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Asceticism

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The Westminster Handbook to Origen

Edited by JOHN ANTHONY MCGUCKIN

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Suffering will be the mark of those who are ambassadors of the word. Their fidelity brought *martyrdom* to the original apostles and may also do the same for their imitators (*HomJr* 14.14.1–69; *ExhMart* 34; *PEuch* 29.4).

Since they were all the authentic apostles of Jesus, there is a certain unanimity among the apostolic body and in the corpus of their teachings (*SerMt* 35; *HomLev* 4.4.11–38; *HomEx* 9.3.62–64). Even so, this unanimity is not a simple uniformity of doctrine. There were clearly several different ways of thinking present among the apostles and within their writings. Origen sees this as related to the fact that although Jesus is one, he has manifold aspects (see *Epinoiai*) wherein he reveals himself; and those who saw him did not see him all in the same way but had the gift of vision, depending on their ability to comprehend and upon the depth of their relationship with Jesus. Thus there is a marked difference between Peter, James, and *John* (who saw Jesus' glory on the mountain) and the other apostles (*CCels* 2.64.1–14; *HomGn* 1.7.57–60; 4.5.35–43). And Peter has a different approach to the cross from that of *Paul*. For Peter, Christ was a model to be studied (1 Pet. 2.21), whereas for Paul, Christ on the cross was the victor who had defeated the devil (Gal. 6.14). Origen thinks that both interpretations are legitimate (*HomJos* 8.3; *HomNum* 2.2.2–3), though clearly one is more profound than the other.

Origen's conceptualization of the apostolic office is critical to his theory of the inspiration of the Bible and the ongoing manner in which God reveals truth to the church as it progresses through the ages. In this he clearly emerges as a major theoretician of Christian *paradosis*, the sacred tradition of revelation, advancing considerably on Irenaeus's theological foundations (his treatment of apostolicity and the *regula fidei*) in the previous generation.

Eno (1973); Frank (1979).

Asceticism Origen could not be a more profoundly influential—if not sometimes enigmatic—figure when considered in conjunction with the controversial and puzzling historical phenomenon that is now called “asceticism,” the English term that is the usual (all too flat) translation of the astonishingly multivalent Greek term *askesis*. Within Christian circles of the late ancient Mediterranean and European medieval worlds, most especially within monastic traditions, Origen was a pivotal, complicated, and complicating figure, both as an early exemplar of ascetic piety and as an ascetic theologian. A part of what has made Origen so challenging was his determination to understand asceticism not as a reference to an independent reality, a particular set of practices, a particular religious doctrine, or even a particular aspect or dimension of a life, but as a profound abbreviation for the whole of a particular type of orientation (*bios*) to what he and many other Christians of his time referred to as the “true life,” participation in Christ, otherworldly existence. How to model the different orientation in personal comportment, how to think about it, and how to be articulate about the profound goal and the necessary steps to be taken to reach it and sustain it—these were among the challenges that Origen took upon himself to address. They were challenges of such magnitude and complexity as to bring upon Origen, during and beyond his lifetime, mixed reviews and misunderstandings about his substantive arguments and intentions.

According to Origen, the single most important challenge to be addressed by those who would participate in Christ's life was how to think about, and what to do with, the “tent” (*skene*) that was the body; that is, how to relate the challenges of embodiment to otherworldly visions and aspirations. A related primary and practical challenge had to do with the source(s) of revelation and authority for clarification regarding such matters. It was obvious to Origen and to his contemporaries in the faith

that the *Scripture* was the chief source of authority in these matters. Yet it was apparent to Origen that there remained the challenge about how to read the Bible so that the truths and mandates regarding participation in the life of Christ might be made evident. He felt that a particular type of reading of the Bible (intellectualist, with emphasis upon spiritualizing) was needed, especially for the mature. As much as he was the consummate and prolific biblical exegete, Origen was also the philosopher-theologian much influenced by Middle-Platonic teachings and discourses (see *Philosophy*). Origen's writings and teachings represent a profound confusion of these two discursive worlds. Such confusion in turn had great impact upon the teachings and modeling and institutionalization of Christian piety after him.

Drawing upon his philosophic and rhetorical training, Origen creatively and selectively engaged Platonic teachings about the philosophic life as a type of otherworldly existence and as a conceptual and language bridge in order to engage and translate the more ancient truths of the Bible about participation in the life of Christ. Understood in terms of the (quest for the) resurrected life and as superior existence, it was the life in which the believer could claim to “see God in the heart . . . and know [God] with the mind” (*PArch* 1.1.8), in contrast to the experience of dullness and death of earthly corporeal existence (*PArch* 3.4.2). So bodily existence was framed by and subsumed under the governance of the spiritual and was, therefore, rendered problematic. It was not altogether rejected or denied; it was valued in limited terms as the needed locus of the soul's preparation for participation in the spiritual realm. Yet was also seen as the stumbling block in the way of flight to the other realm. In this situation the believer's body provoked complex thinking and negotiation so that it might always be properly oriented toward the otherworldly (see *Anthropology*).

