

Origen of Alexandria and Conscience

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The Church's first serious, and arguably greatest, exegete of Scripture who could claim a solid philosophical education was Origen of Alexandria (185–254). His theory of exegesis approached the Scripture more as of a body of oracular literature than as the product of any coherent historical evolution of traditions. He taught that the divine Wisdom, or Logos, of God had presented Scriptures across the ages as a treasure that could only be unlocked once one had the proper key to understanding. It was not, in other words, internally logically coherent or self-explanatory in any of its messages. Truth was hidden and clues were given by the Logos to be recognized by the spiritually refined. For those who are not spiritually mature, the literal word often led them astray because they were either unwilling or unable to lift their minds on high. But for those who were attuned to the deeper meanings hidden in the texts by the Divine Logos, it was clear that all things were meant to lead up away from matter and flesh towards an increasing purity of heart that allowed one the possibility of communion with the Logos, who hid himself from the crass and the foolish (*Alogoi*). Origen taught consistently that Scripture thus had to be read not historically and sequentially (as if it were a slow linear development) but eschatologically—out of time—and in the realisation that its hidden oracular truths were given in accordance with

the mystical profundity of the original messengers who served as vehicles of the Logos, and also in the measure of the spiritual profundity of the reader who approaches them for insight. In short, there was a steep hierarchy of value in Scripture.¹

To begin with, all the Old Testament had to be read in the light of, and subservient to, the New (Origen was the first to introduce this distinction of Old and New Covenants). But moreover, certain writers weighed more than others, and they were, as it were (using a notion borrowed from Rabbi Akiba) “the first fruits of the first fruits.” This meant, for Origen, that the two greatest authorities in all Scripture were the two prophetic seers, John and Paul. After them came the Book of Psalms (seen by Origen as heavily filled with direct, non-historical utterances by the eternal Logos); then Isaiah, the synoptic Gospels, and the Apostolic epistles; then the other New Testament writings; and finally the remainder of the Old Testament. This strict hierarchy of interpretive lenses means that Pauline literature assumed a very strong dominance on Origen's exegesis. Given that Origen's biblical approach was so heavily used in the Greek Christian world after him, both by his friends and enemies, it meant that the Pauline doctrine on any major topic was pushed to the fore in Christian theological reflection ever after.² After Origen, conscience among

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¹ See John A. McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen of Alexandria* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) and *Seeing the Glory*, vol. 1 (Crestwood: SVS Press, 2017).

² Many writers who disdained Origen's exegetical theories (such as Theophilus of Alexandria, Jerome, Theodore Mopsuestia, and John Chrysostom) have been shown to have used him extensively and quietly, even when castigating him explicitly.

the Christians once more assumes the resonances of Paul's mystical teaching riveted to the wider Greek tradition of epistemological awareness. In short: the moral sense became the most acute form of human consciousness, and a border point, a liminal space, where refined consciousness (*logos*) merged into divine awareness (*nous*).

Already, for some of the more philosophically advanced Greek Christians of the second century onwards, *syneidesis* in the human being was preeminently understood as the "awareness" or consciousness of God and divine things.³ For Clement of Alexandria, this awareness is one of the preeminent energies (*dynameis*) of the soul.⁴ It is the force which, from the soul's knowledge of the exemplar of divine things, gives the moral compass to a believer's life.⁵ Clement calls it the best and strongest foundation of the correct life.⁶

However, it was Origen who really elucidated the disconnected ideas present in Paul and who transformed the whole notion into a deeply mystical approach. For Origen, conscience was first and foremost a matter of acute awareness: wisdom (*gnosis*). It was the reflected energy in a human being of the Supreme Wisdom of God (*Logos*). It aroused within a human the realisation that each one was an eternal soul. Moral conscience, therefore, was ultimately the mystical sense of a remembered identity (the soul's original, eternal bliss with God) in communion with the Logos before the lapse to time and space. This lifted the moral imperative to ontological status: being ethical was not just a return to good behaviors, but more so to the springs of immortal being. Origen here was trying to merge aspects of late Platonic epistemology with Christian eschatology. He would get into hot water for this view, both in his lifetime and posthumously;



but even though the Church purged pre-existence ontology from standard doctrine, it took to heart this theological sense of moral conscience as a mystical apprehension of the divine presence. The idea would rise to great precedence in later tradition, particularly moved on by the monastic movement and its deep interest in the scrutiny of the inner mind and its motives.

