



The Biblical Hermeneutics of Origen of Alexandria

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Abstract: The core aspect of Origen's biblical hermeneutics is the connection between the Bible and philosophy. To explain the many problems he detected in the biblical texts, Origen employed the philological techniques that had been developed in Alexandrian philology and were taught in the grammatical schools of the Roman Imperial era. Furthermore, he drew upon the main subjects of the so-called "liberal education" (*enkýklios paideía, artes liberales*), including not only geometry and astronomy, but also philosophy, as auxiliaries of biblical exegesis. The hermeneutical basis of this programme is the assumption that the Bible and the world are based on the same principle of rationality (the Greek *lógos*) and are thus accessible to human reason. Because of this analogy, all human knowledge can be used to understand the Bible. Furthermore, for Origen, an authentic understanding of the world was the prerequisite for a true understanding of the Bible. The achievement of this biblical hermeneutics and theory of science was ambivalent: on the one hand, Origen ascribed essential value to the subjects of general education, the sciences, and philosophy for Christian education and biblical interpretation and thus integrated all these subjects into the Christian educational canon; on the other hand, the subjects of science and philosophy were subordinate to biblical exegesis and Christian theology. Only in modern times was philosophy established as an independent discipline, yet it remained an integral part of theology, which also developed as an independent discipline. Origen laid the foundations for this development with his philosophical exegesis and his Christian theory of science.

Keywords: Origen of Alexandria, Bible, philosophy, exegesis, hermeneutics, theory of science

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Introduction

The core aspect of Origen's biblical hermeneutics is the connection between the Bible and philosophy. This coupling is fundamental to his entire thought, which can be described as "biblical philosophy" or "philosophical exegesis".¹ In recent decades of Origen scholarship, Origen's exegesis has often been reduced to philology, and he has been seen primarily as a philologist.² There is no doubt that Origen masterfully used philological techniques in interpreting the Bible, as will be seen in the following pages as well. But the overall framework of his exegesis is a philosophical approach. In this article, therefore, I want to make a case for this perspective on Origen's exegesis, focusing not so much on its philological methods as on its philosophical hermeneutics. Regarding this nexus, I would like to draw attention to the following aspects: (1) the connection between interpreting the Bible and the world, and the correlation of philosophy and the Bible; (2) the consequences of this hermeneutical principle for the methodology of exegesis; and finally (3) the underlying theory of science, alongside the Christian idea of education and literacy, devised by Origen.

1. Interpreting the Bible and the World

1.1 "Explaining the Bible from the Bible"

Origen's approach to interpreting the Bible is often described as

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- 1 See my earlier contributions to this topic: ALFONS FÜRST, "Origenes—der Schöpfer christlicher Wissenschaft und Kultur: Exegese und Philosophie im frühen Alexandria", in ID., *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus: Studien zur antiken Theologiegeschichte* (Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte, 115), Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2011, 81–114; ID., "Origenes als Theologe der Geschichte: Exegese und Philosophie in der Geschichtstheologie des Origenes", in *ibid.*, 125–162; ID., "Origen: Exegesis and Philosophy in Early Christian Alexandria", in JOSEF LÖSSL/JOHN W. WATT (eds.), *Interpreting the Bible and Aristotle in Late Antiquity: The Alexandrian Commentary Tradition between Rome and Baghdad*, Farnham/Burlington: Ashgate, 2011, 13–32. See also JOSEPH W. TRIGG, *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-century Church*, Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1983.
 - 2 See above all BERNHARD NEUSCHÄFER, *Origenes als Philologe*, 2 vols. (Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft, 18/1–2), Basel: Friedrich Reinhardt, 1987, followed by PETER W. MARTENS, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012. The excessive influence of Neuschäfer's as such excellent book has even lead to an entry in *The Oxford Handbook of Origen*: GERARDO RODRÍGUEZ-GALARZA, "The Contribution of Bernhard Neuschäfer's *Origenes als Philologe*", in RONALD E. HEINE/KAREN JO TORJESSEN (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Origen*, Oxford: University Press, 2022, 160–174.

“explaining the Bible from the Bible,” which echoes the procedure of ancient philologists, “to elucidate Homer from Homer.”³ The attribution of this maxim to Origen is well justified. Its meaning encompasses two levels. Firstly, when explaining biblical passages, Origen often proceeded by seeking parallel statements or terms in the Bible and comparing them to elucidate the meaning of a particular passage.⁴ Secondly, this maxim implies that biblical texts must be interpreted within the context of the understanding of the world and humanity expressed in them, in order to prevent their meaning from being distorted by categories that are alien to them.

In a well-known passage in the *Philocalia*, containing an excerpt from the preface to his *Commentary on the Psalms* and frequently referenced in Origen research,⁵ Origen discussed this procedure using an image originating from Jewish tradition: the Bible is like a house with many locked rooms, for which all the keys are available within the house but none in front of the correct door; the task of the exegete consists of finding the appropriate key for each room. Applying this parable to the Bible, Origen reiterated the following methodological principle: “It is just so with the understanding of the Scriptures, because they are so obscure; the only way to begin to understand them was by means of other passages containing the explanation dispersed throughout them.”⁶ Origen also discovered this Jewish maxim in the Apostle Paul, who had spoken of “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Cor 2:13). Origen frequently pointed to this biblical passage when discussing the understanding of the Bible.⁷ In his *Commentary on John*, he formulated the principle: “One must compare similar things with each other from the inspired words.”⁸ In the hermeneutical treatise in the fourth book of *On First Principles*, in view of biblical passages whose literal wording contains something impossible, he formulated a very similar maxim: “One who reads in an exact manner must [...]

3 Cf. Porphyry, *Ad Iliadem* Z 201 (p. 56 SODANO).

4 See NEUSCHÄFER, *Origenes als Philologe* (n. 2) 283–285. Many examples are to be found in HENRI DE LUBAC, *Geist aus der Geschichte: Das Schriftverständnis des Origenes*, übertragen und eingeleitet von HANS URS VON BALTHASAR, Einsiedeln: Johannes, 1968, 362–369.

5 See recently OLIVIER MUNNICH, “La «clé» du texte et le recours d’Origène à «l’Hébreu»: Reconsidération du problème”, in ALFONS FÜRST (ed.), *Origeniana Tertia Decima: Origen and Philosophy: A Complex Relation* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 338), Leuven/Paris/Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2024, 539–550.

6 ORIGEN, *Philocalia* 2, 3.

7 Cf., e.g., *In Numeros homiliae* 16, 9, 4; *In Iosuaam homiliae* 15, 1.3; *In Matthaeum commentarii* 14, 14; *Contra Celsum* 4, 71; 7, 11.

