

UNIT THREE: The Christian *Gnosis* of Origen of Alexandria

Introductory reading:

Chadwick, chapters 18, 21; Kelly VI 5-6

1. Between orthodoxy and heresy

Perhaps the first thing to note about Origen of Alexandria (c. A.D. 185 –253/4), the first great theologian of the Greek-speaking Church, is that he is never referred to as Saint Origen. The orthodoxy of his theology remains controversial. He seems to stand “between orthodoxy and heresy.” In encountering this controversy we remain with the question of whether it makes sense to speak of a pre-Nicene orthodoxy. Perhaps we are also driven back to a prior question: what is the essence of orthodoxy?

Origen’s legacy helps bring that question into focus. The problem of his orthodoxy does not just come into existence as a result of later, sharper definitions of orthodoxy in the controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. The opponents of later Arian and Apollinarian heresy were well aware that Christian writers in the second and third centuries often seemed to fail to express themselves with the precision that the identification of a heresy now made necessary. They were troubled, not by occasional lapses or indiscretions, but by the whole temper and structure of Origen’s speculations. Even during his lifetime his teaching was a stumbling block to some, while to others it seemed that he alone could fully expound the glories of Scripture in a way that conceded nothing to Gnostic heresy and yet went beyond the simple mythological language of the catechism and the baptismal creed. Controversy about his orthodoxy developed soon after his death but became particularly violent c.400 when Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis, and Theophilus, patriarch of Alexandria, were his chief opponents. For Epiphanius Origen was ‘blinded by Greek culture’, or *paideia* (*Panarion* 64.72.9). The controversy ended in the sixth century when the emperor Justinian condemned nine positions of Origen in an edict of 543, a verdict that the patriarch of Constantinople, the pope and the bishops of the empire all accepted.

Of Origen’s greatness there can be no doubt. Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote (1984: 1):

It is all but impossible to overestimate Origen and his importance for the history of Christian thought. To rank him beside Augustine and Thomas simply accords him his rightful place in this history. Anyone who has given long hours to studying the Fathers will have had the same experience as a mountain climber: the slow, steady receding of the seemingly still threatening peaks around him, until, beyond them, the hitherto-

hidden dominant central massif rises majestically before him...(His) is a voice that drives straight through everything, always pushing on, without fanfare and without fatigue, almost as it seems without an obvious goal, possessed almost to the point of insanity, and yet with a cool, unapproachable intellectual restraint that has never again been equaled. It is not the voice of a rhetorician (there are enough of these among the Fathers so that the difference is immediately obvious), for this voice is not even trying to persuade; nor is it the enthusiastic voice of a poet (although images and comparisons fly up everywhere); it is too brittle, too dry and too plain for that, even to the point of poverty...The voice of the Alexandrian is more like that glowing, rainless desert-wind that sometimes sweeps over the Nile delta, with a thoroughly unromantic passion: in pure, fiery gusts.

2. Life and Works

Origen was born c.185, probably at Alexandria. His father Leonidas was martyred in 201/2. It is reported that his mother hid his clothes to prevent him going out to follow him to his death. Origen was to practice a harsh asceticism and to long for martyrdom. Despite his youth he next year the Bishop Demetrius appointed him to be the first ecclesiastically authorized head of the catechetical school in Alexandria. He taught philosophy, speculative theology and finally the exegesis of Holy Scripture to the more advanced among those preparing for baptism. He also attended the lectures of the Platonist philosopher Ammonius Saccas, and he probably also learnt some Hebrew. Origen wrote more than even Augustine, more than any other writer in Christian antiquity, between 800 and 2000 works. He was given the nickname 'Adamantios,' the man of *adamos*, steel or diamond, or any other material that cannot be 'tamed.' Although he is held to be the master of the allegorical reading of Scripture, rumours circulated from his own lifetime that he took Matthew 19.12 literally and had himself castrated to become a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake (see Eusebius' *Ecclesiastical History* 6.8.2) – a literal implementation of Scripture he later disavowed. He traveled to Rome in 212 and again left Alexandria in c.215 to go to Caesarea in Palestine where he was invited to teach by the bishop there and bishop of Jerusalem. He came into conflict with his own bishop when these two bishops ordained him a priest despite his self-mutilation, which legally disqualified him. Bishop Demetrius of Alexandria caused two synods to be held in Alexandria in 230-1 to depose him from his teaching office and his priesthood and to excommunicate him from the Alexandrian church on the grounds of unlawful ordination and probably also for teaching unorthodox doctrine. Origen remained in Caesarea, returning there from missions to Antioch and Arabia. He was imprisoned and tortured in the persecution of Emperor Decius. After this suffering he died, probably at Tyre, where the crusaders could still see his tomb in the wall of the cathedral.

