

Test Everything:

Retaining What is Good in Origen's Exegesis

Sr. Maria Suso Rispoli, O.P.
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Origen's exegesis, though highly influential on the history of theology and Scriptural interpretation throughout the centuries, begs debate. The allegorical method, which has largely fallen out of favor, especially in the context of the historical-critical concerns of the last two centuries, frequently faces dismissal as "subjective" and "arbitrary." Even though Origen maintained careful scholarship¹ and thought it essential to use all the resources available to him,² some of his premises compromised the results of his exegetical work. The purpose of this paper is to characterize the contemporary debate about Origen's exegesis, consider key characteristics of his exegesis in light of Church teaching on the interpretation of Scripture, and present an evaluation of what in his method may be reasonably retained.

Of course, a major question in the contemporary debate concerns whether we can even speak of a "method" regarding Origen. Scholar Karen Torjesen claims that Origen's critics mistakenly assume that if his approach is not a scientifically reliable method, it must therefore be arbitrary.³ According to this false dichotomy, the lack of "objectivity, consistency, [and] repeatability"⁴ precludes reliable patterns, which simply is not the case. While some theologians like Henri de Lubac seem overly sanguine about Origen's approach,⁵ most who evaluate his work positively suggest, along with Elizabeth Dively-Lauro, "that Origen's exegesis should be judged according to how well it serves the purpose he perceives in Scripture, not according to a

¹ Stephen Westerholm and Martin Westerholm, "Origen," *Reading Sacred Scripture: Voices from the History of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2016), 67-68.

² *Ibid.*, 96.

³ Karen Jo Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis* (Berlin, Germany: Walter De Gruyter) 1986, 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ De Lubac goes so far as to claim that the spiritual sense is "not affirmed to the detriment of its historical character," a claim that will prove untenable. See Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*, trans. Anne Englund Nash and Juvenal Merriell (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press) 2007, 104. In response, R.P.C. Hanson calls De Lubac's attitude "clearly wrong" and insists that "Origen could not have made it plainer that, in the passages which he mentions as examples of places where the literal meaning is not intended, the literal sense cannot have any force at all, with or without the allegorical sense." R.P.C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (London: SCM Press) 1959, 241.

standard foreign to his way of thinking,”⁶ i.e. the historical-critical paradigm. They rightly point out that assuming only contemporary scholars can understand the Bible “is to deny the Bible’s universality – that it is addressed to all people of all times, not only to the learned of a particular time.”⁷ To be fair, at Origen’s time, allegory and typology had not yet been separated and evaluated,⁸ and Jean Danielou even claims the distinction between Antioch (literal) and Alexandria (allegorical) oversimplified and even false.⁹ It should likewise be noted that Origen assumes the letter of the Law “transcended, dead, buried,”¹⁰ partially because he contended with pressures to go back to certain Jewish observances.¹¹ While it is beyond the scope of this study to weigh the merits of these positions, two ideas emerge from this debate. First, much of the debate centers around defending the *intentions* of Origen and affirming that his exegetical approach reasonably matched his historical framework. Second, Origen’s approach raises real questions and concerns in the context of contemporary exegetical practice. Since the purpose of this study is to examine whether Origen’s approach is adaptable to contemporary exegesis, we must agree with R.P.C. Hanson that “to defend [Origen’s] intentions is not the same thing as to defend his methods.”¹² Origen’s intentions and many of his conclusions are undeniably sound. The question is his approach, and thus it is helpful to briefly consider the relevant teaching on exegesis from the Church.

⁶ Elizabeth Ann Dively Lauro, *The Soul and Spirit of Scripture Within Origen’s Exegesis*, *The Bible in Ancient Christianity*, vol. 3, ed. D. Jeffrey Bingham (Boston, MA: Brill Academic) 2005, 13.

⁷ Boniface Ramsey, *Beginning to Read the Fathers* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press) 1985, 41.