8 *In Iohannem commentarii* 2, 22, 142. See NEUSCHÄFER, *Origenes als Philologe* (n. 2) 280–281.

as far as possible trace out, by means of similar expressions, the sense, scattered throughout Scripture, of that which is impossible according to the letter.”⁹ This methodological procedure applies not only to passages impossible in their literal wording but generally to the entire Bible, as Origen often emphasised.¹⁰

1.2 Origen’s Analogy between Bible and World

This inner-biblical procedure—explaining one biblical passage by referencing similar passages in the Bible and taking into account the biblical worldview—is only one side of Origen’s biblical hermeneutics.¹¹ At the same place in the *Philocalia*—which receives little attention in Origen research—following the Jewish parable, another excerpt from the *Commentary on the Psalms* is reproduced in which Origen himself expresses thoughts about interpreting the Bible that go beyond a purely methodological procedure and are of fundamental hermeneutical significance. Because of the importance of this passage for Origen’s hermeneutics, I reproduce it in full:

But if “the oracles of the Lord are undefiled, refined silver, unadulterated with earth, purified seven times” (Ps 11:7[12:6]) and if the Holy Spirit has prompted them with deliberate precision through the servants of the Word (cf. Lk 1:2), we must not miss the analogy, since the wisdom of God has permeated the whole of Scripture even to the individual letter. This is indeed why the Savior said: “Not one iota or one stroke will pass away from the law, until everything comes to be” (Mt 5:18). For just as the divine skill in the fabrication of the world not only appears in the sky, the sun, the moon, and the stars—all of these being bodies through which it courses—but has also acted on earth in the same way even in the meanest material object, since even the bodies of the tiniest creatures are not despised by the Artisan, and even less the souls present in them, each of which receives in itself a particular property, a saving principle in an irrational being. Nor does the Artisan despise the earth’s plants, since he is present in each of them with respect to their roots, leaves, possible fruits, and different qualities. So with regard to everything recorded by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit we accept that, since divine providence has endowed the human race with a superhuman wisdom by

⁹ *De principiis* 4, 3, 5 = *Philocalia* 1, 21.

¹⁰ Cf. *In Exodum homiliae* 8, 2; *In Leviticum homiliae* 12, 4; *In Iosuum homiliae* 23, 3; *In Hieremiam homiliae* 19, 13; *Catena Palaestiniensis* Frg. in Ps. 118, 83; *In Iohannem commentarii* 32, 20, 263–266; *In Matthaeum commentarii* 16, 4. See NEUSCHÄFER, *Origenes als Philologe* (n. 2) 282–283.

¹¹ For the following, see ALFONS FÜRST, “Bibel und Kosmos in der Psalmenauslegung des Origenes”, *Adamantius* 20 (2014) 130–146.

means of the Scriptures, he has, so to speak, sowed traces of wisdom as saving oracles, in so far as possible, in each letter.

One must by all means be persuaded, once one has accepted that these Scriptures are the work of the world's Creator, that those who investigate the Scriptures will confront issues as serious as do those who investigate the rational principle (λόγος) of creation. Indeed, even in creation there exist some problems which human nature finds hard or impossible to resolve, but the Creator of the universe is not to be blamed on this account; for example, we do not ascertain the cause of the creation of basilisks or other venomous beasts. In the case of someone who perceives the weakness of our race and that it is impossible for us to comprehend the rational principles of God's skill even when they have been contemplated with very precise attention, the reverent procedure is to refer the knowledge of these matters to God, so that later, if we are deemed worthy, the things to which we piously pay attention may be revealed to us. Similarly, in the divine Scriptures one must see that there are many problems hard for us to resolve.¹²

In this text, Origen formulates an analogy between the Bible and the world, both with regard to their comprehensibility and with regard to the difficulties and aporias in their understanding. According to this analogy, the Bible and the world are based on the same principle of rationality, the Greek *lógos* (λόγος). God's wisdom permeates both the created world down to the smallest living creatures and plants, and the biblical texts down to the individual letter, both as a creating and preserving principle.¹³ Because the object of exegesis, Scripture, and the object of philosophy, being, are based on the same principle, namely reason, the effort to understand the biblical texts can have recourse to the same principle as the effort to understand natural things. This common principle makes it even hopeful to make them accessible to our reason. This was not a specifically Christian idea but the common property of the philosophical worldview in antiquity. In particular, the Stoics proceeded from a *lógos* which permeates the universe; according to the Stoic view, it also exists and is effective in humans, and it is the task of humans to develop their reason and thus grasp the rationality and meaningfulness of the world. Origen did not view this rationality only as the basis of the world but also of the Bible. Just as

¹² *Philocalia* 2, 4–5.

¹³ Cf. *Contra Celsum* 6, 71: "The oversight and providence of God does permeate all things, but not like the spirit of the Stoics. [...] the divine Logos is not material. Through him all things were made, and in order that all things may be made by the Logos, he extends not to men only but even to the things supposed to be insignificant which are controlled by nature."

the world contains a rational meaning comprehensible to human reason, so does the Bible. Therefore, the Bible is based on the same principles of being and thinking that apply elsewhere, and this is why it is understandable through human reason.¹⁴

Origen even went a step further.¹⁵ Because of this reason-based analogy between the Bible and the world, it was not only possible but even necessary to draw worldly knowledge extensively to explain the Bible. In the inner-Christian dispute over the correct interpretation of the Bible, Origen asked about standards to which this debate should be oriented. In his view, the better argument should prevail in each case. In other words, the Bible should be approached with the same standards of rationality as apply in philosophy and other areas of science. For Origen, the Bible is therefore to be interpreted in an intellectual framework to which a rational attitude towards the surrounding world belongs. Only such a reasonable attitude towards the world protects the biblical interpreter from errors, especially in relation to its Creator. For this reason, he even prioritised the study of the world and its order over the study of the Bible, because only if one achieves a rational understanding in these scientific questions does one also have the chance to understand the Bible correctly. In the newly discovered *Homilies on the Psalms*, he argued against the gnostic and Marcionite biblical interpretation and their separation of the Creator of the world from the true God in the following way:

Therefore it is reasonable that he who made heaven and earth and the things therein is credible not so much because of the Scriptures as because of the world and the order in it, and that whoever believes in Christ does not so much believe from reading as from the evidence that follows from the power of the churches, from the fullness of the power of him who governs the circle of the earth, to then first turn to the Scriptures, then again ask for grace from God, so that we do not misunderstand the text. For much death has entered souls under the pretext of the Scriptures. Every heresy draws godless thoughts from the Scriptures, and from them pretends to establish them, from the Gospels, from the Apostles, some heresies from the Law, from the Prophets. I say this not because I reproach the Scriptures, but because I want decisive faith to rest not so much on the Scripture as on the proof which is clearer than the Scripture; the proof clearer than the Scripture are heaven, earth and what belongs to them. I

14 Cf. these analogies also *In Psalmum 37 homiliae* 1, 1; *In Psalmum 77 homiliae* 1, 6.

15 See MATTHIAS PERKAMS, "Religion and Philosophy in Origen's *Homilies on the Psalms*", in ALFONS FÜRST (ed.), *Origeniana Tertia Decima: Origen and Philosophy: A Complex Relation* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 338), Leuven/Paris/Bristol, CT: Peeters, 2024, 75–85.

remember a conversation with followers of Marcion to whom I said: If there are two possibilities: to believe the Scripture, as you say, in view of the Father or to believe the universe and order in view of the Creator — what should one do rather? Because even if the Scripture did not contain this, it would be reasonable for someone who turns to the universe and sees the order to have believed in the Creator as such assumptions from God as you have put forward. And indeed, as it seems to me, what has been said can convince the one who seeks the clearer proof alongside the weaker one. The clearer proof consists in looking at heaven, constellations, sun, moon and stars, at the earth and the animals on earth, at their king, the human being, who excels on earth with so many skills, to admire the one who made this and to accept the herald of this doctrine, Jesus Christ, our redeemer.¹⁶

This is a remarkable statement which one might not expect from a Christian author: only when humans have acquired a correct understanding of the world can they also understand the Bible correctly. The reverse path too easily leads to false interpretations of the text. Accordingly, faith should not simply be based on a belief in the Bible, but on the evidence of the effectiveness of the churches in the world. Their practical relevance forms the foundation for faith, which can then also refer to the Bible—if it is understood correctly. From Origen's perspective, however, the Bible can only be understood correctly if sufficient relevant knowledge about the world has been acquired beforehand. For this reason, when one follows Origen's advice, parameters foreign to the Bible are not brought to it, and exegesis is not falsified by philosophy or science; rather, it makes sense and is even necessary to read the Bible within the horizon of world knowledge to understand it correctly. Biblicism or biblical fundamentalism is incompatible with such a scientific-theoretical approach.

