

## THEODICY AND THE THEME OF COSMIC CONFLICT IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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In one of the most remarkable texts reflecting the early Christian view of reality, the writer makes the charge against Christians: “[T]hat they make some quite blasphemous errors is also shown by this example of their utter ignorance, which has similarly led them to depart from the true meaning of the divine enigmas, when they make a being opposed to God; devil, and in the Hebrew tongue, *Satanas* are the names which they give to this same being.”<sup>1</sup>

The people described in these deliberately unflattering terms are second-century Christians, and the specific target of scorn is their belief in the existence of personal evil. Those who hold this belief are charged with blasphemy for adopting an outlook that is an affront to the sovereignty of God and with ignorance for substituting a primitive doctrine for one that is more enlightened. Christians have, in effect, turned back the clock, leaving hard-won insight into “*the true meaning of the divine enigmas*” for a crude superstition.

It is important to note that this scathing indictment of the Christian view has not come to us firsthand. The words are those of Celsus, a philosopher of the Middle Platonic School,<sup>2</sup> who set out to refute the Christian teaching at some point during the reign of the emperor Marcus Aurelius (161-180).<sup>3</sup> But Celsus’s work on the *True Account*<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.42. References here are to the translation by Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965). A new critical edition of the complete Greek text has been published as *Origene: Contra Celsum libri VIII*, ed. M. Marcovich (Leiden: Brill, 2001).

<sup>2</sup>The evolution of the thought-world of Middle Platonism has been lucidly explained and discussed by John Dillon, *The Middle Platonists: 80 B.C., to A.D. 220*, rev. ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>3</sup>Silke-Petra Bergjan, “Celsus the Epicurean? The Interpretation of an Argument in Origen, *Contra Celsum*,” *HTR* 94 (2001): 179-204. Origen mistakenly identified Celsus as an Epicurean at the beginning of *Contra Celsum*, but he then gradually seems to have realized his mistake since Celsus’s argument is Platonic. Nevertheless, Origen allowed the notion of Celsus as an Epicurean to stand, possibly because of the rhetorical advantages of this impression.

<sup>4</sup>The Greek title was ‘*Ἀληθῆς λόγος*. Attempts have been made to restore Celsus’s text, such as by Robert Bader, *Der ‘Ἀληθῆς λόγος des Kelsos* (Stuttgart-Berlin: Tübinger Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft, 1940). A convenient introduction to Celsus’s views

would have been irretrievably lost were it not for the effort of the Alexandrian apologist and theologian Origen (185-254). After considerable reluctance, Origen was prevailed upon by his patron Ambrose to refute Celsus's unflattering attack some seventy years after its publication, most likely during the reign of Philip the Arabian (244-249).<sup>5</sup> In his book, Origen carefully reproduces the view of his deceased opponent before attempting to refute it. The passage in question thus stands as a testimony of the earlier writer's view of Christian belief in the latter half of the second century. Moreover, while Origen sometimes takes Celsus to task for misunderstanding or misrepresenting the Christian position, dismissing some objections as untrue or exaggerated, Celsus's statement on the Christian view of evil is not one of them. More often than not, Celsus has done his homework; it was indeed a fact that the Christians "make a being opposed to God," naming that being "devil" in Greek and "Satan" in Hebrew.

The Christian belief in the reality of this doctrine must be sought in the Christian record that precedes him rather than in Origen's own time and preoccupation. While the viewpoint reproduced by Celsus may be classified as patristic rather than apostolic, this chronology nevertheless aligns the Christian outlook at such an early point with the NT material that it creates a continuity of perspective.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the NT witness to the reality of

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is found in Marcel Borret's essay, "Celsus: A Pagan Perspective on Scripture," in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity*, ed. Paul M. Blowers (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 259-287.

<sup>5</sup>Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989), 48. Chadwick's, xxiv-xxix, review and discussion of the dating of Celsus's *True Account* concludes with the period 177-180, although he does not rule out an earlier date. Michael Frede places Celsus's book between 160 and 175 C.E., expressing doubts about whether it was significant enough to warrant a reply, especially so many years later ("Origen's Treatise *Against Celsus*," in *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews and Christians*, ed. Mark Edwards, Martin Goodman, and Simon Price [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 131-156). Origen lived in Caesarea when he wrote *Contra Celsum*.

<sup>6</sup>It is not necessary to accept the apparent premise of Origen's passionate promoter Hans Urs von Balthasar that Origen's message must be eaten raw and whole or not at all (*Origen: Spirit and Fire* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1984], 3-7). The dualist imprint on Origen's anthropology has been seen as an area of striking *discontinuity* between the earthy outlook of the NT and the relative denigration of material existence in Origen's thought. Origen's Platonic bent leaves a bleached version of reality, inviting increasing detachment from history, the body, and the earth. W. H. C. Frend's assessment seems more balanced, pointing out that Origen in his attempt to refute the Gnostics paid a high price in that his solution "reflected the outlook of contemporary Platonists" (*The Rise of Christianity* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984], 377). See also Padraig O'Cleirigh, "The Dualism of Origen," *Origeniana Quinta*, ed. Robert Daly

personal evil is considerably richer and more complex than contemporary theological priorities would lead one to believe.

Nevertheless, any positive tribute to Origen is not without risks. Despite his virtuous life,<sup>7</sup> exceptional intellect,<sup>8</sup> and prolific activity,<sup>9</sup> Origen has received mixed reviews from posterity.<sup>10</sup> His contribution is regarded with suspicion because he came to be regarded as a person who diluted and jeopardized distinctive Christian beliefs. True as that may be, it is worth considering whether Origen also preserved, developed, and defended aspects of the early Christian view of reality that have since vanished or fallen into disrepute through no fault of his. I suggest that the NT view of the reality and role of personal evil stands out as the most obvious candidate for making such a claim on behalf of Origen; his discussion of the subject in *Contra Celsum* is the most telling case in point. Aside from preserving Celsus's perception and criticism of Christian doctrine, Origen

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(Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 346-350.

<sup>7</sup>According to G. W. Butterworth, "Origen is one of those figures, none too common even in Church history, of whose character we can say that we know nothing but what is good" (*Origen on First Principles* [London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1936], v). Frend's tribute, 373, is similar: Origen "shared with Paul and Augustine the honor of being one of the few early Christian leaders who have deserved their reputation—unquestionably."

<sup>8</sup>Jean Daniélou calls Origen and Augustine "the two greatest geniuses of the early Church" (*Origen*, trans. Walter Mitchell [London: Sheed and Ward, 1955], vii). Crouzel, xi, thinks that Origen's "only peers are Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and he remains the greatest theologian the Eastern Church has produced."

<sup>9</sup>Crouzel, 37, suggests that Origen "may well have been the most prolific writer in the ancient world," ranking *Contra Celsum*, along with Augustine's *City of God*, as "the most important apologetic writing of antiquity" (*ibid.*, 47).

<sup>10</sup>The controversy began in Origen's lifetime and came to an early head in his troubled relationship with the Alexandrian bishop Demetrius. Joseph W. Trigg, following Henri de Lubac, is probably correct in describing it partly as a conflict between charismatic and institutional authority and partly as a real concern for Origen's orthodoxy on subjects such as the resurrection of the body, the afterlife, and Christology (*Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church* [Atlanta: John Knox, 1973], 130-146). Most scholars agree that Origen is controversial, but not on which aspect of his contribution should be seen as suspect. Crouzel, 11, who takes a positive view, acknowledges that "Origen lived as a Christian and thought as a Greek." Questions regarding Origen's orthodoxy continued smoldering for several centuries until the Fifth Ecumenical Council formally condemned his teaching in 553 and Justinian proceeded to prohibit and burn his books (Elizabeth Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992]). Whether or not Platonic influences in Origen have been overplayed, as Crouzel suggests, it is well to heed Frend's, 374, assessment that "emotionally Origen was a Christian through and through."

makes an invaluable, if controversial, contribution in his defense of the Christian view. Moreover, his input is priceless precisely on the issue that has proved to be among the most contentious in contemporary Origen scholarship: his use of the OT to corroborate the Christian position.

Against this background, three objectives have been set for this essay. The first is to observe the dualism of personified good and evil<sup>11</sup> as a fact of early Christian belief<sup>12</sup> and to review briefly the biblical basis for this outlook, using Origen's *Contra Celsum* as a point of departure. The second objective is to survey Origen's exegetical method, gain an awareness of his priorities, and evaluate his approach in the light of his own historical context.<sup>13</sup> The third objective is to take a preliminary glance at the theological meaning of personal evil in the Christian outlook.<sup>14</sup> It should be pointed out that this inquiry is limited strictly to the reality of personal evil in the early Christian view of reality and that the accompanying discussion of Origen's exegetical method is restricted to this theme.

### *The Theme of Personal Evil in Early Christianity*

Celsus's statement on the Christian belief in the reality of personified evil cannot be dismissed merely as a quirk in Origen's determined effort

<sup>11</sup>I am opting for a descriptive approach since the terminology of this duality is fluid and imprecise. I incline toward the term "cosmic dualism" in the sense of two opposing wills in the universe rather than as a term distinguishing between a material and an immaterial reality.

<sup>12</sup>The "cosmic dualism" of Christianity is modified in the sense that although evil is real, it is not eternal. It is seen as an intruder, an alien element with a definite beginning and a certain end. Satan represents another will, but he is not another god. Jeffrey Burton Russell, therefore, refers to Christianity as "a moderate dualist religion" (*Satan: The Early Christian Tradition* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981], 32); and as "a semidualist religion" (*The Devil: Perceptions of Evil from Antiquity to Primitive Christianity* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987], 228).

<sup>13</sup>The most complete primary account of Origen's hermeneutical guidelines is found in Book IV of *On First Principles*, entitled *Peri archōn* in Greek and *De principiis* in Rufinus's Latin translation. The secondary literature on Origen's exegetical method is vast and divergent. Most useful and pertinent to this study have been Karen Jo Torjesen's lucid *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1986); idem, "Influence of Rhetoric on Origen's Old Testament Homilies," in *Origeniana Sexta*, ed. Gilles Dorival and Alain le Boulluec (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995), 13-25; idem, "The Rhetoric of the Literal Sense: Changing Strategies of Persuasion from Origen to Jerome," in *Origeniana Septima*, ed. W. A. Biernert and U. Kühneweg (Louvain: Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Louvaniensis, 1999), 633-644.

