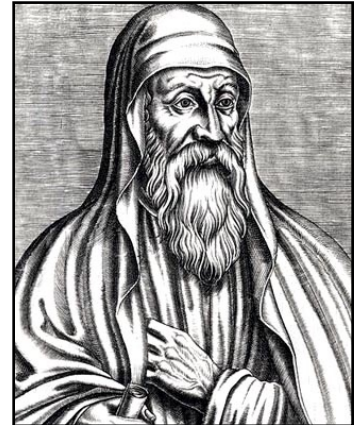




**Study guide for**  
Origin

## Origen: A Short History

One can justifiably say that Origen was the first Christian theologian whose work moved from within the inner realm of the church outward into the Hellenistic world. Born in approximately 185 c.e., likely in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria, a number of factors provide certain sup-positions about his origins and education. In spite of his Greek-Egyptian name (“born of Horus”), Origen was the son of Christian parents. His father, possibly named Leonidas, died during a persecution of Christians around 201 c.e. At the time, Origen was sixteen years of age.



He was so moved by this experience that he also was clearly ready to follow his father in experiencing the death of a martyr. Only his mother's craftiness reputedly hindered him from doing so.

With the execution of his father, the entirety of the family's possessions was confiscated. The mother was left destitute to care for seven children. A wealthy Christian matron took Origen, the eldest of the children, into her home. There lived also a well-known heretic by the name of Paul, who spent considerable time educating the youth. Only later did Origen come to harbor suspicions about him. He was taught by this Paul and was very strongly influenced by his teachings. Along the way, he devoted himself to the study of Greek literature and grammar to the point that he soon began to offer instruction in these fields and to earn his livelihood from this.

From the time of Philo to the end of the second century c.e., Alexandria was the main city of Hellenistic culture. There were to be found various cults, Jews, and Christians, among whom were gnostics and followers of the great church. Present also were the different philosophical schools and their leading thinkers.

While Origen operated his grammar school, he continued to learn through the readings of philosophical texts and sought during his free time to obtain the education of a “master of philosophy.” It is debated whether this instructor was the famous Platonist Ammonius Saccas, the teacher of Plotinus. After some years (around 206 c.e.), a new persecution of the Christians broke out. Bishop Demetrius and most of the catechumens receiving instruction fled the city. Confronted with this situation, Origen assumed responsibility for his own catechetical instruction, having assembled a circle of young people interested in Christianity. He taught the Bible to them at regular intervals. Since people opposed to Christianity often could

identify him, he concealed himself by moving from place to place. However, some of his fellows were captured and executed. When the persecution ended in 211 c.e., Bishop Demetrius and the clerics returned, and Origen opened immediately once again his grammar school and continued, with the bishop's approval, his instruction in the faith. Soon he gave up his grammar school, sold his secular library, and devoted himself exclusively to his churchly vocation. His enthusiasm drove him to emasculate himself, taking literally the understanding of Matt 19:12 in order to “devote himself entirely to the word of God” (Eusebius, Hist. eccl. 6.8.1). He completely occupied himself with the Bible in education, commentary writing, and preaching of biblical texts. This was his life's mission.

In pursuing this goal, he occupied himself with the text of the Bible. The Septuagint manuscripts used in the church and available to him were partially corrupt. The meaning thus was often unclear. Origen wished to compare them with the Hebrew original. A former Palestinian Jew who had converted to Christianity and then immigrated to Alexandria taught him Hebrew and the Rabbinic methods of interpretation. Later he began to produce a work based on his textual criticism. This was a composition designed to produce the primary Hebrew text (in a Greek transcription) in four columns (Tetrapla) with the Septuagint and other Greek translations; he later expanded this to six columns (Hexapla). His objective was, above all, to improve the Septuagint by filling in the gaps and omissions by reference to the primary text.

His travels took him to Rome (ca 215 c.e.), to Bosra to the Roman governor of Arabia, and finally even to the mother of Caesar Septimius Severus, Julia Mamaea, during her sojourn in Antioch (231/2 c.e.). His fame grew, as did the number of people, mostly educated, who visited him in Alexandria. He eventually gave to his student Heracles the task of instructing the catechumens and proceeded then to teach only those who continued in his advanced course in the manner of the philosophical schools. Among others, he succeeded in converting to orthodoxy a wealthy Valentinian, Ambrose, who became his patron and financed the scribes who could write swiftly in order that Origen could dictate his numerous commentaries. However, Ambrose also prompted him to work expeditiously by continuing to ask of him new volumes.

Meanwhile, Origen's conflict with his bishop, Demetrius, increased, since the latter obviously had begun to doubt the orthodoxy of the widely known scholar. This conflict emerged over the philosophical background of his teaching and the content of the early writings produced at that time. One example is that of Origen's text *On Nature*, which, while not surviving, was directed against the gnostic

dualism that sought to distinguish between the ultimate good and the ultimate evil of the nature of humans and angels. Origen sought to demonstrate that God's judgment regarding sinners may not be considered final, unless the fallen angels are not given the opportunity to repent and thereby experience salvation. Indeed, the gnostic teaching that souls are forever intrinsically good or evil may not be viewed as compatible with both divine righteousness and the freedom of heavenly and earthly souls to choose their own paths. Theoretically speaking, even the devil finally may experience salvation. He discussed this problem particularly in a public debate with the gnostic Candidus. The consequence of this debate led Origen's adversaries, including for a time even Heracles, to conclude that the scholar of Alexandria had announced positively that even the devil would be saved ("the restoration of all"; see 1 Cor 15:28). Rather, Origen probably understood the statement to be a hypothetical "worse-case scenario."

Above all, Origen continued to amplify his interpretation of the Bible. After an initial commentary on the Psalter (later replaced by a more mature one), he commented on the laments of Jeremiah and above all the book of Genesis. This commentary reveals that he had already established his typical methods that we later will be able to recognize in a more precise manner. He explained that behind the obvious meaning of a word there is a concealed, spiritual connotation that one may ultimately determine. The criticism raised against this understanding is inherent in the question: "Does Origen deny the historical reality of the Scriptures?" This question pressed him to delay for a time his writing of his commentary in order to write a foundational defense that explained his methodology: *First Principles* (*Peri archōn* = *De principiis*). He even was constrained temporarily to leave Alexandria in order to take up residence in Jerusalem (230 c.e.). However, finally Demetrius requested that he return home. Back again in Alexandria, he began to dictate a multivolume commentary on John, interrupted by a journey to Antioch. In 232 he then renewed his travels, this time to go to Athens, another center of Hellenistic philosophy.

