly damaged floor mosaic of the fifth-century synagogue in Sepphoris.<sup>71</sup> The earliest Christian images are a late fourth-century fresco in the Via Latina

65. For image and descriptions, see Margaret English Frazer, “A Syncretistic Pilgrim’s Mould from Mamre(?),” *Gesta* 18 (1979):137–45.

66. Frazer, “Pilgrim’s Mould,” 139; cf. 138.

67. Bunge, *Rublev Icon*, 113–14 points to the absence of “clearly Jewish or Christian” elements and the angelolatric message of the inscription and judges that there can be no “direct relationship between the seal and the earliest, clearly Christian depictions of Gen 18.”

68. Eusebius, *Dem. ev.* 5.9 (GCS 23:232; Ferrar 1:254): “For they who were entertained by Abraham, as represented in the picture (ἐπι γραφῆς ἀνακείμενοι), sit one on each side, and he in the midst surpasses them in honour. This would be our Lord and Saviour, Whom though men knew Him not they worshipped, confirming the Holy Scriptures. He then thus in person from that time sowed the seeds of holiness among men, putting on a human form and shape (ἀνθρώπειον . . . εἶδος τε καὶ σχῆμα), and revealed to the godly ancestor Abraham Who He was, and shewed him the mind of His Father.”

69. See above, nn.21 and 27.

70. E. R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, 12 vols (New York, Pantheon, 1953–64), 10:94–95. Goodenough’s argument was that three Philistines escorting the ark of the covenant back to Israel would be “originally those of Abraham’s encounter with God, as well as the three great patriarch, the three in which the Existent manifests himself” (10:96). It is difficult not to agree with Kurt Weitzmann and Herbert L. Kessler, *The Frescoes of the Dura Synagogue and Christian Art* (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1990), 79, who judge this kind of symbolism to be farfetched and unconvincing, since there is no basis for such a parallelism between the princes of the Philistines and the three men of the Abraham story.

71. See Zeev Weiss, *The Sepphoris Synagogue: Deciphering an Ancient Message through Its Archaeological and Socio-Historic Contexts* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University

catacomb, an early fifth-century mosaic at Santa Maria Maggiore, the late fifth-century illuminated manuscript known as the *Cotton Genesis*,<sup>72</sup> and a sixth-century mosaic at San Vitale in Ravenna.<sup>73</sup> If the message of the catacomb fresco, featuring three almost identical beardless youths, dressed in white garments and hovering in front of Abraham, can be somewhat ambiguous,<sup>74</sup> the exegesis of the upper register of the Santa Maria Maggiore mosaic is evident: the central figure among the three visitors is clearly set off from the other two by its imposing mandorla. At San Vitale, also, “the central figure . . . sits well in front of the other two.”<sup>75</sup> Moreover, aside from this “restrained prominence of the central angel,” Bunge notes that, within the iconographic program of the cathedral, the meal at Mamre functions as a foreshadowing of the Eucharist, so that the central angel corresponds in some fashion to Christ.<sup>76</sup>

The christological exegesis carries on in later artistic representations of Genesis 18. Two illuminations depicting the greeting of the visitors and the meal in a famous eleventh-century Byzantine Octateuch clearly identify the central angel as Christ by means of a cruciform halo.<sup>77</sup> Even in the 12th century mosaic at Monreale, which depicts three indistinguishable

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of Jerusalem, 2005), 153–61, 228–29. For a discussion of medieval Jewish manuscript illuminations of Genesis 18, see Thérèse Metzger, «Note sur l’hospitalité d’Abraham dans l’iconographie juive,» in *Le comparatisme en histoire des religions: actes du colloque international de Strasbourg, 18–20 septembre 1996*, eds. F. Boespflug and F. Dunand (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 334–59. For images, see Gabrielle Sed-Rajna, *The Hebrew Bible in Medieval Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 32 (description) and 37–38 (images).

72. Kurt Weitzman and Herbert Kessler, *The Cotton Genesis: British Museum Codex Cotton Otho B. VI* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 79–80 (description), fig. 216 (image); John Lowden, “Concerning the Cotton Genesis and Other Illustrated Manuscripts of Genesis,” *Gesta* 31 (1992): 40–53.

