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Origen as Christian Philosopher: a heterodox approach to exegesis of Divine Love

In evaluating the contribution of Origen of Alexandria as a Father of the Early Christian Church it is important to differentiate between the Origenism imputed to him, and anathematized by Ecumenical Council, and the actual scholarship behind his exegetical approach to Holy Scripture which laid the groundwork for subsequent Biblical interpretation. This paper asserts Origen's place as a heterodox theologian whose key contribution to the church was his methodology for interpreting and teaching the Bible, including allegory and a staged approach to reading texts. It will focus on his incorporation of Platonic concepts of Divine Love as expressed in the Song of Songs, considering Greek and Latin terms for Love. The paper will show that the genre of a text relates to how it may be interpreted, how Origen's exegetical method functioned within the context of contemporary heresies, and how his exegetical method in fact articulated orthodox doctrinal teachings. It will conclude that despite his condemnation for certain doctrinal positions which were presented as heretical a more nuanced description of his stance is as a heterodox Christian who was informed by Hellenistic philosophy.

Keywords: Origen, Early Christian Church, Divine Love.

In the 1990s, as a post-graduate student, I was enthusing about Origen to a scholarly monk in an Anglican Seminary. ‘Ah, Origen,’ he mused. ‘A very nice heretic.’ This glib response prompted me to research further into an ambivalent and highly influential father of the church. On the one hand, one could simply follow the lead given by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 which anathematized, under fifteen separate headings, various doctrines imputed to Origen.¹ The doctrine of universal salvation (*apokatastasis*) was a key problem area. One could also recall that Origen (the ascetic and teacher whose Christian father had been murdered in the Great Persecution in 202 when the young Origen was merely seventeen), himself met an ignoble end after being tortured at the instigation of a new wave of persecution of Christians in Palestine, authorised by Decius, dying in 255 within the year of injuries inflicted by the rack.²

However, there is another side to his legacy; his contribution to a basis for scriptural interpretation, of both the Old and New Testaments, which has been built on by subsequent scholars of the Bible. In the mid-twentieth century, Hanson identified ‘leading qualities’ of his interpretation as being ‘competence, subtlety, ingenuity, symmetry.’³ More recently Pelikan described Origen’s method as ‘the fulcrum for defense of the Old Testament through the correctness of spiritual interpretation of scriptures.’⁴ In our own day, Edwards has produced an illuminating study of how what is now deemed the work of heretics was not only a catalyst to orthodox teaching, but a source of salient elements of teachings which did acquire the status of orthodoxy. Edwards prefers the term ‘heterodox’ to heretical, and in application to our subject points out that in his public oratory, Origen was ‘the mouthpiece of the bishops.’⁵ Some important points are raised here. Origen drew on allegory, a device common within Alexandrian milieu which had shaped his early thinking, as part of a rigorous approach to interpreting the Bible. He was fundamental in highlighting the significance of the Hebrew Scriptures, at a time when the canon of the Bible was still settling. One of his key works was the Hexapla, a presentation of the ‘Sixfold’ Hebrew scriptures, with parallel columns for Hebrew, Hebrew in Greek characters, the Septuagint, the Greek versions of Theodotion, Aquila of Sinope and Symmachus. As we shall see, not only did Origen frequently cite the Hebrew Bible but he used it as the foundation of his exegetical method. My contention thus is that, far from being a heretic, Origen was a key witness within the early church to the treasures to be found in the Bible, and his allegorical methods laid the groundwork for Medieval Exegesis, and (for the western Church) the Reformation’s emphasis on greater transparency of the Bible for lay Christians. This paper will assess Origen’s method through exploration of the *Commentary to the Song of Songs*, which sets out a tripartite model of exegesis. This mirrors the tripartite nature of the human person, which religious anthropology may define,

¹ L.D Davies, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1983), 246–7 and see also M. Edwards, *Catholicity and Heresy in the Early Church* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), chapter 4.

² For a brief synopsis of his life and work, see J.A. McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (London/Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004(b)), 43–6.

³ R.P.C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (London/Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1959), 362.

⁴ J. Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 111.

⁵ Edwards, 2009, 79.

in brief, as body, soul and spirit, a taxonomy explicitly referred to by Origen in his *De Principiis*, Book IV. II, 4.⁶ The integration of both Testaments into his method marks his place as an analytical and well informed scholar of the Bible. For example, he defends the use of allegory by reference to the story of Sarah and Hagar (Gen 16); the two women, he argues, represent the two covenants, affirming the important role of the Hebrew Scriptures in illuminating the New Testament. At St Paul does in Galatians 4, Origen shows that non-literal ways of understanding Scripture are derived from Rabbinic practice. Origen clearly follows the Pauline understanding of the living spirit which is to be preferred to the dead letter of the law (2 Cor. 3–6). The literal meaning of a text may be misleading; it is the spirit behind the ‘law’ that contains the full explanation of a text. This approach was also informed by the emerging rabbinic Judaism of his period.⁷ His orthodoxy is also manifest by his use in allegories of received Biblical texts, a further mark of his authority.⁸