Only a small number of his works survive, largely textual criticism and exegesis of the Scriptures, mostly not in the original Greek but in Latin translations. An anthology of his writings, the *Philocalia*, also survives. His *Hexapla*, or 'six-fold' Bible, was intended to

produce an exact text of the Septuagint, a translation which was considered directly inspired by God, and to make its relation to the original Hebrew Bible clear. In six columns Origen presented the Hebrew text in Hebrew characters, the Hebrew text in a Greek transliteration, and four Greek translations. If something had been wrongly translated in the Septuagint, the right reading is inserted. Origen wrote commentaries on almost all the books of the Bible, and on many of them in two or even three literary forms. These are either *scholia*, brief notes on difficult passages or words after the example of the Alexandrian teachers of grammar; or homilies, popular lectures or sermons which sought to edify an audience and were often delivered without preparation, and taken down by one of his seven stenographers to be revised and published later; or learned commentaries in the modern sense offering interpretations which often amounted to long theological treatises.

He also wrote a work of eight books *Against Celsus*, composing the most significant pre-Nicene work of apologetics to respond to a work by the pagan Platonist philosopher Celsus. Origen responds to his argument line by line. He wrote what has been called the first handbook of doctrine, his *On First Principles*. We also possess his *On Prayer*, his *Exhortation to Martyrdom*, two surviving letters, and since the discovery of a papyrus manuscript during the Second World War, his *Disputation with Heraclides*. In these works Origen engages in polemic against Jews, pagans like Celsus, and other Christians whom he accused of being millenarian, ‘anthropomorphite’ – attributing human characteristics to God – or literalist. Origen is not a man to compromise. Even so, his works are almost always calm and eirenic. In his [Commentary on John VI.1](#), written after the synods that condemned him in Egypt, he wrote:

Then, when the enemy assailed us with all bitterness by his new writings, so directly hostile to the Gospel, and stirred up against us all the winds of wickedness in Egypt, I felt that reason [or Reason, the *Logos*] called me rather to stand fast for the conflict, and to save the higher part in me, lest evil counsels should succeed in directing the storm so as to overwhelm my soul, rather to do this than to finish my work at an unsuitable season, before my mind had recovered its calm.

3. Alexandria

3.1 Allegorical Readers

The Christian *gnosis* of Origen must be understood in its Alexandrian context. David Dawson described this context in *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (1992). He describes how scriptural narratives were understood symbolically and why, comparing the strategies of a Jew, Philo, a Gnostic, Valentinus, and a Christian, Clement. He proposes that the tensions between literal and non-literal meanings that characterized ancient allegory issued from efforts by readers to define themselves and their communities and secure authority and power in competition with their rivals.

