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#### Editors’ Note

The year 2019 marks the 500th anniversary of the Leipzig Debate (or Leipzig Disputation). In Leipzig at the Pleissenburg Castle, Luther's colleague Andreas Bodenstein von Karlstadt debated John Eck from June 27 to July 3 on grace, free will, and justification. From July 4 to 8, Luther took Karlstadt's place and debated with Eck especially on the question of whether the pope was established by God as head of the Church. Our first two articles commemorate this debate. They were presented originally at the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions at CTSFW, which was held Jan. 16–18, 2019. They remind us of what was at stake, and what we still joyfully affirm: Christ as the head of the Church, and God's Word as the sole infallible authority.

## Scripture as Philosophy in Origen's *Contra Celsum*

Adam C. Koontz

### I. Origen as a Problem

In words he would come to regret, Jerome described Origen as the outstanding man whom the church had produced:

But why, you ask me, have I thus mentioned Varro and the man of brass? Simply to bring to your notice our Christian man of brass, or, rather, man of adamant<sup>1</sup>—Origen, I mean—whose zeal for the study of Scripture has fairly earned for him this latter name. Would you learn what monuments of his genius he has left us?<sup>2</sup>

Aware that Origen's reputation was not universally good, Jerome went on,

Yet what reward have his exertions brought him? He stands condemned by his bishop, Demetrius, only the bishops of Palestine, Arabia, Phoenicia, and Achaia dissenting. Imperial Rome consents to his condemnation, and even convenes a senate to censure him, not—as the rabid hounds who now pursue him cry—because of the novelty or heterodoxy of his doctrines, but because men could not tolerate the incomparable eloquence and knowledge which, when once he opened his lips, made others seem dumb.<sup>3</sup>

The disciple's enthusiastic praise is not always the church's historical judgment, and Origen's reputation fared much worse after his death than in his own lifetime. During the first Origenist controversy, Jerome's tone was far different, as the political temperature of reading and approving Origen had risen drastically.<sup>4</sup> Within a bare list of eight points from the *Peri Archon* (*On First Principles*)—Origen's systematic exposition of the faith written in his earlier Alexandrian period—Jerome was willing to say things patently untrue: “Fifthly, he most openly

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<sup>1</sup> Origen's alternate name was Adamantius, see Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI.14.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome, Letter XXXIII.3 as found in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Church Fathers of the Christian Church*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 28 vols. in 2 series, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 2/6:46 (hereafter *NPNF*).

<sup>3</sup> Jerome, Letter XXXIII.4 (*NPNF* 2/6:46).

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 121–150.

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denies the resurrection of the flesh and the bodily structure, and the distinction of senses, both in his explanation of the first Psalm, and in many other of his treatises.”<sup>4</sup>

Though Origen was recognized in his own life as a man of many great gifts, his methodological and theological idiosyncrasies were denounced during his life but much more after his death. He is derided for an insufficiently high Christology or an open binitarianism, so that when the Arian controversy exploded, Origen’s Christology was found wanting by some, although he was a significant intellectual influence on the Cappadocian fathers, the formulators of the church’s post-Nicene Christology.<sup>5</sup> Origen’s best-known aberration is *apokatastasis*, the restoration and salvation of all things in Christ, apparently involving the salvation of the devil himself, as God’s plan for the renewal of creation in the fullness of time. This initially startling doctrine is predicated on Origen’s understanding of God’s wrath and anger as always rehabilitative, aimed at the reformation of the sinner and not his destruction.<sup>6</sup> The condemnation of Origen and of Origenism in the sixth century consigned to theology’s ash heap the father of the continuous biblical commentary, one of the few ancient Christians fully conversant in Hebrew, the editor of the *Hexapla*—perhaps ancient Christianity’s greatest edition of the Bible—and a man renowned in his time for his eloquence, piety, and fervor.<sup>7</sup>

