

## The Mystical Meaning of Scripture

### Introduction: The Inner Mysteries (*Interiora Mysteria*)

In the Holy Scripture everything is full of mysteries. The mystical meaning of the Scriptures – these are the *interiora mysteria* which the Scriptures contain.

This mystery is first of all the mystery of God, one and trinity, as it appears to Isaiah in the Temple of Jerusalem (6:1-6). Isaiah saw, says Origen, ‘the *mystery* of the one seated on the throne of the two seraphim and their wings, of the altar and tongs, of the concealment their face and feet by the seraphim’.<sup>1</sup> The Son and the Spirit are identified with the seraphim who veil their face and their feet, that is to say, they know the beginnings (ἀρχαί) and the ends (τέλη) in the Father.

It is also the mystery of the Only-Begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father (John 1:18): ‘Behold the mysteries of love (ἀγάπη), and then you will have a vision of the bosom of the Father, whom the

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1. Origen, *Commentary on Saint John* VI.4.23; SC 157, p. 147; *Commentary on the Gospel According to John*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, 2 vols (Washington, DC, Catholic University of America, 2001, 2006) (hereafter, Heine, *John*) vol. 1, p. 174; cf. Origen, *Hom. on Isaiah* I.4; Origen, *On First Principles* IV.3.14; *On First Principles* (Oxford Early Christian Texts), trans. John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) (hereafter, Behr), s. II, pp. 556-57.

Only-Begotten God alone declared (John 1:18).<sup>2</sup> For it is the mysteries of love that make us see the intimacy of the Father's bosom and His relation to the Word. The word used here for 'to see' is ἐποπτεύω, the technical term employed for 'the vision' (ἐποπτεία) which completes the initiation of the Eleusinian mysteries; and, finally, it is the mystery of the Holy Spirit 'to wrap up and conceal ... in ordinary language, under the cover of history and narrative of visible things, hidden mysteries'.<sup>3</sup>

However, the central mystery that Scripture announces is that of Christ. The Bible is a whole unified by the personal presence of the *Logos*, the mystery of which it expresses. As the Word has manifested himself in history, through his incarnation, and in the Church, his mystical body, so, through Scripture, it is the very voice of the mystical Christ who speaks to souls in the Church.<sup>4</sup> Origen speaks of Jesus' 'mystical cry': 'He who believes in me ... believes in him who sent me; he who sees me sees him who sent me (John 12:44-45) and of the 'great mystery' he announces by saying: 'He who sees me sees the Father (John 14:9). We must therefore not stop at the consideration of his humanity but, through the humanity of Jesus, come to know his divinity and, through the Son, see the Father.

We must not be content with the 'letter' of Scripture but go beyond the letter to grasp the 'spirit'. Opposition between the letter and the spirit of Scripture is no greater than between the *flesh* and the *Logos* in Christ. Just as the humanity of Christ must lead us to the mystery of his divinity, so the letter of Scripture must introduce us to the spiritual and properly divinising sense that it conceals.<sup>5</sup>

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2. Clement of Alexandria, *The Rich Man's Salvation* 37.1; *Exhortation to the Greeks, Rich Man's Salvation, To the Newly Baptized*, trans. G.W. Butterworth, LCL 92 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1919) (hereafter, Butterworth), p. 347.

3. Origen, *On First Principles* IV.2.8; Behr, s. II, pp. 512-13. This whole section (IV.2-3) is dedicated to the understanding and the sense of the Scriptures: the mysteries contained in the Law, the threefold meaning of the Scripture, or the two meanings of the Scripture: the soul and the spirit.

4. Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.8; *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (ACW 26), trans. R.P. Lawson (London: Longmans, Green, 1957) (hereafter, Lawson), p. 198.