⁸ Westerholm and Westerholm, “Origen,” 91.

⁹ Jean Danielou, *Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell (Paulton, Great Britain: Purnell and Sons) 1955, 164.

¹⁰ De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 144.

¹¹ Origen, *De Principiis Book IV*, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, trans. Rufinus and Frederick Crombie (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing) 1885, 8, adapted by Kevin Knight, accessed August 15, 2018. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/04124.htm>.

¹² Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 257.

The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church (1993), because of its length, incorporation of previous teaching, and openness to a variety of approaches, provides the best overall framework for our consideration. Like *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (1943), which presents the Fathers as having “subtle insight into heavenly things” and “a marvelous keenness of intellect, which enables them to penetrate to the very innermost meaning of the divine word,”¹³ *Interpretation* gives a general endorsement to the work of the Fathers, even claiming them as the precursors of the historical-critical method.¹⁴ The spiritual sense, defined “as the meaning expressed by the biblical texts when read under the influence of the Holy Spirit, in the context of the paschal mystery...and of the new life which from it”¹⁵ is upheld. However, complementing the way *Divino Afflante Spiritu* required that the spiritual sense be “clearly intended by God” in light of Sacred Tradition,¹⁶ *Interpretation* requires that “relectures” of texts avoid the “wholly subjective” and “reject...every interpretation alien” to what the authors “expressed.”¹⁷ Peter Williamson rightly points out that “in practice it may not always be easy to distinguish between an interpretation based on the ‘dynamic aspect’¹⁸ of the literal sense which follows the text’s ‘line of thought, [sic] from an interpretation that is ‘alien’ to what the human author expressed in the text.”¹⁹ In other words, though it may be easy to say that God’s intention and the human author’s expression are the parameters for interpretation, those parameters are not easily applied. Reading Scripture in light of the Paschal mystery is specifically endorsed; perhaps Christological

¹³ Pius XII, *Divino Afflante Spiritu* (DAS), *The Bible Documents: A Parish Resource*, ed. David A Lysik, trans. N.C.W.C. (Toronto: Liturgy Training Publications) 2001 [1943], 28.

¹⁴ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (IBC), *The Bible Documents: A Parish Resource*, ed. David A. Lysik (Toronto: Liturgy Training Publications) 2001 [1993], 12.

¹⁵ IBC 135.

¹⁶ DAS 26.

¹⁷ IBC 134.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Peter S. Williamson, *Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission’s The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, *Subsidia Biblica* 22 (Rome: Pontificio Instituto Biblico) 2008, 170.

readings are safer? Unfortunately, even some of Origen's Christological readings seem forced. Ultimately, strict bounds that would answer the question of this paper are lacking in this document and generally in the Church's teaching. As we will see, the lack of clear boundaries leaves some space for Origen's allegorical sense to serve as a model for contemporary exegesis, specifically for those with the responsibility of actualization.

The primary sources considered in this study are Origen's *On First Principles*, Book IV, and his *Homilies on Leviticus*. The former could not be skipped, since it contains Origen's description and justification of his own methods. The latter provided a finite text with a window to Origen's approach toward the Levitical law and its connection to the Paschal mystery. While other components could be considered, the following will give ample opportunity to evaluate his exegetical approach: 1) inspired interpretation, 2) economy, and 3) conceptual bridging.²⁰

Inspired Interpretation

Origen's exegesis critically depends on a life of prayer and dependence on the Holy Spirit. Like the other Fathers, he primarily thinks of the Scriptures as the united work of a single author,²¹ and thus attributes to it an almost infinite depth.²² Those who are "sceptical" [sic] or "unworthy" cannot see the divine mysteries hidden behind the letter,²³ which veils the spiritual sense the way Christ's flesh veiled his Godhead.²⁴ While Origen does at times speak of a third, moral sense, he basically defines two main levels of consideration. "Simple individuals may be edified...by the very body of Scripture; for such term that common and historical sense," while

²⁰ For the source of this term, see John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press) 2001, 73. Accessed August 13, 2018, ProQuest Ebook Central.

