

ORIGEN: READING AS DISCIPLINE AND AS SACRAMENT

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ABSTRACT

The work of Origen, an Alexandrian Father of the Church, falls in the first half of the third century A.D., before the Council of Nicaea established a firm rule of faith. Origen's work at Alexandria and Caesarea helped establish Christian Bible study as an alternative to Greek philosophy and Jewish scriptural study and interpretation, while drawing heavily on both these rival traditions.

Origen's three great surviving commentaries on the Gospels of John and of Matthew and on the Song of Songs show subtly differing ways of integrating Christian, Greek, and Jewish culture and knowledge, both sacred and secular, within the framework of allegorical interpretation. Origen interpreted not only the Old, but also the New Testament allegorically and thus, at least in his late Commentary on Matthew, was able to arrive at an open (to the future) definition of the interpretive community as in the process of growth and learning.

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The great pioneer of Christian scholarship, Origen, began his career early in the third century as a teacher of general education, *enkuklios paideia*. Eusebius, the early historian of the Church, writes that Origen soon "decided ... that the study of literature did not harmonize with training in theology, and promptly broke off his lectures on literature, as useless and a hindrance to sacred studies." (Eusebius, Book 6, ¶3) The eulogy of Origen by his pupil Theodore (Nautin, 1977:183-197) bears this out; Theodore's program of study included only dialectic and not grammar or rhetoric. "In the Gospels," Origen preached,

the Lord refers to the human teachings of the Pharisees, who 'hold to human traditions' (Mark 7:6-9), as 'leaven,' when he says to his disciples: 'Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees' (Matthew 16:6). Thus, for example, grammar, or rhetoric, or even dialectic are likewise human teachings. From such teachings one can gather nothing to be learned of God; but fine speech and splendid elocution and the art of disputation may all be made fitting use of in the presentation of God's word (5th Homily on Leviticus, ¶17)

With Origen, then, we are at the parting of the ways of Christian and late classical ideals of culture. While Christian *paideia* was sometimes neighborly to the Ciceronian culture animi, the 'culture of the soul' that was philosophy, it was to be on the whole decidedly hostile to the *cultus litterarum*, the cult of humane letters. (Niedermann, 1941:20-27; Marrou, 1937:211-235) For the cult of secular letters it substituted the reading and understanding of Holy Scripture, written, says Origen,

in ordinary, and, in Greek estimation, contemptible diction, ... so that the assent of believers may not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. For had the Scriptures been embellished with elegance of style and diction, like the masterpieces of Greek literature, one might perhaps have supposed that it was not the truth which got hold of men, but that the clear sequence of thought and the beauty of the language won the souls of the hearers, and caught them with guile (*Philocalia* IV, 35-6)

The scriptural emphasis of Christian culture was of course Jewish in origin. If the Latin Fathers chose to translate the Greek *paideia*, not with *humanitas* or *cultura*, but with *disciplina*, that was because they were following the use of *paideia* in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of Scripture used by the Jews of the Diaspora. Here *paideia* is used to translate the Hebrew *musar*, which connotes a moral and ethical training – a discipline – rather than a personal and diffusely intellectual 'culture'. (Lubac I, 1 and notes)

But in the very late *Book of Wisdom*, written in Greek, apparently by an Alexandrian Jew, *paideia* is used in a way that seems to blend the Greek and Hebrew traditions. (Finan, 1960:43-5; Larcher, 1969:393-8) Particularly important for the Alexandrian Christian Fathers Clement and Origen was the pseudo-Solomon's inclusion, in the wisdom taught him by God, of "physics" as taught in the Hellenistic secular curriculum of his day:

It was He Who gave me knowledge of all that is,
who taught me the structure of the world and the properties of
the elements, the beginning, end, and middle of the times,

the alternation of the solstices and the succession of the seasons,
 the revolution of the year and the positions of the stars,
 the natures of animals and the instincts of wild beasts,
 the powers of spirits and the mental processes of men,
 the varieties of plants and the medical properties of roots.

(Wisdom 7:17-21, Jerusalem Bible tr.)

Origen, though not entirely convinced of the canonicity of *Wisdom* (Larcher, 1969:43-4), makes important use of it (Voeiker, 1952) in conjunction with *Proverbs* 8:22, as had his predecessor Clement, to show the role of Christ the Logos (the fulfillment of the personified Wisdom of the Old Testament) in building the visible world and making it intelligible to man as the work of the divine "master craftsman"¹. Here he leans on Paul's treatment of pagan philosophy and his distinction between things visible and invisible in *Romans* 1:19-25. He reads this distinction, as had Clement before him, in the light of the Platonic doctrine of Ideas, the *visibilia* being the shadow and image of the *invisibilia*. And so Origen integrates the wisdom of this world into Christian understanding by making the latter always a spiritualization of fleshly things. It follows that the master discipline, for him, is the spiritual interpretation of Scripture, a discipline at once intellectual and moral because it is an ethical overcoming of the challenge of the literal, or 'carnal,' sense and a winning through to the difficult 'noetic' truth of the Spirit.

