

# Origen the Commentator

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**Abstract:**

*The study aims at outlining the works of Origenes of Alexandria, the great scholar, confessor whose body was martyred and broken; that great saint whose mystical vision ever reached out ascetically to union with the Word. This paper does not so much try to rehabilitate Origen, in the style of the Origen Conference in Innsbruck in the 80s, as much as it tries to look at Origen in his own time, not from a dominant, but anachronistically scholastic retrospective. Trying to work from his own temporal context, and in terms of the philosophical premises prevalent in the schools of his day, this paper seeks to ask what motivated Origen's approach to the scriptures. It also briefly deals with Origen's exegesis and then makes a short exposition of Origen's Biblical system.*

**Keywords:** *Origenes, exegesis, the Bible, interpretation, authorial intent*

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Christians are retrospectivists *par excellence*. Our religion is the heir of first century apocalyptic thought, and our originating philosophy of history calls to us to look back to Christ as the mid point of time, what that fine historian Hans Conzelmann in his study of the third Gospel called *Die Mitte der Zeit*: and what his English translators so richly rendered as 'The Theology of St. Luke!' (E.T. Faber, 1960. London). Conzelmann's original title, of course summed up ancient Christian apocalyptic philosophy quite brilliantly – all Time running up to its Lord and running away retrospectively from him until it runs to Him at the *Parousia*. And this not simply a Christology (which it is in profoundest terms needless to say) but also a single sentence summation of all Christian biblical hermeneutic and process: all things run from him and to him and find their meaning in him. Patristic biblical interpretation is from start to end Christocentric, soteriological, illuminatory. And Origen who knows the soul of scripture better than most, recognises this as the core impetus of the New Testament, and passes it on as his major heritage to the later Church of the Fathers.

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

This process has heavily determined our placing and assessment of Origenes of Alexandria in our collective memory: that great scholar, whom Jerome called the 'whetstone that sharpens us all'; that great confessor whose body was martyred and broken; that great saint whose mystical vision ever reached out ascetically to union with the Word. And yet we often regard him askance – remembering the many controversies and denunciations raised against him in history. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there began a long and steady process of rehabilitation of Origen's memory, accompanied, and perhaps caused, by a deep first hand investment in the study of this immensely important author of the ancient Church. The movement began with the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jesuits, the De La Rue brothers, but continued in the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the extraordinary work of the modern Jesuits De Faye, Daniélou, De Margerie, De Lubac [At least, beginning his ecclesiastical career in the Society of Jesus], and later Henri Crouzel and Lothar Lies. It led to an immense and burgeoning interest in this most seminal of all the writers of Christian antiquity. Critical editions were made, and a prolonged series of studies was undertaken with the quadrennial international Origen conferences producing the *Origeniana* series which continues to our time.

And yet, for most theologians, the memory of Origen remains marginalized. He was, after all, censured in his own time by Bishop Demetrios of Alexandria, and Pope Fabian of Rome. We tend to forget,

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

What really mattered in all of this was simply how Origen was received in the Church; and by far the most important aspect of that long drawn out controversy was, in my opinion, the burning (and oft embittered) memory of how Origen's works were used, again retrospectively, in the Arian crisis. We remember how his Christological subordinationism seemed to inspire Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Acacius of Caesarea who delighted in fighting against the great Athanasius at every turn; and who left a more than dubious memory in the Church as to what leading intellectual Origenists were up to in the fourth century Christological debates. But we also tend to forget how Athanasius himself or Gregory the Theologian (as did Dionysios and Alexander of Alexandria before them) also used Origen extensively to articulate the eternity of the divine logos. Nevertheless, the bitterness of the Nicene debates left an aftertaste in the mouth concerning Origen's 'memory'. His greatest admirers were responsible for the 'saving' of Origen for the Church by sinking his systematic, and retaining his exegetical rules and his ascetical

thought. But like all architectural afterthoughts this left a building behind that was at once majestic, but mutilated.

With conservative opinion gathering momentum against him by the late fourth century, Origen's works were still cherished by some of the greatest minds of Christendom. Basil the Great and Gregory the Theologian, seeing the mounting hostility against Origen's reputation, abstracted his exegesis into the *Philocalia Origenis* to save the best of the exegetical principles to be a guide for future generations. In doing this they succeeded in educating almost every Christian preacher and commentator in the basics of exegetical methodology, from the 4<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup>, when the rise of so-called critical biblical interpretation birthed a wider conspiracy to banish all prior symbolic methodologies of reading from the seminary classrooms: in what has been one of the most curious narrowings of interpretative reading in the history of literature; all done in the name of *wissenschaftliche ordnung* [Scientific taxonomy].

