

Origen: Platonism and the Preexistence of Souls in the Gospel of John

Anna Konstantopoulos

Dr. Blackburn

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Introduction

Philosophy and religion have been at odds nearly as long as both have existed. There is a never ending tension between philosophy and religion, reason and faith. Many believe these categories are completely separated, with no need to use one with the other. Others believe reason is essential to faith, otherwise it is impossible to know what one really believes. Origen of Alexandria was one of these people. An early church father who was considered the father of biblical scholasticism, he is the perfect example of what it means to integrate philosophy with theology. But Origen was not a true Platonist, as many believe. He simply used Platonism as a means to interpret scripture more accurately, which can be seen in his *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*.

Historical Context

Origen of Alexandria was raised in Alexandria by Christian parents and “held firmly to the Christianity his parents had taught him.”¹ By all accounts he was extremely devoted in his faith, which is clear simply by the abundance of works he produced about the Christian faith and scripture. His writings were primarily scripture-focused because “the text and exposition of the Bible stand at the very centre of Origen’s work.”² This was also due to his belief that scripture needed to be interpreted. To Origen, the scriptures were “words addressed to someone from whom it awaits a response.”³ He thought while the most important and basic parts of scripture

¹ Eusebius, *The Church History* (Translated by Maier, Paul L. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2007), 202.

² Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 71.

³ Peter William Martens, *Origen and Scripture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 4.

could be understood by anyone (which is what God intended) there were multiple levels of meaning which could only be reached by thorough and proper interpretation. His methodology was influenced by his education, for “by training Origen was a philologist, a scholar of the Greek language and its literature.”⁴ Eusebius, a church historian who provides most of our information about Origen is found, portrays “Origen as a kind of superhero of Christian piety and scholarship.”⁵

Origen, though primarily a theologian, was heavily influenced by philosophy. This “process of Hellenization” which occurs in Origen’s writings was “inevitable” due simply to the fact he lived in Alexandria.⁶ Alexandria was known as the “spiritual center of an aggressive Hellenism.”⁷ Alexandria identified itself as Greek, and made its culture reflect that identity.⁸ Origen, like his teacher Clement of Alexandria before him, was going to be Hellenistic in his tendencies (whether it was in his language, his methods of reasoning, or his rhetoric) regardless of his intentions. But Origen’s intentions became very much strongly in favor of the use of philosophy within theology; he was the “person who would do more than anyone else to relate the Bible to Greek philosophy.”⁹ But he never put the study of philosophy above the study of

⁴ Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 1.

⁵ Anthony Grafton, and Megan Hale Williams, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 22

⁶ David T. Runia, *Philo and the Church Fathers: A Collection of Papers* (New York: Leiden, 1995), 16.

⁷ Joseph Wilson Trigg, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1983), 3.

⁸ *Ibid*, 3.

⁹ Trigg, *Origen*, 3.

theology. He used his hellenistic background to aid in his scriptural interpretation, which he passed onto his students. When teaching them, he “instilled in them a love of philosophy and convinced them to exchange their previous passion for theological study.”¹⁰ He believed so strongly in the use of philosophy in theology that he passed this method onto his students. He also defined Christianity as the “best form of philosophy,” putting them in the same category which had rarely been done so boldly, aside from Clement of Alexandria.¹¹

Introduction to Scholarly Research

There is disagreement among scholars about whether or not to consider Origen as a true Platonist. A true Platonist adheres to the ideas and methodology of Platonism above all else. Is this the case with Origen, or was Platonism just another philosophy Origen used in his search for proper biblical interpretation? The major scholars who argue Origen was a true Platonist are Peter Martens, Illaria Ramelli, R. P. C. Hanson, and Henry Chadwick. There are two main criteria these scholars use to support their view of Origen: methodology and ideology. They either argue that Origen’s methods are Platonic in nature, or that his ideas line up with Platonic ideas, or both.

Both Martens and Chadwick focuses on Origen’s ideology as evidence for his Platonism. Martens focuses primarily on Origen’s belief in the preexistence of souls as evidence for his Platonism. He also fights against the claim that Origen was Platonic simply due to outside influences not within his control. Martens argues Origen engaged with philosophy critically, so his Platonic ideas and language were intentional. He could not have been unaware of his

¹⁰ Eusebius, *The Church History*, 209.

