

# GREGORY NAZIANZEN'S READING OF HABBAKUK 3:2 AND ITS RECEPTION: A LESSON FROM BYZANTINE SCRIPTURE EXEGESIS

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## INTRODUCTION

At least since the nineteenth century, Gregory of Nazianzus has been known in academia as one of the three "Cappadocian Fathers," along with his friends Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. Much older than this scholarly label is the ecclesial designation of "three holy fathers, great hierarchs, and ecumenical teachers" under which Gregory of Nazianzus, Basil of Caesarea, and John Chrysostom (rather than Gregory of Nyssa) are commemorated jointly since the eleventh century. With its typical rhetorical flourish, Byzantine hymnography renders homage to the three hierarchs for their special contribution to Trinitarian theology, celebrating them, as the *apolytikion* of the feast says, as "the three greatest luminaries of the three-sun divinity."<sup>1</sup>

The hagiographic memory of the church honors Gregory not so much as bishop of Nazianzus, but as "Gregory the Theologian"—a title of distinction shared only with the author of the fourth Gospel and, ironically, with Symeon the New Theologian.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Gregory seems to have been

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1. The irony consists in the fact that Symeon's appellation of "New Theologian" was not meant as a flattering comparison with Gregory, but rather as a denunciation for heresy.

viewed as the theologian par excellence. His orations, the most copied of all Byzantine manuscripts after the Scriptures, recited on Sundays and feast days over the course of the liturgical year, used in classroom exercises, annotated and commented upon by some of the best theological minds in Byzantium, were "cited, plagiarized, and plundered thousands of times," and, before being translated into all languages of the Christian commonwealth, came to constitute a common cultural pool of formulations used in the Greek-speaking East in the same way that phrases and bon mots from La Fontaine are used in French, or Shakespearean turns of phrase are still with us in English.<sup>2</sup>

This rich reception history is not confined to the articulation of Christological or Trinitarian doctrine. Numerous passages from Nazianzen's orations have also flown into poetic compositions by John of Damascus, Cosmas of Maiuma, and others, eventually becoming the normative and generally received hymnography of Byzantine Christianity. One of the Byzantine hymns of Pentecost, for instance, is identical to the lines from Gregory of Nazianzus.<sup>3</sup> In other cases, such as John Damascene's Canon of the Resurrection (now part of the Byzantine *Pentecostarion*), the use of Nazianzen's orations is only slightly less than a full quotation.

Compare, for example, the following two passages from John of Damascus's *Canon of the Resurrection* with their source in Gregory of Nazianzus:

(1) Anastaseōs hēmera, kai lamprynthōmen tē panēgyrei, kai allēloys periptyxōmetha; eipōmen adelphoi kai tois misousin hēmas; sygchōrēsōmen panta tē anastasei.<sup>4</sup>

Cf. Anastaseōs hēmera kai hē archē desia, kai lamprynthōmen tē panēgyrei, kai allēlois periptyxōmetha; eipōmen adelphoi kai tois misousin hēmas, mē hoti tois di' agapēn ti pepoitēkosin, ē peponthosi; sugchōrēsōmen panta tē anastasei.<sup>5</sup>

where, depending on the text variants, Eunomius is addressed as *ō kaine theologe* ("new theologian") or *ō kene theologe* ("vain theologian"). Since these two readings would not have been differentiated in Byzantine pronunciation, editorial choices are particularly difficult. Paul Gallay, for instance, chooses *ō kaine theologe* for *Orat.* 29.10 (SC 250:196) and *ō kene theologe* for *Orat.* 34.12 (SC 318:220).

2. See Jacques Noret, "Grégoire de Nazianze, l'auteur le plus cité, après la Bible, dans la littérature ecclésiastique byzantine," in *II. Symposium Nazianzenum* 2, ed. Justin Mossay (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1983), 259-66, esp. 264-65; Friedhelm Leftherz, *Studien zu Gregor von Nazianz: Mythologie, Überlieferung, Scholasten* (Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, 1958), 111-47, 237-57; Leslie Brubaker, *Vision and Meaning in Ninth-Century Byzantium: Inaugural Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 285; George Galavaris, *The Illustrations of the Liturgical Homilies of Gregory Nazianzenus* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 9-12.

3. Pentecost Vespers, Sticheron at Lord I have cried = Or. 41.5 (PG 36:436B): *Pentēkostēn hēortazomen, kai Pneumatatos epidēmian, kai prothēsmian epaggelias, kai elpidos sumploērōsin. Kai to mustērion hoson hōs mega te kai sebasmion.*

4. John of Damascus, *Canon of Resurrection*, doxastichon at the Praises.

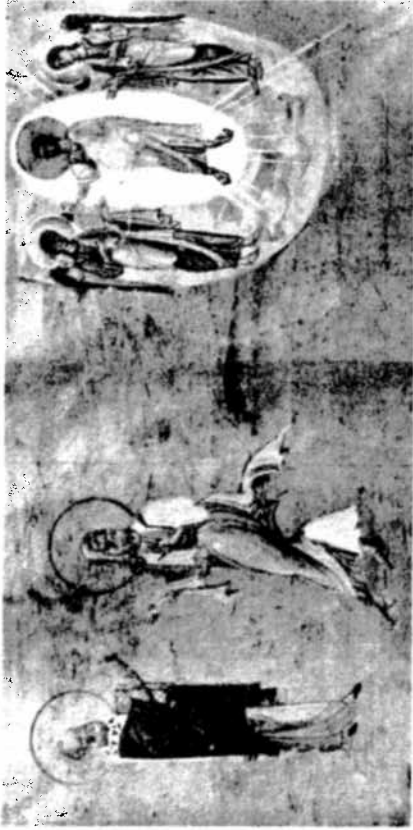


Image 1. Vision of Habakkuk, Codex Taphou 14, fol. 9r (11th c.).

(2) Chthes synethaptomēn soi Christe synegeiromai sēmeron anastantū soi, synestauroumēn soi chthes, autos me syndoxason Sofēr, en tē basilēia sou.<sup>6</sup> Cf. Chthes synestauroumēn Christō, sēmeron syndoxazomai; chthes synenekroumen, syzōpouioimai sēmeron; chthes synethaptomēn, sēmeron synegeiromai.<sup>7</sup>

There are many more such instances, as evidenced in the recent study by Peter Karavites, which gives a near-complete account of Gregory's reception in Byzantine hymnography.<sup>8</sup> As for his iconographic reception, the most familiar icon is that of the three hierarchs, which reflects their common liturgical celebration on January 30, instituted in the eleventh century. Less familiar in the ecclesial milieu, but well-known in academia, are the depictions of Gregory teaching, Gregory at his writing desk, Gregory and the poor, and so on, which appear among the illustrations that accompany the manuscripts of Nazianzen's orations. In what follows I will focus on the depiction of Gregory Nazianzen in the iconography of "the vision of Habakkuk," as it occurs in Codex Taphou 14, fol. 9r (11th c.), Athos Dionysiou Codex 61, fol. 4r (11th–12th c.), and Sinai Codex Gr. 339, fol. 9v (12th c.).