²¹ *IBC* 169.

²² See Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus (HomLev)*, Fathers of the Church, vol. 83, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press) 1990, 2.3.2.

²³ Origen, *De Principiis*, 7.

²⁴ *HomLev* 1.1.1.

the “perfect...may be edified by the spiritual law itself.”²⁵ He values the latter sense so much that he even resorts to shaming his hearers, speaking of the literal sense as for those who are “weak and incapable of the deeper mystery,”²⁶ in order to spur them on to deeper desire and understanding. One can hear echoes of Paul in this attitude, as the Apostle often makes a similar distinction between those ready for “milk” and those “ready for solid food.”²⁷ Origen insists that prayer unlocks the mystery,²⁸ and in this attitude he aligns well with the teaching in *Interpretation* that “as the reader matures in the life of the Spirit, so there grows also his or her capacity to understand the realities of which the Bible speaks.”²⁹ *Interpretation* also gives cautious opening to Origen’s tendency to find multiple spiritual meanings in one text, as when he gives both a moral and Christological reading of sacrifice³⁰ in which the “placement of the two readings side-by-side effects a more complete edification of the hearer.”³¹ *Interpretation* allows that the Divine author could intend more than one meaning, as human authors sometimes do, but maintains that there is usually only one meaning.³² Therefore, Origen’s overwhelming tendency to multiply meanings should be imitated with care.

This insistence on the need for inspiration in the interpreter has a shadow side, as it promotes tension between the text and meaning, a gnostic tendency, and the occasion of eisegesis. Because of his tendency to read texts hyper-literally, Origen insists that some things in the inspired texts, like the injunction to stay in one place on the Sabbath,³³ “on the surface can be neither true nor useful” in order that the reader may look for a “more deeply concealed”

²⁵ Origen, *De Principiis*, 11.

²⁶ *HomLev* 4.2.2.

²⁷ 1 Cor 3:2. All Scripture references from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

²⁸ *HomLev* 12.4.1.

²⁹ *IBC* 126.

³⁰ See *HomLev* 1.

³¹ Dively Lauro, *Soul and Spirit*, 174.

³² *IBC* 132.

³³ Origen, *De Principiis*, 17.

truth.³⁴ The “implicit tension between inspired words and inspired meanings” resulting from Origen’s sense that these meanings are “distinct” and can only be “comprehended with great effort”³⁵ must be rejected by modern exegetes as promoting the “foreign” meanings *Interpretation* censures. The modern exegete must also be careful not to adopt a gnostic or overly rational attitude: as a danger of the historical-critical method is to shut out those without technical or linguistic knowledge, a danger of Origen’s method is to see perfection and rational understanding as overly related,³⁶ shutting out simple souls. Perhaps the most real danger of focusing on the inspiration of the interpreter is eisegesis. As De Lubac points out, “If Scripture is full of mysteries for him, as we have seen, these mysteries are basically always the same...the union of the two Testaments or...the relations between the letter and the spirit.”³⁷ Numbers tend to invite seemingly “foreign” readings, as when he interprets three loaves as Scripture,³⁸ two days as the two Testaments,³⁹ and (because there are five of each kind of virgin in the parable), the five who “will pursue a hundred”⁴⁰ in battle as the five wise who will conquer the hundred foolish by their wisdom. Such readings can be off-putting to “the faithful, in particular those who are well-informed in the sciences sacred and profane, [who] wish to know what God has told us in the Sacred Letters rather than what an ingenious orator or writer may suggest by a clever use of the words of Scripture.”⁴¹ The tendency to see particular “mysteries” throughout the

³⁴ Origen, *De Principiis*, 15.

³⁵ Karen Jo Torjesen, “The Alexandrian Tradition of the Inspired Interpreter,” *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition*, Papers of the International Origen Congress, Pisa, August 27-31, 2001, ed. L. Perrone (Leuven, Belgium: Leuven University Press) 2003, 290.

