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## *Philo as Origen's Declared Model: Allegorical and Historical Exegesis of Scripture<sup>1</sup>*

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### Origen and Jewish Exegesis: Close Interactions

I am going to focus on the relations between Origen of Alexandria († 255 ca.), the great and extremely learned Christian exegete, theologian, and philosopher, and Judaism as regards Biblical exegesis. I will investigate how Philo and Origen used the instrument of allegory to read the Bible in the light of philosophy, but both of them reacted against a sheer allegorization of Scripture (sc. one that denies the validity of the literal-historical plane as well), which existed both among the Jewish allegorizers who preceded Philo and among 'Gnostic' Christian allegorizers. Even Philo and Origen, however, thought—unlike subsequent Rabbinic and Christian exegetes—that the Genesis account of creation had a special status and required to be interpreted not literally, but only allegorically. I will argue for a Platonic influence on this conception and point out how Origen emphasized the Jewish antecedents to his own philosophical allegoresis of Scripture. I will show that, for Origen, Philo the Jew was a better exegete and theologian than Christian 'heretics' were, and I will demonstrate that Origen's attitude toward Philo as his predecessor in Scriptural allegoresis is not ambivalent as it may appear, but definitely positive. I will also point to the chiefly rhetorical and apologetical nature of the "Jewish literalism" *topos* in Origen, who was all too well aware that 'literalists' existed also among Christians (and were his own enemies), and that, conversely, Jewish Biblical exegesis was also allegorical. Philo and Aristobulus are the most conspicuous examples of this, and Origen overtly claims them as his predecessors.

Rabbinic exegesis was more—although not exclusively—"literal"; however, recent and less recent assessments of the relation between Origen and Rabbinic Judaism have more and more brought to light the closeness of the Rabbis' and Origen's interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. It is increasingly clear that each side developed its own exegesis in the awareness of the

exegesis of the other side, which implied interactions, influences, and sometimes also polemical responses. A good albeit partial synthesis, also with overview of past scholarship, today is Anna Tzvetkova-Glaser's monograph.<sup>2</sup> Existing scholarship had already acknowledged in some cases that Origen relied on Haggadic traditions. Conversely, influence of Christian exegesis on *Genesis Rabba* has also been discovered (see below). The same is revealed by some contributions to the volume, *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity*,<sup>3</sup> especially those of Philip Alexandre<sup>4</sup> and Marc Hirschman.<sup>5</sup> Philo is never mentioned by Rabbinic authors, but an influence of his exegesis of *Genesis* may have reached them indirectly or directly through Origen. For instance, the Rabbis assimilated the notion that God created the world having a plan in his mind; this notion was found both in Philo and then in Origen, as I have demonstrated.<sup>6</sup> Origen may have transmitted Philo's concept to the Rabbis, but these may also have read Philo on their own. Also, in the Rabbinic counterpart to the Christian doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, a particularly interesting account is given of Rabbi Gamaliel's teaching on the original elements in a debate with an unnamed philosopher, which, if the Gamaliel in question is Gamaliel II,<sup>7</sup> is set toward

<sup>2</sup> Anna Tzvetkova-Glaser, *Pentateuchauslegung bei Origenes und den frühen Rabbinen* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Emmanouela Grypeou and Helen Spurling, eds., *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians in Late Antiquity* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Philip Alexandre, "In the Beginning: Rabbinic and Patristic Exegesis of Genesis 1:1," in *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians*, 1-29.

<sup>5</sup> Marc Hirschman, "Origen's View of 'Jewish Fables' in Genesis," in *The Exegetical Encounter between Jews and Christians*, 245-254.

<sup>6</sup> Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Clement's Notion of the Logos 'All Things As One.' Its Alexandrian Background in Philo and its Developments in Origen and Nyssen," in *Alexandrian Personae: Scholarly Culture and Religious Traditions in Ancient Alexandria (1st ct. BCE-4ct. CE)*, ed. Zlatko Pleše (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Gamaliel I and Rabbi Gamaliel II are often confused in Rabbinic literature. See Jacob Neusner, *The Rabbinic Traditions about the Pharisees before 70* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), 341-342.

the end of the first century (reported in *Gen. Rab.* 1.9).<sup>8</sup> Even if the source itself is late and, according to Jacob Neusner, stems from the fourth century CE,<sup>9</sup> the elements that Gamaliel claims to have been created seem to me to be identical to those which appear in Bardaisan of Edessa's cosmology. The latter was likewise based on the *Genesis* account, interpreted in the light of Plato's *Timaeus*,<sup>10</sup> and shows other affinities with Jewish traditions that are worth exploring further. The presence of the same material in Bardaisan († 222 CE) suggests that the Midrash in this case can preserve a tradition that is earlier than the fourth century CE.

Rabbinic interpretations of the commandment of circumcision, with their aversion to any allegorization of that commandment, responded to the demands of the Rabbis' polemic against pagan and Christian criticisms.<sup>11</sup> The Rabbis too, however, accepted a moral exegesis of circumcision, provided that this did not obliterate the literal observance of the commandment. This was also the position of Philo, who offered a moral interpretation of circumcision, but did not at all mean that the material observance of the commandment should be superseded. As I shall point out, this was also Origen's own general attitude in Scriptural exegesis, and it was identical to Philo's attitude: both of them contrasted sheer allegorizers of Scripture as well as people who refused to allegorize the Bible at all. The similarities between the Rabbinic and the early Christian interpretations of the sacrifice of Isaac<sup>12</sup> are even

more impressive. For instance, Isaac's willingness to be offered in sacrifice and the redemptive character of his sacrifice in Rabbinic exegesis resemble very closely the Christological interpretation of that episode by the early Christian exegetes, in whose view Isaac is the typos of Christ. As a consequence, it is discussed whether the Rabbinic exegesis of that episode depends on the Christian or vice versa. At least some Rabbinic traditions, such as those of Isaac's true death and subsequent resurrection (which has no grounds in the Biblical text), and of his action of bearing the "cross" on his shoulders, seem to me to reveal a sure influence of Christian accounts. The date itself of the sacrifice of Isaac on 15 Nisan reveals a striking closeness to the date of Jesus' (the new Isaac's) death, also toward mid Nisan. Origen's reading of Isaac as both the priest who offers the sacrifice and at the same time as the sacrificial offering itself clearly assimilates Isaac to Christ, whose functions as sacrificial offering and as high priest Origen especially highlighted in his interpretation of *Hebrews*. Also, if Origen refused to see in the Paschal lamb a prefiguration of the suffering of Christ on the cross, this is because he rejected the etymology of πάσχα from πάσχω and adopted the correct Hebrew etymology "passage." Origen also seems to have known Haggadic traditions in connection with the interpretation of Ex 13:17-14:31.<sup>13</sup>

There is, thus, a significant reciprocal influence between Origen and the Rabbis; Origen also learned Hebrew and received copies of the Hebrew Bible from contemporary Jews and even cited Rabbinic interpretations of Scripture. However, if one wishes to find out the most significant dependence of the Christian Alexandrian on Jewish exegesis, one must certainly turn to investigating the close relationship between Philo of Alexandria—the greatest Jewish Hellenistic exegete—and Origen. As I shall show, indeed, Origen himself claimed that Philo and other Hellenistic Jewish exegetes, such as

<sup>8</sup> Juda Theodor and Hanoch Albeck, eds., *Midrash Bereshit Rabba*, second ed. (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Jacob Neusner, *Judaism and Christianity in the Age of Constantine* (Chicago: University Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> For a recent and sound reassessment of his thought see Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, *Bardaisan of Edessa. A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Interpretation. Also in the Light of Origen and the Original Fragments from De India* (Piscataway: Gorgias, 2009). For his cosmology see 314-355.

