



FOUNDATIONS THE LIFE, TIMES, & THEOLOGY OF THE EARLY CHURCH

Origen of Alexandria, c.185 – 253 A.D.

Origen was the leading scholar and theological mind of the early third century in Alexandria, Egypt. He was a pupil of Clement of Alexandria, incredibly intelligent and remarkably prolific, producing over 6000 writings in this life. His influence on biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) until the Reformation is unquestionable. He was also rather controversial and in later years/centuries, his orthodoxy was often questioned. His allegorical interpretations were guided by bizarre Greek cosmological ideas rather than by those categories provided in Scripture itself. According to a later tradition he supposedly castrated himself, although the reliability of that is questionable. "Where the rule of faith is silent, we are free to extrapolate" was his motto.

The Life of Origen

- Born into a Christian family, in fact he is the first great thinker of Christianity not converted as an adult. His father had been martyred in 202 AD under the reign of Septimius, and Origen had wanted to join his father in death, but his mother prevented him, supposedly by hiding all his clothes.
- The same wave of persecution that took his father's life also forced his teacher/mentor, Clement, to flee the city as well. Clement of Alexandria was the most renowned Christian scholar/thinker in Alexandria and Septimius' edict targeted not simply Christians, but new converts and their teachers.
- As a teenager the Bishop of Alexandria appointed Origen, whose genius was readily becoming known, to the serious responsibility of training candidates for baptism. His notoriety grew as a result of his successes, and eventually he moved on to found his own school of philosophy in Alexandria. His passion was biblical interpretation; he was able to dictate multiple biblical commentaries to multiple scribes in one sitting.
- His students came from all over the known world, and not just Christians, but well-to-do pagans including the emperor's mother and the governor of Arabia.
- However, eventually a widening rift that had developed between Origen and Demetrius, the Bishop, forced Origen to leave Alexandria. He eventually settled in Caesarea where he continued teaching and writing for another 20 years.
- In 249 AD, the Emperor Decius came to the throne and shortly thereafter issued a new edict forcing all to worship the old gods, including the image of the emperor. During this new, systematic, and empire-wide persecution Origen was arrested and tortured. Although he was eventually released, he died only a few days later. He was about 70 years old.

The Times of Origen

- The Empire: The Western Empire was entering its final season and the pressures of Gothic invasions and internal strife preoccupied the powers that be, and apart from brief and sporadic persecution, the years between Severus and Decius were fairly quiet for Christians. Origen and his school benefitted from the relative calm of the first half of the third century.
- Platonism → Middle-Platonism: dichotomy of existence, from the Good to the One High God
- Three main 'schools' of Christian thought at this period, each loosely identified by the cities in which such theologies were taught: Rome, Antioch, and Alexandria
 - Rome: Although its first teachers wrote in Greek (Clement of Rome and Hermas), it was principally Latin, starting with Cyprian and Tertullian. Its theology emphasized sin and guilt being fallen humanity's greatest problem. The great gift of Christ is his propitiatory death as a sacrifice. Tends to use legal and pardon themes, and foundational to the medieval church.

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- Antioch: the great school of thought starting with Ignatius through to Irenaeus. Its theology saw death as the greatest problem of fallen humanity and the great gift of Christ is his coming down to bring us up to life; foundational to the Eastern Orthodox Church.
- Alexandria: this was the intellectual hub of the Eastern Empire at this time, and very much a philosophical melting pot. Ideas from as far away as China and Britain circulated amongst its schools. There was, however, little 'quality control' on the large flux of ideas which Christian thinkers there were facing. Influential, in large part due to Origen.
- Origen's influences: Christianity and pagan philosophy, two approaches.
 - Justin Martyr: since there is only one Truth (God in Christ) any traces we find to be true in pagan philosophy are signposts that point to the great Truth. Thus pagan philosophy was to be engaged but critiqued to see how it prepared the pagan to understand and receive Christ.
 - Tertullian: strong dichotomy between pagan and Christian theology, and ne'er betwixt the two shall go. The light of Christ and the darkness of paganism. Clement of Alexandria, and subsequently his pupil Origen, sought to follow Justin, but over-emphasized the role of pagan philosophy. Justin sought to understand philosophy in light of revealed Christian Truth, Clement and Origen sought to understand (or present/explain) Christianity in pagan terms.
- Origen's influences: Biblical interpretation
 - Clement: the philosophy of the Greeks was equivalent to the Law for Jews. The ideas of god and morality found in philosophy prepared Greeks for the Gospel.
 - Clement: reading scripture involved a two-level hermeneutic, the literal meaning intended by the author, and the special higher meaning. Like Philo, the earthiness of the OT, which he found disgusting, could be explained using allegory, and started to apply it to the NT.
 - Clement: The higher meaning of scripture is called the True Gnosis. The historical literal interpretation was still valid, but only those who were well educated and savvy to this gnosis could fully understand Scripture. This, unfortunately, created a two-tiered model of elitism and utilized the unhelpful term "True Gnosis". Furthermore, most of the guidance in devising his higher meaning followed the pagan middle-platonic ideas more than Scripture itself.

The Theology of Origen

- Origen's contribution to Christian thought is profound. For the purposes of time, we will focus on his primary contribution of his four level hermeneutic.
 - Literal historical level – followed Clement on this. The Exodus is a story of Moses leading the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan.
 - Moral level – what does the passage mean; in the middle ages this was called the tropological level. The Exodus represents God who graciously spares Israel and judges Egypt.
 - Allegorical level – how does the passage point to Christ, also called the Christological level. In Christ God brings his people from sin and death into life.
 - Heavenly level – what we may anticipate, also called the anagogical level. This level could only be understood by using the right code to interpret the text. Origen provides that code, e.g. 'vessel' means 'body' and 'horse' means 'voice'.
- His prolific works edged out the Antiochine influence on the western church. For the next 1300 years the western (medieval) church assumes Origen's four level system, which goes unchallenged until Martin Luther in the 1530s.
- The problem is that Origen takes his cues for his code from Greek philosophy. He does not really define "God", at least as the platonic systems define him/it. Origen sees God creating the world by first creating pure spirits, some of whom fell. From these then sprang a second creation (Genesis 2), meaning this world is a 'reform school' for these fallen spirits who dwell in us. This Plan B will ideally result in the rising up of all the spirits to the One High God, but for the really evil and bad ones there may need to be a third creation before they get there.