¹¹ Grafton, *Christianity*, 23.

philosophical positions, and so he at the very least must have chosen to continue in these positions, even if they were caused by outside influences. He also points out Origen viewed God as “mind,” which is a Platonic idea. Chadwick argues Origen is Platonic not simply in his ideology, but specifically in how he viewed God. He claims Origen “sought...to show the harmony of Jesus and Plato.”¹² He also argued that Origen sought to know about God through the ways outlined by the Platonic school.¹³

Ilaria Ramelli sees both Plato’s ideas and methods in Origen’s writings. For instance, “Origen views scripture like ‘Plato’s living speech.’”¹⁴ Biblical interpretation is not a science but an art. It also ties into how both Plato and Origen view truth as “hidden.”¹⁵ Origen viewed scripture as something which needs to be interpreted and which has multiple levels of meaning. There is also a focus on unity and coherence which is seen in both figures.¹⁶ But Origen’s methodology is Platonic as well. He “deems allegorical exegesis a *philosophical* exercise, and that he takes it for granted that such an allegorical interpretation must be applied to Plato’s myths...which he claimed for scripture as well.”¹⁷ His use of allegory in itself is hellenistic, but Ramelli focuses on his use of it to incorporate Plato’s ideas into Scripture.

¹² Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 71.

¹³ *Ibid*, 82.

¹⁴ Ilaria Ramelli, “The Philosophical Stance of Allegory in Stoicism and Its Reception in Platonism, Pagan and Christian: Origen in Dialogue with the Stoics and Plato” (*International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 18 no. 3 2011), 354.

¹⁵ Ramelli, “The Philosophical Stance,” 351.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 348.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 359.

Hanson argues for Origen's Platonism based on his methodology. He agrees with Ramelli about Origen's use of allegory, and says it was a "fundamental criticism of Origen, beginning during his own lifetime, was that he used allegorical interpretation to provide a specious justification for reinterpreting Christian Doctrine in terms of Platonic philosophy."¹⁸ He also argues Origen's threefold interpretation of scripture is "assisted by Platonic psychology."¹⁹

Believing Origen was a Platonist is by far the most popular stance. The only major scholar on the other side is Mark Edwards, who argued Origen's Platonism was simply a result of his time. Living in a city as hellenistic, how could he not seem Platonic? It means that "as human creatures they enjoyed the same climate and used the same resources, as citizens they lived under common ordinances and aspired to common goods, and as philosophers they reasoned on the same principles."²⁰ Every human is in some way influenced by their cultural environment and time, and Edwards argues Origen of Alexandria is no different; for "how, it is said, could anyone who was nurtured in the Plato-ridden atmosphere of Alexandria fail to become a Platonist himself?"²¹ Or, according to Edwards, who could fail to look like a Platonist? Edwards real view is not that Origen should be measured by the modern definition of what it means to be Platonic but that "Origen must be measured by, not merely assimilated to, the standards of his time."²²

¹⁸ R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), vi.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 237.

²⁰ Mark Edwards, *Origen against Plato* (England: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), 5.

²¹ Edwards, *Origen against Plato*, 7.

²² *Ibid*, 9.

Criteria

To follow Edwards example, Origen must be judged by the standards of his time to whether he was truly a Platonist. This assessment can be done using the criteria from the aforementioned scholars, regarding ideology and methodology. There are four major criteria. The first (from Ramelli) is how Origen uses allegory. The mere use of allegory does not reflect Platonism, but Origen has been accused of using it to implant Platonic ideas in scripture. The second is the use of Platonic language (from Martens). How intentionally does Origen use this language to describe what is being taught in scripture? The third is the use of a three tiered scriptural analysis, and how Origen goes about finding meaning in scripture (from Hanson). According to Hanson, Origen states there are “three senses in Scripture, corresponding to the body, soul, and spirit.”²³ However, Hanson says there is no support for this approach in Scripture, and that it was influenced “by Platonic psychology.”²⁴ The last, and the primary focus of this paper, is how Origen deals with the concept of the preexistence of souls (from Martens). Was it truly a belief which Origen held, or was he just claiming there is room in the proper interpretation of scripture for the possibility of this idea, which is highly Platonic?