<sup>11</sup> Tzvetkova-Glaser, *Pentateuchauslegung*, 179-180.

<sup>12</sup> Tzvetkova-Glaser, *Pentateuchauslegung*, 186-202.

<sup>13</sup> Tzvetkova-Glaser, *Pentateuchauslegung*, 276.

Aristobulus, were his own primary sources of inspiration for his philosophical and allegorical exegesis of Scripture, which was being heavily contested both by 'pagan' Middle Platonists and by some groups within Christianity (and possibly also by some contemporary Rabbinic exegetes). Philo's influence on Origen's exegesis—and, through Origen, on a good deal of subsequent Christian exegesis—is both structural and often extending even to minimal exegetical details. I have already examined several examples of the common exegetical details in a past study.<sup>14</sup> Now some most interesting and in part overlooked aspects of the structural impact of Philo's hermeneutics of Scriptures on Origen's hermeneutical theory and praxis will be pointed out in the following investigation.

#### **Philo's Most General Structural Influence on Origen: Reading the Bible Allegorically through Platonism**

Philo had been the first systematic philosophical interpreter of the Bible who read it allegorically, exactly as Origen did in his footsteps in Christianity. However, Philo in turn had had some precursors in Hellenistic Judaism such as Aristobulus, the Essenes, the Therapeutae, and others. It is Philo himself who attests allegoresis of Scripture as a regular practice among Essenes and Therapeutae in *Prob. 75ff.* and *De vita contemplativa*. More specifically, Philo also informs that the story of Joseph in Egypt was interpreted allegorically by other exegetes before him (*Jos. 151*). Allegory was a powerful tool that allowed Philo to interpret Scripture in the light of *Platonism*, especially a form of Platonism that is conventionally called Middle Platonism, as well as of Stoicism (although from the metaphysical point of view Stoic immanentism was incompatible with Philo's theology), and Pythagoreanism. Remarkably, these are the very same philosophical lines in the light of which

<sup>14</sup> Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Philosophical Allegoresis of Scripture in Philo and Its Legacy in Gregory of Nyssa," *Studia Philonica Annual* 20 (2008): 55-99.

Origen too read the Bible.<sup>15</sup> Also, both Philo's and Origen's attention focused first of all on the Bible itself, so that we can say that it was exegetical first and philosophical after.

Origen indeed was very well acquainted with Philo's works, or at least a good part of them, and was interested in those works of Philo in which the allegorical exegesis of the Bible is predominant. What is more, Origen closely depended on Philo's approach, both from the point of view of the philosophical approach to Scripture and for the allegorical interpretation that both of them applied to the sacred text. This interpretation, as I shall point out, is not the only one contemplated and provided by Philo and Origen: it always parallels the literal, historical interpretation, which keeps its validity in almost all cases.

Origen of Alexandria, the Biblical exegete, was a Christian philosopher,<sup>16</sup> no less Christian for being a philosopher and

<sup>15</sup> For Origen one should add Aristotelianism (see Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Alexander of Aphrodisias: A Source of Origen's Philosophy?," *Philosophie Antique* 13, forthcoming in 2013), but this debt of his is unacknowledged by Origen who, considered Aristotle's philosophy contrary to Christian belief because it denied that divine providence reaches the earth. It is possible that, when Origen refused to teach atheistic philosophical movements, he included both Epicureanism and Aristotelianism among these. Neither Epicurus nor Aristotle in fact denied the existence of the divine, but the denial of divine providence was enough to place these thinkers among "atheists" broadly conceived.

<sup>16</sup> He might even have been the same person as Origen the Neoplatonist. See Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism: Re-Thinking the Christianisation of Hellenism," *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (2009): 217-263, and idem, "Origen the Christian Middle/Neoplatonist," *Journal of Early Christian History* n.s. 1 (2011): 98-130. This position is shared, among other scholars, by Pier Franco Beatrice, "Porphyry's judgment on Origen," in *Origeniana V*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Leuven: Peeters, 1992), 351-67; idem, "Origen in Nemesius' treatise *On the nature of man*," in *Origeniana IX*, ed. György Heidl and Robert Somos (Leuven: Peeters, 2009), 505-532; idem, "The oriental religions and Porphyry's universal way for the soul's deliverance," in *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain: Cent ans après Cumont (1906-2006)*, ed. Corinne Bonnet, et al. (Bruxelles: Institut

no less of a philosopher for being Christian. Origen had been educated in the liberal arts and the study of philosophy—one of his teachers, Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria, was the same who also taught Plotinus—and never rejected philosophy. On the contrary, he used it and continued to teach it all his life. In a letter preserved by Eusebius<sup>17</sup> he even defended as perfectly legitimate the position of a Christian philosopher or a philosopher presbyter against the criticisms of his detractors, who did not approve of a Christian who was a philosopher. He adduced the examples of both Pantaenus and Heraclas to support his case.

Both Philo and Origen deemed Judaism—in the case of Origen, both Judaism and Christianity as its offspring—the true philosophy. In this light it was natural for them to interpret the Jewish Scripture in the light of philosophy. According to a Jewish-Christian apologetical argument that both of them shared, Greek philosophers were in fact inspired by “Moses,” the Hebrew Scripture, or at least by the same Logos that is expressed in Scripture, that is, God’s Logos (for Philo, this is the most important Power of God and almost an independent figure; for Origen, this is Christ-Logos, whom he obviously read in every reference of Philo to the divine Logos). Philo was so deeply persuaded that the Mosaic Scripture and Platonism were

inspired by the same Logos as to insist that Scripture actually expounded the famous Platonic doctrine of the Ideas, especially in Ex 33:18 (which he interprets in *Spec.* 1.41.45-48) and 25:40, as is clear from *QE* 2.82 and *Mos.* 2.74-76. It is significant, but not surprising, that Philo’s exegesis was soon taken over by Origen. On the basis of this conception, Philo understood the Hebrew Scripture as an allegorical exposition of Platonic doctrines. And Origen followed in his footsteps. Both of them, indeed, were so committed to Scripture as the only ultimately authoritative text that they would never have embraced Platonism if they had not been convinced that Platonism was in fact taught by Scripture.

It is interesting that this operation of interpreting Scripture in the light of philosophy, and especially of Platonism, was performed by Philo and Origen in a period in which the religious tradition, in turn, began to work as an important foundation of philosophy, e.g., in the Middle-Platonist Plutarch and, subsequently, in later Neoplatonists. Philosophy tended to become more and more a religion when Judaism and Christianity had begun to present themselves as philosophy. Philo and then Origen had to defend the legitimacy of a philosophical allegoresis of the Bible—that is, of reading Scripture allegorically and finding philosophical doctrines in it—both against internal attacks and against external ones. Indeed, in both Judaism and Christianity, some criticized the allegorical interpretation of the Bible. And outside Judaism and Christianity likewise, there were allegorists, especially Neoplatonists, who denied that the Bible could ever be interpreted allegorically, simply because the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures contained no profound philosophical meanings to be disclosed by means of allegoresis. This was the position of Middle Platonists such as Celsus or Neoplatonists such as Porphyry. Exceptions to this trend are very few. The most outstanding is surely Numenius of Apamea, who lived in Alexandria—like Philo and Origen—and was close to both Middle Platonism and Neopythagoreanism. Not only did

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Historique Belge de Rome, 2009), 343–368; Thomas Böhm, “Origenes – Theologe und (Neu-)Platoniker? Oder: Wem soll man misstrauen: Eusebius oder Porphyrius?” *Adamantius* 8 (2002): 7–23; Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, “Origen on the Limes: Rhetoric and the Polarization of Identity in the Late Third Century,” in *The Rhetoric of Power in Late Antiquity*, eds. Robert M. Frakes, Elizabeth DePalma Digeser, Justin Stephens (London–New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010), 197-218.; eadem, *A Threat to Public Piety: Christian, Platonists, and the Great Persecution* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 18, 51, and *passim*. For the sake of the present argument, however, it is not necessary to suppose that the two Origenes were one and the same person.