<sup>14</sup>Russell credits Christianity with "the virtue of taking the problem of evil seriously" in contrast to "the monist complacency of the hidden harmony" and the "gravely unsatisfactory" view of evil in traditional monotheism (*The Devil*, 227-228).

to build a bridge between Christianity and Greek philosophy. A similar view also applies to Origen's summary of the essentials of Christian doctrine and view of reality in his earlier work *On First Principles*. Even though the voice is Origen's, the hands are those of the Christian community preceding him. He claims that it is a statement of fundamental beliefs held by Christians irrespective of their degree of theological sophistication. If these beliefs are traced to apostolic inspiration and authority, they deal only with the essentials. "The holy apostles, when preaching the faith of Christ," Origen writes, "took certain doctrines, those namely which they believed to be necessary ones, and delivered them in the plainest terms to all believers, even to such as appeared to be somewhat dull in the investigation of divine knowledge."<sup>15</sup> On this point, he does not pose as an innovator. The emerging "Rule of Faith" in the church obligates his own apologetic as much as it is mandated by the need to make the Christian position known and understood. Origen is, therefore, at pains to dissociate his own role somewhat from the doctrinal affirmation, casting it primarily as an account that is based on broader credentials and more ancient authority. In short, he proposes to defend merely "the kind of doctrines which are believed in plain terms through the apostolic teaching."<sup>16</sup>

Belief in the reality of personal evil is not Origen's first priority in *On First Principles*, but it is an important topic. He is, however, circumspect in pointing out that the satanic character to some extent has eluded precise description:

Further, in regard to the devil and his angels and the opposing spiritual powers, the Church teaching lays it down that these beings exist, but what they are or how they exist it has not explained very clearly. Among most Christians, however, the following opinion is held, that this devil was formerly an angel, but became an apostate and persuaded as many angels as he could to fall away with him; and these are even now called his angels.<sup>17</sup>

Certain caveats notwithstanding, the statement leaves the impression that Origen here, as in *Contra Celsum*, is passing on a received teaching. What has been received is not limited only to belief in the reality of personal evil as such. Its origin, nature, and evolution have also crystallized in the minds of "most Christians." Henri Crouzel, whose magisterial grasp of Origen leaves him almost invulnerable to

<sup>15</sup>*First Principles* 1.3.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.4.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 1.6.

questioning, may in this respect not be entirely accurate when he claims that "Origen thus inaugurates a tradition," bequeathing to posterity "the affirmation of the greatness of Satan before the fall when he bore 'the seal of the likeness', that is to say shared in the image of God; the pride which brought about the catastrophe; the name Lucifer, *Eosphoros*, 'bringer of the dawn', denoting the morning star and applied also to Christ"—all on the strength of his own singular exegesis.<sup>18</sup> Instead, the evidence suggests that Origen is indebted to a theological and exegetical tradition that was established prior to him, one to which his own work may have added less than is commonly thought.<sup>19</sup>

Several factors support this conclusion. Isaiah's depiction of the fall of "Lucifer, son of the morning" (Isa 14:12, NKJV) occupies such a prominent role in Origen's writings that a degree of prior consensus on behalf of this reading must be assumed. That is to say, the ubiquity of this text in Origen's many references to the beginning of evil argues strongly against innovation on his part. Other hidden voices must also be ruled out. The suspicion of pervasive Platonic influence that clings to Origen's thought does not apply here because there is no equivalent Platonic counterpart to the Christian belief in personal evil.<sup>20</sup> Although later Platonists tried to delineate the origin, nature, and reality of evil to make it stand out more distinctly, they did not entertain any notion of a personal agent of evil who fell from a state of innocence.<sup>21</sup> The same

<sup>18</sup>Crouzel, 213.

<sup>19</sup>The fact that Tertullian (c. 145-220), earlier and independently of Origen (c. 207), adduces some of the same OT texts as Origen as evidence for his view of personified evil supports this view (*Against Marcion*, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989], 2.10; 5.11). Of interest also is the attribution of the fall of the *Eosphoros* to Origen or even to Irenaeus (c. 182) in the last two of thirty-nine scholia on Revelation that, in important respects, bear the marks of Origen (Constantin Diobouniotis and Adolf Harnack, *Der Scholien-Kommentar des Origenese zur Apokalypse Johannis nebst einem Stück aus Irenaeus*, libri. V, Graece Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der althechristlichen Literatur 38 [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1911], 41, 45-46, 62). Whatever the final verdict on the source of the first paragraph of scholion 38, it could be the first known Christian application outside the NT of the fall of the star in Isa 14:12 to the theme of the war in heaven in Rev 12:7-9.

<sup>20</sup>One cannot escape the impression that for Plato, evil is a property of matter, an unruly negative principle, and for that reason Plato is at pains to absolve God of direct responsibility for bringing the physical world into existence (*Timaeus*, trans. Desmond Lee [London: Penguin, 1977], 97).

<sup>21</sup>Plutarch (c. 45-125) and Numenius of Apamea (c. 150) transformed the negative unruly principle of Plato's *Timaeus* into an active force, a "Maleficent Soul." But this force is seen to preexist and lie outside God's ordering activity, with God unable to overcome it entirely. On the human level, evil is still an expression of material reality

holds true for Philo,<sup>22</sup> to whom Origen was largely indebted for the method of allegorical interpretation of the OT.<sup>23</sup> In Philo, any notion of personal evil is made unthinkable by his tendency to see evil in terms of impersonal abstractions and by his unqualified monotheism.<sup>24</sup> Plato, Philo, Plutarch, and others wrestled with the problem of evil, but there is neither the same explanation nor the same sharp focus as in the Christian account.<sup>25</sup> To the extent that these thinkers contributed to Origen's mind-set and theology, Origen's emphasis on the reality of personal evil runs against the grain; it is an area in his thought that clearly is *not* a spin-off of the Platonic worldview within which he lived and breathed. Moreover, while Origen no doubt was capable of originality, his intellectual background points to a Christian source for his understanding of evil.<sup>26</sup>

The reality of the *being that is opposed to God* belongs to another category, and this being looms at least as large in Origen's system as what Celsus had perceived him to do among Christians many years earlier. "The name Devil, and Satan, and Wicked One, is mentioned in many places of scripture," Origen claims in *On First Principles*, "and he who bears it is also described as being the enemy of God."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the scriptural witness to the existence of this person is as abundant in the OT as in the NT. That is to say, the worldview in the OT has to the Christian community become identical to that of the NT. Both testaments assume the same reality, issues, and agencies. If the mention of the satanic agency seems more veiled in the OT, requiring the discerning eye of the Spirit-filled interpreter in order to

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(Dillon, 202-204, 373-374).

<sup>22</sup>The dates for Philo are uncertain, but he was unquestionably a contemporary of Jesus and the apostle Paul. According to Samuel Sandmel, Philo's birth date is estimated to c. 25-20 B.C.E. and his death thought to happen c. 50 C.E. (*Philo of Alexandria* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1979], 3).

<sup>23</sup>Origen considered Philo to be a trustworthy predecessor in the interpretation of Scripture (David T. Runia, *Philo and the Church Fathers* [Leiden: Brill, 1995], 117-125).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Philo of Alexandria, *On the Creation of the Cosmos according to Moses*, trans. and notes David T. Runia (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 238.

<sup>25</sup>The laid-back inquiries of Plato do not convey the seriousness and sense of existential crisis that is intrinsic to the Christian account of evil. Philo and the Middle Platonists also convey a less dramatic understanding, inhabiting as they do a world wherein evil is a constituent of matter.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Annewies van den Hoek, "Origen and the Intellectual Heritage of Alexandria: Continuity or Disjunction?" in *Origeniana Quinta*, ed. Robert Daly (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 40-47.

<sup>27</sup>*First Principles*, 1.5.2.

strip off its guise, the same challenge applies to the pursuit of the divine Logos in the OT. Origen sees the satanic agency present throughout Scripture from the very beginning, cloaked in various metaphors starting with the earliest disguise as the Serpent in Genesis.<sup>28</sup> He urges the reader of Exodus to inquire “who that being was of whom it is said in Exodus that he wished to kill Moses because he was setting out for Egypt.”<sup>29</sup> Using the LXX term “Apopompeus” instead of transliterating the Hebrew “Azazel” for one of the symbols in the Day of Atonement ritual in Leviticus, Origen probes for the identity of the figure “who in Leviticus is described as Apopompeus.”<sup>30</sup> His list of examples is far from exhausted; there remain among others the enigmatic prince of Tyre in Ezekiel and the figure of Satan in First Chronicles, Job, and Zechariah.<sup>31</sup> “Let these examples from the Old Testament, so far as we can call them to memory at the moment, be now quoted to prove that the opposing powers are both named in the scriptures and are said to be adversaries of the human race and reserved for future punishment,” he concludes at the end of his OT survey.<sup>32</sup>

The evidence in support of this view of reality is no less formidable in the NT. “But let us look also at the New Testament,” Origen continues, calling as his first witness the Synoptic narrative of the Temptation, “where Satan comes to the Saviour, tempting him.”<sup>33</sup> The Gospels speak of Jesus driving out “evil spirits and impure daemons,” while Paul warns the Ephesians that “the saints’ wrestling is not against flesh and blood.”<sup>34</sup> Virtually all the extant writings of Origen include references to the adversary of God and human beings, often recapitulating the fallen being’s background.<sup>35</sup> “He who was Lucifer and

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 3.2.1; cf. Gen 3:1.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 3.2.1; cf. Exod 4:24.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 3.2.1; cf. Lev 16:8.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 3.2.1; cf. Ezek 28:11ff.; 1 Chron 21:1; Job 1:6; Zech 3:1.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 3.2.1. Origen takes the same line of argument in *Contra Celsum*, adding “the passage from Isaiah where a dirge is sung for the king of Babylon” (*Contra Celsum* 6.43; Isa 14:12-20).

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 3.2.1. Cf. Matt 4:1-11.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 3.2.1. Cf. Mark 1:23ff., 32-34; 5:1ff.; Eph 6:12.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. *HomLuke* 31.4-6, in *Homilies on Luke: Fragments on Luke*, trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, The Fathers of the Church 94 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1996), 127-128; *ComJn* 32.302, in *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Books 13-32*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, The Fathers of the Church 89 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 398; *HomJer* 27.5, in *Homilies on Jeremiah; Homily on 1 Kings 28*, trans. John Clark Smith, The Fathers of the Church 97 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998), 247; *HomEzek* 13.1-2, in *Homilies sur*



who arose in heaven, he who was without sin from the day of his birth and who was among the cherubim, was able to fall with respect to the kindness of the Son of God before he could be bound by chains of love," he sums up with no apparent prodding from the text in a comment on Rom 6:8-10.<sup>36</sup> Having covered the same ground in more detail in his rebuttal to Celsus, his final remark on the subject, Origen is ready to apologize for boldness and lack of time, but he will retract nothing in terms of the biblical basis for the Christian position:

However, although we have boldly and rashly committed these few remarks to writing in this book, perhaps we have said nothing significant. But if anyone with the time to examine the holy scriptures were to collect texts from all the sources and were to give a coherent account of evil, both how it first came to exist and how it is being destroyed, he would see that the meaning of Moses and the prophets with regard to Satan has not even been dreamt of by Celsus or by any of the people who are dragged down by this wicked daemon and are drawn away in their soul from God and the right conception of Him and from His Word.<sup>37</sup>

Not all interpreters share Origen's confidence. There is an element in his vision that in the eyes of critics leans too much on the imagination of the interpreter.<sup>38</sup> But even among those who think that Origen claims more than is warranted with regard to the OT, he is not building a lofty theological edifice on a nonexistent foundation. The early Christian belief in the reality of personified evil rises from the NT itself. It is a fair assessment of the NT evidence for Jeffrey Burton Russell to suggest that Satan "stands at the center of the New Testament teaching that the Kingdom of God is at war with, and is now at last defeating, the Kingdom of the Devil. The Devil is essential in the New Testament because he constitutes an important alternative in Christian theodicy."<sup>39</sup> What is lambasted by Celsus as an example of Christian ignorance and blight on God's honor, Origen willingly

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*Ezéchiel*, trans. Marcel Borret (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1989), 55-57, 409-413.

