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The Exegetical Metaphysic of Origen of Alexandria

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Christians are retrospectivists par excellence. Our religion is the heir of first-century apocalyptic thought, and our originating philosophy of history calls to us to look back to Christ as the midpoint of time, what that fine historian Hans Conzelmann in his study of the Third Gospel called *Die Mitte der Zeit*, and what his English translators so lamely rendered as "The Theology of St. Luke"![1] Conzelmann's original title, of course, summed up ancient Christian apocalyptic philosophy quite brilliantly—all time running up to its Lord and running away retrospectively from him until it runs to him at the Parousia. And this is not simply a Christology (which it is in profoundest terms, needless to say) but also a single-sentence summation of all Christian biblical

1. Hans Conzelmann, *The Theology of St. Luke* (London: Faber, 1960).

hermeneutic and process: all things run from him and to him and find their meaning in him. Patristic biblical interpretation is from start to end Christocentric, soteriological, illuminatory. And Origen, who knows the soul of Scripture better than most, recognizes this as the core impetus of the New Testament, and passes it on as his major heritage to the later Church of the Fathers.

From the foundations of the New Testament, through all the patristic ages until, perhaps, modern times, that orientation has remained the basic premise of Christian biblical interpretation. As a result of the foundational attitudes embedded in our Scriptures, almost all Christian historians and commentators have been unashamedly retrospectivist. This is still visibly witnessed in Orthodox and Catholic theological discourse, for the Great Church was ever conscious of its eschatological heritage and preserves the apocalyptic medium in its biblical view of history as a record of salvation, even at those many times throughout history when its embeddedness in contemporary affairs has made it lose sight a little of its core eschatological reality. As a result, we naturally tend to look back on the formative eras of the church through the lenses of later ages. Receptionism is very important to Christian theologians, and is seen as an integral element of catholicity.

This process has heavily determined our placing and assessment of Origen of Alexandria in our collective memory: that great scholar, whom Jerome called the "whetstone that sharpens us all"; that great confessor whose body was martyred and broken; that great saint whose mystical vision ever reached out ascetically to union with the Word. Yet we often regard him askance—remembering the many controversies and denunciations raised against him in history. In the latter part of the twentieth century, there began a long and steady process of rehabilitation of Origen's memory, accompanied and perhaps caused by a deep firsthand investment in the study of this immensely important author of the ancient church. The movement began with the eighteenth-century Jesuits, the De La Rue brothers, but continued in the early decades of the twentieth century with the

extraordinary work of the modern Jesuits De Faye, Daniélou, De Margerie, De Lubac,[2] and later Henri Crouzel and Lothar Lies. It led to an immense and burgeoning interest in this most seminal of all the writers of Christian antiquity. Critical editions were made, and a prolonged series of studies was undertaken with the quadrennial international Origen conferences producing the *Origeniana* series that continues to our time.

Yet, for most theologians, the memory of Origen remains marginalized. He was, after all, censured in his own time by Bishop Demetrios of Alexandria and Pope Fabian of Rome. We tend to forget, because of this, that he was honored by the learned bishops Theotecnos and Alexander in Palestine, and called by them to found the first-ever Christian university. We remember how he was fought against as a pernicious influence by the Egyptian monks and censured by Theophilus of Alexandria in the first Origenistic crisis, though we tend to forget how Theophilus reproduced Origen's exegesis extensively under his own name, even while saying he agreed with the (very literalist) monks who condemned anything associated with Origen. We forget how extensively Origen's exegesis was adopted also by some of the greatest fathers of the church: Saints Gregory the Theologian, Gregory Nyssen, John Chrysostom, Jerome (another public denouncer and private plagiarizer), Cyril of Alexandria, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory Palamas, to name a few. But we cannot forget how he was denounced at the Second Council of Constantinople and the chief offending *sententiae* of his theology held up for public censure. Yet we tend to overlook the telling details that the Origenian denunciations appear to be afterthoughts added to the synodical record tendentiously by the court, and the offending *sententiae* are lifted from the writings of Evagrios of Pontos, not Origen at all.

What really mattered in all of this was simply how Origen was received in the church; and by far the most important aspect of that long-drawn-out controversy was, in my opinion, the burning (and oft-embittered) memory of how Origen's works were used, again

2. At least, beginning his ecclesiastical career in the Society of Jesus.

retrospectively, in the Arian crisis. We remember how his Christological subordinationism seemed to inspire Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Acacius of Caesarea, who delighted in fighting against the great Athanasius at every turn; and who left a more than dubious memory in the church as to what leading intellectual Origenists were up to in the fourth-century Christological debates. But we also tend to forget how Athanasius himself or Gregory the Theologian (as did Dionysios and Alexander of Alexandria before them) also used Origen extensively to articulate the eternity of the divine Logos. Nevertheless, the bitterness of the Nicene debates left an aftertaste in the mouth concerning Origen's "memory." His greatest admirers were responsible for the "saving" of Origen for the church by sinking his systematic and retaining his exegetical rules and his ascetical thought. But like all architectural afterthoughts, this left behind a building that was at once majestic and mutilated.

