

## ORIGEN: MAN OF THE CHURCH AND FOCUS OF CONTROVERSY

### THE LIFE OF ORIGEN

Our main source for the life of Origen, AD 185 ( $\pm 2$ ) to 251+, is the sixth book of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History*. But this account is biased heavily in Origen's favor; it is difficult to separate the merely hagiographical from the historically factual. Pierre Nautin's recent *Origène* is the most helpful guide through Eusebius and the other ancient source material, but fairly widespread disagreement with some of his conclusions and assertions indicates how much more still needs to be done.<sup>1</sup> For our present purposes, it is sufficient to call attention to the particular period in the history of doctrine in which Origen lived and wrote. In the first half of the third century, even the most orthodox Christology was generally expressed in terms that later centuries would find subordinatist. The basic elements of the great christological and trinitarian formulations of the fourth and fifth centuries were still being sorted out, and clarity over what have come to be some of the most fundamental aspects of ecclesiology and sacramental theology was still a thing of the future.

Although he was the most prolific of the early Christian writers, Origen did not begin early. He was in his thirties when he undertook the massive text-critical work which grew into the famous but only fragmentarily preserved *Hexapla*, and in his forties when he wrote the first of his major works to survive, the *De Principiis* or *Peri Archōn*. Everything we have seems to be the work of a mature thinker no longer undergoing rapid or major development. It is also important to note, both in what has survived and in the several extant lists of his works, the massive preponderance of biblical works: scholia, homilies and commentaries. Whatever one may think of the much-debated question of whether Origen was a systematist or an exegete, there is no doubt that he devoted most of his attention to the Bible. Completing the overall picture is Origen's familiarity with the intellectual life and centers of the Roman Empire: early life in Alexandria and his final two decades in Caesarea, Palestine, all punctuated by travels which made him familiar with Rome, Athens and various parts of Asia Minor.

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<sup>1</sup>Pierre Nautin, *Origène: Sa vie et son oeuvre* (Christianisme antique 1; Paris: Beauchesne, 1977). The most recent work in English, Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1983) relies heavily on Nautin. Henri Crouzel, S.J., the "patriarch" of Origen scholars, has informed me in private correspondence that he hopes to write soon his own overall presentation of the life and works of Origen.

## MAN OF THE CHURCH

I want to be a man of the church. I do not want to be called by the name of some founder of a heresy but by the name of Christ, and to bear that name which is blessed on the earth. It is my desire, in deed as in Spirit, both to be and to be called a Christian.

If I, who seem to be your right hand and am called presbyter and seem to preach the WORD of God, if I do something against the discipline of the church and the rule of the gospel so that I become a scandal to you, the church, then may the whole church, in unanimous resolve, cut me, its right hand, off, and throw me away.<sup>2</sup>

These two passages are just two particularly strong expressions of a theme that runs through Origen's whole life and works. For his was a life lived very consciously in and for the Church on which he exercised a tremendous influence, greater perhaps than anyone else after the New Testament writers. In terms of his influence, one could see him as the neck of an hourglass into which gathers and from which flows most of the strands of Christian theology. In addition, despite his difficulties with his own bishop in Alexandria, he seems to have been held in such high esteem as to be recognized as a veritable *arbiter orthodoxiae* called in to referee doctrinal disputes even among bishops, as the *Dialogue with Heraclides* shows. On the great Cappadocian fathers, Basil and the two Gregorys, he seems to have exercised a fascination that was nothing short of hero worship.

## FOCUS OF CONTROVERSY

But despite this dedication, achievement and recognition, Origen became, even in his own lifetime, a focus of controversy. At about age forty-nine he was forced to leave Alexandria because of the "war"—the very word he used to describe his final break-up with Bishop Demetrios—which had broken out there and which forced him to accept the hospitality and patronage of the bishops of Palestine. Within a century, both Athanasius and the Arians were claiming him as support for their opposing positions. By Jerome he was at first revered, and then violently repudiated. This, however, did not keep Jerome from continuing to copy whole paragraphs from Origen's commentaries into his own (without, of course, crediting Origen). The situation worsened. In the middle of the sixth century, he, along with Didymus the Blind and Evagrius Ponticus, was anathematized by the emperor Justinian in the AD 553 Second Council of Constantinople. A. Guillaumont has demonstrated that the fifteen anathematizations laid at Origen's door were actually taken from the works of Evagrius. But this finding has not been accepted peacefully by all Origen scholars.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Homily 16 on Luke and Homily 7.6 on Joshua—see *Origen; Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings* by Hans Urs von Balthasar, trans. by R. J. Daly (Washington: Catholic University, 1984), nos. 389, 390, pp. 155-56.