These representations of Habakkuk's vision have some peculiar features. They depict a majestic Christ resplendent with glory, escorted by two angels; or Christ enthroned on a platform upheld by four creatures; or an angelomorphic Christ, surrounded by angels that form a living throne; or a vision of Christ shared by Habakkuk and Ezekiel. Truth be told, it is difficult to find a passage in the Bible that would speak of a vision of Habakkuk in this manner. Most peculiar is the depiction of

6. John of Damascus, *Canon of Resurrection*, sticheron at Ode 3.



Image 2. Vision of Habakkuk, Athos Cod. Dionysiou 61, fol. 4r (11th–12th c.).

Gregory of Nazianzus in these scenes. At this point, we need to take a closer look at the biblical basis for these icons.

#### HAB 3:2 IN THE LXX

It is perhaps worth insisting that the presence of Jesus in the illustration of a text drawn from the Hebrew Bible is not at all unusual for the iconography, hymnography, and exegetical literature of the first Christian millennium. Theologically, the identification of Christ with the Glory, Name, Angel, or Son of Man manifested to the patriarchs and prophets is a constitutive element of early Christology.<sup>9</sup> This sort of "Yahweh Christology" or "Christology of Divine Identity" has been traced back to the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of John, the Pauline corpus, and the Catholic Epistle of

9. See the articles collected in Carey C. Newman, James R. Davila, and Gladys S. Lewis,

Jude.<sup>10</sup> In the words of Alexander Goltzain, "that Jesus, Mary's son, is the very One who appeared to Moses and the prophets—this is the consistent witness of the ante-Nicene Fathers, and remains foundational throughout the fourth-century Trinitarian controversies and the later christological disputes."<sup>11</sup> Moreover, unlike the Christian West, where Augustine's notion of theophanies as created and evanescent manifestations gradually became an unquestioned theological assumption,<sup>12</sup> Byzantine hymnography carried on the older view of theophanies and transfigurative Christophanies.<sup>13</sup> It is the latter theology that underlies the manuscript illuminations of Habakkuk's vision under discussion.

The scriptural basis for depicting the vision of Habakkuk as an icon of Jesus between two angels is found in the Septuagint of Hab 3:2, which reads, "Lord, I have heard report of you, and was afraid: I considered your works, and was amazed: *you will be known between the two living creatures.*" This rendering appears as such both in the LXX of Habakkuk and in the collection of biblical odes, as well as in the "Barberini version."<sup>14</sup> The Masoretic text of Hab 3:2 is quite different: "I have heard, o

10. Anthony Tyrell Hanson, *Jesus Christ in the Old Testament* (London: SPCK, 1965); Iarl Fossum, "Kyrios Jesus as the Angel of the Lord in Jude 5-7," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 226-43; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); E. Earle Ellis, "Deity-Christology in Mark 14:58," in *Jesus of Nazareth Lord and Christ: Essays in the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, ed. J. B. Greene and M. M. Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 192-203; David Capes, *Old Testament Yahweh Texts in Paul's Christology*, WUNT 47/2 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1992); Walther Binni and Bernardo Gianluigi Boschi, *Christologia primitiva: Dalla teofania del Sinai all'io sono giovanne* (Bologna: Dehoniana, 2004); Charles Gieschen, "The Real Presence of the Son before Christ: Revisiting an Old Approach to Old Testament Christology," *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 68 (2004): 105-26 (with abundant references). For the Christological use of the divine Name in early Christianity, see Jean Daniélou, *The Way to Nicæa* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 2001), 62-66; Gieschen, "The Divine Name in Ante-Nicene Christology," *Vigiliae Christianae* 57 (2003): 115-58.

11. Alexander Goltzain, "Theophaneia: Forum on the Jewish Roots of Orthodox Spirituality," in *The Theophania School: Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism*, ed. B. Lourie and A. Orlov (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009), xviii.

12. See Basil Studer, *Zur Theophanie-Exegese: Augustinus: Untersuchungen zu einem Ambrosius-Zitat in der Schrift 'De Videndo Deo'*, Studia Anselmiana 59 (Rome: Herder, 1971); Michel René Barnes, "Exegesis and Polemic in Augustine's *De Trinitate* 1," *Augustinian Studies* 30 (1999): 43-60; Michel René Barnes, "The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine's Trinitarian Theology of 400," *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 329-56.

13. See Bogdan G. Bucur, "Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies in Byzantine Hymnography: Rewritten Bible?," *Theological Studies* 68 (2007): 92-112; Bogdan G. Bucur, "Theophanies and Vision of God in Augustine's *De Trinitate*: An Eastern Orthodox Perspective," *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 52 (2008): 67-93.

14. Marguerite Harl, *La Bible d'Alexandrie: Les douze prophètes 4-9* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 245-46; Edwin M. Good, "The Barberini Greek Version of Habakkuk III," *Vetus Testamentum* (1959): 11-30. The "Barberini version" is a non-LXX translation of Hab 3, used for liturgical purposes in an Alexandrian synagogue around the late first or second century C.E., and preserved in six manuscripts ranging from the eighth to the twelfth centuries. According to

