

Condescension, anticipation, reciprocal ecstasies: theological reflections on early Christian readings of Isaiah 6 and Daniel 3

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Abstract

In the biblical theophanies of Isaiah 6 and Daniel 3, divine condescension and human ascent constitute reciprocal ecstatic moves towards a divine–human encounter. The christological interpretation, widespread in early Christian reception history, further discerns in Isaiah 6 and Daniel 3 an anticipation of the radical condescension of the Logos-made-human and, conversely, an anticipation of the deifying ascent of humanity in Christ. Finally, the early Christian reading of Isaiah 6 and Daniel 3 as ‘christophanies’ – that is, as manifestations of the Logos-to-be-incarnate – also allows us a glimpse into the performative aspect and experiential claims of early Christian exegesis, broadly construed to also incorporate hymnography, iconography and ritual.

Keywords: anticipation, condescension, Daniel, Isaiah, performative exegesis, theophanies

Introduction

The pages to follow discuss an important strand in the early Christian and later Byzantine exegesis of Old Testament theophanies, namely the straightforward identification of the Old Testament ‘Lord’ with the ‘Lord’ Jesus, using as test cases two important theophanic texts: the vision of Isaiah and Daniel’s story of the three youths miraculously saved in the fiery furnace. After mapping out the reception history of these texts, I attempt to synthesise the early Christian understanding of Isaiah 6 and Daniel 3 by appealing to the notions of condescension, anticipation and reciprocal ecstasies. I show that these theophanies display both a descending movement, evident in the stark anthropomorphism of the divine manifestation, and an ascending movement, evident in the fiery, transfigurative experience of the human recipients. Divine condescension and human ascent, the two trajectories whose intersection marks the space and mode of divine–human encounter, can be seen as ‘reciprocal ecstasies’ – a phrase I borrow from Alexander Golitzin’s study of Dionysius the Areopagite to indicate that the uncreated divinity stretches itself out into the created realm, assuming human shape,

while the prophet is, conversely, stretched out into the transformative work of God's fiery presence.¹

From a Christian perspective, the reciprocal ecstasies discerned in Old Testament theophanies are anticipatory of the even more radical and paradoxical 'Christ event', when divinity assumes human nature not merely in appearance but in the full reality of the flesh, and humanity is thereby not merely granted a brief encounter but is perpetually inscribed on the trajectory of deification.

Reading Isaiah 6 and Daniel 3 as 'christophanies' – that is, as manifestations of the Logos-to-be-incarnate – also allows us a glimpse into the performative aspect and experiential claims of early Christian exegesis, broadly construed to also incorporate hymnography, iconography and ritual.

The vision of Isaiah

The text of Isaiah 6:1–8 reads as follows in the Septuagint (NETS):

And it happened in the year that King Ozias died that I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and raised up, and the house was full of his glory. And seraphim stood around him; the one had six wings and the one had six wings, and with two they covered the face, and with two they covered the feet, and with two they flew. And they cried out one to another and said: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Sabaoth; the whole earth is full of his glory.' And the lintel was raised at the voice with which they cried out, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: 'O wretched that I am! I am stunned; for being a man and having unclean lips, I live among a people having unclean lips, and I have seen the King, the Lord Sabaoth, with my eyes!' Then one of the seraphim was sent to me, and he had in his hand a live coal that he had taken from the altar with the tongs. And he touched my mouth and said: 'Behold, this has touched your lips, and it will take away your lawlessness and purify your sins.' Then I heard the

¹ Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita* (Minneapolis: Cistercian Publications, 2013), pp. 60–4. The Dionysian notion of 'reciprocal ecstasies' is well illustrated by *Divine Names* 4.13: 'Moreover, the divine eros is ecstatic; it does not permit lovers to be among themselves but bids them to be among their lovers . . . Thus, the great Paul who came to be inspired by the divine eros and participated in its ecstatic power, straightforwardly declared: "I live no longer but Christ lives in me." . . . He says this to God as a true ecstatic lover . . . We must dare to say this beyond truth: the cause itself of all beings . . . comes to be outside of itself and into all beings. . . . In an ecstatic power beyond being, it is brought down out of a separation from all and beyond all, to what is in all, yet does not wander out of itself.' English tr. by John D. Jones, *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), p. 145.

voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom should I send, and who will go to this people?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

The imagery of Isaiah 6 – the enthroned figure and the accompanying seraphim, the *Trisagion* hymn, the divine glory filling the temple, the purification of the prophet's mouth by means of a living coal – has captured the imagination of Jewish and Christian exegetes and enjoyed a rich presence in doctrinal, visionary and liturgical texts from the Second Temple era and into the Middle Ages.

The details of Isaiah's vision correspond, quite transparently, to the furnishings of the temple: the throne is the visionary counterpart of the ark of the covenant, the living seraphim correspond to the two cherubim on the mercy seat and the enthroned Lord unveils to the prophetic gaze the otherwise invisible divine presence above the mercy seat. The thunderous noise causing the temple to shake and the dense smoke (6:4) filling it recall the phenomena at Sinai, which are implicitly interpreted as caused by angelic praise and, respectively, by a superabundance of (presumably luminous) 'glory'.² In short, to use Jon Levenson's inspired phrase, in Isaiah 6 'art became the reality to which it pointed' and 'the Temple mythos came alive'.³

Although this cultic setting (perhaps the Day of Atonement: Lev 16:14, 30–4) 'suggests some connection to the Temple in Jerusalem',⁴ one should resist the clear-cut alternative between either imagining that Isaiah entered the holy of holies and assumed the role reserved exclusively for the high priest,⁵

² Note that in the Targum Jonathan to Isaiah, the temple (6:1) and the entire earth are 'filled by the brilliance of his glory'. Bruce Chilton, *The Isaiah Targum: Introduction, Translation, Apparatus and Notes* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1987), p. 14.

³ Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1987), p. 123.

⁴ George Savran, *Encountering the Divine: Theophany in Biblical Narrative* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 15.

⁵ Ironically, given the reference to Uzziah's death, this interpretation implies that Isaiah's presence in the temple is similar to that of King Uzziah (cf. 2 Chron 26:16–20) or King Jeroboam (3 Rgns/1 Kings 13:1–6) and equally transgressive. See Alexander Zeron, 'Die Anmassung des Königs Usia in Lichte von Jesajas Berufung. Zu 2 Chron. 26:16–22 und Jes. 6:1ff', *Theologische Zeitschrift* 33 (1977), pp. 65–8. The Targum Jonathan to Isaiah as well as some rabbinic traditions (e.g. *Exod. Rab.* 1.34; Rashi to Isa 6:1) actually synchronise Uzziah's transgression and immediate punishment – leprosy, equated to death – with Isaiah's vision, but without inculcating the prophet. See for instance *Exod. Rab.* 1.34: 'The king of Egypt died [Exod. 2:23]: he became a leper, who is deemed as one dead, as it is said, *Let her not, I pray, be as one dead* [Num. 12:12]. And it says, *In the year that kind Uzziah died* [Isa. 6:1].' Other rabbinic sources take Isaiah's 'woe is me' as an admission of real guilt for allegedly having been present but silent when Uzziah

or that he had found himself, like an apocalyptic seer, in YHWH's heavenly court, and later recounted his vision of the celestial temple.⁶ Indeed, as C. R. A. Morray-Jones observes,

[i]t is perhaps doubtful whether this distinction would have been very meaningful to the author, for whom the ritual identification of the one with the other was not merely a dramatic metaphor. . . . This ritual identification of the earthly sanctuary with the heavenly throne room was a central theme of the pre-exilic cult tradition, as expressed, for example, in the poetic parallelism of Ps. 11:4 (The LORD is in the temple of his holiness, the LORD, in the heavens (is) his throne).⁷

Reception history: from christophany to trinitarian symbolism

In keeping with the widespread Christian identification of the Logos-to-be-incarnate as the subject of all Old Testament theophanies, much of early Christian exegesis of Isaiah 6 understands the 'Lord' whom the prophet saw (LXX: κύριος; κύριος σαβαωθ; MT: *Adonai*; YHWH *Tzevaot*) as none other than the 'Lord' of Christian worship, Jesus. According to the Gospel of John, for instance, '[Isaiah] saw his [Jesus] glory' (John 12:41),⁸ just as 'we

transgressed. For a detailed discussion, see Benjamin Uffenheimer, 'The Consecration of Isaiah in Rabbinic Exegesis', in J. Heinemann and D. Noy (eds), *Studies in Aggadah and Folk Literature* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1971), pp. 232–6.

⁶ Uffenheimer ('Consecration of Isaiah', pp. 238–40) contrasts the biblical text, which speaks of a vision in the Jerusalem temple, with its Targumic reinterpretation into a vision of the heavenly temple. See also Victor Aptowitzer, 'The Celestial Temple as Viewed in the Aggadah', in J. Dan (ed.), *Binah: Studies in Jewish History, Thought, and Culture* (Tel Aviv: Praeger, 1989), vol. 2, pp. 1–29. In support of his thesis of a purely 'celestial' encounter with God, Aptowitzer notes that 'the text supplies no hint of where the prophet saw this marvelous vision', and that no mention is made of an earthly temple in the parallel text of 1 Kings 22:19, which reports Micaiah's vision in extremely similar terms ('I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, with all the host of heaven standing beside him to the right and to the left of him'), or in other throne theophanies (Ezekiel 1, Daniel 7).

⁷ Morray Jones, 'The Temple Within: The Embodied Divine Image and its Worship in the Dead Sea Scrolls and Other Jewish and Christian Sources', *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 37 (1998), p. 401. Similarly, on the concomitance of 'heavenly' and 'earthly' realities in the vision of Ezekiel, Silviu N. Bunta, 'In Heaven or on Earth: A Mislplaced Temple Question about Ezekiel's Visions', in D. V. Arbel and A. A. Orlov (eds), *With Letters of Light: Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls, Early Jewish Apocalypticism, Magic, and Mysticism in Honor of Rachel Elior* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), pp. 29–44.

