

Christ as Cornerstone, Worm, and Phoenix in Eriugena's Commentary on Dionysius

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Eriugena's commentary on the Dionysian *Celestial Hierarchy* has not been fully analyzed and integrated into Eriugenian scholarship, perhaps because John's own positions are so deeply embedded in his relentless paraphrasing of the Areopagite.¹ On the larger question of how the Neoplatonic pattern of "procession and return" was adapted to a Christocentric salvation history, the *Expositiones* provide several brief and suggestive interpretations of the biblical symbols mentioned by Dionysius.² Eriugena gives special attention to Christ as the cornerstone, by way of Maximus the Confessor, and expands the traditional vermicular Christology into a full life cycle of the phoenix. John the Scot's Christology as a whole is more fully and directly presented in other works, especially in the *Periphyseon*, and in other secondary studies.³ The

1. J. Barbet, ed., *Iohannis Scoti Eriugena, Expositiones in Ierarchiam Coelestem* (Brepols: Turnhout, 1975). Barbet's edition will be abbreviated as Exp, followed by chapter, lines, and page numbers. This essay is adapted from my monograph, "Eriugena's Commentary on the Dionysian *Celestial Hierarchy*" with appended translations of portions of Exp 1, 2, and 8, along with all of Exp 4, forthcoming from the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto. Part of the seventh chapter of Eriugena's *Expositiones* has recently been translated by Steven Chase, *Angelic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002) 161–86.

2. All work on the *Expositiones* is indebted to Barbet's own teacher, R. Roques, who led seminars and published materials on the first three chapters; for the general themes of the second chapter, see Roques' "Téatologie et théologie chez Jean Scot Érigène," reprinted in *Libres sentiers vers l'érigénisme* (Rome: Editioni dell'Ateneo, 1975) 13–43. One of the few recent studies is on chapter thirteen, by Donald Duclow, "Isaiah Meets the Seraph: Breaking Ranks in Dionysius and Eriugena?" *Eriugena: East and West*, ed. B. McGinn and W. Otten (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994) 233–52. Most recently, see the thesis by Jaehyun Kim, "Procession and Return in John the Scot, Eriugena" (Princeton Theological Seminary, 2003).

3. The *Periphyseon* will be cited according to the monumental and recently completed edition of E. Jeuneau, CCCM 161–65, although the translations are from I.P. Sheldon-Williams, *Periphyseon* (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1987). In the *Periphyseon* itself, there is a major passage on Christology at V.25 910C–913B. For studies of John's Christology, see Donald F. Duclow, "Dialectic and Christology in Eriugena's *Periphyseon*," *Dionysius* 4 (1980): 99–118, and Marcia Colish, "John the Scot's Christology and Soteriology in Relation to His Greek Sources," *Downside Review* 100 (1982): 138–51.

specific focus here is on his lesser-known exposition of the Areopagite, especially the menagerie of beastly symbols for the divine in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, chapter two.

John's comments on the first chapter of *The Celestial Hierarchy* nicely introduce his ways of talking about Christ. Since the Areopagite began with the biblical reference to the "Father of lights," Eriugena naturally devotes considerable attention to this passage and its several themes. From this Father is born "the true light, his Word through whom all things were made [Jn 1.3] and in whom all things are substantiated [Col 1.17], his only begotten Son."⁴ Biblical images for the divine, such as light, are worked over thoroughly and often applied Christologically. For example, "Do not think that the brightness of the Father is one thing and the ray of the Father another. The brightness of the Father, the ray of the Father is his Son, who brightened [illuminated] the Father to the world."⁵

The light imagery also leads to a direct discussion of Christology in the more specific sense, namely, the issue of the humanity and the divinity of Christ. When the Areopagite quoted the biblical references to the Word as the true light [Jn 1.9] and to Christ "through whom we have obtained access" [Rom 5.2] to the Father, John turns the Dionysian passage into an explicit invocation of the humanity and divinity of Christ.

For that incomprehensible light of the Father was inaccessible to us, until it became incarnate and was made human, the light born from him [the Father], who is Christ. By him humanized and made in our nature, we have access to the invisible Father; for insofar as we understand the humanity of Christ we also know, as much as it is given us to know, the hidden divinity of himself, and of his Father and of the Spirit of both.⁶

Such a statement emphasizes the humanity of Christ more than the Dionysian text did, and it illustrates John's movement from symbols such as light to overt doctrinal pronouncements, with an eye to the saving results for humanity. This pattern becomes more pronounced as the symbols move down the material ladder to the cornerstone and the worm.