<sup>36</sup>*ComRom* 5.10.16, in *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Books 1-5*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, *The Fathers of the Church* 103 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 377.

<sup>37</sup>*Contra Celsum* 6.44.

<sup>38</sup>R. P. C. Hanson sounds more than a cautionary note in this respect in *Allegory and Event* (London: SCM Press, 1959). More recently, Keith Graham has voiced similar criticism ("Can Anything Good Come Out of Allegory? The Cases of Origen and Augustine," *EvQ* 70/1 [1998]: 23-49).

<sup>39</sup>Russell, *The Devil*, 222.

defends as a vital Christian doctrine and one that lies at the heart of his own theodicy. The view that Satan is found in the biblical narrative from the earliest pages of Genesis is not Origen's invention. Here, too, he merely builds on a conviction that is already established in the NT. We are free to surmise that Origen elsewhere, in homilies or commentaries that have been lost, supplied an even more exhaustive exposition of what he claimed on behalf of the Bible in his answer to Celsus—"a coherent account of evil, both how it first came to exist and how it is being destroyed."<sup>40</sup>

### *Scriptural Exegesis in Origen*

Since the Bible must be seen as the major determinant of the Christian belief in the reality of personal evil, Origen's reply to Celsus cannot be divorced from his understanding of Scripture. In his summary of the most basic Christian doctrines in *On First Principles*, Origen states the view of the early Church:

Then there is the doctrine that the scriptures were composed through the Spirit of God and that they have not only that meaning which is obvious, but also another which is hidden from the majority of readers. For the contents of scripture are the outward forms of certain mysteries and the images of divine things. On this point the entire Church is unanimous, that while the whole law is spiritual, the inspired meaning is not recognized by all, but only by those who are gifted with the grace of the Holy Spirit in the word of wisdom and knowledge.<sup>41</sup>

Despite claiming virtual unanimity for the position he espouses, Origen's exegetical method has been among the most hotly contested areas of his many-faceted heritage. The assertion that the Scriptures do not only have "the meaning that is obvious, but also another which is hidden from the majority of readers" goes to the heart of the matter. If the meaning of Scripture is not found in the simple, straightforward reading that is accessible to the ordinary person, how does the reader grasp the hidden meaning? Is there any hope of predictable or reproducible results when different interpreters set to work on the same texts? What are the accepted controls that will prevent interpretations that are wildly subjective and arbitrary? The consequences of Origen's view on the interpretation of Scripture, voiced though it is as the united position of the church, has been fraught with so much controversy that

<sup>40</sup>*Contra Celsum* 6.44. It is not preposterous to conjecture that such discussions existed, e.g., in Origen's lost commentary on Genesis.

<sup>41</sup>*First Principles* 1.8.

it is prudent, at least temporarily, to jettison Origen as a guide to exegesis and instead use his writings merely as a starting point for further inquiry into the biblical parameters for the Christian view of reality. In the unforgiving view of one scholar, "Origen plods through the Bible, blind to its merits, deaf to its music, like a scientist trying to distill chemical formulae from Shakespeare."<sup>42</sup> Crouzel, on the other hand, sees in Origen a man who works under inspiration; he "possesses to a unique degree the gift of the exegete, analogous to that of the inspired author; he knows how to listen to God."<sup>43</sup>

But even this affirmation cannot quiet the concern that the search for a secondary, hidden sense may lead to a plethora of uncontrolled readings. Origen's liberal use of allegory leaves his work vulnerable to criticism that touches on all aspects of his work, including the way he brings the OT to bear on the existence of Satan in his answer to Celsus. This debate, begun in Origen's lifetime, flared up at irregular intervals and has received renewed attention with the revival of patristic studies in contemporary scholarship.<sup>44</sup>

In his most formal statement on the threefold meaning of Scripture in *On First Principles*,<sup>45</sup> Origen is careful to claim that his approach to the

<sup>42</sup>R. C. P. Hanson, Review of Henri Crouzel's *Origène*, *ZKG* 97/2 (1986): 279.

<sup>43</sup>Crouzel, 28. Harnack's verdict, based on a thorough and critical reading of all the available works of Origen, is worth noting: "Es hat nie einen Theologen in der Kirche gegeben, der so ausschliesslich Exeget der Bibel gewesen ist und sein wollte, wie Origenes" (*Der kirchengeschichtliche Ertrag der exegetischen Arbeiten des Origenes* [Leipzig: J. C. Hinrich, 1919], 2,4).

<sup>44</sup>See Rowan Williams, "Origen: Between Orthodoxy and Heresy," *Origeniana Septima*, ed. W. A. Biernert and U. Kühneweg (Louvain: Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Louvaniensis, 1999), 3-14. During the Reformation, this conflict loomed large in the debate between Erasmus and Luther. Luther's invective that "in all of Origen there is not one word about Christ" is certainly a gross misrepresentation (*Luther's Works*, vol. 54, *Table Talk*, trans. Theodore G. Tappert [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967], 47). Luther also voiced his concern regarding allegory and the quest for hidden meaning in terms that are not far removed from the view of critical scholarship. Cf. Jon Dechow, "Origen's Shadow over the Erasmus/Luther Debate," *Origeniana Sexta*, ed. Gilles Dorival and Alain le Boulluec (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995), 739-757. André Godin credits Erasmus with a revival of interest in Origen during the Reformation; in *Érasme lecteur d'Origène* (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1982). In a statement that was hardly intended to endear him to Luther, Erasmus said that "a single page of Origen teaches more Christian philosophy than ten of Augustine" (*ibid.*, 430).

<sup>45</sup>Karen Jo Torjesen argues that "the *Peri Archon* is best understood in relation to Origen's exegetical work as a philosophical handbook on the interpretation of scripture" ("Hermeneutics and Soteriology in Origen's *Peri Archon*," *Studia Patristica XXI*, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone [Leuven: Peeters Press, 1987], 334). Likewise, Gunnar af Hällström

Scriptures and their meaning “is extracted from the writings themselves.”<sup>46</sup> Taking his warrant from Prov 22:20, 21, he claims a threefold meaning in Scripture, each level leading to progressively deeper insight,<sup>47</sup> “so that the simple man may be edified by what we may call the flesh of the scripture, this name being given to the obvious interpretation; while the man who has made some progress may be edified by its soul, as it were; and the man who is perfect and like those mentioned by the apostle”—and here he appeals to 1 Cor 2:6, 7 for support—“this man may be edified by the spiritual law.”<sup>48</sup> While the three levels of meaning are not always found or pursued with consistency, it is clear that only the search for hidden meaning leads to the heart of the spiritual message of Scripture.

Before evaluating Origen’s approach to exegesis, whether its general outline or the aspects relating to the subject of personal evil, it is important to understand it. This stipulation suggests that at least some of the criticism of Origen’s work stems from a failure to grasp his thinking. Moreover, denigration of Origen may also be due to a myopic view of one’s own presuppositions and an inability to perceive one’s indebtedness, however remote and concealed, to the very work that is subject to censure.

The first point to observe is that in Origen understanding of truth leads to method and not the other way around. This is important because the criteria of scientific thinking look to method to validate the claims of

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describes this book as “das älteste Handbuch der Hermeneutik der Alten Kirche” (“Probleme der Bibelauslegung bei Origenes,” in *Bibelauslegung und Gruppenidentität*, ed. Hans-Olof Kvist [Åbo: Åbo Academy Press, 1992], 36).

<sup>46</sup>*First Principles* 4.2.4.

<sup>47</sup>Origen’s notion of “threefold” counsel is derived from the LXX τρισῶς. The Hebrew text is ambiguous on this point. *BHS* prefers אִשְׁשׁ, having אִשְׁשׁ as an alternate reading. The ambiguity is reflected in English translations: “excellent things” (KJV, NKJV, NASB) vs. “thirty sayings” (RSV, NIV, NEB, NRSV, GNB). Moffatt has “already,” which is also the preference of several French translations. Needless to say, none of these options lends itself well to the notion of the threefold meaning that was important to Origen. It seems fair to Origen to assume that his claim of scriptural support stems more from an overriding homiletical instinct than from a strict exegetical purpose. In *Homilies on Genesis*, Origen takes the levels of the ark as a basis for two or three levels of meaning in Scripture (*HomGen* 2.1 and 2.6, in *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, The Fathers of the Church 71 [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982]). One should keep in mind that Origen’s monumental *Hexapla* proves that he was a textual critic in his own right, sharing with Jerome the distinction as “the greatest critical exegete [Origen] and the greatest literal exegete [Jerome] of Christian antiquity” (Crouzel, 61).

<sup>48</sup>*First Principles* 4.2.4.

investigation. In contemporary terms, this means that the search for what is true is determined by something other than itself. Such was not the case in Origen's time or in his understanding of the truth claims of the Bible. Karen Jo Torjesen, whose examination of Origen's hermeneutics may be the most focused and incisive to date, says that "in the Hellenistic world this relationship of truth to method does not exist. The truth of things grounded in themselves justified a certain method of knowledge and not the reverse."<sup>49</sup> When Origen explains how to read the Bible, he may leave the impression that he begins by delineating method, but this impression is misleading. His method must rather be seen as a consequence of what he has come to see as the truth. It is his understanding of the whole that leads to perceive the parts, including the question of method. The whole, which to Origen is much greater than the sum of its parts, is recognized before sifting the various parts and then putting the pieces together.<sup>50</sup> When this understanding of the relationship of truth to method is kept in mind, Origen's exegesis on the whole meets the three criteria laid down by Torjesen.<sup>51</sup> he strives to be faithful to the church's Rule of Faith. Although his method does not meet the standard of modern criteria, he has a method; he does not simply interpret Scripture arbitrarily. Despite his preoccupation with the spiritual sense, resorting to allegorical excursions on many occasions that seem forced to the modern reader, all the elements in Origen's exegesis must nevertheless be seen as genuinely Christian.<sup>52</sup> His exegesis is based on the conviction that "the Old Testament in its entirety is a prophecy of Christ, who is the key to it."<sup>53</sup>

The second point is that Origen is a pastor in pursuit of a spiritual goal even more than he is an apologist and a scholar. "But when Moses had cut a stone God wrote them a second time and gave them again, which is as if the prophetic word was preparing the soul after the first sin for a second

<sup>49</sup>Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 4.