⁸ According to Martin McNamara (*Targum and Testament Revisited: Aramaic Paraphrases of the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd edn. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 147–8), John 12:41 'uses good targumic language'. Indeed, the Targum to Isaiah (see note above) has 'I saw the glory of the Lord' for MT 'I saw the LORD', and 'the temple was filled with the

have seen his [Jesus'] glory' (John 1:14).⁹ Similarly, the Book of Revelation seems to extend the thrice-holy hymn sung by Isaiah's seraphim to the Son/Lamb.¹⁰ Countless others have followed this exegetical path, from Justin of Neapolis to Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, Eusebius of Caesarea, Jerome, John Chrysostom, Pseudo-Asterius' homilies on the Psalms and the Pseudo-Macarian spiritual homilies.¹¹

Alternative and complementary readings, with roots in second-century Alexandria, call for a more subtle allegorical symbolisation: Clement insists on decoding the seraphim *allegorically* as an image of the perfected soul, the 'Gnostic', in ceaseless contemplation and perpetual praise of God;¹² Origen

brightness of his glory' for MT 'the hem of his robe filled the temple', while the LXX reads 'the house was full of his glory'.

⁹ See C. H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), pp. 207, 261; Nils A. Dahl, 'The Johannine Church and History', in W. Klassen (ed.), *Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), pp. 124–42, esp. 154–5; A. T. Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965), pp. 104–8; Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), pp. 167, 170, 242, 263, 339; Jey J. Kanagaraj, *Mysticism in the Gospel of John: An Inquiry into its Background* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998), pp. 224–6; April D. DeConick, 'John Rivals Thomas: From Community Conflict to Gospel Narrative', in R. T. Fortna and T. Thatcher (eds), *Jesus in Johannine Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001), p. 308; Darrell D. Hannah, 'Isaiah's Vision in the Ascension of Isaiah and the Early Church', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 50 (1999), p. 81; Raymond F. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, 2 vols. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 486–7; C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St John*, 2nd edn (London: SPCK, 1978), p. 432; Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, tr. G. R. Beasley-Murray et al. (Philadelphia: Westminster; Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), p. 452, n. 4; Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St John*, tr. C. Hastings et al. (London: Burns & Oates, 1980), vol. 2, pp. 416–17; Jarl E. Fossum, *The Name of God and the Angel of the Lord: Samaritan and Jewish Concepts of Intermediation and the Origin of Gnosticism* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1985), p. 295, n. 112.

¹⁰ In Rev 4:6–9, the four living creatures – a fusion of Isaiah's seraphim and Ezekiel's cherubim – 'give glory and honor and thanks' to God by singing a version of the thrice-holy: 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!' In the next chapter, however, worship and praise seems to be directed both to 'Him who sits on the throne' and to the Lamb bearing the seven spirits (5:8–14). Cf. 7:10 (God and the Lamb receive the acclamation of the martyrs); 14:4 (God and the Lamb receive the self-offering of the martyrs as 'first fruits' of humankind); 20:6 (God and Christ receive priestly service from those who are worthy, and reign together with them); 21:22–3; 22:5 (the Lamb is or embodies the divine glory and light).

¹¹ See the extensive presentation and discussion of the relevant texts in Bogdan G. Bucur, "'Isaiah Saw His Glory': Re-Envisioning Prophetic Visions', *Pro Ecclesia* 23 (2014), pp. 309–30.

¹² Having identified the seraphim of Isaiah 6 (which he calls τὰ ζῶα τὰ δοξολόγα) with the cherubim of the ark in Exodus 25 (τὰ πνεύματα τὰ δοξολόγα) and with the

notes that the seraphim are veiling, or rather completely concealing, the head and feet of the Lord ('not their own but God's', Origen insists),¹³ so as to show that things pertaining to the beginning and to the end are not given to created knowledge;¹⁴ and, in an exegetical move ascribed to 'my Hebrew master', which would enjoy a rich *Wirkungsgeschichte*, Origen also discerns in the three characters of the narrative – the enthroned Lord and the two seraphim – a symbolic image of the Trinity.¹⁵

Nevertheless, judging from its adoption by later hymnography and iconography, the christological reading of Isaiah 6 seems to have been the more popular and enduring exegetical strand in the Christian reception of this theophany. I limit myself to only a couple of examples of the christological exegesis of Isaiah 6 in Byzantine hymnography. A vesperal hymn for the Feast of the Annunciation and a Matins hymn on Palm Sunday identify the baby held in the arms of his mother with the one 'upon whom the six-winged seraphim and the many-eyed cherubim cannot gaze' and exhort the believers to look upon Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey and to recognise 'the one whom Isaiah saw who has come for our sake in flesh'.¹⁶ As for iconography, its explicit identification of the Lord

two ζῶα found in the peculiar LXX reading of Hab 3:2 ('you will be known between the two ζῶα'), Clement showcases the true Gnostic as one who, in the course of a dynamic process along the continuum of noetic reality that encompasses humans and angels, can and must become a seraph. See Clements, *Strom.* 7.12.80.4 (SC 428.246); *Strom.* 5.6.36.3–4 (SC 278.84): 'He [the Gnostic] all day and night, speaking and doing the Lord's commands, rejoices exceedingly ... and is ever giving thanks to God, like the living creatures who give glory (τὰ ζῶα τὰ δοξολόγια), figuratively spoken of by Isaiah (διὰ Ἡσαΐου ἀλληγορούμενα)'; '[The ark] signifies the repose which dwells with the spirits who give glory (ἀνάπαυσιν ... τὴν μετὰ τῶν δοξολόγων πνευμάτων), which the cherubim represent darkly (ἃ αἰνίσσεται Χερουβίμ). ... But the face is a symbol of the rational soul, and the wings are the lofty ministers and energies of powers right and left; and the voice is delightful glory in ceaseless contemplation (ἡ φωνὴ δὲ δόξα εὐχάριστος ἐν ἀκαταπαύστῳ θεωρίᾳ)'.¹³

¹³ Both the LXX and the MT versions are ambiguous: 'the face' and 'the feet' might be those of the seraphim or of the Lord; the Hebrew has the additional unclarity about the author of the veiling: the Lord may be veiling 'his' face and feet (presumably using the wings of the seraphim), or a seraph may be veiling 'his' own face and feet or those of the Lord.