Dawson argues that in many cases, when a text is interpreted using allegory, power is being exercised by one text over other texts and the worldviews that they represent. Readers may use allegory to absorb and reinterpret other worldviews, bringing meanings unrelated to Scripture into a new and revisionary relationship with Scripture read in a pre-allegorical literal way. An allegorical reading can enable the pre-allegorical or 'literal' meaning to criticize or revise these non-Scriptural meanings. This sort of allegorical revision of other worldviews can be made even stronger if a reader claims originality for the Scripture to which he subordinates other worldviews. In a truly revisionary reading of culture according to Scripture, a reader will not only find this culture actually contained in his own Scripture, but will also make his own Scripture prior to, and hence authoritative over, everyone else's not so sacred texts. If a reader posits his own sacred text as prior to other texts and construes this priority as an authority bestowed by an absolute and divine originality, all competing 'scriptures' will be subordinated. Thus, for example, a reader might not only declare that Scripture rather than Plato offers the most persuasive description of the soul's transformation, but also insist that Moses preceded Plato and that Plato derived all his best insights from an original Mosaic wisdom.

3.2 Philo

This was the strategy of Philo (d. c.50) who was able to adopt in Alexandria in the first century, reconciling the uncompromisingly historical revelation of the Old Testament with an intellectually authoritative Platonist world-view in which history was far less significant. He discovered a Platonist account of the reality of a transcendent immaterial world, the source of both truth and beauty, to which the intellect was the gateway, in the Scripture of the Hebrew Bible. He did this by reading the sacred texts and the events behind them as an encoded message, an 'allegory' of these eternal truths. The meanings of Platonic texts are actually the same as the allegorical 'other' meanings of the Scriptures. Philo claims that these meanings first appeared in Scripture, composed Philo believed by Moses – and not in the texts of Plato. Scripture thus consists of Moses' presentation of non-scriptural ideas, ideas that Moses actually had before anyone else. As a result, Philo presents Moses as the original source for the ideas he finds in his texts using allegory. Dawson argues that Philo intends his interpretations not only to preserve, protect and enhance the integrity of the Alexandrian Jewish community, but also to make Judaism and its self-identifying scriptural narrative the source of all true culture.

The substance as well as the strategy of Philo's interpretation of Scripture was of enormous importance in the development of Christian reflection. The Platonic tradition sustained an attitude to history that associated historical action and historical knowledge with the soul's bondage to the material world. For Philo, the soul's transformation was towards a mature vision unclouded by any distracting worldly particulars: *theoria*. Yet this *theoria* was to be learned and practiced first by contemplating the things of this world. By contemplating the created order, and by

contemplating and bringing moral order to one's own life, one would be led to the pure *theoria* of the fountainhead of all existence, *ho on*, 'the existing one', *He who is* – the name of God revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Historical revelation in this light becomes God's way of spelling out the truth in terms of the world; an arrangement of clues which, rightly seen, leads the seer to illumination. However, this illumination is not really comparable with the enlightenment of the Gnostic; what is different is that there is no technology here, no suggestion of control of the laws of the Spirit. The end is simply contemplation, the enjoyment of God for his sake alone. Philo shares the biblical repugnance for any suggestion that God can be brought under human control. God can never be contained in human concepts. Moses ascends Mount Sinai into cloud and darkness beyond the scope of the intellect, where God offers himself directly to vision, without the intervention of any form or idea. Here then the pilgrimage of understanding is not seen (as for a Gnostic) in terms of acquisition but in terms of stripping away, the stripping away of multiple and diffuse kinds of apprehension to the simplicity of a single hearted vision – in Platonic terms the return from the material to the immaterial and from the many to the divine one. Terms from the intellectually authoritative discourse of Platonism are claimed and assimilated as the teaching of Scripture using allegory, in an interpretation that may be distinguished from a Gnostic system.

3.3 Clement

Christian theologians living in Alexandria used similar techniques. They will often use terms like *gnosis* or *gnostic* to claim to be the true Gnostics. But it is important to distinguish their Christian *gnosis* from Gnostic heterodoxy. Like Philo, these Alexandrians retain a strong sense of God's inaccessibility and freedom. Yet they also both seem uneasy about the historical and fleshly order with both the Platonism of Philo, and with Gnostic systems. Revelation is perceived primarily as the communicating of saving information, and although it issues in love, *agape*, as well as *gnosis*, the main concern is with the *nous*, the spiritual understanding. Knowledge and a 'grasping' of the mysteries of God is the beginning of the spiritual life.

