

## The Passion and the Unveiling of Scripture

### Fr John Behr

#### 1: (St Irenaeus?) *Letter of the Churches of Vienne and Lyons to Asia and Phrygia* (Eusebius, *H.e.* 5.1)



(18) For while we all trembled, and her earthly mistress, who was herself also one of the witnesses, feared that on account of the weakness of her body, she would be unable to make bold confession, Blandina was filled with such power as to be delivered and raised above those who were torturing her by turns from morning till evening in every manner, so that they acknowledged that they were conquered, and could do nothing more to her. And they were astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken; and they testified that one of these forms of torture was sufficient to destroy life, not to speak of so many and so great sufferings. (19) But the blessed woman, like a noble athlete, renewed her strength in her confession; and her comfort and recreation and relief from the pain of her sufferings was in exclaiming, "I am a Christian, and there is nothing vile done by us." ...

41-2: Blandina, hung on a stake (ἐπι ξύλου), was offered as food for the wild beasts that were let in. She, by being seen hanging in the form of a cross, by her vigorous prayer, caused great zeal in the contestants, as, in their struggle, they beheld with their outward eyes, through the sister, him who was crucified for them, that he might persuade those who believe in him that everyone who suffers for the glory of Christ has for ever communion with the living God. ... the small and weak and despised woman had put on the great and invincible athlete, Christ, routing the adversary in many bouts, and, through the struggle, being crowned with the crown of incorruptibility....



45-6: Through their [Blandina' and Attulus'] continued life the dead were made alive, and the martyrs showed favor to those who had failed to witness. And there was great joy for the Virgin Mother in receiving back alive those who she had miscarried as dead. For through them the majority of those who had denied were again brought to birth and again conceived and again brought to life and learned to confess; and now living and strengthened, they went to the judgment seat.

## 2: First Corinthians:

**15:3-5:** I delivered (παρέδωκα) to you as of first importance what I also received that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

**11:23-26:** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered (παρέδωκα) to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

## 3: Rom. 16:25-7:

Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the apocalypse of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now made manifest and made known through the prophetic writings [κατὰ ἀποκάλυψιν μυστηρίου χρόνοις αἰωνίοις σεσιγημένου φανερωθέντος δὲ νῦν διὰ τῆς γραφῶν προφητικῶν ... γνωρισθέντος], according to the command of the eternal God, to all the nations, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory for evermore.

## 4: 2 Cor. 3:12–4:6:

[12] Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, [13] not like Moses, who put a veil [κάλυμμα] over his face so that the Israelites might not see the end of the fading splendor. [14] But their minds were hardened; for to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil [τὸ αὐτὸ κάλυμμα] remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. [15] Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their minds; [16] but when a man turns to the Lord the veil is removed. [17] Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. [18] And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. [4:1] Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. [2] We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. [3] And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled only to those who are perishing. [4] In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the likeness of God. [5] For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. [6] For it is the God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

## 5: St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* 4.26.1:

If anyone, therefore, reads the Scriptures this way, he will find in them the Word concerning Christ, and a foreshadowing of the new calling. For Christ is the “treasure which was hidden in the field” [Matt 13:44], that is, in this world – for “the field is the world” [Matt 13:38] – [a treasure] hidden in the Scriptures, for he was indicated by means of types and parables, which could not be understood by men prior to the consummation of those things which had been predicted, that is, the advent of the Lord. And therefore it was said to Daniel the prophet, “Shut up the words, and seal the book, until the time of the consummation, until many learn and knowledge abounds. For, when the dispersion shall be accomplished, they shall know all these things” [Dan 12:4, 7]. And Jeremiah also says, “In the last days they shall understand these things” [Jer 23:20]. For every prophecy, before its fulfilment, is nothing but an enigma and ambiguity to men; but when the time has arrived, and the prediction has come to pass, then it has an exact exposition (ἐξήγησις). And for this reason, when at this present time the Law is read by the Jews, it is like a myth, for they do not possess the explanation (ἐξήγησις) of all things which pertain to the human advent of the Son of God; but when it is read by Christians, it is a treasure, hid in a field, but brought to light by the cross of Christ, and explained, both enriching the understanding of men, and showing forth the wisdom of God, and making known his dispensations with regard to man, and refiguring the kingdom of Christ, and preaching in anticipation the good news of the inheritance of the holy Jerusalem, and proclaiming beforehand that the man who loves God shall advance so far as even to see God, and hear his Word, and be glorified, from hearing his speech, to such an extent, that others will not be able to behold his glorious countenance [cf. 2 Cor 3:7], as was said by Daniel, “Those who understand shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and many of the righteous as the stars for ever and ever” [Dan 12:3]. In this manner, then, I have shown it to be, if anyone read the Scriptures.