³⁶ F. Cayré, *Manual of Patrology and History of Theology*, vol. 1, trans. H. Howitt (Tournai, Belgium: Desclée and Co.) 1936, 195.

³⁷ De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 194.

³⁸ *HomLev* 5.5.4.

³⁹ *HomLev* 5.9.3.

⁴⁰ Lev. 26:8, as quoted in *HomLev* 16.7.1.

⁴¹ *DAS* 27.

Scriptures, warranted by numbers or other small details, cannot reasonably be retained by modern exegetes.

Economy

Like Philo and the others in the Alexandrian school, Origen insists that every word of Scripture has meaning. He assumes an economy of words that admits no superfluity and downplays any potential rhetoric, focusing on the intentions of the Divine Author. He applies Paul's analogy of the earthen vessels⁴² to the "vulgar and unpolished vessels of words" that hold the "hidden and secret meaning in each individual word."⁴³ A survey of several examples of his attention to each word, juxtaposed with the cautions from *Interpretation*, will show why this aspect of Origen's exegesis should not be imitated by contemporary exegetes.

Wild associations, strange justifications, and overly literal interpretations: these and more problems accompany Origen's penchant for over-analyzing individual words and phrases. When discussing the offering of various sacrifices, for example, each animal must represent something distinct, and while the goat as a symbol of "lewdness" seems plausible, the connection between the "pair of turtledoves" and "join[ing] his mind to the word of God as his true spouse" seems forced, even if doves represent the "eyes of the bride" in the *Song of Songs*.⁴⁴ In another homily, Origen insists that the word "conceives" in "If any woman conceives and bears a male child, she will be unclean for seven days" is added to distinguish Mary from the women who conceive "by human seed." The only justification for this conclusion is that "the addition [of the word "conceived"] is not superfluous."⁴⁵ Indeed, from Origen's perspective, it *could not* be redundant, and that premise leads to a reflection that while pious and true does not seem to be in line with

⁴² 2 Cor. 4:7.

⁴³ Origen, *De Principiis*, 7.

⁴⁴ *HomLev* 2.2.2, quoting Song 5:12.

⁴⁵ *HomLev* 8.2.1-2.

what the author expressed. Sometimes he takes individual words too literally, as when he interprets Isaiah's complaint that he is a "man of unclean lips...among a people of unclean lips"⁴⁶ as referring only to sins of speech. Origen goes on to exhort his people to consider that they, unlike the Prophet who only needed purification for his lips, might merit fire for other parts of their bodies.⁴⁷ Thus, he fulfills his role as teacher, but bases his teaching on a shaky interpretation.

The *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* leaves no room for exegesis tied so deeply to individual words. As Hanson points out, "This determination to explain every conceivable figurative expression and every difficulty by allegory sometimes causes Origen to see difficulties and figurative language where they do not exist...Allegory can indeed become a devouring passion..."⁴⁸ This "devouring passion" resembles *a priori* principles, which *Interpretation* rejects unless they belong to the method itself.⁴⁹ While Origen assumes that *every* word is significant, that assumption is arguably not essential to the allegorical "method" itself, which at its root is openness to the spiritual sense. More pointedly, *Interpretation* states that although the work "to find a spiritual sense in the minutest details of the biblical text" might have been helpful "in the past, modern exegesis cannot ascribe true interpretive value to this kind of procedure."⁵⁰ So what is the contemporary exegete to do with words that seem to have no meaning? He/she would do well to become familiar with parallelism and other Semitic literary structures⁵¹ in addition to continued study of words, languages, and translations. While the allegorical method of exegesis is clearly different from other methods, a proper understanding of

⁴⁶ Is. 6:5.

⁴⁷ *HomLev* 9.7.2.

⁴⁸ Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 246-47.

⁴⁹ *IBC* 27.