4. Exp 1. 62–64, p. 2: *lumen uerum, Verbum suum per quod facta sunt omnia et in quo substituta sunt omnia, unigenitus suus Filius nascitur.*

5. Exp 1. 335–38, p. 10: *Et ne existimes quod aliud sit claritas Patris et aliud radius Patris: claritas Patris, radius Patris est Filius suus, qui Patrem clarificauit mundo.*

6. Exp 1. 234–40, p. 7: *Inaccessibilis enim erat nobis illa incomprehensibilis lux Patris, prius quam incarnaretur et homo fieret, lux ab eo genita, que est Christus; ipso autem humanato, et in nostra natura facto, accessum habemus ad inuisibilem Patrem; nam dum intelligimus Christi humanitatem, profecto cognoscimus, quantum datur nobis cognoscere, ipsius et Patris sui et Spiritus utriusque abditam diuinitatem.*

INTERPRETING MATERIAL IMAGES

The second chapter of *The Celestial Hierarchy* provided Eriugena with an opportunity to expand upon the Dionysian lists of various incongruous depictions of God and to apply some of them more specifically to Christ. One brief passage regarding the symbols of ointment, a cornerstone, ferocious beasts and the lowly worm received an unusually full exposition from John, going considerably beyond the Dionysian text itself. As a good example of his creative interpretative work, this passage will here be quoted in full, section by section, with comments on the commentary.⁷ The Irishman's Christological application of these biblical symbols will illustrate his deft use of various sources, his strokes of genius, and his own variations on procession and return.

In the course of discussing the incongruous biblical depictions of the angelic ranks, and the very idea of the apophatic and the inappropriate, the Areopagite had listed some of the images used by the scriptures for the Thearchy itself. John aptly labels this list "a triple way of the divine imaging," namely, the highest sensible realm (the sun, stars, and light), the middle part (fire and water) and the lowliest realm of earthly matter (the animals mentioned). In his expositions of the first two categories, listed so briefly in *The Celestial Hierarchy*, John makes his comments within the Areopagite's own principle that these images do not apply specifically to Christ.⁸ Yet when he turns to the third category, the lowliest material symbols, the discussion turns Christological even though Dionysius is still speaking explicitly of "it," namely, the Thearchy in general. (Following the Barbet edition, this translation puts John's rendition of the Dionysian text in capital letters.)

There follows: AND AT OTHER TIMES FROM THE VERY LAST, SUCH AS A FRAGRANT OINTMENT OR CORNERSTONE, BUT THEY EVEN PLACE A BESTIAL FORM AROUND IT, AND ADAPT TO IT THE APPEARANCE OF A LION AND A PANTHER AND DEPICT IT AS A LEOPARD OR CHARGING BEAR. After the imagings from the middle parts of the world, the paradigms from the lowest [parts] are taken up next. The lowest parts of the world are those which complete the constitution of the earthly mass. These, although they occupy the lowest or, as it were, the lowliest place among visible things in nature, nevertheless with respect to the power of signifying divine things, are not lowest but are exalted and incomprehensible, greatly signifying both natures of the only-begotten Son of God, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.⁹

7. The Dionysian texts are cited from the *Corpus Dionysiacum* I–II (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990–91). CH 2.5, 15.15–21, 144D to 145A; Exp 2. 994–1098, pp. 47–50.

8. Exp 2. 941–43, p. 45; and Exp 2. 983–87, p. 46.

9. Exp 2. 994–1005, p. 47: *Sequitur: ALIQVANDO AVTEM EX NOVISSIMIS, VT VNGVENTVM SVAVE, VT LAPIDEM ANGVLAREM, SED ET BESTIALEM IPSI FORMAM CIRCVMPOVNT, ET LEONIS EI ET PANTHERIS SPECIMEN COAPTANT, ET PARDALIN EAM VESTIVNT ET VRSAM SEVIENTEM. Post mediarum mundi partium*

In his translation of the Areopagite, Eriugena faithfully retains the neuter pronoun in reference to the Thearchy. Yet these last images, taken from the lowliest realm of earthly matter, are understood by John to refer to Christ in particular. Although lowly in physical terms, their very materiality permits an application to the two natures of Christ, meaning his human and corporeal body as well.