Origen’s formation within philosophical and Christian schools

In common with numerous other Fathers of the Early Church, Origen was exposed to both Christian and philosophical education. By the start of the third century, when Origen began his career, the symbiosis of Christian and pagan teaching was well established in Alexandria. Having lost her husband because of his faith, Origen’s mother attempted to deter her son from following Christianity; as a young man he was likely already engaged in teaching philosophy and also maybe worked as a catechist.⁹ He chose an ascetic life and the greater his knowledge of philosophy, the more he became convinced that it was not at odds with the truths of Divine Wisdom. For detail of his philosophical educators, we may look at Eusebius, whose account of Porphyry in *His Ecc* VI, 19.6 gives some detail; this states that Origen had been taught by Ammonius Saccas, a Platonist who later taught Plotinus. Porphyry is recorded here as saying here that Origen was completely one of the Neoplatonic circle. As we shall see, Origen associates Beauty and Goodness with God and explores the languages of love drawing on Plato’s concept that ‘nothing unworthy of God can be intended by the inspired writers.’¹⁰ The Alexandrian approach to scholarship was based on allegory, a method which allowed Christian teachers to retrieve acceptable meaning from potentially problematic – even offensive – verses in Scripture. Origen employed allegorical method throughout his biblical exegesis. Specific elements in Platonic texts which relate to the discussion of love (divine and otherwise) will be considered in due course, where Origen’s exegetical practices are discussed. As a priest, Origen travelled to Palestine where he was licensed

⁶ R. A. Greer, tr., *Origen, An Exhortation to Martyrdom, Prayer and First Principles: Book IV* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1979), 182.

⁷ J. J. O’Keefe, ‘Scriptural Interpretation’, in J. A. McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (London/ Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004(a)), 193–7.

⁸ Hanson, 1959, 361.

⁹ McGuckin, 2004(b), 243.

¹⁰ H. Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966), 74.

to preach, and his preaching was greatly honoured. His move was not without controversy, and conversations he had with heresiarchs (possibly Candidus, a Valentinian Gnostic teacher, according to Jerome) also laid him open to suspicion, as elements of discussions he had were misrepresented. In Caesarea (a centre of Hellenistic pagan teaching and rabbinic scholarship) he was charged with establishing a 'School' in order to promulgate Christian teaching.¹¹ His fall from favour, in common with many early Church Fathers, owed much to political shifts; the murder of Emperor Alexander Severus led to the installation of a more hostile emperor (Maximin the Thracian) who started a purge of prominent Christians.

The condemnation of Origen and the rise of Origenism

That Origen is a controversial figure within the Christian tradition can hardly be denied; from the fourth to sixth centuries waves of 'Origenist' crises emerged, culminating in the condemnation in 553. Origen's theological assertions pre-dated the ossification of Christian dogma through the promulgations of the Ecumenical Councils, and this resulted in a retrospective condemnation of his teachings which were viewed through the lens of later consensus: dogmatic criteria were applied to him from the context of contemporary theological anxieties rather than in the light of when he was actually writing. In the last quarter of the fourth century, Epiphanius of Salamis was a dominant contributor in the search for heretical teachings which it was felt needed to be identified, labelled and condemned. In 393 a monk named Atarbius circulated a petition among Palestinian monasteries, seeking Origen's condemnation.¹² Although this movement gathered some momentum during the following decade or so the anxiety died down until the middle of the sixth century. Emperor Justinian had drawn up a list of troublesome doctrines in 543 (perhaps influenced by Peregrinus), which included 'such doctrines [as the pre-existence of the soul], together with Origen, who made up such myths.'¹³ The wording of this suggests that it was already possible to distinguish Origen from teachings which allegedly bore his name, and it is always instructive to follow this lead and attempt a separation between Origen and so-called Origenist teachings. As Crouzel's studies show, this is a significant distinction. Of the fifteen anathemas promulgated at the Second Council of Constantinople, some (6, 7, 8, 9, 12, 13) condemn the Christology of Evagrius; in other words they pertain to interpretations of Origen's teaching on the soul by Evagrius, rather than Origen's actual teaching.¹⁴ Misrepresenting Origen as a heretic because of the use Evagrius made of his teaching on the soul risks a wholesale condemnation of the basis of Christian exegesis, and, by extension, an informed and rounded understanding of the Bible – without which there can be no orthodoxy. Aspects of Origen's thought which attracted opprobrium included the suspicion by some (for example Bishop Demetrius in Alexandria who he served before he moved to Palestine) that there was an elitism in his writings, a suggestion that only

¹¹ McGuckin, 2004(a), 15–6.

¹² E. M. Harding, 'Origenist Crises,' in McGuckin, 2004(a), 164.

¹³ *Just. Or. ACO*, 189, cited Pelikan, 1971, 337–8.