That great era of biblical discovery from the 18<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has left behind achievements of enduring significance. But today its refusal to admit into consideration the symbolic readings of its own pre-history has been challenged, by secular schools of symbolic interpretation, and the stage has been set for a renewal of interest in Origen considered as one of the greatest of all Christian masters in the genres of symbolic spiritual exegesis. Following after the importance post-modern philosophy gave to multiple and simultaneous levels of meaning, Origen's exegetical work has attracted a new sympathy. It now looks foolish, rightly so, to apologise for Origen's 'reading-in' to the allegedly simple text. Such complaints, and they have been many, now look rather quaint in their own presuppositions about what a 'plain text' is, or what a theology of revelation ought to look like. The refrain: 'Trust me for I am a plain man dealing in common sense', is now revealed to all (one hopes) as merely a plea to adopt an alternative theory, not a genuine claim that theory has been set aside in favour of unmediated access to truth. With the benefit of hindsight one is better positioned, perhaps, to see that the plain-man approach of a Eustathius of Antioch, or Epiphanius, a Theodore or Diodore, was not so much the triumph of common sense at all; and that the *corona* of useful and appealing exegesis arguably belonged much more, across the sweep of

history, to the moderate Origenists such as Gregory the Theologian, Chrysostom, Ambrose, or Maximos.

It is one thing to try and redraft the record, however, another thing to shift attitudes and sentiments that have been so deeply embedded. Let it suffice then to say that this paper does not so much try to rehabilitate Origen, in the style of the Origen Conference in Innsbruck in the 80's which had on its agenda a petition to the Pope to lift the condemnations from him posthumously (that got nowhere), as much as it tries to look at Origen in his own time, not from a dominant but anachronistically scholastic retrospective. So, trying to work from his own temporal context, and in terms of the philosophical premises prevalent in the schools of his day, this paper seeks to ask what motivated Origen's approach to the scriptures? I would like, therefore, to spend the time that remains to me in setting out very briefly, first of all the terms of Origen's exegesis – the system as it were of how he approaches scriptural texts, and secondly the why and wherefore of this; or the way in which exegetical usage fits into his larger system of *philosophia theologiae* [The philosophical bases of theology: or the relation of wisdom to illumination]. The first task of rehearsing his rules of exegesis has already been done by many people; and hardly requires doing again: so in this part I will simply rehearse the basics as he set them out as the Church's first and greatest master of systematic exegesis.

Beginning with Origen himself in his *Peri Archon*, a title which means 'foundational principles', we are given the reasons why we ought to prioritize scripture, and how we ought to interpret it with a variety of rules. This task of rule-gathering was given a great boost in the 4<sup>th</sup> century when Gregory and Basil provided the first compendium to the voluminous master, and digested his principles from a wide array of his writings. This *Philocalia Origenis* (Lewis 1911) was the first *Handbook to Origen* (there have been others since) and it focused atomistically on his exegesis, setting this out on solid patristic authority as the central guide to how to preach out of scripture. But in recent times, Origen's own system of exegesis *in situ* has been the focus of renewed and very precise scholarly investigation. Important works of the last two generations, such as those by Daniélou (Daniélou 1947: 126-141; 1948: 27-56; 1957: 280-290; 1960a: 132-138; 1960b), Crouzel (Crouzel 1956; 1961; 1969: 241-263), De Faye (Faye 1923a; 1923b: 97-105; 1927; 1928), Gögler (Gögler 1956: 1-13; 1963), De

Lubac (von Balthasar 1936: 513-562; 1937: 38-64), Hanson (Hanson 1944: 47-58; 1959), Harl (Harl 1958), Torjesen (Torjesen 1986), and Dively-Lauro (Dively-Lauro 2005), have accumulated to a monument of precise and learned analysis of Origen's exegesis, that will, eventually, sweep away the generalizing banalities that are still all too often found in less specialist sources. It is unarguable today that Origen's exegetical system is central to his thought, profoundly soteriological in import, and carefully freighted. But in order to understand it best, we need to see it in terms of its own time and in terms of the overarching systematic in which he structurally placed it: for much of that system was abandoned in later ages of the Church and his overarching biblical architecture (like the image we used earlier of an old building whose elements have been added to or demolished over the ages) was often obscured by later writers who more simplistically appliquéd his style over very different contexts.