This Christological move is not alien to the Dionysian text, since the biblical images of cornerstone and so on were clearly understood as applying to Christ, in harmony with exegetical tradition. Yet where *The Celestial Hierarchy* simply listed several images for God in a continuum from the exalted down to the lowly, John goes into considerable detail. The passage continues:

For the fragrant ointment is Christ, in whose image theology says, under the figure of the church: "While the king was on his couch, my nard gave forth its fragrance" [Song 1:12]. Read about the mystical woman who just before the passion poured out an alabaster [jar of nard] on the head of the Lord [Mt. 26.7, Mk 14.3]. The house was filled with the fragrance [Jn. 12.3], that is, the entire world is filled with the most fragrant teaching of the passion and resurrection of the Lord, and of the other virtues, which he achieved for us. The catholic church composes this mystical ointment in the consecration of the chrism.¹⁰

Along with his direct identification of Christ with the "nard" or fragrant ointment of the *Song of Songs*, John interprets the composite Gospel narrative to mean that the house filled with fragrance symbolizes the world filled with the fragrant teaching of the passion and resurrection of the Lord.

Apart from exegetical precedents, this interpretation of the lowly or incongruous symbol of the ointment has emphasized the positive aspects of the image, not the negative. Eriugena here isolates the kataphatic, and omits the apophatic. In this and other expositions yet to come, John takes what Dionysius presented as apparently incongruous and most dissimilar to God, and finds therein a positive correlation or similarity. He thereby adds detail

imaginationes consequenter nouissimarum paradigmata subduntur. Nouissime autem mundi partes sunt que terrene molis complent constitutionem. Que, quamuis in natura uisibilium nouissimum ac ueluti uilissimum optinent locum, uirtute tamen diuinarum rerum significationis non sunt nouissima, sed excelsa et incomprehensibilia, et maxime utriusque nature unigeniti filii Dei, domini et saluatoris nostri Iesu Christi, significatiua.

10. Exp 2. 1005–13, p. 47: *Vnguentum itaque suaue Christus est, in cuius imagine sub figura Ecclesie ait theologia: "Dum esset rex in accubitu suo, nardus mea dedit odorem suum." Lege mysticam feminam que paulo ante passionem fudit alabastrum in caput Domini, et impleta est domus odore, hoc est totus mundus suauissima doctrina passionis Domini et resurrectionis ceterarumque uirtutum, que propter nos peregrit, repletus est. Hoc mysticum unguentum in consecratione crismatis catholica componit Ecclesia.*

to the Dionysian continuum and changes the emphasis, but is not flatly contradicting the Areopagite's comments about similar and dissimilar symbols. Dionysius never argued that the similar symbols alone were to be affirmed and that the dissimilar were to be only negated. Eriugena is an astute and appreciative interpreter of the Areopagite's method, which does not isolate affirmation from negation, but works on a continuum of images, from what seems most exalted to what seems least fitting. All along this continuum, such images are both affirmed and also negated, in that they are both similar and also dissimilar, although in different proportions. The loftiest symbol is finally dissimilar to God. Conversely, even the lowliest image will be found, upon contemplation, to bear some similarity to the divine. In these texts, John provides a more detailed contemplation of the dissimilar, and finds therein many more specific similarities with the divine. This adjusts the emphasis, as more evident shortly, but the basic method is faithful to the Areopagite.

Within the Dionysian principle, John thus probes the lowest depictions for their similarities to God, and does so particularly regarding the ways these material symbols are like Christ. He takes the most interest in the images of the cornerstone and the worm.

Christ is the cornerstone [Eph 2.20, from Is 28.16, and Ps 118.22; Mt 21.42] whom the faithless Judeans reject, but who was made the corner for us. In him the church is conjoined, collected from Judea and the nations. In him, the rational and the intellectual (namely the angelic and human nature) has been made one. "He is our peace, who made both one" [Eph 2.14]. In him divinity and humanity, word and flesh, is made one substance in two natures. And who is suitable to explain worthily the "corner-ness" [*angulositatem*] of Christ? While beyond what we have said about the unification of the circumcised and uncircumcised, of the celestial and the terrestrial (that is, of the intellectual and rational creation) in one divine and supreme city, and of the deity and the humanity in him, a five-fold way of this angularity has been handed down by the holy Fathers.¹¹

11. Exp 2. 1014–26, pp. 47–48: *Lapis angularis Christus est, quem Iudei respuunt perfidi, sed angularis nobis factus est. In ipso enim coniungitur Ecclesia ex Iudea et gentibus collecta. In ipso rationalis et intellectualis, angelica, uidelicet et humana, natura unum facta est. Ipse est enim "pax nostra qui fecit utraque unum." In ipso diuinitas et humanitas, uerbum et caro, una substantia in duabus naturis effecta. Et quis idoneus est angulositatem Christi digne explanare? Dum preter quod diximus de adunatione circumcisionis et preputii, celestium item terrestriumque, hoc est intellectualis et rationalis creature in unam diuinam ac summam ciuitatem, nec non deitatis et humanitatis in ipso, quintuplex ipsius angularitatis a sanctis Patribus traditur modus.*

