The Relationship between the Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible in Origen's Exegesis:

The Example of Is 7:14

Christos Karakolis*

Origen has unquestionably been one of the most important and influential exegetes of the ancient Church.[1] He has also been the most productive one.[2] Apart from his peculiar allegorical method of exegesis, for which he is best known,[3] Origen produced also a pioneering philological-critical work on the Bible, thus following the great Alexandrian philological tradition.[4] He considered the biblical text not only as a field for allegorical interpretation and theological argumentation, but first of all as a literary product that must be treated as such, in order to be correctly understood.

A very important aspect of Origen's philological work on the Bible is his particular understanding of the relationship between the Greek and the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. The aim

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* University of Athens, Faculty of Theology

1) for instance D. Farkasfalvy, *Inspiration and Interpretation: A Theological Introduction to Sacred Scripture* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 124.

2) M. Hale Williams, *The Monk and the Book: Jerome and the Making of Christian Scholarship* (Chicago: University Press, 2006), 57.

3) among others the balanced presentation of Origen's allegorical method by F. Young, "Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis," A. J. Hauser and D. F. Watson, ed., *A History of Biblical Interpretation 1: The Ancient Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 334ff.

4) J. van Seters, *The Edited Bible: The Curious History of the "Editor" in Biblical Criticism* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), 43.

of the present paper is to examine this very aspect. In the first part of my paper I will present Origen's theoretical principles regarding the relationship between the two texts. In the second part I will analyze the example of Is 7:14 in order to demonstrate Origen's exegetical method in a case of an important semantic differentiation between the Hebrew text and the Septuagint.[5]

I

Contrary to many Christian authors of his time Origen believed that the Hebrew text is at least as important as its most correct Greek translation.[6] Of course in his exegesis of the Old Testament Origen has usually avoided quoting the Hebrew Bible since the large majority of his audience did not speak any Hebrew. Nevertheless, he attributed such great importance to the Hebrew Bible, that he used the first two columns of his Hexapla to contain the Hebrew biblical text in Hebrew and Greek script, so that a Greek-speaking reader would also be able to access and even pronounce the Hebrew text in order to be able to follow the relevant exegetical discussion to some extent.[7]

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5) Origen's locus classicus on the importance of the Hebrew bible and language in correctly perceiving scriptural meaning is his *Epistula ad Africanum* (PG11:49ff), in which he focuses upon the content of the book of Susanna. However, from a theological point of view Is 7:14 is evidently a much more important text. Therefore, the analysis of Origen's understanding of this passage can shed more light also upon his methodological principles and practice with regard to the parallel use of the Hebrew and the Greek Bible.

6) Cf. the study of M. J. Martin, "Origen's Theory of Language and the First Two Columns of the Hexapla," *HTR* 97 (2004), 99-106, on this matter.

7) For the rationale of the inclusion of the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew text in the second column of the Hexapla see Martin, "Theory," 104-105; cf. also T. M. Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: University Press, 2013), 144.

Origen seems to have learned the Hebrew language as an adult,
with great difficulty at that, in order to be able to understand
the Bible properly, although he never reached proficiency in the
knowledge of the Hebrew language.[8] However, even reaching a
moderate level of knowledge of Hebrew gave Origen an enormous
exegetical advantage, as it was a quite unusual qualification of
Christian authors at that time.[9]

On the other hand, Origen respected the Septuagint as the
text of the church and considered it to be a more or less reliable
translation[10] and a legitimate base-text for interpreting the Old
Testament. However, there seems to be no explicit theory in his
writings about the uniqueness of the Septuagint in God's holy
plan, or even the slightest reference to the legend of its composition
on the basis of the Letter of Aristeas,[11] as is the case in many
other Greek Church Fathers[12] who have based their Old
Testament exegesis exclusively upon the Septuagint. Origen does
not seem to have believed that the translation of the Septuagint
was inspired in any special way, compared to the other Greek
translations of his time.[13] He just believed that it was the best
translation of an inspired text. On the other hand, according to
Origen it was only appropriate to attribute inspiration to the true