With conservative opinion gathering momentum against him by the late fourth century, Origen's works were still cherished by some of the greatest minds of Christendom. Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian, seeing the mounting hostility against Origen's reputation, abstracted his exegesis into the *Philocalia Origenis* to save the best of the exegetical principles to be a guide for future generations. In doing this, they succeeded in educating almost every Christian preacher and commentator in the basics of exegetical methodology, from the fourth century to the nineteenth, when the rise of so-called critical biblical interpretation birthed a wider conspiracy to banish all prior symbolic methodologies of reading from the seminary classrooms, in what has been one of the most curious narrowings of interpretative reading in the history of literature—all done in the name of *wissenschaftliche Ordnung* (scientific taxonomy).

That great era of biblical discovery from the eighteenth through the twentieth centuries left behind achievements of enduring significance. But today its refusal to admit into consideration the symbolic readings of its own prehistory has been challenged by secular schools of symbolic interpretation, and the stage has been set for a renewal of

interest in Origen, considered one of the greatest of all Christian masters in the genres of symbolic spiritual exegesis. Following after the importance that postmodern philosophy gave to multiple and simultaneous levels of meaning, Origen's exegetical work has attracted a new sympathy. It now looks foolish, rightly so, to apologize for Origen's "reading in" to the allegedly simple text. Such complaints, and they have been many, now look rather quaint in their own presuppositions about what a "plain text" is or what a theology of revelation ought to look like. The refrain "Trust me, for I am a plain man dealing in common sense," is now revealed to all (one hopes) as merely a plea to adopt an alternative theory, not a genuine claim that theory has been set aside in favor of unmediated access to truth. With the benefit of hindsight, one is better positioned, perhaps, to see that the plain-man approach of a Eustathius of Antioch or Epiphanius, of a Theodore or Diodore, was not so much the triumph of common sense at all, and that the *corona* of useful and appealing exegesis arguably belonged much more, across the sweep of history, to the moderate Origenists such as Gregory the Theologian, Chrysostom, Ambrose, and Maximos.

It is one thing to try to redraft the record, however, and another thing to shift attitudes and sentiments that have been so deeply embedded. Let it suffice, then, to say that this essay does not so much try to rehabilitate Origen, in the style of the Origen Conference in Innsbruck in the 1980s, which had on its agenda a petition to the pope to lift the condemnations from him posthumously (that got nowhere), as much as it tries to look at Origen in his own time, not from a dominant but anachronistically scholastic retrospective. So, trying to work from his own temporal context and in terms of the philosophical premises prevalent in the schools of his day, this essay seeks to ask what motivated Origen's approach to the Scriptures. I would like, therefore, to set out very briefly, first of all, the terms of Origen's exegesis—the system, as it were, of how he approaches scriptural texts—and secondly, the why and wherefore of this, or the way in which exegetical usage fits into his larger system of *philosophia*

theologiae (the philosophical bases of theology, or the relation of wisdom to illumination). The first task of rehearsing his rules of exegesis has already been done by many people and hardly requires doing again, so I will simply rehearse the basics as he, the church's first and greatest master of systematic exegesis, set them out.

In Origen's *Peri Archon*, a title that means "foundational principles," we are given the reasons why we ought to prioritize Scripture and told how we ought to interpret it with a variety of rules. This task of rule gathering was given a great boost in the fourth century when Gregory and Basil provided the first compendium to the voluminous master and digested his principles from a wide array of his writings. This *Philocalia Origenis* was the first *Handbook to Origen* (there have been others since),[3] and it focused atomistically on his exegesis, setting this out on solid patristic authority as the central guide to how to preach out of Scripture. But in recent times, Origen's own system of exegesis in situ has been the focus of renewed and very precise scholarly investigation. Important works of the last two generations, such as those by Daniélou, Crouzel, de Faye, Gögler, De Lubac, Hanson, Harl, Torjesen, and Dively-Lauro,[4] have accumulated to a monument of precise and learned analysis of Origen's exegesis that will eventually