16 In *Psalmum 77 homiliae* 1, 1. At the end of the text quoted above from the *Philocalia*, Origen links the analogy between the Bible and the world also to disputes with heretics about the correct understanding of the Bible, *Philocalia* 2, 5: "As for those who, having abandoned the Creator, presume to take refuge in a God whom they have invented, let them resolve the difficulties that we have just presented. After such audacious impiety, let them persuade their conscience to be at peace with their proposals concerning the matters just investigated and the difficulties we have just raised. But if the difficulties remain no less intractable, once they have separated themselves from the godhead, would it not be more pious for them to stay with the common understanding of God, namely that the author of existence is contemplated by means of the creation, and to declare nothing godless and impious concerning such a great God?"

1.3 The Limits of Reason

Before I deal with some practical consequences of this hermeneutical approach, here are a few notes on related considerations by Origen. Firstly, this reason-based scientific approach to the biblical texts does not go hand in hand with certainty of knowledge or excessive confidence in the power of reason. Even if it cannot do without the effort of reason, Origen is very aware of its limits. In the quoted fragment from the *Commentary on the Psalms* in the *Philocalia*, after describing the analogy between the Bible and the world, Origen elaborates extensively on the fact that this analogy also applies to the limits of understanding: in both areas, human thought encounters the same difficulties in understanding. There are aporias in the world, as in the text of the Bible, which cannot be completely understood by human reason, or sometimes not understood at all. The main limit is formed by the problem of theodicy. “It is impossible for us,” Origen writes in the *Commentary on the Psalms*, “to grasp the rational principles of God the artist, even if we devote ourselves to their consideration with all diligence,” which is why it is wise and pious “to leave the knowledge of these things to God.”¹⁷ In the chapter on theodicy in *On First Principles*, he sharply emphasised the same tenet: “In this matter to recognise what the last truth is is reserved for him alone who ‘searches all things, even the depths of God’ (1 Cor 2:10).”¹⁸ Despite all efforts to gain knowledge, Origen repeatedly reminded us of the “rule of piety,” which is to accept the limits of human understanding.¹⁹

For this reason, an interpreter of the Bible can always only be in search of the correct understanding—the “théologie en recherche,” as Henri Crouzel called it with a famous formulation.²⁰ It is about a continuous, lifelong effort to achieve a better understanding of the biblical text, whose deeper meaning sometimes reveals itself to the exegete and sometimes remains closed. In the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, Origen describes his exegetical experience in this respect using the image of the proximity and remoteness of bride and bridegroom from the Song of Songs:

As God is my witness, I often saw the bridegroom drawing close to

¹⁷ *Philocalia* 2, 5.

¹⁸ *De principiis* 2, 9, 5.

¹⁹ Cf. esp. *De principiis* 4, 3, 14.

²⁰ HENRI CROUZEL, *Origène*, Paris/Namur: Lethielleux, 1985, 216–223. Cf. ID., “Qu’a voulu faire Origène en composant le *Traité des Principes*?”, *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* 76 (1975) 161–186. 241–260; ID., “Actualité d’Origène: Rapports de la foi et des cultures: Une théologie en recherche”, *Nouvelle revue théologique* 102 (1980) 386–399.

me and being as close to me as possible. When he suddenly drew back, I was unable to find that for which I was searching. Thus, I desire anew his coming and sometimes he returns. And when he has appeared and has been gripped by my hands, he escapes my grasp, and when he has escaped my grasp, he is sought again by me. He does this often until I truly hold him fast and climb up, leaning upon my beloved (cf. Song 8:5).²¹

This is not the description of a mystical experience,²² but of the experience of Origen the exegete in his continuous work on the biblical text²³ – which only leads to an encounter with the “Word” in the “words” at the end, in the hoped-for completion, which can then be described as mystical:

So also we, at times, consider a problem without arriving at a solution and in other instances rejoice in a solution when the bridegroom, the Word, enlightens our hearts. In further questions we, once again, find ourselves perplexed and he appears to us anew. And this occurs often until we, when we are made perfect, encounter the bridegroom who not only comes to us but makes his abode with us.²⁴

Before this happens, however, Origen is engaged with the “problems” of the biblical text, which are also mentioned in the *Philocalia* fragment from the *Commentary on the Psalms*.

21 ORIGEN, *In Canticum homiliae* 1, 7. Cf. *In Canticum commentarii* 1, 1, 10–12; 3, 11, 18–19; 3, 14, 10; *In Matthaeum commentariorum series* 38.

22 Thus, WALTHER VÖLKER, *Das Vollkommenheitsideal des Origenes: Eine Untersuchung zur Geschichte der Frömmigkeit und zu den Anfängen christlicher Mystik* (Beiträge zur Historischen Theologie, 7), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1931, 103–104; HENRI CROUZEL, *Origène et la “connaissance mystique”* (Museum Lessianum. Section théologique, 56), Bruges-Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1961, 529–530; MICHEL FÉDOU, *La Sagesse et le Monde: Essai sur la Christologie d’Origène* (Collection “Jésus et Jésus-Christ”, 64), Bruges-Paris: Desclée De Brouwer, 1994, 367–368; MARTENS, *Origen and Scripture* (n. 2) 183–184.

23 Thus, PATRICIA COX MILLER, “‘Pleasure of the Text, Text of Pleasure’: Eros and Language in Origen’s *Commentary on the Song of Songs*”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 54 (1986) 241–253, here 246–248; J. CHRISTOPHER KING, *Origen on the Song of Songs as the Spirit of Scripture: The Bridegroom’s Perfect Marriage Song*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, 16–18; RONALD E. HEINE, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 186; ALFONS FÜRST, “Einleitung”, in ID./HOLGER STRUTWOLF, *Origenes: Die Homilien und Fragmente zum Hohelied* (Origenes Werke mit deutscher Übersetzung 9/2), Berlin: de Gruyter, 2016, 1–59, here 15–17.