We cannot here untangle all the skeins of *Dogmengeschichte* and ecclesiastical politics that made the fifth century so drastically different from the third and obtain a comprehensive concept of how Origen and “Origenism” are related. We can, however, examine Origen’s last major work, the *Contra Celsum*, and find in it some keys to understanding Origen’s thought patterns. We will look closely at how Scripture functions as philosophy and Christians as philosophers in the *Contra Celsum* to see how Origen articulated the gospel in a Hellenistic philosophical setting natural to his native city of Alexandria. The missionary salience of *Contra Celsum* is Origen’s presentation of Christian life and thought in conversation with and, at times, identical to philosophy.

Every expansion of the Christian faith is uncomfortable, both for those who bring the message and those who receive it. Unfamiliar terms, persons, and stories must be elucidated, a task to which Christianity has demonstrated its commitment

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<sup>4</sup> Jerome, *Contra Joannem Hierosolymitanum* 7 (NPNF 2/6:428). Cf. Origen’s defense of bodily resurrection in *Peri Archon* II.10, *inter alia*.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* (London: Routledge, 1998), 62–66.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., *Peri Archon* II.10, III.6, *Contra Celsum* VIII.52.

<sup>7</sup> The extirpation of Origenism as one theologically deviant strain of thought among others was connected to Justinian’s unifying efforts throughout his empire. See Fergus Millar, “Rome, Constantinople, and the Near Eastern Church under Justinian: Two Synods of C.E. 536,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 98 (2008), 63.

by the translation of Scripture, liturgies, and catechisms throughout its history. What is unfamiliar must become in some measure familiar to the recipients of the message, a process of familiarization known as “inculturation,” familiar in the way that phrases from the King James Bible are familiar to Anglophones.

Transmission may be successful in reaching its intended audience, yet something may be lost or added in the transmission. Information illegitimately added may occlude the true purpose or meaning of the message. One’s cultural framework for a concept such as “god” or “sacrifice” may be understood as identical to a biblical framework for similarly named concepts and yet be a thousand miles off the mark. When Alfons Fürst described the work of Origen as “inculturation” in his book on Alexandrian Christianity, he indicated a fundamental shift in meanings and foci from Jewish Christianity to a thoroughly Hellenistic Gentile Christianity.<sup>8</sup> Inculturation in this sense *could become* adulteration. In becoming all things to all men, one hazards something. In winning some Greeks for Christ, Origen risked making Christ a Greek. Origen was active in a period of relative peace for the church, a time Eusebius described as missiologically opportune, “this period of rapid expansion of the Faith, when our message was being proclaimed boldly on every side.”<sup>9</sup> It is within the missiological context of Origen’s thought that we find its promise and its peril.

## II. Scripture as Philosophy, Christians as Philosophers

Scripture is copiously present in nearly every line of *Contra Celsum*, so our focus will be on how Scripture appears as philosophy and Christians as philosophers. We will find that the commerce between Scripture and philosophy is not one way with the Christians forever in philosophy’s debt. Although *Contra Celsum* was authored firmly near the end of Origen’s life, well within his Caesarean period, Origen had been teaching the Scriptures since he had charge of a catechetical school in Alexandria at age 18.<sup>10</sup> Scholten has demonstrated that Origen’s school was not for the instruction of inquirers or neophytes in the Christian faith but was a school of philosophy like so many others in Alexandria or any larger Hellenistic city, where a philosopher instructed *anyone who would listen* in the dogmata of his school.<sup>11</sup> Thus Origen himself attended the lectures of Ammonius Saccas

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<sup>8</sup> Alfons Fürst, *Christentum als Intellektuellen-Religion: Die Anfänge des Christentums in Alexandria* (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 2008), 9.

<sup>9</sup> Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica* VI.36 (hereafter *HE*).

<sup>10</sup> Eusebius, *HE* VI.3.

