CHAPTER SEVEN

THE HERMENEUTICS OF A THEOPHANIC REPORT—EXODUS 12:
PASchal EXEGESIS AS MYSTERY PERFORMANCE

This chapter explores the ways in which paschal writers approached the reading of Scripture within, or in connection with, the liturgical context of the paschal feast. This hermeneutical practice was a spiritual exegesis expressed through mystery terminology and placed within a liturgical context understood as a mystery rite. Within that liturgical context, the exegetical practice was primarily a mystagogic performance, similar to those of the Greek mysteries. This stands opposed to an understanding of hermeneutics as being merely an intellectual endeavor. According to the paschal writings of Melito, Pseudo-Hippolytus, and Origen, scriptural hermeneutics does not imply the mere solving of an enigma, but rather constitutes an actual participation in, or encounter with, a reality imperceptible to the senses; that is, the manifestation of the Logos-Christ. Correspondingly, through the course of the production and culminating at its conclusion, the exegetic performance offers the exegete the opportunity to be more than a mere collector of new information. Instead, just as the ancient Greek used to become the subject of an actual meeting with the manifestations of a god or goddess in the mystery cults, the ancient Christian became the participant in a transforming encounter, mediated by scripture, with the various manifestations of the Logos-Christ. Most likely, this kind of exegesis was the reflection of a Christian polemical attitude towards mystery religions.

Cumulative evidence will lead us to the hypothesis that this type of mystery exegesis was connected with, or part of, the complex liturgical feast of Pascha, most likely emerging in second-century Asia Minor. Melito was the first witness to, if not the inventor of, this way of reading Scriptures. Subsequently, Pseudo-Hippolytus and Origen inherited it from their predecessors and further developed it.

1 Putting it into Aristotle’s words, it was a matter of pathein rather than mathein, of “experiencing” rather than “learning” (Fr. 15 from Synesius, Dion 48, in Nicola Turchi, Fontes Historiae Mysteriorum Aevi Hellenistici [Rome: Libreria di scienze e lettere del G. Bardi, 1930]). Cf. Plutarch, Isis 382de, and Clement, Str. 5.71.1.
1. JEWISH PRECEDENTS OF EXEGESIS AS MYSTERY RITE

The Jewish conception of reading the Torah as an experience that leads to the knowledge of divine mysteries served as a precedent for early Christian mystery exegesis. Although various Jewish Diaspora writers such as Aristobulus, Artapanus, the Orphica author, Pseudo-Phocylides, and Josephus employed the terminology of the pagan rites, it was mainly Philo who linked the exegetical practice as religious experience with mystery terminology and Greek techniques of allegorical interpretation. For example, in De cherubim 42–43, one may encounter the early roots of interpreting Scripture as a mystery rite. The Alexandrian author, as an initiated mystagogue, develops his hermeneutic exercise as a mystery performance (sometimes understood as a sheer metaphor) and invites the reader to take part in this exercise in order to become an initiate in the divine knowledge. Additionally, Philo develops an allegorical exegesis in connection with the Passover narrative in his commentary on Exodus.

In their turn, Melito, Pseudo-Hippolytus, and Origen combined the method of reading Scripture as a religious experience with Christian typological interpretation, Greek mystery terminology, and Jewish terms

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3 Bockmuehl, Revelation and Mystery, 78.

4 Ibid., 76–81. Allegory, for Philo, is a mystical quest (cf. Somn. 1.164).