

ORIGEN: THE INCARNATION AND THE HUMAN BEING

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The Life Of Origen And The Controversy That Surrounds Him

Origen lived from about 185 A.D. to about 254 A.D. Origen's Father, Leonides, was martyred. He studied scripture as a child with great zeal. He desired to be a martyr. As a boy Origen encouraged his father not to give in under persecution on account of the family. Origen did all things with a great zeal. He was always controversial. He became a teacher at about age 18 (ca. 203). He made himself a eunuch but later admitted that it was wrong. He could not get ordained because he was mutilated. He was appointed to teach catechumens and prepared his students to be martyrs during the times of persecution. Origen disapproved of pagan beliefs but believed in a thorough basic education in grammar and rhetoric, etc. He was finally ordained a priest in Palestine by local bishops. He moved from Alexandria to Caesarea in 230 where he taught for about 24 more years. He hated false doctrine and for him preaching was explaining the Word of God. Origen believed that certain higher truths are for those who are mature Christians. He suffered persecution as a Christian but was probably not martyred directly as he wished and died in about 254 A.D. ¹

Most of the information about his life is from Eusebius and is probably hagiographical in

¹ Jean Danielou, *Origen*, Translated by Walter Mitchell (London: Sheed and Ward, 1955), 1-26.

tone, tending to give a more spiritual tone than is realistic.² However, we must always keep in mind that because of the deliberate destruction of much of his work due to charges against him, we do not have extant documents of all of Origen's works. While even the facts about Origen's life are disputed by some scholars, they are not the only issues which are or have been disputed about him. Henry Chadwick says,

Origen is not a figure it is easy to see in accurate perspective. . . . The primary reason is perhaps that some of his most characteristic themes, warmly debated during his lifetime and a stone of stumbling to many in the three hundred years following his death, have remained to this day permanently troubling questions in the history of Christian thought. It is notoriously difficult to handle him with that critical spirit which requires sympathy and impartiality from the historian.³

But despite all the debate and controversy Origen has been a source of inspiration and instruction for many great and small in Christendom for millennia. Again Chadwick,

Erasmus wrote once that he learned more of Christian philosophy from one page of Origen than from ten pages of Augustine. He tended to see in Origen a reflection of his own humanist face. It would be difficult and unnecessary to deny the humanism of Origen's scholarship and philosophical temper. At the same time a just view of him must declare that there is more in him that is illiberal, world-denying, and ascetic. And if he remains a perennially enigmatic and embarrassing figure in the history of Christian thought, this is perhaps most due to the fact that we tend to begin the study of Origen by asking whether or not he is orthodox, and find that in the process we are continually driven back to the prior question: what is the essence of orthodoxy?⁴

Since many have acknowledged Origen and Augustine as the giants among the fathers of the church, neither of them can be ignored. Also, since the fathers themselves were the definers of orthodoxy, they can not be excluded from this process. A cursory perusal will reveal that Origen and Augustine are very different from each other. Origen, of course, has a more Eastern mindset. But like him or not, he can not be slighted and his words carry much weight. In defining

² Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought And The Classical Tradition: Studies in Justin, Clement, and Origen* (Oxford: At The Clarendon Press, 1966), 66

³ Chadwick, 66.

⁴ Chadwick, 123.

orthodoxy we must listen to Origen even if we do not adopt his views entirely. To use a phrase of Gregory of Nazianzus, he is “the stone which sharpens us all.”⁵ Various controversies regarding Origen’s Christology and anthropology will be considered in the appropriate places in this paper.

The Incarnation

Some have criticized Origen for saying too little about the incarnation in comparison to other issues. But this is more a matter of quantity than of quality. Jean Danielou says,

Origen does not devote much space in his writings to the incarnation. . . . The reason is that there never was a time when the Word was not acting on the human race. . . . the Incarnation does represent the pre-eminent instance of the Word’s intervention in human affairs. Origen begins by reminding his readers of the Word’s remarkable attributes and then shows what an extraordinary thing it was that he should come down and live among men. At the same time, he does try to find a place for it in his system.⁶

So we see that it is the perspective of Origen’s very Christology which deals with the incarnation so uniquely. For him the incarnation is the next step in the involvement of the Word among human beings. It is his presentation of it that needs to be understood. Origen saw the activity of the eternal Word as a continual event in the lives of men. His concern for life in the body was not all consuming.

If Origen lay so little stress on the incarnation of the Word, the reason is to be found in his peculiar attitude to the visible, which he regards as no more than a sacrament of the invisible. That applies to the Saviour’s humanity as well: it is simply a means of approach to the Logos, who is the real food of the soul. And in this connection Origen again makes use of . . . the idea that the visible phenomena of Christianity are shadows and prophecies of things yet to come.⁷

⁵ Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, Translated by A. S. Worrall (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1989), xi.