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8) Cf. B. Neuschäfer, Origenes als Philologe (vol.1; Basel: Reinhardt, 1987), 95.
9) Cf. the relevant witness of Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.16.1. Jerome is the example
par excellence of an ancient Christian theologian, who cared enough to learn and
study the original language of the Old Testament, cf. C. A. Hall, *Reading Scripture
with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity Press, 1998), 110.
10) Cf. Origen's text-critical remarks on the problems of the Septuagint's manuscript
tradition in his *Comm. Matt.* 15:14.
11) For more information on Origen's position with regard to the Septuagint's authority
see the analysis of Law, *Septuagint*, 144-145.
12) Cf. among others H. S. J. Thackeray, *The Letter of Aristeas* (Eugene, OR: Wipf
& Stock, 2003=1918), xvi-xviii.
13) This explains why Origen very often corrected the Septuagint on the basis of
the witness of the Hebrew text and the other Greek translations, cf. for instance
his *Comm. Rom.* 13.

content and meaning of the Old Testament's spirit in general, and not to a specific translation of it. This would mean that any translation of the Hebrew text, however faithful it might be, remained for Origen simply an effort to approach the meaning of the original text with a greater or lesser degree of success.[14]

Origen did not only read the Septuagint in the light of the Hebrew Bible, but he also compared it to the other Greek translations that were available to him, namely the eponymous translations of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion.[15] Having a variety of Greek translations at his disposal was so important to Origen, that he sought them out anywhere he could. According to his student Eusebius, he even found one Greek translation after an extensive search in a large jar in Jericho, as well as one more in Nicopolis.[16] Origen even cites translations of unknown origin in parts of his Hexapla.[17] Of course, Origen did not always compare the Hebrew text to the various Greek translations that he possessed. In case he deemed a Septuagint rendering as reliable he limited his exegetical endeavours to this text.[18] On the other hand, it is obvious that he used the Hebrew text the other Greek translations, as well as a plethora of manuscripts trying to solve even minor problems he detected in the text of the Septuagint.[19]

Occasionally Origen ascertained that the Septuagint translated in a wrong way or in a way that obscured the original meaning,

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14) Origen, *Comm. Matt.*15:14, explicitly states that one of the reasons for compiling his Hexapla was to correct the Septuagint according to the Hebrew original; cf. the relevant analysis of Law, *Septuagint*, 144.

15) Cf. Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 13.26.161; *Fr. Lam.* 3.

16) Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* 6.16.2-3.

17) In case one or two translations of uknown origin are additionally cited in the Hexapla the work is called the *Heptapla or the Octapla respectively*, cf. among others S. Sipilä, "Max Leopold Margolis and the Origenic Recension in Joshua," in A. Salvesen (ed.), *Origen's Hexapla and Fragments* (Texteund Studien zum antiken Judentum 58; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1998), 16-18.

18) Cf. Origen, *Comm. Jo.* 6.6.40.

19) Cf. Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 15.5; 16.5.

instead of making it clear. In such cases he found himself in doubt
about which of the Greek translations he should choose.[20)]
Therefore he sometimes used to cite all known translations and
comment on them, thus trying to find the most successful one,
even if he had to prioritize the Hebrew text or other translations
to the Septuagint.[21)] Furthermore, Origen occasionally cited Hebrew
words in Greek script attempting to correct the Septuagint[22)] or
even to verify its renderings.[23)] He also seems to have had no
difficulty whatsoever in referring to Jewish exegetical opinions[24)]
being aware that the Jews were in a much better position to under-
stand the grammatical and historical meaning of the original text
of the Old Testament.