In taking the coastal highway, he passed through Caesarea in Palestine, where, surprisingly, he was ordained a presbyter. This occasioned a protest from his current bishop, Demetrius, that was written in a letter sent to Bishop Pontian of Rome. Bishop Demetrius issued a complaint against his colleagues Theoktist of Caesarea and Alexander of Jerusalem. Pontian wrote back that Demetrius was correct in his complaint. However, Demetrius died in 233 c.e., and Heracles became his successor. In the meantime, Origen, disappointed, left Athens before he even was able to situate himself in the city. He remained in Caesarea, where he stayed until 245 c.e., a period of residence interrupted only by a new persecution

of Christians between 235 and 238 c.e. This was a productive time for his various projects.

One of these was his comprehensive commentary series, which he continued to write. Ambrose served as his skilled scribe, allowing Origen to dictate to him, first of all, his commentary on John's Gospel, followed by his commentary on Genesis. Later Origen dictated to him the commentaries on the Pauline Epistles and the Prophets. During this period he also continued to preach every morning on Old Testament texts and three times a week on texts from the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament during eucharistic worship services.

His instruction of new, recently baptized catechumens, who participated in these eucharistic services, is also important for understanding the content of his principles of exegesis. He also tutored a young relative of the governor, serving as an instructor in the aristocrat's house. After concluding a second sojourn in Athens (245–246 c.e.), he returned to Caesarea. He dictated additional commentaries dealing with the prophetic books, Canticles, and the Psalter. His commentary on Matthew followed that of John. In between these, Origen took care of another request of Ambrose. He had sent him a request to offer a rebuttal to another anti-Christian literary attack, this one from the pagan Celsus (“True Word”). Origen delivered this rebuttal in the form of eight volumes entitled *Against Celsus*. What we know of the writing of Celsus comes from citations in this work by Origen. Origen almost had come to the end of his life without having achieved his goal of martyrdom, which he had had since his youth. In the persecution that occurred during the reign of Caesar Decius (249–251 c.e.), he was incarcerated and tortured. Even so, he still survived this imprisonment, if only for a few additional years. The exact date of his death is unknown; he is said to have been sixty-nine years of age.....

Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*. Vol. 1: From the Old Testament to Origen: Trans. Leo G. Perdue (Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta, 2009) Pg. 174-178

# **Summary of Origen's hermeneutical approach.**

## **Description of Origen's hermeneutical approach.**

“He thought that Scripture had three different, yet complementary, meanings; (1) a literal or physical sense, (2) a moral or psychical sense, and (3) an allegorical or intellectual sense. The threefold sense was based upon his belief in a corresponding threefold division of mankind” (1) the physical, (2) the emotional or psychical, and (3) the spiritual or intellectual.”

David Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation* (Baker Grand Rapids, 2000) 88.

## **Origen's threefold division was derived from his view of humanity:**

“Just as human beings consist of body, soul and spirit, so also do the Scriptures. The bodily sense of a text was either the historical or literal meaning. The soulish meaning of a text contained a figurative exhortation to avoid vice and grow in virtue. It was the moral or ethical teaching. The third level was the spiritual meaning of Scripture. It contained the allegorical sense which was the most profound level appropriate to God and humanity. It reveals God's plan of salvation through Christ's incarnation. But it is known only to a mature group of elite believers...”

Bradley Nassif, “Origen,” *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 789  
Nassif's full article in appendix A

## **Origen's general interpretive principles:**

“First, every text is pregnant with profound mysteries and should be discovered through allegory. Second, nothing should be said of God which is unworthy of him. Third, each text was to be interpreted in the light of the rest of Scripture. Finally, nothing contrary to the rule of faith was to be affirmed.”

Dockery, *Biblical Interpretation*, 89.  
Dockery references church historian  
Justo L. Gonzalez *Analysis of  
Origen's hermeneutic.*

## **The message of the Bible was Christ.**

Origen viewed the Bible as having a unity centered in Christ. Scripture had a Christo-telic trajectory. Nassif says, “Origen compares the harmonious nature of Scripture to “one perfect and attuned instrument of God, producing from its various notes a single sound of salvation for those who are willing to learn” (Origen Commentary on Matthew, homily ..... All of Origen’s commentaries and homilies on the Old Testament endeavor to find Christ in the law and the prophets. The divine Logos is everywhere present, if not literally then at least in a concealed manner, that is, metaphorically, typologically or allegorically. The New Testament fulfills the foreshadowings of the Old but also is seen as a prefiguration of the kingdom that is to come. This kingdom Origen refers to as the “eternal gospel” .... Consequently the Old Testament is a shadow that points to the New Testament and even reaches beyond it to the eternal state.

Bradley Nassif, “Origen,” Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters, ed. Donald K. McKim, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007), 792-93.  
Nassif’s full article in appendix A

## **Origen’s biblical theology and interpretive method from “First Principles”**

Adequately describing Origen's principles of interpretation is rendered both easier and more difficult by the fact that he himself articulated these in a section of *De principiis* (4.1–3). One is able to explain correctly his expressions found there, if one compares both the form and manner by which Origen practically pursues his exegesis of texts. They have often been understood in scholarship as conflicting. Origen had already hinted at the theme, “Scripture,” in the preface. There he briefly mentioned the idea of the content of apostolic teaching and preaching that may pose certain questions regarding details or reasons that remain open. “These must be investigated vigorously with acuity and explored from Holy Scripture” (1.preface.4). To the teachings of the church belong also those that have to do with Holy Scripture:

The Scriptures are written by the Spirit of God and have not only the meaning that is obvious but also another that is hidden for the most part. The things that are portrayed are namely the images [formae] of certain secrets [sacraments] and the depiction of divine things. The entire church is of one accord over these things: the entire law is spiritual [see Rom

7:14], although what in the law is spiritual is not entirely understood, but rather only those things that the grace of the Holy Spirit has given in the words of wisdom and of knowledge. (1.preface.8)

In this passage one can already clearly recognize the manner in which Origen takes up a well-known word of Paul and continues in an entirely defined direction. When Paul contrasts his own sinful nature (“fleshly”) with the spiritual nature of the law, Origen delves into the deeper meaning of the Scripture, which can be understood only by means of the gifts of the Spirit, which, taken together, are the means of knowing.