¹⁴ Origen, *Isa. Hom.* 1.2, 4.1 (GCS 33: 245, 247; tr. ACW 68.886, 899); Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah*, Prologue (CCSL 73.1; tr. ACW 68.67).

¹⁵ Origen, *On First Principles* 1.3.4. Greek text in Herwig Görgemanns and Heinrich Karpp, *Origenes vier Bücher von den Prinzipien* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), pp. 164, 166. See also Origen, *Hom. In Isa.* 1.2, 4; 4.1 (GCS 33.244, 258–9); *Cels.* 6.18 (GCS 2.88.28).

¹⁶ Palm Sunday Matins: Sticheron at the Praises: 'Come forth, you nations ... and look today on the King of Heaven on a humble colt as on a lofty throne treading the path

with Jesus Christ was eventually codified in Dionysius of Fournas's *Painter's Manual*:

A house, with clouds and a great light inside it: Christ is sitting in the midst on a high throne, reigning as a king. With his right hand he blesses and in his left he holds a scroll which says, 'Whom shall I send and who will go forth to these people?' In a circle round him six-winged seraphs cry, saying, 'Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth; all the earth is full of thy glory.'¹⁷

Reciprocal ecstasies

When the seraph interacts with the prophet, the text hints at anthropomorphism: 'Then one of the seraphim was sent to me, and he had in his hand (ἐν τῇ χειρὶ) a live coal that he had taken from the altar with the tongs.' Byzantine iconographic exegesis (e.g. Vat. Gr. 699, fol. 72v; Athos Cod. Vatop. 760, fol. 280v) often follows this direction in attempting a 'double depiction' of the seraph: first, as a guardian of the throne, in solemn posture, with the three pairs of wings concealing much of the body; then, in the act of 'communing' Isaiah with the living coal, having lost his wings and the static, majestic appearance, and acquired human shape. The seraph's human appearance, which matches and meets the humanity of the prophet, is an act of 'condescension' initiated and modelled by the Lord himself, whose anthropomorphic appearance sets everything in motion.

Conversely, the prophet finds himself caught in a dynamic process of ascent or ingression, and transformation. He, an impure human and not even a priest, somehow finds himself in the house of God, which is dense with the presence of divine glory; he has entered into the holy of holies, and his eyes are gazing upon the Lord even while his conscience is alarmed. Moreover, this apparently transgressive encounter of the impure mortal with the utterly other holy one of Israel is endorsed and sustained by the Lord himself. The solution – the hot coal – effects an accelerated elevation of the prophet to the status of a seraph, a spontaneous combustion into, precisely, 'a fiery one'.¹⁸

to Jerusalem. ... look on the one whom Isaiah saw who has come for our sake in flesh'; Great Vespers of the Annunciation: *Glory Sticheron at Lord I have cried*: 'How shall He whose throne is heaven and whose footstool is the earth, be held in the womb of a woman? He upon whom the six-winged seraphim and the many-eyed cherubim cannot gaze has been pleased at a single word to be made flesh of this His creature . . .'

¹⁷ For icons and manuscript illuminations, see Bucur, *Christophanic Exegesis*, pp. 176–8, 180–2.

¹⁸ Since the same Hebrew root yields the verb 'to burn, to incinerate' and the noun 'venomous (burning) serpent', the seraphim are generally thought to be fiery guardians of the divine presence, perhaps winged, serpentine personifications of

A certain reciprocity is evident: as the seraph keeps his seraphic status but *condescends* to a human shape that Isaiah would be able to recognise and interact with, the prophet *ascends* to the status of human bearer of the divine fire. In fact, the anthropomorphic seraph and the angelified Isaiah are not simply meeting as equals in the *topos* and *tropos* defined by their respective extension towards each other. The depiction of the scene implies, to attentive readers, such as Ephrem of Nisibis and John Chrysostom, that one should dare to compare the seraph carrying the hot coal by means of tongs with Isaiah who receives the fire on his lips, in his mouth:

In your bread is hidden the Spirit which cannot be eaten. In your wine dwells the fire that cannot be drunk. Spirit in your bread, fire in your wine: It is a distinct wonder that our lips have received. . . . The Seraph did not touch the coal with his fingers. It touched only the mouth of Isaiah. [The Seraph] did not hold it, and [Isaiah] did not eat it. But to us our Lord has given both. . . . A new marvel of our great Lord: for bodily ones, fire and spirit to eat and drink!¹⁹

that altar is a type and image of this altar [and] that fire of this spiritual fire. But the seraphim did not dare touch it with their hands, but only with the tongs; you, however take it in your hands.²⁰

Condescension and anticipation: performative exegesis

The interpretation of Isaiah 6 as an anticipation of the deeper divine condescension and higher human ascent revealed in Christ often assumed a ‘performative’ character, amounting to the re-enactment of the vision in a liturgical setting.²¹ Indeed, it is not really surprising that the exclamation of the seraphim, ‘holy, holy, holy is the Lord Sabaoth’, the *Trisagion*, could be

lightning. See T. N. D. Mettinger, ‘Seraphim’, and R. S. Hendel, ‘Serpent’, in K. van der Toorn and P. W. van der Horst (eds), *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), pp. 742–4, 744–7.