<sup>11</sup> Clemens Scholten, “Die alexandrinischen Katechetenschule,” *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 38 (1995): 16–37. For the missionary context of Origen’s school, see also W. Oliver, “The Catechetical School in Alexandria,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015), 1–12.

in Alexandria, although Saccas was an apostate Christian and was later the teacher of the famous Neoplatonist Plotinus.<sup>12</sup> Origen's school was not unique in its structure, in Origen's Hellenistic education, or in the ideological diversity of its students. It was unique because Origen would lecture not from his copy of Plato's works or the Pythagorean Numenius (two favorite philosophers of Origen); he would have lectured on "philosophy" directly from the Scriptures. Origen functioned as a philosopher through teaching the Bible.<sup>13</sup>

It is thus unsurprising so many years later to find in *Contra Celsum* that Origen used Scripture as a direct opponent of the various Greek philosophical schools (Platonists, Peripatetics, Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, inter alia) and used the terminology appropriate to those schools in conjunction with Scripture. *Dogmata*, the particular teachings of a school, are also in the Bible, which teaches its own disciples. There is a stark difference in the capacity of Christianity to make mankind wise and philosophy's capacity to do the same. Plato taught a small number of intelligent men, and in Origen's day almost no one had read or understood the teachings of Plato, however widespread his teachings were among the intelligent.<sup>14</sup> Origen everywhere presumed a vast difference in the intellectual capacities of the few intelligent inquirers among the human race and the many "simple-minded folk,"<sup>15</sup> but the philosophers largely failed to deal with the great mass of humanity incapable of comprehending or without opportunity to hear the teachings of the Greek philosophers.

What is distinctive about Scripture is that it has enlightened the lives of men of every kind and every capacity across the world. For the intelligent, there is endless room for growth in wisdom and the attainment of perfection that Origen understands as the goal of Christian life and discipline.<sup>16</sup> For the multitude, there are wholesome, straightforward teachings that provide them with the full knowledge of Christ, the Logos of the Father, who will enlighten them and turn them from the power of demons to his own rule. Scripture employs a generally simple style, and Jesus commissioned uneducated men precisely so that it would be accessible to the multitudes in need of enlightenment.<sup>17</sup> Scripture provides richly for all, whereas the philosophers have provided only for a few in the meager wisdom they have found.

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<sup>12</sup> The quotation of the pagan philosopher Porphyry at Eusebius, *HE* VI.19.

<sup>13</sup> Fürst, *Christentum als Intellektuellen-Religion*, 62.

<sup>14</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsum* (hereafter CC) VI.1–2, all quotations from *Contra Celsum* are found in Origen: *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953).

<sup>15</sup> E.g., CC VII.41.

<sup>16</sup> CC III.61.

<sup>17</sup> CC I.62.

Both Scripture and philosophy teach dogmatically but differ greatly in their breadth of audience and their actual capacity to change men's lives.<sup>18</sup>

The hierarchy of the intelligent and the simple is the human side of a similar twofold structure to Scripture. Where there are a few who can understand the complex, the symbolic, and the esoteric, all of which are included in Origen's concept of allegory,<sup>19</sup> just so there is a side of Scripture and teachings of Scripture available only to the intelligent.<sup>20</sup> This method of exoteric text and esoteric allegory Origen finds to be in agreement with Plato's handling of Greek mythology and with Paul's handling of the Old Testament. "It is not we who teach that *brides and maidservants* are to be interpreted allegorically, but we have received this from wise men before us. . . . Anyone who likes to take up the Epistle to the Galatians will know how the stories about the marriages and the intercourse with the maidservants may be allegorized."<sup>21</sup> It is crucial to acknowledge that Origen does not find allegory to be alien to Scripture, a contraband Hellenizing import. He finds the same method in the Bible as in the philosophers and asserts over and over again that the wisdom the philosophers have in treating their shameful myths with some allegorizing reverence is far surpassed by the wisdom of Christ, who spoke some things outwardly to all and some things obscurely and in parables so that the unintelligent and the intelligent could likewise benefit from his words.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, allegory is the Scripture's own desired method of being interpreted. "But since the very authors of the doctrines themselves and the writers interpreted these narratives allegorically [going on to cite 1 Cor 9:9–10; 10:1–4; Eph 5:31–32], what else can we suppose except that they were written with the primary intention that they should be allegorized?"<sup>23</sup>