### **Origen's Biblical System**

So, here follows a very short exposition of a very large subject. It can be traced up more refinedly in Torjesen and Dively-Lauro, or concisely in the short but profound articles on Scriptural hermeneutics contributed by John O'Keefe, Ronald Heine, and Mark Sheridan, in the little handbook to Origen I myself edited some years back (McGuckin 2004).

Origen first defines his own approach to scripture in his early work *On First Principles*. Here he sets out initial premises for approaching the sacred text. But today let us begin with macro structures before looking at the details. One of the most important is that scripture is a coherent whole. It has a single revelatory author, the Spirit teaching about the Logos (*Peri Archon*, 1. Praef. 4; *Peri Archon*, 1.3.1; 4.1.6; 4.2.2; 4.2.7; 4.3.14; CCels. 3.3; *Peri Archon*, 5.60; Com. Mt. 14.4; Hom Gn.7.1; Hom Ex.2.1; Hom Num. 1.1; *Peri Archon*, 2.1; Hom Jos. 8.6; Hom 1Kgs. 5.4.), using the refractory media of saints who are illumined by the Word and who communicate truth according to their level and capacity to receive and thus transmit the revelation. This revelatory capacity is also matched by a corresponding need, at the other end of the hermeneutical line, to have an interpreter who is capable of receiving, that is seeing, the illumination of the Logos. The Logos emits the Spirit, as it were, but the media at both ends also require correct tuning to transmit and receive: and this is profoundly

correlated to the degree of their illumination. Then, since all scripture comes from the single divine author, who has a singular *skopos* (or overall purpose) which he wishes the sacred text to accomplish, all parts of the scripture have mutual self reference. Whatever their time of composition or their disparity as a large library of works, they all co-inhere with a collective and connected message. In order to understand an obscure part, therefore, one may legitimately turn to a clearer part elsewhere to elucidate; even a different book. Scripture interprets scripture.

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

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

We might call this aspect of ascentive soteriological psychology the first plane of a double axis to his fundamental hermeneutical theory. Ben Blosser's recent book on Origen's psychology sets this out elegantly and

persuasively (Blosser 2012). When Origen talks of a psychic or moral sense, therefore, he does not mean simply finding a moral edifying message in the scriptures; more than this he intends his readers to seek for the navigational key back to God from whom we have lapsed in time and space. The psychic or moral sense is mainly, in Origen's hands, what we should properly call a symbolic reading that is higher than literal exposition, and explicitly related to the mysteries of the faith.

But there is there is another macro-structural axis at play in how Origen conceives of scripture, overlying and fleshing out this primary axis of metaphysical ascent; for within his overview of the New Revelation reversing time's flow eschatologically in order to interpret the Old, there cuts across all of this that important fact that not all the books are equally weighted. A few of the Old Testament texts have greater revelatory power than some of the New. Some parts of Old Testament texts which are generally not as significant as New Testament books, have partial episodes which are more symbolically revelatory than several sections of the New. If we were to try and draw up a list of prioritized texts (those containing more of the revelatory power of the Logos who leaves his symbolic revelations hidden in the textual mysteries) then we would need to do it by reference to how Origen clearly and regularly makes up his own lists of 'authorities' in various arguments deduced from the scripture. Accordingly we can definitely perceive a pattern of relative weightings: first John, then Paul, then the Psalms, then the remaining Gospels, then the greater prophets, then the remaining Apostolic writings, and then the historical and legal books of the Law: but all the while remembering that for him certain Logocentric episodes within different books contain mountainous symbols which can individually carry more weight than the remainder of those books. So, for example, the narrative of Sinai, or the account of the Temple sanctuary, can carry greater weight in themselves than the rest of the books in which they appear. Origen does not argue this as a specific theory. This is just how he sets about things in his own exegetical process: the theory emerging from the *praxis*.