All of these criteria, primarily the preexistence of souls, can be seen in Origen’s *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*. It was a magnificent body of work which “became a vast work of thirty-two tomes, of which the medieval scribes only had the courage and energy to transcribe the greater part of nine.”²⁵ But even the entire commentary only goes up

²³ Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 236.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 237.

²⁵ Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 73.

until John 13:3.²⁶ Therein Origen “not only paid critical attention to the meaning of the words in the manner of Alexandrian scholarship, but compared each significant word or concept in the text at hand with that word or concept as it appears elsewhere in Scripture.”²⁷ The words “beginning” and “word” are the only things discussed in the first volume.²⁸ Origen’s *Commentary on the Gospel according to John* is therefore extremely helpful in understanding the true nature of Origen’s position on the preexistence of souls, since it is so in depth. Therefore, this analysis will focus only on the portions of the text relating to this doctrine and the aforementioned criteria.

Commentary Context

The *Commentary* had two main purposes: to fight against ideas of Valentinian Gnosticism²⁹ and to prove to his patron Ambrose "that orthodoxy is not duller than heresy."³⁰ This second purpose is especially important when trying to assess the philosophical standing of Origen, because this commentary is “remarkable for some speculative flights.”³¹ His speculation is not necessarily reflective of what he truly believes, but rather a reflection of how exciting he thinks scriptural interpretation to be. And at the core of his “exposition is in search of a spiritual meaning which is not heretical and yet goes deeper than the surface meaning apparent to

²⁶ Trigg, *Origen*, 148.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 73.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

ordinary Church readers.”³² Yet he manages to do this while also defending orthodoxy.³³ His goal was to make orthodoxy interesting by speculating where there was space and freedom to do so, but never at the expense of orthodox beliefs. It can sometimes be difficult to see this as John is mystical in nature. It is the most spiritual of the four gospels, leading to a more speculative commentary. This speculation is seen clearly in the doctrine of preexistence of souls.

Preexistence of Souls

Origen’s doctrine of the preexistence of the soul can be summed up thus: “Human souls originally flourished in a discarnate state prior to a transgression that led to their subsequent embodiment.”³⁴ This is the most basic definition. Origen also speculated about the origin of the soul, and says there are a few possible options: either “1) it originates from the paternal seed (“traducianism”), or 2) it is created by God, in which case it is either 2a) created by God at the time that the embryo’s body is formed (“creationism”) or 2b) some time before this body is formed (“pre-existence,” i.e., the soul exists before it is embodied).”³⁵ None of this is inherently unorthodox.

Scholars are also divided on whether or not Origen truly believed in this doctrine, or was merely speculating about it in his *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*. Martens argues that “rather than espouse the biblical view of the soul’s relationship to the body, Origen opted for the conflicting view of Plato, the authoritative Greek philosopher throughout much of late

³² Ibid.

³³ Trigg, *Origen*, 149.

³⁴ Peter William Martens, “Embodiment, Heresy, and the Hellenization of Christianity: The Descent of the Soul in Plato and Origen” (*Harvard Theological Review* 108 no. 4 2015): 595.

³⁵ Martens, “Embodiment,” 600.

antiquity.”³⁶ Martens does not question at all Origen’s position, and leaves no room for the idea Origen was merely speculating. He shows that Origen points out several scriptures that suggest this doctrine, but this is not evidence that Origen actually held this view. Hanson also agrees with Martens, and says that even though Origen objects to Plato’s doctrine of the “transmigration of souls,” he does this because his view is so similar.³⁷ Trigg is another scholar who agrees with this view of Origen, because he says that his “position is consistent with a doctrine of continual reincarnation such as Plato at least envisioned mythically.”³⁸ but he does say that Origen developed this idea a bit differently than did Plato.

Mark Edwards is strongly against this view. Rather, “the evidence indicates that, except in a vestigial form that is not heretical, Origen never embraced this doctrine, either as an hypothesis or as an edifying myth.”³⁹ Origen simply left room for the possibility, by following his method of scriptural interpretation. Since it is not unorthodox and there is room for it in the text, it is truthful to say that a Christian can hold the preexistence of souls to be true. He also specifies that there are two aspects of the Platonic doctrine of the soul that Origen does not agree with: the transgression of the soul before it has a body, and the notion of one soul moving through numerous bodies.⁴⁰ It is important to note the absence of these details in Origen’s thought because the “bare hypothesis of a pre-existent soul, without the corollary of

³⁶ Martens, “Embodiment,” 595.