<sup>50</sup>Origen's emphasis on the Bible as an indivisible whole is pervasive: "The complete Word of God which was in the beginning with God is not a multitude of Words, for it is not words. It is a single Word consisting of several ideas, each of which is a part of the whole Word" (*ComJn* 5.5, in *Commentary on the Gospel according to John, Books 1-10*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, *The Fathers of the Church* 80 [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1989]).

<sup>51</sup>The three criteria are (1) faithfulness "to the historical element of the Christian faith; (2) understanding of method, given that Origen's concept of method is so different from modern criteria; (3) that his exegesis must be shown to be fundamentally Christian" (Torjesen, *Origen's Exegesis*, 4-5).

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>53</sup>Crouzel, 64.

writing of God," he explains in *Contra Celsum*.<sup>54</sup> The overriding goal of spiritual formation is restoring the defaced image of God in the soul; this objective shines through in all his homilies.<sup>55</sup> Scripture must not be shorn of its moral and spiritual purpose of changing lives. Origen sees spiritual formation to be intrinsic to Scripture, harnessing his homiletical skills in order to advance this goal and toward that end conjuring up a spiritual vision in biblical metaphor like a Martin Luther King Jr. of the remote past. In order to perceive the truth, the reader must also be *of* the truth, seeking prayerfully the guidance of the Holy Spirit who inspired the Scriptures in the first place.<sup>56</sup> "Only the spiritual person can discern the hidden meaning of the text, but the hidden meaning of the text itself plays a major role in the formation of the spiritual person," writes Origen scholar Ronald Heine.<sup>57</sup> Crouzel makes the same observation, stating that "only like can know like: it is necessary to be similar to anything to know it."<sup>58</sup> Origen brings a pastoral, redemptive purpose to his exegesis of Scripture, convinced that Scripture cannot be read authentically otherwise. The modern interpreter does not necessarily share this presupposition, and it is inevitable that divergent presuppositions in this respect will significantly condition the interpretation of the text. But Origen's concern for spiritual development and the devout life plays a pivotal role in his work; Crouzel maintains that it is impossible "to understand his method of spiritual or allegorical exegesis if one does not see that it is spiritual in the strictest sense of the term."<sup>59</sup>

The foregoing should be specified in a third point that makes more

<sup>54</sup>*Contra Celsum* 1.4.

<sup>55</sup>A striking example is found in Origen's homilies on Joshua. He affirms the historicity of the Israelite conquest of Canaan, but he uses it to make a point closer to home. Featuring yet again the fall of Lucifer in Isa 14:12, Origen encourages his audience to claim the place in heaven that Satan and his angels lost. The territory of the Canaanites, Perizzites, and Jebusites now to be conquered is negative qualities of character—irritability, anger, pride, jealousy, and impurity (*HomJos* 1.6, in *Homélie sur Josué*, trans. Annie Jaubert [Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2000], 109-111). See also Torjesen, "Hermeneutics and Soteriology," 337.

<sup>56</sup>The key is that "the Holy Spirit is not only the author of the Bible but also its interpreter" (Michihiko Kuyama, "The Searching Spirit: The Hermeneutical Principle in the Preface of Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of John*," in *Origeniana Sexta*, ed. Gilles Dorival and Alain le Boulluec [Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995], 435).

<sup>57</sup>Ronald Heine, "Reading the Bible with Origen," in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity*, ed. Paul M. Blowers (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1997), 145.

<sup>58</sup>Crouzel, 74.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

explicit the stance that sets Origen apart from a modern exegete. Origen does not pretend to take a detached, neutral stand in the interest of scholarly objectivity.<sup>60</sup> His concern is to convince the reader as much as it is to explain and elucidate the text.<sup>61</sup> Gerald Bostock writes that Origen's primary concern in explaining the Scriptures "is always to move as quickly as possible to their allegorical or existential significance."<sup>62</sup> In a fascinating study of the subtle and evocative rhetorical elements in Origen, Torjesen takes this observation a step further. She contends that the presence of the hearer is the dominating factor in Origen's exegetical preaching and hermeneutical process, "not the historical past of the scriptural text."<sup>63</sup> The common criticism that Origen has little interest in the literal, primary meaning of scriptural narratives may therefore be exaggerated.<sup>64</sup> Such criticism should be tempered by greater sensitivity to Origen's priorities as an exegete. The importance of the hearer in his homilies and the relative unimportance of the hearer to the contemporary exegete who looks at the same text can easily lead to misleading conclusions. Origen pursues meanings and applications that seem foreign and contrived to many scholars, but the reason need not be that this pursuit is primarily dictated by his flawed grasp of the text. In this respect, Origen has been found to share at least one of the concerns of Paul Ricoeur: his overriding aim is appropriation.<sup>65</sup> Origen asks more than once: "What does it profit me

<sup>60</sup>Assumptions of objectivity may be overrated even where that is the aspiration to a greater extent than in Origen. All exegeses, no matter how "objective," are also exercises in persuasion.

<sup>61</sup>Origen explains the meaning of the Bible "with a kind of restless energy . . . an urgency to the tone, a forcefulness to the argument, and a passionate call to decision and action that goes well beyond the reading and explaining of a classical text" (Torjesen, "Influence of Rhetoric," 14).

<sup>62</sup>Gerald Bostock, "Allegory and the Interpretation of the Bible in Origen," *Journal of Literature & Theology* 1(1987): 46.

<sup>63</sup>Torjesen, "Influence of Rhetoric," 15.

<sup>64</sup>Hanson is a case in point, writing that "the critical subject upon which Origen never accepted the biblical viewpoint was the significance of history" (*Allegory and Event*, 363). While Platonic influences in Origen are pervasive, he nevertheless sees the majority of biblical narratives as real history. Noah and Abraham are historical persons; even "the assumption that he denied the existence of Adam as an individual is incorrect" (C. P. Bammel, "Adam in Origen," in *The Making of Orthodoxy*, ed. Rowan Williams [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], 62).

<sup>65</sup>Christophe Potworowski, "Origen's Hermeneutics in the Light of Paul Ricoeur," in *Origeniana Quinta*, ed. Robert Daly (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1992), 161-166. "The role of the subjective element in Origen's discovery of the spiritual meaning of

to say that Christ has come to earth in the flesh He received from Mary, if I do not show that He has also come in my flesh?"<sup>66</sup>

Awareness of the rhetorical elements in Origen yields a fourth point that is critical both to our understanding of his situation and to taking stock of our own. Time and again Origen flavors his homilies with rhetorical markers that delicately enhance his status as interpreter and the precedence of his interpretation. The road from the literal to the spiritual interpretation is not linear or horizontal, but one of ascent. The literal meaning is no more than "a kind of foundation at the *lower* levels" (emphasis supplied),<sup>67</sup> enabling the reader to "ascend from the historical account to the mystical and allegorical understanding of the spiritual meaning."<sup>68</sup> Moreover, it takes exceptional discernment to arrive at the spiritual sense. Origen wants to "inquire what is the *inner* meaning of the proverb,"<sup>69</sup> leaving no doubt that he considers that interpretation inferior that is content to stay with "the *bare* letter" (emphasis supplied).<sup>70</sup> The genuine interpreter must move beyond what Origen calls the literal and corporeal sense, heeding the call of "the laws of *elevated* interpretation" (emphasis supplied).<sup>71</sup>

All these adjectives are rhetorical markers that create a polarity in the interpretative options that are available to the reader. One option is material, primitive, and naive; the other spiritual, elevated, and discerning. The tenor of these adjectival colorings suggests, on the one hand, that important meanings in the Bible are hidden to the naked eye and, on the other hand, that those who fail to see the deeper sense are prisoners of a stunted, truncated perception.<sup>72</sup>

But the context within which this exercise plays out may be lost on the modern reader. The absence of perspective explains to some extent why many exegetes hold Origen in such low esteem. Origen fights a battle on two fronts. On one side, there is Gnosticism that wants to do

scripture is constantly a stumbling-block to the modern reader. This is clarified by Ricoeur's hermeneutics centered on appropriation and his view of interpretation as the work of productive imagination" (*ibid.*, 162).

<sup>66</sup>*HomGen* 3.7.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.6.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.1.

<sup>69</sup>*First Principles* 2.5.2.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.2.2.

<sup>71</sup>*ComLam* xxiii.

<sup>72</sup>Torjesen, "Rhetoric of the Literal Sense," 638.



away with the OT altogether, seeing the narrative of the OT as the track marks and fingerprints of an inferior god that has nothing in common with Jesus. On the other side, there is the Jewish interpretation of the OT, claiming Scripture for a view that leaves little room for Christians to harness these very Scriptures as the basis for their own message and mission. This context must be appreciated before passing judgment on Origen's effort. In order to wrench the OT away from the Jewish meaning, he has to show that the correct understanding of Scripture is not exhausted by the literal sense and the primary application of a given text at the time of its author. Faced with Jewish objections of opportunism and distortion on the part of the Christian interpretation, he has to address those objections and he has to do it in a way that does not leave him exposed to criticism of the Christian Gnostics, whose goal it is to prove that the deeds attributed to God in the OT cannot lead to the Jesus of the Gospels. Any verdict on the result of Origen's effort should at least begin by acknowledging the daunting task.

To be sure, Origen no doubt sees himself as merely continuing along the trail blazed by the NT appropriation of the OT.<sup>73</sup> Did not Jesus claim the OT as a witness to himself,<sup>74</sup> charging those who failed to grasp it with foolishness and slowness?<sup>75</sup> Had not Jesus himself said to his Jewish critics, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me"?<sup>76</sup> Did not Paul lead the way to a spiritual interpretation of the OT, seeing Jesus as the rock from which the Israelites drank in the wilderness?<sup>77</sup> Was not Paul the one who had pointed out the contrast between letter and spirit, attributing inferiority to the former?<sup>78</sup> Did not Paul, too, resort to rhetorical flourish, claiming to see a veil "over their minds" when discussing the Jewish inability to see the light?<sup>79</sup> Was not he the one who had hallowed the use of allegory in his own peculiar way, making an OT narrative say something other than what it seems to say?<sup>80</sup> Did not the author of First Peter

<sup>73</sup>Crouzel, 65.