⁶ Danielou, 262.

⁷ Danielou, 263.

The invisible was more important to Origen than the visible. He did hold that the elementary beliefs of the Christian faith must be presented simply for the understanding of the undiscerning believer. So he stated clearly, “Jesus Christ is God’s pre-existent Son, begotten before all worlds, who, without ceasing to be God, became man, born of a virgin and the Holy Spirit; he truly suffered and died, rose again, and ascended to heaven.”⁸

However, in addition Origen was actually very emotional about the incarnation as well. In his own words we read again,

When, therefore, we consider these great and marvellous truths about the nature of the Son of God, we are lost in the deepest amazement that such a being, towering high above all, should have ‘emptied himself’ of his majestic condition and become man and dwelt among men . . .

But of all the marvellous and splendid things about him there is one that utterly transcends the limits of human wonder and is beyond the capacity of our weak mortal intelligence to think of or understand, namely, how this mighty power of the divine majesty . . . can be believed to have existed within the compass of that man who appeared in Judaea . . . entered into a woman’s womb and been born as a child and uttered noises like those of crying children; and further, how it was that he was troubled . . . in the hour of death . . . and how at last he was led to that death which is considered by men to be the most shameful of all, - even though on the third day he rose again.⁹

But his admiration also went beyond emotional wonder. We see that Origen believed in a kenosis. At the heart of it all Origen conceived of the incarnation as an unfathomable mystery when he said, “But to utter these things in human ears and to explain them by words far exceeds the powers we possess either in our moral worth or in mind and speech. I think indeed that it

⁸ Chadwick, 80.

⁹ Origen, *Origen On First Principles*, Being Koetschau’s Text Of The *De Principiis* Translated Into

English, Together With An Introduction And Notes By G.W. Butterworth (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1973), 109.

transcends the capacity even of the holy apostles; nay more, perhaps the explanation of this mystery lies beyond the reach of the whole creation of heavenly beings.”¹⁰

This concept of mystery seems to control his handling of the entire matter. On the other hand there were certain concepts regarding this subject about which Origen was quite decided. The most unique of these concepts concerned the origin and nature of Christ’s soul. Since Origen believed that all souls had been created at the beginning and that they were eternal entities, it was necessary for the Logos to obtain a soul from this pre-existent number. He describes this soul in this manner:

But whereas, by reason of the faculty of free-will, variety and diversity had taken hold of individual souls, so that one was attached to its author with a warmer and another with a feebler and weaker love, that soul of which Jesus said, ‘No man taketh from me my soul’, clinging to God from the beginning of the creation and ever after in a union inseparable and indissoluble, as being the soul of the wisdom and word of God and of the truth and the true light, and receiving him wholly, and itself entering into his light and splendour, was made with him in a pre-eminent degree one spirit, just as the apostle promises to them whose duty it is to imitate Jesus, that ‘he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit’ (Col. I. 15.) This soul, then, acting as a medium between God and the flesh (for it was not possible for the nature of God to mingle with a body apart from some medium), there is born, as we said, the God-man, . . .¹¹

Not only is this the weakest point in Origen’s Christology but it is the hardest part for the modern mind, and even any post-Nicene mind, to accept. Here there is a created soul which is not yet in a body which has free will and which attaches itself inextricably to the eternal Word in such a way as to become for all eternity his very own soul. Not only is Origen’s belief in free will vital to this structure, but there is then a potential conflict here as well. Why should this soul so choose and why should it always remain faithful? Origen’s resolution is logical and consistent with his own Christological framework.

¹⁰ Origen, 110.

¹¹ Origen, 110.

But since the ability to choose good or evil is within the immediate reach of all, this soul which belongs to Christ so chose to love righteousness as to cling to it unchangeably and inseparably in accordance with the immensity of its love; the result being that by firmness of purpose, immensity of affection and an inextinguishable warmth of love all susceptibility to change or alteration was destroyed, and what formerly depended upon the will was by the influence of long custom changed into nature.¹²

This must be understood as meaning that this soul was finally rendered incapable of change. It is by long association which was the result of a free will decision that this is accomplished. On this subject of impeccability Henri Crouzel says,

This union confers on the soul, which is nevertheless endowed with free will like the others, a 'substantial' impeccability, like that of the Deity, because of its immeasurable charity, for it is like the iron which when plunged in the fire becomes fire. In the Pauline notion of freedom which underlies Origen's spiritual doctrine, there is no contradiction between it and this impeccability. All this is worked out in one of the finest chapters of the *Treatise on First Principles*.¹³