Origen marked a radical return to close attention to the text of Paul. Like the Apostle, he approached the notion of conscience from a mystical perspective: a matter of the sensing of the indwelling power of the grace of God. The Logos is, for Origen, the source of the cosmos's whole structure and inner meaning and dynamic—especially of the "likeness" to God himself (*homoiosis*), which the Logos, as the supreme divine Image (*eikon*) in the Cosmos himself, has personally located in the human soul, especially rooting it in its higher dynamics of consciousness. For Origen, this close relation of "the image and the likeness" (divine *Logos* and

Origen of Alexandria. Icon by Eileen McGuckin, The Icon Studio, <http://www.sgtt.org/NewIconStudio/>.

³ Methodios of Olympus, *Fragment 10 on Job*, in *Patrologia Graeca*, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1857–86) [hereafter PG] 18:408a.

⁴ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 7.7, PG 9:453a; Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpts from Theodotos* 27, PG 9:673a.

⁵ Clement, *Stromata* 7.8, PG 9:472a.

⁶ Clement, *Stromata* 1.1, PG 8:692b.

human spiritual *syneidesis*) fulfills the text in Genesis that defines the original creation of humankind: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26). Using Platonic cosmology where it suits, Origen explains that this consciousness of God is synonymous with the entrance into all wisdom (*gnosis*) since the soul (the individual considered as a spiritual consciousness) is atemporal, and indeed the knowledge of God is a remembrance of a time before time, when all souls enjoyed a deep ontological union with the Divine Logos, which now (in the fallen material condition) the lapsed soul struggles to rediscover. The return to this former, pre-earthly glory (*apokatastasis*) is driven, in earth’s moral training ground, by increasingly wise recollection of the glory (*doxa*), and by the force of divine *eros* which transfigures the soul through love. For Origen, here following Paul to a larger degree than Plato, this ascensive love is the force (*dynamis*) which makes moral effort, and the ascetical endeavour that underlies it (virtue as *habitus*), synonymous with mystical communion with the Logos. For Origen, conscience is therefore an epistemological factor, as it was with Plato; but more than in Plato or any of the later Neo-Platonists, the ascensive force is divine *eros* leading to communion. It is, therefore, quintessentially a mystical conception of conscience. Origen’s magnificent *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is perhaps the best single work to demonstrate the unfolding of that master theme; and this work was a major, indeed overwhelmingly dominant, influence on the Latin, Greek,

and Syriac monastic traditions of the following millennium.

The Byzantine monastic fathers particularly took up Origen’s themes, and in John Climacus’s *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, an early seventh century book that has been used (from its inception to the present day) as a training manual for monks, *syneidesis* is not merely the moral consciousness of good and evil, but primarily the sense of divine indwelling presence that must be nurtured and developed as a spiritual faculty in the soul, since it will then provide the full direction of a life well lived.⁷ This is the guarding (*phylaxis*) of the heart, which becomes one of the dominant themes in later spiritual writing. The means of this guarding of the heart are the related attitudes of *nepsis* (focused awareness) and *prosoche* (attentiveness). The later Christian writers who continued Origen’s tradition, such as Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–90), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–94), and Maximus the Confessor (c. 580–662), and the later Byzantine monastics who read them closely, also continued to stress the ascensive power of divine *eros* that made the soul of the believer like the lover in the Song of Songs, always seeking restlessly for its Beloved, and shaping all its moral and intellectual energies for the goal of loving communion. The strong link between this loving fidelity and obedience to the moral norms had long ago been established in the renowned *mandatum* of “Maundy” Thursday, when Christ said to his disciples: “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). ✽

⁷ John Climacus, *Ladder of Divine Ascent* 3.3, PG 88:1656b.



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