This is beginning to sound as if Origen is just another idealist, one who has made the journey from Jerusalem to Athens by way of Alexandria. Haven't we found one more close reader of Plato's *Phaedrus*, another practitioner of what Stanley Fish (Ch. 1) calls 'the aesthetic of the Good Physician?' Origen's answer might be "In one sense, yes." If we read only the two major works that culminate his Alexandrian period,² *On first principles and the Commentary on John*, Origen might be reduced to a master of Christian gnosis; but there follows his Caesarean period, his preaching to catechumens and his teaching of future preachers, in which he somewhat reluctantly appears as the churchman. Thus the societal, ecclesiological sense of Scripture, given rather gingerly treatment in the *Commentary on John*, is weighted more heavily in the later commentaries, and even more in the Caesarean homilies. In these the reading and interpretation of the letter of Scripture to the 'carnal' layman by the 'spiritual' preacher, the sacrifice of the holy flesh of Scripture to its holier spirit, is made a public sacrament which recreates, as it celebrates, the Church as a growing community going through various stages of Christian learning.

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THE 'WINDING STAIR' OF THE COMMENTARY ON JOHN'S GOSPEL

In his commentary on the Gospel of John, Origen is much concerned to establish *degrees* of holiness. His commentators, in turn, are quick to see the 'ladder' of Plato's *Symposium* in the offing. But later Judaism furnished examples of this thinking without benefit of Plato. Northrop Frye remarks:

Some of the later Psalms are called Psalms of "ascents" or "degrees," and seem to be connected with ritual processions up the hill to the temple. The ascent is not said to be a winding or spiral ascent, but if it were it would be an interesting addition to a very widespread symbolic pattern, extending in literature through Dante's *Purgatorio* to the winding stairs of Eliot and Yeats and Pound. (1983:158)

Frye, who writes that "in a sense all my critical work ... has revolved around the Bible" (1983:xiv), and who sets the 'centripetal' force of mythologies over against the 'centrifugal' drift of cultural pluralism, knows that his King James Bible *does* contain a winding stair, but that it is placed not outside the rebuilt Temple, but inside Solomon's temple, leading up and into the Holy of Holies:

And they went up with winding stairs into the middle chamber, and out of the middle into the third (I Kings 6:8)

Modern scholars have remodelled this part of the Temple, replacing the "winding ascent" of the Greek translators with "trapdoors;"³ but the error led a long and fruitful life. Origen is apparently the first to have exploited it systematically, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. How Solomon's staircase gets into John's Gospel is in itself a fair illustration of the vagaries of Origen's exposition in this first of Gospel commentaries.

We are at the point where Jesus, who has just chased the moneychangers out of the Temple, is asked by the Jews to show them his credentials:

Jesus answered and said unto them, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up. Then said the Jews, Forty and six years was this temple in building, and wilt thou rear it up in three days? But he spake of the temple of his body. When therefore he was risen from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this unto them; and they believed the Scripture, and the word which Jesus had said. (*John* 2:19-22)

Emboldened no doubt by the fact that Christ himself (or his favorite Apostle) here links the Temple of the Jews with his own body, whose death and resurrection foretold the raising of the Temple of the future, Origen now proceeds to explicate the architectural details of Solomon's temple as figures of the general resurrection of the perfect body of Christ that is the Church Invisible. Promising a full-length explication of all the details in another work, he offers a sample in the present excursus, because

in such texts the peculiar character of God-inspired Scripture is manifested all the more for its exceeding the bounds of human nature, while conforming to Divine Wisdom ... (*Commentary on John X*, ¶266)

While the length and detail of this excursus is typical of this first of Gospel commentaries, Origen is careful to ground himself in *1 Peter 2:5*, "Set yourselves close to him, so that you too .. may be living stones in a spiritual house," and in the typological principle according to which the temple builder Solomon may be seen as the type of Christ, the architect of the Resurrection. All this makes for a culminating point in Origen's exegesis of the 'spiritual Gospel,' laying bare the dialectic *movement* of the understanding in which past things symbolize present things which in turn become themselves the symbols of future things. The winding stair is the appropriate image of this upward movement within God's Temple:

And the house of God has an ascent [staircase] without corners, without sharp bends ... It was necessary that the upward path in God's temple be helicoidal, its spiral ascent imitating the circle, most perfect of forms (X, ¶278)

The Incarnation, the assumption of human nature by the Logos, is the most dramatic of these steps, – the step of steps, as it were, – but Origen minimizes its significance by talking about Christ's body as the reflexive architecture of the pre-existent Logos, the work of the Wisdom who has "built herself a house" (*Proverbs 9:1*). As the 'carnal' sense of Scripture is merely the starting point for the inspired reader, so too the humanity of the Son is the *bottom step* in the winding ascent to the Holy of Holies:

Just as in the Temple there were stairs by which one made one's way to the Holy of Holies, so for us, it may be, the only-begotten Son of God is all the steps; and just as, of steps, one is the first, while the next is higher, and so forth on up to the very highest, just so the Savior is the whole of our steps; the stair which, as the first, is at the bottom, is his humanity; having climbed that, we proceed to his other aspects, which form the entire stairway, ascending

110/ISSUES

thus by way of Him who is at once an angel and all the other Powers (XIX, ¶38)

Here Origen's exposition rejoins the scheme of the first volume of the commentary: Christ the master builder has made himself all things to all men, and so if one could arrange his many titles (*epinoiai*) in their proper order one would have redrawn His blueprint for creation, for He is the one Logos in whom all *logoi*, all the rational avenues of creation and salvation, have their beginning and ending (I, ¶¶113-124). And yet (*Origene eleison!*) the thirty-two volumes of the commentary were not written with the aim of setting Christ's titles in order. Why not?