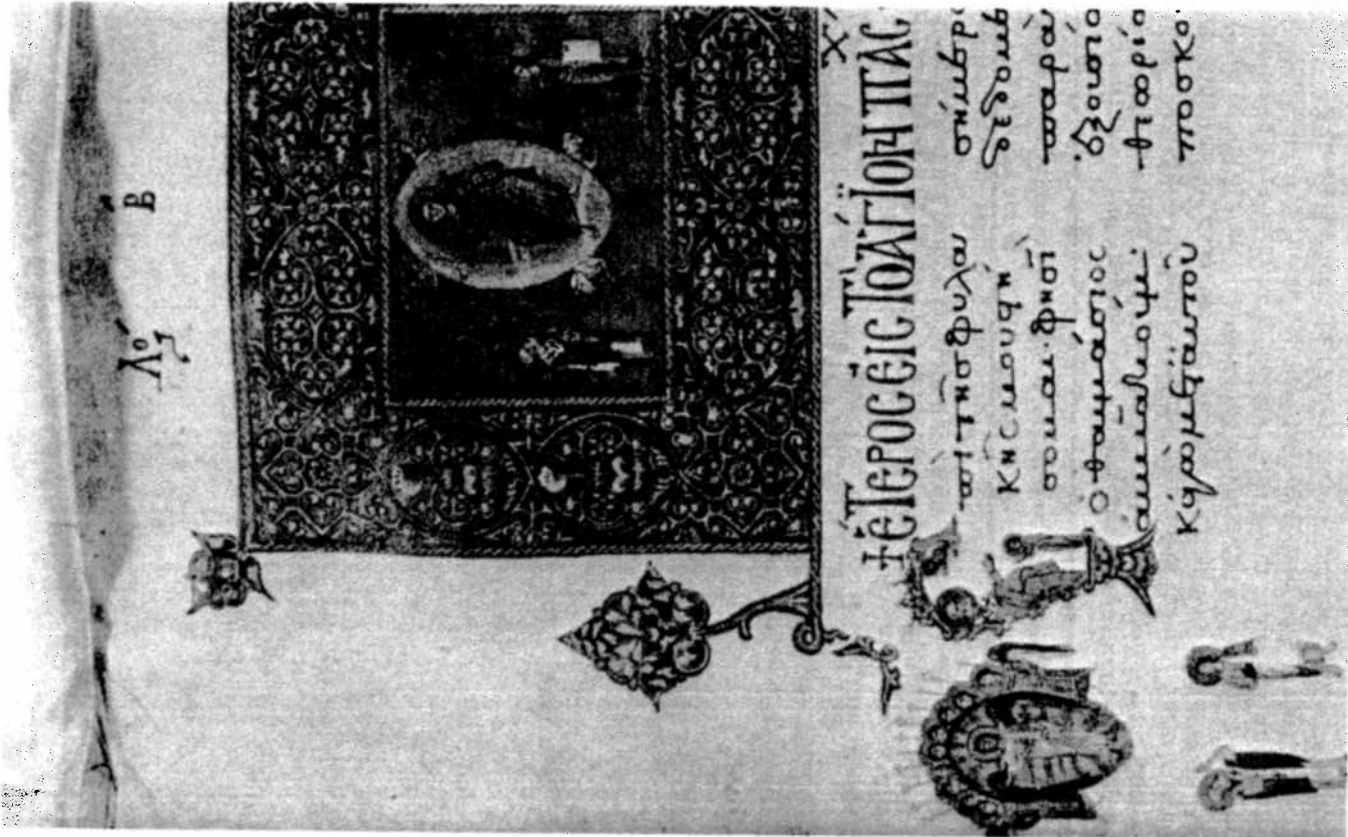


Image 3. Vision of Habakkuk, Sinai cod. gr. 339, fol. 9v (12th c.)

LORD, the report of you, and your work, O LORD, do I fear. *In the midst of the years renew it; in the midst of the years make it known; in wrath remember mercy.*" In Latin-speaking Christianity, despite the Vulgate's option for the Hebrew version of Hab 3:2, the Old Itala, which followed the LXX (*in medio duorum animalium innotesceris*), continued to remain popular. One of the main reasons for this type of conservatism was the ongoing liturgical use of Hab 3 ("the canticle of Habakkuk") as part of the so-called biblical odes—a series of biblical hymns that became part of the Daily Office of both Eastern and Western Christianity.<sup>15</sup>

Scholars have discussed at length the difficulties of the Hebrew text, offering various and conflicting reconstructions of the pre-Masoretic text, and analyzing the puzzling divergences between the Greek and the Hebrew.<sup>16</sup> Despite their efforts, the details of how a combination between a Hebrew *Vorlage* slightly different from the MT and a vocalization different from that of the MT produced the LXX reading of Hab 3:2 remain disputed. In any case, philological analysis alone does not suffice to explain the occurrence of the two living beings in the LXX. The trigger for that particular interpretation of the visually ambiguous phenomenon in pre-Masoretic Hab 3:2 was a *theological* one.<sup>17</sup> The translator made an interpretative

Good, "[t]he independence of Barb. indicates that Hab III circulated independently of the Book of the Twelve, and the liturgical notes in all texts of the chapter show that the circulation was liturgical" (20). Barberini had as its *Vorlage* an early variant tradition of Hab 3, different from the MT (Good, 22) and also different from the LXX. The great exception, however, is Hab 3:2, which "has been conflated with the LXX" (Good, 20). Good takes this fact as an indication that Barberini version cannot be dated later than the second century (29); however, the conflation with LXX could very well have been the work of the Christian copyists to whom we owe the six medieval manuscripts that contain the Barberini text.

15. Heinrich Schneider, "Die biblischen Oden im Mittelalter," *Biblica* 30 (1949): 479–500 (esp. 479–91, "Die griechischen Oden im lateinischen Westen"); Martin McNamara, "Five Irish Psalter Texts," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 109C (2009): 37–104, esp. 54. See also Schneider, "Die biblischen Oden im christlichen Altertum," *Biblica* 30 (1949): 28–65; Schneider, "Die biblischen Oden seit dem sechsten Jahrhundert," *Biblica* 30 (1949): 239–72; Schneider, "Die biblischen Oden in Jerusalem und Konstantinopel," *Biblica* 30 (1949): 433–52.

16. The Hebrew of Hab 3:2 has invited scholarly emendations and conjectures of all kinds. It is interesting that even the Talmud (*b. Sotah 49a*) leaves open the possibility of an alternative vocalization: "read not 'in the midst of the years' [*beqereb šanim*], but 'in the drawing together of two' [*beqereb šenayim*]." For modern scholarship, aside from commentaries on the Book of Habakkuk, see also the following studies: Leo Jung, "Mis-Translation as Source in Jewish and Christian Lore," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 5 (1934): 55–67, at 56–58; Michael Baré, "Habakkuk 3:2 in Context," *CBQ* (1984): 184–97; G. T. M. Prinsloo, "Reading Habakkuk 3 in Its Literary Context: A Worthwhile Exercise or Futile Attempt?" *Journal for Semitics/Vidskrift för Semististik* 11 (2002): 83–111; Marguerite Harl, *La Bible d'Alexandrie: Les douze prophètes 4–9* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 251–51, 287, 243–48, 284–89.