We find ourselves in Alexandria. The Hellenistic intellectual background of this city obviously influenced Origen's understanding of Scripture in a decisive way. The task of the interpreter (here Origen is thinking foremost of the preacher), on one hand, is an intellectual matter. There is a deeper, concealed meaning to detect behind the simple, literal meaning. On the other hand, interpretation is not only an intellectual endeavor; for this understanding the gift of the Spirit is an indispensable presupposition.

In book 4 of *De principiis*, Origen further expands his understanding of Scripture. He seeks in this text the divine nature of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments (both are here already definite concepts) to pinpoint the activity of the two persons Moses and Jesus. Moses' activity is apparent in that his teachings and the laws that he proclaimed awakened among many nations the desire to accept them as a body of rules for life. None of the heathen philosophers or lawgivers was able to succeed in doing this. In the same way, the proclamation of Jesus, brought to the “Greeks and Barbarians, wise and unwise, ” “is associated with the religion announced by him” (4.1.2). In spite of persecutions, the Christian message subsequently has been proclaimed throughout the entire world. For this reason the prophecies of Jesus himself were fulfilled (Matt 24:14; 7:22). “The fact that what was said has entered with such overwhelming power shows that he is truly God who has become a human person in order to give to humans his teachings about life” (4.1.2).

Origen then moves to a traditionally shaped demonstration that Christ was prophesied in the Old Testament (4.1.3–4), discussing in particular the election of the pagan nations and his mission to them. Out of this unfolds the point “that the Scriptures, which have prophesied about him [the Old Testament], are inspired by God, have announced his coming, and have reported his teachings with all power and authority” (4.1.6). This inspiration of the Old Testament is demonstrated with



the coming of Jesus (whose appearance was prophesied by the Old Testament prophets). “It was scarcely possible to give clear examples of the inspiration of the ancient Scriptures before the coming of Christ” (4.1.6). Now, however, it is possible to provide “evidence.” In addition, in a careful and attentive reading of the prophetic word, there is also the experience of a “trace of enthusiasm” that convinces Origen that the Scriptures are not only human but also divine.....

In the second chapter that follows, Origen speaks of the correct manner to read and to understand the Scriptures. A purely literal understanding by the Jews and gnostics leads to misconceptions and gross errors (4.2.1). All are led astray who are not familiar with the spiritual sense of Scripture (4.2.2). However, those who are so familiar are clear that the Scripture contains a “mystical economy” (see Irenaeus). Many things that appear to be objectionable or scandalous, as, for example, Gen 19:30–38, are explicable only as a type. Likewise, the prophets as well as the Gospels are full of riddles and dark words and are thus difficult to understand, if not for the grace that is given to one. The same is true of the letters of the apostles, which also contain many difficult passages (4.2.3). In order to discover the right path (4.2.1) in one's journey through the Scriptures, the “key to understanding” is required (4.2.1).

Following this Origen comes to his famous statement that, in spite of appearing unequivocal, in fact is easy to misunderstand. He cites a verse from the book of Proverbs: “Write this down for you three times with admonishment and knowledge in order that you may give a true answer to the questions asked to you!” (Prov 22:20–21). He explains this passage in the following way: “One must write therefore three times the thoughts of Holy Scripture in his heart, so that the more simple is edified by that which is the flesh of Scripture—this we name the direct view, for one who has been strengthened somewhat by its soul, however, the perfect .... by the spiritual law” (with a citation from 1 Cor 2:6–7). This passage has been understood in general to mean that Origen teaches here a threefold sense of Scripture. By contrast, it is conspicuous that nowhere in his later practice of exegesis does he carry out this threefold sense. Only in 4.2.6 are mentioned a few less than enlightening examples for a meaning of the “soul” of the Scriptures. In addition, one could discover three classes of biblical readings that may be distinguished. The classes of readers or hearers consist of those who are satisfied with the literal reading of the Scriptures, those who consider the “soul” of the Scriptures (however, what does he mean by this expression?), and the perfected, who understand the Scriptures in their spiritual meaning. However, the separation of the thoroughly differentiated classes is obviously not intended. The “way” that Origen has in mind should lead each Christian to an increasingly deeper

understanding! The purpose imposed on the enlightening Spirit is to lead to the spiritual knowledge of the Scriptures (4.2.7). If one realizes that Origen was familiar with his “Hebrew” (Jewish) manner of interpretation, one will recognize in the number three a connecting element between saying and interpretation that is a typical example of the exegesis of a key concept, which we already have encountered in characteristic examples. Origen has associated with the number three the (Greek) tripartite division of humans, consisting of body, soul, and spirit, which he certainly understands in an ascending order of rank. The purpose of the way of a Christian reading the Scriptures is to understand the spiritual meaning.

Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation*. Vol. 1: *From the Old Testament to Origen*: Trans. Leo G. Perdue (Society of Biblical Literature, Atlanta. 2009) Pg. 178-181

### **Allegorical interpretation: it's problem and modern revival**

The allegorical interpretation which Origen, like Philo the Alexandrian Jew, applied to the Bible appears subjective and wholly arbitrary to anyone schooled in a more historical approach to texts.... his [Origen's] allegorical method invites reassessment in a generation that is abandoning the fantasy of coming to a knowledge of God by critical historical study and is open to the possibilities of more imaginative readings of religious texts.

Robert Morgan, “The Bible and Christian theology”,  
The Cambridge companion to biblical interpretation, ed. John Barton  
(Cambridge University press, New York NY. 2003) 120

## Appendix A

IVP Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters:

### **ORIGEN (c. 185-253)**

Origen of Alexandria was the most significant biblical scholar in the first three centuries of Christian history. Other early Christian thinkers reflected seriously on the Scriptures but did not write biblical commentaries, formulate a developed theory of hermeneutics or do extensive work on the text of the Bible. In the history of biblical interpretation Origen deserves to be recognized as the father of biblical criticism. Some eight hundred of Origen's writings have survived, and at least 75 percent are devoted to the exposition of Scripture. The ancient church historian Eusebius indicated that Ambrosius, a wealthy friend, provided Origen with a trained staff of stenographers, copyists and calligraphers. Eusebius offers a colorful account: "For as Origen dictated there were ready at hand more than seven shorthand writers who relieved each other at fixed times, and as many copyists, as well as girls skilled in penmanship" (Eusebius Ecclesiastical History 6.23.2).

