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# Origen's Sources of Exegetical Authority: The Construction of an Inspired Exegete in the Pauline Lineage

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## Abstract

In this paper, I examine several sources of authority to which Origen laid claim as he set about the task of interpreting scripture. On occasion, in both his commentaries and his homilies, Origen provided accounts of his access to three different, though connected sources of authority that contributed to his self-presentation as an expert interpreter. These sources are as follows: 1) participation in the lineage of the apostles, particularly his exegetical role model, Paul. The second source of authority is a result of the first: 2) direct communication from the Logos, whom he understands to be Christ himself, and 3) angelic assistance and engagement with his pastoral exegetical project. In some instances, Origen even claimed to be on par with two of these sources of authority; he can be found claiming to have exegetical abilities similar to Paul's and, on some rare occasions, to have reached the same epistemological level as the angels. This analysis provides us not only with a case study of the kind of self-fashioning and authorising strategies used by elite scriptural exegetes in the first few centuries of the common era, but it also allows us to shift our focus away from exegetical methods towards the figure, personality and social position of the exegete him or herself. From this shift of focus we gain a better appreciation of a topic to which exegetical authors themselves dedicated considerable energy: just who it was that could occupy the office of authoritative Christian exegete and why.

**Keywords:** Pauline reception; Origen; Paul; early Christian exegesis; exegetical authority; ideal exegete; angels

## 1. Introduction

In this article, I will examine a selection of Origen's claims to access various sources of authority as he sought to style himself as an expert exegete. Depending on the rhetorical and pastoral needs of the context at hand, Origen laid claim to such sources of authority as: 1) the apostolic lineage, of which he considered himself a participant who shared affinities with the apostle Paul in particular; 2) his reception of direct communication from the Logos, whom he understood to be Christ himself; and 3) angelic assistance and engagement with his homiletic-exegetical enterprise.

This focus on Origen's claimed sources of authority provides us not only with a case study of the kind of self-fashioning and authorising strategies used by exegetes in the first few centuries of the common era, but it also allows us to shift our focus away

from exegetical methods towards the person of the exegete him or herself. This is an understudied aspect of early Christian exegetical culture, as scholars such as Peter Martens have recently argued.<sup>1</sup> We have not paid enough attention to the following questions: just who got to interpret scripture in the church's earliest centuries and why? How did the authoritative exegetes of this period argue for their exegetical authority?

This was a foundational period for both the self-conscious reflection on scriptural exegesis in the form of interpretive handbooks and the production of systematic commentaries on all scriptural books.<sup>2</sup> The privileged, authoritative position of the scriptural exegete in early Christian communities was therefore due in no small part to the centrality of the scriptural texts themselves within the life of the early church; the scriptures, perceived as divine revelation, were the very stuff of the churches' cultural formation.<sup>3</sup> However, scriptural exegesis was no straightforward business – certain of scripture's contents were obscure and difficult to analyse – and early Christians agreed that it was necessary that the exegete had both the right skill-set (i.e., training in grammar and rhetoric) and the right disposition (spiritual maturity and inspired insight) to deal with scripture's divine message.<sup>4</sup> Exegetical authors, therefore, dedicated considerable energy to discussing just who ought to have the role of exegete, discussions that frequently took place in the prefaces to commentaries and homilies, though sometimes they were laced throughout these works as well. In the case of Origen, a study of his claims to authority allows us to see just how he legitimised his major exegetical project, and it is a point of entry to his particular understanding of the ideal scriptural exegete, which he undoubtedly considered himself to be.

In what follows, I will present several examples of three sources of authority which Origen argued that he possessed, beginning with his likening of himself to the apostle Paul, his most profound exegetical role model. The claim to be like Paul, both as an exegete and as a spiritually mature Christian, allowed Origen to say, with Paul, that he had direct access to divine revelation as he set to the task of scriptural exegesis. Like Paul, Origen said that he heard directly from Christ himself. Unlike Paul, however, Origen also maintained that he was aided in his exegesis by angelic beings, and in fact, on occasion, that he had angelic epistemological capacities himself.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Claims to Belong to the Apostolic (Read: Pauline) Lineage<sup>6</sup>

It is certainly not new to highlight that Origen likened himself to Paul throughout his corpus, particularly in exegetical contexts. Studies of Origen's use and reception of Pauline

<sup>1</sup> Peter W. Martens, 'Ideal Interpreters', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation* (eds. Paul M. Blowers and Peter W. Martens; Oxford: OUP, 2019) 149–165. Cf. Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (OECs; Oxford: OUP, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> For example, see Tarmo Toom, 'Early Christian Handbooks on Interpretation', in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation* 109–25.

