

**1<sup>st</sup> Place (Undergraduate)**  
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**Theophany as Christophany: Biblico-theological Unity as Core Implication of Early  
Christian Theology of Scriptural Theophany and its Implication for Modern Biblical  
Studies**

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# **Theophany as Christophany: Biblico-theological Unity as Core Implication of Early Christian Theology of Scriptural Theophany and its Implication for Modern Biblical Studies**

## **Introduction**

Christological interpretation of Old Testament theophany is one of the first approaches to Christian theology.<sup>1</sup> The early Christian writers utilized this approach in defending their faith in Jesus, thereby fostering the unity of the Scriptures and enabling singularity in belief about the place of Jesus in the history of salvation. This exegetical tradition of identifying Christ as the subject of the visible manifestations of Israel's God, YHWH, in the Jewish Scriptures engendered a bifurcation of Christianity and Judaism. Yet, it fostered the unity of the Bible such that the Jewish Scriptures (Old Testament) and New Testament Scriptures could be read as a single story; the story of Jesus Christ.

Drawing light from the extensive research of modern scholars, especially Bogdan Gabriel Bucur, on the need for the revival of this ancient Christian exegetical tradition, this paper, basically considering Justin Martyr's input on this subject matter, would demonstrate that the theological exploration of the theophany of the Old Testament (hereafter, OT) by the early (first two centuries) Christians is Christological and that the major implication behind this quest is the ensuring of unity of the Christian Scripture (Bible) from theological basis. This work will show that rediscovering this outmoded theological tradition will be helpful in modern times for the right theological interpretation of Scripture, and for ecumenism.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Larry Weir Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 565-66.

## Terms and Thesis Clarification

Theophany is a special term used to describe God's visible appearances to individuals.<sup>2</sup> According to Kari Kloos, "theophany refers to those biblical stories in which God is described as...being seen."<sup>3</sup>

Theology, according to Gregory Nazianzen, means "philosophizing about God" which involves seeking God, especially in the Scriptures, through contemplation.<sup>4</sup> Aidan Nichols clarifies that "the task of theology is the disciplined exploration of what is contained in revelation."<sup>5</sup> Hence, theophany, which is God's visible self-manifestation or self-revelation renders itself a fundamental object of theology. This is because theophany raises deep theological concerns such as: Can men see God? What does it mean for the invisible God to be seen by men, since "no one can see God and live" (Ex. 33:20)? To crack this puzzle, the early Christian theologians dwelt extensively on the OT theophany as a basis for their theological reflections and polemics. Seeking to secede from their Jewish root because of their novel belief in Christ as the *Logos* (Word) who is God incarnate, the early Christians discovered that understanding the OT theophany as Christophany (Christ's pre-incarnational visible manifestations) would become a robust theology and polemical strategy

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing*, (Illinois: Crossway, 2018), 22; the term "theophany" derives from two Greek words; Θεός (*theos*) meaning "God" and φαίνο (*phaino*) meaning "to appear" or "to manifest."

<sup>3</sup> Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation and the Vision of God: Augustine's Transformation of Early Christian Theophany Interpretation* (Boston: Brill, 2010), 3. Instances of theophany are Abraham's encounter with three "anthropomorphic" visitors (Gen 18); Jacob's wrestles with God in "angelomorphic" form (Gen. 15); Moses' vision of the burning bush that was not consumed (Ex. 3); Moses' vision of God's back (Ex. 33); Christ's appearance among Cleopas and another disciple on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24); The appearance of a dove and the voice heard from heaven during Jesus' Baptism at Jordan (Matt. 3), etc.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Nazianzen, "Oration xxvii (First Theological Oration)," 3, translated by Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 7, second series, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, Massachusetts, 1995); for the commentary on "philosophizing about God", see Gregory of Nazianzus, "Five Theological Orations" (*Oration 27*), 3, footnote 10, translated with an introduction and notes by Stephen Reynolds, 2011, [tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream](http://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream), accessed on Dec., 10, 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1991), 32.

to discontinue their Jewish belief in the Scriptures and yet render the Jewish Scriptures into their Old Testament to create continuity with the New Testament (hereafter NT).<sup>6</sup>