⁵⁰ *IBC* 139.

⁵¹ *IBC* 39.

the text itself and openness to the findings of other methods, especially the historical-critical method, is key for correct exegesis.

Conceptual Bridging

The most effective and imitable quality of Origen's exegesis is what John D. Dawson calls the "conceptual bridge." To show that one thing allegorically represents something else, Origen isolates a concept that connects the two. When he does this successfully, the success emerges from a concept that permeates several passages of Scripture and respects its native symbolism. When he does so unsuccessfully, it usually results from using an object as the "bridge" instead of a concept.

Let us begin with unsuccessful attempts at bridging. When discussing the "calf without blemish" to be sacrificed, for example, Origen asks, "is this not that 'fatted calf' which the father [of the prodigal son] killed for that one who returned and was restored to him"?⁵² While his hearers might admire Origen's sense of unity between the two Testaments, the only clear bridge is the object, the calf, and the jump seems unwarranted. A second example regards the linen tunic for the priest.⁵³ Linen, Origen explains, comes from flax thread, which comes from the earth. This reminds him of "Christ, the true high priest" who "takes up the nature of an early body" as his linen tunic.⁵⁴ While one could count two bridges, "high priest" and "earth," the former consideration likely led to the latter. In any case, "from the earth" creates only a tenuous connection, and as it is the *focus* of the passage, the interpretation appears forced. A third example is an extended consideration of the lamp set up by the Tent of Witness.⁵⁵ This word/image study connects lamps throughout the canon, from the Law, to John the Baptist, to the

⁵² *HomLev* 1.2.7.

⁵³ Lev 16:4.

⁵⁴ *HomLev* 9.2.3.

⁵⁵ Lev. 24:1-4.

lamp burning on the oil of good works.⁵⁶ While some hearers might find this chain of associations edifying and delightful, others fear it makes “commentary on the Scriptures look like an exercise in the use of a stream-of-consciousness technique.”⁵⁷ Certainly the consideration of other lamps in Scripture has its value; no doubt Origen’s exercise has inspired some of the faithful. However, it is not at all clear that any of these meanings were intended by God or in line with the expression of the human author.

In contrast to the object bridges, conceptual bridges seem sounder. One essential conceptual bridge Origen explores throughout his homilies on Leviticus deal with the connection between sin and ritual impurity. Jesus’ declaration that sins “are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile”⁵⁸ and all the related teaching of the New Testament, especially in Paul, functions as an implicit backdrop. This conceptual bridge functions as a lens through which Origen may see all related passages. Thus, when he considers what it means for one to become unclean when eating “what is seized by a wild beast”⁵⁹ and concludes that the devil whom Peter calls a lion⁶⁰ is indicated, the primary bridge is sin = uncleanness, not devil = lion. Likewise, with this bridge the verse that says, “Everyone who touches the holy flesh will be sanctified,”⁶¹ can be connected to the woman with a hemorrhage who touches the hem of the garment, and the flesh of Jesus can be interpreted as the cause of holiness in those who approach Him.⁶² That is not to say that *every* interpretation related to this bridge is necessarily sound, as when Origen interprets the shaving of the hair of the eyebrows, beard, etc. as the removal of

⁵⁶ *HomLev* 13.1.3 - 13.2.5.

⁵⁷ Ramsey, *Beginning to Read*, 40.

⁵⁸ Mt. 15:18-20.

⁵⁹ *HomLev* 3.3.5.

⁶⁰ 1 Pet. 5:8-9.

⁶¹ See Lev. 6.11.

⁶² *HomLev* 4.8.1-2.

different types of sin in the life of the priest.⁶³ There again, however, the *focus* is the object (hair) instead of a concept (uncleanness). In general, the conceptual bridges protect his allegory from focusing on minutiae and open it to a Scripture-interpreting-Scripture paradigm.