An illustration as to how the love and loyalty of this soul was transformed, Origen says that it is like a lump of iron that is never taken from the fire, it will feel only like fire and not like iron, and also as by the anointing as an odour of an ointment which can never smell like the vessel. He goes on to point out that the fellows of this soul, human beings, will be partakers to the ointment and odour in proportion to nearness of each to the vase, which is in this instance Christ.¹⁴ So now he has added to his concept the images of fire and odour and this is but a part of the spiritual imagery of Origen. And we should notice here that at the next step Christian believers are now drawn into the plan as each is encouraged to draw near to God in the same manner as Christ's soul has drawn near.

¹² Origen, 112.

¹³ Crouzel, 192.

¹⁴ Origen, 113.

One serious misunderstanding which associates Origen with Arianism involves the spelling of γεννητος and αγεννητος . During Origen’s time they could be spelled with either one ν or two. It is clear in Origen’s teaching on the eternal generation of the Son that Origen did not regard the Son as a created being. But as the Arian conflict grew, it became necessary to distinguish between a spelling with one ν to signify creation and two to signify generation. Later, even though Rufinus compared other texts to attempt to be faithful to Origen’s original meaning it was not enough and Origen was posthumously charged with proclaiming a created Son.¹⁵ The significance of this may be no more than to prove that if people are set against you from the start, no amount of research and reason will change their mind.

Since all souls were pre-existent in heaven, the church was always the Bride of Christ. So Christ remains faithful to her. “However, the Christ did not abandon his fallen Bride. . . He sends her patriarchs and prophets . . .He himself visits the Church from time to time. . .When the moment fixed by the Father for Him to rejoin his fallen Bride arrives, the soul of the Christ gives up ‘the form of God’ to take on ‘the form of a servant.’”¹⁶

Even if there is sometimes confusion between the eternal Word and this soul of Christ, that works to an advantage and it supports the kenosis. For Origen the subject of the kenosis of Philippians 2. 7 and 8, is sometimes said to be the Word and sometimes the soul of Christ. But by virtue of what would later be stressed as the ‘*communicatio idiomatum*’ this is not a problem. Origen also calls the soul assumed by the Word the ‘shadow’ of the Lord Christ. So, for instance, it is the Word, Power of God, who casts his shadow, his soul, over Mary, so that she conceives

¹⁵ Crouzel, 174.

¹⁶ Crouzel, 193.

flesh within her.¹⁷ Christ's soul as his 'shadow' is another image. Origen stresses that this concept exceeds the comprehension of the human mind.¹⁸

Of the many accusations against Origen over the centuries one is that he established a Tetrads and not a Trinity. This is because of the way he presents the soul of Christ. Crouzel takes exception.

But the reproach was unjustified which the extreme Origenists, the Isochristses, made against the moderate Origenists of Palestine in the 6th century, calling them Tetradites because they were held to be turning the Trinity into a Tetrads by introducing into it the soul of Christ; for the latter never occurs in the work of Origen, in spite of appearances, as a Person distinct from the Word: it is part of Trinity by virtue of its union with the second Person who gives it the 'form of God'.¹⁹

All things considered, Origen's devotion to the humanity of Christ as well as to his divinity is strong in his Christology. It is well said that, "we should see that the central place in all this is held by the Christ in his divinity and in his humanity. And Origen's deeply emotional devotion to the humanity of the Word . . . demonstrates that his Christology is the central point of his teaching and of his life."²⁰

Origen's Anthropology

Of course it is inevitable that such a Christology will have a decided effect on Origen's anthropology. Origen defines a soul as "an existence possessing imagination and desire . . . capable of feeling and movement."²¹ He even affirmed the existence of souls in the lower animals such as whales. When he uses the word "movement", this is not only in regard to

¹⁷ Crouzel, 193.

¹⁸ Origen, 114.

¹⁹ Crouzel, 192-3.

²⁰ Crouzel, 197-8.