Undoubtedly Origen's inspiration for his dream of ordering our knowledge of Christ by 'departments' from Alpha to Omega was Jewish speculation on the divine perfection of the Hebrew alphabet. This belief had found expression in the alphabetic Psalms, notably in Psalm 119, in which each of the twenty-two verses introduces a different 'aspect' of the Law. It had also led to tinkering with the numbering of the Hebrew canon (combining *Ruth* with *Judges* and *Lamentations* with *Jeremiah*) to get exactly twenty-two titles. Origen writes:

Just as the twenty-two letters may be regarded as an introduction to the wisdom and the divine doctrines given to men in those characters, so the twenty-two inspired books are an alphabet of the wisdom of God and an introduction to the knowledge of realities (*Philocalia* III).

What kept Origen from constructing a Christian 'staircase of letters,' arranging Christ's titles from Alpha to Omega, was that, just as the Hebrew letter was made clear only in the coming of Christ, so the New Testament also demands spiritual interpretation; it only dimly foreshadows the final revelation, when we shall see "not through a glass darkly, but face to face." Somewhere in Heaven, says Origen, God must have written down Christ's titles, beginning with Alpha and continuing to Omega. Searching our earthly Gospel will tell us much but not all about their proper sequence (I, ¶¶221-226). The "corporal Gospel," the "Gospel of the senses," must be translated into the "spiritual Gospel; but only those rare spirituals who can already see all that concerns Christ face to face here below are granted a preview of the "eternal Gospel" sung to all in Heaven (I, ¶¶43, 44, 40). Elsewhere he warns us against "receiving another, third Scripture as a continuance of knowledge, .. that our very desire to pluck knowledge from the Holy Scriptures not be twisted into sin for us" (*Fifth homily on Leviticus*, ¶9)

Here, then, Origen's textual scruples restrain him from trying to add to Scripture on the pretext of commenting on it. Jacques Derrida would no doubt argue that Origen here stands at the edge of the abyss of "writing in general" and

withdraws, out of piety for the Logos, to the safety of the Book (Derrida, 1976:Ch. I). In the preamble to the sixth book of the *Commentary on John* Origen indeed speaks of his writing of the commentary as *building* "the house which is to receive the Ideas of Truth, a house of Reason announced and spelled out in letters" (VI, ¶1). The second clause reads in Greek *logike hos en apaggelia kai grammasin oikodome*, carrying the added sense of "the house of the Logos within the Gospel and the Letter/Law." Thus he at times ambitiously conceived of his work as an imitation of the architecture of Wisdom.⁴ But his commentator's conscience tells him that "wanting to build in letters the tower of the Gospel" (VI, ¶6) would lead to Babel. There can be no 'good writing' outside the Good Book. So instead he humbly presents his jumbled research notes on the puzzle of the winding stairs, whose order must largely remain a mystery to be revealed only in the 'eternal Gospel' sung in Heaven.

Origen, then, appears here as the research scientist who believes what he cannot prove but who will not go beyond his data. He has discovered the Christian equivalent of the chemist's periodic table, but cannot be sure of the identity of all the elements, nor indeed of their exact order. I would guess that the Stoic idea of science which apparently lies behind his vision of Wisdom as the Logos of all *logoi*⁵ has led him to conceive of himself as the lonely researcher who ought not to be burdened with dealing with the text as it presents itself to the more 'casual' reader. (Significantly, the *Commentary on John* was commissioned by a wealthy convert from Gnosticism.) Things would be clearer if such people would get out of the way; many of Christ's supposed 'titles' are obvious accommodations to fleshly frailty and therefore not part of God's original scheme. (Sanctification and redemption, for instance[!], exist only "for us" and not absolutely.) And so Origen can after all make his own modest addition to the Beatitudes:

Blessed are they who, though standing in need of the Son of God, have yet become such as need no longer a Physician who tends the ill, nor a Shepherd, nor a Redeemer, but rather Wisdom and the Logos and the Just... (I, ¶124)

Origen's intellectual/ethical conception of 'the progress of science' becomes clear as he explicates *John* 4:36, "And he that reapeth receiveth wages, and gathereth fruit unto life eternal: that both he that soweth and he that reapeth may rejoice together." Having already interpreted the 'harvest' reaped as "the clear word on the fulness of Scripture or on the topic of how everything made by God was wholly beautiful" (XIII, ¶¶296-7) Origen goes on to say:

I think that in every art and in every science containing a fulness of propositions the *sowers* are those who discover the first principles [*archai*], which are then taken over and further investigated by

112/ISSUES

others, who in turn pass on to others the things they themselves have found out; so that for these last (who would not have been able to find out the first principles, develop them further, and bring the arts and sciences to their perfection), their predecessors are those who allow them to reap, as in a harvest, the ripened fruits of these same arts and sciences that have been perfected.

And if this be true of the arts and of some of the sciences, it may be imagined how much more it is true of the art of arts and science of sciences. For, having more fully demonstrated the findings of the pioneers, their successors have gone on to transmit, to those who shall later seek in turn to scrutinize their findings, the means by which they may synthesize through Wisdom the body of the one and only Truth (XIII, ¶¶302-303).

In such a scheme of things as Origen further develops it, Moses and the prophets are the sowers of the seed of the 'first principles,' followed by Jesus, the ripened fruit, who offers the 'experimental proof reaped by the disciples, who profit from his revelation by the Holy Spirit. Hence to "synthesize the body of the one and only Truth through Wisdom" is a single action with two aspects. The 'spiritual' who assembles the corpus of knowledge with the aid of 'first principles' simultaneously prepares himself to be a 'living stone' in the "truer and more perfect resurrection of the body of Christ" that is the final harvest of the *pleroma* (X, ¶1236).