¹⁹ Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith* 10.8–11 (CSCO 154.50; tr. FaCh 130.122–3).

²⁰ John Chrysostom, *In illud: Vidi Dominum* 6.3 (SC 277.216).

²¹ ‘Performative exegesis’ may be defined as a ritual reading of the sacred text in which the latter is used as a script to be performed and re-enacted, so that the reader is united with the rhetorical ‘I’ of the sacred text, enters the world of the text and experiences that which the text describes. According to Angela Kim Harkins, ‘strong emotions . . . could have assisted an ancient reader in becoming one with the imaginal body of the text. . . . As the ancient reader sought to become one with the rhetorical “I” of the text, he fashioned for himself a subjectivity that fits that of the imaginal body in the text. In doing so, he came to experience what the text describes’ (‘The Performative Reading of the Hodayot: The Arousal of Emotions and the Exegetical Generation of Texts’, *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 21 (2011), p. 62). The term ‘performative’, coined by the British philosopher of language John Austin (*How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford:

seen as offering a glimpse into the angelic pattern of worship, revealed to humans in order to be imitated on earth. John Chrysostom makes this point forcefully in a passage from his homilies on Uzziah:

Have you not recognized this cry? Is this our [cry] or that of the seraphim? Well, it is both ours and the seraphim's – thanks to Christ who destroyed the dividing wall and made peace between those in heaven and those on earth, thanks to the one who made the two one. This hymn was formerly intoned only in the heavens; but since the Master has deigned to descend on earth, he also brought this melody to us ... as if shouting to each of us and saying: 'you sing with the seraphim, do also stand with the seraphim!'²²

In Jewish tradition, Isaiah's prophetic vision will also come to be understood as the apocalyptic pattern of liturgical practices. The text itself suggests, according to George Savran, that although Isaiah desires 'to separate ... from human society and join forces with the heavenly pantheon', in the end, he 'remains in limbo, neither associated fully with the human world, nor able to join completely with the angelic retinue of the upper realms'.²³ By the time of the *Shi'ur Qomah* – a meditative expansion, roughly contemporary to John Chrysostom, on Numbers 12:8 (Moses 'sees the form of God'); Isaiah 33:17 ('your eyes will see the king in his beauty'); Ezekiel 1 (the divine glory is 'something like a human form'), Song of Solomon 5:10–16 (the physical description of the Beloved), and Psalm 147:5, which purports to offer a precise measuring, mapping and naming of the divine body and all its parts – Isaiah's 'I saw the Lord' is placed on the lips of the famous

Clarendon, 1962), esp. pp. 4–11), is particularly useful in our attempt to articulate these assumptions. As can be seen in some of Austin's examples – 'I promise'; 'I do' (uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony); 'I give and bequeath ...' (as occurring in a will) – performatives are pronouncements in which the uttering of the sentence is not a description of an action, but itself the doing of an action; unlike an imperative, a performative talks about itself and about what it is doing, is self-referential, metalinguistic, metapragmatic. Building on Austin's understanding of performatives, scholars speak of 'performative utterances' and 'performative exegesis' in the religious literature of the Ancient Near East, in biblical and parabiblical writings. See, for instance, Delbert R. Hillers, 'Some Performative Utterances in the Bible', in D. P. Wright, D. N. Freedman and A. Hurvitz (eds), *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 757–66; Seth L. Sanders, 'Performative Utterances', and 'Performative Exegesis', in A. DeConick (ed.), *Paradise Now: Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), pp. 57–79.

²² John Chrysostom, *In illud: Vidi Dominum* 6.3 (SC 277.214, 216).

²³ George W. Savran, *Encountering the Divine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), pp. 17, 168.

second-century mystic, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha: 'I saw [8] the King of the kings of kings, the Holy One, [9] blessed be He, sitting on a high and exalted throne, and His soldiers [10] were standing before Him, on His right and on His left side.'²⁴ The visionary experience is here appropriated by the character of Ishmael ben Elisha, and, through pseudonymity, by the anonymous later writer who mediates this visionary pattern to his readers. Sweeney argues that

the measurements of the body of G-d are placed in a liturgical context ... among sections that present a modified version of the Jewish worship service' (119). The *Shiur Qomah* intends to place its readers in the context of worship of G-d's divine presence. In doing so, it reformulates the Jewish liturgical pieces so that the prayer service could be identified as a heavenly one.²⁵

On the Christian side of the history of interpretation, Isaiah 6 confirms the Christian self-understanding as a community enacting liturgically that which Isaiah saw. Numerous fourth- and fifth-century sources, apparently beginning with Ephrem of Nisibis, understand Isaiah's 'living coal' as a foreshadowing of the eucharist,²⁶ and Mary Theotokos as well as the priest serving the eucharistic liturgy as 'tongs' (λαβίς) in reference to Isaiah 6:7.²⁷ As a matter of fact, after the use of the liturgical spoon was gradually introduced in Byzantine practice (beginning, it seems, in seventh-century

²⁴ Text from Pieter W. van der Horst, 'The Measurement of the Body: A Chapter in the History of Ancient Jewish Mysticism', in D. van der Plas (ed.), *Effigies Dei: Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), p. 59. For this text as a 'midrashic reflection on biblical passages concerned with tangible portrayals of G-d', see Marvin A. Sweeney, 'Dimensions of the Shekhinah: The Meaning of the *Shiur Qomah* in Jewish Mysticism, Liturgy, and Rabbinic Thought', *Hebrew Studies* 54 (2013), pp. 107–20.