73. For all relevant images and a detailed survey of the theological and iconographic exegesis of the Mamre theophany, see Gabriel Bunge, *Rublev Trinity*, 23–44, 86–87.

74. For Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 10:94 n.114 it is noteworthy that “the central figure is distinguished by being slightly smaller than the other two”; for Bunge, *Rublev Trinity*, 25, by contrast, this detail is “scarcely noticeable,” and “nothing indicates that one of them is the Lord.” The main point, for him, is that the three figures “are drawn close together, thus further strengthening the impression of their unity.”

75. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 10:95.

76. Bunge, *Rublev Trinity*, 29.

77. Vat. gr. 747, fol. 39r. For the images, see Kurt Weitzman and Massimo Bernabò, *The Byzantine Octateuchs, vol. 2: Plates* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), fig. 257 and 261. As a matter of fact, an Octateuch from the same family also shows the central angel with a cruciform halo at the meal, while another one illuminates Gen 18.10–14 (“one of the three,” “the Lord,” promising an heir to Abraham and Sarah) with a Christ-figure, identified by its cruciform halo, blessing

characters,<sup>78</sup> the central angel has a nimbus with a red outline, and holds a scroll in his left hand. According to Bunge, “the meaning is simple: here, as in the reception scene at Santa Maria Maggiore, it is made clear—only by other means, i.e., a scroll instead of a mandorla—that one of Abraham’s visitors was the Lord.”<sup>79</sup>

Around the turn of the millennium, icons of the hospitality begin to be labeled “The Holy Trinity,” even though the central figure is clearly identified as Jesus Christ.<sup>80</sup> It is quite clear, as Bunge points out, “that the trinitarian vision would not in the long run be satisfied with the christological iconographic type and its straightforward identification of the Son. Over the centuries, the iconographers responded to the need for a greater harmony between picture and title in various ways.”<sup>81</sup> Only around the middle of the second millennium, and especially with Rublev’s famous “Trinity,” was the transition from christological to Trinitarian signification complete.<sup>82</sup> It is noteworthy, however, that this icon, painted for the Trinity-Sergius monastery, was mounted on the iconostasis as the first icon to the right of the royal doors—that is, it was displayed as an icon of Christ!

#### WHAT KIND OF EXEGESIS? INADEQUACY OF SCHOLARLY CATEGORIES

From the materials presented in the foregoing pages, it seems clear that two broad exegetical avenues can be distinguished in the Christian reception of Genesis 18. To call these interpretations “christological” and “Trinitarian,” as I have done so far, only provides categories for understanding *that* the text was read with a specific doctrinal or polemical aim in sight, without a grasp of *how* the text came to be read in that way. At this point, the question is to find the concepts that best describe and distinguish the various exegetical phenomena at play.

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from heaven (Smyrna fol. 30r and Vat. gr. 746, fol. 73r, in Weitzman and Bernabò, *Byzantine Octateuchs*, fig. 263 and 252). See also John Lowden, *The Octateuchs: A Study in Byzantine Manuscript Illustration* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992).

78. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 10:95 n.121: “nothing distinguishes the central angel at the table except that the others look towards him.”

79. Bunge, *Rublev Trinity*, 29.

80. On this ambiguity, see Bunge, *Rublev Trinity*, 42–44, 52–53; Boulnois, “Trois hommes,” 199–200.

81. Bunge, *Rublev Trinity*, 53.

82. See Bunge, *Rublev Trinity*, 52–56.

*Current State of Affairs*

Among the scholarly terms used to designate early Christian biblical interpretation, the “typology”/“allegory” distinction, now several decades old, is one of the most important. Rooted in the biblical view of history (time flows in a linear, continual, irreversible and progressive fashion and is punctuated “in the fullness of time” by the incarnation of Christ), “typology” is said to answer to the specifically Christian necessity of relating the Old Testament to the life of the church; it depends on history, gives value to history (that is, the biblical account), and respects history and the literal sense. By contrast, “allegory” has its origin in the exegesis of Homeric literature (and, later, of Plato’s dialogues), and was adopted and adapted for the interpretation of biblical texts by cultured Jews in the Alexandrian diaspora; Christians seem to have inherited it together with the Philonian corpus. Allegory obliterates the historicity and relevance of the Old Testament text in favor of the “vertical” relation between heavenly and earthly realities.<sup>83</sup>