<sup>17</sup> Analyzed by Ilaria L.E. Ramelli, “Origen, Patristic Philosophy, and Christian Platonism: Re-Thinking the Christianization of Hellenism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 63 (2009): 217-263.

he not blame Jewish and Christian philosophical allegorists of Scripture, but he even applied allegoresis to the Jewish and Christian Scriptures himself.<sup>18</sup> Origen was well acquainted with his work, as is attested both by his explicit, appreciative mentions of Numenius and by Porphyry *ap. Eus. HE* 6.19. Here Porphyry lists Numenius among Origen's favorite readings, naming him even in the second place just after Plato himself.

There are several examples I noticed that lead to what seems to me an all-important remark: Origen tends expressly to refer to Philo as a predecessor precisely in points that are crucial to his Scriptural allegorical method. This strongly suggests that Philo was his main inspirer for the very technique of philosophical allegoresis of Scripture, and that Origen both was well aware of this and acknowledged his debt. An interesting example is found in *Comm. in Matt.* 10.22, with the mention of Philo, *Ebr.* 208-209, concerning Pharaoh, who is in fact a core character in Origen's exegesis, and in his reflection on free will and providence in *Princ.* 3. Moreover, both passages by Origen and Philo, blaming the celebration of Pharaoh's birthday, are inspired by the fundamental idea that the true imperishable life to be celebrated is not the earthly life. Indeed, it seems to me most significant that precisely in connection with the spiritual interpretation of death as sin, a key concept for all of Origen's ethics and anthropology, we find in Origen one of the few references to Philo as *quidam ex his qui ante nos interpretati sunt locum hunc* ("some of those who before us have interpreted this Biblical passage," *Hom. in Num.* 9.5). Origen had in mind *Her.* 201, where Philo too had already interpreted the "dead" as the impious and foolish. Another significant example is in *Comm. in Matt.* 17.17, where the inspiration from Philo, *Deus* 52-53, is close and declared: "One of my predecessors, who has composed books of allegory of the sacred Laws." Now, both Philo and Origen in these passages are dealing with one of the pivotal motifs of their allegorical exegesis, namely the

therapeutic and pedagogical purpose of Scripture's anthropomorphic expressions referring to God: not only hands, shoulders, and the like, but also anger, punishment and threats are applied to the divinity. All of these expressions, both Philo and Origen maintained, have a didactic purpose and must not be taken at face value, but rather must be interpreted allegorically. The last instance I pick out is probably the most important in this connection: Origen clearly refers to Philo as a predecessor (in the phrase, "some of those before us have taught...": *CC* 7.20) precisely in relation to the basic methodological feature of his exegesis: the distinction between a literal and a spiritual meaning in the Law—"the Law is double: according to the literal sense and according to the implied meaning"—which is the presupposition itself of the practice of allegorical interpretation of Scripture.

It is therefore possible to conclude that Origen tends to openly refer to Philo precisely in those cases—among the very many other instances of Origen's dependence on him—in which a particularly important aspect of his allegoresis or his thought is involved. This entails that Origen wanted to present Philo the Jew as his principal inspirer in fact of Biblical philosophical allegoresis, what indeed Philo was. This is all the more significant in that philosophy, and especially Middle and Neoplatonism, and allegorical exegesis of the Bible are very closely interrelated in both Philo and Origen. Indeed, many theological and philosophical conceptions passed from Philo to Origen through allegory.<sup>19</sup> Philo was the first systematic philosophical interpreter of the Bible who read it allegorically, and Origen was the first, and the greatest, who did so in Christianity. If Origen's monumental *Commentary on Genesis* were not lost, his debt toward his Jewish predecessor would very likely be all the more conspicuous to his readers.

It must be observed that Origen cites Philo explicitly and by name in *Contra Celsum*—as I have remarked—, a scholarly

<sup>18</sup> See frs. 1c and 10a Des Places = Origen *CC* 4.51.

<sup>19</sup> Full demonstration of this point in my "Philosophical Allegoresis."

work against a Middle Platonist, while in his homilies he refrains from mentioning him by name. But in the homilies Origen regularly omits nominal citations, not only of Philo, but of any other *auctoritas* apart from Scripture. This is a general strategy of Origen rather than a sign of ambivalence or embarrassment toward Philo. Origen himself explains the reason why in his homilies he omits citing nominally either Philo or any other author outside Biblical ones: “But I have to omit many details, because now it is not the appropriate occasion to make a scholarly commentary, but I must rather edify the church of God, and stimulate with the example of the saints and allegorical explanations those listeners who are too lazy and indolent” (*Hom. in Gen.* 10.5).<sup>20</sup> Origen in fact abundantly cites Philo as his authoritative albeit unnamed “predecessor” in both his homilies and his commentaries: τις τῶν πρὸ ἡμῶν (*Comm. in Matth.* 10.22); τῶν πρὸ ἔμοῦ τις (*Comm. in Io.* 14.5); τινες (*Comm. in Io.* 6.217); τις τῶν πρὸ ἡμῶν (*Cat. in Ex.* PG 12.285A); τῶν πρὸ ἡμῶν τινες (CC 7.20); τῶν πρὸ ἡμῶν τις (*ibid.* 5.55); τις and τινες (*Cat. in Gen.* B PG 12.116A and 97BC); *quidam ante nos* (*Hom. in Ex.* 9.4); *ante nos quidam* (*ibid.* 2.1-2); *ante nos quidam* (*Hom. in Ios.* 16.1); *quidam ante me* (*Hom. in Lev.* 8.6); τῶν παλαιῶν τις (*Cat. in Lev.* 8.6); *aliquem qui fuit ante nos exponentem* (*Comm. in Matth. ser.* 69); *quidam ex his qui ante nos interpretati sunt locum hunc* (*Hom. in Num.* 9.5); *aliquanti* (*Hom. in Gen.* 14.3); *et a prioribus nostris et a nobis saepe iam dictum est* (*ibid.* 27.4). In all of these cases a comparison with Philo’s exegesis of the Scriptural passages at stake makes it certain that Origen’s “predecessor” is indeed Philo’s.