Along with the context of the Paschal mystery, the Scripture-interpreting-Scripture paradigm is heavily endorsed in *Interpretation*. De Lubac insists that “Scripture interprets Scripture” is Origen’s *modus operandi*: “truth proposed (perhaps optimistically) as the meaning of one passage is found (unequivocally) in another.... however far-fetched Origen’s interpretation of a particular text may seem, the Christian reader at least will seldom object to its content.”⁶⁴ However, De Lubac’s understanding of “Scripture interprets Scripture” is not what *Interpretation* means. An exegete may obtain orthodox conclusions from faulty readings, but that is not Scripture interpreting Scripture, that is his conclusions agreeing with Scripture. “Scripture interpreting Scripture” is another way of specifying which “conceptual bridges” may be used. Few would object, for example, to Origen’s extended consideration of Jesus as the high priest,⁶⁵ since it continuously returns to Paul’s consideration in Hebrews. Scripture itself creates certain lenses that assist the exegete in his task.

Evaluation

Karen Torjesen characterizes Origen as a man who sees himself as simultaneously a teacher, prophet, and exegete. She argues that his prophecy is oriented outward toward “moral transformation, spiritual progression and a deepening comprehension of the divine” in his hearers.⁶⁶ He always has as goal to “bring forth the things which pertain to the edification of the

⁶³ *HomLev* 8.11.6.

⁶⁴ Westerholm and Westerholm, “Origen,” 97.

⁶⁵ *HomLev* 12.1.1 – 12.1.2.

⁶⁶ Torjesen, *Alexandrian Tradition*, 290, 293.

Church,”⁶⁷ and thus he aligns with *Interpretation*’s presentation of “three levels of reality: the biblical text, the paschal mystery and the present circumstances of life in the Spirit.”⁶⁸ However, in the modern context, his overall approach to Scripture fits the description of “actualization” more than “exegesis.” The goal of actualization is “sincerely seeking to see what the text has to say at the present time,” and, as Origen scholar Henri Crouzel points out, “to explain the Bible as one would any secular book is only the first stage. The second is the one that gives the Christian his spiritual food. There is no need to contrast things which are complementary.”⁶⁹

While Crouzel’s contrast between literal exegesis and an allegorical, “spiritual” reading may be oversimplified, seeing Origen’s approach as “complementary” to modern methods of exegesis is desirable for several reasons. First, his approach clearly has no scientific method to it, and modern thought simply cannot return to a pre-scientific framework. Second, seeing his work as a complementary method of actualization allows the exegete to borrow some qualities, like the conceptual bridge, while leaving qualities like the object bridge to the judicious judgement of homilists who may present the Scriptures pastorally without making absolute judgements about what a passage means. As *Divino Afflante Spiritu* points out:

It may indeed be useful, especially in preaching, to illustrate, and present the matters of faith and morals by a broader use of the Sacred Text in the figurative sense, provided this be done with moderation and restraint; it should, however, never be forgotten that this use of the Sacred Scripture is, as it were, extrinsic to it and accidental, and that, especially in these days, it is not free from danger, since the faithful, in particular those who are well-informed in the sciences sacred and profane, wish to know what God has told us in the

⁶⁷ *HomLev* 1.1.5.

⁶⁸ *IBC* 138.

⁶⁹ Crouzel, *Origen*, 84.

Sacred Letters rather than what an ingenious orator or writer may suggest by a clever use of the words of Scripture.⁷⁰

Certainly, some of Origen's interpretations can be seen as the fancies of "an ingenious orator," but those engaged in actualization can sidestep this problem by being honest about their approach. Good teachers use mnemonic devices, and is that not what Origen does when he connects the various virtuous acts of a Christian to the sacrifices he can offer? For example, offering a calf is baptism, martyrdom is offering a he-goat, since goats are symbolic of the devil, etc.⁷¹ Such an approach only seems ridiculous if there is no attempt to explain the literal meaning of the text (Origen fails in that regard because, with Paul, he considers the Law to be obsolete) and if these associations are presented as the true, intended meaning of the Divine author or the human author. However, if the intention of teaching and edifying is clearly expressed to the hearer, and if "moderation and restraint" are used, it is doubtful that even the learned will reject these applications.

