

*Sed Iohannes praecurrit citius Petro ... primo
intrat Petrus in monumentum, deinde Iohannes:*
Eriugena's Appropriation of Dionysian
Exegesis in the *Homilia*

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DIONYSIUS, SCRIPTURE, AND *SKOPOS*

It is difficult to imagine a strictly Dionysian exegesis of an extended scriptural narrative. The Areopagite's efforts, on the basis of *De Divinis Nominibus*, are directed towards unfolding the divine realities contained in the individual, conceptual names of Scripture. Of primary importance here are the divine emanations signified by 'being,' 'life,' and 'intellect,' and not the narrative histories of the patriarchs or apostles, where a characteristically Dionysian analysis could easily become preoccupied with every copula, modifier, or relation required for such accounts. A paradigmatic statement of the Dionysian preference for approaching the enfolded complexities of individual words, rather than the unfolded expressions of more complex syntactical arrangements, appears at *De Divinis Nominibus* IV.11. The author here defends his application of the word ἔρωσ to God, saying that it is foolish to consider the implications of mere words (ταῖς λέξεσιν), instead of the power of the conception inherent in the words (τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ σκοποῦ).¹ As purely linguistic phenomena, words are made necessary by sense perception, but the intelligible conception that precedes the word renders the latter unnecessary once the mind has become united with the intelligible content of the former.²

The Dionysian discussion of divine love is related to a passage from Proclus' *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*,³ and the exegetical strategy common to both works is expressed in the anonymous *Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*.⁴ In this later work, ten rules are proposed for determining the *skopos* of

1. *De Divinis Nominibus*, IV.11, 708C. Except where noted, all translations are my own.

2. *Ibid.*, IV.11, 708D.

3. See *In Alcibiadem*, 30,5 and following.

4. I am not, of course, making the anachronistic claim that this text was available to either Proclus or Dionysius, but rather that the doctrines herein expressed would have been part of their shared intellectual climate.

a Platonic dialogue. The true *skopos* of any dialogue is held to be: that which is one, rather than many (1); that which is most general and total (2, 3); that which is higher, rather than lower (4); that which is exact, rather than broad (5); that which is in agreement with the contents of the dialogue (6); that which does not consist in negative criticism (7); that which is not affective (8); that which is not instrumental to the means employed by the dialogue (9); that which is not strictly derivable from the explicit subject matter of the dialogue (10).⁵ Without engaging in a lengthy analysis, or mutual resolution, of these criteria, it is already possible to distinguish a common ancestry between the pursuit of the *skopos* of a Platonic dialogue, in this work, and that of Scripture in the Dionysian work. For Dionysius, to find the *skopos* of a divine name is to be united with the single, sufficient cause of all of its subordinate effects (criteria 1–4); this cause is unambiguously identifiable as the cause of its effects (5); the cause is the same as that which dispenses illumination to the Scripture writers, and is therefore not at variance with itself (6–7); the cause is intelligible, and ultimately supra-intelligible, and therefore not properly received by the senses or by sense objects (including linguistic phenomena) (8–10).⁶

While Dionysius does not deviate from any of the criteria, there is still no reason, apart from a personal motivation of focus, for him to avoid pursuing *skopoi* in the more extended narratives of Scripture. An earlier section of the *Prolegomena*, as part of an effort to explain why Plato chose the literary form of the dialogue, establishes a correspondence between the constitutive elements of the dialogue and those of the cosmos. The articulated terms of the correspondence are as follows: Matter—interlocutors, time, and place of the dialogue; Form—style; Nature (i.e., the union of Matter and Form)—the form of teaching; Soul—scientific demonstrations; Intellect—the problem from which the demonstrations arise; the Divine—the good at which the dialogue aims.⁷ From this schema it is clear that the aim of the dialogue, or its good, need not be isolated from the procedural means of its exposition. To maintain an observance of the ten criteria for the *skopos*, it is sufficient that the aim not be identified as a means employed within the dialogue or as part of the work's obvious subject matter (criteria 9–10). This observance

5. *Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy*, ed. L.G. Westerink (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1962), IX.21–23, pp. 38–44. See also P. Hoffmann, “What was Commentary in Late Antiquity? The Example of the Neoplatonic Commentators,” in *A Companion to Ancient Philosophy*, ed. M.L. Gill and P. Pellegrin (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2009), 597–622.

6. That Dionysius meets the criteria set forth by the *Prolegomena* is my own claim, for which there seems to be sufficient textual support in *De Divinis Nominibus*, I.1–3.