But it is in two passages of his *Against Celsus*—and not in any homily—that Origen mentions Philo nominally, and it is only in a passage of a scholarly commentary that he cites him almost nominally, that is, indicating, if not his name, a specific

<sup>20</sup> *Sed ut omittamus plurima – neque enim commentandi nunc tempus est, sed aedificandi Ecclesiam Dei et pigriores ac desides auditores exemplis sanctorum et mysticis explanationibus prouocandi.*

work of his: the *Allegories of the Laws*. In CC 6.21 Origen is speaking of Jacob’s vision of the ladder on which angels went up and down (Gn 28), in relation to a possible Platonic exegesis that contemplates the descent of souls onto the earth through the planetary spheres. Origen, with a typical apologetic move, vindicates the anteriority of Moses over Plato and avers that Moses’ story of Jacob’s ladder hides “a greater allegorical meaning.” Now, this meaning—he maintains—was already detected by Philo, and here Origen not only cites Philo by name, but also recommends his work *On Dreams* (*De somniis*) in the highest terms: “There is a book by Philo on the ladder story, which is worthy of wise and intelligent examination on the part of those who love the truth.”<sup>21</sup> CC 4.51 is the pivotal passage on which I have already commented, concerning Philo and Aristobulus as Origen’s declared inspirers in fact of Biblical allegoresis. Finally, in *Comm. in Matth.* 17.17, which I have mentioned as a crucial passage in relation to Scriptural allegoresis, since it deals with the interpretation of Biblical anthropomorphisms, Origen refers to Philo as his predecessor and the author of the *Allegories of the Laws*: τῶν πρὸ ἡμῶν ποιήσας τις βιβλία νόμων ἱερῶν ἀλληγορίας. Therefore, the examination of the passages of Origen’s scholarly works—*Against Celsus* and *Commentary on Matthew*—that cite Philo nominally strongly confirms that Origen refers back to Philo as an authority in an explicit way precisely in connection with crucial issues that bear on Biblical allegoresis. This signifies that Philo, whom Origen often calls his “predecessor,” was Origen’s great inspirer in the allegorical philosophical interpretation of Scripture.

Beside these, there are innumerable echoes of Philo in Origen, most of them undeclared. To those listed by Annewies

<sup>21</sup> Περὶ ἧς καὶ τῷ Φίλωνι συντέτακται βιβλίον, ἄξιον φρονίμου καὶ συνετῆς παρὰ τοῖς φιλαλήθεσιν ἐξετάσεως.

van den Hoek in her careful study<sup>22</sup> I add one example concerning Origen's double notion of virginity, of the body and of the soul, which would prove especially influential on the holistic concept of virginity held by Methodius and then Gregory of Nyssa.<sup>23</sup> Origen expresses his double notion of virginity in *Hom. in Gen.* 10.4 commenting on Rebecca as presented in Gn 24:16: "It is not enough for the soul that she is continent in the body [...] For it may happen that one has bodily virginity, but knows this execrable male, the devil, and receives from him the arrows of concupiscence in one's own heart, and thus the virginity of the soul is lost. Thus, because Rebecca was a virgin, pure in both body and spirit, this is why Scripture doubles her praise and says: 'She was a virgin; no man had known her.'"<sup>24</sup> Now Philo, commenting on the same passage, in *Quaest. in Gen.* 4.99, 323 Aucher, had written: "Scripture wants to make it clear that she has a double virginity, one according to the body and another according to the soul. For she was beautiful both physically and spiritually."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Annewies van den Hoek, "Philo and Origen: A Descriptive Catalogue of Their Relationship," *Studia Philonica Annual* 12 (2000): 44–121.

<sup>23</sup> See Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "L'Inno a Cristo-Logos nel Simposio di Metodio di Olimpo," in *Motivi e forme della poesia cristiana antica tra Scrittura e tradizione classica. Incontro di studiosi dell'Antichità cristiana Roma, Augustinianum, 3-5 Maggio 2007* (Rome: Augustinianum, 2008), 257-280.

<sup>24</sup> *Non ergo sufficit animae ut casta sit corpore [...] Potet enim fieri ut quis habeat in corpore uirginitatem et cognoscens istum uirum pessimum diabolum atque ab eo concupiscentiae iacula in corde suscipiens animae perdidit castitatem. Quia ergo Rebecca uirgo erat sancta corpore et spiritu, idcirco eius duplicat laudem et dicit: Uirgo erat, uir non cognouerat eam.*

<sup>25</sup> *Uult autem declarare quod duplicem habeat uirginitatem, unam secundum corpus, alteram secundum animam. Erat enim tam uisu quam intellectu pulchra.*

### Another Structural Aspect of Philo's Influence on Origen's Exegesis: The Coherence of Scripture and the Reaction against Extreme Allegorization

An important, constitutive parallel between Philo and Origen not only as allegorical exegetes of Scripture, but also as theorists of Biblical allegoresis, concerns the notion of the literal and spiritual meaning of Scripture as, respectively, the body and soul of the Bible. This notion is paramount in Origen's theory of Scriptural allegoresis in the fourth book of his *De principiis* and is developed into a threefold division of "body," "soul," and "spirit" of Scripture. Now, this core conception is already present in Philo, who in turn ascribes it to the Therapeutae (*Contempl.* 78). In this connection, it is not accidental that Philo himself attributes to these Jewish ascetics the practice of allegorical exegesis of the Bible, as I have mentioned. It is irrelevant to the present investigation to determine whether these ascetics were an invention of Philo, as some scholars have suggested,<sup>26</sup> or existed historically, as most scholars think. What is more interesting within the present analysis is that Eusebius, a Christian Platonist and a Biblical allegorist himself, who admired Origen a great deal and was also well acquainted with Philo's work, presented the Therapeutae described by Philo as *Christian* first-century ascetics (*HE* 2.17.1). In this way Eusebius endeavored to project Scriptural allegoresis back to the very beginning of Christianity, as the truest and very best exegetical practice (all the more so in that in his day it was under attack, within the frame of wider criticisms leveled against Origen). Eusebius was well aware that this was both Philo's and Origen's practice, which he intended to ennoble. Eusebius was certainly also conscious of the strong influence of Philo, as an allegorical exegete and a reader of Scripture in

<sup>26</sup> For example, see Troels Engberg-Pedersen, "Philo's *De vita contemplativa* as a Philosopher's Dream," *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 30 (1999): 40–64.

the light of Platonism, on Origen; this is also why he portrayed Philo along the very same lines as he portrayed Origen.<sup>27</sup>

Origen also adhered to Philo's allegorical methodology when in his Scriptural exegesis he constantly sought, and insisted on, unity, coherence, and wholeness. Philo likewise had deeply felt the structural unity of the allegorical system throughout Scripture, as a counterpart of the deep internal unity of the divine Scripture itself. Philo's and Origen's allegoresis, in this respect, was very different from Stoic allegoresis, which tended to be more fractioned and episodic.<sup>28</sup> Origen and Philo seem to share a common demand for unity and coherence in their allegoresis, while Stoic allegorists cared less for this. Stoic allegorists were aware of the principle of interpreting Homer with Homer—a Hellenistic philological principle, which was also used for philosophy—, but they did not derive a strong demand for unity from this. On the contrary, both Philo and Origen, transposing that principle to Scripture (so to interpret Scripture with Scripture),<sup>29</sup> drew from it the idea that both Scripture itself and, consequently, its allegorical interpretation must form a consistent unity. This also parallels the methodology used in their Biblical exegesis by the Rabbis, who interpreted Scripture with Scripture.

Exactly like the early Rabbis, Origen used an intra-Biblical comparative method. That is to say, when he had to explain a Biblical passage, he turned to other relevant Biblical passages for inspiration. He did so because the Bible,

<sup>27</sup> Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "The Birth of the Rome-Alexandria Connection: The Early Sources on Mark and Philo, and the Petrine Tradition," *The Studia Philonica Annual* 23 (2011): 69-95, here 79-80.