¹⁴ McGuckin, 2004(b), 133.

a certain exclusive echelon of humanity could be saved, which recalled the Gnostics (whom Origen condemned). This would, in fact, appear to go against Origen's teaching that all might be restored and saved at the end of time. The question of elitism and the extent to which it is found outside Gnosticism is discussed later, in an evaluation of Origen's teaching about the different levels of spiritual maturity. Edwards' book devotes the whole of chapter four to detailing the specific criticisms made of Origen, from his own generation onwards, and the attempts made by his supporters to affirm his teachings. It is now possible to value Origen's integration of Jewish and Christian scriptures in his hermeneutical method, and to appreciate the acceptable doctrinal teaching this reveals. Rather than condemning him as a heretic, a more informed reading is that he was the 'architect ... of the substructure of Christian dogma and biblical theology in the late antique period.'¹⁵ This is so whether one sees his teachings as acceptable or as a catalyst to further debate. None of the anathemas of 553 relate to Origen's exegetical methodology.

Gnosticism and exclusivity: Celsus compared to and critiqued by Origen

Before focusing on the discussion of divine love in Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (which was written around 238–44) we should consider how this theme is handled in Origen's *Contra Celsum*, a slightly later text in which elitist elements of divine love are raised. Origen's refutation of Gnosticism was compiled in response to Celsus' *The True Word*, which dates from c. 178.¹⁶ In reading *Contra Celsum* we should be aware that Patristic writings against heresy are, inevitably, concerned with hermeneutical method, since both those deemed heretics and those found to be orthodox were using sources taken from the Bible (even if not the same books of the Bible). A biblical commentary – such as Origen's on the *Song of Songs*, together with its accompanying homilies – is a very different genre of writing, serving different intentions, to a polemical tract. The use each type of text makes of the Bible needs to be read in the light of this diversity of genre and intention. Since both heterodox and orthodox teachings on the faith frequently drew on exactly the same Biblical passages, it was the interpretation of them that was crucial to determining whether the content of their teaching was heretical or not. This is why hermeneutics as a discipline is so crucial – and why Origen's contribution to the development of hermeneutical method was such a significant contribution to the growth of the early church. The need for correct interpretation of the Bible is a concern for the early church. Tertullian's writings against Marcion (*Marc* 4. 19.6, for example,) criticise the reductive method in which literal interpretation is the sum of the argument, rather than a more nuanced approach. Another criticism of heretical writers was their method of restricting the range of Biblical sources when constructing an argument. Irenaeus noted that the Ebionites denied the authority of any Gospel except that of Matthew; Marcion, on the other hand, only cited Luke, and the Valentinians restricted their insights to texts taken from the Fourth

¹⁵ McGuckin, 2004(b), 243.

¹⁶ McGuckin, 2004(a), 32.

Gospel.¹⁷ This should be compared to the approach of Origen, who comments on both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and who also includes references to the apocrypha. Gnostics are normally criticised for the elitism they express, for suggesting that only a favoured few can progress to full integration with the Godhead. This exclusivity or elitism is denied by the Christian teaching of the fullness and all-encompassing nature of God's love, and its gracious availability to all those who choose to believe that Jesus is the son of God. Origen does mention different and higher levels of human and spiritual development. He criticizes Celsus for suggesting divine love is exclusive and inaccessible, yet at the same time writes about humanity in such a way as to suggest at the very least a social snobbery, which could imply elitism. Origen states that it was because of:

the abounding love which He had for men, that He gave to the more learned a theology capable of raising the soul far above all earthly things; while with no less consideration He comes down to the weaker capacities of ignorant men, of simple women, of slaves, and, in short, of all those who from Jesus alone could have received that help for the better regulation of their lives which is supplied by his instructions in regard to the Divine Being, adapted to their wants and capacities.¹⁸

However he also spells out the reason for this hierarchical approach. In common with Hebrew practice, Origen appears to be restricting access to the Biblical text to those who are sufficiently spiritually sophisticated – a spiritual elite if you will – to avoid the misinterpretation of erotic language as referring to carnal matters. However given that this is a scriptural commentary it may be that Origen's intention here was not to suggest God's love or wise words should only be available to a chosen elite; rather, he is continuing the Jewish midrashic requirement which urges anyone 'who is not yet rid of the vexations of the flesh and blood and as not ceased to feel the passion of his bodily nature, to refrain completely from reading this little book.'¹⁹ He clearly relates this to the Pauline concept of spiritual milk and spiritual food being required by spiritual infants and the more mature; in other words, he sees the Christian as capable of evolving beyond the base level of interpretation, but urges caution about engaging with an ambiguous text too early in that process. It is possible for people to develop beyond the baser level of existence and come to a higher life in due course. So Origen's intention, and that of Celsus and the gnostic tradition, differs. Origen stresses that God loves all humanity equally and graciously: he disregards merit and loves the Egyptians as well as the Israelites. Celsus is presented as seeing *agape* as the characteristic of a hero rather than as a self-sacrificial response; according to Origen, Celsus argues against the *agape* of God by asking what heroic great deeds did Jesus ever do for humanity?²⁰ This blindness to the salvific death of Christ is evidence of Celsus' heresy, according to Origen, who by contrast sees the kenosis of the crucifixion as evidence for God's love for humanity – a self-giving, not a gaining.