### **Scriptural Unity**

Justin the Martyr,<sup>7</sup> in the second century AD, was regarded by Oscar Skasaune, as the first to employ Christological Interpretation of Theophany (hereafter CIT) of OT to articulate the theology of Christ's pre-incarnational existence.<sup>8</sup> In his *First Apology*, Justin affirms that it was Jesus, the Son of God, who spoke to Moses at the burning Bush,<sup>9</sup> and not the "Father of the universe" as the Jews commonly believed.<sup>10</sup> He notes that it was Jesus who appeared to Moses in the figure of fire, like an angel, and in different forms to other prophets and eventually was born.<sup>11</sup> So, Christ, in these appearances, according to Justin, could be called "Angel" or "Apostle" but not "Father."<sup>12</sup> Speaking to Trypho, in his *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin identifies Christ as God who manifested himself to Daniel in his vision (Dan 7:9-28).<sup>13</sup> Quoting Justin, Trypho articulates Justin's view saying that he claims that Jesus was with Moses and Aaron and had "spoken to them

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation and the Vision of God*, 5-6.

<sup>7</sup> Justin Martyr is a writer and outstanding Christian apologist of the second century AD.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Oskar Skarsaune, *Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin Martyr's Proof-Text Tradition; Text-Type, Provenance, Theological Profile* (Leiden: Brill, 1987), 208-210 & 422-424.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Exodus 3:1-14: This text contains the theophany of Moses at Mount Sinai where God appeared to Moses in a burning bush that was not consumed and told him: "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." *Holy Bible*, New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition, Anglicized Text (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Justin Martyr, "First Apology," LXIII, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, translated by Philip Schaff et al., eds., Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1995)

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, LXIII.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, LXIII.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, XXXI, translated by A. Lukyn Williams (New York and Toronto: The Macmillan Co., 1930).

in the pillar of cloud” before he was born as a man.<sup>14</sup> For Skarsaune, Justin’s argument can be summarized thus: Christ is the subject of all OT theophany, not the Father.<sup>15</sup>

Melito of Sardis was another prominent second century Christian author who applied CIT after Justin. His was not in an anti-Judaistic polemic but an argumentation to show how the OT is replete with references to Jesus and as such should be revered as Scripture.<sup>16</sup> Melito argues that Jesus was the one who led Israel in the Pillar of fire by night (Ex. 13:21), gave them Manna to eat, and was the rock that quenched their thirst.<sup>17</sup>

Justin’s interpretation of theophany as Christophany, Just like Melito’s, is in a Binitarian perspective; meaning that Jesus, as the subject of the OT “theophanies,” is believed to be God but distinct in “number” (Person) from God, the Father. This could be seen in his assertion that “Christ has been called even Lord... and that the Father, who is Lord of all... (called him to sit at)... His right hand...”<sup>18</sup> and that “for they who affirm that the Son is the Father, are proved neither to have become acquainted with the Father nor to know that the Father of the universe has a Son; who also, being the only-begotten Word (*Logos*) of God, is even God.”<sup>19</sup> He made the earlier assertion as criticism to his interlocutor’s (Trypho) view, which is representative of the common Judaistic theophany interpretation which holds that the Father and creator of the universe is the subject of all Scriptural theophany.<sup>20</sup> Philo Judaeus, a Jewish philosopher, in his exegesis of Genesis 18, testifies to this common Jewish theophany belief by identifying one of the three

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. Justin, *The Dialogue with Trypho*, XXXVIII.1.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Oskar Skarsaune, “The Development of Scriptural Interpretations in the Second and Third Centuries – Except Clement and Origen,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the Middle Ages*, edited by Magne Saebo (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 408.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 578.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Melito of Sardis, *Melito of Sardis on Pascha and Fragments*, 78-86, translated by Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon 1979)

<sup>18</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, XXXII.3; words in bracket are mine.

<sup>19</sup> Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, lxiii; words in bracket are mine.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, LXIII, and Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, LVI.9.

“anthropomorphic” guests of Abraham as “the Father of all universe” and the other two as His powers.<sup>21</sup> Bogdan Bucur, in his work: “Justin Martyr’s Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies . . .,” also affirms that this theophany interpretation is prevalent among all the Jews as recorded in the rabbinic text.<sup>22</sup>