This approach, however, is no longer tenable. One reason would be that the clear-cut distinction between “allegory” and “typology” does not account for the much more varied terminology perpetuated in Jewish and Christian tradition. In a recent article, Peter Martens has argued convincingly that, at least for scholarship on Origen, this nomenclature is actually unhelpful and should be abandoned.<sup>84</sup> Origen is, of course, not the only stumbling block for a neat distinction between “allegory” and “typology”: Philo often uses *τύπος* when engaging in allegorical interpretations of Scripture,<sup>85</sup> and, conversely, Paul (Gal 4.21–31) views his perfectly “typological” linking of Hagar and the Old Testament and, respectively, Sarah and

83. Erich Auerbach, “Figura,” *ArchRom* 22 (1938) 436–89, translation in Auerbach, *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), 11–76, esp. 29, 36, 42; G. W. H. Lampe, “The Reasonableness of Typology,” in *Essays On Typology* (Naperville: Allenson, 1957), 9–38; Jean Daniélou, “Traversée de la Mer Rouge et baptême aux premiers siècles,” *RSR* 33 (1946): 402–30; Daniélou, “Qu’est-ce que la typologie?” in *L’Ancien Testament et les chrétiens*, eds. P. Auvray et al. (Paris: Cerf, 1951), 199–205; Daniélou, “Typologie et allégorie chez Clément d’Alexandrie,” *SP 4/TU* 79 (1961): 50–57; Daniélou, *Theology of Jewish Christianity*, 2 vols., trans. J. A. Baker (Chicago: Regnery, 1964), 2:237–53; Raoul Mortley, *Connaissance religieuse et herméneutique chez Clément d’Alexandrie* (Leiden: Brill, 1973), 39–49; Folker Siegert, “Homerinterpretation, Tora-Unterweisung, Bibelauslegung: Vom Ursprung der patristischen Hermeneutik,” *SP* 25 (1993): 159–71, esp. 170–71.

84. Peter W. Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen,” *JECS* 16 (2008): 283–317, esp. 283–96.

85. See the examples and discussion in Hindy Najman, “Cain and Abel as Character Traits: A Study in the Allegorical Typology of Philo of Alexandria” in *Eve’s*

the New Testament as allegory (Gal 4.24, ἄτινά ἐστιν ἀλληγορούμενα)! If, however, much of early Christian literature appears to perpetuate such “confusion,” it may well be that the fault lies less with the ancients than with our modern perspective.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the allegory-typology distinction reflects the agenda of modern patristics rather than the mind of patristic authors. “Typology” is, after all, a nineteenth-century coinage,<sup>87</sup> whose function was never to capture the broad range of the ancient term *typos/figura*, but rather to give expression to certain theological presuppositions about what constitutes the proper characteristics of Christian—in contradistinction to Jewish or ancient Greek—exegesis.<sup>88</sup>

Today many scholars prefer to use the term “allegory” in a very broad sense, so as to cover any interpretation that proposes something other than the literal sense. Typological exegesis appears, then, as a species of allegory.<sup>89</sup> Despite the occasional confusion caused by encountering both “typological allegory” and “allegorical typology” in scholarly literature,<sup>90</sup>

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*Children: The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, ed. Gerard P. Luttikhuisen (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 107–18.

86. Martens offers a thorough and convincing documentation in the case of Origen. Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction,” 315 warns: “While the scholarship takes over English terms that are derived from, echo, and often translate Origen’s exegetical vocabulary, it also defines these terms in non-Origenian ways. There are substantial ramifications to these definitional discrepancies, not the least of which is the tendency to mislead Origen’s readers into imposing diverging definitions onto his own terms.”