17. In his book *Meaning in the Text: Translation Technique and Theology in the Septuagint of Amos* (New York: Brill, 2009), W. Edward Glenny notes—and his observations on Amos are perfectly applicable to Hab 3:2—that "when the translator was confronted with difficult and ambiguous

choice under the inevitable influence of the imagery of Exod 25 (God's appearance between the two cherubim) and Isa 6 (God's appearance between the two seraphim). How else does one account for the LXX's interpretation of "in the midst of" (*beqereb*) as "in between *two*" (*en mesō duo*)?

#### WIRKUNGSGESCHICHTE OF HAB 3:2

Origen alone offers two distinct interpretations of Hab 3:2. In his *De principiis* (1.3.4), possibly on the basis of older writings,<sup>18</sup> but surely echoing, as he says, the oral instruction of a Jewish-Christian teacher, Origen uses the Habakkuk text in conjunction with the vision of Isa 6 (God enthroned and attended by seraphim in the Temple) and explains:

My Hebrew master also used to say that those two seraphim in Isaiah, which are described as having each six wings, and calling to one another, and saying, "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts" [Isa 6.1] were to be understood of the only-begotten Son of God and of the Holy Spirit. And we think that that expression also which occurs in the hymn of Habakkuk . . . ought to be understood of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. For all knowledge of the Father is obtained by revelation of the Son through the Holy Spirit, so that both of these beings which, according to the prophet, are called either "living things" or "lives," exist as the ground of the knowledge of God the Father.

The identification of Isaiah's two seraphim as the Logos and the Holy Spirit also occurs in Origen's homilies on Isaiah, this time without any reference to Habakkuk.<sup>19</sup> Even though he had himself translated these homilies into Latin, Jerome later deemed this Trinitarian interpretation heretical, most likely because of its subordinationistic connotations.<sup>20</sup>

points out at the onset of his chapter entitled "Visually Ambiguous Phenomena" (109–46), appears to have been coined by James Karol Palmer, "Not Made with Tracing Paper: Studies in the Septuagint of Zechariah" (Ph.D. diss., Cambridge University, 2004), 81.

18. Irenaeus, *Epid.* 10 (God is glorified by the Logos and the Spirit, who are identified with or in charge of "their powers"—the cherubim and seraphim); *Mar. Asc. Isa.* 9 (God is worshipped by the angel of the Logos and the angel of the Holy Spirit). For a discussion of these passages in conjunction with Origen, see Georg Kretschmar, *Studien zur frühchristlichen Trinitätslehre*, BHT 21 (Tübingen: Mohr, 1956), 64–67, 73; Jean Daniélou, *The Theology of Jewish Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1964 [1958]), 134–40. See also, for connections with Philo, Emmanuel Lanne, "Chérubim et séraphim: Essai d'interprétation du chap. X de la *Démonstration de s. Irénée*," *Recherches de science religieuse* 43 (1955): 524–35.

19. Origen, *In Isaiam hom.* 1.2 (PG 13:221B): "Quae sunt ista duo seraphim? Dominus meus Jesus et Spiritus sanctus."

20. Jerome, *Ep.* 61.2 (*To Vigilantius*): "Origen is a heretic, true; but what does that take from me who do not deny that on very many points he is heretical? He has erred concerning the resurrection of the body, he has erred concerning the condition of souls, he has erred by supposing it possible that the devil may repent, and—an error more important

A different interpretation of the Habakkuk passage occurs in Origen's *Commentary on Romans* (3.8.2–8), which combines Hab 3:2 with Exod 25:22 (“There I will meet with you, and from above the *hilastērion*, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant”) and Rom 3:25 (God set Christ forth as the *hilastērion*). Origen’s exegetical reasoning is worth following with attention. He notes, first, that a connection between Hab 3:2 and Exod 25:22 is suggested by the common verb (*gnōstihēsē/ gnōstihēsomai*), the similar locative phrase (*en mesō/ana meson*) and the peculiarly Septuagintal introduction of the numeral “two” in Hab 3:2. Once the connection of Hab 3:2 with Exod 25:22 has been established, Origen uses the occurrence of *hilastērion* in the passages in Exod 25 and Rom 3 in order to connect Hab 3:2 with Romans. Briefly put, the vision of Habakkuk can be read Christologically via Exod 25. Origen comes to the following conclusions: (1) Habakkuk’s “two living beings” are the two cherubim on the mercy-seat, where God makes himself known in theophany; (2) the mercy seat (*hilastērion*) is the human soul of Jesus, in whom the Word and Spirit dwell perpetually, and it covers the ark, which represents Jesus’s flesh; (3) the statement in Hab 3:2 (“you will be known between the two living beings”) applies “to any saint who is a servant of God: God does not become known from any other place . . . except from that propitiatory, which we have expounded above” (3.8.8)—in other words, the locus of theognosy is Jesus, in whom dwell the Spirit and the Logos.<sup>21</sup>

Evidently, the Christological exegesis of Hab 3:2 is not necessarily tied to Origen’s protological speculation, which is most likely a complication of the earlier Christological reading of Hab 3.<sup>22</sup> Quite likely, the tradition that Origen had received was an interpretation of the “two living beings” in Hab 3:2 in light of the two cherubim on the mercy-seat (Exod 25), identified with the two seraphim in Isaiah’s vision (Isa 6)—all within the general framework of a Christological understanding of OT theophanies.

The Christian exegesis of “God known between the two living beings” has many variants.<sup>23</sup> According to Tertullian (echoed by Augustine, Leo

21. For a reconstruction of Origen’s theology of the cherubim, see Vlad Niculescu, *The Spell of the Logos: Origen’s Exegetic Pedagogy in the Contemporary Debate regarding Logocentrism* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009), 147–51.

22. A similar exegesis of the Old and New Testament references to *hilastērion*, but without Origen’s note on the soul of Jesus, occurs in Cyril of Alexandria’s scholion 14 on the Incarnation (PG 75:1387–89).