<sup>3</sup> Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Rpt; Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> This has been well-demonstrated in the following studies of Origen's exegesis: Margaret M. Mitchell, 'Problems and Solutions' in Early Christian Biblical Interpretation: A Telling Case from Origen's Newly Discovered Greek Homilies on the Psalms (Codex Monacensis Graecus 314)', *Adamantius* 22 (2016) 40–55; Lorenzo Perrone, 'Origen Reading the Psalms: The Challenge of a Christian Interpretation', in *Scriptures, Sacred Traditions, and Strategies of Religious Subversion. Studies in Discourse with the Work of Guy G. Stroumsa* (eds. Moshe Blidstein, Serge Ruzer and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2018) 131–48.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that Paul would not or could not have made such a statement. We simply do not have record in his relatively small corpus of letters of his saying such a thing.

<sup>6</sup> Origen likened himself to other authors of scripture elsewhere, though it is Paul whom he most frequently claimed to resemble. For example, Origen said that he had affinities with the prophet Jeremiah and the psalmist

exegesis abound.<sup>7</sup> I have contributed to this area of study in a forthcoming essay on Origen's self-identification with Paul, which, I argue, he felt free to do because he did not consider Paul's writings to be at the same level as the Gospels and because Paul himself admitted to his imperfection, which Origen observed can be charted within his own letters (e.g., Phil 3.12–3).<sup>8</sup> I build on these arguments here, demonstrating in this section that Origen asserted his own exegetical authority because of his perceived resemblance to Paul. The result of his Pauline identification is, in both examples that follow, the ability to present oneself as accessing direct revelation from Christ.

Before we turn to these examples, however, a discussion of Origen's understanding of 'scripture' as such is necessary, given what I have said about the distinctions the third-century author made between the writings of Paul and the Gospels on the one hand, and, as we shall see below, between the Old and New Testament writings on the other. It must first be acknowledged that Origen wrote well before the biblical canon as such became fixed, even if its shape and contents were generally agreed upon at that time.<sup>9</sup> While Origen considered all of scripture to be sacred, and accordingly, to be full of hidden mysteries to be discovered and used by the careful reader, he did distinguish between the various sections of the scriptures in a hierarchical fashion. As Karen Jo Torjesen has shown, Origen believed that the personal, teaching Logos (Christ) was present in all of scripture, but his presence in the Old Testament writings could only be detected in light of the incarnation and its record in the four Gospels.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, it is typical of

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in the following passages: *Hjer* 19.14.9; *HPs67* 1.1. He discussed his exegetical output in relation to the scriptural authors in general in Book 5 in an extended section of his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*.

<sup>7</sup> One of the most substantial and thoroughgoing is that of Francescha Cocchini, *Il Paulo di Origene: Contributo alla storia della recezione delle epistole Pauline nel III secolo* (Rome: Edizione Studium, 1992). She examines Origen's 'Paulism', as she puts it, arguing that Origen, throughout his life, was indebted to Paul for both the formulation of his exegetical theory as well as his exegetical practice. See also: Margaret M. Mitchell, *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 36–7, 48–60; Richard A. Layton, 'Recovering Origen's Pauline Exegesis: Exegesis and Eschatology in the Commentary on Ephesians', *JES* 8 (2000) 373–411; Peter Gorday, *Principles of Patristic Exegesis: Romans 9–11 in Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983); Kasper Bro Larsen, 'Visdommen, hvor finder man den? Kristendommen som højeste visdom i Contra Celsum', in *Perspektiver på Origenes' Contra Celsum* (eds. René Falkenberg and Anders-Christian Jacobsen; Copenhagen: Forlaget Anis, 2004) 103–15; R. Roukema, 'La predication du Christ crucifié (1 Corinthiens 2,2) selon Origène', in *Origeniana Sexta: Origène et La Bible. Actes du Colloquium Origenianum Sextum. Chantilly, 30 août - 3 septembre 1993* (BETL CXVIII; eds. Gilles Dorival et Alain le Boulluec; Leuven: Peeters, 1995) 523–30; G. Bostock, 'Origen's Exegesis of the Kenosis Hymn (Philippians 2:5–11)', in *Origeniana Sexta* 531–547; Lavinia Cerioni, "'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face" (1Cor. 13:12): Pauline Reception in Origen's Commentary on the Song of Songs', *Studia Patristica* Vol. C (eds. H.A.G. Houghton, M.L. Davies, M. Vincent; *Including Papers Presented at the Sixth British Patristics Conference, Birmingham, 5–7 September 2016, 2020*) 93–101; Sylwia Kaczmarek, 'L' Exemplum di Paolo nel Commento alla lettera ai Romani', in Sylwia Kaczmarek and Henryk Pietras (eds.), *Origeniana Decima: Origen as Writer* (BETL 244; Leuven: Peeters, 2011) 445–56; Samuel Fernández Eyzaguirre, 'Pablo, maestro de exégesis bíblica, según Orígenes', *Teol. Vida* 2013 vol 54.4 (2013).

<sup>8</sup> DeCock, 'Origen's Self-Identification with his Exegetical Role Model, Paul', in *Origen and Paul* (Pauline and Patristic Scholars in Debate; eds. Elizabeth Dively Lauro and Paul M. Blowers; New York: Bloomsbury; forthcoming, 2024). See such comments on Paul here: *Comm Rom*. Pref. 3–4 (Origenes, *Der Römerbriefkommentar des Origenes: Kritische Ausgabe der Übersetzung Rufins*. Buch 1–3 (ed. C. P. Hammond Bammel; AGLB 16; Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1990)) 37–9; *Comm Jn* 1.15–6 (SC 120:62, 64; Heine, 35).