24 ORIGEN, *In Canticum fragmenta* 27.

1.4 Allegorical Interpretation

The analogy between understanding the world and understanding Scripture underlies the philological method of allegory, primarily employed by Origen—alongside typology, from which it is not always clearly distinguishable. Origen did not simply interpret the Bible allegorically because this was the prevailing method of philosophical interpretation of mythical texts in his time. Rather, he justified the applicability of this method to the Bible by referring to the underlying philosophical worldview: just as the visible world contains an invisible sense accessible to reason, so the visible text, the letter of the Bible, points to a spiritual sense contained within it; this approach can be seen in a *Philocalia* fragment from the *Homilies on Leviticus*:

He who created the visible also established the invisible (cf. Col 1:16; 2 Cor 4:18). And there is a kinship between the visible and the invisible. This kinship is such that “the invisible things of God from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made” (Rom 1:20). There is also a kinship between the visible in the Law and the Prophets and the invisible, yet spiritually discernible, in the Law and the Prophets. Now Scripture itself also consists, in a manner of speaking, of a body which one sees, a soul which is spiritually perceived and grasped in it, and a spirit corresponding to the types and shadows of heavenly things (cf. Hebr 8:5).²⁵

Just as creation is an image of the Creator in nature, and He can thus be recognised from it—as also stated at the end of the *Philocalia* fragment from the *Commentary on the Psalms*²⁶—so the history presented in the Bible is His image in history, a “historical image” (*eikôn historikê*, εἰκὼν ἱστορικὴ), as it is called in the *Commentary on John*.²⁷ The world and the Bible are visible images of God’s invisible reality. Both can, indeed must, therefore be approached using the same methodological instrumentarium to penetrate from the visible to the invisible:

[...] from the creation of the world one recognises that it was founded by divine wisdom according to such a plan that it should instruct us about invisible things through the things themselves and through individual examples from the visible world, leading us from the earthly to the

²⁵ *Philocalia* 1, 30. Cf. the corresponding Latin text *In Leviticum homiliae* 5, 1.

²⁶ *Philocalia* 2, 5 (quoted above in n. 16): “the author of existence is contemplated by means of the creation.”

²⁷ *In Iohannem commentarii* 10, 4, 17.

heavenly. These references to meaning are found not only in all created things, but also in the divine Scripture itself, which is written in such artful wisdom.²⁸

1.5 Philo of Alexandria

This analogising of Bible and world in respect of the methodological procedure applicable to both in order to grasp their meaning goes back, like so much else in Origen, to Philo of Alexandria. He understood the Bible—or more precisely the Torah—in accordance with a Jewish tradition as containing the whole world,²⁹ whereupon he conceived of the Greek translation, the Septuagint, as a universalisation of the Torah. According to Philo, the specific precepts of the Torah correspond to general cosmic principles, enabling him to correlate the world and the Bible: Moses begins the Torah with the account of creation “as if to indicate that both the world is in harmony with the Law, and the Law with the world.”³⁰ He also justified the procedure of allegory in a way strikingly reminiscent of Origen:

The interpretation of the sacred Scriptures proceeds in such a way that the meaning hidden in allegories is investigated. For the entire body of the Law books, according to these men, resembles a living being which has literal ordinances as its body, but an invisible meaning hidden in the words as its soul. It is particularly in this respect that the rational soul begins to gaze upon its kindred. Through the words, as through a mirror, it beholds the excessive beauty of the thoughts displayed in them; it unfolds the allegorical symbols and removes them, and brings the meaning of the words nakedly to light for those who need only to remember something in order to see the invisible through the visible.³¹

One will therefore not be wrong in assuming that Origen received strong impetus from Philo’s writings in this matter.

1.6 The Bible as Philosophy

In view of the parallelising of interpreting the world and the Bible, it will perhaps be less surprising that Origen understood the Bible itself as philosophy.

28 *In Canticum commentarii* 3, 13, 27–28. Cf. *In Iohannem commentarii* 13, 42, 279: Through the presence of God’s Word, the fields of the world shine as beautifully and clearly as the fields of Scripture.

29 Cf. *Midrasch Tanchuma* to Gen 1:1; *Talmud Bavli, Nedarim* 32a.

30 PHILO OF ALEXANDRIA, *De opificio mundi* 3. Cf. *De vita Mosis* 2, 25–52.

31 *De vita contemplativa* 78.

He did not describe himself as a “philosopher” throughout his life, nor did he apply the designation “Christian philosophy” to his thought. Both were ascribed to him only by later admirers who continued the paths he had blazed³²—and rightly so, given the connections described above. But he himself consistently distanced himself strongly from the terms “philosophy” and “philosopher.”³³ This was presumably because he understood himself—in distinction from heretical currents—to be decisively a “man of the Church” and identified himself as such,³⁴ and from this standpoint did not wish to be counted among the professional philosophers in the imperial philosophical schools. He could not, on the other hand, describe himself as a “theologian” —nor could his work be described as “theology”—because these terms also denoted thinking about God in philosophy, and therefore the term “theology” was not suitable as a criterion of distinction from “philosophy.”³⁵

Nevertheless, Origen’s thinking possessed strong philosophical traits.³⁶ Thus he described those Christians who devoted themselves to the task of pondering and explaining biblical doctrines because of their abilities as “lovers of wisdom,” *amatores sapientiae*,³⁷ which is nothing other than the Latin translation of the Greek word *philosophos* (φιλόσοφος), “philosopher.” And Origen himself, using a phrase coined by Clement of Alexandria,³⁸ called Christian teaching “true philosophy” (*vera philosophia*), “the true philosophy of Christ” (*vera philosophia Christi*) or “divine philosophy” (*divina philosophia*),³⁹ so he used the term “philosophy” quite readily to refer to his own work.

In this context also falls his description of the Bible itself as a kind of philosophy: the Book of Proverbs corresponds to ethics, the Book of Qoheleth to physics, and the Song of Songs to the discipline he called “epoptics,” “vision”

32 Cf. GREGORY THE WONDERWORKER, *Oratio prosphonetica ac panegyrica in Origenem* 75; 78; EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6, 3, 6.9; 6, 18, 3–4. GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Vita Gregorii Thaumaturgi* (Gregorii Nysseni Opera 10/1, 13), calls Origen “the leader of Christian philosophy.”

33 See HENRI CROUZEL, *Origène et la philosophie* (Théologie, 52), Paris: Aubier, 1962.

34 Cf., e.g., ORIGEN, *In Leviticum homiliae* 1, 1; *In Isaiam homiliae* 7, 3; *In Hieremiam homiliae* 9, 1; *In Lucam homiliae* 16, 6.

35 See JOHANNES ZACHHUBER, “Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity”, in EVA ANAGNOSTOU-LAOUTIDES/KENNETH PARRY (eds.), *Eastern Christianity and Late Antique Philosophy* (Texts and Studies in Eastern Christianity, 18), Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2020, 52–77.

36 See ALFONS FÜRST, *Origenes: Griechen und Christ in römischer Zeit* (Standorte in Antike und Christentum, 9), Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 2017, 28–37, 73–95.

37 ORIGEN, *De principiis* 1 praef. 3.

38 Cf. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stromata* 1, 21, 2; 5, 141, 4.

39 ORIGEN, *In Genesim homiliae* 11, 2; *In Canticum commentarii* prol. 3, 8.14.17.

or “contemplation.”⁴⁰ He thus followed the division of philosophy into individual disciplines as it was customary in Imperial Roman times.⁴¹ The most common was the Stoic division into ethics, physics, and logic. In Imperial times, however, logic was no longer considered an independent discipline but replaced by what Plato had called “dialectics,” namely the discussion of the intellectual principles of being. Not least due to increasing influences from the religious sphere on philosophy, “dialectics” has been called “epoptics” since the first century AD—a word derived from the Eleusinian Mysteries cult and already used by Plato to denote the goal of initiation into the mysteries of Eros and the return of the soul to perfect beauty.⁴² Plutarch claimed for the first time that Plato and Aristotle had called the central part of philosophy “epoptics,” equating Platonic dialectics with Aristotelian metaphysics and theology.⁴³ Until the end of antiquity, Platonic philosophy oriented itself towards the division into physics, ethics and “epoptics.”