<sup>3</sup>A. Guillaumont, "Évagre et les anathématismes antiorigénistes de 553." *Studia Patristica* 3 (Texte und Untersuchungen 78; Berlin: Akademie, 1961), 225. See also *Les Képhalaia Gnostica d'Évagre le Pontique et l'Histoire de l'Origénisme chez des Grecs et les Syriens* (Patristica Sorbonensia 5; Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962).

The Renaissance saw a revival of interest in Origen, especially among the humanists, but his name continued to be dogged by controversy. The "progressives," such as Erasmus, looked on him with favor; the "conservatives," such as Luther, continued to see him as dangerous. This, interestingly, was for the same reasons, such as the interpretation of Scripture, that continue to divide progressives and conservatives to this day. The nineteenth century saw the beginning of the still not fully resolved debate about reading Origen primarily as a systematician or as a biblical spiritual theologian.

Today, scholarly progress and the more irenic spirit of an ecumenical age has helped to mediate some of the opposing positions. But most of the major issues are still unsettled. It is hardly possible to take up any major theme connected with Origen without getting involved in issues that have a history of controversy. This is conveniently illustrated by the list of major papers planned for the Fourth International Congress on Origen Studies to be held at Innsbruck on September 2-7, 1985: H. Vogt, "Why Was Origen Declared a Heretic?"; M. Harl, "Preexistence in Origen"; H. Crouzel, "Apocatastasis"; G. Dorival, "Resurrection in Origen"; J. Ruis-Camps, "Subordinationism in Origen"; R. P. C. Hanson, "The Influence of Origen on the Arian Controversies"; L. Lies, "Origen's Conception of the Eucharist: Between the Confessions"; P. Nautin, "Origen's Teacher: The Hebrew"; U. Berner, "Origen and the Problem of Syncretism."

#### THE MANY ORIGENS

Origen was described by Porphyry as a philosopher, the son of pagan parents, and by Eusebius as the son of a Christian martyr and the greatest Christian theologian. Since then he has been perceived and categorized in an astonishing variety of ways: as philosopher and savant, mystic, systematician, proponent of an esoteric system, exegete and/or allegorist, Christian saint (even martyr), the true gnostic (à la Clement of Alexandria), one for whom mystical knowledge is the way to salvation, Hellenist, Platonist, moralist, ascetic, man of the Church, eunuch, syncretist.<sup>4</sup> He is a writer of uniquely extraordinary richness who resists being squeezed into any one of any small handful of these categories. Berner arranges modern scholarship on Origen under three main approaches. He finds sixteen types of systematic interpretations of Origen, six types of nonsystematic or "mystical" interpretations, and two types of what he calls mediating interpretations. Caution in labeling is the obvious first commandment for an Origen scholar.

#### ORIGEN AS BIBLICAL THEOLOGIAN

Despite this warning, there are obvious grounds for viewing Origen primarily (but not exclusively, one must insist) as a biblical theologian. He has been called Christianity's first great exegete. "Exegete," however, is misleading. For if one has in mind, as a modern scholar inevitably does, one who applies modern historical and critical methods of analysis to the biblical text, then it is far more ac-

<sup>4</sup>For a useful survey, see Ulrich Berner, *Origenes* (Erträge der Forschung 147; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1981).

curate to say that Origen was not an exegete. But he was a scholar for whom there was no real or practical distinction between theology and biblical study. For Origen, all theology was basically a search for the spiritual (i.e., Christic) meaning of the WORD of God (the *Logos*) he believed to be incarnate in every word of Scripture.

When Origen was speaking or thinking of the biblical WORD incarnate in Scripture, at least four interconnected levels of meaning were never very far from his consciousness: (1) the preexistent divine *Logos*; (2) this WORD which *took flesh of Mary*; (3) this same WORD now also *incarnate in the words of Scripture*, and (4) this same divine and preexistent WORD, now incarnate of Mary and in the Scriptures, as also *dwelling in and at work in us*. This multiple understanding of WORD is Origen's central and all-encompassing hermeneutical principle.<sup>5</sup> The following is but one of countless passages which illustrate this:

Jesus is thus the WORD of God who enters into the soul, which is called Jerusalem, riding upon an ass loosed from its bonds by the disciples; riding, I say, upon the simple letters of the old covenant now made clear by the two disciples who loosed them, the one leading forth the writings and interpreting them allegorically for the health of the soul, the other pointing out from what lies in darkness the good and true things to come. But he also rides on a young foal (cf. Zech. 9:9), the new covenant; for in both of these is found the WORD of truth that purifies us and drives out from us all thoughts of buying and selling.<sup>6</sup>