Thus the unifying theme in the writings of the most celebrated exponent of this 'Christian *gnosis*', Clement (c. 150 –c. 215), is that God and human nature alike are both reasonable, and that they encounter one another through the activity of *logos* in both. In his [*Stromateis \(or Miscellanies\)* 7.2](#) when Clement interprets Paul's teaching at Ephesians 4:13 about attaining to a Christ-like *perfection of manhood*, he refers to the 'passionless' condition of the eternal Logos, to the self-possession of reason beyond compulsion and emotion. The place of Christ in this scheme is essentially that of an instructor. The concern of Irenaeus with the saving effect of God's sharing of our human limitation, and with conversion rather than enlightenment, is not to the fore. The imitation of the divine activity is not the creative obedience within the limits of the flesh and time that Irenaeus defined, but the practice of freedom from compulsion and emotion, and the communication of enlightenment.

4. Origen against Plato?

The Christian *gnosis* of Origen is far more subtle and discriminating but it uses some the same strategy of allegory developed by Philo and its account of the transformation of the soul has been seen as labouring under some of the same difficulties with history and the flesh. The relation of his thought to that of Plato is a complex and difficult question. He studied under a Platonist philosopher Ammonius Saccas, but did so as a Christian. In certain respects Platonism is the air that he and his contemporaries breathe, so it is misguided to critique Origen for the simple evidence of Platonic influence in his thinking. He takes for granted a Platonist account of the metaphysical hierarchy of the cosmos, and assumes without discussion that it is divided in to higher and lower, eternal and temporal, intelligible and sensible, spirit and matter, one and many. The material world is illusory and precarious. The world of sense is to become the means by which, and from which, we must rise to apprehend the world of truth and ultimate value, where wisdom and knowledge are the only sure and abiding realities. Platonism is certainly no mere veneer of apologetic. Platonic ways of thinking about God and the soul are necessary to him if he is to give an intelligible account of his Christian beliefs. But his attitude toward the philosophers is distant and he can use expressions of cold disparagement. He justifies his study of philosophy with the example of the Israelites spoiling the Egyptians of their gold (see Ex. 12:36). The effectiveness of Origen's strategy may be judged from the tone of the response of the greatest of the apologists for paganism, Porphyry, who denounced him of using allegory to rationalize crude barbarian superstition. Porphyry's denunciation presupposes that no one could be as deeply hellenized as Origen without accepting the pagan beliefs, which, for him, Hellenic culture was indissolubly associated. The scorn shown by Celsus for the ignorance and stupidity of the Christians is not found in the same way in pagan apologetic after Origen. Mark Edwards (2002: 161) defends him from the charge that he was a Platonist who contaminated scriptural theology with pagan philosophy, in a way that makes Porphyry's tone understandable:

Origen's is an autonomous philosophy designed to answer not to flatter, the teaching of the schools. No doubt he turned his pen to many questions that would never have occurred to him had he been ignorant of Plato, the Stoics or Aristotle, just as it might not occur to the apologists of our own day to reflect on the laws of nature, on institutional poverty or on the origins of consciousness had they never heard of Einstein, Marx or Freud. Often it is those who are most conversant with the fashions of the age who are least enslaved to them, and if Platonism was such an epidemic in Alexandria as scholars have supposed, the surest vaccine was to read Plato. . .we may say that, far from exhibiting the symptoms of contagion, Origen's work contains the antibodies to Platonism as proof that he has suffered and resisted its attacks.