<sup>9</sup> In fact, scholars such as Frances Young consider Origen's systematic exegetical treatment of the Christian scriptures to be a decisive turning point in the story of the Bible's formation. For her, Origen's treatment of the scriptures as the basis for a Christian educational system is comparable to the 'Neoplatonic' treatment of Homer in the Greco-Roman schools. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 292. See also Edmon L. Gallagher's essay 'Origen via Rufinus on the New Testament Canon', *NTS* 16 (2016) 461–76.

<sup>10</sup> See Karen Jo Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis* (PTS 28; Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1986).

Origen to treat the Gospels as distinct amongst the scriptural writings because they contain ‘the narration of the deeds, sufferings, and words of Jesus’, and thus the foundational Christian message of salvation.<sup>11</sup> Concerning the Pauline epistles, which for Origen included those scholars now consider ‘deutero’, and the rest of the writings that would become the New Testament, they provide us only with ‘the understanding of wise men that have been aided by Christ’.<sup>12</sup> That being said, as Peter Martens has rightly argued, for Origen, all of scripture’s disparate parts, in the end, had the same (multifaceted) message: ‘the drama of salvation’.<sup>13</sup> After this all too brief discussion of Origen’s understanding of scripture, we are now in a better position to turn to the analysis of our examples.

The first is from his third homily on Ps 36.<sup>14</sup> As he dealt with the words of Ps 36.21, ‘The sinner borrows and will not pay back, but a righteous person is merciful and would give’, he discussed lending and borrowing in terms of scriptural interpretation, such as was the case when Paul taught and his audience listened.<sup>15</sup> After explaining the referents of the psalm verse’s lender and borrowers, *i.e.*, Paul and his audience, Origen addressed his own audience directly, saying, ‘and all of you are borrowing now. These are the loans, these words are the silver...if I teach badly, my silver is unproven. If I teach well, my silver – not mine, but the Lord’s is proven. I am allowed to lend the Lord’s silver, but I am not allowed to lend my own’.<sup>16</sup> In contrast to the heterodox, such as Marcion, Basilides, and Valentinus, who teach and lend their own words, Origen explained, like Paul himself, Origen had the capacity to lend God’s words in the prophets and the Gospels, and thus he could truly say with Paul, ‘do you seek proof of Christ speaking in me?’ (2 Cor 13.3).<sup>17</sup> Given that Origen understood himself to share deep affinities with Paul, he could better style himself as one who was perfectly positioned to interpret scripture’s words, and as he did so, he perceived that Christ himself spoke in and through him.

The second example is from Book 13 of Origen’s *Commentary on John*, in which he dealt with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. This passage Origen treated primarily ‘above the letter’, that is, in a non-literal manner, as representative of ‘heterodox’ and ‘orthodox’ interpretations of the well of the scriptures.<sup>18</sup> In the Johannine narrative, Jesus offers the Samaritan woman ‘living water’, which Origen understood as different from the well of scripture.<sup>19</sup> For Origen, the ‘living water’ represented Jesus’ teachings, and accordingly he understood Jesus to say: ‘he who has received of my water will receive so great a benefit that a fountain capable of discovering everything that is investigated

<sup>11</sup> For example, see his preface to his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 1.12–14, 20, in which he privileged the Gospels over the rest of the components of scripture.

<sup>12</sup> Origen, *Comm. Jn* I. 15 (SC 120:62; Heine, 35).

<sup>13</sup> Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 221. See Martens’ entire chapter on Origen’s ‘doctrine of Scripture’ as he calls it. He provides his own thorough account of the topic as well as the extensive literature on it. Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 193–226.

<sup>14</sup> Throughout this article, the Psalm numbering given is according to the LXX.

<sup>15</sup> The translations of the scriptural verses in this paper come directly from the translations of the text as cited by Origen in his commentaries and homilies. I have amended them in only a couple of instances.

<sup>16</sup> *HPs* 36 3.11. (Origenes, *Die neuen Psalmenhomilien: Eine kritische Edition des Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* (Ed. Lorenzo Perrone; Origenes 13; GCS 19; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) 154; Origen: *Homilies on the Psalms, Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* (trans. Joseph W. Trigg; FC 141; Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2021) 117.

<sup>17</sup> *HPs* 36 3.11 (Perrone, 154; Trigg, 117).

<sup>18</sup> For Origen, the wells he found in scriptural narratives tended to represent the scriptures themselves, interestingly. See for example: *HGen.* 7.5–6; 10.3; 11.3; *HNum.* 12.2.5; *Comm Cant.* preface.

<sup>19</sup> *Comm Jn* 13.42. (Origène: *commentaire sur saint Jean, Livre XIII* (ed. Cécile Blanc, SC 222; Paris: Cerf, 1975) 54; Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John, Books 13–32* (trans. Ronald E. Heine; FC 89; Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1995) 77).