A modern reader may remain skeptical about Origen's concept of allegory or the firmness of its anchoring in Paul's exegetical method, but for our purposes there is great significance in Origen's weighing of his method against philosophy. He does not have an inferiority complex about theology, as might be the case in the modern

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<sup>18</sup> CC I.64; VII.41.

<sup>19</sup> Charles J. Scalise's "Origen and the *sensus literalis*" in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and Legacy*, ed. Kannengieser and Petersen (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 117–129, fails to appreciate fully Origen's training in Hellenistic rhetoric but makes the valuable point that Origen limits the literal sense to what is obvious to the simple man (*Peri Archon* IV.2, 4). Peter W. Martens makes the much more historically informed point that Origen's exegetical method, especially in its opposition to literalism, was developed in opposition to Alexandrian Judaism and its denial of the Christological nature of Scripture. Cf. his *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 133–148, 216–221.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. what is available to the intelligent who can truly grasp "wonders of your law" (Ps 139:18) with what was written for the simpleminded in CC IV.50. Also, "the resurrection of the flesh which, while preached in the churches, is understood more clearly by the intelligent," VI.18.

<sup>21</sup> CC IV.44.

<sup>22</sup> Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 156–160.

<sup>23</sup> CC IV.49; VII.20.

era when theology has been largely banished from the university where it used to reign. He does not need a method from outside the Bible to understand the Bible. He believes his methodology is biblical and that certain Greeks have, in their love of wisdom and desire to know the truth, obtained a consonance with biblical thoughts and methods in some regard.

How could that be? The argument for superiority from antiquity exists throughout *Contra Celsum*; in quoting Plato on the highest good, Origen says, “Our wise men, Moses who was the most ancient and the prophets who succeeded him, were the first to understand that ‘the highest good cannot at all be expressed in words.’ . . . In the words of our Jesus, ‘blessed are the pure in heart; for they shall see God.’”<sup>24</sup> Part of Celsus’s foolishness was his ignorance or ignorant refusal to acknowledge the much greater antiquity of Moses and the prophets to Plato, to Homer, and even to the Greek alphabet itself.<sup>25</sup> Since in the ancient world antiquity was much preferred to novelty, the antiquity of Christian revelation is proof of its superiority to the relative novelty of Hellenic philosophy. Indeed, Plato may have derived some of his teachings from acquaintance with the writings of Moses, especially in his travels in Egypt.<sup>26</sup> In that case, the most sublime teachings of the Platonists are adulterations of Mosaic dogmata taught long before Plato walked the earth. Moses was a philosopher *avant la lettre*.<sup>27</sup>

Scripture is philosophy, and the readers and followers of Scripture become philosophers themselves. Christ was a philosopher and surpassed all others, as do his followers, because his philosophy united teaching with life.<sup>28</sup> Christians are those “who endeavor to believe rationally.”<sup>29</sup> Philosophy as taught outside the church is not so much entirely erroneous as inadequate to the one who truly loves wisdom.

After [young men] had first been trained in a general education and in philosophical thought I would try to lead them on to the exalted height, unknown to the multitude, of the profoundest doctrines of the Christians, who discourse about the greatest and most advanced truths, proving and showing that this philosophy was taught by the prophets of God and the apostles of Jesus.<sup>30</sup>

Christianity is the study of a wisdom that is itself elite, separated out from the multitude who are unaware of its greatest teachings. That wisdom is contained

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<sup>24</sup> CC VI.4. Cf. also VI.13, 19.