John is here interested not so much in the general biblical imagery of a stone or rock, directly cited by Dionysius in *The Celestial Hierarchy* and elsewhere,¹² but rather in the specific image of a corner, the angle where two lines are joined. He uses the unusual words *angulositas* and *angularitas* to signal his emphasis. The scriptural passage in the deep background for Eriugena, but never cited by the Areopagite, is 2 Chronicles 26.9 where King Uzziah's building project involved several corners or angles. As a corner makes a conjunction within itself of the two walls where they meet each other, so Christ unites in himself Jew and Gentile, divinity and humanity, the intellectual and the rational, the celestial and the terrestrial. It might not seem that the passage in 2 Chronicles could bear such cosmic and Christological weight, but John is transmitting basic patristic tradition, as he himself says. The next section of the text is in fact a paraphrase of a passage from a venerable authority, as quoted directly and openly elsewhere.

For he united in himself both sexes (namely, masculine and feminine) in the simplicity of the divine image according to which he was made human. "In Christ," says the Apostle, "there is neither male nor female" [Gal 3.28]. In him, the sphere of the earth and paradise are made one paradise through the grace of his resurrection. In him generally earth and heaven are made one heaven through the likeness of human and angelic life. In him the bodily and spiritual creature become one spiritual creature through the uniting of substance, in that the inferior everywhere passes into the superior. In him, every creature is coupled with the Creator both in the hope now in place and also will be coupled in the reality itself face to face. You see the five-part way of the corners of Christ, concerning which specifics we have treated more fully in the books, *Periphyseon*.¹³

John's explicit reference back to his own *Periphyseon*, one of three such references in the *Expositiones*,¹⁴ provides some clarification for the passage but also raises some new questions. In the *Periphyseon* V [895D–896A] John quoted a full paragraph from Maximus the Confessor that named roughly these same pairings as united by the corner or angle that is Christ: male and

12. See also DN 1 119.9, 596C and *Letter* 9 195.5, 1105A.

13. Exp 2. 1026–39, p. 48: *Ipse siquidem in seipso utrumque sexum, masculinum uidelicet et femininum, in simplicitatem diuine imaginis secundum quam factus homo coadunauit. "In Christo enim, ait Apostolus, non est masculus neque femina." In ipso orbis terrarum et paradisi per resurrectionis sue gratiam unus efficitur paradisi. In ipso generaliter terra et celum per similitudinem humane et angelice uite unum efficitur celum. In ipso corporalis et spiritualis creatura per adunationem substantie una fit spiritualis creatura, dum inferiora ubique transeunt in superiora. In ipso omnis creatura Creatori et copulatur in spe adhuc posita et copulabitur in re ipsa per speciem. Videsue quinquepartitum angulorum Christi modum, de quibus singulis in libris ΠΕΡΙΦΥΣΕΩΝ latius tractauimus.*

14. The other two references are at Exp 4. 100, p. 68 and Exp 11, 102f., p. 160 on different topics; all three references use the Greek title for the work.

female, Paradise (Eden) and the rest of the earth, earth as a whole and heaven, the bodily or sensible and the spiritual or intelligible, and the creature and the Creator. The passage paraphrased here in the *Expositiones* was quoted directly there in the *Periphyseon* and was also introduced with an explicit attribution to Maximus, within John's over-arching discussion of the unification and return of all creation. Here "procession and return" has become explicitly Christological and historical. "Maximus treats of the unification of Creation not only in his *Ambigua* but also in the *Scholia*, where, in the forty-eighth chapter he gives the mystical interpretation of the towers which Ozias built in Jerusalem."¹⁵ John then quoted Maximus' own introduction to the five pairings, from the *Quaestiones ad Thalassium* 48, which he erroneously entitled *Scholia*: "Perhaps the scriptural account means by the angles the different unifications appointed through Christ for the various creatures."¹⁶ The reference to the angles, as mentioned in the description of Uzziah's building program, reminds us that this all began with Eriugena's exposition of the Dionysian mention of cornerstone in *The Celestial Hierarchy*.¹⁷

John's glance back at his own *Periphyseon* raises at least two questions. First of all, why did he not name Maximus here in the *Expositiones* as the source of the quotation? Perhaps the fact that the *Periphyseon* citations of Maximus also involve Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa suggested to him the more generic reference to "the holy Fathers." But this possibility does not explain the larger puzzle of why Eriugena never names Maximus even once in all fifteen chapters of the *Expositiones*, despite John's translations of Maximus and repeated tributes elsewhere to the Confessor for significant help in understanding the Areopagite.