The principle of relative weighting gives clear precedence to John, for example, for this is the book of the one who is most radiantly illumined as the disciple who 'rests on the bosom of Jesus' (Jn. 13.23 reprising, in the transmission of revelation to the Beloved Disciple, the symbol of Jn. 1.18)



and Paul carries great weight throughout all he says because he has the insight of one who was ‘lifted up to the third heaven’ (2 Cor. 12. 2-5). The Synoptic Gospels can fall below this level of authority as their apostolic authors, generally, appear rather lower down the scale of illumination. If we try and envisage the model of this hermeneutical system for the great Alexandrian we need to imagine this double axis: almost like a three dimensional astrolabe. It is not simple to keep this in mind. But it does resolve to a relatively simple base theory: all is coherent and unified in pedagogical soteriological intent. All is a sacrament of the Logos’ illuminations to recall fallen souls to their former state of union with the Word. Union brings illumination. Illumination brings ascent. This double axis of his hermeneutic, the psycho-soteriological, and the metaphysical-eschatological, is most strongly welded together as two aspects of a single soteriology: the Logos seeks to reconstitute the wholeness of the Creation, by restoring the psychic integrity of his world of fallen Souls. When the later Fathers discard this core aspect of the return of *Psychai* to their status as pre-existent *Noes* they rescue Origen for the Church at the cost of obscuring the cosmological scale of his architecture.

Now, having understood this we can proceed to what is more commonly referred to as Origen’s theory of exegesis, which is his famed threefold levels of textual meaning: the *sarkic*, that is the material or literal; the *psychic* or moral, and the *spiritual* (the noetic or mystical) (Citing Proverbs 22.20-21 as a core text; also 1 Thess. 5.23; *Peri Archon*, 4.2.4. Hom Num. 9.7; Hom Lev. 5.1). This is what almost every text book will tell us is the Origenistic system of the bible. But it isn’t – it is merely the exemplarist aspect of his system. In terms of this threefold method, for example, he often does not follow it himself. But it works at some levels as an example to trainee exegetes. It all begins with the insight of Paul (1 Cor. 2. 6; Hom Jos. 6. 1; Com. Mt. 12. 32) that there is a primary distinction between the letter and the spirit (*Peri Archon*, 4.2.4. “We must, therefore portray the meaning of the sacred scripture in a threefold way upon our own soul, so that the simple person may be edified by what we may call the ‘flesh of the scripture’; this term signifying the obvious interpretation; while the ‘man who has made some progress’, may be edified by its soul, as it were, and the man ‘who is perfect’...may be edified by the spiritual law, which has a ‘shadow of the good things to come’. For just as man consists

of body, soul, and spirit, so does the scripture, which has been prepared by God to be given for man's salvation"). Origen connects that notion of underlying triads to pedagogical process (working from easy to hard), and to anthropology (the threefold constitution of the human being). He teaches that the scripture is fundamentally a *paideia* of divine writings (*Peri Archon*, 4.1.2-3); and (as Paul also notes) what is suitable food for the novice is not always what is appropriate for the advanced. The text, he tells his readers, is not composed to give an account of past events for their own sake, but rather 'for our discipline and for our use' (He bases this principle on 1 Cor. 10. 6,11. Hom Ex. 1.5; 7.4; Hom Jos. 5.2; Hom Jdg. 2.3; Hom Jer. 12.3; 19.15; Hom Ezek. 12.2). The principle of utility is very significant to him (See 2. Tim. 3.16; Hom 1Kgs. 5.2; *Peri Archon*, 4.1.7 & 4.2.6; Hom Num. 27.1).

Over the centuries Origen's exegesis has been prone to many criticisms of being overly symbolical, not tied in enough to the text, or being allegorically too fanciful. But this often betrays a critic who has not read the works in question first hand. For Origen was a serious and exacting *Grammatikos*, and is always, without exception, deeply aware of the primary text: its grammar, syntax, and context. It is just that he believes the primary text does not always exhaust itself with its immediate literal signification; nor that history is the highest level of meaning. Criticisms that he is 'fanciful' have also generally ignored the greater axes of his *theoria*. Why are there three levels in a text? Because there are three levels within the psychic ontology of the individual: whether we call that Body Soul and Spirit, with Paul; or Lower Soul, Upper Soul and Nous along with the Origenists. Or, to take a slightly different angle, because there are also a symbolical three levels of initiation within the church which is given the text as a sacrament of salvation. As Paul said, milk is necessary for babies; solid food for those more grown up: and the Logos is ultimately sustenance enough for the perfected.