<sup>25</sup> CC VII.29–30.

<sup>26</sup> CC IV.39.

<sup>27</sup> CC IV.11, 21, 36; VI.7, 43; VII.28.

<sup>28</sup> CC II.16, 27.

<sup>29</sup> CC III.16.

<sup>30</sup> CC III.58.



within the philosophical genre of discourse, whether in conversation or written as if in conversation within the academy. That discourse concerns the greatest truths possible and is subject to rational processes of proving and showing, far from the smoke-and-mirrors legerdemain to delude the gullible masses of which Celsus accuses the Christians. That study and those doctrines are “this philosophy” directly drawn from the entire canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

The starkest point of contrast between Christianity and philosophy is for Origen the connection between what is taught and what is lived. Both Christianity and philosophy teach truths: Christianity the entirety of truth and various philosophies some truths. Both Christianity and philosophy concern themselves with metaphysics, cosmology, anthropology, eschatology, and any other number of subjects. The salient distinction between them is that Christianity has produced and does produce disciples who have integrity. The tragedy of Plato is that having known God, he did not worship God according to his eternal attributes. Paul’s description of pagan theologizing in Romans 1 recurs several times in the *Contra Celsum* as a tagline for the best efforts of the Greeks.<sup>31</sup> Origen finds any elevation of the Egyptians as wiser than all other nations particularly absurd and disgusting because they almost uniquely worship the full panoply of creation mentioned in the apostolic list of false gods.<sup>32</sup> Philosophy cannot produce a teacher or a disciple who worships purely in accordance with a pure knowledge of the Creator. Christianity can make even the simplest of human beings capable of knowing God truly and worshiping him with a life of integrity,<sup>33</sup> which is the sacrifice Christians offer in place of the blood-offerings and sacrifices to demons of the pagans. “[God] chose the foolish things of the world, the simplest of the Christians, who live lives more moderate and pure than many philosophers, that He might put to shame the wise, who are not ashamed to talk to lifeless things as if they were gods or images of gods.”<sup>34</sup> The distinction between Christianity and philosophy is finally personal and practical: “From the beginning, therefore, this doctrine of Jesus had great influence upon his hearers, teaching them to despise the life of the multitude, and to seek earnestly to live a life like that of God.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> CC III.47; IV.30; VII.46–48.

<sup>32</sup> CC III.17–19.

<sup>33</sup> CC III.54.

<sup>34</sup> CC VII.44.

<sup>35</sup> CC II.44; III.68.

### III. A Multivalent Apologetic

*Contra Celsum* is not an abstract meditation. It addresses Ambrose, Origen's inquiring patron whom he had turned from some variant of Gnosticism,<sup>36</sup> and any Christian who may be shaken in mind through reading Celsus's *The True Doctrine*, a book rather old by the time Origen responded. In order to shore up the faith of the wavering (for the perfect would have no need of such a book), Origen is eclectic in his argumentation. The robing of Scripture as philosophical teaching or the church as an academy is only one of his stratagems.

Especially when his exasperation with Celsus's unfairness of mind and low carping boils over, Origen describes for his readers the high-minded even-handedness with which he approaches an opponent so patently partisan.<sup>37</sup> This is a conscious display of Christian purity of mind over against the cramped thinking and lazy unacquaintance with the New Testament of his pagan interlocutor. "Here Celsus, who professes to know everything, has fallen into a very vulgar error concerning the meaning of the Bible."<sup>38</sup> Whereas the Christian knows more about philosophy than the pagan, the pagan has some passing knowledge of the Old Testament and of some New Testament traditions.<sup>39</sup> Celsus's knowledge of the Marcionite heresy affects his assertions, many of which land far off the mark for Origen and his focus. It is unclear how much of the New Testament Celsus knew, but his every mistake and breezy ignorance are pointed up by Origen to display the much greater intellectual curiosity and fairness of mind of the Christian apologist. "In these words, however, Celsus seems not to have been quite fair in his intentions, but indeed to have been deeply prejudiced as a result of his hatred of us, so unbecoming to a philosopher."<sup>40</sup>