23. Eusebius of Caesarea, *Dem. ev.* 6.15; Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat.* 12.20; Hesychius, Scholion on Ode 3, in *Comm.* in *Odas* (Vatroslav Jagić, *Supplementum psalterii Bononiensis: Incerti auctoris explanatio Graeca* [Vienna: Holzhausen, 1917], 301–2); *en mesō: Lexei tous duo lēstias, tous staurōthēntas syn autō*; Cyril of Alexandria, *Scholia on the Incarnation of the Only Begotten* 30 (PG 75:1403; see the English translation and note of John McGuckin, *Saint Cyril of Alexandria and the Christological Controversy* [Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2004], 325n13); *Gospel of Ps.-Mt.* 14; Augustine, *Civ.* 18.32; Jerome, *Comm. Hab.* 2.49 (PL 25:1309CD); Ps.-Leo of Rome, *De Transfiguratione Domini* / *Sermo* 20.4 (PL 54:522C); Eleutherius of Tourmai, *Sermo de Nativitate Domini* (PL

of Rome, the Venerable Bede), the vision of the Lord in his luminous glory between the two living beings (Hab 3:2) is a vision of the transfigured Christ between Moses and Elijah:

We find also in Habakkuk the complete outline of this vision (*habitu visiois istius*), where the Spirit speaks in the person of the apostles (*ex persona apostolorum*) sometime to be, “Lord, I have heard thy hearing and was afraid” (Hab 3:2). What hearing, other than of that voice from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, hear him” (Luke 9:35)? “I considered thy works and was astounded” (Hab 3:2): when else than when Peter saw his glory, and “knew not what he said” (Luke 9:33)? “In the midst of two living creatures—Moses and Elijah—thou shalt be known” (Hab 3:2). . . . And once more, Habakkuk again, “His virtue covered the heavens, with that cloud, and his glory will be as the light” (Hab 3:3–4) the light with which even his garments glistened (*marc.* 4.22.12–13).

Anastasius the Sinaite also links the vision of Habakkuk and the Transfiguration: Jesus appears “between the two living beings” both on the Mountain of the Skull (between the two thieves, in a manner befitting the Cross, *staurōprepōs*) and on the Mountain of the Transfiguration, between Moses and Elijah, in a manner befitting God (*theoprepōs*).<sup>24</sup>

Another possibility, which occurs in Hesychius of Jerusalem and the Venerable Bede, is to read Hab 3:2 as a reference to Jesus crucified between the two thieves. Or, as in Cyril of Alexandria, Symeon the New Theologian, the *Gospel of Ps.-Mt.*, and Eleutherius of Tourmai, to read Hab 3:2 as a prophecy about the newborn Jesus between the ox and the ass. In this case, Hab 3:2 is again connected with Isaiah, this time with Isa 1:3, “The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master’s crib, but Israel has not known me”—a connection made possible by three elements: theophany, the issue of “God being known/recognized,” and the peculiarly Septuagintal reading of “two things” in Hab 3:2 (itself probably under the influence of Exod 25 and Isa 6). Other readings are more theologically abstract: Christ between his earthly life and his life after the Resurrection (Cyril of Jerusalem), Christ between the human and the divine natures (Eusebius of Caesarea), Christ between the Old Testament and New Testament (Cyril of Alexandria, Augustine, and Jerome), Christ between the present life and future life (Theodoret).

(CCSL 119B:383; English tr. Sean Connolly, *Bede on Tobit and on the Canticle of Habakkuk* [Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997], 68). One should also note the strictly literal-historical exegesis of Theodore of Mopsuestia in *Commentary on the Twelve Prophets*, tr. Robert C. Hill (Washington: CUA Press, 2004), 280: God will display his power in the invasion of the Assyrians and that of the Babylonians. See also the references collected by Marguerite Harl, *La Bible d’Alexandrie: Les douze prophètes 4–9* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), and Francesc Caprubi, “El bou i l’ase en el pessebre,” *Revista Catalana de Teologia* 14 (1989): 441–51.

24. André Guillou, “Le monastère de la Théotokos au Sinai: Origines; épitélèse; mosaïque de la Transfiguration; homélie inédite d’Anastase le Sinaïte sur la Transfiguration (étude et

It is quite clear that the Christological interpretation of Hab 3:2 LXX was, by far, the more popular one. And it is this Christological interpretation that also occurs in the "Vision of Habakkuk" from the *Codex Taphou* 14: the risen Christ, luminous, between the two angels.<sup>25</sup>

Of course, picturing the risen Christ between angels owes to a reading of Hab 3:2 filtered through the Gospel of Peter (9:35–10:40):

Now in the night in which the Lord's day dawned, when the soldiers, two by two in every watch, were keeping guard, there rang out a loud voice in heaven, and they saw that the heavens opened and that two men come down from there in a great brightness and draw nigh to the sepulcher. The stone which had been laid against the entrance to the sepulcher was opened, and both young men entered in. . . . They saw again three men come out from the sepulcher, and two of them sustaining the other, and a cross following them, and the heads of the two reaching to heaven, but that of him who was led of them by the overpassing the heavens.

#### HAB 3:2 AS A MERKAVAH VISION

The close relation between the throne-theophanies of Isaiah and Ezekiel, and their frequent merger in later biblical texts (e.g., Rev 4) and in Christian mysticism, hymnography, and iconography, has been discussed at length. Less attention has been given to the relation between the visions of Ezekiel and Habakkuk. The ancients, however, saw things differently. The Babylonian Talmud gives both the vision of Habakkuk and the vision of Ezekiel as readings for Shavuot, the feast of the giving of the law.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in Byzantine iconography Ezekiel and Habakkuk are sometimes depicted as visionaries of the same Christ on the chariot-throne. This is the case of the famous fifth-century mosaic at the Latomos monastery in Thessaloniki, or its fourteenth-century copy at the Poganovo monastery in Serbia.<sup>27</sup>

25. Evidently, there is here a discernible trace of the tradition preserved in the Gospel of Peter 35–43.

26. *h. Meg* 31a: "On Pentecost, *Seven weeks shall thou number* [Deut 16:9], and from the Prophets, in Habakkuk 3. An anonymous teacher says *In the third month* [Exod 19], and the portion from the Prophets should be from Ezekiel 1, about the Divine Chariot. And now when in exile we keep two days Pentecost, we do as both have said, but reverse it on the first day of the New Year, as the anonymous teacher, and on the second as above." Hab 2:20–3:19 was appointed as the *hattarah* for the Second Day of Shavuot some time between the first century B.C.E. and the early decades of the first century C.E. See M. Harl et al., eds., *La Bible d'Alexandrie: Les douze prophètes 4–9* (Paris: Cerf, 2004), 244; Charles Perrot, "The Reading of the Bible in the Ancient Synagogue," in *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading, and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, ed. M. J. Mulder and H. Sysling (Philadelphia: Fortress; Assen: Van Gorcum, 1988), 137–259, esp. 146–47.

27. For an extensive discussion, see Wayne A. Meeks, "Vision of God and Scripture Interpretation in a Fifth-Century Mosaic," in *In Search of the Early Christians: Selected Essays*.