Here then is where the ascetic life is made compelling. The life oriented toward the otherworldly can be realized only to the degree that a larger perspective (informed and focused by the Bible and philosophical traditions) about the origins and destiny of the world and about the mixed constitution of human beings is recognized. Origen understood the visible world to be the result of the fall of soulness into an embodiment of materiality that is destined for corruption (see *Fall, Souls*). Human beings are constituted as spirit, soul, and body (the first two often synonymous for him). Such a constitution sets in motion the struggles between the original spiritual realm and the belated material realm. These struggles are played out in the soul housed in the body (*ComRm* 1.18). Yet Origen also argued that the body is not intrinsically evil and that the soul is not merely a neutral entity housed by, or clothed in, the body. The problem is that the interests and needs of the body and those things associated with it distract the soul from a primary focus upon the spiritual realm (*PArch* 3.4.4). This is why the body is sometimes characterized as “death” or “corruption,” and the soul (*nous*) as that which can produce the virtues of otherworldly existence, namely righteousness, self-control, courage, wisdom (*PArch* 4.4.10).

Whether or not we now accept Eusebius's report (*H.E.* 6.8.1–5) about Origen's supposedly radical act of ascetical self-castration in his youth (for Origen himself denounces such a literalist interpretation of the Gospel text [Matt. 19:12] as “an outrage”) [*ComMt* 15.1–5]), it is clear that Eusebius reported the tradition for the edification of his fourth-century readers and is at some pains to describe Origen's dedicated scholarly life in terms that would be easily identified as protomonastic (Eusebius, *H.E.* 6.3). Origen's mature exegesis always shows a layered, albeit complex, reading of the Scriptures and of the human constitution itself.

Just as human beings are complex organisms constituted by spirit, soul,

and body, so the truths of the Scriptures, especially regarding Christian practice in the world, must be seen as layered and engaged by different "senses" or types of readings (see *Allegory, Typology*), the superior reading being the allegorical or spiritual. It is this system of reading which, for Origen, helps the mature believer understand the complexity of the fundamental truth of the ascetical imperative: that the body is not intrinsically polluted, that no human being is naturally or fatalistically oriented toward life or death (but must choose), that the believer can be made perfect only by God's will, but must nevertheless freely choose to discipline the body in order to cooperate with the process of being made perfect (*PArch* 1.5.5-7) (see *Grace, Virtue*).

Chadwick (1962); Crouzel (1989), 135-49; Gould (1995); McGuckin (1985a); Rubensen (1999); Wimbush and Valantasis (1995).

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Atonement Both Harnack (1895-1903) and De Faye (1928) claimed that the traditional Christian lore about the redemption as being centered in the cross, though richly expounded in Origen, remained subordinate or merely an annex to his personal vision of redemption as the restoration of rational creatures to their original state, guided by the enlightening presence of the Logos. The tension between these two pictures can be allayed somewhat if we note a certain chronological sequence in the development of Origen's thought. A Platonizing perspective on the incarnational economy prevails in the early Alexandrian masterpieces (*PArch* and *ComJn* 1-5). Here Origen describes it as follows: "On earth he is not as he is in heaven, for he has become flesh and speaks through shadow, types and images," thus offering a shadow of the Logos to simple believers who cannot progress to the vision of the true Logos

(*ComJn* 2.49-50). The perfect have gone beyond faith in Christ crucified (Christ according to the flesh) to knowledge of Christ as Wisdom (*ComJn* 2.29; 33; cf. 1 Cor. 1:23-24; 2:6; 2 Cor. 5:16). However, the incarnation acquires more centrality as Origen the theologian progressively steep himself in scriptural thought, even though he occasionally still reaffirms the need to graduate from "Christ crucified" to "Christ the Wisdom of God" (*HomEx* 12.4).

The tension between the two pictures of salvation is also allayed by a spiritualizing interpretation of the biblical and ecclesiastical traditions about the atonement, which Origen seeks to reground in his vision of the work of the Logos. This is particularly clear in the result of the incarnational economy. For Origen, the glory of Christ's death for humanity is due not to the impassible Logos but to the man, who is rewarded by being made identical with the Logos (*ComJn* 32.322-26). The humanity of Christ, though originally (almost anticipating Nestorian Christology) an independent hypostasis from the Logos (*ComJn* 1.195-97; 32.192-93), is now "fused" with the Logos (almost as if in monophysite style) (*ComMt* 15.24) and by sharing in its divinity is transformed into God, Christ's body acquiring an ethereal and divine quality (*CCels* 3.41). This ascent to a maximally spiritualized mode of being is something that Origen envisages as a destiny for other humans, too, insofar as they are fallen spirits in the process of return to God (see *Anthropology*).