What is lacking in this whole scheme (from the point of view of a devoted jaywalker and joyrider through the Book) is any sense of present closeness between those who are in the future to be joined together in Christ. This is what one might expect from a thinker who downplays the Eucharistic presence and who sees in the Incarnation only a humbling of the Spirit unaccompanied by any honoring of the Flesh. Saint Peter's first letter urges Christians to be "living stones in a spiritual house" here and now: his whole letter is filled with advice to Christians on how they should behave toward each other, and toward pagans, toward masters, toward the Roman authorities. Little or none of this finds reflection in Origen's adaptation of Peter's metaphor. Origen does mention that those who lack 'joints' (Greek *harmonia*) will not become part of the spiritual house at the latter day, and one suspects this is the same "joint of charity" of which he speaks elsewhere;⁶ but here he is silent on the workings of charity in this world.

Are we charitably to assume that, in the *Commentary on John*, Origen, following Paul, deliberately "knows in part and prophesies in part?" That he is reserving the "more excellent way" of charity for a later work? Certainly the formal failings of the *In Ioannem* as sustained commentary, and its substantive failure to achieve a balanced view of life in the Spirit, are splendidly overcome in the most

famous of his commentaries, written some fifteen years later (Nautin, 1977:435-7), on the *Song of Songs*. It is time to turn to this work to see how the 'winding stair' of Solomon, whose first spiral has been experienced rather calmly and coolly, turns into a spiral of love, which is at the same time a leisurely professorial review, in full sight of God's love, of all the other books of his we have read in our cautiously ascending 'song of degrees.'

SETTING CHARITY IN ORDER: THE SONG OF SONGS

In the Prologue to the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* preserved only in Rufinus's Latin translation, Origen introduces the idea that there is a definite order in which Scripture should be studied, and that the Song of Songs should come among the last, if not last of all, -- and if at all! He warns the Christian freshman:

I advise and counsel everyone who is not yet rid of the vexations of flesh and blood and has not yet ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book and the things that will be said about it. For they say that with the Hebrews also care is taken to allow no one even to hold this book in his hands, who has not reached a full and ripe age. And there is another practice too that we have received from them -- namely, that all the Scriptures should be delivered to boys by teachers and wise men, while at the same time the four that are called *deuteroiseis* -- that is to say, the beginning of Genesis, in which the creation of the world is described; the first chapters of Ezekiel, which tell of the cherubim; the end of that same, which contains the building of the Temple; and this book of the Song of Songs -- shall be reserved for study till the last. (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Prologue, I)

Thus the book is the ultimate test of one's mastery of the intellectual/ethical discipline of reading, for the apparent sense is carnal from beginning to end and yet the book is never to be taken as intended fact, for it is always and only spiritual in intent. Witness the fact that even the Jews, who (wrongly) interpret so much of Scripture carnally, do not make that mistake when it comes to the *Song of Songs*. (If we may judge from the evidence of the *Targum*, the Aramaic translation of, and commentary on, Hebrew Scripture, the *Song of Songs* was, in the rabbinical Academy, a graduate course in loving God and keeping his commandments through the discipline of the Law.)⁷

114/ISSUES

Origen proves, for once, to be extremely sensitive to questions of style and of literary genre in his exegesis of the *Song of Songs*, finding it to be a carefully crafted allegory and not a dim typological narrative. In his view it cannot be typology because it never occurred 'carnally'; it is the allegory of a divine poet. It must be read as an edifying work of fiction in dramatic or dialogic form. Like that other dialogue, Plato's *Symposium*, to which Origen compares it, it has spiritual love as its theme.

That it is the third in order of Solomon's books, coming after *Proverbs* and *Ecclesiastes*, shows, according to Origen, that the Greek division of general education into three branches derives from Solomon, who was taught it by the Wisdom he was the first to receive from God. *Proverbs* deals with Ethics, *Ecclesiastes* with Physics, while the *Song of Songs* treats of Enoptics, the 'metaphysical' science that goes beyond things seen toward things unseen, toward the love of things divine and heavenly (1957:39-42). And so the proper understanding of the *Song of Songs* is identical with the 'art of arts and science of sciences' that crowns a lifetime of study:

The other songs that the Law and the prophets sang, were sung to the Bride while she was still a little child and had not yet attained maturity. But this song is sung to her, now that she is grown up, and very strong, and ready for a husband's power and the perfect mystery. It is said of her for this reason: *My perfect dove is but one.* (1957:47)

One might, Origen says, consider that this is "the Song of Songs not only in relation to those that were sung before it, but also in respect of those that followed it in time," which would allow us to add the fifteen Psalms of Ascent, showing "with what stately steps the Bride, as she makes her entrance, attains by way of all of these to the nuptial chamber of the Bridegroom." (1957:50)

The exegetical method announced in the Prologue and at the beginning of Book I is to read the *Song* for a simple record of its fictional events, and then to find the spiritual meanings, in which "the appellations of Bride and Bridegroom denote either the Church in her relation to Christ, or the soul in her union with the word of God." (1957:58) This threefold scheme must not be confused with the "historical, moral, mystical" triad put forward, for instance, in the fifth homily on *Leviticus* (¶15), for here the two spiritual meanings are both mystical, describing alternately the mysteries of corporate and individual union with Christ.