¹⁷ Adv Haer. 3. 11.7, Roberts-Donaldson, tr., www.earlychristianwritings.com accessed 12 August 2017.

¹⁸ CC VII.41, Roberts-Donaldson, tr., www.earlychristianwritings.com accessed 12 August 2017.

¹⁹ *Commentary to Prologue to the Song of Songs* (hereafter Prologue), R.P. Lawson, tr., Origen: *The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies* (New York: The Newman Press, 1956), 23.

²⁰ CC II, 33, Roberts-Donaldson, tr., www.earlychristianwritings.com accessed 12 August 2017.

Origen acknowledges that Celsus and other Gnostics were constructing a sense of Divine love from the Platonic accounts from which he also worked. Origen uses the Diagram of the Ophites to illustrate how the agape of God might be interpreted, and to refute the Gnostic cosmology of Celsus. According to Nygren (who reproduces this image), it shows:

Two concentric circles, the larger being the Father, the smaller being that of the Son. But like a leaden weight, there hangs at the bottom of these two circles yet a third, with the inscription *Agape*; it is the love-longing that draws the Divine down towards the lower world. *Agape* thus becomes the same as *epithymia*, the divine love becomes the same as desire, or downright sensual passion.²¹

As we shall see, Origen uses exegesis to transform *epithymia* into kenotic love, thereby Christianising the Greek philosophical teaching. To see this better we shall now look at the Platonic teaching on love and how Origen engaged with the terminology of love and desire.

Plato on Love; Greek and Latin terms for love

As noted above, Origen was influenced by both Greek philosophy and Christianity in his evolution as a thinker and writer. The text of his on which this paper focuses is ostensibly on love; the *Song of Songs* is an allegory using metaphorical accounts of love to suggest Divine love and intimacy. To cite Origen:

It seems to be that this little book is an epithalamium, that is to say a marriage-song, which Solomon wrote in the form of a drama and sang under the figure of the Bride, about to wed and burning with heavenly love towards her Bridegroom, who is the Word of God.²²

It is therefore worth looking at the teachings on Love that Origen might have been aware of, and the variety of terms used to describe it in his mother tongue. The key Platonic texts are the *Symposium* and *Phaedrus*. In the former, Eryximachus reveals that Phaedrus invites a discussion on the mighty god Love.²³ Alongside the obviously libidinous and philosophical content of much of the speeches on love that follow, there are elements in the discussion which allow Christian appropriation of the text. A focus on the other-orientedness and sacrificial nature of true love is found in one of Phaedrus' speeches, described in terms of soldiers who are unwilling to abandon their comrades even in the face of death – love is demonstrated by people who are willing to give their lives for others.²⁴ It is not hard to see how this could be construed as leading to the Christian belief in the loving sacrifice of the crucifixion of Christ. Pausanias makes a nice distinction between the Heavenly and Common Aphrodite, and argues in favour

²¹ A. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*. London: SPCK, 1982, 304.

²² *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 21.

²³ *Symposium*, 176e, W. Hamilton, tr., *Plato: The Symposium* (London: Penguin Classics, 1951), 40.

²⁴ *Symposium*, 179c, Hamilton, tr., 1951, 43.

of the heavenly version.²⁵ (This was a distinction picked up by Plotinus in part five of his *Third Ennead*, a text possibly written around the time Origen was writing but not published until 301; both were perhaps showing the influence of their neo-Platonic teacher as noted above.)²⁶

In the *Symposium*, Socrates responds to these and other speeches with the question: 'Is the nature of Love such that he must be love of something, or can he exist absolutely without an object?'²⁷ This was to be a knotty problem for Christian exegetes. In Christian teaching, since God is perfect and has no need of anything in order to be complete, his love must be 'absolutely without an object' since He has no need of human regard, and is not lacking or yearning for anything.

Section 203b of Plato's *Symposium* presents a dialogue between Socrates and Diotima, a wise woman who taught him about Love. Here, Love is described as 'a great spirit, Socrates; everything that is of the nature of a spirit is half-god and half-man,' a creature whose function was to form a channel of communication between men and gods since 'God does not deal directly with man ... Spirits are many in number and of many kinds, and one of the is Love.'²⁸ The text continues with a description of the conception of Love on Aphrodite's birthday. So for Plato, Love was the intermediary between the divine and the human elements of creation. Christianity reconfigures this impetus as 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life' (Jn 3.16); the 'Spirit' of Plato's text has become the Son of God, Love Incarnate.

Phaedrus, subtitled 'Or On the Beautiful', continues the point raised by Agathon in the *Symposium* about the relationship between beauty and love,²⁹ and there is evidence that Origen appeared to be referring to this in his Commentary, where he writes:

Among the Greeks, indeed, many of the sages, desiring to pursue the search for truth in regard to the nature of love, produced a great variety of writings ... the object of which was to show that the power of love is one other than that which leads the soul from earth to the lofty heights of heaven, and that the highest beatitude can only be attained under the stimulus of love's desire.³⁰

More significant for our purposes, though, is Origen's use of the various Greek terms for love and how these have come down to us through Latin translation.