It was the Alexandrian Clement who introduced this concept into Christian biblical thinking. He correlated the parts of philosophy with the Pentateuch: the historical and legislative texts correspond to ethics, the liturgical and priestly ones to physics, and the theological ones to “epoptics.”⁴⁴ Presumably inspired by Clement,⁴⁵ but certainly also drawing on this philosophical tradition independently, Origen developed this division into a systematic analogy between philosophy and Bible. Besides the above-mentioned sequence of the Solomonic books, he also discovered it in other parts of the Bible. Abraham, for instance, represents ethics because he led a life of obedience, Isaac represents physics because he dug deep wells, thus immersing himself in natural things, and Jacob with his vision of the ladder to heaven represents mysticism, which Origen also called “epoptics.”⁴⁶ Or another example: Abimelech embodies ethics, his wife natural philosophy, and his maidservants “the various and manifold kinds of dialectics corresponding to the various schools;”⁴⁷ and again another version: Abimelech and his two companions Ahusat and Pichol “represent, in my opinion, the entire

⁴⁰ *In Canticum commentarii* prol. 3, 1. Cf. *In Lamentationes fragmenta* 14.

⁴¹ See PIERRE HADOT, “Les divisions des parties de la philosophie dans l’Antiquité”, *Museum Helveticum* 36 (1979) 218–231; German translation: “Die Einteilung der Philosophie im Altertum”, *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 36 (1982) 422–444.

⁴² Cf. PLATO, *Symposium* 210 a 1; *Phaedrus* 250 c 4.

⁴³ PLUTARCH, *De Iside et Osiride* 77, 382 d.

⁴⁴ Cf. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stromata* 1, 176, 1–3.

⁴⁵ Cf. ORIGEN, *Selecta in Psalmos* 76, 21 (III p. 109 PITRA). This text comes very close to the text of Clement.

⁴⁶ Cf. *In Canticum commentarii* prol. 3, 17–21.

⁴⁷ *In Genesim homiliae* 6, 2–3.

philosophy, divided into three parts among them, logic, physics, and ethics.”⁴⁸ What Origen asserts with these variable assignments is a structural correspondence between the mode of thought of philosophy and the mode of thought of the Bible. Underlying this correspondence is reason, which is one and the same and common to both, as emerges from the fragment in the *Philocalia* discussed above. Being and Scripture are both products of the same, in Origen’s eyes divine, reason, and can therefore both be grasped by the same human reason. Therefore, Origen’s mode of thought can be described as “biblical philosophy” or “philosophical exegesis.”⁴⁹

2. Methodology of Exegesis

This correlation of philosophy and the Bible had the consequence that Origen, in the concrete practice of his biblical exegesis, drew upon all the methods and procedures used in his time for the explanation of texts. Since my focus in this contribution is more strongly on hermeneutics than on methodology, I will only give a few brief sketches.

2.1 Biblical Philology

Origen took from the imperial-era school philology the techniques of textual explanation that had been developed in Alexandrian philology for the explanation of Homer’s epics.⁵⁰ He applied the method of textual criticism very conservatively and without conjectural emendations, as can be seen in his enormous *Hexapla*, a synopsis of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament with several Greek translations.⁵¹ To explain words and concepts, he made use of pagan lexicons and availed himself of the widely practised etymology, for which he drew upon biblical *Onomastica*. In the explanation of facts and events, customs and traditions, he treated questions of chronology, topography, geography, prosopography, and ethnography. Furthermore, he dealt with the grammar and rhetoric of a text, its metrics and its style. To this was added the appreciation of the content and its evaluation in aesthetic and moral respects. Examples of all these procedures are found in abundance in the writings of

48 *In Genesim homiliae* 14, 3. Cf. *In Exodum homiliae* 3, 3; *In Lucam fragmenta* 218.

49 See ALFONS FÜRST, “Origenes und der Ursprung der philosophischen Bibelauslegung”, in MARTINA ROESNER (ed.), *Philosophische Schriftauslegung: Geschichte eines ungewöhnlichen Programms* (Adamantiana, 25), Münster: Aschendorff, 2022, 15–35.

50 For this see, e.g., FRANCESCA SCHIRONI, *The Best of the Grammarians: Aristarchus of Samothrace on the Iliad*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2018.

51 See, e.g., ALISON SALVESEN (ed.), *Origen’s Hexapla and Fragments* (Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum, 58), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1988 (2020).

Origen.⁵² His biblical interpretation is thus characterised by a procedure organised in methodical steps and is controllable.

In the prefaces to his commentaries, Origen explicitly and programmatically placed his exegesis within this tradition of philological interpretation.⁵³ As was customary in pagan commentaries of the Roman Imperial period and late antiquity, he dealt initially with the questions to be discussed before the joint reading and interpretation of a text.⁵⁴ The *Sitz im Leben* of this procedure in the school context becomes clearly graspable here. Such prolegomena included the title of the text to be interpreted, its main theme (for example, “love” in the Song of Songs and “Jesus” in the Gospel of John), its genre (the Song of Songs as a dramatically shaped wedding song, and the Gospel of John as a *Protreptikos* urging belief in Jesus), and its intention.⁵⁵ Not only with this catalogue of topics to be treated in the introduction to a commentary, but also with some of his answers—especially when he understood the Gospel of John as a *Protreptikos*—did Origen place his biblical exegesis in a decidedly philosophical context and follow the scientific methodological standards of his time.

For the methodically conducted interpretation of biblical texts, Origen drew upon a remarkably extensive amount of general knowledge from all academic disciplines insofar as it served the understanding of the texts. His writings contain a plethora of scholarly information from mathematics and geometry, physics and meteorology, mineralogy and zoology, geography and music, astronomy and astrology, and not least from medicine, to which numerous connections could be traced via metaphors of healing and salvation, and via the image of Christ as physician. For all this he made extensive use of ancient Greek literature, especially philosophical writings and specialist literature, including lexicons and handbooks.⁵⁶

2.2 Biblical Philosophy

Alongside these philological techniques, Origen also applied a specifically philosophical procedure to the explanation of biblical texts, namely the analysis of concepts. A central form of philosophical work consists in pondering the

52 Comprehensively described by NEUSCHÄFER, *Origenes als Philologe* (n. 2) 85–285. See also MARTENS, *Origen and Scripture* (n. 2) 41–66.

53 See MATTHIAS SKEB, *Exegese und Lebensform: Die Proömien der antiken griechischen Bibelkommentare* (Clavis Commentariorum Antiquitatis et Medii Aevi, 5), Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007, 137–278.