It would be inappropriate for all to have to find a common revelatory message from a sacred but unalive text that had no cognizance of the many varied levels of spiritual acuity existing simultaneously in the church. So, for example, the Logos ensures that in his incarnate teaching he gives some messages in the valleys, some on the plains, and some on the mountain tops. This refers, Origen says, to basic moral teaching about repentance and reorientation, more advanced instructions to those already on the road to

repentance, and finally, mystical initiations to accelerate purified souls to take them further than their earthly senses alone would allow. The commentator does not always point to three levels in any given text. For some the literal meaning is enough if it instructs. For those who are not yet ready the mystical meaning is inappropriate and obtuse. In any case, if one is mystically enlightened one hardly needs the noetic level to be supplied. His point is a pedagogic one: If you are not past grade school piano, don't try Rachmaninov just yet.

These are the grander structures of his thought. There are other rules and processes he gives to his students in the course of his many writings. Some of them are images designed to help in the application of the theory: such as the notion that the scripture is a series of locked doors with keys lying outside each door, but which are not necessarily the keys to that door. The key to wise interpretation is a gift of light from the Logos: meaning is not simply given, it has to be sought for ascetically and intellectually. Another rule is his famed axiom: *opou logos agei*: we must go wheresoever the Logos leads us. It is, of course, a deliberate pun on the meanings of *Logos* as: Divine Word, rationality, and systematic process. So exegesis is an encounter with the Word, and therefore intellectual insight and acuity are part of the very sacramentality. What a courageous view of Christian civilization that was.

Another axiom he brings forward is that of the *defectus litterae*; those places where the literal sense leads to odd or scandalous things, or simply the impossible geographical details we can find there. These are 'stumbling blocks', Origen says, left there for us by the Logos. They are not proofs that the text is unreliable or crude, rather they are left like red flag markers in a Google map - signs for the acute, to realize that all this is symbol too, and to test us to discover what is the fitting theology behind them (*Peri Archon*, 4.2.9). The test is to ensure that we will never interpret the odd things as if they had literal authority. The phrase 'Happy is the man who shall take your infants and dash their brains against a rock' (Ps. 137.9), is not be a jihadist's excuse. It is a symbolic reference to other things: in this case the children are what scripture specifies elsewhere as the 'children of Amalek', the typological symbol of Satan and evil, and they (that is the vices) need to be savagely dashed from the soul of each one who wishes to ascend the path of psychic purification. Too fanciful? Well, in this Origen

cut clean through the hawser of holy war theology that would deeply anchor the canonical theology of Judaism and Islam. Later Christian biblical fundamentalism swam down unadvisedly to retrieve its leaden weight once more, and even in our own time we still hear voices using the bible to justify violence: a bronze age text shoring up a stone age mentality.

A related axiom behind this is the premise: ‘Nothing unworthy of the divine majesty’ is ever to be affirmed out of exegesis (See Hom Lev. 7.5). This too would be something useful for modern fundamentalists to learn, who can sometimes be seen holding up placards that call for the stoning of gays on divine authority allegedly drawn from the Bible (Lev. 20.13). In Origen’s case a good example of the principle is the story of God’s walking in the garden with Adam and Eve. For Origen this is a typical instance where what he calls ‘merely apparent history’ turns out, in reality, to be mystical symbolism all along (*Peri Archon*, 4.3.1; cf. *Philocalia Origenis* c. 17; Lewis 1911: 18).

This notion – that the teaching text must never corrupt, and if it seems to inculcate a foolish (*alogon*) or impossible (*adunaton*) view of God, the true exegete must show how this cannot be so: was first set out in Hellenistic literature by Xenophanes, and was heavily used in the philosophical re-reading of Homer, before it was picked up by Philo to rework the consistency of the Old Testament narratives. The principle insists that divine literature must result in interpretations which are *theoprepes*: ‘fitting’. This, allied with Origen’s reminder to us that we must read the Old Testament through the resolving lens of the New, is one of the most characteristic aspects of what constitutes Orthodox biblical process. Origen also expected his students to ‘complete the action’ when reading a text; another common technique in the Hellenistic *scholae*. In other words the *Magistros* set out the broad premises and principles and then the students were expected to be able to add the conclusion themselves. This explains why so many of Origen’s exegeses are left incomplete, or seem tentative in nature (cf. Torjesen 1986: 23-26, 124-129; 1995: 13-25).

Many of these Origenian rules of exegeses would have been widely recognized in the schoolrooms of antiquity. In many senses, as I have argued elsewhere (McGuckin 2003: 121-135), Origen set out as a young man deliberately copying the principles of philosophical literary interpretation he saw at work in the Great Library of Alexandria. Three

things in this regard deeply influenced his life's work as an exegete. The first two can be mentioned briefly, but we shall conclude here with a slightly fuller note on the third.