The reason that the usual moral sense is missing here is that in the individual case we have to do only with "every soul that has been first instructed in ethics and then practised in natural philosophy," with the 'instructed soul' no longer

in need of the *moralis quid agas* of the medieval jingle. Christ is drawn to such souls because they have already achieved "amendment of manners, knowledge of affairs, and uprightness of conduct" (1957:76), the stock in trade of the moral sense. The reader of the *Song of Songs* is being praisefully reminded again and again by the Bridegroom that she is right to have pursued him spiritually and is almost ready to progress from knowledge of his names and titles to knowledge of "his actual, incomprehensible, unutterable Self"(1957:76) – to wordless, if not Wordless, bliss.

Thus much of the allegory of the *Song*, in Origen's explication, is what Kenneth Burke, in *The rhetoric of religion*, calls "logological," an allegory of allegories. For example, verses 1:11-12a, in the Septuagint "We will make thee likenesses of gold with silver inlays, till the King recline at his table," are read to mean that "as long as the soul is still a little child, and set under tutors and guardians, ... she is instructed by means of likenesses and is taught, as we may say, by parables and patterns,... but every now and then particles of light [the silver inlays: CB] are shed upon the deeper mysteries for those who are being instructed, so that they may conceive desire for higher things."(1957:157) Thus there are higher forms of spiritual interpretation which "look back on" and classify lower, also spiritual, forms.

One might try to extract a special 'moral sense' out of this by maintaining that one is being instructed in how to act interpretively, that the interpreter is receiving vocational training. But for Origen each and every spiritual reading is charismatic, a special gift of the Holy Spirit to this reader in this time and place. The soul may only pray (and Origen often interrupts his exposition with prayer) "that her pure and virginal mind may be enlightened by the illumination and the visitation of the Word of God himself."(1957:61)

And yet the Bride's experience of the charity of the Bridegroom will after all reveal a new and higher moral teaching, for although she has the "betrothal gifts" of natural law and reason and free will, charity is a divine gift not following the logic of nature. It is a higher morality in which she must be schooled, one not to be read out of the Bride/Bridegroom story unaided. It would seem that Origen would have to violate the strict framework of mystical interpretation he established at the outset, but – the Bridegroom's friends come to the scholar's rescue!

Crucial to Origen's exposition is his reading of verse 2:4. The Jerusalem Bible gives this as "He has taken me to his house of wine,/ and the banner he raises over me is love," but the Septuagint translation yields "Bring me into the wine house: set love before me," and the love in question is agape. The text is an interpretive crux even today. Jerome's Latin yielded *Ordinavit in me caritatem*, with the Bridegroom clearly doing the ordering. Origen reads "Set ye in order charity in

116/ISSUES

me;" the Bride is not looking forward to intoxication, but is asking some of the Bridegroom's bachelor friends, among them "perhaps ... the Apostles"(1957:187ff): "Teach me the different degrees of charity." The Apostolic writings provide Origen with a literal answer to this quite literal request by a quite fictional Bride.

This pedantry is not original; in the *Targum*, the Wine House turns out to be the Hebrew Academy, and the "banner of love" is shown to be the discipline of the study of the Law! (Pope, 1977:2:4b) But here, ironically, the Christian exegete is able to stay closer to the letter of the text, since Christ's redefinition of the Law as love of God and of neighbor makes it seem quite natural for the Apostles to come in with their explanation of the mystery of charity supposedly hidden from the Jews.

The Apostles teach the Bride that, while she is right to love the Bridegroom inordinately, "for the love of one's neighbor there is a certain measure: *Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself* (1957:187) Speaking earlier of the parable of the Good Samaritan, Origen had explained:

By nature, indeed, we are all of us neighbours one of another; but by the works of charity a man who has it in his power to do service to another who has not that power, becomes his neighbour. Wherefore also our Saviour became neighbour to us, and when we were lying half-dead from the wounds the robbers had inflicted on us, He did not pass us by.

We must recognize, therefore, that the charity of God is always directed towards God, from whom it always takes its origin, and looks back towards the neighbour, with whom it is in kinship as being similarly created in incorruption. (1957:34f)

To call love of neighbor 'charity' is to use the word in a sense "that is, as it were, derived and secondary". The name of charity "belongs first [of all] to God," but we are also to love "wisdom and right-doing and piety and truth and all the other virtues; for to love God and to love good things is one and the same thing"(1957:34f). But to direct charity toward a neighbor in whom none of these good things are presently to be found cannot be to love him in this primary sense; it can only be to reflect back Christ's love through Christ onto someone as undeserving as we once were.

The rather startling (but, remember, "ante-Nicene") corollary of this is that Origen includes even the presently worthless neighbors on whom our charity is reflected among the members of that visible Church of whom Paul says (*I Corinthians* 12) that "we are members one of another." The lowest order of charity

is therefore the Church understood as a natural body loved spiritually, Christian equality operates at this level. There are, however, degrees of importance in spiritual gifts, as Paul goes on to explain; and Origen now adds that *these represent degrees of charity as well*; the more virtuous, the more Godlike, the more worthy of the love of God that is charity (*agape*).

All this has interesting implications for the structure of the interpretive community. We are peers only in body, never in spirit. We are to love our teachers, but not to teach each other in love. There can be no meaningful reciprocation between fellow-Christians in Origen's church, only an increasing reciprocation between the soul and Christ. My love of Christ in you cannot feed upon your love of Christ in me. Only Christ is a mirror; the rest of us face the front of the classroom and relate in charity not 'to each other,' but only 'one to another,' through the divine Pedagogue.

Just between thee and me, *mon hypocrite lecteur*, wouldn't it have been more fun to learn *with*, rather than *from*, the Twelve, when they were still bumbling disciples, in the days when "there was no Spirit as yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified?" (*John 7:39*) So let us now go back with Origen, in his later *Commentary on Matthew*, to find a pleasantly fallible interpretive community in which the Holy Spirit makes His first appearance as a babe just out of swaddling.