<sup>74</sup>John 5:39; cf. *ComJn* 5.6.

<sup>75</sup>Luke 24:25; cf. *First Principles* 1.3.1.

<sup>76</sup>John 5:46; cf. *ComJn* 6.109.

<sup>77</sup>1 Cor 10:4; cf. *First Principles* 4.2.6; *Contra Celsum* 4:49.

<sup>78</sup>2 Cor 3:6; cf. *First Principles* 1.1.2.

<sup>79</sup>2 Cor 3:15; cf. *First Principles* 1.1.2; *Contra Celsum* 6.70; *HomJer* 5.8.1.

<sup>80</sup>Gal 4:24; cf. *First Principles* 4.2.6. Allegory is here defined "as the means whereby one thing is said and another thing is indicated. The Greek word *allegorein* means to say one thing openly but to imply something else" (Bostock, 39); see also David Dawson,

even claim that the prophets of the OT failed to understand their own messages, finding a measure of relief in their search only as they were reconciled to learn that they were writing about future events and for the benefit of coming generations?<sup>81</sup>

In Origen's understanding of the unity of Scripture there is undeniably the conditioning of the Platonic Logos, magnified by the influence of Philo's attempt to read the OT as the original template of Greek wisdom.<sup>82</sup> But these stipulations do not diminish and they must not be allowed to overshadow the role of the NT in the Christian view of the OT prior to Origen and in Origen's own thinking. The influence of Plato and Philo is a real but not sufficient element to a balanced reading of Origen's hermeneutics. The one sufficient element in this respect is the NT; Origen consciously strives to delimit the role of extrabiblical influences with the goal of promoting an avowedly Christian point of view.<sup>83</sup> It is his conviction that the OT Scripture should be conceived as a single storehouse of meaning; advice passed on by Origen to his contemporary readers bears quoting in full:

As we are about to begin the interpretation of the Psalms, we shall disclose a very beautiful tradition handed on to us by the Hebrew which applies generally to the entire divine Scripture. For the Hebrew said that the whole divinely inspired Scripture may be likened, because of its obscurity, to many locked rooms in one house. By each room is placed a key, but not the one that corresponds to it, so that the keys are scattered about beside the rooms, none of them matching the room by which it is placed. It is a difficult task to find the keys and match them to the rooms that they can open. We therefore know the Scriptures that are obscure only by taking the points of departure for understanding

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*Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 3-4.

<sup>81</sup>1 Pet 1:10-12; cf. *ComMat* 15.27.

<sup>82</sup>Philo's ambition was not merely assimilating Jewish heritage to the Greek philosophical tradition. Instead, Philo sought to make Greek culture Jewish, a much bolder and presumptuous aspiration from a classical point of view. "Jewish interpretative subordination is in fact a hermeneutical usurpation in which classical writers are demoted to the status of Mosaic epigones, condemned merely to echo his original and sublime insights. Authentic Greek culture is actually Jewish" (Dawson, 82); see also Yehoshua Amir, "Authority and Interpretation of Scripture in the Writings of Philo," in *Mikra*, ed. Martin Jan Mulder (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988), 421-453.

<sup>83</sup>*First Principles* 3.3.2; 4.1.1. The spiritual interpretation pursued by Origen is in his eyes rooted in the OT as much as in the NT: "The prophets also do not limit the meaning of their sayings to the obvious history and to the text and letter of the law" (*Contra Celsum* 2.5).

them from another place because they have their interpretative principles scattered among them.<sup>84</sup>

Does a simple, literal, historical reading of the OT lead to the NT? If Origen at times seems to doubt it, he has the evidence of contemporary Jewish exegesis to reinform his doubts. Acting as stewards of the primary meaning and the literal sense, Jewish exegetes do not perceive in the OT the witness to Christ that Christians make it out to be. For the early Christians, however, the road that leads from the OT into the NT takes for granted that the narratives of the OT point beyond the immediate historical situation. In their eyes, the Jewish Scriptures describe real people and actual events, but they are also figurations—shadows and types of Christ and the message of the NT. Moreover, the relationship between the OT and the NT is not merely the connection between promise and fulfillment. Following the NT writers, the early Christian apologists do not simply see the OT as prophecy of Christ; they see Christ in the OT. This is also the view of Origen. If he practices this conviction to excess, the difference between him and the NT is one of degree, not of kind.

The rhetorical aspect serves a function beyond the explication of texts. It also signals the underlying power struggle.<sup>85</sup> At stake are not only the meaning of the Scriptures, but also which group may rightfully claim them as theirs. Origen “is engaged in a fierce struggle to christianize the Jewish scriptures which the Christian had expropriated,” notes Torjesen.<sup>86</sup> Equating the Jewish meaning with the literal sense, Origen denigrates it as too superficial and simple. He thereby invests the Christian interpretation with an aura of superiority, and secondarily gives himself and other like-minded scholars preeminence as interpreters of Scripture. But this emphasis and rhetoric are neither frivolous nor a trivial matter for the Christian teacher and apologist in the early part of the third century, buffeted by criticism of impiety and ignorance, as seen in *Contra Celsum*, by the threat of local and imperial persecution, and by the charge of having falsely usurped the Jewish

<sup>84</sup>*ComPs 1-25*, translation taken from Trigg, 70-71.

<sup>85</sup>Paul M. Blowers writes that “Christian-Jewish confrontations in this period were therefore more than trivial or bookish disputes over the scriptures; they were genuine struggles for credibility” (“Origen, the Rabbis, and the Bible: Toward a Picture of Judaism and Christianity in Third-century Caesarea,” in *Origen of Alexandria*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988], 109).

<sup>86</sup>Torjesen, “Rhetoric of the Literal Sense,” 641.

Scriptures.<sup>87</sup> Rather, it was a matter of life and death.<sup>88</sup> Recognition of this may mute the disapproval of Origen and generate a fairer recognition of his achievement, perhaps even an appreciation of specific interpretations that have been belittled to the point that they are no longer seen as sound.

This possibility justifies a fifth point that brings out more clearly the contrast between early Christian interpretation up to and including Origen and viewpoints that seem more attuned to modern scholarship. There is a semantic field in time, a frame of reference surrounding words and concepts as they are imperceptibly shaped by usage, that has been called “a secondhand memory.”<sup>89</sup> It is the notion of the “secondhand memory” of words that is relevant in the context of coming to grips with Origen’s exegetical struggle. The “second hand memory” refers to the accumulated meaning that must accompany the interpretation of words. Seizing on this concept in describing the context for the Scriptures between Jewish tradition and Christian interpretation, Torjesen shows how the first generation of Christian exegetes “worked to repress, submerge or efface the ‘second hand memory’ of the words of the Septuagint—their Jewish meanings.”<sup>90</sup> Origen’s monumental *Hexapla* exemplifies the depth of this struggle. He was not working as a modern textual critic, trying to construct an original or authoritative text of the LXX; his goal was rather to provide “the Christian controversialist with a text that would be acceptable in the authoritative eyes of contemporary Jewish scholars.”<sup>91</sup>

Torjesen focuses on this process at a time in the evolution of Christianity when the tide is already turning. Up to and including Origen, the Christian effort must be seen as an uphill struggle, trying to bleach from the OT the deep hues of Jewish meaning, replacing it instead with a Christian perspective that had to be pervasive in order to succeed at all. Less than two centuries after Origen, this process had

<sup>87</sup>Jewish allegations of foul play are implied when Origen somewhat self-consciously makes the comment that “we have explored these things without the support of any allegory, lest we leave an opportunity to those of the circumcision to clamor against the truth, as customarily happens” (*ComRom* 2.13.17).

<sup>88</sup>“Es ist leicht J. Lebreton zuzustimmen, der sagt: für Origenes ist die Allegorie ‘une question de vie ou de mort’” (Hällström, 42).

<sup>89</sup>Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 79.

<sup>90</sup>Torjesen, “Rhetoric of the Literal Sense,” 633.

<sup>91</sup>S. P. Brock, “Origen’s Aims as a Textual Critic of the Old Testament,” *StPat* 10, ed. F. L. Cross (Berlin: Academic-Verlag, 1970), 216.

reached the point that it no longer served any utility. Where Origen painstakingly worked to carve out conceptual turf for the Christian position, Jerome was ready to scale back some of the claims and even to belittle the work of his predecessors.<sup>92</sup> But this only happens when the reading of the text has been conditioned by several generations of Christian interpretation. The text has, so to speak, acquired a new “secondhand memory.” Between the times of Origen and Jerome the momentum has swung in favor of the Christian position as “layers of Christian meanings have been deposited on the bedrock of the Jewish text for nearly two centuries.”<sup>93</sup>

By Jerome’s day, the Christian “secondhand memory” of the words of the OT was firmly in place. The task of exegesis and the strategies of persuasion had moved on to other challenges—lesser ones, perhaps, because Christian interpreters would not again face the challenges confronting the generation of Origen.<sup>94</sup> The corrective of subsequent generations, from Jerome to Luther and beyond, must not be overvalued, because the shift in emphasis proceeds in part from the safe refuge provided by the battles fought by earlier generations. Luther’s boundless confidence in what he considered to be the literal sense may have been inadequate for the task facing interpretation before Christianity became the ascendant religion. “Only the true principal meaning which is provided by the letter can produce good theologians,” Luther writes in a statement critical of Origen, clearly implying that the Alexandrian fell short of his standard.<sup>95</sup> But changing circumstances and ingrained meanings can overestimate the powers attributed to the grammatical sense. Luther could advocate the straightforward meaning

<sup>92</sup>Torjesen writes that for Jerome “the meanings lie directly below the surface, their outlines are clearly visible, there is no complicated relationship between depth and surface. On the other hand for Origen meanings lie deep below the surface and extend to unfathomable depths, their outlines are not clear on the troubled surface, but still their luminous presence can be discerned by the trained eye” (“Rhetoric of the Literal Sense,” 638).

<sup>93</sup>Ibid., 633.

<sup>94</sup>The question of the “virgin” in Isa 7:14 is the *locus classicus* in the Jewish-Christian contest of OT interpretation. Adam Kamesar shows that Jerome solves the challenge inherent in the Jewish position more successfully than his Christian predecessors, including Origen, even though Jerome looks to the literal sense and employs the tools of historical and grammatical analysis. What Kamesar does not show, however, is whether it would have occurred to Jerome or to anyone else to embark on the task unless the issue had arisen on other grounds (“The Virgin of Isaiah 7:14: The Philological Argument from the Second to the Fifth Century,” *JTS* 41 (1990): 51-75.