What compelled Origen to be so prolific a writer? Clearly it was a combination of his worldview and impassioned love for the Bible. Origen's cosmology, shaped by a mixture of Christian doctrine with the Greek literary and philosophical tradition, formed his hermeneutical theory and exegetical method. In everything he wrote, he was simultaneously an exegete, theologian and mystic. Origen's labors on the text of the Bible are among the most outstanding of any age, not just of the early church. His influence on the history of biblical interpretation has been exceeded perhaps by no one except the apostle Paul.

### **Context:**

Origen's historical context needs to be established in order to understand his contributions to the history of biblical interpretation. The cultural, religious and philosophical milieu of Alexandria played a decisive role in shaping his perspectives on the Bible.

Alexandria was the greatest intellectual, cultural and commercial center of the Roman Empire. Alexander the Great founded the city (331 B.C.) and Hellenized it, making Greek language, philosophy, art and literature dominant features of its cultural life. Several harbors were built for commercial trade. Businessmen and sailors traveled back and forth, making Alexandria the chief seaport of Egypt. Dating from the mid-third century B.C., an advanced institute of research known as the Museum was still in existence in Origen's day. The library was reputed to have six hundred thousand volumes. It contained a repository of scholarship on the classics of Greek antiquity, philosophy, literature, philology, mathematics,

astronomy, algebra and geometry. The great algebraist Diophantius and Hero, author of famed textbooks on geometry and ballistics and inventor of a functioning steam engine, may have been Origen's contemporaries. The second-century grammarian Apollonius Dyscolus authored the Canon of Apollonius, which is still cited by exegetes of the Greek New Testament.

Like other Christians living in Alexandria, Origen was educated in the classical curriculum. Much of his work is characterized by the same concerns of those disciplines. Classical learning was viewed as a prerequisite for the study of philosophy, and subsequently, for Christians, scriptural interpretation. Philosophy was the preparatory discipline for studying Christianity. "To achieve this," said Origen, desire you to take from Greek philosophy those spheres of knowledge which are potentially an introduction to Christianity, and whatever information from geometry and astronomy that may serve to explain the sacred books; that what philosophers say of geometry, music, grammar, rhetoric, astronomy—namely, that they are handmaidens of philosophy—may be said as well of philosophy itself in relation to Christianity" (Ep. to Gregory, 3). Origen probably started to study the elementary principles of reading, writing, counting and doing sums at age seven. After that, he went on to study general education and grammar. General education included arithmetic, musical theory, astronomy and geometry. Grammar focused on Homer, Hesiod, Euripides and other Greek authors from the literary tradition. In the grammar curriculum, pupils went through four stages of learning. In the first phase the class engaged in criticism of the text. Students went over their manuscripts together with the teacher, line on line, to make sure all had the same text. Next came oral reading, in which they spoke the text aloud. In the third stage students engaged in exposition (or exegesis, as it was called), in which the linguistic and historical background of the texts was discussed. Fourth came judgment, in which the instructor assisted students with the drawing out of moral lessons from their reading. After Origen completed his literary education, he became a teacher of grammar.

From the philosopher Ammonius Saccas (c. 175-242) Origen learned Platonic doctrines. He acquired from Ammonius a sympathetic yet critical attitude toward classical antiquity and even appropriated Ammonius's language and style of writing. The technical vocabulary of Platonism, such as "the incorporeal" (*asomaton*), "the mind" (*nous*) and "the governing faculty" (*hegemonikon*), appears on virtually every page of Origen's writings. Consequently Middle Platonism (first century B.C. to second century A.D.) and neo-Platonism (developed by Plotinus from 205 to 270) provided the philosophical framework for much of his work. Platonism was put in the service of Christian apologetics against the Gnostics.

Jewish religion in Alexandria also influenced Origen's biblical scholarship. Until around 115, Alexandria had a flourishing Hellenistic Jewish population. The Jewish

community produced the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek, the book of Wisdom and the works of the great Jewish philosopher Philo (c. 20 B.C.-A.D. 30). By Origen's day the influence of the Jewish community had diminished, but it still posed a significant challenge to the Christian community there. Origen's contact with the Jews is not entirely clear, but it is beyond doubt that they induced him to produce his most important work on the text of the Old Testament, the Hexapla.

Finally, Origen's theological work was developed in the face of heretical Christian groups such as the Gnostics. The forms of Gnosticism that Origen fought against were those by Basilides, Valentinus and Marcion. Their most serious attacks were aimed at the church's belief that Jesus' Father is identical with the Creator God of the Old Testament, the applicability of messianic prophecies to Christ, the reality of his humanity and the validity of the entire Old and New Testament books of the Bible. Origen sought to refute Gnostic objections rationally and to preserve the whole biblical canon and the church's rule of faith. Yet despite his valiant attempts to speak meaningfully to his own generation, vital issues within his theological system were judged negatively by his successors. Those issues were spelled out in detail in the posthumous condemnation of Origen(ism) by the Fifth Ecumenical Council (553) (see J. Meyendorff, 47-68). But the condemnations may not have always been fair to Origen due to certain distortions of his thought by overenthusiastic followers, especially Evagrius Ponticus. The anathemas should not diminish the value of his immense contributions to the history of biblical interpretation.

### **Literature:**

A large number of Origen's writings have been lost due to his condemnation by Justinian in 553 and the subsequent confiscation and burning of his books. Nevertheless, modern scholarship has been able to reconstruct some of those writings, many of which focused on biblical interpretation. There remains a vast legacy of materials to evaluate from Origen's work on the Bible. Jerome classified Origen's biblical writings into three types of literature: scholia, biblical commentaries and homilies (Jerome [PL 25.585-86]).

