

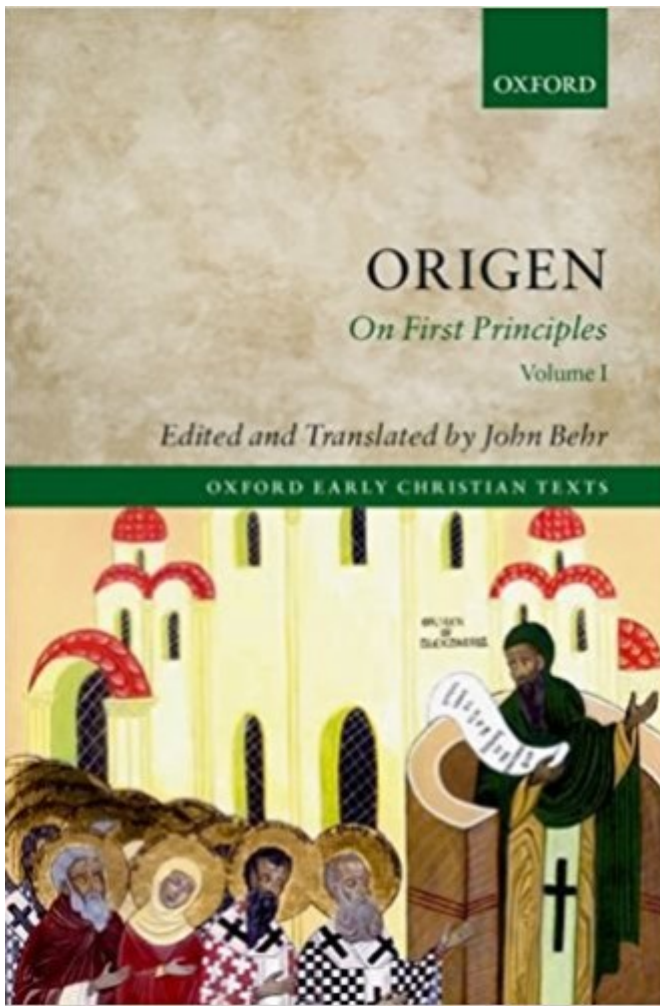
Take & read: New books in theology

Theology lives in the space between apocalypticism and Christian Platonism.