7. *Prolegomena*, ed. Westerink, V.16–17, pp. 30–34; this analogy between the cosmos and the dialogue should be compared with the slightly different formulation of Proclus, *In Alcibiadem*, 10.3–14, briefly reproduced in Westerink's edition, p. xxxv.

does not make the *skopos* any less constitutive of the literary form than the other elements of its cosmos.

This is not to say, however, that Dionysius isolates the *skopos* of any divine name from the rest of Scripture, or from its effects in the world, since this is manifestly not his intention. The question nevertheless remains why the Areopagite should not want to exploit more fully the narrative, or *historia*, of Scripture. There remains the possibility that Dionysius has in fact accounted for the genesis of scriptural narrative in his descriptions of the Scripture writers. These privileged individuals have been granted a power by the Holy Spirit, whereby the divine is grasped in a union surpassing all human powers, and which results in the recorded words of Scripture.⁸ The stability of this union issues in the “beneficent processions of God,” by which those who contemplate Scripture might be raised to the same union of which it is the product.⁹

This twofold movement—upwards, towards union, and downwards, following the divine processions—of scriptural production cannot be said to exclude the *historia* of Scripture, and should be contrasted with an event described later in *De Divinis Nominibus*. At III.2, Dionysius describes the conduct of his master Hierotheus upon witnessing the event of the Koimesis. In a manner that surpassed all present, except for the ‘theologians’ James and Peter, Hierotheus was made wholly ecstatic, and experienced a communion (κοινωνίαν) with the objects of his praise.¹⁰ It should be noted that the proximate object of the vision of Hierotheus is the actual event of the passing of Mary. This event both takes place in time and is present to the senses, and it therefore discloses its own narrative or *historia*. The excellence of Hierotheus’ praise, however, consists in his being wholly taken out of his subjective perception of, and even his individual location within, this narrative, and being made one with the true object of the things praised. In contrast to the Scripture writers, who record the divine narratives proceeding from divine union, Hierotheus rises to union as a result of witnessing an event within the divine narrative.

It is therefore clear that Dionysius does not consider scriptural narrative to be something that must be purged and discarded, in virtue of its intelligible and unifying *skopoi*. Rather, the divine *historia* both precedes and proceeds from the union that the *skopoi* themselves ensure. Moreover, since Dionysius is just as dependent on the insights of Hierotheus as he is on the Scripture writers, there is no way of privileging either the preceding or the proceeding course of scriptural narrative. Thus, without engaging in any extended exegesis

8. *De Divinis Nominibus*, I.1, 585B–588A.

9. *Ibid.*, I.4, 589D; trans. C. Luibheid in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works* (Mahwah, NY: Paulist Press, 1987), 51.

10. *Ibid.*, III.2, 681C–684A.

of divine *historia*, Dionysius demonstrates that it is as integral to Scripture as the unifying and intelligible *skopoi* of the divine names themselves. This demonstration, however, does not give explicit treatment to how the *skopoi* are related to scriptural narrative, whether the former are direct causes of the latter, or whether human consciousness acts as a mediating term between the two. The Dionysian endorsement of scriptural narrative is at once unambiguous and highly suggestive.

ERIUGENA'S *HOMILIA*

In his *Homily on the Prologue to the Gospel of John*, Eriugena appears to respond to the suggestive affirmation of divine *historia* offered by Dionysius. That the *Homily* is a thoroughly Dionysian work is obvious on practically every page, and this is particularly so on those where the Areopagite is not mentioned by name. The *Homily*, for instance, begins with the contrasting modes by which the church is enjoined to receive the voice of the eagle: "Exterior sensus transeuntem accipiat sonitum, interior animus manentem penetret intellectum."¹¹ The contrast between the passing sound and the remaining understanding immediately brings to mind the Dionysian contrast between the words of Scripture and the power of their conception (*skopos*), from *De Divinis Nominibus* IV.11. The Dionysian resonance is even more apparent in light of Eriugena's translation of this section of *De Divinis Nominibus*, which applies the word 'transeuntes' to the words heard in the absence of what they signify.¹²

Yet another parallel between the *Homily* and *De Divinis Nominibus* occurs in the extended comparison Eriugena offers between John and Peter. The comparison begins with Eriugena's praise of John as the one to whom it was granted to penetrate the hidden mysteries of the highest good. To the rhetorical question of who might be compared to John in this regard, Eriugena suggests the name of Peter, "the highest summit (summo vertici) of the apostles."¹³ The choice of words once again reflects Eriugena's translation of Dionysius, in this case the description of Peter at *De Divinis Nominibus* III.2, as "vertex et honorabilissima."¹⁴ It should be recalled that the Dionysian passage contains a description of the mutual witness of the Koimesis by Peter, James, and Hierotheus, and that the passage was offered as an apology for pursuing the method of Hierotheus in the treatise that follows.