<sup>95</sup>Luther, “Answer to the Hyperchristian Book,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 39, *Church and Ministry* 1, trans. Eric W. Gritsch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), 178.

because the text had been saturated with the “secondhand memory” of Christianity and because the Jewish perspective no longer represented any threat. It could be—and was—dismissed by crass ridicule.<sup>96</sup> From Jerome onward, Christian interpretation reaps the benefits of centuries of Christian exegetical traditions. Moreover, an appraisal of its dominant position must also take into account the profound religious, social, and political transformation that took place during the period between Origen and Jerome. For centuries to come after Jerome, the Christian interpretation had the additional backing of institutions unimagined by Origen and his generation. The interpretation of the church was also to be “secured by the teaching office of the bishops and anchored in conciliar authority sanctioned by the state.”<sup>97</sup>

This complete redrawing of the political and religious landscape must be broadened into a sixth and final point in order to grasp the immeasurable difference between Origen’s setting and that of later generations.<sup>98</sup> At the time of Origen, the church was perceived as a menace to the state; whereas after the conversion of the emperor Constantine, the state became the chief sponsor of the church. The church of Jerome and Augustine, as well as the church of Luther and Calvin, is a church that plays a commanding role on the world stage and in the lives of individual citizens. The observed contrast in hermeneutical method from Origen to Luther is no greater than the dissimilarity in theological priorities, and their respective concern plays out against very different backgrounds.<sup>99</sup> Origen must explain God’s ways to his audience. He cannot take the preeminence of Christianity for granted. He must win people to the Christian position as such on the merits of his message; he cannot count on axioms that have been engraved on the Christian society. Origen cannot command or

<sup>96</sup>Luther, “On the Jews and Their Lies,” *Luther’s Works*, vol. 47, *Christian in Society* 3, trans. Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 137-306.

<sup>97</sup>Torjesen, “Rhetoric of the Literal Sense,” 641.

<sup>98</sup>Any attempt to establish a distinct theological paradigm in the absence of delineating the political situation of the church, as has been done for Origen and Augustine, is bound to be deficient. Cf. Charles Kannengiesser, “Origenes, Augustine und der Paradigmenwechsel in der Theologie,” in *Theologie—wohin?* ed. Hans Küng and David Tracy (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Mohn, 1984), 151-164.

<sup>99</sup>The fact of an evolution in hermeneutical perspective and theological priorities is borne out in Wai-Shing Chau’s study, *The Letter and the Spirit: A History of Interpretation from Origen to Luther* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995). However, little attention, if any, is devoted to the vastly different situations facing Origen compared with later interpreters.

proclaim; he must persuade.<sup>100</sup> This is reflected in his attempt to resolve the riddles raised by the stories in the OT,<sup>101</sup> by his repudiation of eternal punishment,<sup>102</sup> and by his emphasis on free will.<sup>103</sup> His argument is not based on an appeal to divine sovereignty, a take-it-or-leave-it proposition where human appreciation for God's ways counts for nothing and where God's sovereign will overrides human consent.<sup>104</sup> But if his theological orientation reflects the social and political situation of the Christian community as much as his own deeply held convictions, the same holds true for exegetes and theologians working in the era of Christian dominance. The arguments used by Origen in order to win acceptance for the Christians' God are less in demand

<sup>100</sup>Origen takes issue with Celsus's charge that Christian faith is devoid of rational reflection. He "cannot simply appeal to an institutional authority because he requires that disputes be settled by an appeal to rational argument" (Trigg, 54).

<sup>101</sup>E.g., *First Principles* 2.5.2. Trigg, 8, thinks that "Origen's initial impetus toward allegorical interpretations of Scripture may have come from the need to obviate Marcion's criticism," i.e., the charge that the OT tells of an inferior god.

<sup>102</sup>To Origen, Scripture indicates "that every sinner kindles for himself the flame of his own fire, and is not plunged into a fire which has been previously kindled by someone else or which existed before him. Of this fire the food and material are our sins" (*First Principles* 2.20.4). In a related comment, John R. Sachs writes that "on the day of judgment, when face to face with God, in the purity and perfection of divine love, sin will manifest its own true nature with a burning clarity. Sinners themselves will be their own accusers and the evil they have done will ignite within them, as a fever takes hold of a person who has indulged in bad food or intemperate, unhealthy behavior" ("Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology," *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 626.

<sup>103</sup>Crouzel, 21, calls Origen "the supreme theologian of free will." René Cadouss writes that for Origen "liberty became the most general of all the laws of the universe" (*Introduction au système d'Origène* [Paris: Société d'édition "Les Belles Lettres," 1932], cited in Daniélou, 205-206. Clark, 7, asserts that the challenge facing Origen, as well as his motives, were lost to view to his critics to the extent that "only [Origen's translator] Rufinus understood the religious issue confronting Origen that had prompted the writing of *On First Principles*: the need to construct a polemic against Gnostic and astrological determinism that would 'save' human free will and God's justice." To Origen, the meaning of the cross is related to freedom. The cross has a healing, not simply a judicial, purpose, and its reach extends beyond the "human order." "We certainly do not deny that free will always will remain in rational natures, but we affirm that the power of the cross of Christ and of his death which he undertook at the end of the ages is so great that it suffices for the healing and restoration not only of the present and the future but also of past ages. It suffices not only for our human order, but also for the heavenly powers and orders. For according to the Apostle Paul's own pronouncement: Christ has made peace 'through the blood of his cross' not only with 'the things on earth' but also with 'the things in heaven'" (*ComRom* 5.10.14).

<sup>104</sup>E.g., *First Principles* 2.1.2.

once the church is able to command the theological agenda. It is an irony that certain doctrines rejected as untenable and repugnant by Origen are later held proudly by the church and its leading theologians, whether Catholic or Protestant. Theodicy is replaced by soteriology as the main frame of reference, moving the focus to a more detailed picture within a much smaller frame. Eric Osborn writes fittingly that with the conversion of Constantine “theodicy gave way to triumphalism.”<sup>105</sup> Osborn describes this transformation as a process of contraction: “Theology was narrowed, first, because the rule no longer had the need for the apocalyptic, Gnostic extensions of Origen’s theodicy and second, because the whole rule was packed into christology and trinity.”<sup>106</sup> Here the choice of words such as “contraction” and “narrowing” is revealing, pointing to the shrinking field of vision. In Origen, soteriology constitutes a smaller circle within the larger circle of theodicy, the latter exerting a controlling influence on the former. In later theology, soteriology stands largely alone.

### *Origen’s Account of Evil*

The above are elements that one is advised to recognize before passing judgment on Origen’s work and the role played by the reality of personal evil in the understanding of the early church. All are in evidence when Origen brings out the OT verification for the Christian belief in *Contra Celsum* and in the more in-depth account in *On First Principles*. When Origen explains why passages in the OT point beyond the immediate historical circumstances of the writer, he is guided by his view of what the NT has singled out as important. But this argument is in turn corroborated by the pregnant nature of the OT itself, a conviction that Origen holds in common with the writers of the NT. As in *Contra Celsum*,<sup>107</sup> his two most important textual witnesses in *On First Principles* are Ezekiel’s lament over the king of Tyre (Ezek 28:12-19) and the related lament over the king of Babylon in Isaiah (14:12-20). Clearly believing that his argument flows convincingly from the text itself, Origen quotes both passages *in extenso*, adding his own remarks prior to and after presenting the texts. The Ezekiel text, he claims, “is most evidently of such a kind that it cannot possibly refer to a man, but must

<sup>105</sup>Eric Osborn, “The Apologist Origen and the Fourth Century: From Theodicy to Christology,” in *Origeniana Septima*, ed. W. A. Biernert and U. Kühneweg (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1995), 58.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>107</sup>*Contra Celsum* 6.43.



be understood of some higher power, which had fallen from higher places and been cast down to lower and worse ones."<sup>108</sup> The historical reality of Tyre is inadequate to fit the billing of the text, and the reference to "the prince of Tyre" must therefore be seen as an allusive and composite figuration:

For when he who is called "prince of Tyre" is related to have been "among the holy ones" and "without stain" and set "in the paradise of God", "adorned with a crown of honour and beauty", how can I ask, can we suppose such a being to have been inferior to any of the holy ones? He is described as having been "a crown of honour and beauty" and as having walked "in the paradise of God" "without stain." How then can anyone possibly suppose that such a being was not one of those holy and blessed powers which, dwelling as they do in a state of blessedness, we must believe are endowed with no other honour than this?<sup>109</sup>

The shoes worn by the "prince of Tyre," then, are too big for the historical Tyre of Ezekiel's own day. While not denying that Tyre represented the manifestation of a proud and oppressive power, Origen takes the passage to speak to the subject of evil on a deeper level. In his eyes, the text conflates past and present, earth and heaven, the fall of the highest angel and the fall of human beings, but at its core lies the story of the undoing of the prince of evil himself in his supernatural and superhuman form. Origen's interpretation is conditioned by the conviction that the Christian worldview must apply to all the biblical manifestations of the conflict between good and evil—certainly in texts that in his eyes are bursting with primordial overtones and the connotation of ultimacy. Careful not to claim too much without presenting the evidence, Origen quotes the full text before asking rhetorically:

Who is there that, hearing such sayings as this, "Thou wast a signet of likeness and crown of honour in the delights of the paradise of God," or this, "from the time thou wast created with the cherubim, I placed thee in the holy mount of God", could possibly weaken their meaning to such an extent as to suppose them spoken of a human being, even a saint, not to mention the prince of Tyre"? Or what "fiery stones" can he think of, "in the midst" of which any man could have lived? Or who could be regarded as "stainless" from the very "day he was created", and yet at some later time could have acts of unrighteousness found in him and be said to be "cast forth into the earth"? This certainly indicated that the prophecy is spoken of one who, not being in the earth, was "cast forth

<sup>108</sup>*First Principles* 1.5.4.

<sup>109</sup>*Ibid.*

into the earth", whose "holy places" also are said to be "polluted."<sup>110</sup>

A simple historical application would force the text into an implausible straitjacket if applied to "a human being, even a saint, not to mention the prince of Tyre," as Origen exclaimed. The latter example evidently fits the hypothesis especially poorly; he thinks it highly unlikely that the Tyre of history would be deserving of such an auspicious beginning.