selected by [Benjamin Myers](#) in the [May 23, 2018](#) issue



In Review



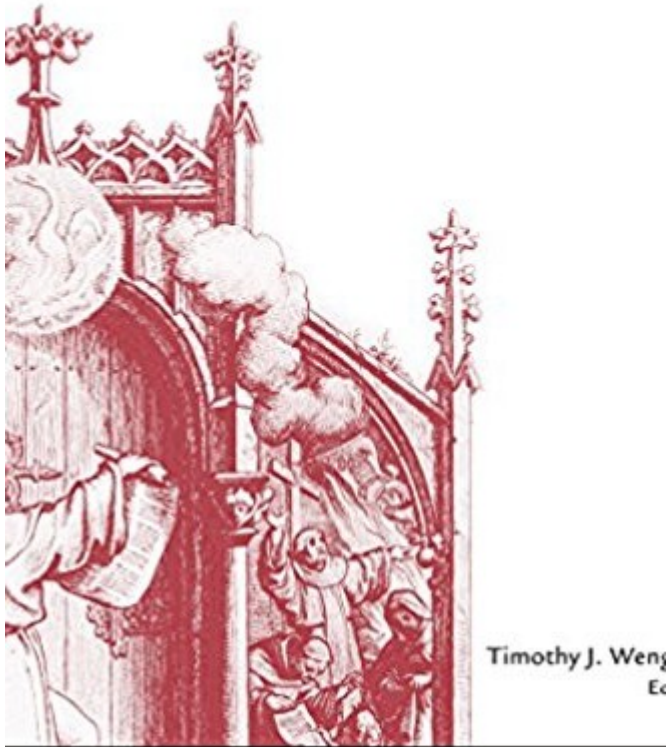
On First Principles

by Origen, edited and translated by John Behr
Oxford University Press

THE ANNOTATED LUTHER

THE ROOTS OF REFORM

VOLUME 1



The Annotated Luther

6 volumes

edited by Hans Hillerbrand, Kirsi Stjerna, and Timothy Wengert
Fortress

THE CRUCIFIXION

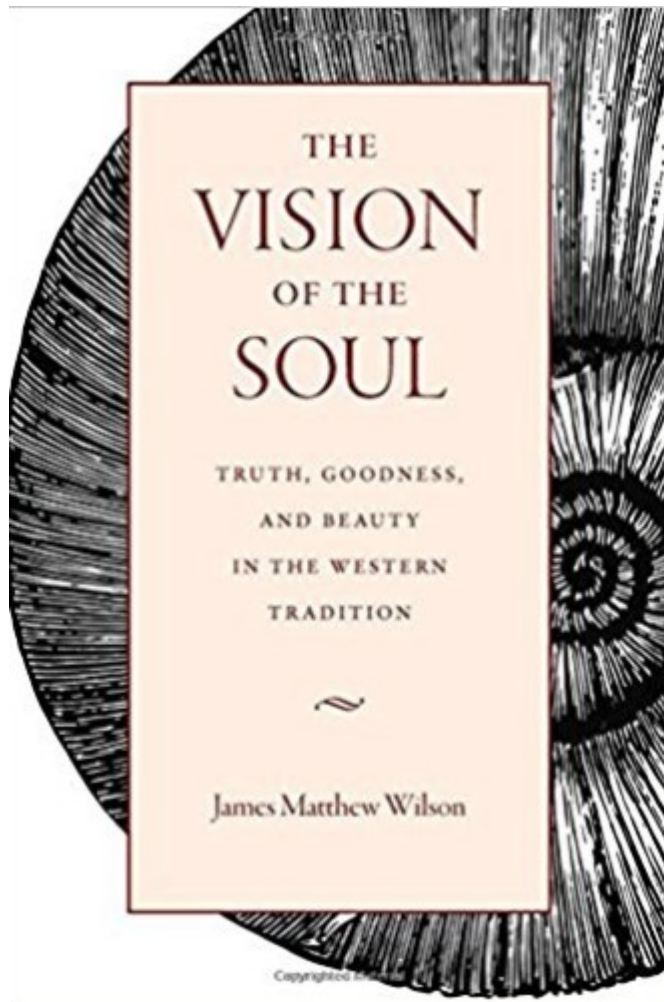
Understanding the Death
of Jesus Christ

FLEMING RUTLEDGE



The Crucifixion

by Fleming Rutledge
Eerdmans



The Vision of the Soul

Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition

by James Matthew Wilson

Catholic University of America Press

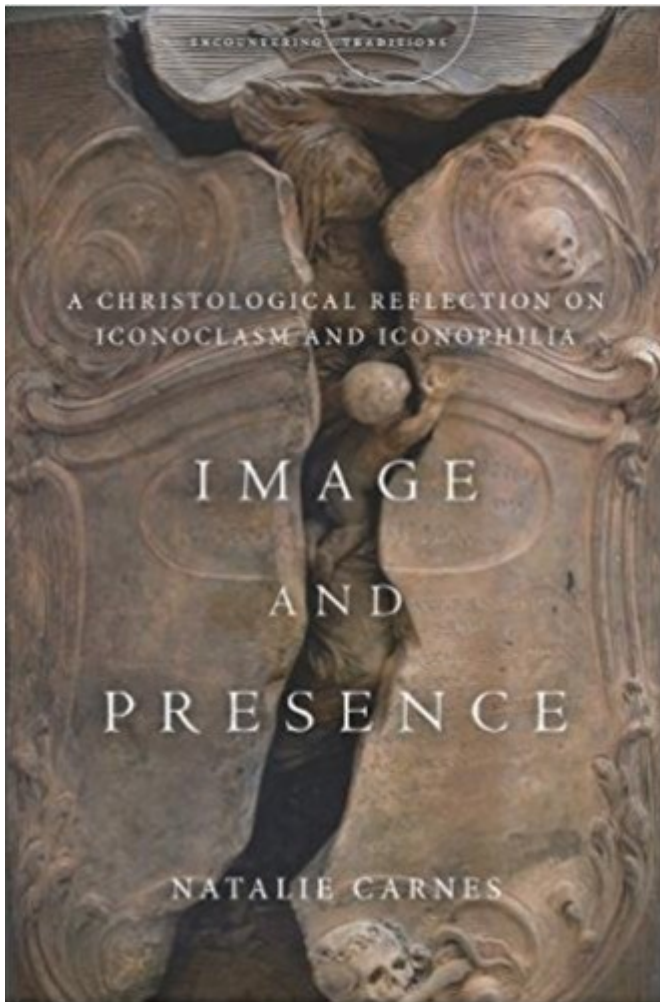


Image and Presence

A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia

by Natalie Carnes

Stanford University Press

Everywhere in theology today, scholars are reaching back into the past and trying to rehabilitate neglected sources. This is the single most notable feature of contemporary theology. John Behr of St. Vladimir's Seminary in New York has done more than anyone to blaze the trail back to the ancient sources of Christian thought, not only through his widely read series *Popular Patristics*, but also through his own work as a translator and interpreter of patristic texts. Behr has surpassed other laborers in this field and has now also surpassed his previous work with a magisterial edition of Origen's *On First Principles* (Oxford University Press).

The two-volume work features the Latin text and Behr's translation on facing pages. It also includes a book-length introduction, which is itself a major theological achievement. In his introduction, Behr sets out a provocative new reading of the work's theology. He reads it in an apocalyptic key, showing how deeply it subverts our usual ways of thinking about the visible and invisible, creator and creation, time and eternity. Thanks to Behr's unique blend of diligence and free-spiritedness, these volumes bring to life one of the most fearsomely inventive works of theology ever written.

The return to primary sources in theology has focused mainly on patristic texts. But there are also encouraging signs of renewed interest in early Protestant thought. Last year marked the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. The scholarly world celebrated the occasion with an outpouring of publications; some praised the Reformation, others condemned it, and a very good time was had by all. Many of these new books will prove to be of lasting value. But towering above them all was the completion of the new six-volume edition of *The Annotated Luther*, edited by Hans Hillerbrand, Kirsi Stjerna, Paul Robinson, Mary Jane Haemig, Euan Cameron, and Timothy Wengert (Fortress).