1. He composed a number of brief explanatory notes on the biblical text called scholia. Following the literary methods of the classical curriculum, Origen made marginal notes on manuscripts, notes that could include textual, grammatical or interpretive comments. No scholia on individual books of the Bible, however, have come down to us in their entirety.

2. Origen wrote extensive biblical commentaries on most books of the Old and New Testaments. From all that we know, it appears that Origen was the first exegete in Christian history to form a systematic commentary on an entire book of

the Old or New Testaments. These commentaries are longer and less numerous than the homilies. None of them has survived in complete form. J. Quasten estimates that “out of 291 commentaries 275 have been lost in Greek and very little is preserved in Latin” (Quasten, 2:51; for the most up-to-date work on Origen’s theology and exegesis and a listing of all critical editions in the various languages, see Vogt). Of all his writings, the insights recorded in the commentaries come closest to the historical-critical method of modern exegesis. Yet they are written in a style that is unlike that of modern commentaries in that Origen used Scripture to elaborate on philosophical concepts while also providing philological, grammatical, historical and literary observations on the text. This hybrid of philosophical theology and critical exegesis was the result of Origen’s overarching interest in finding an inner unity of Scripture through allegorical exegesis.

3. There are homilies, or expository sermons, on select chapters or passages from the Bible. These Origen preached almost every day during the later part of his ministry, when he lived at Caesarea. Toward the end of his life, when he was more than sixty years old, he allowed these sermons to be taken down in shorthand by stenographers as they were delivered. That is why they seem to read more like conversational lectures than like modern sermons. The devotional emphasis of the homilies shows them to be more valuable for tracing the history of Christian spirituality than for understanding Origen’s biblical scholarship.

4. We should add to Jerome’s threefold classification of Origen’s exegetical works a systematic treatise titled *On First Principles* (Lat. *De principiis*; Gk. *Pert Archon*). This is the first systematic exposition on Christian hermeneutical theory.

### **Old Testament:**

Following the concerns of his earlier training in grammar curriculum, Origen’s study of the Old Testament involved two problems: the text and the boundaries of the canon. A major catalyst for addressing these issues arose out of the need to find common ground for dialogue with the Jews. Any meaningful arguments that could be used to persuade the Jews had to be based on a common Bible. But the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament differed in the books they contained and the original text used (Hebrew versus the Greek Septuagint [LXX]).

Origen used both the shorter Hebrew canon and the longer Septuagint, which included apocryphal books like *Judith*, *Tobit* and the *Wisdom of Solomon*. He was content to conduct his apologetics against the Jews within the framework of their own shorter canon in the Septuagint since he knew little or no Hebrew. The reasons for this were that the church accepted the Septuagint as authoritative Scripture and that the Jews had produced new competing Greek translations for the refutation of Christian proofs of Jesus’ messiahship. Against Jews who protested that the church’s text of the Septuagint was an illegitimate Bible, Christians had

come to believe that the Septuagint was a divinely inspired translation and therefore a definitive replacement of the Hebrew text. When Origen encountered differences between the Hebrew and Greek Bibles he occasionally preferred the original Hebrew; but most often he accepted the Septuagint readings because he considered them to be divinely appointed advances over the original (e.g., by contributing christological nuances to the Hebrew by addition or alteration). Ecclesiastical usage served as the criterion for Origen's acceptance and defense of the Septuagint.

Having been trained as a grammarian, Origen realized that the first requirement for understanding the Bible was to establish its correct wording. This led to his creation of the Hexapla, one of his most important contributions to biblical interpretation. The Hexapla, or Sixfold Bible, was an ongoing edition of the text of the Old Testament. Through painstaking labors, Origen produced it in Alexandria and Caesarea over a period of thirty-one years (c. 212-243). It was a manuscript of approximately sixty-five hundred pages. Because of its length, it was probably never copied in its entirety. Only parts of the Hexapla have survived. The church historian Eusebius apparently had the column that contained the revised Septuagint copied for public use, and Jerome states that he used the original in the library of Pamphilus at Caesarea. The original was destroyed there in the seventh century during the Muslim conquest of Palestine.

Although the number of columns was not consistently six, as the title suggests, the main work was set out in six parallel columns: (1) the original Hebrew text, (2) a transliteration of that Hebrew text into Greek letters, presumably to assist in the vocalization of the unpointed Hebrew text, (3) a translation by Aquila, a second-century Jew whose rendering was the most literal of the group, being closest to the Hebrew; the translation preserved Hebrew word order and idiomatic turns of phrase, (4) a translation by Symmachus, another Jewish translator, but his was a more readable Greek rendering of the Hebrew, (5) a revised Septuagint, presumably the text current in Alexandria and (6) a translation by Theodotion, who may have been a Jewish Christian. Prior to its inclusion in the Hexapla, the last four columns existed in a separate form known as the Tetrapla, or Fourfold Bible. The Tetrapla was available to Origen through its current use in Jewish synagogues in Alexandria.

The most important column of the Hexapla was the Septuagint. Since Origen did not have a full mastery of the Hebrew language, he consulted Jewish scholars and compared the Septuagint with the other Greek translations of the Old Testament to understand the Hebrew original. Following the symbols of classical grammarians, Origen added to the Septuagint words that were in the Hebrew but not in the Greek by using an asterisk (\*) to mark the spot. Words that were in the Greek but not in the Hebrew were marked by an obelus ( \_ or a). To mark the

conclusion of a passage to which the asterisk or obelus referred, a metobelus was used (: or /). These signs are still used by textual critics. Minor disagreements between the Hebrew and Greek were silently corrected by Origen. The evidence indicates that in all his changes, Origen did not rely on a direct translation from the Hebrew but on one or another of the adjacent columns that contained the three versions by Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion. Origen wrongly assumed that the Hebrew text current in his day was identical to that from which the Septuagint translation was originally made. This resulted in a recension (edition) of the Greek Old Testament rather than a restoration of the Septuagint. In the early church this recension was regarded as having great authority.