²¹ Origen, 120.

movement from place to place. It can also be understood to refer to the transmigration of souls.²² It is most important that he considers the original fault in man regarding the fall to be in the pre-existence. In this free will is essential and the righteousness of God is protected because humans only receive that which they deserve as a result of their actions.²³

Origen carries his imagery of fire begun in his Christology even further in his anthropology explaining this original fault. He begins with the fact that the greek word for soul is ψυχη. This feminine noun is akin to the verb ψυχω which means to breathe or to cool by blowing and, therefore, to grow cool. This then indicates that the soul first had warmth or fire. The soul sinned or cooled and, therefore died.²⁴ The reasoning follows then that since all souls are pre-existent and some have sinned before they occupy a body, people then find themselves in different states in life due to the past sins of their souls and God is justified in his actions. All of this is based on Origen's belief in the pre-existence of souls and it will, of course, not work without this belief. It appears, however, that this thought may have been present in the disciple's minds when they asked, "Who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9.2) To be born blind and at the same time be suffering for past sins would require a pre-existent soul. It is worth noting here, however, that Jesus did not exactly agree with the disciple's position when he said, "Neither has this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him." (John 9.3). Jesus' position on the pre-existence of souls is not made clear in this passage but rather another point is made.

Origen was anathematized by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 A.D. because of their understanding of his teaching about souls, especially regarding the movement or

²² Origen, 129.

²³ Crouzel, 209.

²⁴ Origen, 124.

transmigration of souls, even though he said that this was not a set doctrine.²⁵ This, Origen's strangest doctrine, should not have been as glaring in Origen's day as it has been since. It is very important to understand that the church did not have an established doctrine on the subject in Origen's day. The two prominent theories in circulation held that either the soul came into existence upon conception from the paternal seed or that God created the soul at the same time that the paternal seed formed the body. Both of these in their time were open to serious criticism and Origen avoided this criticism with his doctrine of the pre-existence of souls.²⁶

Crouzel draws attention to the vital connection between Origen's Christology and anthropology and their bearing on the Christian life.

What is it in the very structure of humanity that permits man's contact and dialogue with God? Two main doctrines of Origen's give the answer to this: his doctrine of man as a trichotomy and of man's sharing in the image of God. . . . In defiance of stubborn assertions to the contrary it is not possible to assimilate Origen's trichotomy to Plato's: the latter is about the soul alone, the former about the whole man. And the terms are different in each case: . . .²⁷

This is a vital point of understanding and the source of some disagreement between different groups of Christians. Paul says, "your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Thessalonians 5.23) Being aware of this Origen teaches the trichotomy of man's nature. This trichotomy is in regard to the entire nature of human beings and not, like Plato, only the soul. Origen sees this structure along with the image of God in human beings as the key to human communication with God. God is a Spirit (John 4.24) and the spirit part of man is most suited for communication with God. Dichotomists have a weak position. They say that the two words are actually two ways of saying the same thing and will even go on to the next doublet in Hebrews 4.12 in comparison and say that bones and

²⁵ Origen, 125-6.

²⁶ Crouzel, 174.

²⁷ Crouzel, 87.

marrow are also the same thing. Why would scripture use two distinctly different words if one entity was meant? In their effort to explain their position dichotomists when challenged with these two different words will further attempt to establish their case by saying that the spirit referred to here is actually the Holy Spirit as he indwells the believer. Then the question must be asked why Paul would pray that the Holy Spirit be preserved blameless? Was the Holy Spirit ever assigned any blame, or sin? The answer is a resounding, “No”. The Trichotomists view is the more sound position of the two.

Crouzel continues in his understanding of Origen’s position.

The spirit is the divine element present in man and thus it has real continuity with the Hebrew *ruach*. Being a gift of God, it is not strictly speaking a part of the human personality, for it takes no responsibility for a man’s sins; nevertheless these reduce it to a state of torpor, preventing it from acting on the soul. It is the pedagogue of the soul, or rather the intellect, training the latter in the practice of the virtues, for it is in the spirit that the moral consciousness is found; and training it also in the knowledge of God and in prayer. Distinguished from the Holy Spirit, it is nonetheless a kind of created participation in the latter and the latter’s seat when He is present in a man. ²⁸

This indeed is a masterful position. As a result of sin the human spirit is rendered ineffective in applying the moral conscience to the soul. The human spirit is the place of residence to the Holy Spirit when he is present in a person. Therefore, communication takes place between God and man at a level deeper than the intellect of the soul and this communication must be passed on to the soul. However, the soul has both a higher, rational, and a lower nature.

The soul is the seat of free will, of the power of choice and so of the personality. If it submits to the guidance of the spirit, it is assimilated to the spirit, becomes wholly spiritual, even in its lower element. But if it rejects the spirit and turns towards the flesh, the lower element takes over from the higher its governing role and renders the soul entirely carnal. This higher element, intellect, heart or governing faculty, constituted the whole of the soul in the pre-existence, according to the theory favoured by Origen. . . . It bears the ‘divine senses’, spiritual sight, hearing, touch, smell and taste.

²⁸ Crouzel, 88.