Secondly, Eriugena's first list of those binary pairings which are united at the angle or corner that is Christ does not fully match the five-fold division

15. *Periphyseon* V 895CD: *Idem itaque Maximus, non solum in Ambiguis uerum etiam in Scoliis, de adunatione creaturarum disputat, XLVIII capitulo, ubi turrium, quas Ozias aedificauit in Ierusalem, theoriam exposuit.*

16. *Periphyseon* V 895D: "Angulos fortassis," inquit, "sermo (scripturae) dixit ipsas per Christum factas diferentes separatarum creaturarum adunationes." From *Quaes ad Thal* a 48; CCSG 7 332f.; PG 90 433C–36C. Maximus added his own "Scholia" to his *Quaestiones*, which led John to call the whole thing "Scholia;" CCSG 7 xcix.

17. The full discussion in the *Periphyseon* would take us even further afield, for John there (893B) made even fuller use of a similar passage in Maximus' *Ambigua ad Iohannem* 37; that text starts off with a quotation from Gregory of Nazianzus but makes extensive use of Gregory of Nyssa's discussion of the same theme, the five-fold division of creation which will be overcome in the resurrection and return of all to God: CCSG 18, 179f., from Greg Naz. *Oratio* 39, 13 PG 36, 348D and Greg Nys *Contra Eunomiam* PG 45, 333BC and 793C–96A. See E. Jeaneau, "La division des sexes chez Grégoire de Nysse et chez Jean Scot Érigène," *Eriugena: Studien zu seinem Quellen* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1980) 33–54.

of the second list, the one quoted directly in the *Periphyseon* upon the authority of the Fathers. This is not simply a difference in terminology, for the one list emphasized the uniting of Judea (or Israel) and the nations (or Gentiles) which does not at all appear in the patristic five-fold pattern, and it neglected entirely the unification of male and female, which is clearly essential to Eriugena's presentation of the return of all and was part of the pattern in Gregory of Nyssa, Maximus, and John's other presentations of this theme. Why this disparity? The mention of Judea might be explained by reference to the initial citation of the "cornerstone," since the builders who rejected it in Psalm 118.22 are, to Eriugena, "the faithless Judeans."¹⁸ Thus, the unifying function of Christ as the corner or angle is applied immediately to the Church collected from Judea and the nations, and then to the rational and the intellectual or the human and the angelic (also not explicitly named in the patristic quintuple distinction) and to Christ's own divinity and humanity, the word and flesh, "made one substance [subsistence] in two natures."¹⁹ These binary pairings may have then reminded John of the traditional five-fold list he had already used and discussed in the *Periphyseon*. Whatever the reasons for the discrepancies in the lists, in keeping with his exposition of the Dionysian mention of the lowliest and material images for God, Eriugena has here emphasized the incarnate Christ as the unifying corner or angle, joining together certain separated parties during the return of all to God.

John then resumes his exposition of the compressed Dionysian list in *The Celestial Hierarchy*: ointment, cornerstone, lion, and so on.

He is the lion of the tribe of Judah [Hos 5.14, Rev 5.5] who has conquered the world and its prince. Indeed, in the form of a lion is expressed the fortitude of Christ, and the rational anger by which he despises and completely destroys the evil powers besetting us and all vices opposed to the virtues. He is also the mystical panther. Indeed "panther" is said as if "pan ther" [all beast], namely, most bestial, for it is the most ferocious of all beasts. This figure is understood regarding Christ in two ways: either it is accepted as an opposite, such that through the excessive ferocity of this beast is signified the ineffable clemency and gentleness of the divine piety by which he wishes all men to be saved and to come to the recognition of the truth [1 Tim 2.4]; or else, through the metaphor of this most savage beast the zeal of divine goodness is imaged, by which it devours and consumes all the wild and irrational motions of our nature. In the same figure both the leopard and the charging bear are introduced [Hos 13.7f.]. Indeed the rational and more than rational love of the divine goodness always desires to destroy the irrational and more than irrational motions of our nature, and to consume into itself this very nature, free and rescued from its every wild impulse, in ineffable morsels of divine nourishments.²⁰