(πηγὴν εὐρετικὴν πάντων τῶν ζητουμένων) will gush forth within him'.<sup>20</sup> In other words, for Origen, one was to begin with the scriptures, but given that they do not contain some of 'the more lordly and more divine aspects of the mysteries of God', one ought to move beyond them to the teachings of Jesus, which one could access within oneself as one matures spiritually.<sup>21</sup>

This latter assertion concerning scripture's limitations, Paul himself indicated to Origen, as the third-century exegete said explicitly: 'Paul, too, says that "he has heard words that cannot be spoken" (2 Cor 12.4). These were not words that were not permitted to be spoken by anyone, for angels were permitted to speak them, but not humans, "for all things are permitted, but not all things are beneficial" (1 Cor 6.12)'.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Origen stated, again with reference to Paul's words in 2 Cor 12.4 concerning his mystical experience,<sup>23</sup> 'And [Paul] says that "it is not permitted to humankind to speak" those things that he had heard, "words that cannot be spoken"'.<sup>24</sup> Paul's account of the revelation given to him as he encountered Christ in the third heaven provided Origen with evidence that there was additional revelation beyond that which is to be found in scripture, to be received from Christ himself.

Origen then went on to compare himself with Paul as he warned his reader that these teachings beyond scripture were not to be dealt with by the majority, but by the minority of persons who were capable, such as the apostle Paul,<sup>25</sup> who heard them, but was not able to speak them or commit them to writing.<sup>26</sup> For, such teachings would be known only to those who have received Christ's living water, 'the fountain of water leaping into eternal life to those who no longer have the heart of man, but who are able to say like Paul, "But we have the mind of Christ (1 Cor 2.16)",<sup>27</sup> and "that we may know the things that are given to us by God, which things also we speak, not in the learned words of human wisdom, but in words learned of the Spirit (1 Cor 2.12–3)".<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Comm Jn* 13.16 (SC 222:42; FC 89:72).

<sup>21</sup> *Comm Jn* 13.27 (SC 222:46; FC 89:74).

<sup>22</sup> *Comm Jn* 13.28 (SC 222:46; FC 89:74). Note that along with Paul, Origen included John as one who received teachings not recorded in scripture with reference to Jn 21.25, 'For there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were each written, I suppose not even the world itself would contain the books that would be written.' He also referred to Rev 10.4, claiming that John was forbidden to write what the seven thunders said.

<sup>23</sup> This is a reference to Paul's account of a person who was 'in Christ, who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven', or Paradise, as he also calls it, and who in the process, 'heard things not to be told, that no mortal is fit to repeat', on whose behalf Paul is willing to boast (2 Cor 12.1–4). While there has been some debate amongst New Testament scholars concerning the identity of the person who had this experience, for Origen, it was clearly an indirect reference to his own encounter with the Lord, the content and result of which he was not permitted to speak or communicate in writing. See, for example the foundational treatment of this passage by Wilhelm Bousset, *Die Himmelsreise der Seele* (RL 71; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), as well as the more recent, representative treatment of Hans Josef Klauck, 'Die Himmelfahrt des Paulus (2 Kor 12,2–4) in der koptischen Paulusapokalypse aus Nag Hammadi (NHC V/2)' in: *SNTU* 10 (1985) 151–90.

<sup>24</sup> *Comm Jn* 13.29 (SC 222:48; FC 89:74). Note that I have adapted Heine's translation to remove the generic 'man' and 'men' to 'humans' and 'humankind'.

<sup>25</sup> The Samaritan woman, who asked for and received Jesus' living water, was another such person, for in the course of the Johannine narrative she moved not only from the camp of the heterodox to the fold of the church, but more significantly, she gained access to 'that which is beyond what is written'. Origen developed this argument in more detail in *Comm. Jn* 13.40–2. (SC 222:52–4; FC 89:76–7).

<sup>26</sup> *Comm Jn* 13.32–4 (SC 222:48; FC 89:75).

<sup>27</sup> For an instance in which Origen claimed directly to have 'the mind of Christ' as he turned to interpret a scriptural passage, see: *CommMatt.* 15.30.

<sup>28</sup> *Comm Jn* 13.35 (SC 222:48, 50; FC 89:75). This was one of Origen's favourite Pauline verses, and he summoned it time and again as exegetical and spiritual aspiration, and as scriptural authorisation for his claims to interpretive precision on the non-literal plane. See for example, *Peri Archon* 4.2.3; *Comm. Jn* 13.5–6. This is therefore an implicit claim to belong to this privileged minority, a claim which will become more explicit below.