PORTRAIT OF THE HOLY GHOST AS A YOUNG CHILD

Origen, for whom spiritual exegesis and free will were inter-dependent,⁸ may well have consciously varied his interpretive method as he moved from one book of Scripture to another, partly to suit his sense of the varying function of each as a structural member of the canon. We have seen him weave John's insight of Christ as the logos in the *arche* back through the Wisdom books into the creation myths of Genesis, retailoring the Fourth Gospel for his reader as a theological treatise. The *Song of Songs* becomes, in his interpretation, a final recapitulation in which all that the Spirit has written is looked back upon as readying the reader to go beyond words and into the ineffable bliss of union with God.

In the *Commentary on Matthew*, on the other hand, the important dimension of Scripture seems to be, not the vertical (or helical), but the horizontal – or, to switch to the analogy of music Origen uses there, the polyphony of Scripture. Commenting, in the (lost) second volume on Matthew, on the text "Blessed are the peacemakers," Origen finds one sort of peacemaker to be the exegete

118/ISSUES

who demonstrates that where others see conflict, there is no conflict, and who establishes that all the Scriptures are in harmony and at peace with one another; the Old with the New, the Law with the Prophets, Gospel with Gospel, Apostolic with Apostolic ... They may indeed sound disharmonious to those 'not having ears to hear' but they are in truth most harmonious.

The skilled exegete is, like David, "a cunning player,"

playing now upon the strings of the Law, now upon those of the Gospel in harmony with them, now upon those of the Prophets; and where the harmony of good sense is required, he strikes the Apostolic strings tuned to suit the foregoing, and, similarly, Apostolic strings in harmony with those of the Evangelists. (*Philocalia* VI, 2)

Unsurprisingly, this turns out to be a good description of Origen's own performance in his *Commentary on Matthew*. On the surface the First Gospel seems to lack Paul's doctrine of the indwelling Spirit and Luke's witness to its omnipresence, and these are therefore introduced. More important yet for the texture of this commentary is Origen's weaving in of John's (7:39) insight that in his initial teaching of the disciples, Jesus "was speaking of the Spirit which those who believed in Him were to receive; for there was no Spirit as yet because Jesus had not yet been glorified." Throughout the *Commentary on Matthew*, as Marguerite Harl has shown, this Johannine pronouncement explains the early failings of the disciples before the all-clarifying Transfiguration.

In all his 'harmonizings' Origen was able to look back for inspiration to Matthew himself, who had already begun for his commentators the task of showing the unity of the Old and New Testaments. The author of the First Gospel was probably a 'scribe,' a Jewish schoolteacher who left us his self-portrait in Jesus's saying: "Every scribe who becomes a disciple of the Kingdom of Heaven is like a householder who brings out from his storeroom things both new and old" (*Matthew* 13:52). It is now generally agreed that Matthew reworked the shorter, more abruptly enigmatic, more confrontational, Gospel of Mark. Some recent studies see Matthew as having been versed in *midrash*, the interpretive and accommodative culture surrounding Jewish Scripture, and find him to have composed a sort of "midrashic expansion of Mark" (Goulder, 1974:8), much as the author of Chronicles creatively edits the books of Samuel and Kings. Origen would seem to have been aware of the existence and scope of such *intra-Biblical* exegesis, which has come in for increasing critical attention in the last few years (Fishbane). A recent student of the First Evangelist maintains that

the features of Matthew's vocabulary, style, theological emphases, and habit of conforming traditional phraseology to the Old Testament... exhibit such a high degree of editorial liberty that the adjectives 'midrashic' and 'haggadic' become appropriate. (Gundry, 1982:628)

Origen's claim here, and his similar claims elsewhere, to have learned "how to produce a note of God's music" from Scripture itself, is probably quite firmly founded in this intra-Biblical tradition; he is less original than earlier critics of his method would have had us believe.

By the time of the *Commentary on Matthew* (written in the year 249 or thereabouts: Nautin, 1977:376-381), Origen had moderated his public teaching, in response to official investigations into his orthodoxy. (Nautin, 1977:429f, 436f). His method in the later works is to offer his more fanciful and doctrinally debatable readings as *exercises*, mental 'gymnastics' to be played around with in a collegial context. Whether totally sincere or not, this method of exposition has the great value of making the reader/student a partner in the work of exegesis. The model for this undogmatic procedure is the work of the disciples before the arrival in full of the Spirit. This model is on view in the section of the commentary (XIII, ¶¶14-19) entitled "On those who said, 'Who is the greatest?' and on the child called by Jesus." Origen establishes the classroom framework by beginning:

We must catch the spirit in which 'the disciples came to him,' as students bringing their problems to their teacher, as they investigate the matter of who is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven. And we should imitate the disciples in this, for when we are unable by ourselves to solve a research problem, let us take it, in all concord, to Jesus, Who is present wherever two or three are gathered in His Name (Matthew 18:20), and who is ready, in his coming in power, to enlighten the hearts of those who truly wish to study with him the subject under research.

Nor would it be in any way unsuitable for us to come to any one of the masters ordained by God within the Church, and propose to him a problem analogous to this...(XIII, ¶15)

The exegesis of Matthew 18:1-6 that follows is worth detailed study as an epitome of Origen's late manner. We will find it yielding some surprises.