Bucur identified another theological view of theophany recorded by Justin in his *Dialogue with Trypho* which corresponds with modalism holding that the “theophanies” are only temporary manifestations of the power of the “One” God (sometimes in angelic forms) which have no distinct existence.<sup>23</sup> Bucur notes that Justin contends this view holding that Scriptural theophanies are manifestations of Christ, who is Lord, Son of God and God, and who exists distinctly from God the Father, both numerically and in nomenclature.<sup>24</sup> Bucur also observes, from the *Dialogue with Trypho*, that Trypho (as well as some Jews) also holds a similar Binitarian monotheistic theological view of theophany as Justin, but, while Trypho’s Binitarianism identifies the angel-agent of “theophanies” as angelic, which could be named God, Justin holds that the angel-agent is Christ, who is God.<sup>25</sup>

It could be gathered that Jewish theology of theophany may vary across diverse interpretations and implications. However, early Christians’ “proto-orthodox”<sup>26</sup> theology of theophany is Binitarian and is majorly geared at uniting the Bible (Christian Scripture) from a

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. Philo, “On Abraham” XXIV.121, in *The Works of Philo*, new updated edition translated by Charles Duke Yonge with introduction by David M. Scholer (Peabody, Massachusetts, Hendrickson Publishers Inc, 1993).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Bogdan G. Bucur, “Justin Martyr’s Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies and the Parting of the Ways between Christianity and Judaism,” *Theological Studies* 75 (1): 35.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Bogdan G. Bucur, “Justin Martyr’s Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies,” 40.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Bogdan G. Bucur, “Justin Martyr’s Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies,” 39-41; Justin Martyr, *Dial.*, CXXVIII.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Bogdan G. Bucur, “Justin Martyr’s Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies,” 39; Justin Martyr, *Dial.*, LX. 3-4.

<sup>26</sup> “Proto-orthodox” is a term used by Larry W. Hurtado to describe Christians (and their theology) who have high regard in traditional beliefs and practices of the Christian faith and who are very suspicious of religious innovations and theological thoughts which are opposed to the traditions they greatly revered. Contrary or contradictory views or positions to “proto-orthodox” are referred as “heterodox” or “heretical.” Cf. Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 519.

unique theological standpoint. According to Bogdan Bucur, this exegetical approach of “theophanic” interpretation of the Scripture, employed by Justin, has one major value which is that it “produces a coherent narrative (of the Bible) leading from Genesis to Jesus, a Christologically rewritten Bible in which Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as Moses and the Prophets are ‘men of Christ.’”<sup>27</sup> Bucur warns that the idea of this “rewritten bible” is not in the production of a new text, in line with Geza Vermes’s coinage,<sup>28</sup> but the reading of the existing texts from a new theological perspective.<sup>29</sup>

### **Theological Unity**

CIT has also served as a wonderful tool for theological unity in the early centuries of Christianity. Unity, not in the sense of unification of all theological positions, but in ensuring distinction in theology. Early Christians employed this approach as polemics against theological positions that are inimical to the “proto-orthodox” theology of the Christian faith. Justin Martyr (discussed above) in the second Century utilized this tradition to articulate the Christian faith in opposition to Judaism of his time thereby drawing a line for Christian theology of theophany.<sup>30</sup> He also attacked heretical groups of his time which he mentioned as follows: “the Marcionites, Valentinians, Basilidians and Saturnilians,”<sup>31</sup> who hold theological positions antithetical or contrary to the “proto-orthodox’s.” Justin didn’t give a detailed analysis and critique of all these heresies but asserts that the proponents are “godless” and “insincere.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bogdan G. Bucur, “Justin Martyr’s Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies,” 36-37; words in bracket are mine.

<sup>28</sup> The term “rewritten Bible” describes the text produced by some groups in the early centuries who literally rewrote Scriptural texts in conformity with their theological views. This practice is common in the Second Temple period; Cf. Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961), 95.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Bogdan Gabriel Bucur, *Scripture Re-envisioned: Christophanic Exegesis and the Making of a Christian Bible*, (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2019), 271 & 276.

<sup>30</sup> Justin’s Christological argument from theophany can be found mainly in his two major works: *Dialogue with Trypho* and *First Apology*; See footnotes 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 20, 21 and 22 above.

<sup>31</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, XXXV.6.

<sup>32</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, XXXV.4-6.