It becomes clear throughout his treatment of John 4 that Origen understood himself to have received revelation that was beyond scripture in that he claimed to receive the non-literal meaning of Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well. Indeed, the whole of Origen's overarching non-literal treatment of the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 constitutes the exegete's assertion that he belonged to this select minority of Christians, alongside Paul and the Samaritan woman, each of whom he thought possessed the capacity to understand the teachings of Christ that are beyond scripture.<sup>29</sup> Origen was able to describe and explain the journey vis-à-vis scripture embarked upon by the Samaritan woman, and for our purposes, by Paul, because he understood himself to have undergone a comparable journey as one who spent his life 'engaged very diligently (ἐπιμελέστατα ἀσχοληθέντα)' with the scriptures, and no longer needed them alone.<sup>30</sup> Here then, albeit somewhat indirectly, Origen placed himself at Paul's level, for he too had 'the mind of Christ' and could therefore access those teachings that were beyond scripture, in his case vis-à-vis non-literal exegesis.

This forging of such a close connection to the expert Paul allowed Origen to make the attendant claim to receive various forms of divine revelation or inspiration, for as many have demonstrated, Paul too understood himself as a recipient of direct communication from Christ, and he or 'someone he knows' saw and heard secret things when he was taken to the third heaven (2 Cor 12.3–4).<sup>31</sup> In the two examples above, we saw that Origen's self-presentation as a scriptural interpreter in the Pauline lineage entailed divine revelation by implication. In the two sections that follow, I will examine a set of examples in which Origen makes such claims to divine revelation directly.

### 3. Direct Communication from the Logos

As Torjesen has demonstrated, Origen understood the teaching Logos (i.e., Christ) to be mediated for the reader or hearer by the Old or New Testament author's own encounter with the Logos.<sup>32</sup> I argue here and elsewhere that Origen considered himself and the exegete more generally, to be another kind of mediator of the teaching Logos.<sup>33</sup> In other words, it is in the exegesis of the scriptural text where one encountered the teachings of the Logos. At several points throughout his exegetical homilies, Origen stopped a particular line of interpretation to indicate that the Logos spoke to him in that very moment.

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However, he had already said as much explicitly in the preface-like section of Book 1 of the *Commentary on John*. As he discussed the privileged position of John's Gospel, the first-fruits of the four Gospels, he made a distinction between those able to interpret John's Gospel rightly, i.e., the spiritual Levites and priests, and the majority of Christians who were not so devoted to the study of Scripture, i.e., the spiritual Israelites. See *Comm Jn* 1.10–2. Origen clearly identified with the first group, the Levites, for he said, 'we are eager for those things that are better, all our activity and our entire life being dedicated to God'. *Comm Jn* 1.12. (SC 120:60; FC 80:33–4).

<sup>29</sup> Such a claim, David Brakke suggests, places Origen alongside the so-called 'gnostic' thinker, Valentinus, as well as his predecessor at Alexandria, Clement. See Brakke, *The Gnostics: Myth, Ritual, and Diversity in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010) 131. Unlike Clement, Brakke argues, Origen claimed (like Valentinus) that the 'gift of insight' in biblical interpretation came directly from God.

<sup>30</sup> *Comm Jn* 13.42 (SC 222:54; FC 89:77). Cf. *Comm Jn* 1.10–2.

<sup>31</sup> See for example, the work of Heidi Wendt, *At the Temple Gates: The Religion of Freelance Experts in the Roman Empire* (Oxford: OUP, 2016) 146–89. Cf. Jennifer Eyl's recent study of Paul as practitioner of divinatory techniques, in which she devotes a substantial section to what she describes as 'textual divination'. Eyl, *Signs, Wonders, and Gifts: Divination in the Letters of Paul* (Oxford: OUP, 2019) 102–12.

<sup>32</sup> Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis* (PTS 28; Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1986) 66–7.

<sup>33</sup> I deal with this phenomenon in more detail in my article 'Origen's Mediation of the Logos in his Exegesis of the Old Testament Psalms and Prophets', *Studia Patristica. Papers presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford*. Vol 8. (December, 2021) 101–9.



On such occasions it was therefore necessary for him to listen intently to determine the extent to which he was to share what was being communicated to him with his audience and to adapt his explanation of the text to this new revelation from the Logos.

In the first example, from his *Homilies on Jeremiah*, Origen contended that the Logos pointed him toward a reading concerning the Logos himself.<sup>34</sup> In this instance, the Logos' direct communication with Origen required that he pastorally 'handle' the teaching being given by the Logos before communicating it with his audience. In Homily 20 on Jer 20, Origen sought to interpret Jer 20.9, 'it arose in my heart as a burning fire ... and I could not bear it'. The words caused Origen to reflect on his own desire to feel a fire in his heart after he had sinned, and as he did so, he seems to have been interrupted by the Logos himself, whom Origen said, is 'about to dare something (μέλλει τι ὁ λόγος τολμᾶν)'.<sup>35</sup> Origen then expressed some hesitation about sharing with his audience what had been communicated to him, saying, 'I do not know for what sort of audience it is fitting (συμφέρον)'.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, he divulged what he apparently heard from the Logos, namely, that there exists an imperceptible punishing 'fire', which he then described in detail. In fact, Origen explained, it is the fire about which Christ spoke in the Gospels, saying, 'I came to cast fire on the earth' (Luke 12.49) and which burned in the hearts of Simon and Cleopas on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24.32). The source of this fire, then, is Christ, and like Simon and Cleopas, who received fire in their hearts on the road to Emmaus, Origen's claims to receive it occurred as he explained the prophetic words to his hearers. The remainder of the homily was spent discussing who (else) was worthy to receive this imperceptible fire of the heart, and, according to Origen, it was the Logos himself who nudged him in this interpretive direction in real time.