²⁵ Sweeney, 'Meaning of *Shiur Qomah*', pp. 115, 117, 119.

²⁶ Ephrem, *Hymns on Faith* 10.8–11 (CSCO 154.50; tr. FaCh 130.122–3); Theodoret of Cyrus, *Comm. Isa.* 6:6 (SC 276.266); John Chrysostom, *In illud: Vidi Dominum* 6.3 (SC 277.216); Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Hom. cat.* 16.36–8 (Tonneau, 590/591, 592/593, 594/595; Mingana 6:260–61 [Syriac]; 118–19 [English]).

²⁷ Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Hom. cat.* 16.36–8 (Tonneau, 594/595; Mingana 6:260–1 [Syriac]; 119 [English]); Germanus, *On the Divine Liturgy*, 94/95–96/97: 'And "one of the seraphim was sent, and he took into his hand a coal which he had taken from the altar with a pair of tongs" [Isa 6:6] – this represents the priest who with the tongs of his hands (τῆ λαβίδι τῆς χειρὸς αὐτοῦ) holds in the holy altar the spiritual coal, Christ, Who sanctifies and purifies those who receive and partake.' On Mary Theotokos as 'tongs', see Pseudo-Methodius, *De Simeone et Anna* 7, 10 (PG 18.364 AB, 372 C).

Jerusalem),²⁸ that artefact was given the name ‘tongs’, so that the presbyter would enact, first, the prophet Isaiah – receiving the living coal – and then the part of the seraph when, equipped with the liturgical ‘tongs’, he would dispense the eucharist to the congregants.

As I have noted above, the text of Isaiah 6 invites a certain comparison between the seraph and the prophet, and even suggests that anything the seraph does, Isaiah does better. Christian exegesis of Isaiah 6 is even more daring, positing that the anthropomorphic Lord has condescended even further and become fully and really ‘the *anthropos*’ (John 19:5, Ἰδὸν ὁ ἄνθρωπος) and that a reality still greater than was granted to either the seraph or the prophet is extended to the worshipping community approaching the eucharist.

The Lord in the fiery furnace: Daniel 3

The episode of the three Hebrew youths in Babylon, condemned to death in the furnace on account of their faith but saved by God’s miraculous intervention, is one of the most celebrated stories in both Jewish and Christian traditions.

Old Greek

Theodotion

22 Because the king’s command was insistent, the furnace was also heated sevenfold more than before [. . .] 49 But **an angel of the Lord came down into the furnace** to be with Azarias and his companions and shook the flame of the fire out of the furnace 50 and made the inside of the furnace as if a moist breeze were whistling through.

... 91(24) Then Nabouchodonosor the king was astonished. And he rose quickly and said to his friends, 92(25) ‘Lo, **I see four men** unbound and walking in the fire, and no ruin has come to them, and **the appearance of the fourth is the likeness of a divine angel.**’

22 When the king’s word prevailed, the furnace was also heated excessively [...] 49 But **the angel of the Lord came down into the furnace** to be with Azarias and his companions and shook the flame of the fire out of the furnace 50 and made the inside of the furnace as though a moist breeze were whistling through.

... 91(24) And Nabouchodonosor heard them singing hymns and was astonished. ... 92(25) ‘Here **I see four men** unbound and walking in the middle of the fire, and there is no destruction on them, and **the appearance of the fourth is like a divine son.**’

The biblical text is characterized by a certain ambiguity: it is ‘the angel of the Lord’ who comes down into the furnace (Dan 3:49), but his spectacular

²⁸ See the exhaustive study by Robert E. Taft, ‘Byzantine Communion Spoon: A Review of the Evidence’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 50 (1996), pp. 209–38.

mastery over the elements suggests divine intervention; the king refers to him as ‘man’ (Dan 3:92, ‘four men’), but describes his appearance as being similar to that of an ‘angel’ (OG) or ‘son’ of God (Theodotion). Exegetes throughout the ages seized upon this fact. Jewish sources debate whether it was divine or angelic intervention that saved Abraham and, later, the three youths in the furnace.²⁹

Reception history: from christophany to trinitarian symbolism

Early Christian writers, from Irenaeus to Romanos the Melodist and from Tertullian to Prudentius, consistently identified Christ, the Logos, as the heavenly agent who entered the furnace and saved the three youths, regardless of the language of ‘son of God’, for the majority who use Theodotion, or for the few who use the OG, ‘angel’ (understood, via Isa 9:6, as ‘the angel of great counsel’).³⁰ A good example occurs in Hippolytus’ *Commentary on Daniel*, in a section that opens with the question, ‘who was this angel?’, and continues with a litany of biblical references: it was none other than the one who rained fire on Sodom, drowned the Egyptians, appeared to Isaiah and to Ezekiel, the ‘the angel of the Lord’ and ‘angel of great counsel’, who remains unnamed in Daniel 3 ‘because Jesus had not yet been born of the Virgin’.³¹ This interpretation of the fiery furnace as a ‘christophany’ (that is, a manifestation of the Christ in angelomorphic guise) was eventually absorbed into the theology popularised by the hymnography of Romanos the Melodist, becoming and remaining a major part of the Byzantine theological tradition.³²

