

VERBUM DEI INCARNATUM AND VERBUM DEI SCRIPTUM IN THE FATHERS

~: Joseph Hugh Crehan, S.J. ~:

Frequent appeal has recently been made to the analogy by which the written Word of God, the *Verbum Dei Scriptum*, produced in the Scriptures by God's power and man's operative union, is compared to the mystery of the incarnation, the *Verbum Dei Incarnatum* where godhead and manhood are united in the person of Jesus Christ.

It has been quoted with approval by theologians of such different views as Loisy, Hurter, Bainvel, and G. B. Bentley,¹ and it is admitted into a recent encyclical of Pope Pius XII.² It was rejected by no less a theologian than Cardinal Billot as being inapplicable.³ Even in Hurter, where the analogy is set forth most fully, the only early authority invoked is that of Hrabanus Maurus, the eighth-century Archbishop of Mainz who wrote in the afterglow of the patristic age, saying:

As in these last times the Word of God, clothed with flesh taken from the Virgin Mary has come forth into this world, though there is one element in him that is visible and another that is hidden, even so when the Word of God is set before men by prophet or legislator, it is set forth in befitting garments, the letter being visible like the flesh of Christ, while the spiritual meaning is hidden within like his divinity.⁴

- 1 Alfred Loisy, *Études Bibliques* [Biblical Studies] (Paris: Alphonse Picard, 1901), 34; Hugo Hurter, *Theologia Generalis Complectens Disputationes Quator* [General Theology], vol. 1 (Innsbruck: Wagner Academic, 1900), 174; Jean Vincent Bainvel, *De Scriptura Sacra* [The Sacred Scripture] (Paris: Gabriel Beauchesne, 1910), 121; Geoffrey Bryant Bentley, *The Resurrection of the Bible* (Paris: Dacre, 1940), 40–47.
- 2 Pope Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* [Inspired by the Divine Spirit], Encyclical Letter Promoting Biblical Studies (September 30, 1943), 41, in *The Scripture Documents: An Anthology of Official Catholic Teachings*, ed. Dean P. Béchar, S.J. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 19–31.
- 3 Louis Billot, *De Inspiratione Sacrae Scripturae: Theologica Disquisitio* [The Inspiration of Sacred Scripture: A Theological Disquisition] (Rome: Society for the Propagation of the Faith, 1903), 129.
- 4 Latin: "Sicut in novissimis diebus Verbum Dei ex Maria virgine carne vestitum processit in hunc mundum, et aliud quidem erat quod videbatur in eo, aliud quod tegebatur, . . . ita et cum per prophetas vel per legislatorem Verbum Dei profertur ad homines, non absque competentibus profertur indumentis . . . ut litera quidem aspiaciatur tanquam caro, latens vero intrinsecus spiritualis sensus tanquam divinitas sentiatur," in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina*, ed. J. P. Migne, 221 vols. (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1844–1864), 108:248. Hereafter abbreviated PL.

It does not seem therefore to be out of place to examine here a few of the patristic evidences on which this analogy can be based.

Even if no patristic text gave an express statement of the analogy, it would be correct to say that the foundations for it are in the Fathers. On the one hand, Eusebius and St. John Damascene speak of Christ using his humanity as an instrument, just as a musician might show forth his wisdom by means of a harp⁵; on the other hand the Fathers generally, from the days of Athenagoras and Theophilus of Antioch, call the inspired writers of the Bible the instruments of God breathed upon by the Spirit of God as a piper might play upon his pipe.⁶

It is true that Christ's humanity is not merely the instrument of his godhead, but then again, neither are the inspired writers mere instruments in the production of the Scriptures, for they are both living and intelligent instruments. The analogy holds good up to the point where one examines the nature of the union between divine and human elements, and here the union of Holy Spirit and inspired writer in the production of the *Verbum scriptum* has yet to yield precedence to the hypostatic union between divine and human natures in Christ.

The first evidence of the analogy in the Fathers I find is in St. Ignatius of Antioch's epistle to the Philadelphians where he speaks of himself "fleeing to the Gospel as to the flesh of Jesus."⁷ The word "Gospel" is changing its sense in the time of Ignatius from the good news preached, to denote something written. Here the context implies that a written gospel (or gospels) is intended, for Ignatius goes on to say that his other refuges are the apostles and the prophets; thus, he uses the common second-century designation of the Old Testament and New in these terms of "prophets" and "apostles." His thought is further clarified in his epistle to the Trallians, where faith is said to be the flesh of Christ and charity his blood.⁸ "Faith" as it was understood in these early times means the elementary creed that was adhered to rather than the act of adherence itself, a creed which the gospels amplified, explained, and defended.

If Ignatius does not say *how* the Gospel is to be likened to the flesh of Christ, Origen and later writers show no such reticence. In his homilies on Leviticus,

5 Eusebius, *Proof of the Gospel*, bk. 4, chap. 13, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne, 161 vols. (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1857–1866), 22:285. Hereafter abbreviated PG. See also John Damascene, *The Orthodox Faith*, bk. 3, chap. 15 (PG 94:1060); also in *The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1947–), 37:277–278. Hereafter abbreviated FC. Athanasius also has the idea that the humanity is the instrument of the Godhead: *Treatise on the Incarnation of the Word of God*, 8, 41 (PG 25:109, 169).

6 Athenagoras, *A Plea for the Christians*, 9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004 [reprint]), 2:133. Hereafter ANF. Theophilus, *To Autolycus*, bk. 2, chap. 9 (PG 4:1064; ANF 2:97).