Modern textual critics of the Septuagint have often been unfair to Origen in their assessment of his work on the Hexapla. The claim made is that Origen's lack of knowledge of Hebrew caused him to rely on the Jewish Greek editions rather than to make a fresh Greek translation. But Origen's goal for the Hexapla was not the same as that of the modern critic who seeks to recover the original text. The primary goal of the Hexapla was immediately apologetic. Origen sought to obtain a revised text of the Septuagint that would be acceptable in Greek-speaking Jewish circles of his day so as to provide a sound basis for dialogue. He wanted a Septuagint that would correspond as closely as possible to the Hebrew text in order to avoid the charge made against Christians of a messianic altering of the original. But this did not mean that Origen wanted to substitute the Hebrew for the Septuagint, for he considered both to be inspired by God. But whether the Septuagint or the Hebrew was regarded as the final court of appeal in theological matters remains a disputed question. Origen appears to have adopted an unsettled conviction about which was the authoritative text of the Old Testament canon. S. Brock puts the matter in perspective: "It is this apologetic purpose of the Hexapla that one must always keep in mind when considering Origen's practice as a textual critic. He was not interested in constructing any 'original text' of the LXX, in the way that modern scholars are, but simply in providing the Christian controversialist with a text that would be acceptable in the authoritative eyes of contemporary Jewish scholars' (Brock, 216).

### **New Testament:**

Origen's textual criticism of the New Testament is less substantial than that of the Old Testament. But his chief contributions to the New Testament focused on two problems: the text and boundaries of the New Testament canon. Within those areas Origen illuminates the number of books, original wording and history of the New Testament text (i.e., the dating of different text types and establishment of their geographical locations). As with the Old Testament, Origen made wide use of the New Testament Scriptures in commentaries, homilies, doctrinal discussions or



controversies with his contemporaries. His apologetics were directed against the Jews, various pagan authors, Marcionites, Gnostics, modalists, adoptionists, docetists and various chiliasts. As a necessary defense against Judaism and Gnosticism, Origen developed a well-conceived system of allegorical hermeneutics.

An exceptionally valuable contribution was made to the history of the canon when Origen refers to all twenty-seven books of the New Testament. He divides them and others into three categories: those that were universally accepted, those that were disputed and those that were rejected. The accepted books included the four Gospels, Acts, thirteen letters of Paul, Hebrews (apparently because he accepted its apostolic content but doubted its Pauline authorship), 1 John, 1 Peter and Revelation. The disputed books were 2 Peter, 2 John, 3 John, James, Jude, the Shepherd of Hermas, the Didache, the Epistle of Barnabas and the Gospel of the Hebrews. Other writings were put in the false category. [The primary criterion that guides his selection is general usage by the church (see Eusebius ecclesiastical History 0.25.8-14). Sometimes, however, Origen quotes or makes reference to a Gospel beyond the four canonical Gospels with qualifying phrases such as “which the church approves” or “if any one receives it” (e.g., the Gospel of Peter, Gospel According to the Hebrews). He also frequently makes use of unwritten sayings of Jesus. However, in an important passing comment in the Homilies on Joshua 7.1 (c. 240), we find Origen making a list of all the authors of the New Testament. The list implies an acceptance of the same twenty-seven books that are contained in our New Testament canon. But the sermon was likely given for the purposes of edification, not technical analysis, so it is difficult to ascertain his certainty about which books belong in the canon. All this points to the fact that while the canon was far down the path toward the church’s final definition of a list of authoritative books, the question was still open in Origen’s day.

Origen probably never attempted to edit a critical edition of the New Testament, although some modern scholars think otherwise (for a summary of opinions, see Metzger 1963, 7895). Furthermore, no definitive answer has been given to solve the great riddle of what New Testament text type Origen used. Yet, in all his writings, especially his exegetical treatises, one finds comments about the sometimes poor condition of a manuscript or variant readings of a given text. When deciding between which variant to accept, his choice is often based on theological considerations more than on objective textual evidence. For example, when Origen rejects the reading “Jesus Barabbas” in favor of “Barabbas” (Mt 27:16-17), he does so because he believes that the name Jesus was never applied to evildoers. Again, Origen’s well-known preference for the reading “Bethabara” instead of “Bethany” as the place where John baptized (Jn 1:28) was based on geographical and etymological grounds rather than on textual evidence. In other instances Origen withholds choosing between two variant readings since, because

of his allegorical hermeneutics, he is able to find spiritual truths in both texts. Origen provides invaluable information to the modern textual critic who is concerned with the history of the transmission, corruption and restoration of the text of the New Testament.

### **Hermeneutics:**

Origen was not interested in biblical criticism for its own sake. The issues he grappled with concerning the texts and boundaries of the Old and New Testaments were essential prerequisites for a higher task. That task was the interpretation of the Scriptures themselves. Origen's theory of biblical inspiration, eschatology, anthropology and the unity of the Old and New Testaments had a profound effect on his theory of biblical interpretation.

Origen was persuaded that all truth necessary to humankind is contained in the inspired Scriptures. Holy Scripture is ultimately authoritative and divine because it has God as its author. Origen compares the harmonious nature of Scripture to "one perfect and attuned instrument of God, producing from its various notes a single sound of salvation for those who are willing to learn (Origen Commentary on Matthew, homily 2). The terminology that Origen used resembles that of Philo or Josephus. Yet Origen is more careful than they were to emphasize the self-consciousness and free will of the prophets. He did not eliminate human agency. The biblical authors put the teachings of the Spirit in writing but knew their allegorical meanings. He rejects the ecstatic, irrational idea of inspiration applied by the Greeks to their poets, as well as that of the Montanists.

In every book, chapter, verse and letter of the Bible, Origen traces the breath of the Holy Spirit at work. The text, not the author, is the locus of inspiration. "The wisdom of God has penetrated to all the inspired Scripture even as far as the slightest letter" (Origen Philocalia 2.4 [PG 12:1081]). From beginning to end the Bible is entirely truthful in all its assertions. Yet from a historical or literal perspective, the Spirit "wove into" the text a great many inconsistencies, contradictions, inaccuracies or impossibilities. So truth for Origen is not always factual information but saving knowledge. The trustworthiness of Scripture is sometimes to be found on strictly literal grounds but always on the level of its spiritual or allegorical meaning (Origen De principiis 4.2.9; 4.3.1-5). In many cases, for the allegorical to be true, the literal should be as well. Where the literal sense could not be true the so-called error was a signal put there by God to move the reader beyond the literal level to a higher spiritual plane. How does one know when to move beyond the literal to the allegorical meaning? When the historical or literal meaning seems to be impossible, unworthy or in some other way fraught with difficulty, such as when the different Gospels do not seem to harmonize completely (see Daly, 137; Trigg 1988).