54 Cf. ORIGEN, *In Iohannem commentarii* 1, 15, 88; *In Canticum commentarii* prol. 1, 8.

55 Cf. *In Iohannem commentarii* 1, 3, 18; 1, 15, 27–31; 1, 15, 88; *In Canticum commentarii* prol. 1, 8.

56 See FÜRST, *Origenes: Griechen und Christ* (n. 36) 58–69.

meaning of concepts, as Plato demonstrated decisively in his dialogues. Aristotle and the Stoics developed sophisticated methods of argumentation that extended not only to concepts but also to sentences and statements. Origen was familiar with Aristotelian and Stoic conceptual and propositional logic and used it in interpreting biblical texts.⁵⁷ He possessed a highly developed sense for the fact that the same words can have different meanings in different contexts and had recourse to the ancient theory of homonymy, for which he once cited Aristotle's classic definition: "Things are called homonymous when they share only the name in common, while the essence belonging to the name is different."⁵⁸ Even Justin and Clement before him had perceived the ambiguity of concepts as a characteristic of biblical language,⁵⁹ which Origen made a starting point for his analysis of the concepts used in the Bible:

Therefore the reader of Holy Scripture must carefully observe that the Scripture does not consistently speak of the same things with the same expressions. Sometimes it does this in the form of homonymy, sometimes in the form of trope (i.e. transferred figures of speech), and sometimes also because the context requires that one expression be used differently in certain places than in others. If we carefully observe this, we shall avoid many errors and false interpretations.⁶⁰

At not a few places in his homilies and commentaries Origen therefore thought extensively about individual words and concepts, often engaging in considerations that extended far beyond the biblical text. So, in a longer fragment in the *Philocalia* from the *Commentary on Romans*, he lists the many meanings that the word "law" (*nómos*, νόμος) can have⁶¹ and examines at each place in the commentary its precise meaning.⁶² The emphasised phrase *vir unus*, "one man" at the beginning of the First Book of Samuel (1 Kings 1:1) prompted

57 See RÓBERT SOMOS, *Logic and Argumentation in Origen* (Adamantina, 7), Münster: Aschendorff, 2015.

58 ARISTOTLE, *Categoriae* 1 a 1–2, quoted by ORIGEN, *In Hieremiam homiliae* 20(19), 1.

59 Cf. JUSTIN MARTYR, *Dialogus cum Tryphone* 34, 1; CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stromata* 8, 22.

60 *Philocalia* 9, 3 = ORIGEN, *In Epistulam ad Romanos fragmenta* to Rom 7:7. Cf. *Philocalia* 14, 1–2 = ORIGEN, *In Genesim fragmenta* D 9 METZLER.

61 *Philocalia* 9, 1–2. Cf. *In Epistulam ad Romanos commentarii* 3, 4, 6; 6, 12, 1; *In Epistulam ad Romanos fragmenta* 5, 6 (p. 164 SCHERER); *In Epistulam ad Romanos fragmenta* 10 RAMSBOTHAM. See MARGUERITE HARL, "Origène et la sémantique du langage biblique", *Vigiliae Christianae* 26 (1972) 161–187.

62 Cf., e.g., *In Epistulam ad Romanos commentarii* 3, 3, 1; 3, 4, 3. All evidence is gathered in RIEMER ROUKEMA, *The Diversity of Laws in Origen's Commentary on Romans*, Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1988, 18–77.

him to a detailed presentation of his metaphysics and ethics of unity.⁶³ The prime example of this kind of philosophical exegesis is the conceptual dihaereses and assignments that Origen made in the first two books of the *Commentary on John* to explain the concepts “beginning/origin” (*archê*, ἀρχή), “word” (*lógos*, λόγος), “God” (*theós*, θεός), “life” (*zôê*, ζωή), “light” (*phôs*, φῶς), and “truth” (*alêtheia*, ἀλήθεια).⁶⁴

These philosophical procedures finally had the opposite effect: through this kind of biblical interpretation, Origen made a contribution to the philosophical questions of his time.⁶⁵ The problems of “origin” and “unity” belonged to the central themes of philosophy in the Imperial period, especially Platonism. With his philosophical exegesis, Origen created a philosophy *sui generis*, which worked with all available philological and philosophical means, but whose basis and centre was the Bible.

3. Ideal of Education and Theory of Science

Origen also laid the programmatic foundations for the connection between philosophy and the Bible by devising a concept of education and a theory of science. His interpretation of the Bible included corresponding instruction, which he practised in his schools in Alexandria and Caesarea. The practical side of Origen’s biblical philosophy became graspable in the curriculum of these schools and in programmatic considerations.

3.1 Educational Programme

Origen had been active in Alexandria as a Christian philosophical teacher from around AD 210. Traditionally, this school in Alexandria is referred to as the “catechetical school,”⁶⁶ but it was not an ecclesiastical institution for the instruction of catechumens within the framework of pre-baptismal instruction (the catechumenate) or even for the training of church catechists.⁶⁷ Rather, it

63 *In libros Regnorum homiliae* lat. 4. See ALFONS FÜRST, “Einleitung”, in ID., *Origenes: Die Homilien zum Ersten Buch Samuel* (Origenes Werke mit deutscher Übersetzung, 7), Berlin et al.: de Gruyter, 2014, 1–113, here 31–49.

64 See ALFONS FÜRST, “Merkmale philosophischer Exegese im Johanneskommentar des Origenes”, in JÖRG FREY/TOBIAS NICKLAS (eds.), *Das Johannesevangelium in antik-christlicher Rezeption* (History of Biblical Exegesis, 7), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2024, 85–106, esp. 94–98.

65 See FÜRST, *ibid.*, 98–104.

66 EUSEBIUS OF CAESAREA, *Historia ecclesiastica* 6, 3, 3.

67 For this interpretation, see ATTILA JAKAB, *Ecclesia alexandrina: Évolution sociale et institutionnelle du christianisme alexandrin (II^e et III^e siècles)*, Bern et al.: Peter Lang, 2001 (2004), 97–104; DIETMAR WYRWA, “Religiöses Lernen im zweiten Jahrhundert und die Anfänge der alexandrinischen Katechetenschule”, in BEATE EGO/HELMUT

was a school in the style of pagan philosophical schools—dating back to Origen’s predecessors in Alexandria, Pantaenus and Clement—where Origen taught Christian philosophy in graded stages with foundational courses and main courses.⁶⁸ In Caesarea, where he went in AD 232/233, Origen continued this teaching activity by founding a new school, which can rightly be considered the first Christian college. We know the study programme of this school from a unique text. At the end of his studies in Caesarea, a later famous bishop, Gregory the Wonderworker from the Roman province of Pontus (in northern Asia Minor), delivered a panegyric thanksgiving address in AD 238 to his teacher Origen. In this address he described how his own life path had led him in his youth to Origen in Caesarea, praised him in the highest terms as a model example of a philosophical teacher who had already almost reached the Christian and Platonic life goal of assimilation to God,⁶⁹ and described the structure and subjects of the studies in detail.

In accordance with the customary division of philosophical disciplines since Hellenistic times (see above), there were initially courses in dialectics, physics, ethics, and theology.⁷⁰ In ancient philosophical understanding, the subject “theology” meant “the doctrine of God” in the sense of the doctrine of the fundamental principles of being. In this subject, all the writings of Greek poets and philosophers were studied in the school of Origen in Caesarea.⁷¹ Thus the study programme in Caesarea contained much philosophy, reflecting the importance that Origen attached to a solid philosophical education. This training in thought, he stated in the *Homilies on Exodus*, is essential for all further understanding; in particular, it prepares one for the knowledge of the Divine.⁷² Accordingly, these foundational courses were followed by main

MERKEL (eds.), *Religiöses Lernen in der biblischen, frühjüdischen und frühchristlichen Überlieferung* (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 180), Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005, 271–305; CHRISTOPH MARKSCHIES, *Kaiserzeitliche christliche Theologie und ihre Institutionen: Prolegomena zu einer Geschichte der antiken christlichen Theologie*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007, 97–102.