Likewise, Origen enjoys unraveling logical knots into which Celsus put himself. Origen does this not so much to improve Celsus's argument as to show that any contradiction of Scripture will itself result in logical contradiction. The scriptural philosopher, the Christian, will be able to reason logically from his first principle of divine revelation. The non-scriptural philosopher will not be able to construct his argument in a thoroughly logical manner because he will, for instance, at one time revile the Christians for morally heinous practices and at another excuse the moral turpitude of the traditional Greek gods. "He seems to me to be confused on this

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<sup>36</sup> Eusebius, *HE* VI.18.

<sup>37</sup> *CC* I.71.

<sup>38</sup> *CC* VII.18. This is not an exaggeration! Celsus claimed in I.12, "If they would be willing to answer my questions, which I do not put as one who is trying to understand their beliefs (for I know them all)."

<sup>39</sup> *CC* VI.30.

<sup>40</sup> *CC* VI.27.

subject [of daemons]. Sometimes his mind is distracted by the daemons, and sometimes, when he recovers his senses a little from the irrationality which the daemons produce, he gets a glimpse of the truth.”<sup>41</sup> Thus logic is a weapon Origen uses to identify and refute the inconsistencies of the non-scriptural philosophers. As an example, let us consider Origen’s discussion of avian augury.

The discernment of the future from the flight of birds (augury) or their entrails (haruspicy) was a commonplace of the Greco-Roman world.<sup>42</sup> Celsus argued that Christians should respect this because (1) human beings and animals are not distinct in being able to commune with God, and (2) knowledge of the future, such as many birds have displayed, is divine.<sup>43</sup> The conflation of human being with animal being is one Origen rejects out of hand because he understands mankind to be the unique bearer of the image of God, which is displayed in the *rational* soul man alone possesses. Rationality is not (as after the Enlightenment) a bare capacity for autonomous thought; it is the sum total of our faculty for intelligence concerning divine and earthly things that makes us human. Mankind is susceptible to the temptation of demons because he is rational and can alter his course of action from good to evil.<sup>44</sup> Animals are irrational and do what they do, not by reason—whether for good or evil—but by instinct.<sup>45</sup> Their actions are a witness to the wisdom of the Logos, who has imprinted those instincts upon their being, but human actions that glorify God witness rather to the salvation of the Logos, who has enlightened men with the true rationality of Christian teaching. This is an argument combining careful philosophical definition, biblical reasoning, and biological observation.

Interestingly, Origen does not argue that it is *impossible* that certain pagan stories of birds foretelling the future occurred. He does not think it impossible for any animal to tell what will occur in whatever way it communicates. Should an animal be able to tell the future, that would, however, crucially not be evidence of divine favor or inspiration. Knowledge of the future could be accumulated solely from experience of similar conditions, as a sailor has knowledge of the weather and the sea far surpassing the landsman. If birds are as close to God as Celsus reasons and know his will much better than mankind, then they are surely wiser than the most revered Greek philosophers. “It would accordingly be logical of Celsus, since he thinks birds superior to men, to use birds as teachers and none of the Greek

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<sup>41</sup> CC VIII.63.

<sup>42</sup> At the outset of Rome’s history, Naevius shows Anchises knows “how to watch for his bird in the right area of the sky” (frag. 25.1). Cicero discusses the origin of augury and haruspicy (which he calls the *Etrusca disciplina*) in *De divinatione* 1.3.

<sup>43</sup> CC IV.88.

<sup>44</sup> CC IV.97.