11. *Homilia Super 'In Principio Erat Verbum,'* ed. E. Jeuneau (Brepols: CCCM, 2008), I.1–3, p.3.

12. *Dionysiaca I: Recueil donnant l'ensemble des traductions latines des ouvrages attribués au Denys de l'Aéropage*, ed. Ph. Chevallier (Bruges: Desclée de Brouwer, 1937), 202–03.

13. *Homilia*, II.1–8, p.5.

14. *Dionysiaca I*, 136.

Taking these two Dionysian resonances together, it is possible to see the beginnings of a commentary on the Areopagite's account of the relation of *skopos* to *historia*. The first comment draws attention to the importance of stabilizing the passing (transeuntem) sound of the Gospel by means of the remaining (manentem) understanding. The second comment reveals that the stable content of a vision of the divine mysteries can be received into the implicit instability of multiple human spectators. Moreover, the Dionysian antecedent to the second comment inserts an ambiguity as to how the divine mysteries are perceived: we do not yet know whether Eriugena means that they are perceived within the divine principle and in a unified manner, or, as with the Koimesis, unfolded in the visible phenomena of the world. In the rest of the *Homily* Eriugena seeks to resolve these contrasting elements.

‘IN PRINCIPIO ERAT VERBUM’: COMPARING PETER AND JOHN

From the very beginning of the *Homily*, Eriugena gives a clear suggestion as to how we should interpret John's words through his characteristic mode of apprehending the divinity. The voice of the eagle is one that transcends every vision (theoria), beyond all things which are and which are not, by means of the swift wings of the most profound theology, and by the gazes of the highest and most brilliant contemplation.¹⁵ The tension introduced between the stable activity of vision and the motile activity of flight, which must leave one place for another, is maintained throughout the *Homily*, and has already been suggested in its first words: the Gospel itself is given simultaneously by a passing sound and a remaining understanding.

Eriugena offers an initial resolution of the tension between flight and sight by explaining that the object of what John purely perceives (pure dinoscens) is the supersubstantial distinction, and the superessential unity, of Father and Son. The object of the gaze allows John to fly above the things which can be understood and said, to pass into the things which exceed every understanding and signification, and finally to be exalted outside of all things.¹⁶ John's flight is therefore a consequence of his vision, and the effect of flight, moreover, is only perceived as such from the perspective of things so transcended.

However, the object of John's stabilizing vision contains a destabilizing element, namely the distinction within unity of ‘In principio erat verbum.’ In parallel fashion to John's flight, the destabilizing effect of this object of vision can only be distinguished in different viewers, and not in the object itself. In this way John is distinguished from Peter, the symbol of faith and action, who perceives Christ in the flesh. Peter's faith leads to the certain recognition of the incarnate Son of the living God, whereas John's “contem-

15. *Homilia*, I.3–8, pp. 3–4.

16. *Ibid.*, I.12–20, pp. 4–5.

plation of truth” leads him to wonder (*miratur*) at the absolute and infinite Word in its own principle. This passage contains distinctions of particular importance, and it is worth quoting in full, with its terms of distinction represented in bold type:

Petrus itaque, hoc est **actio virtutum**, dei filium **mirabili et ineffabili modo** carne circumscriptum per virtutem fidei et actionis **conspicatur**. **Iohannes** vero, hoc est **altissima veritatis contemplatio**, dei verbum per se ante carnem absolutum et infinitum in principio suo, hoc est in patre suo, **miratur**.¹⁷

This allows a clearer understanding of how the single object of vision can be diversified according to different modes of apprehension. Peter, who is identified with the action of virtues, perceives in a wondrous and ineffable manner, whereas John, who is identified with the highest contemplation of truth, simply wonders. Moreover, as we learn in the passage immediately following, John’s wonder is understood to be prior to, and more perfect than, Peter’s perception:

Petrus aeterna simul ac temporalia in Christo unum facta, divina revelatione **introducitur, inspicit**. **Iohannes** sola aeterna eius in notitiam fidelium animarum **introducitur**.¹⁸

John’s contemplative state issues in an activity that introduces the object of his wonder to other souls; the highest contemplation of truth is active in its distribution. Peter, on the other hand, must be introduced into the active state (*actio virtutum*) in which he perceives; the power of faith and of action must be induced by a revelation to which the subject is a passive recipient.