³⁷ Hanson, *Allegory*, 217.

³⁸ Trigg, *Origen*, 107.

³⁹ Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*, 89.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 90.

transmigration or a fall from heaven, was not a heresy.”⁴¹ If Origen actually did believe in the pre-existence of souls, and not just as a hypothesis, even that would not be considered a heretical belief without the addition of these two facets of Platonic thought. Lastly, Edwards argues Origen’s idea may not even have come into being due to Platonic ideas, but due to the ambiguity of the phrase “*ab initial creature.*”⁴² Mark Edwards argues both against Origen having either Platonic ideology or methodology.

Analysis

Now we must look at Origen’s writings to see if they line up with the criteria previously established by these renowned scholars. We will gauge Origen’s alleged Platonism by examining his treatment of the doctrine of preexistence of souls in Jesus, the doctrine of preexistence of souls in John the Baptist, and miscellaneous examples of possible Platonic ideology and methodology in Origen’s *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*.

Christ is central in nearly all of Origen’s works; “No one would deny that Christ the Logos, the eternal Word and Wisdom of God, is at the centre of Origen’s theology.”⁴³ This focus is seen clearly throughout his *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*. Origen starts in the first book of his commentary with who Christ is. Above all, he says “we cannot fail to see that it is as a man that He is Christ, in respect of His soul, which was human and liable to be troubled and sore vexed, but that He is conceived as king in respect of the divine in Him.”⁴⁴ There are two

⁴¹ Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*, 90.

⁴² Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*, 94.

⁴³ Edwards, *Origen Against Plato*, 65,

⁴⁴ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 1:30.

primary aspects of Jesus which Origen affirms: "“Here again, is this the biblical Word? Is this the person of Jesus? It is both, identically.”⁴⁵ While Origen clearly states that Jesus’ soul and humanity became one, many view this language as implying the preexistence of the soul. Origen talks about the Word being there with God at the beginning. As this is the same Word which is Christ and becomes human, it sounds as if it was a soul who preexisted a body. Origen says in his commentary that “Jesus existed before him (John the Baptist) because He was before him, since He is the first-born of all creation.”⁴⁶ This language is used to support more explicit ways of Origen addressing this topic as evidence of him believing it, and not just entertaining it. However, this is not enough evidence on its own to support thinking Origen believed in the preexistence of the soul. To deny this aspect of Christ would be to deny his very divinity, which is far more heretical than believing in the preexistence of souls.

Origen describes Jesus using Platonic language. He refers to him several times in his commentary as “demiurge,” saying “For Christ is, in a manner, the demiurge, to whom the Father says, ‘*Let there be light,*’ and ‘*Let there be a firmament.*’”⁴⁷ The demiurge is a dualistic Platonic idea, used to make a distinction between two beings: one who was just and one who was good.⁴⁸ Origen himself calls the people who believed this heretics.⁴⁹ But then immediately afterwards, he says that the “distinction may, I think, if carefully examined, be applied to the Father and the

⁴⁵ Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 1950), 390.

⁴⁶ Origen, *Commentary*, 5:3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 1:22.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 1:40.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*.

Son."⁵⁰ He does this to emphasize the differences between the Father and the Son. This distinction, however, is what lead to many accusing him of being a heretic for claiming the Son as less than the Father. He says “Christ we have taken to be the demiurge, and the Father the greater than He. Christ we have taken to be the demiurge, and the Father the greater than He.”⁵¹ He explicitly refers to Christ not only as the demiurge, but as being less than the father.

How much of this can directly be tied to Platonism? According to Origen, this is nothing new compared to what is seen in scripture. Throughout the gospels, especially the Gospel of John, Christ is seen as saying such phrases as “the Father is greater than I.”⁵² What Origen is claiming about the relationship between the Father and the Son is nothing else than what is explicitly stated in scripture. The language, however, is explicitly Platonic. But Origen uses this Platonic language to describe a scriptural ideal. To expound upon scripture necessitates the use of non-scriptural language, and that is exactly what Origen is doing with the language of the demiurge. Origen uses Platonic language, but does not reflect Platonic ideas when it comes to Christ except for what is in accordance with the scriptures.