²⁵ *Symposium*, 180e, Hamilton, tr., 1951, 45–6.

²⁶ Plotinus: *The Enneads*, S. MacKenna, tr., Plotinus: *The Enneads* (Penguin Classics, 1991), xlii.

²⁷ *Symposium*, 199e, Hamilton, tr., 1951, 75.

²⁸ *Symposium*, 203b, Hamilton, tr., 1951, 81.

²⁹ *Phaedrus*, H.N. Fowler, tr., *Plato: Phaedrus* (London: Loeb, 1966), 473.

³⁰ *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 23–4.

Origen's use of the terminology for love and desire

Greek has many different words for the concepts described in English as 'love' and 'desire'. But although Origen wrote in Greek we do not have the benefit of this nuanced lexicon, as almost all the Greek versions of Origen's works were destroyed in the aftermath of his vilification, and much of what remains for the modern reader is from Latin translations (or, more accurately, versions) by Rufinus. So when we look at the terms used to discuss 'love' in Origen's writings we encounter a wide range of words. These need to be examined in order to evaluate the differences between God's love for humanity and other representations of human love in its many dimensions. If we start with the Greek words for love, it is noticeable that the word *eros* appears only once in Origen's corpus, according to the *Thesaurus Lingua Graecae*. This compares to 492 instances of *agape* and 71 uses of *philanthropia*. Origen's *Commentary on the Song of Songs* is predominantly known through the translation by Rufinus and the *Homilies on the Song of Songs* through that by Jerome.³¹ These give us in place of the Greek terms the words *amor*, *caritas* and *dilectio*. How to navigate through these terms is tricky. If we start with *eros*, there is an immediate sense of caution in using this term of God's love because of the associations of the erotic with libidinous urges, such as a clearly expressed in Plato's writings about love. But it is possible to recapture an acceptable reading of *eros* in regard to the love between the Almighty and His creation. It is sometimes distinguished from *agape* by an assumption that *eros* is an appetitive and *agape* is a giving type of love, a distinction to which we will return shortly. Early Christian writers, however, found their own ways to interpret the 'eros' of God. This is explained by Nygren who devoted his study of *Agape and Eros* to analysing how Irenaeus, Clement and Origen (as well as later Fathers of the Church) interpreted God's love for humanity and humanity's responsive love for God.³² Three main readings of God's *eros* emerge here: a Christian response to Judaism, featuring love of neighbour as well as of God – a love based on spirit now law, following St Paul's view of the 'life-giving spirit.' Nygren identifies Tertullian as the key exponent of this tradition. A second variant is an *agape*-focused interpretation which he suggests shares some characteristics with Marcion (and which he sees as exemplified by Irenaeus). Thirdly he argues for a legalistic sense of *eros*, which he sees as verging on Gnosticism and this is the framework in which he places Origen. Recent scholars also acknowledge the place of classical understandings of divine love, through the cosmological ascent/descent motif, found in Greek philosophy. Rist explains the manifestation of God's love for humanity as being a descent from on high, with a matching soteriological ascent. This articulates the divine economy and the literal Incarnation of Divine love for sinful humanity. Rist describes 'a downward flowing *eros* as well as the normal *eros* which is desire'³³ and argues that divine love has a 'downward as well as an upward force.'³⁴ Rist also suggests that Origen understood *eros* to have

³¹ *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 4.

³² Nygren, 1982, especially 250–1.

³³ J.M. Rist, *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus and Origen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 207.

³⁴ Rist, 1964, 213.

a ‘non-appetitive meaning’³⁵, which is indeed found in Plato where the subdivision of the soul is discussed.

This ‘non-appetitive’ understanding of love is sometimes distinguished from *eros* by being called *agape*. Rist believes that while most Christian writers seek to maintain this distinction, Origen ‘is more in the spirit of Plato – or at least of Plato’s Demiourgos – in stating that there is nothing wrong with calling God *eros*, which word appears in the Rufinian translation as *Amor*.’³⁶ However, given the aforementioned problem of the absence of much in the way of Greek manuscript tradition for Origen’s work this seems a little tendentious. Osborne’s more recent studies of love and Neo-Platonism in Origen provide a more convincing argument, suggesting *philanthropia* as the most appropriate term to use, since it denotes the loving kindness of God towards humanity, regardless of humanity’s response or merit.³⁷ This term also suggests the kenosis of the Incarnation, securing Origen’s role as theologian as well as Biblical exegete. Origen himself leaves the way open to interpreting divine love in a variety of ways; it is the function of it, he suggests, not the precise terminology which is significant. God’s love is for humanity and it is constant, though underserved. As he says in the *Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs*:

It makes no difference whether the Sacred Scriptures talk of love, or of charity, or of affection; except that the word ‘charity’ is so highly exalted that even God Himself is called Charity, as John says.³⁸