18. Exp 2. 1014, p. 47: *Iudei ... perfidi*.

19. Exp 2. 1019f., p. 47: *una substantia in duabus naturis effecta*.

20. Exp 2. 1040–58, p. 48: *Ipse est leo de tribu Iuda qui uicit mundum ipsiusque principem. In forma quippe leonis fortitudo Christi exprimitur, et furor rationabilis, quo aduersantes no-*

Here again, that which was simply listed by Dionysius (“a lion or a panther, a leopard or a charging bear”) receives fuller explication from John as he unfolds the meanings of these scriptural symbols. These ferocious animals appear together in several biblical passages (Hos 13.7–8, Dan 7.4–6, and Rev 13.2) and are here interpreted together as a group, with the panther given some special consideration. In general, the wild beasts’ destructive ferocity indicates the divine destruction and consumption of all sinful powers and irrational impulses, with an explicit naming of Christ. (The lion is discussed in more detail in the final chapter of *The Celestial Hierarchy* but the references there pertain to the way lions symbolize the angels.²¹) Notice that John emphasizes how these ferocious beasts are similar to Christ, as long as ferocity is given a spiritual interpretation as the rational anger that consumes sinful powers and vices. In the Areopagite, these animals were listed as examples of incongruous and dissimilar symbols; yet every such image retains some similarity to the divine, implicitly in Dionysius and explicitly in Eriugena.

The panther presents us with a special case, for two reasons. In the Greek of the Septuagint (Hos 5.14 and 13.7), its supposed etymology is so pertinent that John makes a special point of it: “pan ther” means “all beast” or most ferocious. Secondly, in this particular case, John offers two ways of interpreting the symbol: as a dissimilarity to be contrasted with the gentleness of Christ or as a similarity that is also applied to the other carnivores in the sense that Christ spiritually “devours and consumes all the wild and irrational motions of our nature.” It is the Dionysian dissimilarity or argument from the opposite which is unusual for John (and shows his independence from the *Physiologus* where the panther is the most friendly of beasts), at least in this list of material symbols ranging from ointment and stone through these wild beasts even down to the lowly worm.

bis iniquas potestates, omniaque vitia uirtutibus opposita contemnit penitusque interimit. Mysticus quoque panther est. Panther quippe dicitur quasi pan ther, hoc est bestialissimus; ferocissima enim omnium bestiarum est. Que figura dupliciter in Christo intelligitur: aut enim e contrario accipitur, ut per nimiam ipsius bestie ferocitatem ineffabilis diuine pietatis clementia et mansuetudo, qua uult omnes homines saluos fieri et in agnitionem ueritatis uenire, significetur, aut per metaphoram seuisime bestie zelus diuine bonitatis, quo deuorat et consumit omnes ferales et irrationabiles nostre nature motus, imaginatur. In eadem figura et pardalis ursaque seuiens introducit. Rationabilis quippe et plus quam rationabilis diuine bonitatis amor irrationabiles et plus quam irrationabiles nostre nature motus semper appetit delere, ipsamque naturam liberam, omnique ferali suo impetu ereptam in seipsam ineffabilibus diuinorum alimentorum morsibus consumere.

21. CH 15.8, 57.6–10 336D; Exp 15, p. 208. See also Robert M. Grant, *Early Christians and Animals* (London: Routledge, 1999).

A VERMICULAR CHRISTOLOGY

The last Dionysian example elicited from John his most expansive and creative interpretation, starting with the traditional similarity between Christ and a worm and ending with a fabulous creature that is not in the Dionysian corpus but aptly symbolizes the cycle of descent and ascent.

There follows: AND I ALSO ADD THAT WHICH BOTH APPEARS TO BE MORE LOWLY THAN ALL AND [YET] TO SIGNIFY MORE, THAT THE DIVINE WISE ONES HAVE HANDED DOWN THAT IT CLOAKS ITSELF EVEN IN THE APPEARANCE OF A WORM. I add, he says, this symbol among the aforementioned imagings, which seems to be more lowly than all, and [yet] to signify more, or, to translate more clearly, [to be] more obscure or dissimilar. The divine wise ones (that is, the theologians) have handed down that this wisdom formed itself in the appearance of a worm, perhaps in that passage where it is said through the prophet "I am a worm and not a person" [Ps 22.6]. This is understood of Christ, who was not born of male seed, but just as a worm [is born] from the simple nature of the earth, so he himself assumed flesh from the womb of the perpetual and undefiled virgin.²²

The singular Psalmic reference to a worm was frequently and naturally applied to Christ in Christian exegesis, especially since Jesus identified himself with the Psalmist's opening verse ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") according to St. Matthew's Gospel. Although Dionysius never developed the symbolism of the worm, saying only that it seemed lowliest and most incongruous of all, Eriugena makes a full presentation of the various ways a worm is similar to Christ, starting with their generation.