Even in cases of very small differences between the Septuagint
and the Hebrew text Origen would compare the Septuagint render-
ing to the ones of the other Greek translations in order to choose
the one closer to the original.[25)] He would also try to explain
the difference of the Septuagint rendering, concluding either that
there is a theological reason for it or that the Septuagint has simply
followed a different vorlage from the one at his disposal.[26)]

In the opinion of Origen a single manuscript of the Septuagint
was not enough as a base-text for understanding and interpreting
the Bible correctly because he held no individual manuscript as
being absolutely reliable. Therefore, he tried to collect or at least
study as many manuscripts of the Septuagint as possible, in order
to end up with a reliable text, as he knew only too well that even
small differences from one manuscript to another could bear im-
portant theological implications.

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20) Cf. *Origen, Comm. Matt.* 16.16.
21) Cf. Origen, *Hom. Jer.* 16.10; *Selecta in Psalmos* (PG 12: 1133); ibid. 1420; *Selecta in Ezechielem* (PG 13:796).
22) Cf. Origen, *Selecta in Psalmos* (PG 12: 1057-1060); ibid. 1104.
23) Cf. Origen, *Adnot. Deut.*17.36; *Selecta in Psalmos* (PG 12:1269).
24) Cf. Origen, *Selecta in Genesim* (PG 12:101); *Selectai n Ezechielem* (PG 13: 800-801).
25) Cf. *Selecta in Genesim* (PG 12:141).
26) Cf. Origen, *Comm. Matt.* 15.14.

On the other hand, Origen was also aware of the fact that all philological and exegetical problems due to dissonances among various manuscripts and translations could not always be definitively resolved. In such cases he accepted the insufficiencies of his philological and exegetical method contending himself with presenting the various exegetical options at hand, and allowing his audience to choose the most correct one.[27] Thus, Origen relativized the significance of his own exegetical approach. He generally believed that the Holy Scripture had two senses, namely the literal and the spiritual.[28] He could apply the scholarly approach of the Scripture only to its letter. However, the Bible's theological interpretation always remained his priority.[29] This allowed him to surmount any unresolved textual or philological problems by proceeding to a theological intepretation of the passage in question.[30]

Origen was in a position to relativize the importance of his philological conclusions about text and translation of the Septuagint, because his exegesis, even on the level of textual criticism and philology, was governed by a very strict christological principle: Almost each and every verse of the Old Testament, whatever disagreements may have existed about its actual form or content, or even about its authoritative translation, referred to Christ and to his gift of salvation.[31] This christological and soteriological principle unified all textual variants and translations of the Old Testament under one scope, namely the preaching of and about Jesus Christ.

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27) Cf. Origen, *Fragm. Lam.* 86-87.

28) T.D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 93.

29) Cf. R. N. Soulen, *Sacred Scripture: A Short History of Interpretation* (Louisville, KN: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 84-85.

30) Cf. Barnes, *Constantine*, 92-93.

31) Cf. G. D'Costa, "The Bible in a World of Religious Pluralism: Reading the Bible with and for the Jewish People?" A. Paddison and N. Messer, ed., *The Bible: Culture, Community, Society* (London: Blumsbury, 2013), 144-145.

II

As a characteristic example of the way Origen dealt with incon-
sistencies, differences or even disagreements between the
Septuagint and the Hebrew text, I will now examine his inter-
pretation of Is 7:14, and specifically the way he dealt with the
problem of the translation of the Hebrew word הָעַלְמָה as παρθένος
in the Septuagint.

The most detailed and critical reference to Is 7:14 in Origen's
writings is found in his work *Contra Celsum* 1.34-35. Origen in
corporates this Old Testament passage in to his christological argu-
mentation against Celsus quoting it firstly from the Septuagint.
He then mentions that the Septuagint seems to have one major
difference compared to the Hebrew original, since it translates the
word הָעַלְמָה as παρθένος and not as νεᾶνις, as it should have, accord-
ing to the original meaning of the word and to the other Greek
translations of that time.[32]

Initially, by quoting the Septuagint text of Is 7:14 Origen gives
his reader the implicit message that the Septuagint is a respectable
and reliable text and should be used as the base-text for interpreting
the Old Testament in a Greek-speaking context. It is also clear
that Origen does not know of any other Septuagint variants of
the crucial word παρθένος, since he includes no relevant text-critical
remarks, as he usually does, in cases of text-critical problems.