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120/ISSUES

Origen, as far as we know, never wrote a commentary on Mark and never even took a text from him for a homily. Arguing from negative evidence becomes perhaps more plausible when the subject is someone who wrote so much; and I would argue that Origen was happy to have Mark screened and sifted by the other Evangelists, all three of whom he glossed at length.

In the Gospel of Mark (9:33-37) the episode in question is indeed an abrupt little drama. Philip Carrington draws out its meaning:

The disciples had failed to take in the doctrine of the death of the Son of Man ... Their recognition of Jesus as the Messiah had gone to their heads; the thought of a political regime was occupying their minds; they had been disputing on the road 'which of them was the greatest.' Jesus taxes them with it so soon as they are 'in the house'; and then 'He sat down and summoned the Twelve.'

.....'If anyone would like to be first,' Jesus says, 'he shall be last of all and servant of all'; an invitation which nobody apparently accepted. ... He then took a child, stood him in the midst of them, and installed him as an apostle: 'Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but Him who sent me' [the formula of apostolic commission:CB] (Carrington, 1960:202-203).

In Mark's account, the disciples, all but seduced by the prospect of their future 'kingliness,' are outmaneuvered by Jesus, who disruptively places a humble child, in all its earthly thisness, in their midst, and asks them to baby-sit the new apostle. They are to 'suffer little children to come unto him' and, while they are at it, to suffer the world. Jesus' thought, and Mark's style, are quite anti-hierarchic and perhaps even anti-hieratic here. The apostles are to go out into the world to turn it inside out, and so Jesus has thrown a little piece of the world into the midst of their wrongheadedness, to keep them from turning things outside in.

Matthew begins the process, carried further by Origen, of making the disciples into well-meaning pupils. Robert Gundry points up the contrast with Mark:

According to Matthew, Jesus does not ask the disciples a question, and they do not keep silent. Rather, they take the initiative and themselves ask him a question. It is an innocent question, even a knowing question – just as we should expect, since Matthew stresses understanding as necessary for discipleship (Gundry, 1982:359)

In the context of Matthew's narrative, then, the logical inquiry into the whole subject of hierarchy with which Origen credits the disciples is not out of place:

The subject, then, that the disciples came to Jesus to learn, was: Who then was the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven? And perhaps they wanted to get an answer from him along the lines of "This one is greatest..;" but He speaks in more general terms, of the attributes of him who is greatest.; and let us now, as far as we are able, find out the sense of the text (*Matthew 18:2*): "And Jesus called a child," and so forth (XIII, ¶15)

Origen now proceeds to offer, first a 'simple,' and then a 'gymnastic,' reading of the text. The simple reading renders the moral sense of the passage:

If one wished to offer a simple explication of this saying of the Savior's, he might say that the man who mortifies his male desires, killing through the spirit the practices of the body, and always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus' (2 Corinthians 4:10), so that he is as a child in things sexual,... is converted, and has become as the little children; and the further he has progressed toward their emotional state, to that extent he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, compared to those who are working toward, but have not yet attained, his degree of self-control (XIII, ¶16)

Origen then widens his inquiry from sexuality to "the other affections and infirmities and illnesses of the soul," combining the resources of Stoic psychology (Inwood, 1985:72-73) with Paul's insight "Had I not known the Law, I had not known sin." Before the acquisition of reason, he maintains, little children do not 'know' the passions, and, most to the point for the exposition of Matthew's text, they are *not proud*:

... in little children one finds neither superciliousness, nor overweening pride in noble birth or in riches, or in any such things which are esteemed to be, but are not, good. And this is why one sees children no longer infants, up to the age of three or four, act like the base-born, though one sees they are clearly of noble birth; and they do not seem at all to like the visibly rich children more than the poor (XIII, ¶16).

A beginning convert in possession of Stoic *logos* but who has not yet learned to imitate the humility of the child in imitation of the incarnated Logos, may

122/ISSUES

be led to stumble, in which case he who has led him to stumble (an apostle whose example teaches pride?) "shall have a millstone hung round his neck, and shall be sunk into the depths of the sea." Origen, however, does not like the way Matthew dwells on the eternal torments of Gehenna, and so he arrives at a *purgatorial* reading, "It is well for him" rather than "It were better for him;" the millstone is "part of his cure"! (XIII ¶17)

This aberration aside, Origen's rather lengthy 'simple explanation' shows him successfully integrating the scientific psychology of his day, the Stoic theory of action (Inwood, Long), into his exposition of the moral sense of scripture, genuinely deepening his inquiry into the meaning of the text. Origen's 'gymnastic' reading next offered is, one might say, something else.

Here is the beginning in full:

¶18. Beyond this so-called simpler reading we may offer another, whether for the sake of dogma or, so to speak, for the sake of exercise, and our inquiry shall be: Who was the little child called by Jesus and set amid the disciples?

Now think over whether we may say that the Holy Spirit, Who humbled himself when he was called by the Savior and set amid the consciousness of Jesus's disciples, was the little child Jesus called? For does He not want us to turn away from all else and to turn instead toward the models proposed by the Holy Spirit, that we may become as little children, themselves all likewise converted and modelled on the Holy Spirit? God gave these children to the Savior, according to what we read in Isaiah (8:18): "I and the children whom God has given me." And no one shall enter into the Kingdom of Heaven who has not converted from the practices of this world and modelled himself upon the little children who have the Holy Spirit in themselves; the same Holy Spirit Who, when called by Jesus, from His own state of perfection came down among men as a little child, and was set by Him among the disciples.