A worm was generally thought to come from the earth itself without any paternal seed; John applies this unusual generation to Christ's miraculous birth from the undefiled and ever-virgin womb of his mother. This analogy of a worm with Christ was a patristic commonplace, as in Augustine's exegesis of this verse: a worm is also born without coition.²³ This striking but standard parallel or similarity, where one might expect only dissimilarities given the Dionysian context, is but the beginning of Eriugena's vermicular imagery.

22. Exp 2. 1059–71, pp. 48–49: *Sequitur: ADDAM VERO ET QVOD OMNIVM VILIVS ESSE ET MAGIS SIGNIFICARE VISVM EST, QVIA ET VERMIS SPECIE IPSAM SEIPSAM CIRCVMFORMANTEM DIVINI SAPIENTES TRADIDERVNT. Addam, inquit, predictis imaginationibus illud symbolum, quod vilis omnium esse visum est, et magis significare uel, ut expressius transfertur, magis obscurum uel dissimile. Diuini siquidem sapientes, id est theologi, tradiderunt ipsam sapientiam in specie uermis seipsam formasse, eo loco fortassis ubi per prophetam loquitur: "Ego sum uermis et non homo." Hoc enim intelligitur de Christo, qui de virili semine non est natus sed, sicut uermis de simplici natura terre, ita ipse ex uisceribus perpetue uirginis et incontaminate carnem assumpsit.*

23. PL 36: 174; *St. Augustine on the Psalms* vol. 1, p. 213 (*Ancient Christian Writers*, 29).

For nothing in the nature of material things is more lowly than the worm, which is conceived from simple earth. Nevertheless, through this is imaged the incarnation of the Word of God, which transcends every sense and intellect [Phil 4.7]. “Who will narrate his generation?” [Acts 8.33, from Is 53.8] It can also be understood thus: “I am a worm and a human is not,” that is, I am a worm and a human is not a worm. As if he were to say, I who am more than a human, I penetrate the secrets of all of nature, as a worm [penetrates] the bowels of the earth, which no one participating only in human nature can do. With this sense agrees that which is written in another Psalm, “and my substance in the depths of the earth” [Ps 139.15], that is, and my substance, which is wisdom in itself, subsists in the depths of the earth, that is, in the intimate folds of created nature. “For the divinity beyond being is the being of all.” Thus the worm that penetrates the hidden things of all of creation is the Wisdom of the Father, which, while human, transcends all humanity. Hear the Apostle saying of himself: “Paul, an apostle not from men nor through a man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead” [Gal 1.1].²⁴

In this passage John’s exploration of the imagery of the worm as pertaining to Christ takes on added complexity, and goes quite beyond the Psalm. On the one hand, we see here a second parallel between the worm and Christ, namely, that just as a worm penetrates the depths or bowels of the earth, so also Christ penetrates the secrets of all of nature. John has here pressed the Dionysian understanding of symbols to the limit, finding multiple similarities or congruities where the Areopagite was originally illustrating only dissimilarity and incongruity. Yet Eriugena’s interpretation is still operating within the Dionysian principle that all perceptible symbols, even the most incongruous, have at least some similarity to that which is being symbolized.

On the other hand, John attaches this second similarity to a different interpretation of the Psalm, wherein Christ says that he is a worm but that a human is not a worm, since no one merely human could penetrate those

24. Exp 2. 1071–88, p. 49: *Nihil itaque in natura rerum materialium uilius uermis, qui de simplici humo concipitur, et tamen per ipsum incarnatio Dei Verbi, que superat omnem sensum et intellectum, imaginatur. “Generationem enim eius quis enarrabit?” Potest et sic intelligi: “ego sum uermis et non homo,” hoc est: ego sum uermis, et non homo uermis. Ac si diceret: ego qui plus quam homo sum, secreta penetro totius naturae, sicut uermis uiscera terre, quod nullus solius humane nature particeps potest agere. Cui sensui aridet, quod in alio psalmo scriptum est: “Et substantia mea in inferioribus terre,” hoc est: et substantia mea, que per seipsam sapientia est, in inferioribus terre, hoc est in intimis nature condite sinibus subsistit. “Esse enim est omnium super esse diuinitas.” Vermis itaque qui abdita totius creature penetrat, Sapientia Patris est que, dum est homo, omnem superat humanitatem. Audi Apostolum de se ipso loquentem: “Paulus apostolus, non ab hominibus, neque per hominem, sed per Iesum Christum et Deum Patrem qui suscitauit eum a mortuis.”* The interior quotation (that “the divinity beyond being is the being of all”) comes from *The Celestial Hierarchy* 4 (20.16f. 177D), as thoroughly discussed by Eriugena within his own doctrine of creation (Exp 4, pp. 69–70), as discussed in chapter five of my study of the *Expositiones*.