7 Ignatius, *To the Philadelphians*, 5, 1 (ANF 1:82; Greek: "prospflugōn tō euangeliō hōs sarki Iēsou").

8 Ignatius, *To the Trallians*, 8 (ANF 2:69; Gk: "en pistei ho estin sarx tou Kuriou").

Origen writes: "With the flesh and blood of his word as with pure materials does he give food and drink to the whole human race. Next after his flesh are Peter and Paul and all the apostles to be regarded as pure food, and in the third place, their disciples."⁹

Origen has no doubts about the nature of the Eucharist; he shows his mind about this later in the same set of homilies.¹⁰ The food that Christ gives us is the Word of the Scriptures; the words that he spoke to us are spirit and life, as St. John records;¹¹ Origen loved this text: "We are said to drink the blood of Christ not only at the sacred liturgy but when we take to ourselves those words of his in which are spirit and life, according to his own saying in John."¹² The principal food Christ offers us is his body and blood, and there is analogy, but not strict identity, between the food that is himself and the food that is his written word.

"Blessed Is He who Discerns the Marrow in this Corn"

The analogy is now fairly launched. It reappears in Eusebius, again in conjunction with the text from John 6.¹³ One may in passing remark how much the exegesis of this chapter of John would have gained, and how much Reformation controversy we should have been spared, if this analogy had been familiar at an earlier age when a strict dichotomy was being urged—either the Bible or the Eucharist but not both. Had the interest of theologians then been turned on the problem of authorship, divine and human, of the Scriptures, as in this psychology-ridden age it is now turned, perhaps the analogy would have emerged from its cover much sooner.

One of the most interesting uses of the analogy is made by the author known as pseudo-Jerome, identified with St. Columbanus by the older editors of the *Breviarium in Psalmos* (A Brief Treatise on Psalms). He says, commenting on the words of psalm 147: "He shall fill thee with the fat of corn [Latin: *adipe frumenti saturavit te*]," that this food is the Word of God. "Blessed is he who discerns the marrow in this corn. We read the holy Scriptures. I consider the Body of Jesus is

9 Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, Hom. 7, 5 (FC 83:146; Lat.: "Carnibus enim et sanguine verbi sui tanquam cibo ac potu potat ac reficit omne humanum genus. Secundo in loco post illius carnem mundus cibus est Petrus et Paulus omnesque apostoli; tertio loco discipuli eorum"); also in *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Drei Jahrhunderte* [The Greek Christian Scriptures of the First Three Centuries] (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1897–), 6:387. Hereafter abbreviated GCS. See also, Clement of Alexandria, *The Instructor*, bk. 1, chap. 6, 38 (GCS 1:113; ANF 2:219–222).

10 Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, Hom. 9, 10 (GCS 6:438).

11 John 6:63.

12 Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*, Hom. 16, 9 (GCS 7:152; Lat.: "Bibere autem dicimur sanguinem Christi non solum sacramentorum ritu sed et cum sermones eius recipimus in quibus vita consistit, sicut et ipse dicit: Verba quae ego locutus sum, spiritus et vita est").

13 Eusebius, *Church History*, bk. 1, chap. 3, 12 (GCS 4:168). Also in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]), 1:86. Hereafter abbreviated NPNF2.

the Gospel, the holy Scriptures, his doctrine.”¹⁴ This writer has gone back to the original statement of the analogy in Ignatius. The marrow of the corn was indeed the written Word of God, especially when it told of Christ.

But does not the whole Scripture tell of him? “Search the Scriptures; the same are they that give testimony of me,” as Origen was never tired of quoting from John.¹⁵ This idea, that the whole Scripture looks forward to, or is concerned with Christ, was best brought into relation with our analogy by a medieval writer, Rupert of Deutz. Taking a text from Isaiah: “Before she was in labor, she brought forth,” he finds in it this meaning (which he must have gathered from the Fathers, though I cannot discover his source):

That Word which the Virgin Mary bore incarnate, that same Word did the souls of patriarch and prophet conceive by faith and bring forth in speech and writing at an earlier time.¹⁶

Origen had said as much in another connection: “This honey is good which is found in the Scriptures; and just as among bees there is one that is called king, even so the prince of bees is my Lord Jesus Christ, to whom the Holy Spirit sends me that I should eat honey, for that is good.”¹⁷

¹⁴ PL 26:1334; see also Ps. 147:14.

¹⁵ John 5:39.

¹⁶ Rupert of Deutz, *On Isaiah*, bk. 2, chap. 31 (PL 167:1362; Lat.: “Quod Virgo Maria Verbum parturivit incarnatum, ipsum fide conceptum dicto ac scripto pepererunt prius animae patriarcharum et prophetarum”); compare Isa. 66:7. It has been suggested to me that St. Gregory the Great was Rupert’s source. Gregory does indeed throw out a lapidary phrase (“Learn the heart of God in the words of God [*disce cor Dei in verbis Dei*]”) when writing to Theodore the imperial physician; see *Epistles*, bk. 4, ep. 31 (PL 77:706; NPNF2 12:156). But to my mind Athanasius is more likely in view of his striking statement that when the Logos comes to be in the prophets, then they give forth prophecies in the Holy Spirit. See *Epistle 1 to Serapion*, 31 (PG 26:601).

¹⁷ Origen, *Homilies in Isaiah*, Hom. 2, 2 (PG 13:227; GCS 8:252; Lat.: “Bonus est hoc mel quod in scripturis invenitur; . . . et quomodo inter apes rex quidam est, qui nominatur esse rex, sic princeps apum Dominus meus est Iesus Christus, ad quem mittit me Spiritus sanctus ut comedam mel, bonum est enim”).