<sup>45</sup> CC IV.98.

philosophers.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, the inspiration of demons is particularly to be found in animals that Origen considers intrinsically wicked or shameful, such as wolves, foxes, crows, and eagles, whom the demons employ to shame the men who hearken to the leadings of these irrational beasts.<sup>47</sup> Here again a consistent use of logic, anthropology, biology, and Scripture combine to form an argument against Celsus.

#### IV. The Structure of Origen’s Argument

Those arguments against Celsus flow one after the other for eight books. There is no discernible structure to the arguments that would classify some into one kind, some into another. For example, when Origen begins the seventh book in the formulaic way in which he has begun all the others, he promises especially to take up the question of prophecy in this book.<sup>48</sup> He does handle the nature of prophecy at some length there, but he deals with individual scriptural prophecies and the reliability of Scripture’s prophetic oracles in many other places as well. In most instances, Origen makes no pretense of having any particular focus in a specific book, so that the distinction between books would seem to be largely a matter of his exhaustion or the space available in a given manuscript. One hears his tiredness when he apologizes for the great length of each book or for the fact that this or that discussion has proceeded long enough or that he does not have time at present to give a particular subject the attention it needs.

There is something nearly perfunctory about his references to his own works, sending the reader elsewhere in the library to find the answers to Celsus’s questions that Origen provided years ago. It is as if *Contra Celsum* is meant as a handbook for the inquirer, something to hold in the right hand as Celsus’s *The True Doctrine* is open in the left. In order to make the inquirer’s task of shoring up his faith as easy as possible, Origen slavishly follows the meandering arrangement of Celsus’s original treatise. His only abbreviations are when he believes Celsus says something utterly irrelevant to Christianity, the Scriptures, or any topic remotely connected to those. Otherwise, he reproduces Celsus’s text at such length that modern editors can produce respectable critical editions employing Origen as the sole available witness.

Origen’s intention is to lay low any challenge from Celsus. This arranges his topics, his arguments, and his use of Scripture around an apologetic, edificatory purpose. The church’s doctrines are assailed; they must be defended. There is a moment in Book VIII when Origen would plainly like to discuss his understanding

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<sup>46</sup> CC IV.89.

<sup>47</sup> CC IV.93, 97.

<sup>48</sup> CC VII.1–2.

of the restoration of all things in some detail but cannot because addressing Celsus's particular objections, lines of argument, and slanderous accusations is more pressing.<sup>49</sup> This diversion from one's own sense of what may be truly profound for the sake of what is immediately assailing the church is perhaps more felicitous than he knew.

### V. Origen within the Church's Mission

Scripture as philosophy is a way Origen proclaims the gospel to a world familiar with philosophy. It is not a capitulation to the supremacy of philosophy over theology because Origen understands what we now call theology as simply that philosophy drawn from the prophets and apostles. Origen's most frequent, practically ubiquitous, method is the quotation and interpretation of canonical Scripture, specifically rejecting any citations Celsus uses against Christians from outside those Scriptures. Jesus as a philosopher and his people as his disciples is an image near enough to Scripture that it accords well with the picture Origen paints of the church as the sole philosophical school in which all kinds of men find enlightenment and healing for their souls and a teacher who has no gap between what he teaches and who he is. This Hellenization of the gospel, for the sake of Greeks, anchors itself firmly in the gospel and the Scriptures.

Logically, any error found in Origen or attributable later to anyone following his writings closely could originate in the understanding that any philosophical truth will somehow find its own source in Scripture. This means that for Origen, especially in the cases of Socrates and Plato, a doctrine such as the restoration of all things may have some source in Scripture if it is in fact true. As any truth of Plato could have first been a truth proclaimed by Moses and prophets, so might that one, too. That presupposition could affect Origen's understanding of the materiality of the resurrection, a charge less often made, or, of course, his eschatology.