87. The Latin “typologia” dates to 1840, whereas “typology” appears in print in 1844; see David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California, 1992), 254 n.51; Frances Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (New York: Cambridge University, 1997), 193 n.20.

88. See the discussion in Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 194–95 n.23; Najman, “Cain and Abel,” 109.

89. Henri de Lubac, “‘Typologie’ et ‘allégorisme,’” *RSR* 34 (1947): 180–247; Henri Crouzel, “La distinction de la ‘typologie’ et de ‘l’allégorisme,’” *BLE* 65 (1964): 161–74; Manlio Simonetti, *Lettera elo allegoria: Un contributo alla storia dell’esegesi patristica* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, 1985), 24–25 n.32; Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 118; Dawson, *Allegorical Readers*, 15–17, 255–58; John O’Keefe, “Allegory,” and Richard A. Norris Jr., “Typology,” in *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, ed. J. A. McGuckin (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2004), 49–50, 209–11; Simonetti, “Allegoria,” and Angelo di Bernardino, “Tipologia,” in *Nuovo Dizionario patristico e di antichità cristiane*, ed. A. de Bernardino; 3 vols. (Milan: Marietti, 2006–2008), 1:125–26 and 3:5369–70; Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 198 prefers the term “figural allegory” and distinguishes between its several subtypes (192).

90. Mastrangelo, *Prudentius and the Poetics of the Soul*, 92 uses “typological allegory” throughout, or “typologically driven allegory” for Prudentius’s use of “biblical typologies” to “produce non-historical, allegorical effects” (120). Najman, “Cain and

and even though the nomenclature of “typology” and “allegory” should, ideally, be abandoned, the distinction itself, which the terms were meant to highlight, remains valid. What is needed, according to Martens, is “that we find alternative labels for these two forms of nonliteral interpretation.”<sup>91</sup> Scholars such as David Dawson and Lewis Ayres do, indeed, propose other terms for the same distinction.<sup>92</sup>

Let us now return to Genesis 18, and to the question of “naming” the early Christian tradition of identifying one of Abraham’s guests as Christ. Thunberg views this interpretation of Genesis 18 as “mainly of a *typological* character,” “based on a *typological* exegesis.”<sup>93</sup> For Bunge, “typological” accounts for both the exegetical linking of the three men with the tri-hypostatic Christian God, and the exegetical linking of the “Lord” in the Genesis account with the “Lord” Jesus.<sup>94</sup> If Bunge can speak of “typological representation” in both the christological and the Trinitarian interpretations of Genesis 18, it is because he understands the christological interpretation to consist in “characteriz[ing] one of three . . . as a *type of Christ* through certain attributes.”<sup>95</sup> But is this really what Justin,

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Abel” refers to Philo’s use of *typos* in his allegorical treatment of Cain and Abel as “allegorical typology.”

91. Martens, “Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction,” 316 makes the following proposal: “first, that we discontinue using ‘typology’ and ‘allegory’ as labels for better and worse forms of nonliteral exegesis respectively; second, that we find alternative labels for these two forms of nonliteral interpretation; and third, that we develop a conversation around the criteria for successful nonliteral scriptural interpretation.”

92. David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) uses “figural” and “figurative,” and ranges Origen’s terms *typos*, *hyponoia*, and *allegoria* under the former. Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 34–38 distinguishes between grammatical and figurative readings. Acknowledging Dawson’s opposition of figural and figurative (he describes the latter as “an exegesis that begins with the plain text but loses the link with it” [38]), Ayres writes: “I prefer to speak more simply of figural and bad figural exegesis”—whereas the decision about what makes “good” or “bad” figural reading “is established within a tradition’s development and internal argument” (38).

93. Thunberg, “Three Angels in Gen. 18,” 565, 569. Emphasis added.

94. Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity*, 45, 47, 51: “This typological level of meaning, according to which an Old Testament event is understood as the type (image, figure, sketch) of the New Testament fulfillment, is, in our case [Genesis 18] Christological and Trinitarian”; “If Abraham’s three visitors are understood as a type of the Trinity, then, this would suggest . . . a representation of three similar young men. On the typological level, we have here, therefore, a representation of the Holy Trinity”; “If the Lord, who appeared to Abraham, may also be understood as the Logos in his hidden presence, so can the threefold number of the visitors be equally interpreted as a reference to the threeness of the persons.”