²⁹ In the early decades of the first century CE, 3 Mac 6:2, 6 has no doubt that it was the ‘king, dread sovereign, most high, almighty God’ who rescued Daniel and his companions; the roughly contemporary *Liber Antiquitatum Biblicarum* mentions Nathaniel, ‘the angel in charge of fire’ (LAB 38.3). Some centuries later *Exodus Rabbah* thinks it was Gabriel who came down to deliver Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; *Genesis Rabbah*, by contrast, states that it was the Lord who saved Daniel, whereas Abraham had been rescued by the Archangel Michael; finally, the Babylonian Talmud (b. Pes. 118a–b) has the Lord intervening to save Abraham and sending Gabriel to rescue the three youths (notwithstanding an attempt by ‘Yurkami, the prince [in charge] of hail’ to gain the mission for himself).

³⁰ See Martine Dulaey, ‘Les trois hébreux dans la fournaise (Dn 3) dans l’interprétation symbolique de l’église ancienne’, *Revue des sciences religieuses* 71 (1997), pp. 33–59; Dennis Tucker, ‘The Early *Wirkungsgeschichte* of Daniel 3: Representative Examples’, *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 6 (2012), pp. 295–306.

³¹ Hippolytus, *Comm. In Dan.* 2.32–4 (GCS NS 7.118–28).

³² See Romanos, *Kontakion on the Three Youths* 26, 29 (SC 99.396, 398, 402): ‘This is not an angel, but rather the God of the angels. He showed himself in the form of an angel,

Just as it pondered the trinitarian symbolism of the three characters in Isaiah's vision, Christian exegesis also found the image of the three youths in the furnace deeply significant. Romanos the Melodist refers to the three youths as 'the three-essence perfume blend' (ἡ τρίμυρος εὐωδία) and 'the three-branched root' (ἡ τρίκλωνος ῥίζα);³³ others insist on the fact that the youths were 'equal in number to the Trinity' (τῆς Τριάδος ἰσάριθμοι). One popular and influential text occurs in the Canon of the Exaltation of the Cross composed by Cosmas of Maiouma in the eighth century:

Bless, children equal in number to the Trinity, God the Father [and] Creator; praise the Word who came down and changed the fire into dew; and highly exalt unto the ages the all-holy Spirit who gives life to all.³⁴

Condescension and anticipation: the polymorphic Christ

It is to Romanos that we owe the following stanza 25 in the Nativity Kontakion, which is worth citing in full:

Standing as a choir in the midst of the furnace, the children changed the furnace into a heavenly church, singing together with the angel to the maker of the angels (ψάλλοντες μετ' ἀγγέλου τῷ ποιητῇ τῶν ἀγγέλων), and imitating the entire liturgy of the bodiless ones. When, however, they found themselves filled with the all-holy Spirit from having worshipped (ἐκ τῆς λατρείας), they beheld something else, more fearsome still: the very one they had seen as angel was constantly changing his appearance, so that they saw him now as divine, now as a human, and he was now giving commands, now supplicating together with them (καθ' ἐκάστην ἡλλοίου τὴν μορφήν, καὶ ὅτε μὲν θεῖος, ἄλλοτε δὲ ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἔωρᾶτο, καὶ ποτὲ μὲν ἐκέλευε, ποτὲ δὲ συνικέτευεν).³⁵

who is to come into the world ... He shows himself now and points us to the image of things to pass.'

³³ Romanos, *Kontakion on the Three Youths* 3 (SC 99.366); 21 (SC 99.390).

³⁴ Canon of the Exaltation of the Cross, Ode 8, Eirmos (translation mine). This hymn is sung several times during the liturgical year as part of the abbreviation of the Canon known as the *katabasis*, and was also incorporated in the Service of the Furnace. On this topic, see Andrew Walker White, *Performing Orthodox Ritual in Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). Cf. Canon of the Forefathers, Ode 1, stanza 5: 'In number and faith of the divine Trinity (ἀριθμῷ καὶ πίστει τῆς θείας Τριάδος) the Youths in the furnace overthrew godlessness and in symbols revealed beforehand to the world the mysteries of God that were to be ...'

³⁵ Romanos, *Kontakion on the Three Youths* 25 (SC 99.396).

The exegetical problem facing Romanos is the following: on the one hand, the fourth youth joins the three Hebrews in their place of suffering and prayer; on the other hand, Christian tradition sees here the divine presence of the Logos-to-be-incarnate. But how can the 'Lord' also be a fellow-suppliant? Evidently, the episode of the fiery furnace offers Romanos the opportunity for oblique remarks on the paradox of the incarnation.