The Marcionites are followers of Marcion (c. 130AD), a Second-century heretic whose theological position holds that the OT creator “God” is different from the NT benevolent God whom Jesus Christ has come to reveal and who has been unknown.<sup>33</sup> Hence, Marcion rejected the OT Scriptures as part of Christian Scripture.<sup>34</sup> Irenaeus criticized the Marcionites for perverting the Scripture.<sup>35</sup>

In the same century, Irenaeus and Tertullian employed CIT as polemics against the Valentinians’ theology of the incarnation which holds that Christ displayed his “flesh” in the “theophanies” just as he did in the incarnation, such that the incarnation has no real difference from the “theophanies.” Valentinians aimed at excluding the flesh from salvation<sup>36</sup> Irenaeus refuted this claim holding that the “theophanies” of the *Logos* (Christ) in the OT are “human-like” but different from the actual humanity of Christ after the Incarnation.<sup>37</sup> Tertullian also rebukes this Valentinians’ theological position holding that to describe the agent of theophany in terms of “body” or “flesh” would make sense theologically if seen as a “flesh” that has not been born, such that it is not subject to change and mortality.<sup>38</sup> Therefore, for Tertullian, theophany could be understood as the manifestations of the Christ in bodily appearance assumed for a specific occasion different from His incarnated human body.

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 549-550; See also Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*, translated by Siegfried S. Schatzmann (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2007), 112-113.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ*, 552.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.XXVI.2, translated by Philip Schaff (Moscow: Roman Roads Media, 2015).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Adamantius, *Dialogue on the True Faith in God*, Translated with Commentary by R.A. Pretty (Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 150; See also Hubertus R. Drobner, *The Fathers of the Church*, 111-112.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4.xxvi.2; 3.XVI.1-2; 4.I.1-3.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Tertullianus, *On the Flesh of Christ*, Chapters I; XV; XVII; XIX & XX, translated by Philip Schaff, *Ante Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf03.html>, accessed on December 12, 2021.



Interestingly, this theological unity sought by early Christians is not unconnected with their primal quest for Scriptural unity.<sup>39</sup>

### **Before Justin**

Although Oskar Skarsaune posits that the argument from theophany was invented by Justin the Martyr,<sup>40</sup> recent scholarship on Christian Origins has contended that CIT is an exegetical tradition that preceded Justin.<sup>41</sup> Larry Hurtado, a prominent representative of the group called “New *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*,”<sup>42</sup> argues that CIT is a tradition that originated from the NT writings.<sup>43</sup> The NT writers, as a way of demonstrating Christ’s preexistence, identified Him as the subject of OT “theophanies.” The author of John’s Gospel identifies Jesus Christ as God, who is the co-creator (*Logos*) of Genesis, who appeared visibly to Adam at various times (Jn. 1:1-4; Gen. 1:1-26; 3:8-19) fostering Binitarian theology.<sup>44</sup> John also ascribes the Lord of Isaiah’s vision (Isa. 6:1-3) to the Christian Lord (Jesus Christ) such that the one whom Isaiah “saw his glory” (Jn 12:41), is the one he and Jesus’ disciples “have seen his glory.” (Jn 1:14). St Paul presents Christ as “the Lord of Glory” who appeared to Moses so that Moses had to cover his face with a veil (2 Cor. 3:7-13) and the rock from which the Israelites drank in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:4). The

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<sup>39</sup> The criticism by Justin and Irenaeus of the Marcionites heresy (which divorces the Jewish Scriptures (OT) from the NT Scriptures) aims at fostering the unity of both entities into one Christian Scripture called the Bible.

<sup>40</sup> See footnote 8 above.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Jarl Egil Fossum, “The New *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*: The Quest for Jewish Christology,” *Society of Biblical Literature Seminar Papers* 30 (1991) 638-646.

<sup>42</sup> *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule* is a group which consists of scholars with great interest in the Scriptures (Bible) especially as influenced by the cultural situations and origins of the books of the Scriptures. It is a unique group of scholarship on Christian Origin. The phrase translates as the “History of Religion School.” Also see footnote 43.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, 496, 568-576.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Andreas J. Kostenberger, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 27-29.

author of Jude holds that Jesus is the one who rescued Israel from Egypt (Jude 5).<sup>45</sup> This evidence gives credence to the fact that CIT dates back to the NT writings.<sup>46</sup>

Implicit in this CIT by the NT writers is the quest to posit the unity of OT and NT Scriptures from a theophanic theological position.