So it is necessary for him who has turned away from worldly desires to humble himself, not just as a little child, but, as it is written, 'as this little child.' But to humble oneself as that little child is to imitate the Holy Spirit, Who humbled Himself for the salvation of men (XIII, ¶18)

That these breathtaking gymnastics are quite seriously meant becomes obvious at the end of Origen's exegesis, where, in comparing the parallel passages in

Matthew, Mark, and Luke, he chooses what is for him the greater precision of Luke's language:

But according to Luke (9:46), the "deliberation" did not begin with the disciples, but "arose among them," around the question of "which of them should be greatest. And Jesus, seeing the deliberations of their hearts," – as He had eyes to see the deliberations of hearts, – "seeing the deliberations of their hearts," without being asked, according to Luke, "took the little child and set him," not just in their midst, as Matthew and Mark have it, but now also "by His side, and said" to the disciples, not merely "Whoever shall welcome one such little child," or "Whoever welcomes one of such children in My name, welcomes Me;" but now, even ascending a step higher, "Whoever welcomes this little child in My name, welcomes Me."

According to Luke, then, one must welcome in the name of Jesus the very same little child whom Jesus took and placed by His side. And so I very much doubt that anyone can interpret other than tropologically the saying "Whoever welcomes this little child in My name." For that same little child whom Jesus took and set by His side is to be welcomed in the name of Jesus; for he lives as immortal ...(XIII, ¶19)

In other words, there was never a carnal, mortal child whom Jesus took and set among the disciples; Jesus was speaking metaphorically of the Holy Ghost as he set Him, in his earthly foreshadowing, in the consciousness of the disciples and in ours. The so-called "child" was the Holy Spirit. And Origen now concludes, drawing on his store of textual variants:

"He that is least among you all, he is great" (Luke 9:48), but other copies have "he shall be great." Now, according to Luke (18:17), "Anyone who does not welcome the Kingdom of God as the little child shall not enter it;" and this saying is ambiguous. For either he who would welcome the Kingdom of God is to become as a little child; or he to whom the Kingdom of God has become as a little child, is to welcome it. And who knows but that those who welcome the Kingdom of God here and now, welcome it when it is as a little child; but in the future age no longer as a child; and that the greatness of perfection in the (as one might say) coming of age of the Spirit⁸ shall be made manifest to all who presently welcome the Kingdom of Heaven while it is here as a little child? (XIII, ¶19)

124/ISSUES

And so those who, like the disciples, gather together by twos and threes in Christ's name to welcome the Spirit that has humbled itself by putting on the veil of human language, are shown a preview of Christ's coming in power and the future collective "coming of age" in His fulness, a preview of the main events of the general resurrection -- just as the 'spirituals' of the Old Testament were given a preview of the Incarnation. This is a foretaste of a world beyond reading, beyond discipline and even beyond sacrament; all who are to be saved will then have been saved, and the priest will no longer need to "eat the sins of the people" by sacrificing their sinfully literal understanding of Scripture on the altar of the broken letter (*Fifth homily on Leviticus*, ¶13). We will be hearing the third, the heavenly Gospel already being sung to the Angels.

It is because the Kingdom of Heaven is in its "childhood" here below that we can receive it at all in our limited understandings. Nevertheless, if we may believe that Christ will not come again until every catechumen can seek out his portion of the truth; that not all the spirituals have been born yet; and that the work of the Spirit as a 'little child' here below will always remain relatively playful and limited, -- we may then, after all, find in Origen's seemingly childish 'gymnastic' reading of Matthew a proper celebration of the ongoing workings of the Spirit within a constantly expanding interpretive community.

NOTES

1. The author of *Wisdom* reads *Proverbs* 8:30 as calling Wisdom God's "master craftsman" ('amon) rather than his "nursling" ('amun) this is crucial to Origen's reading. Larcher, 331-340, favors 'nursling' because "the idea of an active participation by Wisdom in the work of creation is not to be found in Prov. VIII, 22-31." Yet the immediately following words of IX, 1 -- a text often invoked by Origen -- do after all have Wisdom "building herself a house" (for Origen a vital reference to the Incarnation).
2. Nautin's 1977 work is today the basis for biographical study of Origen. His researches are summarized in a chronology, 409-412. He dates the *On first principles* around 230 and the first four volumes on *John* around 231 (Nautin 368). Origen's statement in his preface to the Alexandrian volumes of the commentary that they are his 'firstfruits' was at one time wrongly taken to mean that they are an early work: Nautin shows they are not.
3. The Septuagint has *helikte anabasis* (whence Jerome's *cochlea*) for the Hebrew *lulim*, which does not occur elsewhere in the OT, but means "trapdoors" in post-Biblical Hebrew (Gray 166).
4. The phrase is further echoed in volume X in what is perhaps the most ambitious reading of all; Jesus's riding into Jerusalem on a donkey and a colt is read as the Word of God borne on the Old and New Testaments (X, ¶174).
5. For instance, in the 7th homily on *Leviticus*, ¶2, as pointed out by Cecile Blanc (SC 157, 525n2).
6. The quite 'haggadic' commentary of the *Targum* on the *Song of Songs* is summarized for each verse in Pope's 1977 commentary.
7. As Marguerite Harl stresses in the introduction to her superb edition of Origen's *Philocalia* and in her 1958 work, listed below.
8. More literally "in the spiritual manhood" (*helikia*), a reference to *Ephesians* 4:13. Jesus's "coming in power" to the interpreter in search of him is clearly an anticipation of the general parousia, echoing *Mark* 9:1.

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128/1ISSUES

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