The second example, from the *Homilies on the Psalms*, is found in the context of Origen's comments on the words of Ps. 76.3, 'I sought God with my hands'. He provided two readings of the verse before he stopped to say that the Logos was speaking to him. The first concerns one's conduct; to seek God 'with the hands' refers to the way in which one lives one's life, whereas the second concerns the act of prayer itself, and it was assisted by the apostle Paul's words in 1 Tim 2.8, 'I want men everywhere to make supplication in every place lifting up holy hands without wrath and argument'.<sup>37</sup> A third reading, however, was provided directly by the Logos, which Origen indicated by saying, 'the Logos is about to say something (μέλλει τι λέγειν ὁ λόγος)'.<sup>38</sup> This reading concerns the stretching of Christ's hands in prayer at the time of his crucifixion, for in this instance, Origen explained, 'Christ sought God with the hands, stretching them over the whole world on the wood and fixing them in order that he might then pray, with hands stretched and the whole body and soul stretched together by him, not for the body but for the whole world, over the whole world'.<sup>39</sup> This stretching of the hands in prayer, then, required and was thereby effective because of the simultaneous offering of oneself. According to Origen, this too, his hearers could do, if they followed Christ and took up his cross, stretching *their* hands on the cross, in order to be crucified with Christ to the world

<sup>34</sup> For other instances where Origen claimed to hear directly from the Logos, see *HPs* 15 1.6; *HPs* 77 4.6; *HJer* 19.15.3.

<sup>35</sup> *HJer* 20.8.4. (*Origenes Werke XI. Die Homilien zum Buch Jeremia*, ed. Alfons Fürst und Horacio E. Lona, GCS NF 11 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 516; *Origen: Homilies on Jeremiah* (trans. John Clark Smith; Fathers of the Church 97; Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1998) 239.)

<sup>36</sup> *HJer* 20.8.4 (Fürst and Lona, 516; Smith, 239).

<sup>37</sup> Like most early Christian authors, Origen understood Paul to be the author of the so-called pastoral epistles.

<sup>38</sup> *HPs* 76 1.4. (*Origenes Werke XIII. Die Neuen Psalmenhomilien*, ed. Lorenzo Perrone, GCS NF 19 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015) 299; *Origen: Homilies on the Psalms, Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* (trans. Joseph W. Trigg; FC 141; Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2021) 243.)

<sup>39</sup> *HPs* 76 1.4 (Perrone, 300; Trigg, 244.)

(Gal 6.14).<sup>40</sup> The Logos guided Origen to this reading concerning his own raising of the hands in prayer as he sacrificed his body on the cross. Origen went on to incorporate this special interruptive revelation from the Logos seamlessly into his treatment of the verse, concluding with comments concerning the way in which the Christian might truly ‘seek God with the hands’, namely, through the sacrificial following of Christ.

In both examples of this section, we saw that Origen claimed to hear directly from Christ, the Logos, as he set to the task of interpreting scripture for his audience. Such a claim to divine inspiration put him in good company with his exegetical role model, Paul. Origen too, though he can be found throughout his corpus urging his elite and scholarly audience to develop the appropriate intellectual skills and expertise, made clear that divine guidance and engagement with one’s enterprise was vital.

#### 4. Angelic Assistance and Engagement

Now to the final source of exegetical authority that Origen argued he possessed: angelic supervision and assistance.<sup>41</sup> We should first note that for Origen, the angels had a foundational role in supervising the ‘production’ of that which would become the content of the Christian scriptures throughout the history of salvation. That is, they were involved with the production of the law, the prophets and the Gospels. According to Origen, the angels’ role within this process provided them with intimate knowledge of scripture itself, rendering them more advanced in their knowledge and understanding of scripture than the prophets and apostles, the human authors of scripture. Further, in several passages of his corpus, Origen indicated that he understood his own preaching and engagement with scripture to belong to the current age of salvation history, and therefore, as a direct extension of the age in which the law was given to Moses, followed by the time of the prophets and the apostles.<sup>42</sup> One of the ways that he legitimated such a claim was by suggesting that the present age of salvation history was also supervised and witnessed by angels. Significantly, however, the angels were not mere observers of Origen’s preaching, but they were actively involved in his delivery of scripture: they prayed for the homiletic exegete; they rejoiced as he presented scripture fittingly; and they served as mediators between Origen and Christ as he made his homiletic-exegetical offerings.