More so than in his study and exposition of the nature of Christ, Origen’s doctrine of the preexistence of souls can be seen in his study of John the Baptist. In his *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, Origen spends most of his analysis on the language of John being “sent” into the world. This language leads to Origen’s primary question: “He who is sent is sent from somewhere to somewhere; and the careful student will, therefore, enquire from what

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² John 14:28, NRSV.

quarter John was sent, and whither.”⁵³ Origen begins by addressing the possibility of John being sent in a more spiritual sense. Many interpret this language as saying John was sent to minister, in the same way ministers are “sent” to minister. This interpretation sounds more like a calling from God rather than a literal being sent from one place to another. But to Origen, as with most of his scriptural interpretation, there is a deeper understanding: John was sent into the world.⁵⁴ And following the logical procession of thought, Origen says that John must have been sent from somewhere that was not earth, which means it was “either from heaven or from Paradise, or from some other quarter to this place on the earth.”⁵⁵ Since John was sent into the physical realm, he must have been coming from the non-physical realm.

But this kind of language is not the only evidence Origen draws on for believing in the preexistence of John’s soul. He says that the “more convincing argument for the view that John was sent from another region when he entered into the body, the one object of his entry into this life being that he should bear witness of the truth, may be drawn from the narrative of his birth.”⁵⁶ Specifically, he is referring to the passage in John where Mary comes to visit her cousin Elizabeth to tell her of the good news she has received from the angel. Upon hearing Mary’s greeting, John “leapt” in Elizabeth’s womb. It was not a mere coincidence, according to Origen, but evidence that John was aware of why he had been sent. Even in the womb, he recognized the news of the savior. Origen is so strongly convinced by both the language surrounding John and

⁵³ Origen, *Commentary*, 2:24.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

this story that he says anyone “who sedulously guards himself in his dealings with Scripture against forced, or casual, or capricious procedure, must necessarily assume that John's soul was older than his body, and subsisted by itself before it was sent on the ministry of the witness of the light.”⁵⁷ The most speculative part of all of this is when Origen wonders who John is. Simply, he says “John is Elijah who is to come.”⁵⁸ He says this because John is accused of being Elijah by several people throughout the gospel of John. Origen also believes it is most likely John was Elijah because “he had been promised immortality.”⁵⁹ But Origen clarifies this is extremely speculative, and that regardless of whether John is Elijah, his soul most likely preexisted his body.

Origen is claiming that he is not bringing a Platonic doctrine into scripture, but rather this doctrine is evident to anyone who takes the time to analyze scripture. John being described as someone who has been “sent” must mean he was sent from somewhere, and that somewhere must not be of earth. If John is leaping in the womb, it must be a sign of some kind of knowledge an infant should have. Neither of these ideas are inherently heretical,⁶⁰ but are rather the logical progression of thought if one takes the time think Scripture through. And Origen differentiates his own position from the Platonic doctrine of preexistence of souls, by saying that John would most likely be “an angel who had deliberately chosen to become incarnate in order to minister to

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Origen, *Commentary*, 6:7.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The definition of heresy depends on the context. In this context, I simply mean that Origen’s ideas were not condemned at the time in which he was writing. Heresy is contrary to the doctrines and unity of the church; his ideas were neither, and there was no formal council or synod which addressed them.

Christ.”⁶¹ This proposal does not fit within the Platonic thought of souls having to transgress in order to be sent to a body, for “though for most souls embodiment is a remedial punishment, some souls have taken on bodies in order to serve their fellows. This is preeminently true of the human soul of Christ though Origen hinted in his *Commentary on the Gospel according to John* it may also be true of John the Baptist.”⁶² Here, God chooses a spirit to be sent into the earth to make way for Christ, much like the Word is sent into the world to make a path for salvation.

Origen’s descriptions of both Jesus and John, how he brings into discussion the preexistence of soul, and the Platonic language he uses to do so are what most scholars rely on to prove Origen is a true Platonist. But there are other Platonic themes and examples of the criteria previously laid out which can be seen in Origen’s *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*. Primarily, it is the language he uses to describe commonly accepted biblical themes. The first is when he discusses the reason given to human beings, he says “It is the light of men either, as we showed before, because there is nothing to prevent us from regarding it as the light of other beings besides men, or because all beings endowed with reason are called men because they are made in the image of God.”⁶³ The language Origen uses to describe the inherent gift of reason within humanity is compared by scholars to the language found in Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.” But it is not an unbiblical concept to say that because all human beings are made in the image of God they are endowed with the light of reason. It is also not an inherently Platonic idea. The phrasing of this passage simply shows Origen’s upbringing and education in an extremely

⁶¹ Hanson, *Allegory*, 217.