The redemptive role of the Logos centers on the image of his coming (*epidenia*) into the world, in particular his dwelling in the souls of saints and prophets (Wis. 9; *CCels* 4.3.7). Early texts in the Origenian corpus describe the invisible mission of the Logos to the Old Testament saints almost as equal to the coming of the Logos to the apostles (*ComJn* 1.37; 6.15-16; 28). In later writings Origen is of the opinion that the incarnational economy brings a fuller presence of the Logos (*ComMt* 17.36;

ComJn 13.315-19). Its climactic indwelling in the soul of Jesus is a central nexus in Origen's metaphysical and salvation-historical vision (*CCels* 7.17). Universal participation in the Logos is enriched by the special coming of Christ to the saints, who may thereby be said to be the only truly Logos-filled people (*logikoi*) (*PArch* 1.3.7). Curiously, an early text (*ComJn* 1.273-75) associates this universal presence with the incarnational economy, whereas the special coming of Christ to the soul is linked to the nonincarnate or "naked" Logos (cf. *ComJn* 6.179). Even so, Origen considers that the universal presence of the Logos in the cosmos was insufficient to save the human race and so had to be sent to the world of humankind as incarnate (*ComJn* 2.83). Origen believes that humans are defective until the Logos is perfected within them, but this occurs not in the incarnational economy but in a surpassing or bypassing of it. Origen's unease about the singularity of the incarnation is connected with his theory of pre-existence, his vision of salvation as restoration to a status quo ante, which differs from the sense of a radically new future found in the earlier soteriologies of Irenaeus and Clement. The process of atonement in Origen is thus "largely" figured as a Platonic *regressus*. The Logos returns to the state in which he was at the beginning with God; his incarnate state is something of a pedagogical detour. However, Origen has read his Scripture carefully. The Logos in heaven still carries the marks of the passion, and when we contemplate him we will not forget, he says, that he came to us in a human body (*ComJn* 2.61). But for all practical purposes, in his vision of the transcendent fulfillment of salvation into which the Logos inducts restored souls, the world of bodies will be little more than a memory.

Even in later texts, Christ's healing work in his incarnation, death, and physical resurrection, though proclaimed necessary for salvation (*HomJos* 4.5; *HomLev* 8.10) and though foregrounded in his apologia against Celsus, may still have a somewhat secondary

status beside or within the total salvation process, which concerns the relation of the Logos to rational souls, whether angelic or human. The Logos comes as a physician to sinners, but as a teacher of divine mysteries to those who no longer sin (*CCels* 3.62; *ComJn* 1.124). The comingling of divinity and flesh is more warmly celebrated in his later work, therefore, but the emphasis is on the friendship and communion with God, or divinization, that it allows (*CCels* 3.28). The Logos appears in many shapes or forms (*epinoiai*) (*ComJn* 1.119; *CCels* 3.21; *ComMt* 12.29-30; 36-37), depending on one's degree of spiritual progress (*CCels* 4.16; *SerMt* 100); he appears as a human to humans, as an angel to angels (*ComJn* 1.217; *ComMt* 12.30; *HomGen* 8.8) for the respective needs of each. In linking himself to human nature he uses all its aspects as pedagogic expedients (*ComMt* 10.14; *HomIs* 7.1) and though impassible suffers in his body on the cross (*ComPs* 21:2), suffers in compassion for the multitude (*ComMt* 10.23), and grieves even now when we sin, his work unfinished until we are made perfect (*HomLev* 7.2).

Origen provided the soteriological ideas of the church with a broad and secure biblical basis and at the same time fashioned them into an integrated whole. He fleshed out a biblically resonant atonement language in his allegorical reading of Leviticus and sought to place it within a comprehensively overarching philosophical and theological framework. As is always the mark of Origenian thought, this he did in a profoundly spiritualizing key and, accordingly, he is always ready to say that it profits us nothing that Christ once came in the flesh or once lived in Paul, unless he comes to our minds daily (*HomLc* 22.3; *HomJr* 9.1).

Origen carries through systematically the interpretation of Christ's death as a propitiatory sacrifice made necessary by sin. In a style that would be fateful for later theology, he figuratively describes this sacrifice as a complicated "transaction": Jesus, or the Logos, offers