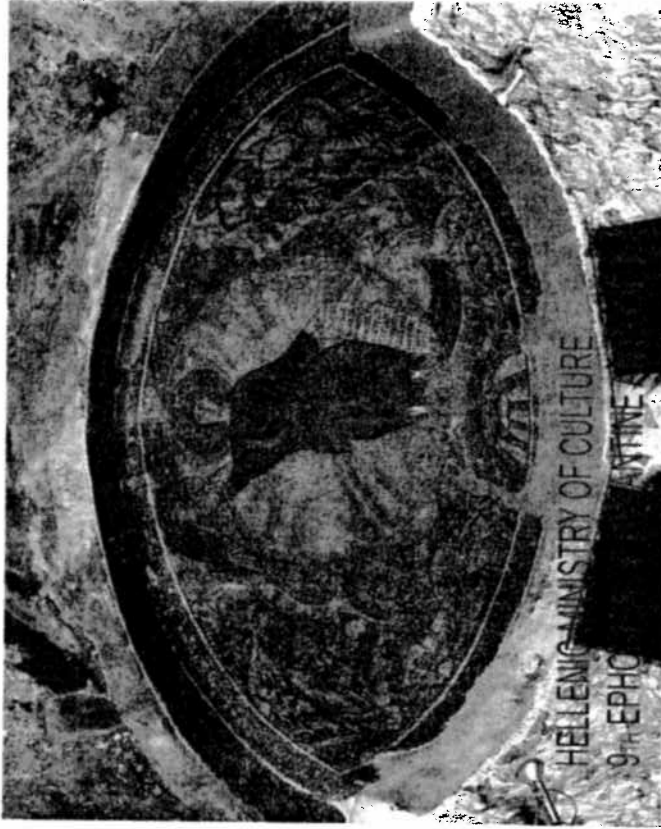


Image 4. Vision of Habakkuk, mosaic in the Hosios David church of the Latomos monastery, Thessaloniki (5th century). Photo courtesy of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, 9th Ephoreia of Byzantine Antiquities.

Both icons rely on visual details from the prophecy of Ezekiel: the four tetramorphic creatures (Ezek 1:5, 6, 10), reinterpreted as four creatures bearing the throne (Rev 4:7), and the rainbow (Ezek 1:28); even the scroll that Habakkuk holds, in the Poganovo icon, contains a passage from Ezekiel: "Son of Man, eat this scroll!" (Ezek 3:1). Strangely, however, the scroll of Christ contains a quotation from Isa 25:9–10: "Behold our God in whom we hope, and we have rejoiced over our salvation: for God will give rest in this house" ("Idou ho Theos hemōn, eph' hō elpizomen [*Isaiiah: elpizomen*] kai ēgalliometha epi tē sōtēria hēmōn hoti anapausin dōsei ho Theos epi ton oikōn toutōn [*Isaiiah: epi to oros touto!*]). As Meeks notes, "the inscription . . . substitutes 'this house' for 'this mountain', equating the church with Mount Zion."<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the elimination of the verse's opening ("And in that day they shall say"), coupled with the change of tense from *ēlpizomen* to *elpizomen*, apply the prophetic text more clearly to the community at worship.

Given all of the above, it is not unusual to see that Sinai Cod. gr. 339 fol. 9v. represents Habakkuk's vision as a vision of Christ on a throne supported by four angelic creatures. Indeed, the connection with Ezekiel, whose first chapter is taken up entirely with the description of the chariot-throne

bearing the human-like manifestation of God, is not arbitrary: the (two) *zōa* of Hab 3:2 quite naturally suggest a relation with the (four) *zōa* in Ezekiel 1. Moreover, Hab 3:8 speaks of God who will mount his horses (*epihēsē epi tous hippos*) and whose horse-chariot (*hē hippusia*) is salvation. This can be connected conceptually with texts such as Ps 18:10 (*epēbē epi cheroubim*) and Ezek 43:3 (“the vision of the chariot,” *hē horasis tou harnatos*).

And yet, how can we even be sure that the prophet in this icon is not Ezekiel but Habakkuk? Paradoxically, we know that this is Habakkuk because of the second figure in the icon—Gregory of Nazianzus! The inclusion of Gregory in the depiction of Habakkuk’s vision owes to the following passage in Nazianzen’s *Second Paschal Oration* (Orat. 45.1):

“I will stand upon my watch and mount upon the rock” [Hab 2:1], says the venerable Habakkuk . . . Well, I have taken my stand, and looked forth; and beheld a man riding on the clouds and he is very high, and his countenance is like the countenance of an angel, and his vesture is like the brightness of piercing lightning [Hab 3:4]; and he lifts his hand toward the East, and cries with a piercing voice . . . “Today salvation has come to the visible and to the invisible world. Christ is risen from the dead, rise all with Him!”

An additional difficulty arises if one considers the presence of Nazianzen in *Codex Taplicou* 14. In this illumination, Christ between two angels obviously depicts Hab 3:2 (“you shall be known between the two creatures”); however, the paschal oration discusses Hab 2:1 (“I will stand upon my watch and mount upon the rock”) and Hab 3:4 (“his vesture is like piercing lightning”). This apparent discrepancy is explained by the assumed connection between (a) the vision for which Habakkuk prepares himself, which God instructs him to write down clearly for all (Hab 2), (b) and the hyper-luminous theophany of the Lord between the two living creatures (Hab 3), and (c) Gregory Nazianzen’s allusion to Luke 19:9 (“Today salvation has come to this house”). Overall, Habakkuk’s vision is interpreted as a vision of the risen Christ, and is met with the “piercing cry,” “Today salvation has come to the world! Christ is risen from the dead!”<sup>29</sup>

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#### THE LAYERED EXEGESIS OF HABAKKUK’S VISION IN GREGORY NAZIANZEN AND JOHN DAMASCENE

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The biblical text reporting the vision of Habakkuk has had a multilayered hymnographic and iconographic reception. There is, first, the icon in

29. Cf. Bissera Pencheva, “Imagined Images: Visions of Salvation and Intercession in a Double-Sided Icon from Poganovo,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 54 (2000): 139–53, at 144: “This humbly made popular Habakkuk’s vision of the Resurrection of Christ among the Byzantine