secret places as a worm penetrates the earth. Christ, after all, is not merely human, but also more than human, as St. Paul confirms. This exegetical move also invokes the resurrection of the dead, which is beyond the normal range of the worm imagery. Christ's descent down to the depths offers a parallel to a worm's descent down into the earth, but this would seem to be as much as our creative interpreter could draw out of the Psalm's reference to a worm. Nevertheless, John has one more interpretive association to make, one that turns the descent into ascent.

Eriugena's exposition of the worm as a symbol for Christ does not stop at the parallel in fatherless generation and the penetrating to hidden secrets; it goes on to encompass Christ's descent to the depths and his return in triumph. In John's hands, the symbolism of the worm can lead to the resurrection and the ascension, but by way of a different and fabulous creature.

Is he [Christ] not that mystical worm, in whose image a worm is born every five hundred years from the ashes of an Arabian bird, I mean the phoenix, consumed by the flame of its own breast, and is recalled to its original freshness? For Christ was consumed by the ardor of the passion which he accepted of his own will, and descended to the depths [as] a marvelous worm. But soon he returned after three days, and his apostles who had seen him burning on the cross were amazed to observe him rising in a spiritual body, flying on the wings of the virtues, and ascending to his Father.²⁵

The imagery of the phoenix, of course, had long been used in Christian expositions of the death and resurrection of Jesus, and some of these accounts included the reference to a worm, such as in Clement of Rome, Ambrose, and Gregory Nazianzus.²⁶ In that variation on the legend of the phoenix, the first to emerge from the ashes of the consumed bird is a worm; then the worm develops into the reborn phoenix. John's creativity here lies in his poetic application of this tradition, especially in starting with the worm of the Psalm and ending with the risen phoenix.

The image of the phoenix also allowed Eriugena to expand significantly upon his theme of the worm, to go back before the descent to the depths in order to re-state the death of Jesus as a consumption by ardor, "burning on

25. Exp 2. 1088–98, pp. 49–50: *Nonne ipse est mysticus ille uermis, in cuius imagine quingentesimo semper anno transacto de cinere arabice auis, phenicis dico, proprii sui pectoris flamma consumpte, uermis nascitur, et ad pristinam uiriditatem reuocatur? Christus siquidem ardore passionis, quam sponte sua susceperat, consumptus est, et descendit ad inferos mirabilis uermis. Sed mox post triduum reuersus est, sui que apostoli qui eum in cruce ardentem uiderant, in spirituali corpore resurgentem conspexere, uirtutumque pennis uolantem, ad Patremque suum ascendentem mirati sunt.*

26. Clement of Rome (ad Cor. 1.25) and Gregory Nazianzus (*Ex ad uirgines* 526f.; PG 37. 620). For the broader discussion of the phoenix, see R. van der Broek, *The Myth of the Phoenix, according to Classical and Early Christian Traditions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972).

the cross,” and then to depict the resurrection and the ascension of Christ as the flight of the phoenix. Remarkably, all of this is an expansion of the worm Christology. From the Areopagite’s ultimate example of dissimilar biblical imagery for God in general has come a full-scale Eriugenian narrative about Christ in particular, explicating the multiple similarities between the incarnate one and the lowly worm, and masterfully arranging these parallels in the Christological order of saving history, from the virginal conception to the crucifixion and descent to the depths, and then—with the help of the legend of the phoenix—to Christ’s resurrection and ascension to the Father. With a few deft strokes, the parable of the phoenix illustrates the parabola of procession and return. This portion of his commentary thus provides an excellent example of Eriugena’s more expansive and creative exposition of the Dionysian text, in this case in the service of a Christological descent and ascent. That this pattern is not simply Christ’s individual journey but the larger history of all humanity, indeed all of creation, is only suggested in the *Expositiones*, as in the image of the cornerstone, but is fully developed in the *Periphyseon*.