5. Cf. *ibid.* 2.3; Lawson, p. 116.

It is not enough only to *listen* to the Word of God, but it is also necessary to keep it, that is to say, to put it into practice, to conform one's life to the 'Word of truth, that which is contained in the Scriptures' (*Verbum veritatis eius quae in scripturis continetur*).<sup>6</sup> Understanding the Word of God therefore requires one who receives it to become, like John, the disciple of the Word.

We might dare say, then that, the Gospels are the first fruits of all the Scriptures, but that the first fruits of the Gospels is that according to John, whose meaning no one can understand who has not leaned on Jesus' breast nor received Mary from Jesus to be his mother also. But he who would be another John must also become such as John, to be shown to be Jesus, so to speak. For if Mary had no son except Jesus, in accordance with those who hold a sound opinion of her, and Jesus says to his mother, 'Behold your Son' (John 19:26), and not, 'Behold, this man also is your son', he has said equally, 'Behold, this is Jesus whom you bore'. For indeed everyone who has been perfected 'no longer lives, but Christ lives in him' (Gal 2:20), and since 'Christ lives' in him, it is said of him to Mary, Behold your son', the Christ.<sup>7</sup>

In book 22 of the *Commentary on Saint John* (chapters 20 and 21), Origen will explain that John rested in the Word and its mysteries in a manner analogous to that in which the Son rests in the bosom of the Father. If one does not rest, like the beloved disciple, on the bosom of the Word which itself rests in the bosom of the Father, one cannot grasp the 'meaning' of the Word of God; and if we do not take, like John at the Cross, Mary as mother, and if we do not become, through motherhood, another Jesus, we cannot know the mystery of Jesus. To understand of the meaning of the Scriptures, it is necessary to experience childbirth like Mary.

The Fathers and, following them, the Doctors of the Church, distinguished different meanings of Scripture, which I shall show

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6. Origen, *Hom. on the Psalms* (Ps. 36, 98), SC 411 (1995), p. 150.

7. Origen, *Commentary on Saint John*, I.23; SC 120bis (1996), p. 69; Heine, *John*, vol. 1, p. 38.

myself starting with Origen (third century) and its rereading in the twentieth century by Jean Daniélou<sup>8</sup> and Henri de Lubac.<sup>9</sup>

The study of the mystical meaning of the Scriptures in Origen will lead us to the discovery of his ‘mysticism of Jesus’, after the expression of Frédéric Bertrand,<sup>10</sup> as there is a mysticism constituted by Scripture, as there is a liturgical mysticism constituted by the liturgy. Our general reflection bears on Christian mysticism with a view to comparing it with non-Christian mystics, in particular, Indian mystics, and for this we must first display the different aspects of Christian mysticism.

Finally, the Word of God is not only the object of an *auditio* or a *lectio*, *lectio divina*, but also of a *manducatio*, because the Word is, like bread, food. This traditional image in the Bible and the Fathers of the Church was taken up by the apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010),<sup>11</sup> which speaks of the ‘sacramentality of the Word’.

We shall therefore first show how Origen understands (i) the relationship between the letter and the spirit, and then (ii) the Gospel and its readers, before concluding with (iii) that of the bread and the Word.

## **The Letter and the Spirit**

Origen sees all Christian spirituality as springing from a biblical exegesis dominated by the mystery of Jesus, who died and rose again for us. In Origen, the term *μυστικός* refers to the mystery of Christ in him and in us. One can only understand Christ by first being understood in him.

As Hans Urs von Balthasar saw, if Origen differs from Saint Paul, it is above all in his focusing on this ultimate fulfilment of ‘Christ in us, the hope of glory’ (Colossians 1.27), culminating in the mystery of

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8. Jean Daniélou, ‘Les sources bibliques de la mystique d’Origène’, *RAM* 23 (1947), pp. 126-41: article republished in Jean Daniélou, *Origène* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1948), pp. 287-301.

9. Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et esprit: L’Intelligence de l’Écriture d’après Origène*, *Théologie* 16 (Paris: Aubier, 1950).