<sup>28</sup> See Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *Allegoria I: L'età classica* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2004), ch. 9.

<sup>29</sup> For the influence of Homeric exegesis on Philo see Maren Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). A similar study for Origen is missing.

according to him—just as according to Philo and the early Rabbis—forms a coherent unity within itself. Philo and Origen in particular, with their allegorical interpretation, tended not to take into account a single, isolated allegorical point, but rather a whole passage in its allegorical system. As a support for his practice, in CC 4.71 Origen quotes 1 Cor 2:13, with its exhortation to comparing spiritual realities with other spiritual realities. Origen here takes "spiritual realities" as the allegorical, spiritual meaning of one passage in Scripture, and "other spiritual realities" as the allegorical meaning of other related passages in all of Scripture. Therefore, he can be said to have used a comparative hermeneutical method. In *Philoc.* 2, from the commentary to Psalm 1 (cf. chs. 1-7 too), Origen assimilates the divine providential power, which pervades everything, to the divine inspiration that pervades all of Scripture, down to the smallest details. "Traces" and "hints" of the divine Wisdom are found everywhere, "in each letter;" for, "as *the Jewish masters* asserted," the words of Scripture have been calculated "with the utmost accuracy." This is why in the Bible not a single word or even letter is superfluous, again exactly as the Rabbis maintained.<sup>30</sup>

Another momentous structural parallel between Philo's and Origen's Biblical exegesis is the following. Both Philo and Origen maintained the validity and truth of the literal-historical plane of Scripture, together with its deeper meanings. In this respect, their allegoresis remarkably differed both from the Stoic and from "pagan" Middle and Neoplatonic allegoresis. Origen here deliberately chose to take over Philo's allegoresis rather than the Stoic or "pagan" Middle Platonic one, and he did so clearly in order to safeguard the historicity of Scripture. This is why, remarkably, Origen used the Greek terms *allēgoria*, *allēgoreō* and the like very sparingly, since he regarded them as compromised by "pagan" allegorical practice. Not by chance,

<sup>30</sup> *Phil.* 6; *Comm. in Matth.* 16.2; *Comm. in Matth. Ser.* 89; *Hom. in Num.* 3.2; 27.1; *Hom. in Jos.* 15.3; *Comm. in Io.* 19.40.89.

Origen's treatise against the "pagan" Middle Platonist Celsus is the work in which Origen employs the term *allēgoria* and related terminology most often. This clearly confirms that he associated such terminology with "pagan" allegoresis.<sup>31</sup>

It is important to observe that Origen was also familiar with "Gnostic"—particularly Valentinian—allegoresis of Scripture. He was friends with Ambrose, a rich Valentinian "converted" by him to the Great Church, who placed scribes at his disposal for the publication of his writings.<sup>32</sup> A disciple of Valentinus's who lived in the second half of the second century, shortly before Origen, was Ptolemy, who interpreted allegorically the prologue of the Gospel of John and saw in it many references to the Ogdoad.<sup>33</sup> Heracleon, another "Valentinian," wrote the earliest Christian exegetical commentary we know of: it interpreted the Gospel of John and Origen himself preserves several fragments of it in his own commentary on John. Here Origen engaged in a debate with Heracleon's interpretation, which was purely allegorical.<sup>34</sup> For instance, Capharnaus according to Heracleon is a symbol of matter because it is located on the stagnant water of a lake (F 11.40); the Samaritan woman represents the Valentinian "spiritual/pneumatic human being" as opposed to the hylic and the psychic; the deep well is

a symbol of the "psychic" condition from which she must elevate herself (F 17). Origen does not criticize allegoresis per se, but an interpretation of Scripture that is exclusively allegorical. Origen's anti-gnostic exegesis of the Gospel of John perfectly reveals his deep concern for the preservation of the historical level of Scripture, including the fact of the incarnation of the Logos, and for offering an allegorical exegesis that is consistent with the literal level. For this reason Origen criticizes Heracleon because he interpreted allegorically the Gospel of John without maintaining consistency with the literal sense, and without Scriptural support (*Comm. in Io.* 2.103 and 139; 6.306; 13.427).<sup>35</sup> In addition, Origen in CC 4.71 quotes 1 Cor 2:13, which invites the reader to compare spiritual realities with other spiritual realities. On this basis, he uses a comparative hermeneutical method, bringing together the allegorical meaning of one Scriptural passage with the allegorical meanings of other Scriptural passages, of both the Old and New Testaments (see, e.g., *Comm. in Matth.* 10.15; *Hom. in Lev.* 1.7). This, again, contrasts with the break between the two Testaments introduced by Marcionites and some "Gnostics" alike. Indeed, the latter are explicitly criticized by Origen because "they do not respect the expositive harmonic interconnection of Scripture from the beginning to the end" (*Comm. in Io.* 10.42.290).<sup>36</sup> It is noteworthy that precisely on the grounds of the double meaning of Scripture, literal and allegorical, Origen refutes those—mainly "pagans" and, again, "Gnostics"—who criticized the Hebrew-Christian Scripture as a rustic text (as it will famously appear to Augustine too prior to his conversion): "These observations show that the divine Scripture has not been

<sup>31</sup> John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Eusebius *HE* 6.18.1; 23.1-2. Origen actually helped the "Great Church" to regain educated persons who inclined to "Gnosticism," keeping up the philosophization and rationalization of Christianity already attempted by Justin, Pantaenus, and Clement of Alexandria: so, after their efforts, it was more difficult to accuse Christianity of being a religion for uneducated and fanatic people.

<sup>33</sup> On the allegorical interpretation of Christ's vicissitudes by Valentine see Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 155ff.

<sup>34</sup> See Bart Ehrmann, "Heracleon, Origen and the Text of the Fourth Gospel," *Vigiliae Christianae* 47 (1993): 105-118; Manlio Simonetti, "Eracleone e Origene," *Vetus Testamentum* 3 (1966): 111-141; and Ansgar Wucherpfennig, *Heracleon Philologus* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> See also Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 127-137. On Origen's ideal of coherence between *littera* and *allegoria* see *Princ.* 4.2.9; 3.4.6; *Comm. Matth.* 10.14-15; 15.1.

<sup>36</sup> See Ilaria Ramelli, "La coerenza della soteriologia origeniana: dalla polemica contro il determinismo gnostico all'universale restaurazione escatologica," in *Pagani e cristiani alla ricerca della salvezza, secoli I-III. Atti del XXXIV Incontro di Studiosi dell'Antichità Cristiana, Roma, Istituto Patristico Augustinianum, 5-7 maggio 2005* (Rome: Augustinianum, 2006), 661-688.

composed—as it seems to very many people—in an unlearned and rustic style, but it has been put together according to the discipline of divine teaching, and it aims at offering not so much historical reports as mystical meanings” (*Hom. in Gen. 15.1*).<sup>37</sup>

Origen, thus, criticized the exclusively allegorical method of Heracleon and other “Gnostics,” and it is noteworthy that he did so *in the very same way as Philo* had criticized some Hellenistic Jewish allegorists of the Bible who preceded him. For both these Jewish Hellenistic exegetes and the “Gnostics” of Origen’s day, in their exclusively allegorical reading, cancelled the historical value of the Bible. And neither Philo nor Origen after him were willing to discard the historicity of Scripture, even if neither of them admitted *only* of the historical, literal meaning of Scripture, but both Philo and Origen *also* allowed for one or more allegorical meanings. Indeed, Philo was praised by Origen with a reference to those Jews who interpreted the Law not only literally, but also “allegorically” (CC 7.20): also, but *not exclusively*.