However, Origen mentions another translation possibility, at-
tributing it hypothetically to a Jew, who could claim that the correct
rendering should be νεᾶνις and not παρθένος.[33] Origen's use of the
word εὑρεσιλογεῖν, which has an obvious polemic undertone, for
describing the Jew's hypothetical disagreement shows that at this
point much more is at stake than simply the correct rendering
of an Old Testament passage. We are faced here with the crucial

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32) Origen, *Cels.* 1.34. Origen has probably been the first Christian theologian to
   thematize this problem and to propose a solution to it.
33) Ibid.

problem of whether the christological teaching of the Christian church about Jesus' virgin birth is founded on the Old Testament witness or not.[34] A Jew would of course have to deny such a christological intepretation, while a Christian would have to support it. In our case it is clear that Origen believes a priori in the theological truth of the rendering parqenoj in the Septuagint. However, he attempts to prove this fundamental belief of his on an exegetical level as well. Thus, he proceeds to examining the Jewish perspective by analyzing the problem from a philological point of view.

As a first step he examines the Hebrew word הָעַלְמָה that is translated in the Septuagint as parqenoj and by all other translators as neaij.[35] This demonstrates the great importance he attributes to the Hebrew text. Origen keeps also the other Greek translations in mind mentioning them collectivelly, since they are in agreement with each other at this point. His aim is just to prove that the Septuagint is also correct, in other words that the rendering of the Septuagint is also a philological possibility that has an equal validity compared to the mainstream translation of Is 7:14.

Origen's main argument is based upon Deut 22:23-26, which he quotes as a proof-text. He claims that in Deut 22:23-26 the word הָעַלְמָה actually refers to a virgin, without however being able to confirm that this word indeed means a virgin. Evidently Origen knows that the word הָעַלְמָה in Deut 22, 23-26, as well as in Is 7:14 is correctly translated by the word neahij, which actually means a young woman without any information about her being a virgin or not. The word parqenoj is also used in the Septuagint version of Deut 22:23-26 too, but as a translation of the word הָעַלְמָה. Both of these Hebrew words belong to the same context and refer to the same case of a young, engaged virgin woman who is or is

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34) For the theological significance that Jesus' virgin birth bears in Origen see W.G. Rusch, "Mary" J.A. Mc Guckin, ed., *The Westminster Hand book to Origen* (Louisville, KN: Westminster John Knox, 2004),149-150.

35) *Cels.* 1.34.

not to be put to death depending on the circumstances under which she commited adultery. Origen tries to harmonize the originally different meanings of the two words by claiming that both of them actually bear the same meaning, simply because they refer to the same case. Consequently Origen is able to prove that also in the case of Is 7:14 the word הָעַלְמָה can bear both meanings, namely of a young woman and a virgin, thus proving that the Septuagint rendering is also correct.[36] These exegetical operations clearly demonstrate that according to Origen the Hebrew Bible is always the initial text. In cases of semantic differences Origen would either correct the Septuagint according to the Hebrew original or to prove the Septuagint's convergence with it. In our example he chooses the second option due to theological reasons.

However, Origen does not complete his argumentation at this point. He proceeds further on the basis of the fact that his previous philological observations are obviously not clear enough for someone who does not understand Hebrew. Therefore, he attempts to justify the correctness of the Septuagint rendering of Is 7:14 by using a contextual, an ethical, an historical and finally an allegorical argument.[37]

According to the contextual argument, Origen underlines the fact that in Is 7:14 the birth of Emmanuel is characterized as a sign. Had it been a normal birth by a young woman, it could have never been understood as a sign. The term "sign" should apparently refer to something extraordinary and unusual, even a miraculous event. This means that the translation of the Septuagint about the virgin woman bearing a child is more accurate, as far as the contextual unity and meaning of Is. 7:14 is concerned.