A similar method is applied to the passage from Isaiah against the "king of Babylon" (Isa 14:12-20). After introducing the text as evidence, Origen claims that "it is most clearly proved by these words that he who formerly was Lucifer and who "arose in the morning" has "fallen from heaven."<sup>111</sup> For if, then,

he was a being of darkness, why is he said to have formerly been Lucifer or light-bearer?<sup>112</sup> Or how could he "rise in the morning", who had in him no light at all? Moreover, the Saviour teaches us about the devil as follows: "Lo, I see Satan fallen as lightning from heaven." So he was light once. . . . Yet he also compares Satan to lightning, and says that he fell from heaven, in order to show thereby that he was in heaven once, and had a place among the holy ones, and a share in that light in which all the holy ones share.<sup>113</sup>

As with the passage in Ezekiel, indeed, as though these passages are two of a kind, the lament over the "king of Babylon" takes the story of the *being that is opposed to God* back to its mysterious beginning and forward to its inevitable end, employing the historical reality of Babylon as the literary vehicle for the unveiling. Origen may harness biblical

<sup>110</sup>Ibid. Tertullian's earlier exposition of the Ezekiel passage reads almost like Origen's: "This description, it is manifest, properly belongs to the transgression of the angel, and not to the prince's: for none among human beings was either born in the paradise of God, not even Adam himself, who was rather translated thither; nor placed with a cherub upon God's holy mountain, that is to say, in the heights of heaven, from which the Lord testifies that Satan fell; nor detained amongst the stones of fire, and the flashing rays of burning constellations, whence Satan was cast down like lightning. No, it is no one else than the very author of sin who was demoted in the person of a sinful man: he was once irreproachable, at the time of his creation, formed for good by God, as by the good Creator of irreproachable creatures, and adorned with every angelic glory, and associated with God, good with the Good; but afterwards of his own accord removed to evil" (*Against Marcion* 2.10).

<sup>111</sup>*First Principles* 1.5.5.

<sup>112</sup>This is Butterworth's English translation of the Latin text made by Origen's defender Rufinus around 397 C.E. almost one hundred and fifty years after the death of Origen. Jerome's Vulgate translation has the word "lucifer" in Isa 14:12, "quomodo cecidisti de caelo lucifer qui mane oriebaris corruisti in terram qui vulnerabas gentes."

<sup>113</sup>*First Principles* 1.5.5.

passages by methods, such as allegory,<sup>114</sup> typology, allusion, figural extension, historical generalization, or prophecy for a given purpose. In this instance, however, Origen is so impressed by the obvious “surplus of meaning” in these texts that he seems to count on a mere literal reading to shatter applications that stop at the respective rulers of Babylon or Tyre.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, these laments are part of the record of the conflict between good and evil; and the historical manifestations of this conflict, whether in biblical terms or in Origen’s eyes, cannot be explained in human terms alone.

No less an authority than Luther apparently called the derivation of “Lucifer” from the passage in Isaiah “*instignis error totius papatus.*”<sup>116</sup> While this tendentious attribution will not stand, a number of critical scholars dismiss any link between this passage and Satan. Some deny that the Bible hints at anything that can be assembled into a coherent story of the fall of Lucifer from a state of innocence, or, if conceding that such ideas may be inferred, they deny that the passage in Isaiah applies to the subject.<sup>117</sup> Exegetes in the early church held a different

<sup>114</sup>A strictly allegorical interpretation of these passages is found in *Contra Celsum* when Origen applies the adversarial notion of “Satan” to any person “who has chosen evil and to live an evil life” (*Contra Celsum* 6.44).

<sup>115</sup>“Similarly the statements concerning the ruler of Tyre cannot be understood of any particular man who is to rule over Tyre. And as for the numerous statements made about Nebuchadnezzar, especially in Isaiah, how is it possible to interpret them of that particular man? For the man Nebuchadnezzar neither ‘fell from heaven,’ nor was he the ‘morning star,’ nor did he ‘rise in the morning’ over the earth” (*First Principles* 4.3.9).

<sup>116</sup>The attribution of this statement to Luther is found in Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah*, trans. S. R. Driver (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1892), 310. Luther’s understanding of this passage seems to have been ambiguous. Often he treats Isa 14:12 as a reference to the fall of Satan, but the context is generally rhetorical. An example of this is found in Luther’s commentary on Ps 101 (Luther, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 13, *Selected Psalms* 2 [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995], 196). In what may be seen as intended exegesis of the passage, *Lucifer* is said to denote the historical king of Babylon (idem, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 1, *Lectures on Genesis 1-5*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995], 112; idem, *Luther’s Works*, vol. 16, *Commentary on Isaiah 1*, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1995], 140).

<sup>117</sup>G. B. Caird claims that “the Bible knows nothing of the premundane fall of Satan, familiar to readers of *Paradise Lost*” (*The Revelation of St. John* [London: A. & C. Black, 1966], 153). Graham, 34, deplores the persistence of Origen’s application of the “King of Babylon” and the “Prince of Tyre” to Satan, citing these texts as examples of an erroneous interpretation “which persists in some quarters to this day.” Ronald Youngblood dismisses any interpretation of “Lucifer” that goes beyond the immediate historical situation of the writer. In his eyes, it is the early Christian interpretation and not Lucifer that has fallen (“The Fall of Lucifer [in More Ways than One],” in *The Way of Wisdom: Essays in Honor of Bruce K. Waltke*, ed. J. I. Packer and Sven K. Soderlund

view, as we have seen, and it is likely that the outlook of modern exegetes is conditioned as much by different presuppositions and theological priorities as by the nature of the evidence.

Despite the weight of the considered reservations noted above, one should hesitate to canonize Luther's objection or accept the conclusions of scholars who deny any connection between the Isaiah passage and Satan. A host of scholars do, in fact, see in these texts elements that reach beyond the immediate historical situation quite apart from any intent to vindicate Origen or other readers in the early church. Scholars have not only acknowledged the compelling literary qualities of the poem in Isaiah,<sup>118</sup> but have also to a varying degree seen in it tantalizing hints that affirm many of the elements of the early Christian position: the primordial origin of evil, the banishment of a distinguished being from heaven, and the ultimacy of the poetic aspiration.<sup>119</sup> Moreover,

[Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000], 173).

<sup>118</sup>Otto Kaiser calls the poem in Isaiah "one of the most powerful poems not only of the Old Testament, but of the whole literature of the world" (*Isaiah 13-39* [London: SCM, 1974], 29).

<sup>119</sup>Acknowledging the tenor of ultimacy in the text, Kaiser, 30-31, allows one interpretation to be "the moment in which God was to bring about the end of the final world ruler in the long chain of empires which had destroyed each other and yet remained essentially the same. The fact that the name of the ruler is not given, the jubilation throughout the liberated world at his fall, and the explicit statement that the staff of the wicked and of the tyrants has been broken, point in this direction." In contrast to interpreters who see nothing primordial in the text, R. E. Clements says that "vv. 12-15 appear to contain either a fragment of, or at least an allusion to, an ancient myth of the banishment of a divine being from heaven" (*Isaiah 1-39*, NCBC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980], 142). Gale A. Yee takes more than a small step in the direction of the early Christian interpretation, writing that "the poet transmits an ancient myth of the demigod Helel in the form of a dirge. By imbedding this dirge in the center of the overall lament, the poet assimilates the tyrant to this primordial figure, identifying the tyrant's rise and fall with that of Helel, the Bright One" ("The Anatomy of Biblical Parody: The Dirge Form in 2 Samuel 1 and Isaiah 14," *CBQ* 50 [1988]: 577-578). In a reference to Isa 14:12-15, Jon D. Levenson grants that the notion of a rebellion in heaven is found in the OT, but that this view is rarely expressed (*Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988], 136). He, 136, suggests that this outlook was theologically so troublesome that it was suppressed: "That snippets of it are indeed to be found evidences profound insecurity about YHWH's kingship even within the world of Israelite myth. . . . That the myth of theomachy or rebellion has been repressed rather than destroyed accounts for the fact that we now have snippets, and only snippets." Dissenting from the idea that "Lucifer" is merely a metaphor for the "King of Babylon," William L. Holladay concedes that the poem "does not press one directly to assume that the tyrant is a king of Babylon" ("Text, Structure, and Irony in the Poem on the Fall of the Tyrant, Isaiah 14," *CBQ* 61 [1999]: 635).

according to the NT, the correct grasp of the OT needs the help of interpretation.<sup>120</sup> The latter has only a partial disclosure of hidden realities, good or evil. With rare exceptions (e.g., Luke 2:25-38), the OT is for the early followers of Jesus a landscape concealed in fog, yielding its veiled secrets to the rising sun of the fuller revelation of the NT. If the prominence of Satan is quantitatively greater by orders of magnitude in the NT, the qualitative parameters are identical: the NT tells the story of how God makes right what according to the OT went wrong. Luther's deprecation of the early Christian interpretation of the disputed passage in Isaiah need not stem only from a sharpened and more critical hermeneutical perspective. As suggested already, it could also be a result of changing presuppositions, receiving from a given text only what is strictly in accordance with the questions asked. If Luther had no eye for theodicy because he had no need for it, the weight of his criticism must be modified accordingly. R. P. C. Hanson's verdict that "Origen's thought remained outside the Bible and had never penetrated within it" may apply to important areas of Origen's thought, but it is not persuasive with regard to Origen's account of the early Christian understanding of evil.<sup>121</sup> The stinging criticism that Origen plods heavily-footed and mechanically through the Scriptures—"blind to its merits, deaf to its music"—and therefore oblivious to the subtle intimations and soaring ascents of biblical poetry, would lead to quite the opposite result if tested by the early Christian scrutiny of the OT for evidence for the reality of Satan.<sup>122</sup> On that point, at least, it seems more appropriate to direct the stigma of impaired musicality to interpretations that insist on seeing the human and the immediate where inspired poets aspired to describe the primordial and the ultimate. Still more could be turned on its head in such a revaluation because the theological outlook that has little use for the early Christian belief in personal evil lies closer to the pagan critic Celsus than to the early Christian view.

### *Theological Implications of the Christian Belief in Personified Evil*

It is evident that Celsus takes offence at the Christian doctrine because he is a confirmed believer in the tradition of the fathers, the stability of society, and the well-being of the empire. But it is a mistake to think that Celsus is concerned only with the prospect of dimming imperial fortunes if the new

<sup>120</sup>Such is the perspective of such texts as Luke 24:25-27; John 12:27-32; Heb 1:1-2.

<sup>121</sup>Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 363.