The visions must also be distinguished according to their objects. Peter’s characteristic mode of perception follows upon his vision of the Son of God circumscribed by the flesh, and, having been introduced to this revelation, he is able to perceive both eternal and temporal things made one in Christ. John, as he wonders at the Word of God in its Father, introduces only the eternal things of Christ into the understanding of faithful souls. It should be reemphasized that the apparent difference between these two objects of vision is a result of the difference between the viewers. However, even these apparent differences in the object can be resolved with reference to the single *skopos* beheld by both Peter and John. To revisit the criteria for the identification of the *skopos* of a divine name articulated above, it seems clear that both

17. *Ibid.*, III.27–31, p. 8. For an excellent analysis of the poetic contrasts within Eriugena’s prose, see P. Dronke, “*Theologia Veluti Quaedam Poetria*: Quelques Observations sur la Fonction des Images Poétiques chez Jean Scot,” in *Jean Scot Erigène et l’histoire de la philosophie*, ed. R. Roques (Paris: Colloques Internationaux du C.N.R.S., No. 561, 1977), 243–52.

18. *Ibid.*, III.32–34, p. 8.

Peter and John, notwithstanding the distinction between their objects of vision, are both in the presence of a genuine *skopos*. Both behold in Christ the unambiguous, single, and sufficient cause of all subordinate effects (criteria 1–5), and clearly neither finds in Christ anything that is contrary to Scripture (6), or anything that has a strictly negative relation to anything else (7). The remaining three criteria—that is, those which distinguish the intelligibility of the *skopos* from the appeal to sense-perception inherent in the linguistic media of Scripture—serve to distinguish Peter and John, even though they exclude neither from a true conception of the *skopos*. Peter's perception, by means of the senses, of Christ in the flesh elevates Peter to a vision of the unity of temporal and eternal things *In principio*. John's contemplation, which has nothing to do with the senses, grants him a vision of the eternal cause of eternal things *In principio*, and it is from this contemplation that John descends in order to introduce these eternal things to others. The true difference between Peter and John is apparently not one of *skopoi*, but of ascent towards and descent from one and the same *skopos*.

In the midst of these contrasts Eriugena insists that he is not considering the dignity of apostolic persons, but rather investigating the most beautiful difference of divine mysteries.¹⁹ This difference is inherent in the principle, but only explicitly apparent in those who behold the principle. The distinct mode of John's vision is to behold the Word, born before all times, in the principle. This mode of vision confers upon John an anticipatory quality, which can be expressed in three ways:

- 1) John anticipates the certainty that follows faith in the Word.
- 2) John anticipates the faith that leads to certainty, insofar as his own contemplation of truth leads to wonder.
- 3) John anticipates the conditions under which faith and certainty are convertible, insofar as the Word of his vision must be spoken and preached.

It must now be noted that the third expression of John's vision re-introduces a motile element to this otherwise stable condition. Eriugena adds that John proceeds in a descending motion when he evangelizes that God the Word was made man, and that he ascends when he proclaims that the same Word is born from the Father before and beyond all things.²⁰

'FUIT HOMO MISSUS A DEO'

The motility of John's vision is given further expression with the introduction of John the Baptist. Here Eriugena remarks that the eagle relaxes the wings of the highest contemplation, and descends into the most profound

19. *Ibid.*, III.24–26, p. 8.

20. *Ibid.*, V.22–25, p. 11.

valley of *historia*.²¹ The implications of this transition are explained by an analogy of divine Scripture as an intelligible world constituted of four parts, the one encompassed by the next in a series of concentric circles. In the place of the centre is *historia*, flowing about which are the waters of the moral understanding. The waters are surrounded by the air of natural science, and this, finally, is comprehended by the aether of “the highest contemplation of the divine nature,” namely theology. Eriugena explains that John’s Gospel has until now occupied the sphere of theology, but, in order to narrate the things that were done just before the incarnation of the Word, John diverts his intelligible flight towards the earth.²²

Although this analogy of exegetical senses clearly provides a context for the ascent and descent of theology, it is not strictly Dionysian, but Maximian. As such, it is not exactly identifiable with any of the prominent modes of Christian exegesis prior to Maximus, although the twelfth-century audience of the *Homily* can perhaps be forgiven for finding here the historical, moral, and allegorical senses of Origen.²³ A closer model for the Maximian schema is in fact presented by the analogy between the Platonic dialogue and the cosmos, in the anonymous *Prolegomena*. It will be remembered that the analogy of this work placed the time, place, and interlocutors of the dialogue at the level of Matter, and that the remaining stylistic and argumentative features were situated in an ascending order of cosmic elements, culminating with the divine. The *skopos* of the Platonic dialogue is that which establishes the unity and precision of all of the cosmic elements, while at the same time remaining distinct from them. Given the similarity between the exegetical models of Maximus and the *Prolegomena*, and also Eriugena’s characterization of the Maximian model as the “intelligible world of divine Scripture,” it is worth considering whether Eriugena deploys the interpretive power of the *skopos* in a similar fashion to the *Prolegomena*.