Whilst at the time Origen was writing the doctrine of the Incarnation was not yet pinned down as an essential tenet of Christian faith, as it was in subsequent centuries of ecumenical debate, it is appropriate to bear the kenotic nature of God’s love in mind. The concept is from Paul’s epistle to the Philippians (2:5) and therefore predates the doctrinal discussion in Ecumenical Councils, and would have been available to Origen when he was writing about divine love. Again, we can turn to a modern analysis of the situation: ‘Origen’s *philanthropia* is more than the Plotinian *eros*, in that it implies not merely cosmic love of self manifested in creation, but the love of a Saviour.’³⁹ Osborne, too, argues that what distinguishes Origen from ‘the remote providence of Stoic and Platonic gods’ is his kenotic emphasis.⁴⁰ Whichever Greek term is chosen this self-giving emphasis is evident in divine love. So let us look at what is meant by *philanthropia*.

³⁵ Rist, 1964, 198.

³⁶ Rist, 1964, 38.

³⁷ C. Osborne, ‘Neoplatonism and the Love of God in Origen,’ in *Origeniana Quinta*, ed. R. J. Daly, (Leuven, 1992) 270–283.

³⁸ *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 35.

³⁹ Rist, 1964, 207.

⁴⁰ Osborne, 1992, 278.

Divine Love as philanthropia: the kenosis of the Incarnation

Philanthropia is other-oriented, and the converse of *epithymia*, a grasping desire. God, being perfect and all complete, has no unfilled desire, and does not experience being bereft of something. He cannot experience love as a desire to unite with beauty (mentioned in the Platonic dialogues), because he is himself the author of all beauty and goodness. God's love is other-oriented, dispassionate and desirous of the wholeness and wellbeing of its recipient. It is because God loves humanity that it loves Him in return, not out of gratitude necessarily but because divine love acts as a lodestone to the source of all love.⁴¹ By comparison to God's other-oriented love, humanity's love for God is the antithesis of this; the human soul feels a hunger for God's truth which could be called *epithymia*, the yearning desire of the lover. We cannot therefore exclude this term from a discussion of divine love but need to see it as pertaining to humanity's desire of God and not God's love for humanity. Origen writes of 'this love with which the blessed soul is kindled and inflamed towards the Word of God.'⁴²

The incarnational, kenotic sense of God's love for humanity is found in various places in Origen's writings. The *Contra Celsus* uses the metaphor of descent/ascent to imply the Incarnation, saying: 'because of His Great love to man, God had made one special descent in order to covert those whom the divine scripture mystically calls 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel' (Mt 15.24).'⁴³ We read also: 'the Word out of great love to mankind brings down a Saviour to the human race.'⁴⁴ In the *Commentary on John* we find a reference to the *felix culpa* and the need for Jesus to be born on earth to save humanity: 'If Adam hadn't sinned ... nor died [since] there would have been no sin for which he had to die because of his love [*philanthropia*] for men.'⁴⁵ There are echoes of the Symposium, specifically Eryximachus' concern with order and limits to love, in Book Three of the *Commentary on the Song of Songs*: we can never love God too much, Origen argues, because:

In loving God, there is no measure to observe, no limit, save only that you ought to give Him as much as you have got. For in Christ Jesus God is to be loved with the whole heart, and the whole soul, and the whole strength.⁴⁶

As we shall see moving on to explore Origen's hermeneutical method, the greatness of God's love for humanity demands an unconfined response from humanity. In *Homily Two* on the *Song of Songs*, glossing 'set ye in order charity in me,' Origen explains that human beings have a tendency to rank their love incorrectly, not giving first place (as they ought) to God. Human love needs to be ordered and measured.⁴⁷ God's love, however, knows no measure, because it is

⁴¹ Osborne, 1994, 74.

⁴² *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 38.

⁴³ CC 1.64. Roberts-Donaldson, tr., www.earlychristianwritings.com accessed 12 August 2017.

⁴⁴ CC 1.64. Roberts-Donaldson, tr., www.earlychristianwritings.com accessed 12 August 2017.

⁴⁵ CC 1.20. Roberts-Donaldson, tr., www.earlychristianwritings.com accessed 12 August 2017.

⁴⁶ *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Book 3, Lawson, tr., 1956, 188.

⁴⁷ *Second Homily on the Song of Songs*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 294–5.

utterly focused on human wellbeing; it does not need to meet its own needs, and this is demonstrated through the gift of His Son. Let us now pull together the threads of the sources for Origen's exegetical model by looking at what he himself says about how to interpret the extraordinary challenges of *The Song of Songs* for a Christian readership/audience.