4.1 Scripture and History

Exegetical concerns shape Origen's theology. Scripture is the repository of all wisdom and all truth. But the inward spirit of the Scriptures is veiled in, with, and under the external letter of law, history and parable. His account of the external and the historical can seem ambivalent. It remains controversial.

In *On First principles* IV, he first argues at length that the true meaning of Scripture must be founded upon the spiritual and allegorical meaning, since there are statements in the Bible that are literally and historically impossible. This argument is then qualified by the remark that this does not mean that none of the Bible is history, that no laws are to be understood literally, or that no records of events in the life of Christ are to be taken as history. Only a relatively few passages have no literal meaning at all, and they are providentially placed in Scripture to act as signposts to the fact that everything in the Bible has a spiritual meaning. In this qualification Origen shows himself aware of the danger that allegory can dissolve redemptive history into timeless myth. The Gnostic exegesis he resisted presupposed a radical discontinuity between the plane of history, and the divine realm so that there can be no contact. He complains that heretics go beyond Scripture, and regard the written letter as pernicious while claiming that their own doctrines are the life-giving spirit. He cites Paul's warning to the Corinthians against them: they must learn 'not to go beyond that which is written' (1 Cor 4:6). The Scriptures are an indispensable rung in the ladder of ascent and remain so throughout this mortal life.

Yet, Richard Hanson (1960: 281ff.) relates his impression that Origen frequently reads into the mind of a scriptural author thoughts that are really his own:

...such a mind as Origen's could never completely assimilate biblical thought or language because it approached the Bible with one presupposition which closed to it many doors of understanding, the presupposition that history could never be of significance.

Hanson claims that history for Origen, if it is to have any significance at all, can be no more than an acted parable for showing forth eternal truths about God; it is not as it is for the prophets, the place where through tension, and uncertainty, and danger and faith, men and women encounter God as active towards them. So the Incarnation becomes for Origen merely a necessary early stage in the long process by which souls learn essential truths about God. It is not the final unique event, contemporary to all people, whereby God speaks to them in history for salvation or loss.

Edwards (2002: 152) trenchantly replies to Hanson's objection that Origen has no use for history in these terms:

Origen...thinks of the world and its transactions as merely shadows, but in scripture and dogmatics, as in life, there is no shadow without a substance. From the actions of the body we deduce the inner man, and through the transient phenomena that vex us we descry another world, which will outlive the present one and yet make sense of all that has occurred here. At home in the body, Paul says, we are absent from the Lord; but even an absent monarch may do much through intermediaries who display his signature. The signature of God, in Origen's thought, is history. For Edwards the old objection that Origen uses allegory to make the text mean whatever they desire is equally false (2002: 161):

He holds that scripture is threefold, consisting not of body and soul but of body, soul and spirit. The spirit of scripture, like that of the regenerate saint, absorbs both soul and body, without destroying them, and a spiritual interpreter will consequently uphold the literal meaning of most passages that purport to describe historical occurrences; on the other hand, historical truth is never a sufficient explanation for the presence of an episode in Holy Writ, and the deeper sense must always be pursued. The literal sense is purged but not discarded when we detect the latent spirit, just as the body is purified but not lost on the final day when it becomes transparent to the inner man.

4.2 Christology

Origen develops a Logos Christology like that of Justin Martyr in relation to the Platonic problematic of the relation of the one and the many. According to a solution he takes from this discourse the transition from the many to the divine one requires a mediator who belongs to both spheres. He appropriates this role for the Logos. So the Son as the image of the Father is Wisdom and Word. In relation to the Father he is Wisdom, the knowledge of the Father. In relation to the world he is the Word, the Logos, the communication of what he beholds in the Father.