Practically, the fullness of speculation in which Origen indulges in other places about *apokatastasis* is inadmissible in this, his final great work. This is not a trivial matter of time or space failing him to explain everything he thought. Disciples will do almost whatever they like with their master's words, as anyone familiar with the theological-cum-political strife after Luther's death will know, and one cannot defend one's own reputation after his death. There is also the difficulty of Origen's words that were intended provisionally or as commentary that could later be revised, but instead were taken as carved in stone forever. What may sound necessary for a specific place and time or may be a theologian's speculation within his own school

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<sup>49</sup> CC VIII.72. Similar reticence and the sense that only a few will understand eschatology at VI.20.

neither sounds the same nor can be further elucidated in the heat of public debate. When pressed to their logical limit, certain of his propositions could easily be understood as erroneous, if they were not already *in nuce* or *in extenso* in his own time, as some charged then and now. Since Origen was tortured for his faith but died a year after his release from imprisonment and did not receive the crown of martyrdom, his reputation and words could be a plaything in later years. His disciple Pamphilus devoted efforts equal to any detractor's in defending the memory of his teacher:

A great many other traditions about Origen have been passed on orally by the older men of our day, but I think I will omit them, as irrelevant to the present work. All that it is important to know about him can be gathered from the *Defense of Origen* written by myself and that holy martyr of our time, Pamphilus—a joint effort, a labor of love undertaken as an answer to carping critics.<sup>50</sup>

So whose side should be taken? The passion on both sides is evident, but it is possible to understand Origen's significance best when we let his work remain within its own time. He was not available either to praise or to refute Arius, nor could he have known what would be done with his words. No figure in the church's history lives outside the mission in which the church is engaged. For that mission, Origen found it useful to employ terminology and ideas that were not ultimately suitable for the confession of the truth. Of that there can be no doubt. Universalism mars *Peri Archon* more obviously than in *Contra Celsum* because the systematic structure of the former permitted frequent speculation about eschatology, where Origen unmoored himself from biblical data. He presumed that God's punishment of sin was remedial and medicinal rather than punitive.<sup>51</sup> The punishment of the wicked he analyzed under the metaphor of God's being the "physician of souls." Since God was reconciling the world to himself through the blood atonement of Jesus (2 Cor 5:20), divine wrath *cannot be* contained solely or even primarily under a rubric of mere discipline or medicine. Divine wrath that is only medicinal and not punitive would not have demanded the death of Jesus. Origen's eschatology makes light of the gravity of sin and thus the biblically explicit notion of everlasting punishment for the wicked.<sup>52</sup>

As the church evaluates its own history, it may avoid undue praise and undue blame by understanding its theologians as fitted for certain tasks at certain times.

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<sup>50</sup> Eusebius, *HE* VI.33.

<sup>51</sup> *Peri Archon* II.X.6–7.

<sup>52</sup> Matt 3:12; 25:41; Mark 9:48; John 5:29; 2 Thess 1:8; Heb 10:27; 2 Pet 3:7; Jude 1:7; Rev 20:14–15; 21:8.

There is a providence in Origen's final major work being in a genre not of his choosing and on a book he plainly disliked immensely, not respecting the interlocutor whom he found finally intellectually incoherent. We need not follow Jerome in massive praise at one time and great blame at another. Undue praise and undue blame of any figure in church history may be symptoms of idolatry, attributing too much good or evil agency to finally only human actors. Rowan Williams commented that, "It has been well said of Origen that in him the 'disciple of Jesus' coexists very uneasily with the Platonic speculative philosopher."<sup>53</sup> And rather than reading that as an eschatological sentence upon one man's life, we should recall that the missiological thrust to become "all things to all men" is a transformation neither entirely comfortable for the one who is transformed for mission nor easily accomplished without the slightest theological peril. All communication of the gospel entails the possibility of some error in transmission. Origen was part of the church's proclamation of the gospel for the Greek-speaking world and was used mightily for that purpose. Yet in every time and place the message and the mission remain the Lord's.

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<sup>53</sup> Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge* (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1979), 39.