Such actualization will need to preserve a balance between contemporary concerns and the realization the Scripture is "a word which God has spoken in a historical context and which God addresses to us today through the medium of human authors."⁷² Peter Martens claims that Origen's approach to the law is not the simple rejection it can be painted, but that he "walk[s] a careful line between two opposing positions prevalent in his day," namely the desire to resume Jewish observances and the push to stop reading the Levitical texts entirely.⁷³ This tension forms a backdrop for the first homily, in which Origen claims that if he focuses on the literal sense, "I,

⁷⁰ *DAS* 27.

⁷¹ *HomLev* 2.4.6.

⁷² *IBC* 55.

⁷³ Peter W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life*, ed. Gillian Clark and Andrew Louth (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 2012, 142.

myself a man of the Church... am compelled by the authority of the divine precept to sacrifice calves and lambs and to offer fine wheat flour with incense and oil.”⁷⁴ His point is worth considering, even today. Despite our contemporary appreciation for the historical sense and appropriateness of these laws, “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.”⁷⁵ We do well to ask, with Origen, what purpose these ancient texts have in the life of modern Christians. The approach will need to test what came before, “sifting and setting aside” what proves outmoded without barring openness to “further progress.”⁷⁶

When Origen preached and taught, he did not have the benefit of the two thousand years of Tradition that we have today. Now, exegetes can easily check their interpretations against the backdrop of Scripture and Tradition. In Origen’s day, the exegetical task posed more dangers. When Origen tied salvation history together with the scarlet thread, linking the cord of Rahab, the blood of Jesus, and the birth of Tamar’s sons,⁷⁷ the connection could have suffered the same fate as some of his other allegorical interpretations, but the interpretation continues to be repeated. Crouzel argues that “when exegeses have been constantly repeated by later generations and have become incorporated into the common teaching, they cease to derive from personal opinions but rather from the mental climate of faith...it is linked to the tradition in a relationship that is not arbitrary.” Thus, the interpretations that get taken up over the years “are not individual opinions then substituted for those of the Saviour, but they flow from the message confided by Christ to his Church.” Crouzel claims that Origen’s exegesis “has proved one of the privileged

⁷⁴ *HomLev* 1.1.2.

⁷⁵ 2 Tim. 3: 16-17.

⁷⁶ *IBC* 172.

⁷⁷ *HomLev* 8.10.11.

means of this developing awareness and in large measure theology has emerged from it.”⁷⁸ The trouble with this evaluation is that it requires time and suggests that the work of an exegete or theologian cannot be fully judged in his own day. Without this time, it would be difficult to distinguish between what *Interpretation* calls the “fuller sense” and overly subjective extrapolations. However, *Interpretation* sets the parameters of “an explicit biblical text” or “authentic doctrinal tradition”⁷⁹ for the “fuller sense,” and thus the aspiring exegete is not completely without guidance.

In conclusion, Origen’s exegesis, while it cannot be described a “method” in the modern sense, has limited usefulness for modern exegetes. While the scientific study of language, literary form, and cultural context has blossomed in recent history, even those advances would not make up for his faulty assumptions that every individual word veils spiritual meaning and that the literal sense is not always true. However, Origen and the other Fathers “teach us to read the Bible theologically, within the heart of a living tradition, with an authentic Christian spirit.”⁸⁰ As a model for those who actualize the text for the faithful, he presents the Scripture with devotion and always provides edifying conclusions, which he desires to be faithful to the Tradition of the Church. His use of concept bridges would be especially helpful to those who wish to use his approach as a model for their own interpretations.

⁷⁸ Crouzel, *Origen*, 83.

⁷⁹ *IBC* 141.

⁸⁰ *IBC* 173.

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