## **6: St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* 1.8.2:**

Such, then, is their system (ὑπόθεσις), which neither the prophets announced, nor the Lord taught, nor the apostles delivered, but of which they boast that beyond all others they have a perfect knowledge. They gather their views from that which is unwritten (ἐξ ἀγράφων); and, to use a common proverb, they strive to weave ropes of sand, while they endeavor to adapt with an air of probability to their own peculiar assertions the parables of the Lord, the sayings of the prophets, and the words of the apostles, in order that their scheme may not seem altogether without support. In doing so, however, they disregard the order and the connection of the Scriptures, and so far as in them lies, dismember and destroy the truth. By transferring passages, and dressing them up anew, and making one thing out of another, they succeed in deluding many through their wicked art in adapting the oracles of the Lord to their opinions. Their manner of acting is just as if one, when a beautiful image of a king has been constructed by some skillful artist out of precious jewels, should then take this likeness of the man all to pieces, should rearrange the gems, and so fit them together as to make them into the form of a dog or of a fox, and even that but poorly executed; and should then maintain and declare that *this* was the beautiful image of the king which the skillful artist constructed, pointing to the jewels which had been admirably fitted together by the first artist to form the image of the king, but have been with bad effect transferred by the latter one to the shape of a dog, and by thus exhibiting the jewels, should deceive the ignorant who had no conception what a king's form was like, and persuade them that that miserable likeness of the fox was, in fact, the beautiful image of the king. In like manner do these persons patch together old wives' fables, and then endeavor, by violently drawing away from their proper connection, words, expressions, and parables whenever found, to adapt the oracles of God to their baseless fictions. We have already stated how far they proceed in this way with respect to the interior of the Pleroma.

## **7: St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies* 1.9.4:**

... But if he takes them and restores each of them to its proper position, he at once destroys the narrative in question. In like manner he also who retains unchangeable in his heart the rule of the truth which he received by means of baptism (ὁ τὸν κανόνα τῆς ἀληθείας ἀκλινη ἐν ἑαυτῷ κατέχων, ὃν διὰ τοῦ βαπτίσματος εἴληφε), will doubtless recognize the names, the expressions, and the parables taken from the Scriptures, but will by no means acknowledge the blasphemous use which these men make of them. For, though he will acknowledge the gems, he will certainly not receive the fox instead of the likeness of the king. But when he has restored every one of the expressions quoted to its proper position, and has fitted it to the body of the truth, he will lay bare, and prove to be without any foundation, the figment of these heretics.

## **8: Origen, *Commentary on John*, 1.23:**

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

## **9: Origen, *Commentary on John*, 1.26:**

But if the writings of Paul were gospel, it is consistent with that to say that Peter's writings also were gospel and, in general, those which present the sojourn of Christ and prepare for his coming and produce it in the souls of those who are willing to receive the Word of God who stands at the door and knocks (cf Rv 3.20) and wishes to enter their souls.

## **10: Origen, *Commentary on John*, 1.32–3, 36:**

[32] But someone may think he must object to the first definition since those writings not entitled gospels also fall under it. For the Law and the prophets are believed to be discourses containing a report of things which, with good reason, make the hearers glad whenever they accept the things which are reported, because they are beneficial. [33] One might reply to this, however, that before the coming of Christ, the Law and the prophets did not contain the proclamation which belongs to the definition of the gospel since he who explained the mysteries in them had not yet come. But since the Savior has come and has caused the gospel to be embodied in the gospel, he has made all things gospel, as it were. ...

[36] Nothing then of the ancients was gospel, then, before that gospel which came into existence because of the coming of Christ. But the gospel, which is a New Testament, made the newness of the Spirit which never grows old shine forth in the light of knowledge. This newness of the Spirit removed us from 'the antiquity of the letter' (Rm 7.6). It is proper to the New Testament, although it is stored up in all the Scriptures. But that gospel which produced the gospel thought to exist in the Old Testament too, had to be called 'gospel' in a special sense.

### **11: Origen, *Commentary on John* 19.28**

...spoke or wrote about God as Father in secret and not in a manner intelligible to all, so that they might not anticipate the grace that is poured out to all the world through Jesus, who calls all people to adoption so that he may declare the name of God to his brothers and praise the Father in the midst of the assembly in accordance with what has been written.

### **12: Origen, *Commentary on John*, 1.37–9:**

[37] We must not fail to remark, however, that Christ came spiritually even before he came in a body. He came to the more perfect and to those who were not still infants or under pedagogues and tutors (Gal 3.25, 4.2), in whom the spiritual 'fullness of the time' (Gal 4.4) was present, as, for example, the patriarchs, and Moses the servant, and the prophets who contemplated the glory of Christ. [38] But just as Christ visited the perfect before his sojourn which was visible and bodily, so also he has not yet visited those who are still infants after his coming which has been proclaimed, since they are 'under tutors and governors' (Gal 4.2) and have not yet arrived at 'the fullness of the time.' The forerunners of Christ have visited them – words with good reason called 'pedagogues' because they are suited to souls which are children – but the Son himself, who glorified himself as the Word who is God, has not yet visited them, because he awaits the preparation which must take place in men of God who are about to receive his divinity. [39] And we must also know that just as there is a 'law' which contains a 'shadow of good things to come' (Heb 10.1), which have been revealed by the law proclaimed in accordance with truth, so also the gospel, which is thought to be understood by all who read it, teaches a shadow of the mysteries of Christ.