The lower element of the soul was added to it after the primitive fall: it corresponds to the soul's standing temptation to turn aside from the spirit and yield to the attraction of the body. It is the source of the instincts and the passions, . . .²⁹

The soul's functions according to Origen are clearly enumerated by Crouzel. The soul is the element that possesses the free will which is very important in Origen's teaching. The soul can, therefore, choose to agree with either the spirit with its moral conscience or the lower carnal or fleshly nature and the person will then move in that direction.

The body in essence is subject to the will of the soul. However, for Origen the definition of the body is not without complications because "Origen's notion of the body is not easy to pin down and shows many ambiguities. . . . But the word incorporeality which can express either the absence of any body, however subtle, or simply the absence of the earthly body, has yet a third sense, that of a way of life without regard to the unlawful desires of the body, a meaning that is thus of a moral order: applied to the blessed in eternity, it is also applied fairly often, though obviously in a relative degree, to the righteous still living on earth." It must also be noted that the body, σωμα, and the flesh, σαρξ, are not the same entities. The word flesh expresses an undue attachment to the body and thus refers to the lower part of the soul. The ethereal body of pre-existent state took on after the fall an earthly quality and then becomes a standing temptation to the soul to stick at the level of the perceptible.³⁰

Important in regard to the body as a major source of misunderstanding in Origen is his unclear position on the exact nature of matter itself. "Origen never reaches a perfectly clear and decisive opinion on the exact status of matter in the divine purpose, even though the solution of this problem is of the highest importance both for his conception of the nature of man and for his

²⁹ Crouzel 88-9.

³⁰ Crouzel, 90.

doctrine of the destiny of the redeemed.”³¹ It is unfortunate that Origen never clarified this issue. It is important to understand that the dominant context of this anthropology is more moral and ascetic than mystical. It has to do with the spiritual battle. The soul is torn between the spirit and the attraction of the earthly body. In this struggle the soul is both the “scene and the stake”. The soul has the free will. It is the soul that has to decide. Because of the two elements or tendencies that divide it, “the soul is in league with both sides.”³² So we find the soul torn by both influences and responsible for choosing its way.

Since Origen’s Christology and anthropology are so closely connected, it is, therefore, now necessary to arrive at a comparison between the life of Christ and the life of the believer.

Danielou helps provide perspective on Origen’s view.

He does not dwell on the externals of Christ’s life, nor does he lay much stress on the eschatological side, the comparison between the two “parousias”. . . . What he was out to do was to discover the relevance of the mysteries of Christ’s life to the life of the soul. He regarded Christ’s whole life as one great sacrament, which continued to operate, invisibly, in the Church. The mysteries of Christ’s life were still being enacted in the Church. What Christians had to do, then, was to go behind the external details of the historical Christ’s behaviour and try to discern the spiritual activity of the Christ who lives in the soul.³³

Sacramental living is the issue here. The life of Christ is still being enacted in the church corporate. From this we must deduce that Christ who is Word, soul and body is alive in his church which is composed of individuals who are spirit, soul and body. What is important to Origen is not so much a future return or even a past incarnation but a present reality in the life of the church. Also, for Origen, it is more of a moral issue than a metaphysical one. Nicea and Chalcedon were still to come.

³¹ Chadwick, 86.

³² Crouzel, 92.

³³ Danielou, 267.

One Necessary Outcome Of Origen's Thinking

Probably the most controversial result for modern theologians in Origen is the inevitable conclusion of universalism. Again Chadwick,

If these arguments are dead, Origen's universalism is not. . . . His case always rests on the creative goodness of God as the ground of redemption. Therefore, Christ's atoning work remains in an important sense incomplete until every soul made in his image has been restored to communion with God. And so long as the creature remains rational and free, there is always the possibility of conversion. . . . Therefore, Origen does not affirm universal salvation as something we can all comfortably take for granted, and it is more his hope than his assured certitude.³⁴

Origen's unique position on the eternal nature of the soul with the understood or misunderstood possibility of the soul's migration into various life forms gives a soul many chances, indeed endless chances to reform. This sets the stage for universal salvation. Origen's attitude as it is regarding many issues is not in a certainty of this outcome but only in the possibility of this outcome.

Those who come from a theological environment in which much has been established through many centuries of searching and debate and strife can easily criticize the apparent naiveté of Origen. He was a man of his time. He spoke to the people of his time, but not only to them. No mere human ever gets everything right. But there is much in Origen that can help Christians of every age. As the early great expositor and theologian of the church Origen's attitude, if not his teaching, was wholly admirable. Others would do well to follow him in this regard.

³⁴ Chadwick, 119.