10. Frédéric Bertrand, *Mystique de Jésus chez Origène*, *Théologie* 23 (Paris: Aubier, 1951).

11. Benedict XVI, *Word of God (Verbum Domini)* (London: Pauline Books & Media, 2010).

Christ and of the Church, seen as ‘one flesh’ and finally ‘one spirit’ (1 Corinthians 6:17).<sup>12</sup>

In the fourth book of *De Principiis* (chapters one and two), Origen gives the key to his interpretation of the Scriptures: inspired Scripture can only be studied and interpreted in the same Spirit from which it comes.<sup>13</sup> The constitution *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II will take up the same idea:

However, since Sacred Scripture must be read and interpreted in the light of the *same Spirit* as the one who had it written, it is not necessary, in order to discover exactly the meaning of the sacred texts, to pay less attention to the content and to the unity of the scriptures, having considered the living Tradition of the whole Church and the analogy of faith. It is for the exegetes to strive, following these rules, to penetrate and expound more deeply the meaning of Sacred Scripture, so that, through their preliminary studies, in a way, the judgment of the Church matures. For everything that concerns how to interpret Scripture is ultimately subject to the judgment of the Church, which exercises the divinely received ministry and mandate to keep the Word of God and to interpret it (no. 12).

It is the same Spirit that inspires the Word and opens our hearts to understanding that Word.

According to Origen, there are three moments in the history of salvation which establish a triple meaning of Scripture: the Old Testament leads to the New centred on the figure of Christ who gives the Spirit to believers and constitutes Church, his body.<sup>14</sup> This scheme will be translated as a passage from shadow (σκία) to truth (ἀλήθεια). What is truth in Christ is still only a figure or image (εἰκών) in relation

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12. H. Urs von Balthasar, *Parole et mystère chez Origène* (Paris: Cerf, 1957).

13. On the exegesis and mysticism of Origen, see de Lubac, *Histoire et esprit*, and idem, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, 4 vols (Paris: Aubier, 1959-64); H. Crouzel, *Origène et la 'connaissance mystique'* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1960); Bertrand, *Mystique de Jésus*.

14. Origen, *On First Principles* IV.1-2.

to the eschatological reality of the Church and of what we must all become in her.<sup>15</sup>

The Platonising exemplarism is expressed in the pairs image–reality or image–truth (εἰκὼν–ἀλήθεια), hence the allegory of Galatians 4 (terrestrial and celestial Jerusalem, that is to say the Church), and also the ‘types’ mentioned in 1 Corinthians 10. The μυστήριον is the spiritual *reality* of which the material reality, in particular the *historia* given by a biblical text, is the *image*.

There are three levels of meaning:

(1) the literal meaning, *historia*, studied by philology and historical criticism;

(2) the moral or tropological sense (from τρόπος, way of acting), which corresponds to the rabbinical distinction between *haggadah* (story) and *halakah* (morality) – ‘Today we cross the Red Sea ...’; and

(3) the spiritual meaning found in Christ; it is he who achieves the unity of the Testaments and opens the eschatological dimension through his resurrection.

### ***The Degrees of Spiritual Life and the Senses of Scripture***

Understanding the meaning of the Scriptures requires conversion to Christ; and this conversion to Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit just like the inspiration of the Scriptures and our understanding of the Scriptures. However, the transformation of the heart by the Spirit as well as the understanding of the Scriptures are, through the Spirit, not only linked, but also progressive.

The basic idea of Origen is that advancement in understanding the mystery of Christ in the Scriptures goes hand in hand with advancement in the spiritual life and identification with Jesus. Entry into the mystery of Christ through Scripture is gradual, and deeper understanding comes only after a prayerful reading of the sacred texts. It is necessary to seek the deep and spiritual meaning, the

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15. De Lubac, *Histoire et esprit*, p. 219.