As he interpreted the Scripture, Origen generally had in mind four classes of people:<sup>7</sup> (1) the "Jews" whom he accused of looking only to the "history" or to the letter of the text and not to its underlying spiritual meaning; (2) the heretics or gnostics who likewise clung just to the literal meaning, but in their case in order to ridicule it more easily; (3) the simple Christians (*pistikoi*) who also clung to the historical meaning, but naively, and thus had little protection against the ridicule of the heretics; (4) the spiritual or perfect (*pneumatikoi/teleioi*) Christians who constantly searched under or behind the historical meaning to find the spiritual or Christic meaning. Relying both on the generally Platonizing cast of his own thought and on the Scriptures themselves (e.g., Heb. 8:5 and Col. 2:17), Origen saw the historical or literal meaning of Scripture as the shadow or earthly form of the heavenly realities.

Within this general line of approach it is possible to outline Origen's hermeneutics in seven principles: (1) the need to establish the most reliable text possible—for him this generally meant the Greek Septuagint translation of the OT; (2) the need to establish the historical meaning, if possible; (3) the insistence that, on the level of the spiritual meaning, the OT is not lower than the NT; (4) the insistence that every text always has a spiritual meaning, but not always a literal or historical meaning (however, he had a very literal-minded definition of literal

<sup>5</sup>See *Origen; Spirit and Fire*, Translator's Foreword, pp. xi-xviii.

<sup>6</sup>Commentary on John 10:18; See *Origen; Spirit and Fire*, No. 160, pp. 88-89.

<sup>7</sup>For a fuller presentation of Origen's method summarized here, see R. Daly, "The Hermeneutics of Origen: Existential Interpretation in the Third Century" in *The Word in the World* (Cambridge MA: Weston College, 1973), pp. 135-43.

meaning); (5) the location of the spiritual meaning, the real content of a text, in Christ; for the *Logos* is incarnate in or referred to in all Scripture; (6) finding the framework or living context of interpretation in the actual life and needs of the Church, that is, the *Logos* living and active in us now; (7) and finally, the insistence that the most important practical guideline for interpretation is the Church's rule of faith.

Origen also has some practical methods or steps for applying these principles. (1) There are numerous signs within Scripture itself which indicate when we must search for the spiritual meaning, for example, when the historical meaning is impossible, unworthy, or involves some difficulty, or when there is something unusual in the text, or when the text speaks metaphorically, or when the gospels do not completely harmonize. (2) Because the *Logos* is incarnate in Scripture, *each individual* word is important as a possible key to the spiritual meaning. (3) Each Scripture passage can, in principle, shed light on any other, for it is the same *Logos* which is incarnate in all Scripture. (4) When the text still does not lead to the suggestion of a useful spiritual meaning, one must turn to allegory. This Origen did with some frequency, and with a fertile and sometimes fantastic imagination. Often enough, these allegorical interpretations had little obvious connection with the historical meaning of the text. Thus, when Origen's method became separated from his immense knowledge of the Bible and the Church, and when there was not as much care for contextualizing the interpretation in the actual life of the Church as a whole, and for keeping it in accord with the rule of faith, the excesses of less gifted and less careful followers brought Origen's name into ill repute.

It would be misleading to suggest that this sketch does justice to Origen as biblical theologian, or that it even covers the various ways in which he might approach a text. For example, in his exposition of Psalm 37 (RSV 38), there is only one basic step. The spiritual meaning is presented precisely as the literal meaning.<sup>8</sup> Origen expounds the text only in terms of questions about the situation of the psalmist (who, of course, represents the reader/prayer of the psalm), thus making the exposition simultaneously an exposition of the soul, the Church and the spiritual life. Christ, the eternal *Logos*, acts within the world of the psalm, rebuking, teaching and healing both the psalmist and the Christian who is hearing/praying the psalm. It is significant and quite revealing that Eusebius, Didymus and Augustine proceed in exactly the same way as they interpret this psalm; but they come up with different interpretations because they have different conceptions of the journey of the soul to God.

#### HOW ORIGENISM AND ITS CONDEMNATION CAME ABOUT

Henri Coruzel (see art. "Origenism" in *Sacramentum Mundi*) provides a convenient definition:

Origenism signifies an intellectual current which has its origin in some speculative positions of Origen's work *On First Principles* and which, when separated from

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<sup>8</sup>See Karen J. Torjesen, "Origen's Interpretation of the Psalms," *Studia Patristica* 17 (Oxford/New York: Pergamon, 1982), 944-58.

their context, and thus stripped of their hypothetical, antithetical character, were organized into a system in the course of the 4th to 6th centuries.