Both in Philo’s and in Origen’s view there are only very few cases in all of Scripture in which the literal, historical meaning is absent and only an allegorical meaning is possible. These exceptions have precisely the function of signaling that in Scripture the reader must search for deeper meanings beyond the literal plane. But normally the historical level *must* be maintained, along with the spiritual meanings. The Bible, for both Philo and Origen, almost always recounts historical facts that really happened at a certain time, and not just symbols. In *Princ. 1, praef. 8* Origen presents as a doctrine taught by the church that “all the Law is in fact *spiritual*.” Origen maintains that this is taught by the church obviously because it is taught

<sup>37</sup> *Quae observationes ostendunt Scripturam diuinam non, ut plurimis uidetur, inerudito et agresti sermone compositam, sed secundum disciplinam diuinae eruditionis aptatam, neque tantum historicis narrationibus quantum rebus et sensibus mysticis seruientem.*

by St. Paul (Rom 7:14). But at the same time the Law—and by extension all Scripture—also keeps its historical sense in Origen’s view, just as Philo also maintained. Origen thought that the literal, historical level of Scripture retains its full value in almost all cases. Very few in the Bible are the passages that are deprived of literal meaning, due to absurdities, paradoxes, or impossibilities.<sup>38</sup> Origen emphasizes that those passages which are true at the historical level in the Bible are “*much more numerous* than those which have a bare spiritual meaning” not wrapped up in a literal sense (*ap. Pamph. Apol. 123*). As a consequence, for instance, Origen (*ibid. 125*) maintains that the story of the Patriarchs, as well as the miracle of Joshua, really happened historically. Philo clearly agreed on this score, as well as the Rabbis. In almost all of Scripture, both the historical and the allegorical planes go together: “Even if these passages have a spiritual meaning, however their spiritual sense must be received *only after first maintaining their historical truth*” (*ibid. 113*). The full historicity of the Biblical narrative is not in question either for Origen or for Philo, who in this respect definitely differed from Stoic and Middle and Neoplatonic allegorists of myths, as well as from some Jewish Hellenistic allegorists and some ‘Gnostic’ allegorists of Scripture.

In *Princ. 4.2.9*, Origen observes that the very few Biblical passages that only have a spiritual meaning, because their literal meaning is impossible, were placed there by God specifically “for the sake of those who are *more expert* and particularly *fond of investigation*, that, applying themselves to the toil of the *examination* of Scriptures, they may be persuaded by reason that in Scriptures it is necessary to *look for* a meaning that is worthy of God.” Origen notably applies here the lexicon of philosophical investigation to the exegesis of Scripture. This is because in his view, exactly as in Philo’s view, the allegorical exegesis of the Bible is an important part of *philosophy*; precisely in this connection Philo spoke of Mosaic philosophy.

<sup>38</sup> *Princ. 4.2.5; 4.2.9; 4.3.1-4.*

The literal level is useful to “edify” those who cannot understand Scripture more profoundly (*Princ.* 4.2.6; 8-9). It is because of his attention to this level that Origen produced his monumental critical edition of the whole of Scripture, the *Hexapla*. With this he intended to fix the Scriptural text on the basis of the Hebrew Bible and its Greek translation, the Septuagint, besides later Greek versions such as those of Aquilas, Symmachus, and Theodotion. On the basis of this edition he discussed philological points in his commentaries. In this respect Origen proved, so to say, even more Jewish than Philo, who only knew the Septuagint and had recourse to etymological lists written in Greek for the etymologies of Biblical Hebrew names. Origen studied Hebrew on purpose and produced an edition of the Bible in which the first two columns were devoted to the Hebrew text and its transliteration, and the rest to its correct translation into Greek.

Also, it is above all from Philo that Origen drew the moral interpretation of Scripture, that is, the exegesis that refers what is recounted in the Bible to the moral life of the soul.<sup>39</sup> For already Philo read the Scriptural text as an allegory of the moral vicissitudes of the soul and its choice of good or evil. Origen considers this level to be the “soul” of Scripture (*Princ.* 4.2.4). Such moral allegoresis in his view is useful for those who are making moral progress, according to a category that was drawn from Hellenistic moral philosophy and was well known to both Philo and Origen.

Very interestingly, in CC 5.44 Origen states that the Jewish priests, “in secret,” researched and explained the symbolic meaning of Scripture. It is unclear whether Origen here was referring (1) to Hellenistic Jewish exegetes like Philo himself (who was *de genere sacerdotum*, “of priestly descent” according to Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 11, but whose primary activity was

<sup>39</sup> *Moralis interpretatio, moralis locus* (*Hom. in Gen.* 2.6); *moralis doctrina vel ratio* (*Hom. in Num.* 9.7).

not priestly, but rather literary and political, and whose allegorical reading of Scripture was not carried out “in secret” but overtly) or (2) to other priests of Second Temple Judaism, such as the teachers of St. Paul, in whose letters in fact Origen constantly sought a Scriptural justification to his own allegorical exegesis of the Bible, or else still (3) to the early Rabbis of post-Temple Judaism. In this case Origen would be alluding to a contemporary situation with which he had a direct acquaintance. In the light of what I have expounded at the beginning of this study concerning the close relationship between Origen and Rabbinic exegesis, hypothesis (3) would seem no less probable than hypothesis (2). In any case, it is remarkable that Origen was endeavoring to assimilate his own allegorical exegesis of Scripture to a parallel *Judaic* practice. While “pagan” Platonists and allegorists such as Porphyry accused him of arbitrarily transposing the technique of allegoresis from Stoic philosophy—which applied allegoresis to “pagan” classical myths—to a “barbarian” text such as the Bible, Origen insisted that he owed his allegorical method (applied to Scripture) to Philo, Aristobulus, and “the Jewish priests.” I shall soon return to this momentous point and its equally consequential implications.

It is certainly the case that Origen repeatedly denounces the literal meaning as “Jewish” and thus missing the Christian allegorical meaning of the Old Testament. But this operation, predominantly found in his homilies—where he had to apply simplifications most—, is mainly rhetorical. And for rhetorical and pastoral reasons Origen was even willing to give up one of his most distinctive and boldest theological doctrines: that of apokatastasis or universal restoration.<sup>40</sup> That he

<sup>40</sup> See Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine of Apokatastasis: A Critical Assessment from the New Testament to Eriugena* (forthcoming in 2013). On Origen’s caution in proclaiming this doctrine to the less spiritually advanced see Mark Scott, “Guarding the Mysteries of Salvation,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 18 (2010): 347-368.

maintained the opposite of this doctrine when addressing a certain audience does not mean that he did not uphold this doctrine. Indeed, “Jewish literalism” is mainly a rhetorical construct, which served the apologetical purpose of showing that if contemporary Jews rejected Jesus Christ and observed the Law literally (keeping the circumcision, the Sabbath rest, etc.) it was because they did not want to recognize that the Law is spiritual and that the Hebrew Bible figurally speaks of Christ. Thus, Jewish literalism is a rhetorical label useful for a theological polemic in a Christian apologetical perspective. But Origen was all too well aware that not all Jews supported an exclusively literal interpretation of Scripture, and that, vice versa, not all literalists were Jews. In fact he knew and declared without problems both that literalists existed also among Christians and were his enemies (he repeatedly dubs them *Philistini* in his *Homilies on Genesis*), and that allegorical exegesis was practiced by Jews as well: as he explicitly says, not only by Aristobulus and Philo, but even by “Jewish priests.” Unless with “Jewish priests” he meant again Philo himself, who is reported by Jerome, as I have mentioned, to have been a priest.