### **13: Origen, *Commentary on John*, 1.40–6:**

[40] And that which John calls an eternal gospel (Rv 14.6), which would properly be called a spiritual gospel, clearly presents both the mysteries presented by Christ's words and the things of which his acts were symbols, to those who consider 'all things face to face' (Prov 8.9) concerning the Son of God himself. Consistently with these matters, we understand that just as one is a Jew outwardly and cir[cumcised], there being both an outward and inward cir[cumcision] (cf Rm 2.28-9), so it is with a Christian and baptism. [41] Both Paul and Peter, formerly being Jews outwardly and circumcised, later received from Jesus to be such also inwardly, not only confessing in words, but demonstrating in deeds that they were Jews outwardly for the salvation of the many in accordance with the dispensation. And one must say the same things also of their Christianity. [42] Just as Paul cannot help those Jews in the flesh unless, when reason persuades, he circumcise Timothy (Acts 16.3), and, when it is reasonable, be shaved (Acts 21.24), and offer an offering and, in general, become a Jew to the Jews, that he might gain the Jews (1 Cor 9.20), so he who is set out for the benefit of the many cannot, through inward Christianity alone, improve those who are instructed in the basic principles of outward Christianity and lead them forth to better and higher things. [43] This is why we must live as a Christian in a spiritual and in a physical manner. And wherever it is necessary to preach the literal (*somatikon*) gospel declaring among the carnal (cf 1 Cor 3.1) that we 'know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified' (1 Cor 2.2), we must do this. But whenever we find those who are established in the Spirit and are bearing fruit in him (cf Col 1.10) and desiring the heavenly wisdom, we ought to share with them the Word who was restored from being made flesh to what "he was in the beginning with God" (Jn 1.2) [44] We do not think our discussion was in vain when we examined these matters about the gospel, distinguishing in concepts, as it were, the gospel which is perceptible by the senses from the intelligible and spiritual gospel. [45] And, indeed, the task before us now is to translate the gospel perceptible to the senses into the spiritual gospel. For what is the interpretation of the gospel perceptible to the senses unless it is translated into the spiritual gospel? It is little or nothing, even though most common people believe they receive the things which are revealed from the literal sense. [46] But all kinds of difficulties stand in our way as we attempt to reach into the depths of the meaning of the gospel and examine the bare truth of the types in it.

### **14: Origen, *Commentary on Matthew* 12.43.**

After the touch of the Word, lifting up their eyes they saw Jesus only and no other. Moses, the Law, and Elijah, the prophetic element (ἡ προφητεία), became one only with the Gospel of Jesus; and they did not remain three as they formerly were, but the three became one.

### **15: Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, 1.1:**

As in "the last days," the Word of God, which was clothed with the flesh from Mary, proceeded into this world, and what was seen in him was one thing, and what was understood was another—for the sight of his flesh was open for all to see, but the knowledge of his divinity was given to the few, to the elect—so also, when the Word of God was brought to humans through the Prophets and the Lawgiver, it was not brought without proper clothing. For just as there it was covered with the veil of the flesh, so here with the veil of the letter, so that indeed the letter is seen as flesh but the spiritual sense hiding within is perceived as divinity.

**16: Origen *Homilies on Luke, 1.4:***

The apostles themselves saw the Word, not because they had beheld the body of our Lord and Savior, but because they had seen the Word. If seeing Jesus' body meant seeing God's Word, then Pilate, who condemned Jesus, saw God's Word; so did Judas the traitor, and all those who cried out, 'crucify him, crucify him, remove such a one from the earth.' But far be it that any unbeliever should see God's Word. Seeing God's Word means what the Savior says, 'He who has seen me has also seen the Father who sent me.'

**17: Origen *Homilies on Jeremiah, 9.1:***

According to the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ as narratively told (κατὰ μὲν τὴν ἱστορουμένην παρουσίαν), his sojourn (ἐπιδημία) was bodily and something universal, illumining the whole world, for "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" [Jn 1:14]. "He was the true light that enlightens every man who comes into the world. He was in the world and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own, and his own received him not" [Jn 1:9-11]. However, it is also necessary to know that he was also sojourning prior to this, though not bodily, in each of the holy ones, and that after this visible sojourn of his, he again sojourns in us. ... It is necessary for us to know these things, because there is a sojourn of the Word with each, especially for those who would benefit from it. For what benefit is it to me, if the Word has sojourned in the world and I do not have him?

**18: St Ephrem of Syria *Commentary on the Diatessaron 7.22*. Trans. C. McCarthy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).**

If there were [only] one meaning for the words [of scripture], the first interpreter would find it, and all other listeners would have neither the toil of seeking nor the pleasure of finding. But every word of our Lord has its own image, and each image has its own members, and each member possesses its own species and form. Each person hears in accordance with his capacity, and it is interpreted in accordance with what has been given to him.