3. G. Lewis, trans., *The Philocalia of Origen* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1911).

4. J. Daniélou, "Les sources bibliques de la mystique d'Origène," *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 23 (1947): 126–41; idem, "L'Unité des deux Testaments dans l'œuvre d'Origène," *Revue des sciences religieuses* 22 (1948): 27–56; idem, "Origène comme exégète de la Bible," *Texte und Untersuchungen* 63 (1957): 280–90; idem, "Exégèse et typologie patristique," *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* 4 (1960): 132–38; idem, trans., *From Shadows to Reality: Studies in the Biblical Typology of the Fathers* (London: Burns and Oates, 1960), English trans. of *Sacramentum Futuri* by Dom W. Hibberd. H. Crouzel, *Théologie de l'Image de Dieu chez Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1956); idem, *Origène et la "connaissance mystique"* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1961); idem, "Origène et le sens littéral dans ses Homélies sur l'Hexateuque," *Bulletin de literature ecclésiastique* 70 (1969): 241–63. E. de Faye, *Origène, sa vie, son oeuvre, sa pensée*, vols. 1–3 (Paris: Le Puy-en-Velay, 1923, 1927, 1928); idem, "Origène est-il exegete ou dogmaticien?" *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuse* 3 (1923): 97–105. R. Gögler, "Die christologische und heilgeschichtliche Grundlage der Bibelexegese des Origenes," *Theologisches Quartalschrift* 136 (1956): 1–13; idem, *Zur Theologie des biblischen Wortes bei Origenes* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1963). Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Le Mysterion d'Origène," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 26 (1936): 513–62 and 27 (1937): 38–64. R. P. C. Hanson, "Origen's Interpretation of Scripture Exemplified from his *Philocalia*," *Hermathena* 63 (1944): 47–58; idem, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: John Knox, 1959). Marguerite Harl, *Origène et la fonction révélatrice du Verbe Incarné*, Patristica Sorbonensia 2 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1958). K. J. Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis* (New York: De Gruyter, 1986). E. Dively-Lauro, *The Soul and Spirit of Scripture within Origen's Exegesis* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

sweep away the generalizing banalities that are still all too often found in less specialist sources. It is unarguable today that Origen's exegetical system is central to his thought, profoundly soteriological in import, and carefully freighted. But to understand it best, we need to see it in terms of its own time and in terms of the overarching systematic in which he structurally placed it: for much of that system was abandoned in later ages of the church, and his overarching biblical architecture (like the image we used earlier of an old building whose elements have been added to or demolished over the ages) was often obscured by later writers who more simplistically appliquéd his style over very different contexts. So here follows a very a short exposition of a very large subject. It can be traced up more refinedly in Torjesen and Dively-Lauro, or more concisely in the short but profound articles on Scriptural hermeneutics contributed by John O'Keefe, Ronald Heine, and Mark Sheridan in the little handbook to Origen I myself edited some years back.[5]

As we have noted, in his early work *On First Principles*, Origen sets out initial premises for approaching the sacred text. But let us rather begin with macro structures before looking at the details. One of the most important is that Scripture is a coherent whole. It has a single revelatory author, the Spirit teaching about the Logos,[6] using the refractory media of saints who are illumined by the Word and who communicate truth according to their level and capacity to receive and thus transmit the revelation. This revelatory capacity is also matched by a corresponding need, at the other end of the hermeneutical line, to have an interpreter who is capable of receiving—that is, seeing—the illumination of the Logos. The Logos emits the Spirit, as it were, but the media at both ends also require correct tuning to transmit and receive, and this is profoundly correlated to the degree of their illumination. Then, since all Scripture comes from the single divine author, who has a singular *skopos* (or overall purpose) that the Spirit wishes the

5. John A. McGuckin, ed., *The Westminster Handbook to Origen of Alexandria* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2004).
6. *Peri Archon* 1. Praef. 4; ibid., 1.3.1, 4.1.6, 4.2.2, 4.2.7, 4.3.14; *Cels.* 3.3, 5.60; *Comm. Matt.* 14.4; *Hom. Gen.* 7.1; *Hom. Exod.* 2.1; *Hom. Num.* 1.1, 2.1; *Hom. Jos.* 8.6; *Hom. 1 Kgs.* 5.4.

sacred text to accomplish, all parts of the Scripture have mutual self-reference. Whatever their time of composition or their disparity as a large library of works, they all co-inhere with a collective and connected message. To understand an obscure part, therefore, one may legitimately turn to a clearer part elsewhere to elucidate, even a different book: Scripture interprets Scripture.

The single *Skopos*, or authorial intent, which allows this internal cross-referencing over large distances of time and editions, between Chronicles and Revelation, or Malachi to Matthew, is quintessentially *Soteria:* a salvation to be effected by divine illumination which leads to our understanding that the soul has been alienated from God across time and space, and must turn again (repent) in order to ascend back to union with God (the status quo ante). The Scripture contains living soteriological force. In this regard, Origen compares Scripture to the body of the Logos, sacramentally charged, similar to the Eucharist. All the books are orientated toward acts of revelation to time-bound and fallen creatures, designed for their rescue.

Though all the texts are sacred and illuminative, however, they act soteriologically in differently nuanced manners. Most basically, the Old Testament adumbrates the New; the New Testament explains and interprets the Old. The meaning does not clarify or progress according to chronology—that is, historical sequencing or unfolding—but rather by radically discontinuous eschatological priorities. They are metaphysical maps for turning again. The notions of repentance (turning as *metanoia*) and revelation (*apokalypsis*) are fundamental to all of Origen's thought. His hermeneutic is thus fundamentally a metaphysical soteriology, and we may legitimately classify it as a deep form of eschatological metaphysic. Scripture exists as one of the major ways the Logos uses to save the fallen world, as Pedagogue and Illuminator. Divine Illumination and the Communion it confers are not merely moral or mystical refinements of the created order for Origen; they are rather its core ontology.

We might call this aspect of ascentive soteriological psychology the first plane of a double axis to his fundamental hermeneutical theory.