In *Hom. in Gen.* 13.4 Origen identifies the above-mentioned *Philistini* with those Christians who did not want him to speculate about the causes for Jacob’s election and Esau’s repudiation—which according to Origen lie in his grand doctrine of the *logika*, their fall, and their restoration—: “I too wanted to ask him: ‘Lord, who sinned, this man, Esau, or his parents, that he should be born all full of hair like this, and that he should be supplanted by his brother already in the womb?’ But if I want to ask God’s Logos about this and make an investigation, some Philistines will immediately attack me and level calumnies against me!”<sup>41</sup> These were Christians who criticized Origen’s

<sup>41</sup> *Et ego uolebam interrogare eum et dicere: Domine, quis peccauit, hic Esau aut parentes eius, ut sic totus hirsutus et horridus nasceretur, ut in utero supplantaretur a fratre? Sed si uolueris de his interrogare uerbum Dei et inquirere, statim mihi lites Philistini et calumnia mouent.*

allegorical exegesis of Scripture and the theological and anthropological doctrines that he drew from it. In the same passage Origen is clear that these people opposed his spiritual and allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament, here represented by the notion of digging deep to find living water (sc. the hidden and salvific meaning of Scripture): “For if I want to dig deep and open hidden veins of living water, immediately some Philistines will appear and attack me; they will altercate and level calumnies against me, and will begin to fill my wells with their earth and mud.”<sup>42</sup> The identity of these opponents of Origen as Christian literalists, present even in the congregation he was addressing, is confirmed *ibid.* 13.2-3:

Who are these people who fill wells with earth? No doubt they are those who limit the interpretation of Scripture to the earthly and fleshly law, while they preclude the spiritual and mystical interpretation. [...] If I attempt to find out the spiritual sense of Scripture, to remove the veil of the law and show that what is written is allegorical, indeed I dig wells, but immediately the friends of literal exegesis will level calumnies against me, and will ambush me; they will instantly machinate, preparing hostilities and persecutions, claiming that truth cannot be found but on earth.<sup>43</sup>

The correct attitude to Scripture, instead, and especially the Old Testament narratives, is indicated by Origen for instance in

<sup>42</sup> *Si enim uolueris in altum fodere et aquae uiuae latentes uenas aperire, continuo aderunt Philistini et litigabunt mecum, rixas mihi et calumnias commouebunt, et incipient replere terra sua et luto puteos meos.*

<sup>43</sup> *Qui sunt isti, qui terra puteos replent? Illi sine dubio, qui in legem terrenam et carnalem intelligentiam ponunt, et spiritalem ac mysticam claudunt. [...] si sensum in iis quaerere spiritalem, si conatus fuero uelamen legis amouere et ostendere allegorica esse quae scripta sunt, fodio quidem puteos, sed statim mihi mouebunt calumnias amici litterae et insidiabuntur mihi, inimicitias continuo et persecutiones parabunt, ueritatem negantes stare posse nisi super terram.*

*Hom. in Gen.* 10.2: “Do you think that these are myths? Do you think that the Holy Spirit in Scriptures just tells stories? This is rather teaching for souls, a spiritual instruction, which educates you [...] All that is written in Scripture is mysteries,”<sup>44</sup> that is, allegories. In the same way Origen insists with wonder *ibid.* 9.1: “The more we go on reading, the more a heap of symbolic meanings increases before us [...] so immense a sea of mysteries,”<sup>45</sup> that is, again, allegories.

### The Most Overlooked but Weighty Structural Influence of Philo on Origen’s Exegesis: The Special Status of the Scriptural Account of the Beginning

According to both Philo and Origen, the Scriptural narrative concerning the origin of the world seems to be subject to special hermeneutical rules. Indeed, Origen certainly had both Philo and Plato in mind when he interpreted the Scriptural narratives on the *arkhē* and the *telos* in a different way than the rest of the Bible. For, within the Bible, narratives concerning the *arkhē* and the *telos* escape the aforementioned composite model of interpretation at the same time literal and allegorical. These narratives endowed with such a special hermeneutical status are the very first sections of *Genesis*, which contain the account of the creation of the world and of the human being, and, for Origen, *Revelation*, with the account of the end of the world. Philo of course could not even know the latter book, which was composed after his death; Philo anyway was not interested in the end of the world (I have explored elsewhere the reason for that,<sup>46</sup> which also results in his non-eschatological notion of apokatastasis, different from Origen’s

<sup>44</sup> *Haec fabulas putas esse et historias narrare in Scripturis Spiritum Sanctum? Animarum est ista eruditio et spiritalis doctrina, quae te instituit. [...] Mystera sunt cuncta quae scripta sunt.*

<sup>45</sup> *Quantum legentes progredimur, tantum nobis sacramentorum cumulus augetur [...] tam uastum misteriorum pelagus.*

<sup>46</sup> See Ramelli, “Philosophical Allegoresis of Scripture.”

eschatological concept<sup>47</sup>), but he was certainly highly interested in the creation narrative.

The literal and historical meaning of the creation account was probably the most insubstantial in the whole Bible in both Philo’s and Origen’s view. In the prologue to his *Commentary on the Song of Songs* Origen refers to a Jewish tradition that ascribed a peculiar standing to the first chapters of *Genesis*, those including the creation story. These ought to be studied after all the rest, just like the *Song of Songs* (which is of course the main focus of his interest in this commentary). For these Biblical books are the so-called δευτερώσεις, “second/subsequent objects of study,” because they should come *after* all the other Biblical books in one’s study plan. This is because the *Genesis* account of creation, just as the *Song of Songs*, ought to be exclusively allegorized. They cannot absolutely be taken literally. This is why they require a mature student. Very interestingly, Origen claims that it was the *Jewish tradition* that chose these δευτερώσεις. In this way Origen is once again expressly founding his exegetical practice on the Jewish tradition. Indeed, the *Song of Songs* was almost always allegorized in the Rabbinic tradition as well.

With respect to the exclusively allegorical interpretation of the creation story, both Origen and Philo were probably inspired by Plato’s philosophical myths, which Origen explicitly appreciated as the only way of speaking of what is impossible to expound theoretically (CC 4.39). Plato could only use a mythical, and not theoretical, language when he dealt with the origin of the world and the soul in his *Timaeus*, with which both Philo and Origen were intimately familiar. That Origen read *Genesis* with Plato on his mind is confirmed, I think, by the fact that he explicitly assimilated Plato’s myth of Poros to the

<sup>47</sup> A comparison between Philo’s and Origen’s notions of apokatastasis is sketched in Ramelli, *The Christian Doctrine*, but a specific study will be needed.