95. Bunge, *Rublev Trinity*, 46 (emphasis added). Similarly, Pier Franco Beatrice, *La lavanda dei piedi: Contributo alla storia delle antiche liturgie cristiane* (Rome:

Eusebius, and so many others—Procopius’s “Judaizers”—meant when they affirmed, straightforwardly, “that one of the three is God, while the other two are angels”? It seems to me that applying the scholarly label of “typological representation” to both the Trinitarian and the christological reading of Genesis 18 obfuscates the direct identification of the Logos as the subject of the Mamre theophany typical of so much of early Christian exegesis.

The lack of an adequate descriptor for what the “Judaizers” saw in Abraham’s three visitors is very evident in a recent article by Robin Jensen on “Early Christian Images and Exegesis,” which devotes considerable attention to the visual exegesis of Genesis 18. Since “[e]arly Christian art interpreted sacred narratives visually, using methods comparable to the verbal forms of exegesis,” Jensen applies to both visual and verbal exegesis the threefold classification of early Christian exegesis as “historical,” “typological,” or “allegorical,” corresponding to the anthropological triad of body, soul, and spirit.<sup>96</sup> There is no question that much of the textual and visual evidence can be explained in this manner. Yet, the chosen conceptual lenses also create a very significant blind spot: left out of the account is precisely the interpretation of Genesis 18 with which Jensen’s essay actually starts, namely Eusebius’s report about an image of Abraham’s hospitality he had seen, in which the central figure is identified with Christ. Jensen notes that this interpretation is in accord with Eusebius’s theology, but has nothing else to say about the kind of exegesis at play. Indeed, the Christian exegesis of the Mamre theophany illustrated by Eusebius—a view, as the foregoing pages have shown, that was widespread in the early Christian commentaries, sermons, hymns, and images—does not easily fit the scholarly descriptions of either “historical,” or “typological,” or “allegorical.”<sup>97</sup>

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Edizioni liturgiche, 1983), 85–89 calls “typological prefiguration” the identification (present in Novatian, Gregory of Elvira, and Chromatius) of the Lord who receives Abraham’s hospitality with the Lord who “repays” this hospitality by washing the feet of his disciples.

96. Robin Jensen, “Early Christian Images and Exegesis,” in *Picturing the Bible: The Earliest Christian Art*, eds. J. Spier et al. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 65–85, at 84 (quotation) and 74–76 (classification).

97. Cf. Jensen, “Early Christian Images and Exegesis”: at the *historical* level, “the text was just as it seemed—a historical account of God’s intervention in the affairs of his Chosen People” (75); *typology* “identified places in the Hebrew scriptures where New Testament events, and even Christian practices, were foreshadowed. . . . Figures, symbols, or actions described in the text were perceived as ‘types’ or ‘prefigurations’ of future events or persons” (75); *allegory* “was even more symbolic, and tended toward esoteric or mystical readings, rather than equating one figure with another, or locating types and antitypes in the two testaments” (76).

*A Critique of the Status Quaestionis*

The approaches outlined so far fails to do justice to the complexity of the texts surveyed in the pages above. In particular, they do not account satisfactorily for the richly attested interpretation of Genesis 18 in which Christ is not “foreshadowed” or “signified” by the characters and events of the text, but straightforwardly *identified* with the “Lord” of the biblical narrative. It is one thing to say that the threeness of Abraham’s visitors offers an image of the modes of spiritual perception; it is another to say that Abraham’s three visitors set forth an image of the Holy Trinity; and it is quite another matter to say that Abraham encountered the Word of God in a theophany that anticipates the incarnation of the Word. There is need for better distinctions that would sharpen our focus.

A first distinction should be drawn between readings, such as Philo’s, in which the connection between sign and signified does not presuppose and require a link between Old and New Testament, and the two other interpretations, for which such a link is fundamental. Whatever term one chooses—and the “allegory”/“typology” pair seems, indeed, to bring more confusion than clarity to the issue—the distinction is too significant to be buried under a vague common category.