Origen views both Testaments as sharing two parts of one complete covenant record. The Old Testament was a “shadow” (*skia*), the New an “image” (*eikon*). The Old Testament has been fulfilled through the incarnate presence of the divine Logos and must therefore be interpreted christologically (Homily on Joshua 2.1 in Tollington 51-52) All of Origen’s commentaries and homilies on the Old Testament endeavor to find Christ in the law and the prophets. The divine Logos is everywhere present, if not literally then at least in a concealed manner, that is, metaphorically, typologically or allegorically. [The New Testament fulfills the foreshadowings of the Old but also is seen as a prefiguration of the kingdom that is to come. This kingdom Origen refers to as the “eternal gospel” (*euangelion aionion*; taken from Rev 14:6 in Origen’s *De principiis* 4.3.13). Consequently the Old Testament is a shadow that points to the New Testament and even reaches beyond it to the eternal state. That “eternal gospel” is as far greater to the New Testament as the New testament is to the Old.

Origen does not conceive this eschatology in terms of “this age” and “the age to come.” Rather there are an infinite number of ages preceding and following this world in which we live. Beyond the horizon of history, when all ages have passed away, time will cease and eternity will reign wherein life will reach its perfect end and God will be “all in all” (*apokatastasis ton panton*): “But after the present age, there will yet be further ages to come . . . when all things are no longer in an age, but ‘God is all in all’” (Origen *De principiis* 2.3.5). For this reason Origen continually insisted that the Old and New Testaments had as their goal the mystical union of the soul with the Logos. But if that union is mediated through a knowledge of the Scriptures, what is the content of that knowledge and how is it to be grasped? Origen answered by developing a method of exegesis that conformed to the goal of mystical union and that presupposed a Platonic cosmology and its views concerning the nature of humanity and its relation to God.

### **Methods of Exegesis:**

Origen did not invent his interpretive techniques but borrowed them from a complex hermeneutical environment that was already present in his day. These included both Christian and non-Christian elements. Christian influences on his approach to Scripture came from the Bible itself and the precedents set by early Christian interpreters (such as \*Justin Martyr, Melito and the apostolic fathers, who bequeathed to Origen certain terms and symbols that he adapted and used in his own homilies). Deeply rooted in the life and prayer of the church, the ready-made inspiration for his spiritual exegesis was the church’s longstanding tradition going back to Christ and the apostles about the typological meaning of the Old Testament. The Old Testament prefigured the New Testament, while the New Testament revealed the eternal patterns of the church and the Christian life. This

ready-made, ecclesial hermeneutic facilitated Origen's transition to adopt the more extreme forms of Hellenistic allegorical methods, even though Origen himself likely knew the distinction between typology and allegory but often merged the two in his exegesis.

Non-Christian influences on Origen's exegesis came from Greek, Jewish and heretical sources. Allegorical interpretation was first developed in the Hellenism of ancient Greece. It attempted to bring ancient mythology and poetry into line with prevailing philosophical and moral opinions. The mythologies of Homer and other Greek gods included immoral stories that needed to be allegorized so as to move readers beyond the offensive historical account to a higher spiritual meaning that would improve the gods' moral standing. The object of Greek allegory was to present absolute, eternal, ahistorical or at least transhistorical truth. The historical was unimportant. If a religious document was divine it required an allegorical interpretation, and if such a document was interpreted allegorically it must be divine. For a religious document to have more than a temporary value in the Hellenic world, it had to contain mysteries and obscurities that demanded allegorical interpretation. That method was adopted by Origen and applied to the Bible. Moreover, Alexandrian Jews such as Philo employed a Platonic philosophy that Philo believed was allegorically contained in the Scriptures. In Origen's debates with the Marcionites and pagans such as Celsus, Origen forged literary techniques that answered charges that the Bible contained impossible literalisms. Finally, one cannot understand Origen's exegetical goals without relating them to the underlying structure of his worldview. The chief philosophical presupposition that guided Origen's exegesis was the metaphysics of Platonism. Since Platonism is the true metaphysic, Scripture must yield Platonic truth and reflect its vision of reality. Platonic cosmology corresponds to the nature and purpose of the Bible.

The controlling hermeneutic that dominated Origen's approach to Scripture was the interconnectedness of God, his Logos and humanity. In both Platonism and Christianity there is a similar belief in a direct link between the image (eikon) and the "model" or "original" (pros ti). The Logos is the direct Image of God who reveals the paternal Archetype. Humans are an image of the Image of God in the Logos. Everything concerned with the destiny of humanity must be related to the divine Image. The image of God in humans is therefore both a self-manifestation of God and the foundation of their relationship with God. Within this worldview Scripture serves as a vital link that unites the human image with the divine Image. Insofar as humans contemplate the Bible's spiritual message, they fulfill their own human nature as spiritual creatures made in the image of God.

Origen explains his hermeneutical theory in book 4 of *On First Principles*, which was written in Alexandria between 220 and 230. Basing himself squarely in the tradition of allegorical exegesis as exemplified by Aristobulus, Philo, Pantaeus

and Clement, Origen claims that Scripture itself reveals how we should understand the Bible. A Platonic trichotomy, supported by Proverbs 22:20-21 (LXX) and 1 Thessalonians 5:23, instructs the faithful to interpret Scripture in a threefold manner. Just as human beings consist of body, soul and spirit, so also do the Scriptures. The bodily sense of a text was either the historical or literal, meaning. The soulish meaning of a text contained figurative exhortation to avoid vice and grow in virtue. It is the moral or ethical teaching. The third level was the spiritual meaning of Scripture. It contained the allegorical sense which was the most profound level appropriate to God and humanity. It reveals God's plan of salvation through Christ's incarnation. But it is known only to a mature group of elite believers (see Simonetti 1994, 39-48, for important distinctions the literal and spiritual senses and the impact of Origen's christology on his doctrine of Scripture.). Note that Origen approved the allegorical procedure even though it was imported from pagan hermeneutics which believed that divine texts required the allegorical method because of their divine nature. It should also be observed that Origen's threefold theology of ascending exegesis has been overemphasized by modern interpreters. Origen does not consistently practice a threefold theory on every biblical text. Quite often he simply distinguishes between the literal and higher senses and leaves it at that. The criteria by which he discovered the various levels of meaning remains an understudied topic in Origenian studies. In addition, his anthropological model of exegesis unites biblical ideas with neoPlatonic dualistic presuppositions that create an unresolved ambiguity between Scripture and Platonism.