Prior to this, there also existed what has been called an "ecclesiastical Origenism" at relative peace within the Church in the century and a half after Origen's death.<sup>9</sup> In the course of history, most scholarship, to say nothing of popular opinion, has not sufficiently differentiated between Origen himself and the various types of Origenism. The worst example of this in modern times has probably been Koetschau's 1913 GCS edition of *On First Principles*<sup>10</sup> which used the AD 553 anathematism, which most now agree came from Evagrius, as a means of reconstructing the original text of the *Peri Archōn*. Until recently, this was the only available "critical" edition.

There is nothing new about such misunderstandings and misrepresentations of Origen. They began even in his own lifetime. In his AD 232 denunciation of Origen, Bishop Demetrios of Alexandria supported his accusations of heresy by quoting from the *Dialogue with Candidus* in which Origen reportedly claimed that the devil would be saved. In defense, Origen pointed out, among other things, that the text from which Demetrios quoted had been falsified. He supplied his new patron bishops, Theoctistos of Caesarea and Alexander of Jerusalem (by then the rupture with Demetrios was irreparable) with a true copy (see Nautin, *Origène*, 429-30).

Of course, Origen's willingness to call many things into question and to speculate freely in his quest for deeper understanding did not help matters. He himself was very careful about how he did this, constantly qualifying the conjectural nature of his speculations, and frequently reflecting, even aloud in his homilies, on the difficulties of doing justice to an issue without offending or scandalizing the simple. But when lesser minds began to forget the careful qualifications, it was only a matter of time before the master was condemned along with his inept followers.

#### ORIGEN: PARADIGM FOR THE MODERN THEOLOGIAN

Thus it was that Origen, one of the greatest minds ever to serve the Church, became also a focus of controversy within that Church. In that story lie some remarkable parallels to the contemporary situation of tension between institutional and charismatic leadership in the Church.

Following the analysis made by Arthur McGovern, S.J. in an address to the annual meeting of the College Theology Society in Newport, R.I. on June 1, 1985, the vision of Pope John Paul II for the Church today seems to focus on the need for tight unity, for a disciplined, unified, virile Church able to survive and flourish against the threat of world communism. If one merely changes the term "world

<sup>9</sup>See Wolfgang Bienert, *Dionysius von Alexandrien; Zur Frage des Origenismus im dritten Jahrhundert* (Patristische Texte und Studien 21; Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1978), p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>Paul Koetschau, ed., *Origenes Werke*, vol. 5: *De Principiis [Peri Archōn]* (GCS 22; Leipzig, J. C. Hinrichs, 1913).

communism" to "pagan culture and society" the same words could well be used to describe Demetrios's program for the Alexandrian church. And a very successful program it was too, especially when one considers the great influence of that see in subsequent history.

It was Demetrios who, in the course of a long episcopate, led the church of Alexandria from a charismatic type of structure and leadership, in which the *didaskalos* rather than the *episkopos* tended to be the leading figure, to a strong monarchical episcopate. This cannot be dismissed merely as grasping for power, since experience was showing that strong monarchical church structures seemed to flourish better and to be more effective in surviving persecution than the more charismatic structures. Demetrios's success also helped to make the strong monarchical episcopate a power in the Church. Henceforth, for example, only presbyters could preach, and only those became presbyters whom the bishop chose to ordain. Both discipline and doctrine were thus brought effectively under the control of the bishop.

The mere presence of Origen, even with the best will on both sides, could only have been a thorn in Demetrios's side. Demetrios, a mere local bishop in what was still a small religious community, was hopelessly upstaged by Origen whose theological reputation was known across the whole Church and whose philosophical reputation was also known across the empire. The mere existence of such a figure must have been a living contradiction to all that Demetrios was trying to accomplish institutionally. When one adds the fact that Demetrios did not ordain Origen (we do not know whether the matter was ever discussed between them), that he vigorously protested when his brother bishops Alexander of Jerusalem and Theoctistus of Caesarea invited Origen the layman to preach, and that he considered it an ultimate breach of church discipline when these Palestinian bishops ordained Origen, a member of the church of Alexandria, without first seeking the permission of the bishop of Alexandria, the pieces fall together fairly clearly. The fact that Origen had apparently castrated himself some years earlier in a rash act of misguided youthful fervor probably served Demetrios as a convenient reason for keeping from the pulpit one who could not be counted on to restrict himself to what was safe and untroubling to the ears of the simple faithful.

But the final lesson seems to be that, granted the situation, granted the differences and the transitions taking place in church structure and authority, granted the different spiritual and intellectual needs of various members of the Church, tension and controversy was probably absolutely unavoidable. Historical hindsight also indicates that the Church probably would have ended up much the poorer if each side of the controversy had not been so strong or so much in tension with the other. But historical hindsight also suggests that the Church might also have come from antiquity with a richer heritage if the actors in this fascinating bit of history had been able to work out their differences more constructively.

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