More important, however, is another distinction, drawn between the first two readings (i. the triad of visitors as an image of the modes of spiritual perception; ii. the triad of visitors as an image of the Holy Trinity) and the third (iii. Abraham encountered the Logos in a theophany that anticipates the incarnation). In the first case, the relation between the two terms is literary, exegetical; in the other, everything turns on the strong claim to a real encounter or real “presence.” The Trinitarian interpretation of Genesis 18 differs from the christological one in that the divine presence in the “type” is not an epiphanic self-evidence, but rather a “weaker” symbolic presence, a matter of exegetical and theological convention.<sup>98</sup>

98. An exception to this general rule occurs, however, in the *Palaea* fragment on Abraham, discussed earlier (ἐμφάνησαν αὐτῷ ὁ πατήρ καὶ ὁ υἱὸς καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα). Similarly to the way in which a saint’s halo appears oddly out of place in early Renaissance paintings that maintain this characteristic element of two-dimensional iconography even while they have adopted the linear perspective in order to create the illusion of a three-dimensional space, so also does our anecdote strike a tone of comedy and kitsch when it applies the “epiphanic” symbolization, characteristic of the older identification the central angel with Christ, to a trinitarian reading of the passage, which depends on a different type of symbolization. The contrast with the type of signification found in the catena on Genesis, also discussed above—εἰς τύπον τῆς ἁγίας τριάδος (fr. 1053); τῆς ἁγίας καὶ ὁμοουσίου τριάδος ἐπέχοντα τὸν τύπον (fr. 1054); τὰς τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις σημαίνουσι (fr. 1058)—is notable.

Few scholars have seized upon the epiphanic element that the term “typology” does not capture. In a book published in 1965 and met with undeserved neglect, A. T. Hanson pointed out the distinction between what he called “real presence,” on the one hand, and “typology,” on the other, and argued that the former is typical of New Testament authors.<sup>99</sup> Several other authors have seized upon the epiphanic element that the term “typology” does not capture: Alexander Schmemmann, speaking about liturgical symbolism;<sup>100</sup> Charles Gieschen, describing the pre-Nicene exegesis of theophanies;<sup>101</sup> Richard E. McCarron, writing about the type of exegesis in Jacob of Serug’s memra *On Abraham and his Types*;<sup>102</sup> Folker Siegert, with direct reference to Genesis 18.<sup>103</sup> Larry Hurtado provides perhaps the clearest distinction

99. A. T. Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965).

100. Alexander Schmemmann speaks of a shift from one type of symbolization to another: in his words, from *symbol* to *symbolism*, from “ontological/real/eschatological symbol” to “illustrative symbolism.” In the older type of symbolization, “the empirical (or ‘visible’) and the spiritual (‘invisible’) are united not *logically* (this ‘stands for’ that), nor *analogically* (this ‘illustrates’ that), nor yet *by cause and effect* (this ‘means’ or ‘generates’ that), but *epiphanically*. One reality *manifests* and *communicates* the other, but . . . only to the degree to which the symbol itself is a participant in the spiritual reality and is able or called upon to embody it.” By contrast, “illustrative symbolism” is the sign of something that does not exist logically, but only by convention, just as there is no real water in the chemical symbol H<sub>2</sub>O.” See Schmemmann, *The Eucharist, Sacrament of the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1983), 38–39. Cf. Schmemmann, “Symbol and Symbolism in the Byzantine Liturgy: Liturgical Symbols and Their Theological Interpretation,” in *Liturgy and Tradition*, ed. Thomas Fisch (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1990), 115–28. Cf. Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1973), 141: “In the early tradition, . . . the relationship between the sign in the symbol (A) and that it ‘signifies’ (B) is neither a merely semantic one (A *means* B), nor causal (A *is the cause of* B), nor representative (A *represents* B). We called this relationship *epiphany*.”

101. Charles Gieschen, “The Real Presence of the Son Before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68 (2004): 103–26.