In the first place Origen wanted to gather books and commentaries and a history of research on behalf of the Christians who lacked all these things, and who relied, in his day, largely on an erratic text; and an even more erratically symbolic exegesis. He saw a great model for this in the imperial administration's support of the project of the Great Library, which sought to have a copy of every major work, and to standardize the art of commentary. This impetus would lead Origen to collect books in Alexandria, and Athens, and eventually to move to Caesarea where he founded the greatest library and school of the Christian world. In the second place Origen realized that the Great Library scholars, and the Tannaitic Rabbis then based at Caesarea, were both advancing critical exegesis as a major element of their proferring to the world their respective missionary theologies: for the one, the offer of philosophical monotheism as the real heart of Hellenism, and for the other the creation of Rabbinic Judaism to stand as the true heir of ancient Israel's heritage. Origen learned from this that the advancement of the Church's claim to be the true inheritor of all revelation (through scripture), and all truth (through philosophy, and literature) was a large scale missionary endeavour that had to be founded on serious literary principles. His whole exegetical method, in short, is missionary in intent. The *Speech of Thanksgiving by Theodore* demonstrates how this might work. It is the seed of all of Christianity's deep investment in the Academy.

But last of all, when Origen presents himself as a learned commentator, he is also setting out his wares as a public intellectual and philosopher. As the Origenian scholar Ronald Heine (Heine 2011: 69-70; see Heine 1995: 1-12) has shown, Origen's biblical system fits closely with Hellenistic schoolroom techniques. There are, for example, an extensive series of Greek texts extending from the third century through to the 12<sup>th</sup>, which set out to comment upon Aristotle's works. They have been published in 26 volumes by the Berlin Academy. In a study in 1909 (Praechter 1909: 516-538) of their commonalities, the philologist Karl Praechter noted that the Prefatory materials of all of them demonstrated a common form, and from this he argued that in Antiquity there was an

established protocol for approaching the hallowed canonical text of the Stagirite.

The process of ancient *paideia* in Hellenistic times determined that rhetorical and philosophical study was quintessentially exegetical in character. The *Magistros* read the text of the philosopher to his class, and interpreted the meaning as he progressed through it. Praechter demonstrated from the *Commentary Prologues* that there was a formal schoolroom procedure for reading the philosophers, ascending by a set of base line questions that were systematically and repeatedly addressed to the texts in hand. Heine draws our attention to how three of these classroom *quaestiones* were regarded as singularly important by Origen, and through him came to dominate the whole range of later patristic biblical commentary. The first *quaestio* was the Issue of Obscurity – what a text could mean, problems of specific clarity and transmission. The Second Century author Galen (Galen's questions are cited in: Mansfeld 1994: 150), commenting on Hippocrates, opined that in considering an obscure passage one had to determine at an early stage whether the text itself was unclear, or whether it was the reader who did not have sufficient preparation or skill to make sense of it. Marguerite Harl has written on how significant this question was to Origen (Harl 1982: 334-371 (esp. p. 369, n. 67)), not merely as a preliminary exercise for approaching scriptural passages, but also as a specific initiation into the second level of technical exegesis, that is the second *quaestio*.

This second problematic was the issue of how to lay bare the purpose or intentional goal (*skopos*) of the author of the text: to be able to expound authoritatively what was the mind of the author in any given passage under consideration. Since the authorial intent in the scripture is no less than the *phronema theou* (insight into God's Logos) this is, for Origen, a divine and transcendent theology depending on illuminative grace.

In the schools, once both *quaestiones* had been successfully answered, the way was opened to the third *quaestio*, which was the discussion and analysis of the utility of the text: how it demonstrated principles of right living that the scholars could discuss, dissect, and ultimately adopt. We can see therefore that in this simple scheme of the tripartite questions of the schoolrooms, significantly influenced by Aristotelian philosophers, and their generic leaning towards the chief point

of exegesis being the *telos* of a text, not merely its *punctum significationis*, most of Origen's smaller details of procedure can be seen to be housed, and explained. What he does over and above Aristotelian commonplaces, however, is truly spectacular in its theoretical grandeur and in its depth of theological mystery. It is what Yeats in another setting rhapsodized about saying: 'Nor is there singing school but studying / Monuments of its own magnificence;' Origen, like Yeats' 'sages standing in God's holy fire' emerges from the flame of his immense cosmic vision, still to be able to serve as the 'singing master' of our soul.

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