*Genesis* account of creation, both in CC 4.39 and in his lost *Commentary on Genesis*. Likewise, in CC 6 Origen claims that the *Genesis* story of the protoplasts' sin and their being covered with "skin tunics" as a result of that sin must not be taken literally, but has a "mystical and secret meaning," which he assimilates again to the symbolic meaning of Plato's myth of the descent of the soul. The *Genesis* story of the creation and fall of the human being and Plato's myths of Poros and Penia and of the fall of the soul, in Origen's view, expressed the same content in a symbolic way, and both of those mythical accounts had to be interpreted exclusively allegorically. Origen projected Plato's mythical accounts of the *arkhē* and the *telos onto his own exegesis of the Scriptural accounts of the arkhē* and the *telos*, according the same epistemological status to both Plato's myths and the Biblical mythical accounts, so that Origen's exegesis of the Paradise and the initial sin is *exclusively* allegorical. Exactly in the same way, Philo provided an allegorical exegesis of the Paradise as virtue and Eden as luxury (*Leg.* 1.45). His exegesis was of course known to, and inspired, Origen. In *Princ.* 4.3.1 Origen explicitly included the whole account of the Paradise and the whole story of creation in *Genesis* among the scriptural passages deprived of a literal meaning and susceptible only of an allegorical interpretation: "these things *indicate symbolical truths in an allegorical way*, by means of what *looks like a historical account*, and yet has *never happened corporeally*." This is a clear statement that in the case of the first chapters of *Genesis* exegetes are faced with a myth, and not history. The story of Adam never happened literally and historically, but it is to be interpreted allegorically, in that it encompasses "mysteries," truths expressed in a symbolic way. Thus, for instance, we find many examples of allegorical exegesis of the creation and the Paradise in Origen's own exegetical production.<sup>48</sup> Origen, like Philo, allegorized the

creation account, and attributed to it an epistemological standing similar to that of Plato's creation myth.

Origen's own explanation of the reason why striking similarities emerge between Plato's myth and the *Genesis* myth goes much in the same direction as—once again—*Jewish Hellenistic* apologetics: "It is not quite clear whether the myth of Poros occurred to Plato's mind by chance or, as some believe, during his sojourn in Egypt *Plato also ran into people who adhered to the philosophy of the Jews*" (CC 4.39). Origen intentionally speaks of a Jewish *philosophy*, and not a *religion*, because the allegorical interpretation of the Bible is in his view a *philosophical* task, and he knew and wanted to highlight that this task had already been performed by *Jewish* authors, such as Philo himself and Aristobulus, and other predecessors of Philo. Indeed, in CC 4.51, after reporting Celsus' declarations against any allegoresis of the Bible, Origen observes that those statements are not only an attack on Christian allegoresis of the Bible, but also on *Jewish* allegoresis of it as represented by Philo, Aristobulus, and others: "He gives the impression of saying so concerning *the treatises of Philo or of those even more ancient exegetes, such as Aristobulus*. I suppose Celsus had not even read those books." Origen is clearly creating for himself, once again, a *Jewish ancestry* in the field of philosophical allegoresis of Scripture. This ancestry seems to have been completely overlooked—most probably intentionally—by Middle and Neoplatonists who opposed biblical allegoresis, such as Celsus and Porphyry. The latter preferred to accuse Origen of unduly transporting the allegorical technique from Stoic exegesis of myths (he mentioned Cornutus and Chaeremon in

<sup>48</sup> E.g., "intelligible trees" (*Hom. in Gen.* 2.4), "intelligible rivers" and "intelligible woody valleys" in Paradise (*Sel. in Num.* PG 12.581B); the etymology of "Eden" as ἔδην, "once upon a time," to signify a primeval state (*Fr. in Gen.*

236; D15 Metzler). The whole of the first *Homily on Genesis* bristles with passages from the creation story of which only an allegorical explanation is given. The same claim that the creation account must be allegorized emerges even from *Hom. 1 in Ps.* 36.

this respect<sup>49</sup>) to the Jewish Scriptures; this is why he was unwilling to admit that Jewish Hellenistic exegetes, such as Aristobulus, Philo, and others had already done what Origen was doing: a philosophical allegoresis of Scripture. By contrast, Origen proudly cited these Jewish antecedents to his own allegorical exegesis.

### Epilogue: Philo the Jew as a Better Exegete and Better Theologian than Christian “Heretics”

Origen was criticized for his Biblical allegoresis not only by “pagans” such as Porphyry, but also by Christians. Some Christians were so suspicious of allegory as a whole—which they saw as “pagan” and in some cases also as “Gnostic,” something that Origen too perceived—that they definitely refused any application of allegoresis to the Bible. There was also a specific reaction from the Christian side against Origen’s allegorization of the *Genesis* narrative, which also accounts for the loss of his Commentary on that book.<sup>50</sup> Philo’s allegoresis of Scripture, too, was rejected by certain sectors of Judaism, both in his own day and in later Judaism. Indeed, in Rabbinic Judaism his memory seems to have been obscured, although feeble traces of his influence have been detected here and there, as I have mentioned at the beginning of this essay. However, his reception and the very preservation of his works entirely depended on Christianity.<sup>51</sup> But Philo significantly enjoyed no appreciation in those sectors of the Christian Patristic tradition that were hostile to Biblical allegoresis. He only enjoyed a very

positive reception in the Christian *allegorical* tradition, i.e., the Origenian tradition.<sup>52</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, in his allegorization of the Bible Origen countered “Gnostic” and Marcionite claims that the Old Testament had to be separated from the New as a product of an inferior God or an evil demiurge, and consequently could not contain philosophical truths to be decoded by means of allegoresis. In *Hom. 5 in Ps. 36, 5* Origen is targeting Marcionites and some “Gnostics” when he denounces their distinction between God the creator and a different, good God superior to the former: “they are inspired by the demons in their claims against God, the Creator of all, and if they are so mistaken in their thoughts it is because they interpret the Law *exclusively in a literal sense*, and ignore that *the Law is spiritual*.” Very interestingly, Origen here indicates the reason why, in his view, Marcionites and “Gnostics” erred: precisely because they did not read the Old Testament *allegorically*. This is why they found there many anthropomorphisms attributed to God and other details that are unworthy of God, and therefore concluded that the Old Testament, as well as the material world, was a product of an evil demiurge. If they had read the Old Testament allegorically, as Philo had done, they would have found it worthy of God. Therefore, according to Origen, *Philo the Jew was a much better exegete, and consequently a much better theologian, than these Christian “heretics*.” Philo knew what Paul, his contemporary and Origen’s hero, stated: that the Law, and by extension the rest of Scripture, has a spiritual meaning. The Law is spiritual (Rom 7:14). Paul had learned this from his Jewish teachers, first of all Rabbi Gamaliel. These may be the Jewish priests Origen was thinking of when he stated that they interpreted Scripture allegorically, albeit “in secret.” Origen, however, just as Philo had done against some predecessors of his in Jewish Hellenism, criticized those extreme allegorists of Scripture, such as some “Gnostics,” who refused to admit of the

<sup>49</sup> See Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, “Origen and the Stoic Allegorical Tradition: Continuity and Innovation,” *Invigilata Lucernis* 28 (2006): 195-226.

<sup>50</sup> These polemics are echoed in Epiphanius *Pan.* 55.1-2; 58.6-8 and the Antiochenes.

<sup>51</sup> See David Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature. A Survey* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1993), and idem, *Philo and the Church Fathers. A Collection of Papers* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

<sup>52</sup> Clement, Origen, Eusebius, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Jerome, etc.

historicity of the Bible and offered an exclusively allegorical reading, as though Scripture were entirely a myth totally deprived of historical value. Origen, instead, drawing inspiration from Philo, treated only few, very limited parts of Scripture as myths, but not most of the Bible itself.