⁶² Trigg, *Origen*, 107.

⁶³ Origen, *Commentary*, 2:17.

hellenistic culture. But it is further proof his Platonic language is not reflective of Platonic ideas; rather, it is simply a man who is immersed in his culture, and is speaking of scripture with the language and resources he has.

Origen's exegetical methodology of scriptural interpretation has often been deemed to have Platonic origins, specifically because his "doctrine of the spiritual sense is not restricted to the Holy Book."⁶⁴ This is because to Origen, scripture "was not a self-interpreting document."⁶⁵ It is not something that can be taken at face value; rather, there are three levels to Origen's interpretation of scripture. His focus on deeper meanings of scripture can be seen when he is discussing John the Baptist. He states that John the Baptist being "sent" can mean simply sent on a mission but he doesn't stop there: "so much we have said of the first sense; and now we adduce certain solutions which help to confirm the deeper meaning about John."⁶⁶ This kind of approach, this constant search for the hidden meaning, has often been accused of stemming from the Platonic idea of hidden truths.

Origen is constantly focusing on the deeper, more spiritual meanings of Scripture, which is why he so frequently uses allegory as a tool to dig deeper into seemingly simple passages of scripture. Indeed "the word allegory is automatically associated with Origenian exegesis."⁶⁷ Many view his use of allegory as a way to incorporate Platonic doctrine into scripture. But, as previously shown, not all Platonic doctrines Origen is accused of having are actually Platonic.

⁶⁴ Lubac, *History*, 396.

⁶⁵ Martens, *Origen*, 4.

⁶⁶ Origen, *Commentary*, 2:24.

⁶⁷ Lubac, *History*, 10.

Allegory alone is simply an interpretive device, even though it is hellenistic in its origin. However, it is not evidence of Platonism in this context. Origen does not use allegorical interpretation to justify the seemingly Platonic doctrine of the preexistence of souls. He focuses solely on what is said in the scriptural passages about Jesus and John. If Origen's only purpose in using allegory was to implant Platonic ideas into scripture, then this would have been the perfect place. But Origen's focus on using allegory in other places is due to the fact that "All of the Biblical writers knew, he repeatedly insisted, the full mystical meaning of their books and intentionally employed allegory to hide it."⁶⁸ It was not something Origen merely thought was useful to the interpretation of scripture, but rather something he viewed as essential to it. But even in his time he knew some of the connotations which would be made about his methods, and so he "sharply distinguished his own use of the allegorical method from the false and arbitrary interpretations of the Gnostics."⁶⁹ He was so against using it in a false way that he explicitly drew a line between him and those who were falsely employing allegory for their own gain.

Conclusion

Origen has so frequently been accused of being a true Platonist that it is almost accepted as fact. This accusation is due to his use of Platonic language, seemingly Platonic doctrines, and Platonic methods for interpreting scripture. However, while he does seem Platonic on the surface, Origen is clearly adhering to biblical truths first and foremost in his scriptural interpretation. Yet there is a much larger issue at hand: is there an interpreter of scripture who is able to remove their worldview while looking at the scriptures? To completely remove their

⁶⁸ Trigg, *Origen*, 150.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 153.

upbringing, their education, the input of family and friends, the common scholarship, and their culture while interpreting scripture? Can this truly be done with any text by any person?

Everyone has their own presuppositions, their own culture, their own use of language. And while these things do reflect a persons upbringing, it does not necessarily reflect their values and their opinions on what they believe to be true. For Origen, it would be illogical to assume Origen could suspend his worldview while looking at scripture: “the Christian truth did not enter into empty minds.” Origen’s mind was far from empty, but the conclusions he reached are nothing if not biblical. He knew the influence Platonic philosophy had in his life, and rather than ignoring it he used it to better his scriptural interpretation. Many of us, if we are not ignorant of the influences in our own lives, fail to subordinate them to biblical standards. If Origen is a heretic, then we all are.

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