Origen's Method spelled out

Origen's earliest account of his exegetical method is spelled out in Book IV, II, 4 of *De Principiis*, his first and ambitious summary of the Christian faith. Here, he uses as an authority for his exegetical approach Solomon: 'we are taught what sort of understanding we should have of it by no less the Scripture itself,' he explains. A tripartite approach – mimicking the tripartite nature of the human person which he invokes, and referring to the Triune God – is derived from his reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. Citing Proverbs 22.20–21 LXX, he expounds:

for your part describe them to yourself threefold in admonition and knowledge, that you may answer words of truth to those who question you ... therefore, a person ought to describe threefold in his soul the meaning of divine letters, that is, so that the simple may be edified by, so to speak, the body of the Scriptures; for that is what we call the ordinary and narrative meaning.

This is the most basic level of understanding of a passage of Scripture. Only when a person is more experienced in the faith and more secure of understanding can they contemplate the next level of interpretation:

But if any have begun to make some progress and can contemplate something more fully, then they should be edified by the soul of Scripture.

Finally, after 'reading' a passage for its 'bodily' and level and at the level of the soul, then the final stage of understanding can be attained:

And those who are perfect ... should be edified by that spiritual Law (cf. Rom 7. 14) which has a shadow of the good things to come (cf Heb. 10.1), edified as by the Spirit of Scripture. Thus, just as a human being is said to be made up of body, soul, and spirit, so also is sacred Scripture, which has been granted by God's gracious dispensation for man's salvation.⁴⁸

In linking the constitution of the human person (body, soul and spirit) to a triple-layered approach to Scripture Origen incarnates his argument, and demonstrates that in addition to being a Biblical exegete he is a theologian. He is concerned here with how reading God's word can begin the process of transformation of the human individual – made in God's image – into a person of faith, who can grow in spiritual maturity. Every person has these component elements, he suggests, and therefore they may potentially benefit at a basic level, then ultimately a more spiritual one, from the truths of Holy Scripture –

⁴⁸ Greer, tr., 1979, 182.

in good time. The whole person can benefit from the truths of scripture. Discernment is needed to determine when a person should approach a text like this, and also to ensure that they are not pre-maturely exposed to it; as we have noted earlier, neither Jews nor Christians felt it was necessarily appropriate for a person who was not spiritually mature to read such a text, in case they were only able to comprehend it at a carnal level. The right approach is by invoking the Spirit behind the text, beyond its mere letter, as suggested by I Cor. 2.14–15: ‘A man gifted with the Spirit can judge the worth of everything.’ There is, he writes in the *Prologue to the Commentary*,

one love, known as carnal and also known as Cupid by the poets, according to which the lover sows in the flesh; so there is another, a spiritual love, by which the inner man who loves sows in the spirit.⁴⁹

In the following section of *De Prin*, Origen, he admits that not all three layers of meaning are always to be found;

there are certain passages in Scripture in which what we have called the body ... is not always to be found ... And there are places where only what we have called the soul and the spirit may be understood.⁵⁰

This enables the exegete to avoid or disregard an overly carnal reading of a passage – of especial utility with the potentially inflammatory content of the *Song of Songs*. Origen’s use of a method located in Hebrew Scriptures resonates with Irenaeus’ passage in *Adv Haer.* 4.2.3., which affirms the writings of Moses as being the words of Christ.⁵¹ We see here that both Hebrew and Christian exegetes employ allegory and typology.⁵² In employing these methods, Origen shows himself to be in the company of approved fathers of the church; as Edwards contends in his study of the relationship between heresy and orthodoxy, in believing that ‘any sacred text will be susceptible of an allegorical reading’ he conformed to the practices of ‘almost all fourth-century authors who were not later regarded as heretics.’ An allegorical reading was only denounced, Edwards argues, ‘when it extruded the literal sense.’⁵³

In the *Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Origen again acknowledges the challenge faced in examining this text. He advises following St Paul’s distinction between the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ man, and refers to 1 John 2.12–14 when explaining that the concept of Christian youth and maturity relates to ‘the soul’s age, not the body’s.’⁵⁴ Yet, he notes, the same words are used to denote different things. This is how allegory works: ‘the names of the members [of the body] can in no way be applied to the visible body, but must be referred to the parts and powers of the invisible soul.’⁵⁵ The allegorical method, allied to the tripartite model of humanity and exegesis, allow Origen to explain how aspects of human experience which seem sensual or even sensuous may be used

⁴⁹ *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 29.

⁵⁰ *Dr Prin* IV.II. 5, tr. Greer, 1979, 183.

⁵¹ Pelikan, 1971, 61.

⁵² Pelikan, 1971, 111–2.

⁵³ Edwards, 2009, 99.

⁵⁴ *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 26.