However, Justin can still be credited for initiating a radical, dialectical, and polemical approach to CIT. This led to its prevalence in the writings of second to fifth centuries Christian theologians such as Melito, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Athanasius, and Augustine.<sup>47</sup>

### **Spiritual**

Worthy to note is a minor theological implication of early Christians' CIT observed by Kari Kloss which is transformative. Its primary aim is not polemics, but to show the significance of theophanic experiences in ensuring the personal spiritual growth of Christians.<sup>48</sup> Nevertheless, this implication is not devoid of Scriptural unity.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> There are variants in this text regarding the figure who delivered Israel from Egypt but the commonly supported figure is Jesus Christ. Cf. Jarl E. Fossum, "Angel Christology in Jude 5-7," in *The Image of the Invisible God: Essays on the Influence of Jewish Mysticism on Early Christology* (Freiburg: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995), 41-70.

<sup>46</sup> Jarl E. Fossum, "The New *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*: 640-645.

<sup>47</sup> Bogdan G. Bucur, "Justin Martyr's Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies," 35.

<sup>48</sup> This spiritual aspect of theophany exegesis was contained in the works of Irenaeus, Origen and Tertullian and was employed to show the relation between bodily purity (piety) and spiritual vision of God, as well as, to show Christ's role as incarnated image of the Father in facilitating such spiritual visions in this world and at the eschatology. Cf. Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation and the Vision of God*, 7.

<sup>49</sup> The aim of this theophanic theological exegesis is to enable believers in Christ, especially Jewish converts, to see the events of OT "theophanies" as avenues to prepare themselves well by leading holy, pious or ascetical lives like Christ did, as well as those who had theophanic experiences in the Scriptures, so that they (Christians) too can experience spiritual visions of God in this world or at the Beatific vision in heaven. See. Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation and the Vision of God*, 7.

## Pitfalls

Strikingly, CIT by early Christian writers especially Justin's has some risky theological implications. Bucur paid little attention to this aspect. He only mentioned that it is "theologically deficient" resulting in its Trinitarian reading in the fifth century AD.<sup>50</sup> It is important to highlight specific theological deficiencies of CIT. Kari Kloos provides more of these. He observes that modern scholars see this "literal Christological reading" of theophany by early Christians as "eisegesis" which means the act of reading their own theological doctrine into the text since the narrative texts did not explicitly speak of Christ as the subject of the "theophanies."<sup>51</sup> Kloos also notes that some recent scholars observe that there is "suppressionism" inherent in this exegetical approach of the early Christians since they displaced the Jewish Scriptures from their original context by imposing on them their own Christological beliefs.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Michael Barnes indicates that early Christians CIT is vulnerable to "subordinationism" whereby Christ was understood as subordinate and inferior to the Father.<sup>53</sup>

It could be observed that Justin Martyr failed to provide a detailed exegesis of how each theophany text could be the manifestation of Christ. For instance, he did not explain how the three messengers of Abraham in Genesis 18 can be considered as the manifestation of Christ. So, it becomes difficult to understand how Christ would appear at once in three "human" forms without occasioning some theological quagmire. Also, theological exegesis of theophany as Christophany may appear reductionistic. Indeed, too much of it does. It renders the entire edifice of Christian theology to Christology alone. More so, interpreting all theophany as Christophany could be

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<sup>50</sup> Cf. Bogdan G. Bucur, "Justin Martyr's Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies," 35.

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation and the Vision of God*, 2.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. Kari Kloos, *Christ, Creation and the Vision of God*, 2-3.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Michel Rene Barnes, "The Visible Christ and the Invisible Trinity: Mt. 5:8 in Augustine's Trinitarian Theology of 400," *Modern Theology* 19.3 (2003): 341.

absurd or biblically inconsistent. For instance, saying that Christ is the “dove” that descended on Him during His baptism in the theophany of Matthew 3:16-17 is absurd since it suggests two visible manifestations of Jesus at the same cosmic time raising questions about the theology of the incarnation. This interpretation would also be dangerous to the theological reality, role, and manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the Scripture who was explicitly mentioned in the text as the one who appeared.<sup>54</sup>

These challenges and more resulted in the transition of the Binitarian interpretation of Theophany by the early Christian theologians to its Trinitarian reading in the fourth and fifth centuries expounded by Augustine before theophany exegetical tradition became silent in history.<sup>55</sup>

However, the context of the early Christian writers is vindicative of their theological standpoint. Their “Binitarianism” was not a denial of the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, rather they aimed to prove, against the Jewish “monarchical” monotheism prevalent in their time, that the Father and the Son are one God but distinct in Persons; that only the Son can manifest visibly to human beings whereas the Father remains invisible. Given that Christ had declared that it is about him that the authors of Jewish Scriptures wrote,<sup>56</sup> the early Christians took it upon themselves to defend this. Importantly, CIT provided a theological basis for reading the OT and NT Scriptures