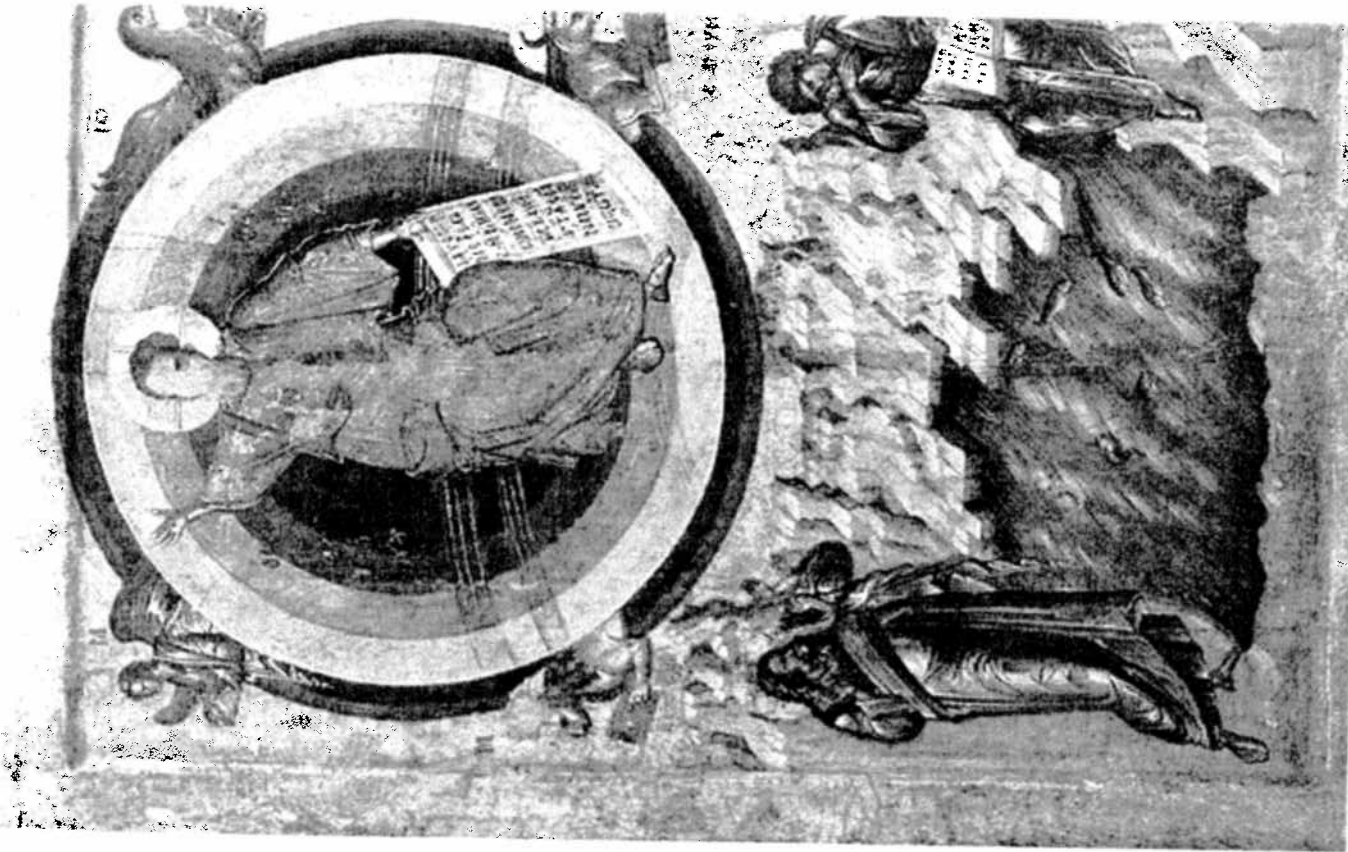


Image 5. Vision of Habakkuk, monastery of Poganovo (Serbia), now at the National

which Gregory seems to point out to Habakkuk just what it is that he is seeing. Second, we have another instance of Gregory being quoted and reworked by John Damascene, this time, in Ode 4 of the Paschal Canon: "Let the prophet Habakuk, inspired by God, keep the divine watch with us, and show forth the radiant [*pluosphoron*] angel, who with resounding voice declares, 'Today is salvation for the world, for Christ is risen as almighty.'" We have, in other words, a biblical text—Habakkuk—surrounded by three layers of exegesis: Gregory's paschal oration, Damascene's paschal canon, and the icon. It is noteworthy that the icon refers back not only to the biblical text, but also to the exegesis of Nazianzen. It would be better to speak of a collapse of time in the liturgical "now" of the icon, where Habakkuk's vision and Gregory's exegesis of the vision become contemporaries. What is more important, the icon also aims at collapsing the temporal distinction between the beholder of the icon and the liturgical "now" of the icon: in other words, the beholder is to join the prophet's vision, by joining in Gregory's exegesis.<sup>30</sup> This, however, is not an invitation to study the biblical writings or the patristic exegesis of the Bible; rather, as Nazianzen says explicitly, it is an invitation to consume the Scriptures liturgically by proclaiming the Resurrection—*Christ is risen from the dead!*—and an exhortation to what is sometimes called "transformational mysticism": *rise all with Him!*

In this way, the icon furnishes not only a depiction of the scriptural text (the vision of Habakkuk), but also a depiction of what exegesis is about, and what it means to be an exegete. More broadly speaking, the icon illustrates well Gregory's notion of theology as mystery. As one reads repeatedly in the orations, the root of all theology is God's tremendous mystery revealed in Jesus Christ. Using biblical imagery, he likens it to an ascent into the inaccessible darkness of divine mystery, and compares the theologian with Moses ascending Sinai and entering the cloud of divine unknowing, which he identifies with the innermost recesses of the heart (*Orat.* 28.3); and, again, he compares the theological endeavor with access to the inaccessible holy of holies in the Temple. If theology is a matter of divine initiation, and theologians are, as he says, "friends and fellow-initiates" (*Orat.* 28.3), theology is also meant to be converted into an effective mystagogy. This is what has been captured magnificently in a sixteenth-century Russian icon of the three hierarchs. In the lowest register of that icon, which depicts Nazianzen, the text of Gregory's sermon is indistinguishable from his priestly stole, suggesting that what he writes and preaches is indistinguishable from his sacramental ministry. In

30. As Meeks notes about the Latomos mosaic, "liturgy, art, and preaching worked together to mediate an experience of worship" (Meeks, "Vision of God and Scripture Interpretation in a Fifth-Century Mosaic," 235).