68 See CLEMENS SCHOLTEN, “Die alexandrinische Katechetenschule”, *Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum* 38 (1995) 16–37; ALAIN LE BOULLUEC, “Die ‘Schule’ von Alexandrien”, in LUCE PIETRI (ed.), *Die Geschichte des Christentums, Vol. 1: Die Zeit des Anfangs (bis 250)*, Freiburg et al.: Herder, 2003, 576–621, esp. 607–608; ALFONS FÜRST, *Christentum als Intellektuellen-Religion: Die Anfänge des Christentums in Alexandria* (Stuttgarter Bibelstudien, 213), Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2007, 39–40, 47–48, 60–62.

69 Cf. GREGORY THE WONDERWORKER, *Oratio prosphonetica ac panegyrica in Origenem* 10; 13.

70 Cf. *ibid.*, 93–108, 109–114, 115–149, 150–183.

71 Cf. *ibid.*, 151–153.

72 Cf. ORIGEN, *In Exodum homiliae* 2, 2.

courses in which the interpretation of the Bible was on the syllabus.⁷³ Thus the study at the Christian college in Caesarea culminated in exegesis, prepared by thorough philosophical studies. Philosophy and Bible are here assigned to each other in graded fashion, so that the study of philosophy is the prerequisite for the study of the Bible.

3.2 Educational Ideal and Theory of Science

This curriculum expresses Origen's Christian concept of education. After Gregory had returned to his homeland, Origen wrote to him a letter urging him to put what he had learned in his studies into appropriate professional practice. Gregory should, according to Origen, not become a lawyer—which he originally intended—nor a professional philosopher in the sense of pagan philosophy (which Origen's studies had apparently qualified him for). Rather, he should devote his talent and skill entirely to Christianity, which Origen describes in the following way:

But I always wished you to apply the whole strength of your talent, so far as the goal is concerned, to Christianity. As regards the procedure, however, I wished you to take from the philosophy of the Greeks what serves as general education or propaedeutics for Christianity, and from geometry and astronomy what is useful for explaining the Holy Scriptures. Thus, just as the disciples of the philosophers say of geometry and music, of grammar and rhetoric, and of astronomy, that they are auxiliaries of philosophy, so we may say the same of philosophy itself in relation to Christianity.⁷⁴

With this assignment of subjects from ancient general education and philosophy as propaedeutics for Christianity, specifically for the interpretation of the Bible, Origen offers a Christian educational concept.⁷⁵ Behind this lies a philosophical theory of science originating with Plato and shaped by Philo. Ancient Greece and Rome knew a circle of subjects, which they called *enkýklios paideía* (ἐγκύκλιος παιδεία) in Greek and *artes liberales* in Latin, constituting

73 Cf. GREGORY THE WONDERWORKER, *Oratio prosphonetica ac panegyrica in Origenem* 173–178.

74 ORIGEN, *Epistula ad Gregorium* 1. Cf. *Contra Celsum* 3, 58; 6, 13–14.

75 See ALFONS FÜRST, "Einleitung", in ID., *Origenes: Briefe* (Origenes Werke mit deutscher Übersetzung, 25), Berlin/Boston: de Gruyter, 2025, 1–151, here 76–85. MARTENS, *Origen and Scripture* (n. 2) 25–40, also refers to this text (*ibid.*, 28–33) but in contrast to Origen's emphasis on all subjects of the common education and especially on philosophy, he reduces all to philology and depicts Origen as a philologist.

“common general education” that people in socially privileged and correspondingly affluent circumstances could acquire.⁷⁶ These subjects of general education were not accorded intrinsic value by ancient philosophers but were regarded as preparation for higher life goals. So Plato considered the subjects arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music⁷⁷ “as preliminary training for dialectics.”⁷⁸ For the Stoic Chrysippus, the subjects of general education were “occupations” leading to virtue.⁷⁹ In Platonism in the Roman Imperial period the same applied: Plutarch, Alcinous, and Maximus of Tyre emphasised the primacy of philosophy over the generally formative subjects.⁸⁰ Latin philosophers such as the Academician Cicero and the Stoic Seneca adopted this ranking.⁸¹ With his educational concept Origen followed this ancient assignment of sciences to philosophy but transformed it into a Christian theory of science by assigning both to Christianity or exegesis as propaedeutic subjects.

This concept was not his invention. Rather, he drew upon an Alexandrian tradition and specifically Philo, who in a treatise entitled *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies* assigned the general sciences and ancient philosophy to “wisdom” under which he understood the knowledge stemming from the Jewish Bible:

And indeed, just as the common studies serve the acquisition of philosophy, so philosophy contributes to the possession of wisdom. [...] So, just as general education is the servant of philosophy, so philosophy also may well be the servant of wisdom.⁸²

Philo expressed himself often in this vein.⁸³ The metaphor of the “servant” for the subordination of the sciences to philosophy and the latter to biblical

76 See HENRI-IRÉNÉE MARROU, *Geschichte der Erziehung im klassischen Altertum*, Freiburg/München: Alber, 1957, 259–273; ILSETRAUT HADOT, *Arts libéraux et philosophie dans la pensée antique: Contribution à l'histoire de l'éducation et de la culture dans l'Antiquité*, Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1984; Librarie Vrin 2005 (revue et augmenté), 263–293; HARALD FUCHS, “Enkyklios Paideia”, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 5 (1962) 365–398; GEORG RECHENAUER, “Enkyklios Paideia”, *Historisches Wörterbuch der Rhetorik* 2 (1994) 1160–1185.

77 These subjects in PLATO, *Protagoras* 318 e; *Theaetetus* 145 a; *Politeia* 7, 524 d–531 c.

78 *Politeia* 7, 536 d, where Plato only mentions arithmetic and geometry.

79 Cf. CHRYSIPPUS, *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 3, 294. Cf. also *ibid.*, 3, 136 and 3, 738.

80 Cf. PLUTARCH, *De liberis educandis* 10, 7 c; ALCINOUS, *Didascalicus* 28, 4; MAXIMUS OF TYRE, *Dissertationes* 37, 3.

81 Cf. CICERO, *De oratore* 3, 127; SENECA, *Epistulae morales ad Lucilium* 88, 20.

82 PHILO, *De congressu eruditionis gratia* 79. Cf. *ibid.*, 145.

83 See the evidence gathered by HADOT, *Arts libéraux et philosophie* (n. 76) 282–287; FUCHS, “Enkyklios Paideia” (n. 76) 389–390.

exegesis originates from ancient doxography. In this, the subjects of general education were equated with the maids of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, for instance by Plutarch: “Just as the suitors, unable to approach Penelope herself, consort with her maids, so those who cannot reach philosophy occupy themselves with the other educational subjects, which are useless.”⁸⁴ With Philo, the speech about philosophy as “servant of wisdom” is determined by the fact that he commented on Gen 16:2, in which Sarah sends Hagar, Abraham’s concubine and Egyptian maidservant, to conceive children by him—Sarah being a figure of virtue—by associating Hagar with general education:

For we are not yet able to receive the offspring of virtue unless we first consort with her maidservant. But the maidservant of wisdom is the general liberal education learned in the propaedeutic subjects. Just as before the gate of houses there is the door and before cities there are suburbs through which one enters into them, so also do the general sciences lie before virtue.⁸⁵

Following Philo, Clement of Alexandria adopted this mode of speech, designating philosophy as a “helper,” “associate,” and “preparation” for “true knowledge.”⁸⁶ Christians should, according to Clement, acquire from the Greek sciences what is useful, then return home to “true philosophy.”⁸⁷ Origen drew upon this Alexandrian tradition and was particularly influenced by Philo, who in his writing *On Mating with the Preliminary Studies* listed the same five subjects as Origen in his letter to Gregory: grammar, geometry, astronomy, rhetoric, and music; both omit dialectics and arithmetic from the classical seven subjects.⁸⁸

In the letter to Gregory, Origen highlighted two subjects that Gregory also programmatically named for natural science in his oration of thanksgiving: geometry and astronomy.⁸⁹ These two subjects played a special role in the Platonic educational programme: they “have a pivotal role between physics and what comes after,” by “their abstract properties” training the soul to turn

84 PLUTARCH, *De liberis educandis* 10, 7 d. Further evidence in *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta* 1, 350.