This exegesis is not new in early Christian literature. It falls, rather, within the category of 'polymorphic christology', a theological device whose function is to convey divine adaptation and condescension to a variety of revelatory circumstances, and which is well known in scholarship on Christian origins. It describes well what one encounters, for example, in the apocryphal Acts of the Apostles, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* or the *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*.³⁶ The paradoxical vision of the three youths, made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit in the course of divine worship – namely, Christ 'constantly changing his appearance, so that they saw him now as divine, now as a human, and he was now giving commands, now supplicating together with them' – can be compared to the description of the transfigured Christ in the Acts of John 90:

At another time he took me and James and Peter to the mountain, where he used to pray, and we beheld such a light on him that it is not possible for a man who uses mortal speech to describe what it was like. ... Now I, because he loved me, went to him quietly as though he should not see, and stood looking upon his back. And I saw that he was not dressed in garments, but was seen by us as naked and not at all like a man; his feet were whiter than snow, so that the ground there was lit up by his feet, and his head reached to heaven; so that I was afraid and cried out, and he turned and appeared as a man of small stature ...³⁷

³⁶ See Gedaliahu Guy Stroumsa, 'Polymorphie divine et transformations d'un mythologème: l'Apocryphon de Jean et ses sources', *Vigiliae Christianae* 35 (1981), pp. 412–34; Pieter J. Lalleman, 'Polymorphy of Christ', in J. N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Apocryphal Acts of John* (Kampen: Kok Pharos, 1995), pp. 97–118; Hugues Garcia, 'La polymorphie du Christ: Remarques sur quelques définitions et sur de multiples enjeux', *Apocrypha* 10 (1999), pp. 16–55; Garcia, 'L'enfant vieillard, l'enfant aux cheveux blancs et le Christ polymorphe', *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses* 80 (2000), pp. 479–501; Paul Foster, 'Polymorphic Christology: Its Origins and Development in Early Christianity', *Journal of Theological Studies* 58 (2007), pp. 66–99; Foster, *Gospel of Peter: Introduction, Critical Edition and Commentary* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. 165–8.

³⁷ Acts of John 90, in J. K. Elliott (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament: A Collection of Apocryphal Christian Literature in English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 317.

The heavenly agent in Daniel 3 is ultimately revealed to be the Lord in angelomorphic disguise. Christian exegetes see the presence of the angel in the furnace not only as an instance of divine condescension but also as an anticipation of, or a first step toward, the incarnation. According to Hippolytus in the above-mentioned passage from the *Commentary on Daniel*, this is the angel in the fiery furnace, the angel of great counsel, the angel of the Lord, unnamed as yet because not yet born of the Virgin.

Reciprocal ecstasies

Divine condescension elicits a reciprocal move, which occurs when the recipients of theophany are lifted up by the interaction. Romanos' theological poetry sees the descent of the heavenly agent as effecting not only a cooling of the fiery furnace to a safe, even pleasant, temperature, but a complete transformation of the place. In fact, the cooling is the paradoxical effect of the fire in the furnace being overcome by the fire of divine presence. Standing in that fire, similarly to Isaiah's implicit transformation into a fiery one, the three youths assimilate, under the direction of the angel, the pattern of angelic worship (it 'imitates the entire liturgy of the bodiless ones').³⁸ Since the furnace has become 'a heavenly church', participation in this new reality 'fills' the three youths with 'the all-holy Spirit'; this filling, in turn, causes a further deepening of their spiritual perception, so that they can apprehend the presence of the Lord himself in their midst. And it is the divine descent into the furnace that, on the one hand, cools the furnace and, conversely, pushes the three humans through a sort of spiritual combustion, which transforms them into angelomorphic seers and singers. In the end, the furnace-become-church is revealed as a laboratory of sorts, in which divine condescension and human ascent meet in a deifying theophany.

Conclusions

In the biblical theophanies of Isaiah 6 and Daniel 3, as received by Jewish and Christian traditions, divine condescension and human ascent constitute reciprocal ecstatic moves towards a divine-human encounter. The christological interpretation of theophanies, which seems to have been the earliest and, in any case, the most popular Christian way of reading these texts, also sees Isaiah 6 and Daniel 3 as anticipations of the radical condescension of the Logos-made-flesh and, conversely, of the deifying ascent of humanity in Christ.

³⁸ Incidentally, Romanos' phrase 'standing as a choir in the midst of the furnace' recalls 1 En. 71.1: 'I saw the sons of the holy angels walking upon the flame of fire' (OPT 1.49).

The ancient authors consulted above also allow us a glimpse into the experiential claims of early Christian exegesis, broadly construed to also incorporate hymnography, iconography and ritual. That sacred texts and sacred images somehow ‘come alive’ in the course of ritual is nothing new; scholarly accounts are simply catching up with the assumptions underlying worship in the Jerusalem temple and in the Christian church. This performative aspect is especially evident in such texts as Romanos’ *Kontakion on the Three Youths* 25, discussed above, or the liturgical ‘reenactment’ of Isaiah.

Evidently, the hymns discussed in the pages above are self-referential. Their authors obliquely described *themselves and their communities* as engaged in a performative reenactment and extension of the biblical texts, mediated and sustained by ritual (‘they found themselves filled with the all-holy Spirit from having worshipped’) and confirmed and reinforced by hymnography and iconography; they recognise their location – the liturgy of the church – as the furnace visited by the divine presence, and acknowledge and renew their participation in the spiritual ‘now’ of divine–human interaction. It is in this kind of environment that the Hebrew Bible was re-envisioned christologically and appropriated as Christian scripture.