The series is beautifully produced. It features translations of Luther's major writings supported by a wealth of accessible scholarship as well as numerous woodcuts and other 16th-century illustrations. The volumes are thematically organized so readers get a clear picture of Luther as a social reformer, an exegete, a pastor, and so on. For those of us (myself included) who are intimidated by the 55 volumes of Luther's complete works, *The Annotated Luther* provides an attractive and user-friendly way of coming to terms with the theology of the great German monk.

The impetus to return to historical sources has also given rise to a growing interest in apocalypticism. In this case, the sources are the letters of Paul. Paul's apocalyptic imagery was largely marginalized by an earlier generation of scholars. They saw apocalyptic themes as part of an ancient worldview that shaped only the expression, not the substance, of Paul's thought. By contrast, many recent scholars have argued that apocalyptic themes belong at the heart of Paul's message and should form part of the church's message today.

Fleming Rutledge's big book, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Eerdmans), is one of the most impressive works of theology to emerge from this new apocalyptic school. With a vast command of the scholarly literature,

Rutledge interprets the death of Christ as a cosmic event in which evil is annihilated and a new creation comes into being. In some ways, this approach continues the trajectory of liberation theology that has marked so much Christian thinking since the 1970s. Liberation theologians shifted the spotlight from the individual and argued that sin and salvation should be seen on a social and political scale.

Rutledge argues that such an approach does not go far enough. The scale needs to be cosmic, not merely social. The individual recedes ever further into the distance. Rutledge's book provides a robust alternative to the self-enclosed pieties of evangelical conservatism on the one hand and the naiveties of secular-minded Protestant liberalism on the other. Salvation, as she sees it, is neither a private spiritual drama nor a collective political program. But does the individual soul still play any significant role in this apocalyptic theology? It seems notable that the idea of personal repentance—the turning of the soul toward God—is banished from Rutledge's theology. Repentance disappears because the soul has disappeared, or has become merely a site on which cosmic forces wage battle.

At the opposite pole from apocalypticism is a revitalized Christian Platonism that has become increasingly prominent in recent theology. If apocalypticism finds no place for the soul, Christian Platonist writers defend the priority of the soul and argue for an innate kinship between human subjectivity and an objective order of reality. This approach is admirably represented in James Matthew Wilson's latest book, *The Vision of the Soul: Truth, Goodness, and Beauty in the Western Tradition* (Catholic University of America Press). Wilson explores the loss of transcendence in the modern West, together with the loss of confidence that the mind could ever apprehend an objective reality. He argues that the soul is ordered toward reality, and that reality is beautiful.

Every perception of beauty, Wilson argues, is a kind of intellectual saturation in which reality opens itself to us. The aim of life is the contemplation of beauty. The question, then, is where beauty is to be found. Here Wilson turns to art. He argues that the arts are tools that train our perception. Through art we learn to contemplate beauty and thus to align ourselves with the divinely given order of reality. But here's the problem: if apocalypticism struggles to account for the soul, Christian Platonism struggles to account for sin. It risks reducing sin to an aesthetic failure that can be repaired through education in the liberal arts.

Taken together, apocalypticism and Christian Platonism represent some of the major tensions in theology today: tensions between order and disorder, the corporate and the personal, the ethical and the aesthetic, the otherness of God's intervention and the immanence of God's presence in creation.

One attempt to make sense of these challenges is Natalie Carnes's small but demanding book, *Image and Presence: A Christological Reflection on Iconoclasm and Iconophilia* (Stanford University Press). According to Carnes, the love of images and the critique of images—iconophilia and iconoclasm—are both essential to the Christian faith. Both arise from the logic of the incarnation. In Christ, God becomes visible. The divine reality can be seen, touched, and represented. Yet God's presence is not exhausted in the humanity of Jesus. Even in the very act of self-revelation, God remains hidden and transcendent. Wherever God's image appears, it is an image of the invisible God. Jesus reveals God, but God remains more than what appears in Jesus. Paradoxically, Jesus manifests God's presence by pointing beyond himself to the Father.

So God's revelation, Carnes argues, involves the making and breaking of images. The image says that God is here, while the breaking of the image says that God is not only here and is not contained in any representation. God can choose to be revealed in a creature but is never wholly identified with it. God remains God. Revelation occurs where there is both an image and its negation. The negation without the image would be a denial of revelation while the image without negation would be idolatry. Carnes uses this theological account of images to reflect on the perplexities of life in an image-saturated world. Her work could also fruitfully be drawn into dialogue with the wider theological scene. Christian Platonists (iconophiles) tend to assume that one can directly perceive the divine beauty in a beautiful work of art, while apocalyptic thinkers (iconoclasts) tend to assume a total discontinuity between the divine act and everything belonging to this world. Carnes's book points to a subtler way of exploring the tensions between God's presence in, and transcendence over, the world. [Read Rob Saler's review of *Image and Presence* [here](#).]