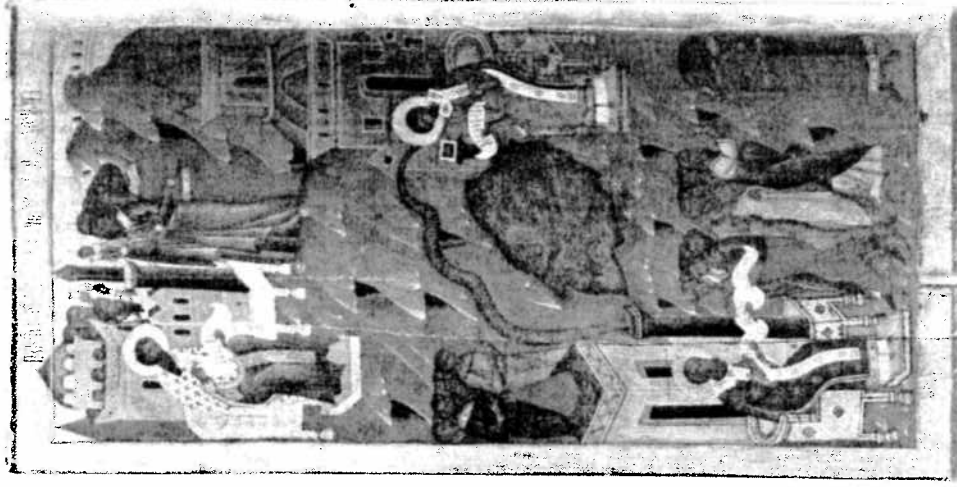


Image 6. Semen Hromoi, "Beseda trekh vseleskikh svyatilelei" ("Blagodatnye plody ucheniya"), Perm State Picture Gallery (early sixteenth century). Photo courtesy of the Perm State Picture Gallery.

hearing or reading Nazianzus, the audience thus receives the blessing of divine wisdom; and, indeed, as a result, the icon depicts people feasting on Nazianzen's theology: an allusion, it seems, to the biblical invitations to eat and drink, most particularly the invitation of divine Wisdom to the banquet in Proverbs 9.

One of these ideal readers of Gregory is John Damascene, whose Paschal Canon follows in the spirit of Nazianzen's oration and offers a

biblically based depiction of *theōsis*. While in his compendious theological works he uses Scripture to establish a theology that finds expression in the consecrated technical terms (*ousia*, *physis*, *hypostatis*, *prosōpon*, *energēia*, *thelēma*, etc.), in the Canon he sets forth a theology that rehearses the phrases of Scripture and Tradition (i.e., Gregory the Theologian) in order to draw the worshippers into the vision recorded by the biblical theophanies. This is what the Damascene views as the theology of “icons” broadly construed, of which the theology of icons in the strict sense is only one aspect.<sup>31</sup>

### FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In both Gregory’s paschal oration and John Damascene’s canon of Pascha, the angel is not identified with the prophet, *pace* the popular English translation.<sup>32</sup> Who, then, is the angel? Whatever it is, the angel offers an image of what the human herald of the Good News should be: “And would that I might receive a voice that should rank with the angel’s and should sound throughout all the ends of the earth” (*Orat.* 45.1). This is more than simply rhetorical embellishment, since Nazianzen moves to substantial considerations about the human being as a “new angel, a mingled worshiper . . . a living creature trained here and moved elsewhere” (*Orat.* 45.7).

If it were not that the angel points to Christ as someone else than itself, we might assume that it was Christ himself appearing as an angel. It could be an angel at the tomb, but the depiction does not correspond neatly to any Gospel accounts. Another possibility would be to consider the angel as an angelomorphic appearance of the Holy Spirit. Such a theology is not unknown in earlier centuries.<sup>33</sup> In fact, Damascene calls the Word “the natural image of the Father,” as well as “angel of the mind,”

31. When he defines “icon,” John of Damascene shows that there are six kinds of “icons”: (1) the natural, intra-Trinitarian icons: the Son as the icon of the Father, the Spirit as the icon of the Son; (2) icon as paradigms and predeterminations of the divine will: the Old Testament manifestations of the divine “glory”; (3) the human being as an icon of God; (4) “the use in scripture of shapes and forms and figures to convey a faint conception of God”; (5) typological prefigurations; (6) memorials, sacred texts, objects, images. See *Divine Images* 3:18–23, in *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos*, 4 vols., ed. Bonifatius Kotter (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1969–1988), 3:126–30; English translation in *Three Treatises on the Divine Image*, trans. Andrew Louth (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003), 96–101.

32. “He [Habakkuk] is like a shining angel crying with a piercing voice.” *The Paschal Service*, trans. John Erickson and Paul Lazor (Wayne, NJ: OCA Department of Religious Education, 1986).

33. See the recent work by Bucur, *Angelomorphic Pneumatology: Clement of Alexandria and Other Early Christian Witnesses*, VigChrSup 95 (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

and soon after speaks of the Spirit as “undeviating image [*aparallaktos eikon*] of the Son.”<sup>34</sup> The angel in Ode 4 could therefore represent the deifying work of the Holy Spirit: “cleansed by the fire of a mystic vision,” as John of Damascus says in the *Canon of Theophany*,<sup>35</sup> the ancient prophet and the present human worshippers anticipate here and now their luminous angelic destiny. At this level biblical exegesis has come alive through liturgical performance, and moving from the letter to the spirit, has become Theology.

In celebrating Gregory of Nazianzus first and foremost as “Theologian,” Christian tradition has not only canonized his theological doctrine, but also—perhaps especially—his theological method. Aside from the rich reception history of Hab 3:2 in Christian tradition, interesting in itself and illustrative of how much is at stake in the recuperation of the LXX for theology, the foregoing pages suggest that there is a “lesson” of some value in the model of exegesis displayed by the orations and the later reception of Gregory.

Both for the ancient translators of Habakkuk 3 and for the later interpreters of Hab 3:2 in early Christian and later Byzantine tradition, sacred text, liturgy, and visionary experience form a hermeneutical circle, in which each element unfolds its meaning and is kept in check by the others: the ascetic, visionary, and liturgical experience detects certain nexus between discrete biblical texts; this network of biblical texts determines a specific doctrinal articulation; doctrine then shapes and guides specific liturgical (and ascetical) practices; and liturgy and doctrine are then shaping the presuppositions guiding the work of the biblical exegete, of the translator, and of the copyist. Gregory’s paschal orations embody this approach to exegesis, doctrine, and vision. Following in the footsteps of the same tradition, John Damascene reemphasizes the angelic, transformative dynamics of Gregory’s homilies on Pascha. This allows and reinforces the entry of the divinized prophet and saintly homilist into the same angelic “place” of worship, so that they become an angelic frame for the theophany of Christ.

34. John of Damascus, *Divine Images*, 3:18.

35. *Canon for Theophany*, Ode 4: “Cleansed by the fire of a mystic vision the Prophet sang the praises of the renewal of mortal man. Filled with the inspiration of the Spirit, he raised his voice, telling of the Incarnation of the ineffable Word, who shattered the dominion of the strong.”