⁵⁵ *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 28.

to receive God's love. For example, in *Book One of the Commentary*, he describes how:

the sense of smell, by which the Bride and the maidens perceived the fragrance of the Bridegroom's ointments, denotes not a bodily faculty, but that divine sense of scent which is called the sense of the interior man.⁵⁶

Likewise, the Bride's longing for the 'kisses of His mouth' is explained as the soul's desire for the 'solid and unadulterated doctrine of the Word of God Himself.'⁵⁷ Before becoming spiritually mature, however, the Bride of human soul 'of necessity ... received 'kisses' that is, interpretations, from the mouth of teachers.' The apparently erotic language used in the allegory is extended when Origen introduces the Pauline metaphor of spiritual maturity as solid food, compared to the milk required by infants, in order to gloss 'we will love thy breasts more than wine.' He Christianises the verse, using the image of the Bridegroom, with its connotations of married love and covenant:

when the fullness of the times has come and Christ in them has advanced in age and wisdom
... they will then love the Bridegroom's breasts, which now they love after the manner of children, 'more than wine' – that is, they will be apter students of Christ's full and perfect teachings than ever they were of their ordinary studies.⁵⁸

In addition to allegory, Origen also employs typology, whereby a figure or event in the Hebrew Scriptures is presented to the Christian reader as prefiguring a Christian parallel. As noted already, Origen's knowledge of and respect for the Hebrew Scriptures was extensive. In the *Prologue to the Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Origen cites the Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiasticus, Genesis and Exodus to explain what is meant by 'stretching out [God's] words.'⁵⁹ He also finds his 'threefold structure of divine philosophy' as being:

prefigured in those holy and blessed men on account of whose most holy way of life the Most High God willed to be called the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob (Ex 3.6).⁶⁰

The close attention to the Hebrew Scriptures is continued as he pursues his method; in analysing the title of the Song of Songs, he looks in turn at other songs throughout the Hebrew Bible. He concludes that 'Solomon is in many respects a type of Christ.'⁶¹ In summing up his method he also notes the place of the apocryphal scriptures within the canon of the Bible, asserting that New Testament writers cite them. Effectively, he asserts the need to adopt rabbinic practices of using scripture to interpret scripture, and uses allegory to allow one

⁵⁶ *Commentary Book One*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 80–81.

⁵⁷ *Commentary Book One*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 61.

⁵⁸ *Commentary Book One*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 88.

⁵⁹ *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 42–3.

⁶⁰ *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 44.

⁶¹ *Prologue*, Lawson, tr., 1956, 51.

word or concept to be understood at a range of different meaning, according to the spirit not the letter of the law. Applying this to 'love' enables the mature Christian to understand fully the deep, kenotic love of God for humanity, and differentiates this from any appetitive or libidinous love.

Conclusion

The fact that Origen – or more properly ideas imputed to him, and often mediated through other writers who had fallen out of favour – was condemned at an Ecumenical Council in the sixth century C.E. should not deter the reader from consuming his writings and benefitting from them. His exegetical method, especially as expounded in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, demonstrates an entirely orthodox understanding of the redeemability of the human person, of humanity made in God's image and loved by God such that He sent His Only Son to articulate the fullness of love. In common with many polemical writers of the early church period Origen did not shy away from conversing with Gnostics. Refuting their teaching was incidental to his writing, as the majority of what he is known to have written focuses on Biblical exegesis rather than polemic. However this choice should not be read as leniency or toleration for the erroneous teachings of Gnostics. Although he shared with heretical writers of the period a desire to 'prove' theological and philosophical points through Biblical citation he differed from Gnostics and other non-orthodox thinkers in drawing on a wide range of Biblical sources, and, indeed, in also using the methodology of Jewish scholarship. Far from confining God's truth to a narrow elite of people who had undergone secret initiations, he discerned that Christians underwent a process of formation, a metaphorical 'growing up' from the infant to the mature adult; a process of finding faith in a God who sent his Word to all, and who progressed from feeding His flock with spiritual milk to allowing access to the full riches of spiritual food. In common with many early Christian writers, Origen absorbed insights from Greek philosophy which he was able to integrate into an evolving Christian discourse, at a time before the most basic creedal statements had found consensus within the Church. His integration of Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, the seeds of knowledge about 'the divine' and godly love in the Greek pagan writers, and his practical experience as a pre-eminent preacher combined to create in Origen the foundation stone of later Biblical exegesis.

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Ориген как христианский философ: неортодоксальный подход к экзегетике Божественной любви

Оценивая вклад Оригена Александрийского как отца ранней христианской церкви, важно отличать оригенизм, вмененный ему и анафематствованный Вселенским собором, и фактические заслуги в виде созданного им экзегетического подхода к Священному Писанию, который заложил основу для последующей библейской интерпретации. Эта статья обращает внимание на Оригена как на неортодоксального богослова, у которого главные усилия в церкви были сфокусированы на создании методологии для толкования и преподавания Библии, включая аллегорию и поэтапный подход к чтению текстов. Его задачей было включение платоновской концепции Божественной Любви, выраженной в Песни Песней, выраженной в рассмотрении греческих и латинских определений любви. В статье будет показано, что определение жанра текста зависит от того, как его интерпретировать; как экзегетический метод Оригена применялся в выявлении ересей и как его экзегетический метод повлиял на последующее формирование правоверных догматических учений. Несмотря на его осуждение за определенные догматические взгляды, которые были представлены как еретические, более тонкое понимание его учения говорит о нем как о неортодоксальном христианине, который был воспитан эллинистической философией.

Ключевые слова: Ориген, ранняя христианская церковь, Божественная любовь.