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. Mt. 3:16-17.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Bogdan G. Bucur, “Justin Martyr’s Exegesis of Biblical Theophanies,” 35; Bucur explains that the controversies of fourth and fifth centuries and the development of a more precise terms in the definition of doctrine punctured the momentum of the soaring tradition of theophanic exegesis by early Christians in the first and second centuries which has been a veritable instrument for theology, formation of doctrine, worship in liturgy and helpful approach to spirituality.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. John 5:39.

as a unit (The Word of God) before they were canonized as a single book (The Bible) in the fourth century AD.<sup>57</sup>

### **Recommendations/Conclusion**

It is my conviction that despite the shortcomings of CIT, the theological exegesis of Scriptural theophany would be of great help to contemporary Scriptural and theological studies as well as for ecumenism. It is beneficial that a renewed interest in scholarship on Christian Origins, including theophany Christology of early Christianity, began just a few centuries ago. Thanks to the group known as the “New *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*”<sup>58</sup> which has made a resounding impact in casting attentive light to this dim exegetical tradition of early Christianity, and kudos, especially, to Wycliffe College for shifting its frontiers to a wider audience including undergraduates in different parts of the globe such that I could be a part. It is against this backdrop that the impact of Bogdan Bucur would be better appreciated who proposed that the exegesis of biblical theophany can offer veritable insights for the right theological interpretation of Scripture.

In his explanation of the theophany of Luke 24 where Christ appeared to Cleopas with another disciple on their way to Emmaus, Bucur proposes that this theophany text could provide methodological guidelines for understanding early Christianity’s interpretation of Scripture. These guidelines could be summarized as follows: 1. That the biblical exegete, as a disciple, must relate with Jesus with the openness of true discipleship (willing to be taught). 2. That he or she must base his or her exegesis on a sacramental understanding of Jesus, as the Christ 3. He or she ought to be

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<sup>57</sup> The canon of the Bible, including the books of the OT and NT Scriptures, was drawn in the fourth century AD at the Councils of Hippo (393) and Carthage (397). But, the OT and NT Scriptures were read in Christian liturgical celebrations as the Word of God before this time but were contained in separate scrolls (books). Cf. Cletus U. Obijiaku, *The Bible at a Glance: An Introduction* (Asokoro, Abuja: Gaudium et Spes Institute, 2005), 43-44.

<sup>58</sup> See footnote 44 above.

disposed to enter into a relationship with Jesus in his or her exegesis of the Scripture using the appropriate method accruing from the believing community.<sup>59</sup>

It would be helpful to Biblical studies if these guidelines are recognized as principles for Scriptural interpretation in modern times, especially, to the biblical interpretation approach called Theological Interpretation of Scripture (TIS). It would help to respond to “mechanical” approaches to Scriptural interpretation in modern biblical scholarship which study the Bible as an “ordinary” book, instead of, as the Word of God. Reading the Scripture, according to Bucur, should be done “performatively within the life and worship of the Church...where their representation of Christ and the Holy Trinity had to be gradually and patiently unfolded... in ecclesial context.”<sup>60</sup> Hence, modern Biblical scholarship should learn from the ancients that Scriptural interpretation is not done without theology.

There are other benefits that the revival of this early Christian tradition of theophany exegesis would bring. It would foster novel vistas of right biblical studies which are foundational. Furthermore, it would serve as a veritable tool for modern ecumenism since it served as a widely shared tradition in the early years of Christianity transcending barriers created by councils, creeds, theological parties, and liturgical families.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, the argument from theophany was very instrumental in realizing a distinct theological and spiritual outlook for Christianity in its early years. Among other purposes it served, it majorly provided a very important tool for uniting the two worlds of the OT and the NT into a single Bible from a distinctly theological standpoint.

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<sup>59</sup> Bogdan Gabriel Bucur, *Scripture Re-envisioned*, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Bogdan Gabriel Bucur, *Scripture Re-envisioned*, viii: Forward by Paul M. Blowers.

<sup>61</sup> Cf. Bogdan G. Bucur, “A Blind Spot in the Study of Fourth-Century Christian Theology: The Christological Exegesis of Theophanies,” *The Journal of Theological Studies* 69 (2018): 592.

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