102. Richard E. McCarron, “An Epiphany of Mystical Symbols: Jacob of Sarug’s Mêmra 109 on Abraham and His Types,” *Hugoye* 1 (1998): 57–78. Discussing Genesis 22, McCarron argues that understanding Jacob of Sarug’s exegesis as “merely typological” fails to capture the theological intent of the poem; he speaks instead of an “*epiphany of mystical symbols* that allow an almost ecstatic communion of past, present, and future . . .” (40). Thus, “[f]ar from a ‘foreshadowing’ of Christ, Abraham actually sees Jesus’s saving actions played out before him in his own actions and is thus a major figure in the proclamation of the salvation of the world that is yet to come: the eschatological promise his actions hold” (33).

103. Siegert, *Wohltätig verzehrendes Feuer*, 77: “Sie [christliche Theologie] insistierte exegetisch auf der Gleichheit der drei Gestalten (so Augustin, *De trin* II, 18, 34), . . . dogmatisch auf einem Typos (keiner direkten Erscheinung, sondern einem vorauslaufenden Analogon).”

among three exegetical approaches to the Old Testament characteristic of “second-century proto-orthodox Christians” (e.g., Justin Martyr): first, “proof texts” drawn from the prophets; second, “a wider ‘typological’ reading of the Old Testament as filled with figures and event that foreshadow Jesus”; and, third, “the interpretation of Old Testament accounts of theophanies as manifestations of the pre-incarnate Son of God.”<sup>104</sup>

*A New Proposal: Christian Exegesis as “Rewritten Bible”*

Given the ideological freight of terms like “symbolic,” “typological,” or “epiphanic”—to say nothing of “real presence!”—it might be more profitable to find a new conceptual tool. I have elsewhere argued that the exegesis of biblical theophanies in Byzantine hymnography often follows the logic of rewritten Bible: just as the *Wisdom of Solomon* identifies the heavenly agent at work in the Exodus events as Lady Wisdom, and just as the *Book of Jubilees* has Moses receive the Law from the Angel of the Presence, so also do numerous Byzantine hymns identify the central character in Genesis 18—“the Lord”—as Jesus Christ.<sup>105</sup> These observations apply, it seems to me, to the case at hand. In other words, I think that the christological and “epiphanic” reading of Genesis 18 documented above could be viewed as a form of “rewritten Bible.”

Speaking of a certain strand of early Christian exegesis as “rewritten Bible” is not unproblematic, however. Some scholars note that the term “rewritten Bible” builds on the anachronistic assumption of a normative “Bible” during the Second Temple era; others find that the application of “rewritten Bible” to Christian documents is in any case unwarranted; and others point out that, beginning with Vermes himself, the term has always remained far too ambiguous. It is quite clear that, if we are to use

104. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 565–66.

105. Bogdan G. Bucur, “Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies in Byzantine Hymnography: Rewritten Bible?,” *TS* 68 (2007): 92–112. The application of the category “rewritten Bible” to the biblical exegesis of Byzantine festal hymns is a novelty; the term itself, of course, is not. “Rewritten Bible” was coined by Geza Vermes in 1961, and has since been used by scholars dealing mainly with Second Temple Pseudepigrapha such as the *Book of the Watchers* (in *1 Enoch*), the *Book of Jubilees*, the *Genesis Apocryphon*, the Targums, Josephus’s *Jewish Antiquities*, or Pseudo-Philo’s *Liber antiquitatum biblicarum*. For a presentation and discussion of numerous examples, see Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism: Haggadic Studies* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 67–126; Michael Segal, “Between Bible and Rewritten Bible,” in *Biblical Interpretation at Qumran*, ed. Matthias Henze (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 2005), 10–28; Antti Laato and Jacques van Ruiten, eds., *Rewritten Bible Reconsidered: Proceedings of the Conference in Karkku, Finland, August 24–26 2006* (Åbo: Åbo Academy University Press/Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2008).

“rewritten Bible” for our case at hand, some engagement with these points of criticism is unavoidable.