In the fourth century, representatives from the Antiochene school of exegesis, such as Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia, attacked Origen's allegorical method for its dehistoricizing, philosophizing, arbitrary and elitist characteristics. The Antiochene exegetes proposed an alternate form of mystical exegesis (*theoria*) that attempted to be consistent with the literal meaning of the text (for a survey of the issues and current state of scholarship on this neglected and misunderstood principle of Antiochene exegesis, see Nassif). Despite their efforts to restrain the tide of Alexandrian exegesis, Origen, more than anyone else, became famous for making allegory the dominant approach to biblical interpretation down through the Middle Ages. It prevailed as the foremost method of exegesis in both theological and monastic literature, even though Origen's theology was often opposed.

Entry on "Origen" by Bradley Nassif,  
Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters,  
ed. Donald K. McKim,  
Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007

# Appendix B

## Glossary

### **allegory**

a text in which the meaning is presented symbolically

### **aspect**

in grammar, the way the action of a verb is internally organized, as opposed to tense, which concerns the time of its occurrence. Thus 'I go' and 'I went' are differences of tense, but 'I go', 'I am going' and 'I do go' are differences of aspect.

### **canonical criticism**

a style of biblical interpretation which seeks to respect the canonical status of the text, usually through a synchronic interpretation

### **composite**

of a text, composed from several discrete sources

### **cosmology**

theory about the origin and nature of the universe

### **cultural relativism**

the belief that there are no absolute values or truths valid across all cultures

### **deconstruction**

an attempt to show how texts 'subvert' themselves by undermining their own presuppositions

### **diachronic**

concerned with historical change; thus a diachronic study of a text is interested in the stages by which the text came into being, as contrasted with a synchronic concern.

### **dissonance theory**

a sociological theory about the reaction of societies whose hopes and expectations are not fulfilled

**Enlightenment**

intellectual movement of the seventeenth  
And eighteenth centuries characterized by belief in reason

**eschatology**

theories about the end of the world or of the present age, or more generally about the purposive course of history *often functioning as an interpreting lends to analyzing theological texts.*

**Exegesis**

interpretation esp. through exact philological study, *often focusing on grammar and syntax of a text*

**fundamentalism**

the belief that everything in the Bible is true, usually allied to an evangelical system of doctrine

**hermeneutical circle**

the fact that the parts of a text can only be understood in the light of the whole, yet the whole can only be understood through the parts.

**hermeneutics**

the science or art of interpretation, formulating general rules about the meaning of texts; sometimes as a hermeneutic, a particular interpretive technique

**Hexateuch**

the Pentateuch plus Joshua

**historical-critical method, historical criticism**

the attempt to analyze texts in their historical context.

**holistic reading**

a reading which seeks to interpret biblical texts exactly as they stand - as finished wholes — rather than seeing them as made up of pre-existing components

**intertextuality**

the mutual relationship among texts within a given corpus of literature

**liberation theology**

system of thought and action which asserts that God is on the side of the powerless

**Massoretic text**

the standard text of the Hebrew Bible established by the Massoretes in the seventh and eighth centuries AD.

**modernism**

- (1) synonym of modernity;
- (2) esp. in Catholic thought, attempt to apply an Enlightenment appeal to reason to faith and dogma

**modernity**

movement of thought in aesthetics marked by belief in rationality, order and progress

**narratology**

the study and theory of narrative texts

**New Historicism**

a style of historiography which attends to the bias in our sources, especially where this tends against the interests of oppressed groups.

**parallelism**

primary technique of Hebrew verse, whereby the meaning of a line is repeated by using synonyms: 'he who dwells under the defense of the Most High / abides under the shadow of the Almighty' (Psalm 91:1)

**Pentateuch**

the five books of Moses — Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy

**polysemous**

having many meanings

**postmodernism**

originally an architectural term, postmodernism denotes a movement of thought which suspects all large-scale explanatory schemes and delights in parody and pastiche



**poststructuralism**

movement which extended and also criticized structuralism by showing that the meaning of texts is indeterminate.

**Pseudepigraphic,**

pseudonymous of texts, attributed to someone other than their true author.

**Q**

a hypothetical document thought to have been drawn on by Matthew and Luke, and accounting for resemblances between them

**reader-response criticism**

style of literary criticism that stresses the role of the reader in not only perceiving but contributing to the meaning of a text

**reception**

what texts have been taken to mean

**Redaction**

editing; *process of editing a text*

**redaction criticism**

study of the way biblical books were edited

**Second Temple period**

the time after the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem in Cc. 530 BC; often used of the later part of this period, from 300 BC or so

**speech-act theory**

linguistic theory concerned with the use of speech to perform actions, e.g. naming, blessing, promising

**structural linguistics**

the synchronic study of language as a structure of interrelated parts, as opposed to historical linguistics

**structuralism**

linguistic, literary or cultural analysis that finds meaning in the way a text or a culture is ordered, and in the contrasts between its parts

**synchronic**

concerned with the state of something at a given moment; thus a synchronic study of a text is interested in the interrelation of the parts with each other in its present form, as contrasted with a diachronic concern

**synecdoche**

figure of speech in which a part represents the whole

**Talmud**

massive compilation of Jewish teaching published in fifth century AD and existing in two editions and Babylon and Palestinian

**Tenakh**

Jewish acronym for Scripture: the Law, the Prophets and the Writings (Torah, Nebiim, Ketubim); also Tanak, Tanakh

**Torah**

the Jewish Law or teaching, conceived of as contained in the Pentateuch and in oral traditions deriving from it.

**Typology**

drawing parallels between people or events in different periods, e.g. Jesus and Moses

Glossary adapted from terms in  
'The Cambridge companion to biblical interpretation', ed. John Barton  
(Cambridge University press, New York NY. 2003) pg. viii-xv  
All changes and additions are in italics.