First, in his *Homilies on Luke*, Origen discussed the fact of the angels’ presence in the Christian church – according to Origen, each church had their own angel<sup>43</sup> – and then he turned to explain the angels’ interaction with the preacher, saying, ‘if we say anything in accord with reason (*iuxta rationem*) and according to the intent of the Scriptures (*iuxta scripturarum dicimus voluntatem*), the angels rejoice and pray with us’.<sup>44</sup> In this context, as the angels rejoiced whenever Origen’s homiletic interpretation of scripture was in accord with what they knew to be its true intent, their celebratory attention served as a kind of implicit authoritative standard to which he aimed in his exegesis. Just as significant is his assertion that the angels pray with the preacher whose homiletic interpretation was aligned with the intent of scripture. Unfortunately, Origen did not explain the content or effects of such angelic prayers, but surely, he thought the impact of his homiletic exegesis was strengthened by them in these instances.

<sup>40</sup> *HPs* 76 1.4 (Perrone, 300; Trigg, 244.)

<sup>41</sup> I deal with Origen’s claims to angelic assistance in greater detail in my article ‘Angels, Scripture, and the Exegesis of Origen’, *Patristica Nordica Annuaia* 34 (Spring, 2020) 27–50.

<sup>42</sup> See for example, *HJer* 19.14.9; *HPs* 67 1.1; *HPs* 36 3.11.

<sup>43</sup> See *HLuc* 23.7 where Origen cited Rev 2.12, and 14 as proof of this understanding.

<sup>44</sup> *HLuc* 23.8. (Origène; *Homélie sur saint Luc* (eds. Henri Crouzel, François Fournier, and Pierre Périchon; SC 87; Paris: Cerf, 1962) 322; Origen: *Homilies on Luke* (trans. Joseph T. Lienhard; FC 94; Washington D.C.: CUA Press) 101.)



Now to the second example, which is from his eleventh homily on Numbers, in which Origen outlined his understanding of one of the ways in which the angels served as intermediaries between his preaching and Christ, the high priest. As he discussed the angels' role in offering humanity's first fruits offering to Christ, Origen told his hearers that each person had an angel in attendance to the field of her heart. In Origen's own case, his offering in this context was the interpretation of scripture in his exegetical homilies. He told his readers the following, concerning both his offering and the mediating role of his church's particular angel as he made his exegetical offerings to Christ, the 'supreme high priest': 'And if today I should be deserving to bring forth some great interpretation that is worthy of the supreme high priest ... it could possibly happen that the angel who presides over a church would choose something from all these statements and would offer it to the Lord in the place of the first fruits from the little field of my heart'.<sup>45</sup> For Origen, then, it was through the angels, who were present as he preached, that Christ, the high priest, was alerted to worthy interpretive offerings. Here, the angels' role is best described as evaluative, and it is clear that Origen presumed that they occupied the necessary position vis-à-vis scripture to fulfil this role. I suspect, however, that such a comment also served a rhetorical purpose for Origen, namely, assuring his hearers that they were in the fortunate position to receive explanations of scripture that could potentially receive the 'stamp of approval' from the heavenly beings who enjoyed direct contact with Christ himself.

We have seen that Origen assumed the angelic powers to be attentively engaged with his exegetical-homiletical endeavours. This itself is a significant claim to interpretive authority. However, there are also several instances in his writings where Origen argued that his exegesis and teaching of scripture had an angelic dimension of their own. Significantly, in these instances, Origen did not indicate that he had received direct guidance or assistance from the angels, but instead claimed either the capacity to interpret at a level on par with the angels or at least the aspiration and/or potential to do so. We will look at one example here.

As he turned to interpret Ps 77.25a, 'a person ate the bread of angels', Origen provided an extensive discussion of the content of the angels' bread, which he understood to refer to their work, asserting, 'the work set out before them is to contemplate reality (θεωρεῖν τὰ πράγματα) and to enjoy the wisdom of God and to see the Logos of the order of the universe'.<sup>46</sup> For Origen, it was possible that those human beings who had made great progress on the journey toward the divine could 'eat the bread of angels', and this he went on to assert directly of himself: 'Humans have also received the bread of angels, which nourishes angels, for when I gain understanding about God, about the cosmos, about Christ, about his divinity and about his inhabiting a human body and soul, I eat the bread of angels'.<sup>47</sup> He continued, commenting specifically on his angelic rank with respect to exegesis: 'When I explain (ἐξερτόζω) the words of the Holy Spirit, I eat the bread of angels'.<sup>48</sup> He said no more in this passage about his angelic homiletical-exegetical work before he moved to the next verse, but, even so, it is clear that he considered himself to be such an angelic interpreter, one who could, on occasion, contemplate reality and understand God, the mystery of Christ and the communication of the Holy Spirit in the words of scripture with the angels themselves.

<sup>45</sup> HNum 11.5.1. (*Origène; Homélie sur les Nombres, II, Homélie XI-XIX* (ed. Louis Doutreleau; SC 87; Paris: Cerf, 1999) 46; *Origen: Homilies on Numbers* (trans. Thomas P. Scheck; ACT; Westmont: IVP, 2009) 57.)

<sup>46</sup> HPs 77 4.10 (Perrone, 406; Trigg, 338).