The external function of the Logos for Origen is two-fold: it refers to creation and to the history of salvation. Through him the world has been created and is sustained. The mediation of the Logos in creation and history allows the revelation of God, saving communication of truth, and introduction to the ascent to the eternal vision of God. In the history of salvation the Logos is behind all human events. In the Old Testament he exercises the work of prophetic insight mediated through chosen men. In the fullness of time he was made man. In the Incarnation the Logos accommodates himself as a teacher to the capacity of human persons, and perfects all earlier theophanies. He sustains the Church as he mediates the saving power of God received in prayer, knowledge and love. He also mediates this power to the angels and the powers. Thus the Logos gradually unifies all with himself, without violating the freedom of individual beings. When he has perfected this unity, which Origen teaches will include even the fallen angels, he himself, as the head of the Church, will subordinate himself to the Father, and God will be all in all. This will mean the fulfillment of salvation, which is realized in the lasting presence of the Logos in creation and history, the *parousia*. The

Logos leads the world created through him to salvation. He leads the world to what Origen calls *apokatastasis*, the restoration of God's plan for the happiness of his creatures, which had long been overwritten by human sin and folly.

Origen's Logos Christology has been accused of being a source for the heresy of Arius that was condemned in 325 at the Council of Nicaea. His Christology has been accused of 'subordinationism', that is, teaching that the Son is subordinated to the Father – which is problematical because this disparity in rank seems to put the full divinity of Christ in question. Thus he must be 'the father of Arianism,' for, as we shall see, Arius was to place the Logos on the side of creation, thus blurring the difference between the eternal generation of the Son and the creation of all things. Lewis Ayres (2004: 20-21) treats this accusation as implausible for three reasons. Firstly, Origen exercised influence on all sides of the later debates in Alexandria. Secondly, his influence is always partial and usually hard to trace with precision. His legacy was complex because aspects of his work were controversial within a few years of his death. Thirdly, Origen's account of the Son as in some ways subordinate to the Father is in part simply that of his contemporaries: the aspects most his own seem to push in different directions from those pursued by Arius.

But if some of the accusations made against the orthodoxy of Origen seem unjustified there are questions that still remain, in spite of all. For Rowan Williams (1979/1990: 47-48), Origen's account of the incarnation is too 'instrumentalist' to be really acceptable. He is too concerned with the incarnate life as a means to some superior end. It is a concession to human imperfection, and unlike Irenaeus in his doctrine of recapitulation, he is very reluctant to say anything positive about temptation or conflict, in Jesus experience. There is a sense in which his Christ is less than fully incarnate. This is clear not only in certain passages where he toys with the idea that Jesus could assume different physical forms at will, but also in a general unconcern with the human will and human development of Jesus – a sharp contrast with Irenaeus. The story of Jesus remains an external presentation, and all that can be known of his inner life is his unbroken filial relation with God.

5. Degrees of orthodoxy?

For Henry Chadwick (1966: 122-123) if the meaning of orthodoxy is to wish to believe what the Church believes, then there can be virtually no hesitation in pronouncing Origen orthodox. In the preface to *On First Principles*, he states that the essential criterion of the truth of Christianity is conformity with the ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition. He wanted to be a Christian and not a Platonist. Orthodoxy is a word that suggests clear-cut and absolute lines of division. It begins to look different if we ask whether some theologians may be more orthodox than others, whether there are degrees of understanding, whether, if we all see through the glass darkly, some may be able to see a little more clearly than others. Origen himself was aware of the danger of

over-confidence. In advanced matters of theology, he remarks in a discussion of the creed, absolute confidence is possible for only two classes of people, saints and idiots.

The Texts

The texts are taken from Stevenson (*op. cit.*) illustrating the teaching of Clement, and Origen's commentary on the words of *John 1 – In the beginning was the Word*, and his letter to his disciple Gregory Thaumaturgus where he affirms the value of Greek philosophy while subordinating it to Scripture and cautioning against its misuse.

Further Reading

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Questions for consideration

1. Why did readers in ancient Alexandria read Scripture allegorically?
2. How does Clement imagine 'salvation'?
3. How does Origen develop Logos Christology?
4. How does he relate Scripture to Greek philosophy?

5. What do his critics object to?