The first critique, although pertinent to the field of Second Temple Judaism,<sup>106</sup> has much less relevance for the discussion concerning early Christian texts. Ironically, “rewritten Bible” might be less problematic in its application to certain Christian exegetical phenomena than, as initially intended, as a descriptor of the exegesis set forth in certain Second Temple Jewish texts. The second problem was raised by Hindy Najman, who argued specifically for a clear differentiation between the exegesis of Jewish Pseudepigrapha and that of New Testament and patristic texts: “[i]n contrast to the familiar Christian claim to *supersede* the Sinaitic covenant with a *new* covenant . . . *Jubilees* invoked an archaic, pre-Sinaitic covenant, whose pre-eminence depends on its claim to *precede* Sinai.”<sup>107</sup> In my opinion, this affirmation does not stand up to scrutiny. For patristic exegetes of Genesis 18, the Christian revelation is superior, paradoxically, not because it is *newer*, an “upgrade” of sorts, but rather because it is *more ancient*, since Christ is said to precede Abraham (cf. John 8.58) and, generally, to be the object of Old Testament theophanies. Finally, the issue of ambiguity: it is not clear whether the term “rewritten Bible” stands for a literary genre or for an exegetical strategy. Vermes himself seems to have used it both ways, and notable scholars have since then chosen one direction or the other.<sup>108</sup> My view is that if “rewritten Bible” is to be used for the Christian texts discussed above—some of which are doctrinal treatises, others exegetical writings, and others hymnographic and iconographic productions—then the phrase can only refer to an exegetical strategy, displayed in works belonging to a variety of genres, and serving a variety of polemical, doctrinal, liturgical, and artistic aims.

## CONCLUSIONS

The rich reception history of Genesis 18 in early Christianity is marked by a transition from a christological to a Trinitarian interpretation, and,

106. Extra-canonical writings such as the *Book of the Watchers* in *1 Enoch*, or *Jubilees* present themselves not as derivative compositions, but as inspired, fully authoritative divine revelation; and canonical writing such as Deuteronomy or Chronicles constitute perfect examples of “rewritten Bible” inasmuch as they rewrite and reinterpret texts from earlier Torah and earlier historical books, respectively.

107. Hindy Najman, *Seconding Sinai: The Development of Mosaic Discourse in Second Temple Judaism* (Boston: Brill, 2003), 125.

108. I am indebted here to the astute and richly documented article by Anders Klostergaard Petersen, “Rewritten Bible as a Borderline Phenomenon—Genre, Textual

simultaneously, by a gradual move from an “epiphanic” reading of the text as a record of direct divine presence and action, to a more speculative understanding of the text as signifying certain theological and spiritual realities. The latter position becomes normative in doctrinal and exegetical writings after the fourth century; hymnography and iconography, however, generally hold on to the christological and “epiphanic” reading for several more centuries. It should be noted that these two trajectories are often interwoven; early Christian writers such as Ambrose or Prudentius, for instance, can move seamlessly from a christological to a Trinitarian interpretation, and from a typological linking between the Old and the New Testaments to theological and psychological allegories.

The current scholarly concepts fail to distinguish properly between the various types of exegesis involved in each of these cases. My concern in this article has been with only one of the ways in which early Christians read Genesis 18, namely the straightforward identification of the Septuagint *kyrios* with the New Testament’s *kyrios* Jesus. Even though this is not the only early Christian interpretation of Genesis 18, it is the oldest and, certainly, very widespread, as the pages above have amply documented. I have argued that, to single out this strand of Christian exegesis of Genesis 18, a distinction should be made *within* what is usually called “typological” or “figural” exegesis.

Since early Christian writers did not feel the need for a special term to describe their identification of the Old Testament “Lord” with Christ, one may wonder why it would be necessary or useful to introduce yet another scholarly label. The need arises, I believe, from the fact that scholarship has generally ignored this most fundamental theological assumption of a very large strand of early Christian literature, and has often conflated and confused it with other exegetical phenomena. This is not a trivial issue: without recognizing the phenomenon and crafting an appropriate concept to designate it (assuming the risk, of course, as with all scholarly concepts, of obscuring certain other elements), we fail to grasp an important factor in the development of early Christian theology.

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