*interiora mysteria*,<sup>16</sup> to find access *ad interiora doctrinae spiritualis*,<sup>17</sup> because, 'in the understanding of the mysteries, my soul is built up' (*in intelligentia sacramenti aedificabitur anima mea*).<sup>18</sup>

Commenting on the verse 'The people thirsted for water' (Exodus 17:3), Origen states:

He [God] told Moses to take his staff, to strike the rock, to make water spring out for them (Exod. 17:5). For he wants them from now on to drink from the rock (1 Cor. 10:4), he wants them to progress and reach inside the mysteries [*Vult enim eos iam de petra bibere, vult eos proficere and ad interiora venire mysteria*]. They murmured against Moses (Exod. 17:5), this is why the Lord gave orders to show them the rock where they would drink. ... Moses shows them the rock which is Christ (1 Cor. 10:4), he leads them to this rock for them to drink there and quench their thirst. But this rock will not give water, unless *struck*; *stricken*, it will make the springs flow. For the *stricken* and crucified Christ made the springs of the New Testament flow; therefore it is said of him: I will *strike* the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered (Zech. 13:7). So he had to be *struck*. If he had not been *struck* and if there had not come out of his side water and blood (John 19:34), we would all have gone on thirsting for the word of God.<sup>19</sup>

Just as Moses *struck* the rock (Exodus 17:6), so the centurion *struck* (or *pierced: enuxen*) the side of Christ (John 19:34): in both cases, *striking* (though not the same word). It was by *striking* the rock

16. Origen, *Hom. on Leviticus* V.5; PG 12, 454; SC 286, p. 229: 'He wants them from now on to drink from the rock; he wants them to progress and reach inside the mystery' (*Vult enim eos iam de petra bibere* [cf. 1 Cor. 10:4], *vult eos proficere et ad interiora venire mysteria*).

17. Origen, *Hom. on Leviticus* V.5; SC 286, p. 333: 'You also when you are will eat from the manna, the celestial bread of the Word of God and drink water from the Rock, when you will approach the inside of the spiritual doctrine [*ad interiora doctrinae spiritualis accesseris*], expect to fight, prepare yourself for the war.'

18. Origen, *Hom. on Exodus* XI.2; SC 321, p. 329.

19. *Ibid.*; SC 321, pp. 329-31.

that Moses caused the living water to flow out and it was by striking the heart of Christ that the Centurion made ‘the springs’ of water and blood (which Origen called the ‘springs of the New Testament’), which quench the thirst of people.

*The Three Senses of Scripture*

Philo in his *Questions on Genesis* had successively given a psychological, cosmological and mystical interpretation of Scripture. Now, the influence of Philo has been considerable on the Fathers of the Church (Clement, Origen, Gregory of Nyssa).<sup>20</sup>

For Origen, the Bible, unified by the personal presence of the Logos, expresses its mystery. There are three meanings of Scripture:

Three senses of Scripture	Three stages:			Three degrees of reality:	Anthropology	Spiritual life
					Three components:	Three degrees:
Historical sense	Old Testament	Israel	Law	shadow	body	beginners
Moral or tropological sense	New Testament	Church	Gospel	image	soul	making progress
Mystical or spiritual sense	Glory	Kingdom	Heaven	truth	spirit	the perfect

Origen gives two schemes on the triple meaning of Scripture:  
A. In *On First Principles*<sup>21</sup> he distinguishes three senses of Scripture:

- (1) the current historical meaning – this is the very relationship to facts;

20. Cf. J. Daniélou, *Philon d’Alexandrie* (Paris: Arthème Fayard, 1958).  
21. Origen, *On First Principles* IV.2.4: the triple meaning (Behr, s. II, pp. 496-99); IV.2.5: only two meanings: soul and spirit (Behr, s. II, pp. 500-1); IV.2.6: examples of each of the meanings (Behr, s. II, pp. 502-7); IV.2.7: the spiritual meaning and its mysteries (Behr, s. II, pp. 508-11); IV.2.8: but these mysteries are hidden under the letter (Behr, s. II, pp. 512-13).