<sup>122</sup>Hanson, Review of Henri Crouzel's *Origène*, 279.

teaching continues to gain adherents. Confronted with the Christian belief in personal evil, his ire has also been aroused on philosophical and theological grounds by the offensive character of the belief itself. The ignorance so apparent to Celsus has found expression in a proposition amounting to blasphemy in any meaningful religious system. His objections should, therefore, be read as a theological evaluation; it is the lack of theological merit in the Christian position that bothers him. By their belief in Satan, Celsus asserts, the Christians have departed "*from the true meaning of the divine enigma.*"<sup>123</sup> And what is that *enigma*? It is that any God worthy of the name would not permit such a challenge to his authority to exist. The notion is an affront to the sovereignty of God, and for Celsus the sovereignty of God is the most basic and sacred belief of any religion.<sup>124</sup> Conceding that ancient mythology also has notions of combat among the gods, Celsus sees the Christian view as distinct from these: the former "*are not like the tales which tell of a devil who is a daemon, or . . . who is a sorcerer and proclaims opposing opinions.*"<sup>125</sup> The existence and activity of the devil in the Christian view of reality have no genuine counterparts in pagan myths. In the Christian conception, evil has achieved a historical concretion and is accorded explanatory powers that pagans do not demand of their myths. Celsus has picked up the striking qualitative difference, a distinction that continues to elude even Christian interpretations that give Satan more than a passing glance: The devil, notes Celsus, has something to say; he "*proclaims opposing opinions.*" This, too, is unthinkable in the theological paradigm of Celsus, within which the imperial will of God must hold undisputed sway and no dissenting viewpoint is permitted. To Celsus, it is also sacrilege to infer that "*when the greatest God indeed wishes to confer some benefit upon men, He has a power which is opposed to Him, and so is unable to do it.*"<sup>126</sup> The Christian view has produced a God who appears impotent. By proposing the existence of an opposing power that infringes on God's domain, "*the Son of God, then, is worsted by the devil.*"<sup>127</sup> In Celsus's view, God is outsmarted and entangled by a foe that should have been easily put in his place by God's power. While Celsus has not fully grasped the meaning of the confrontation between Christ and Satan, he finds the thought ludicrous that it should be in the devil's power to inflict suffering on the Son of God.

<sup>123</sup>*Contra Celsum* 6.42.

<sup>124</sup>Chadwick, xxi, attributes quite high-minded motives to Celsus; his concern for the truth and for the good of society is taken to be deeply sincere.

<sup>125</sup>*Contra Celsum* 6.42.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup>*Ibid.*

This impugns the dignity of God and defies common sense. "In my opinion," says Celsus, God "ought to have punished the devil; he certainly ought not to have pronounced threats against the men who had been attacked by him."<sup>128</sup>

Origen's reply is characteristically circumspect. He agrees with Celsus that there is a certain resemblance between the Christian understanding of Satan and the combat myths of ancient mythology. In fact, he turns this part of Celsus's criticism to his own advantage, seeing in these myths clues to a perspective held in common, however vaguely articulated in the pagan myths. But he also agrees with his opponent that the figure of Satan stands apart, appealing for support to sources that to him carry more weight than a host of ancient writers, including Homer. Clearer than any other source and much older, claims Origen, it is the writings of Moses that "taught the existence of this wicked power that fell from the heavens."<sup>129</sup> In the form of the serpent, this agency "was the cause of man's expulsion from the divine paradise."<sup>130</sup>

Much as Origen feels bound and emboldened by Scripture, he is quite able to single out the difference between the Christian view and that of Celsus on a deeper theological and philosophical level. First, evil did not arise by necessity, as if by some flaw in the divine design or by a capricious withdrawal of divine favor. Sin lies instead in the choice and not in the nature of the beings that brought evil into the world.<sup>131</sup> Second, goodness itself has meaning only when the possibility of evil exists. Virtue is not worthy of the name if the option to choose otherwise has been ruled out. This point is as basic to Origen's underlying view of God as it is to his specific understanding of the origin of evil, fighting his battle against the determinism of the Gnostics and others who misinterpret the existence of evil to reflect negatively on God.<sup>132</sup> Third, there was no quick fix for the crisis that arose when evil came to exist contrary to God's will and purpose, as Celsus so condescendingly assumed. "In my opinion he ought to have punished the devil," says Celsus, seeing God easily restricting the devil's range for harming others. But Origen is not fazed by the implied criticism that the God of the Christians lacked the power to put the devil in his place. In his view, there is more depth to God and more subtlety to the nature of evil than for such a crude remedy as power to succeed. "It was necessary for

<sup>128</sup>Ibid.

<sup>129</sup>Ibid., 6.43.

<sup>130</sup>Ibid.

<sup>131</sup>Ibid., 6.44.

<sup>132</sup>*First Principles* 1.1.5; 2.1.2; *Contra Celsum* 4.3.

God," Origen answers, "who knows how to use for a needful end even the consequences of evil, to put those who became evil in this way in a particular part of the universe, and to make a school of virtue to be set up for those who wished to strive lawfully in order to obtain it."<sup>133</sup>

Rather than admitting that Celsus has identified a weak spot in the Christian view of reality, Origen argues that it is Celsus who has failed to understand. He has demonstrated his ignorance of the Scriptures on this matter, and Celsus has also shown himself to be strangely naive as to the nature of evil itself. The origin and reality of evil cannot be restricted to the human sphere alone, because the Bible has mandated a wider frame of reference. Expressing his confidence that the story of evil is traceable from beginning to end in the Scriptures, Origen entices the reader to unearth the evidence and pursue the implications more fully.<sup>134</sup> He contends that the Christian case is the stronger one on theological and philosophical grounds, precisely the areas that Celsus attacks as the weakest. To Origen, the witness of Scripture is no embarrassment to reason. Scripture and experience reflect reality;<sup>135</sup> competing accounts, as Origen is eager to show, are far less persuasive.

Celsus, at least at the outset of his criticism, does not deny the reality of evil. He proposes to give a more sophisticated explanation by invoking philosophy. "*It is not easy for one who has not read philosophy to know what is the origin of evils,*" says Celsus somewhat condescendingly,<sup>136</sup> but he prefers not to delve deeper into the subject than to make the assertion. Specifically how philosophy solves the dilemma is reserved for the few who are initiated. For the masses it is enough "*to be told that evils are not caused by God.*"<sup>137</sup> Backing off slightly on what the masses need to know, Celsus adds that the masses may also be told that evils "*inhere in matter and dwell among mortals.*"<sup>138</sup>

Appearing unconvinced by his own argument, Celsus then reverses

<sup>133</sup> *Contra Celsum* 6.44.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> In a suggested improvement on Chadwick's translation of a passage in *Contra Celsum* 1.2, J. C. M. van Winden takes Origen's meaning to be that "a man who comes to the gospel with his Greek way of thinking will judge that is true and by putting it into practice he will prove that it meets the requirements of a Greek proof" ("Notes on Origen, *Contra Celsum*," in *Arché: A Collection of Patristic Studies*, ed. J. Den Boeft and D. T. Runia, VCSupp 41 (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 161-162.

<sup>136</sup> *Contra Celsum* 4.65.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*



himself as if to prove that the study of philosophy has not been of much help to him in explaining the reality of evil. Quite unexpectedly, he brings up a deterministic, pessimistic, and somewhat rambling outlook that reads as though the notion of evil must ultimately be dismissed. Having begun on a note of superiority, leading the reader to expect an explanation for the reality of evil that is better than the Christian position, he appears rather sheepishly to take refuge in fatalism. If "evil" is a necessity and if human beings are trapped in a cycle that no one can escape, the concept of evil has no meaning. Celsus asserts that "*the period of mortal life is similar from beginning to end, and it is inevitable that according to the determined cycles the same things always have happened, are now happening, and will happen.*"<sup>139</sup>

Origen is not impressed by what Celsus brings to the table from his study of philosophy. To Celsus's claim that "*it is not easy for one who has not read philosophy to know the origin of evils,*" Origen notes that his deceased opponent leaves the impression that "anyone who is a philosopher is easily able to know their origin, while for anyone who is not a philosopher it is not easy to perceive the origin of evils although it is possible for him to know it, even if only after much hard work."<sup>140</sup> This assumption is patently false because the learned have fared no better than the unlearned with respect to explaining the existence of evil. Deprived of insight that revelation alone can give, Origen claims that philosophy has come up short on several counts. Even on such basics as knowledge of God, ignorance of whom is the greatest evil, philosophy has failed to give a coherent answer, as Celsus well knows. Origen states modestly that "it is not easy even for one who has read philosophy to know the origin of evils, and probably it is impossible even for these men to know it absolutely, unless by inspiration of God it is made clear what are evils, and shown how they came to exist, and understood how they will be removed."<sup>141</sup>

At the deepest level, Origen dismisses Celsus as a traditionalist whose attack on the Christian view of reality cannot conceal his shallow view of evil and his deep-seated conviction that makes faithfulness to tradition and conformity to the values of the state the hallowed definition of what is good. Such an attitude is, in Origen's eyes, doomed from the outset. No one, says Origen, "will be able to know the origin of evils if he has not realized that it is an evil to suppose that piety is preserved by keeping the established laws of states in the ordinary sense of the word."<sup>142</sup>

<sup>139</sup>Ibid.

<sup>140</sup>Ibid.

<sup>141</sup>Ibid.

<sup>142</sup>Ibid.

Where Celsus claims to find the *True Account* on the basis of tradition and reason, Origen points to the Bible and to revelation for the better answer to the most perplexing questions facing human existence. In the connected, coherent, and comprehensive narrative of the biblical drama, Origen defends the Christian view of reality with a picture of God that emphasizes human and creaturely freedom more than divine sovereignty, love rather than power, and persuasion in contrast to the use of force. The framework of this early Christian belief is reflected in the imperiled situation of the Christian community. These views are not homegrown tenets of belief by an innovative and freewheeling thinker. Origen proposes to defend no more than what Christians believed in Celsus's day some seventy years earlier, and earlier still as this view of reality comes to light in the NT. Celsus's attempt to embarrass the Christian position has in Origen's eyes come to grief—as will others that refuse to acknowledge the personal and supernatural nature of evil. In Origen's answer, the Christian message takes the reality of evil seriously to a degree not imagined by Celsus. The latter stands exposed, caught in its own rhetorical web that, on the one hand, promised a better explanation and, on the other hand, implied that there is nothing to explain. To Origen, Celsus's wholehearted effort to uphold convention and his half-hearted and incoherent attempt to offer an alternative explanation are damning evidence that “no one will be able to know the origin of evils who has not grasped the truth about the so-called devil and his angels, and who he was before he became a devil, and how he became a devil, and what caused his so-called angels to rebel with him.”<sup>143</sup>

In conclusion, I suggest that the theme of cosmic conflict and its accompanying theodicy in the early church represent a lost theological treasure that is waiting to be rediscovered and reclaimed. They expand the biblical narrative to its native, comprehensive scope and restore the neglected cosmic perspective to its rightful place. Theological issues that were eclipsed when Christianity became an ascendant political force in society may be due for a substantial revision in the light of this rediscovery. Issues poised to rise to the foreground will be the biblical story of the origin of evil and even Origen's view of liberty as “the most general of all the laws of the universe.”<sup>144</sup> If this were to happen, the church of today may not only find itself in fruitful dialogue with the early church and its theological concerns. It may also, like Origen, have more to say to the contemporary person to whom the reality of evil is a real obstacle to faith, as are misconceptions of the God who permitted it to happen.

<sup>143</sup>Ibid.

<sup>144</sup>Cf. Daniélou, 205-206.