Eriugena has previously stated that John descends as he evangelizes the Word made flesh, and that he ascends as he proclaims the Word born of the Father. The Evangelist’s descent into the valley of *historia*, for the purpose of narrating the history of John the Baptist, does not at first glance correspond to the twofold motion described previously, but it is nevertheless a consequence of it. Eriugena states that it is in accordance with the intelligible world of Scripture that the Evangelist introduces the Baptist into his own theology.²⁴ The use of the word “introducitur” recalls the previous reference to John’s

21. *Ibid.*, XIV.1–5, pp. 26–27.

22. *Ibid.*, XIV.5–24, p. 27.

23. For the medieval fortunes of the *Homilia*, including its misattribution to Origen, see Jauneau’s “Introduction” to the edition of 2008, pp. vii–xv.

24. Accepting Jauneau’s comment that Eriugena characteristically employs “consequenter” as a translation of ἀκολουθῶς. See *Homilia*, p. 28, n.1.

activity of introducing the eternal things of Christ into the understanding of faithful souls.²⁵ The use of the word here announces both a turn to the *historia* of Scripture as well as a reciprocal return of *historia* to the intelligible aether of theology. The arrival of John the Baptist is therefore anticipated by what the evangelist has contemplated *In principio*.

But if the Baptist is anticipated by the eternal things of Christ, there is nevertheless a sense in which he anticipates both Christ and the evangelist, and this is precisely the sense proper to *historia*. Eriugena states that here “the evangelist narrates the history of his precursor; he to whom it was given to perceive the Word *in principio* recalls him to whom it was given to precede the incarnate Word.”²⁶ This notion of precedence is purely one of space and time, since these are the only senses in which anything can precede the humanity of the Word. Eriugena then begins to subordinate this historical sense of precedence by making a distinction in the precise wording of the Gospel: John does not simply say ‘he was sent by God,’ but rather ‘there was a man,’ which is to distinguish the one who goes before, who is a participant of humanity alone, from the one who comes after, who is united to divinity and humanity.²⁷ So far, the distinction preserves the historical sense of precedence, since the Baptist is still distinguished as the ‘one who goes before.’ The very next clause, however, reverses this precedence, when Eriugena states that the evangelist emphasizes the Baptist’s humanity “ut segregaret vocem transeuntem a verbo semper et incommutabiliter manente.”²⁸ Employing vocabulary strikingly similar to that which served Eriugena in his treatment of the Dionysian *skopos*,²⁹ this clause can be taken as a reinsertion of the *skopos* of John’s vision into the *historia* of John the Baptist.

Once the distinction is made between the passing voice and the remaining Word, there can be no confusion as to the temporal precedence of the former and the metaphysical precedence of the latter. This precision is maintained throughout the remainder of this section of the *Homily*, which culminates in a vision of the unity of the two forms of precedence. Eriugena begins by repeating the words of the Gospel: “Homo erat missus. A quo? A deo verbo quem praecurrit. Missio eius praecursio eius.”³⁰ The very sending of John the Baptist, that he might precede the Incarnate Word in time, is the going before of the Word that immutably remains. In this way, the *skopos* of John’s

25. *Ibid.*, XV.1–2, p. 28; cf. III.32–34, p. 8.

26. *Ibid.*, XV.3–5, p. 28.

27. *Ibid.*, XV.6–9, p. 28.

28. *Ibid.*, XV.9–10, p. 28.

29. See notes 11 and 12, above.

30. *Ibid.*, XV.22–23, p. 29.

vision, which has served so well to distinguish the events of *historia* from theology, finds the underlying unity of the two in the same vision.

CONCLUSION

From the passages discussed above, it is clear that Eriugena has not advanced much further than Dionysius in the exegesis of an actual, extended narrative of Scripture. However, the very task of commenting upon the Gospel presupposes the unfolding of an ineluctable, historical narrative that mirrors the unfolding of divine providence. Eriugena's more significant achievement is to have isolated and applied a recognizably Platonic *skopos* in the service of explaining the narrative possibilities of the Gospel. By distinguishing between Christ as the unification of the temporal and the eternal, on the one hand, and solely as eternal cause and source, on the other, Eriugena is able to situate Peter and John in their different visions of the same object. Finally, Eriugena reasserts the central and pivotal role of *historia* within the world of Scripture by accounting for how the temporal world both anticipates and is anticipated by Christ, only to be united with Him whose sending is His going before.