85 PHILO, *De congressu eruditionis gratia* 9–10. Cf. *De fuga et inuentione* 183; *De ebrietate* 49.

86 CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *Stromata* 1, 28, 1; 1, 32, 4; 1, 99, 1; 6, 94, 2. Cf. *ibid.*, 1, 30, 1; 6, 91, 1; 6, 93, 1.

87 *Ibid.*, 6, 89, 2–3. See HADOT, *Arts libéraux et philosophie* (n. 76) 287–289; FUCHS, “Enkyklios Paideia” (n. 76) 382. 390.

88 Cf. PHILO, *De congressu eruditionis gratia* 11.

89 Cf. ORIGEN, *Epistula ad Gregorium* 1; GREGORY THE WONDERWORKER, *Oratio prosphonetica ac panegyrica in Origenem* 113.

away from the world perceived through the senses and orient itself upwards.⁹⁰ For this reason, in the Platonic tradition the subjects geometry (sometimes together with arithmetic, in which abstract thinking not oriented towards the sensible is also practised) and astronomy are often mentioned together, already by Plato himself:

Furthermore, there are now three branches of learning for free men; and these are reckoning and numbers (arithmetic), the art of measuring line, surface, and body (geometry), and the third concerns itself with the revolutions of the stars, describing the paths they follow in their natural order in relation to one another (astronomy).⁹¹

In Platonic philosophy in the Roman Imperial period these subjects were considered essential prerequisites for the study of Plato's works.⁹² Against this background, it should not be accidental that both Gregory and Origen specifically highlighted these two subjects.

Origen did not apply the designation of Hagar as "servant" to philosophy but drew upon other biblical passages to justify the relationship between Christianity and the sciences and philosophy that he advocated.⁹³ So he saw "perhaps," as he expressed himself in his typically tentative style, in the "silver and golden vessels and clothing" which the Israelites took out of Egypt at God's command in the exodus (Ex 11:2; 12:35–36) and out of which they "fashioned objects for worship" a picture of the use of ancient pagan education in Christianity.⁹⁴ Perhaps he had been inspired to this interpretation once again by Philo, who had interpreted the "baggage" with which the Israelites were to leave Egypt according to Gen 15:14 as "education."⁹⁵ However, the interpretation of the passages from the Book of Exodus mentioned above is likely to originate from Origen.⁹⁶ More widespread than the image of the

90 CLEMENS SCHOLTEN, "Psychagogischer Unterricht bei Origenes: Ein Ansatz zum Verständnis des 'Sitzes im Leben' von frühchristlichen theologischen Texten", in MANFRED HUTTER/WASSILIOS KLEIN/ULRICH VOLLMER (eds.), *Hairesis: Festschrift für Karl Hoheisel* (Jahrbuch für Antike und Christentum. Ergänzungsband, 34), Münster: Aschendorff, 2002, 261–280, here 266. See FUCHS, "Enkyklios Paideia" (n. 76) 393–394.

91 PLATO, *Nomoi* 7, 817 e.

92 Cf. DIOGENES LAËRTIUS, *Vitae philosophorum* 4, 10. 36.

93 See FÜRST, *Origenes: Briefe* (n. 75) 85–88.

94 ORIGEN, *Epistula ad Gregorium* 2.

95 PHILO, *Quis rerum divinarum heres sit* 274.

96 See PIER F. BEATRICE, "The Treasures of the Egyptians: A Chapter in the History of Patristic Exegesis and Late Antique Culture", in FRANCES M. YOUNG (ed.), *Studia Patristica XXXIX: Papers presented at the Fourteenth International Conference on Patristic*

golden and silver vessels of the Egyptians, however, was the metaphor of the beautiful foreign woman whose hair and nails an Israelite must first cut off before he can take her as his wife (Deut 21:10–13). Origen applied this metaphor to what “we find good and sensible said by our enemies” or what we “read wisely and prudently said,” which the Christians must “purify and remove from the knowledge that exists among them and cut off everything that is dead and worthless,” before they can use it for themselves.⁹⁷

4. Origen's Achievements

Building on philosophical, especially Platonic, and Jewish-Christian Alexandrian traditions, Origen devised a Christian theory of science in which the Bible and philosophy were inextricably linked. The specific way in which this took place had an ambivalent effect. On the one hand, Origen ascribed essential value to the subjects of general education, the sciences, and philosophy for Christian education and specifically biblical interpretation. Thus he integrated all these subjects into the Christian educational canon. For its highest level, the interpretation of the Bible, all available knowledge should be drawn upon.⁹⁸ This scientific concept contributed over the centuries to the fact that Christians not only read the Bible but also engaged with all sciences and philosophical worldviews because without these the Bible could not be understood. Conversely, this had the effect *à la longue durée* that ancient educational knowledge was preserved in Christianity and did not disappear — a cultural development whose significance cannot be overestimated. Although there were stronger reservations about “worldly” education in Christianity in the Latin West,⁹⁹ Latin theologians nevertheless wrote comprehensive accounts of specialist subjects, notably Augustine (who only completed the books on grammar and music, but elaborated a Christian doctrine of science in *De doctrina christiana*), Cassiodorus in the *Institutiones*, and Isidore of Seville in the *Etymologiae*.¹⁰⁰ Christian education, as propagated by Origen, was thus based not only on the Bible but also on all “worldly” sciences and especially philosophy.

On the other hand, the subjects science and philosophy were clearly

Studies held in Oxford 2003, Leuven/Paris/Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2006, 159–183.

97 ORIGEN, *In Leviticum homiliae* 7, 6. For this metaphor in medieval times, see HENRI DE LUBAC, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'Écriture*, Vol. 1 (Théologie, 41/1), Paris: Aubier, 1959, 290–304.

98 Cf. ORIGEN, *In Genesim homiliae* 11, 2; *Contra Celsum* 3, 58.

99 See HARALD FUCHS, “Bildung”, *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* 2 (1954) 346–362, here 357–359.

100 See HADOT, *Arts libéraux et philosophie* (n. 76) 101–214; FUCHS, “Enkyklios Paideia” (n. 76) 391–396; RECHENAUER, “Enkyklios Paideia” (n. 76) 1178–1179.

subordinate in this concept to the educational goal formulated by Origen, namely biblical exegesis. Even though he did not use the metaphor of philosophy as “servant”, originating from ancient traditions and specifically Philo, this ranking was inherent in his theory of science and led over the centuries to the Christian subordination of philosophy as “handmaid of theology” (*ancilla theologiae*), as it came to be called in the Middle Ages. Philosophy only freed itself from this subordination in modern times and established itself as an independent discipline. However, philosophy remained an integral part of theological studies, which also developed as an independent discipline. Origen laid the foundations for this with his biblical hermeneutics, his educational programme, and his theory of science.

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