<sup>47</sup> HPs 77 4.10 (Perrone, 406; Trigg, 338). Note that I have amended Trigg's translation of the psalm verse from 'a man ate the bread' to 'a person ate the bread' as well as Origen's comment on the verse from 'Men' to 'Humans'.

<sup>48</sup> HPs 77 4.10 (Perrone, 406; Trigg, 338).

According to Origen, then, the angels, who are well-versed in scripture given their foundational role in the provision of the messages that would become its contents, were heavenly intermediaries on his behalf as he presented scripture to those under his charge. In fact, they were the perfect source of authority for claims concerning the legitimacy of his own biblical interpretation. Not only did they provide him with supervision, mediation and prayer during the exegetical-homiletical process, but they also provided attainable exegetical examples, for, as we have seen, Origen believed that certain elite members of the church, such as himself, could sometimes reach angelic levels of understanding. Significantly, Scripture itself guided Origen toward this self-understanding as we saw in the last example in which he interpreted the meaning of 'the bread of angels' in Ps 77. Surely, the exegetical homilist who did the work of angels was to be trusted with the appropriate handling of the scriptures. Not even Paul made claims to such exegetical and epistemological capacities, nor did he understand himself to be given exegetical assistance by angels.<sup>49</sup> Thus, we might understand Origen to argue that he possessed an additional source of authority to that which his role model and predecessor had done.

## 5. Conclusion

This brief examination of Origen's arguments concerning the sources of his exegetical authority has allowed us to glimpse how one early Christian figure thought about himself not only as an authoritative exegete but also as one who shared the skills and qualifications possessed by the authors of the scriptures themselves, and particularly Paul. Perhaps the unfixed nature of the canon at this stage is what allowed an interpreter such as Origen to make such claims for his authority. However, I suspect that such argumentation was also necessitated by an ecclesial and/or paedagogical context in which the works of interpreters from a previous generation, such as Heracleon, Basilides, Marcion, and the like, continued to exert some authority. Origen made such remarks about his exegetical authority not only so that his exegesis might be better received by his audience, but also because he aimed to repudiate other specialists, or at least their followers, who claimed a similar authority vis-à-vis similar sources.

I have pointed here to two different sources of authority to which Origen laid claim throughout his exegetical writings, both of which resulted from his self-understanding as a participant in the apostolic and exegetical lineage of Paul. I have treated them as somewhat separate entities. I suspect, however, that Origen understood each of them to be part of a larger interconnected system, in which he, the spiritually mature and technically rigorous exegete, participated. For, as I mentioned briefly above, Origen understood each of the scriptural authors to have had his own encounter with the teaching Logos, an encounter which compelled and inspired them to record in writing their reflections on what they 'saw'. I focused in particular on Paul. These two authorities then, Paul and the teaching and revealing Logos, were, for Origen, tightly connected, as I have already observed.

As for the angels, a source of revelation not mentioned by Paul, they were, by virtue of their place within the hierarchy of beings, mediators between humanity and the divine, and as we saw in one of the examples, they too were in communication with the Logos on the exegetical-preacher's behalf. The angels had acted in this way before, guiding and supervising the events of salvation history, such as the provision of the law, the oracles delivered by the prophets and the preaching of the apostles, that is, those events that came to be recorded in the nascent canon. That said, I suspect that the angels were for

<sup>49</sup> It is only in the book of Acts that Paul is said to have received communication and assistance from an angel, and this in the context of his journey by ship to Rome. See Acts 27.21–6.

Origen, simply one more available source of revelation by which he could legitimise his project and profile.<sup>50</sup> In fact, there is a sense in which Origen simply made use of whatever authorising agent most expedient to his context and/or the content of the scriptural text at hand.

Conspicuously absent from this analysis has been a treatment of the Holy Spirit's role in inspiring the interpreter. This requires further exploration, in my view, though I maintain that Origen's notion of inspiration was decidedly more 'Christocentric' than that of the later tradition. That said, one does not have to go far to find instances in which Origen prayed to the members of the trinity as he set himself to the task of interpreting a scriptural passage. The connection between Origen's perception of himself as operating within the Pauline tradition and inspired exegesis has been insightfully treated by Ronald E. Heine, who observed that for Origen, the Holy Spirit illuminated the meaning of a given text as the interpreter compared it with others in which the Holy Spirit spoke.<sup>51</sup> This understanding of the Spirit's inspiration is decidedly textually oriented. I have focused in the above on other (related) agents of revelation or inspiration, which were seemingly more directly involved in Origen's exegesis than the picture of the Spirit's inspiration painted by Heine. Communication from the Spirit was, in my view, but one source of authority an interpreter such as Origen could claim to access.

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<sup>50</sup> We might compare this to Clement of Alexandria's mode of Christianising the inspiring Muses, as has been brilliantly demonstrated at length by Jane Heath in her *Clement of Alexandria and the Shaping of Christian Literary Practice: Miscellany and the Transformation of Greco-Roman Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>51</sup> Ronald E. Heine, 'Reading the Bible with Origen', in *The Bible in Greek Christian Antiquity* (Ed. Paul M. Blowers; Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997) 131–48.