According to his ethical argument Origen thinks that only a virgin is entitled to give birth to a child that will be called "God is with us," while it would have been inappropriate for such a child to be conceived through a woman's passion.

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36) Ibid.
37) Ibid. 1.35.

Origen then states that Is 7:14 does not actually refer to the time of the prophet, i.e. it is not an historical text, but a prophecy concerning Jesus Christ. He proves this remark by claiming that the sign of the birth of Emmanuel cannot possibly be linked personally to king Ahaz, but generally to the house of David, and therefore actually to Jesus Christ, who is a descendant of David as to the flesh.

Finally, Origen interprets Is 7:14 in an allegorical way. According to this interpretation the terms "height and depth" (Is 7:11) that are used in connection with the sign of the virgin birth, link Is 7:14 with Eph 4:10, meaning that this sign actually refers to Jesus Christ.

Summarizing the above it would seem that in his exegesis of Is 7:14 Origen tries at first to understand and interpret the Septuagint from a philological point of view as a translation by comparing and conforming it with the authoritative Hebrew text. As a second step, he then utilizes all available exegetical methods and arguments in order to verify, clarify and support his initial philological conclusions, so that his theological exegesis is in accordance with his philological analysis.

Even if many reservations about Origen's individual exegetical methods and theological positions justifiably remain, his scrutiny on the level of textual analysis, as well as his effort to base his theological conclusions upon this analysis are very important exegetical principles, not only for his own historical context, but even for contemporary biblical scholarship.

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The Relationship between the Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible in Origen's Exegesis: The Example of Is 7:14

Christos Karakolis
(University of Athens, Faculty of Theology)

A very important aspect of Origen's philological work on the Bible is his particular understanding of the relationship between the Greek and the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. The aim of the present paper is to examine this aspect. In the first part we present Origen's theoretical principles regarding the relationship between these two texts. As an example, in the second part we analyze his exegesis of Is 7:14 and specifically the way he dealt with the problem of the translation of the Hebrew word הָעַלְמָה as parqenoj in the Septuagint.

Origen believed that the Hebrew text is at least as important as its most correct Greek translation. Having a variety of Greek translations and manuscripts at his disposal was extremely important to him. Occasionally Origen ascertained that the Septuagint translated in a wrong way or in a way that obscured the original meaning of the Hebrew. In such cases he used to cite all known translations and comment on them, thus trying to find the most successful one, even if he had to prioritize the Hebrew text or other translations to the Septuagint. Even in cases of very small differences between the Septuagint and the Hebrew text, Origen would compare the Septuagint rendering to the ones of the other Greek translations in order to choose the one closer to the original. On the other hand, Origen was also aware of the fact that all

philological and exegetical problems due to dissonances among various manuscripts and translations could not always be definitively resolved. In such cases he accepted the insufficiencies of his philological and exegetical method contending himself with presenting the various exegetical options at hand, and allowing his audience to choose the most correct one. His christological and soteriological perspective unified all textual variants and translations of the Old Testament under one scope, namely the preaching of and about Jesus Christ.

Origen observes that the Septuagint translates the word of הָעַלְמָה Is 7:14 as παρθένος and not as νεᾶνις. He also notes that on the contrary the word הָעַלְמָה is rendered as νεᾶνις in all other Greek translations. He then tries to demonstrate that the rendering of the Septuagint is also philologically possible by claiming that in the context of Deut 22:23-26 both הָעַלְמָה and בְּתוּלָה actually bear the same meaning. Thus, he is able to prove that also in the case of Is 7:14 the word הָעַלְמָה can bear both the meaning of a young woman and of a virgin, which would mean that the Septuagint rendering is also correct. He concludes his analysis by offering a contextual, an ethical, an historical and an allegorical argument.

In the case of Is 7:14 Origen follows at first his usual methodological procedure when dealing with translation issues. However, his aim is clearly to verify the Septuagint rendering, due to ecclesiastical and theological reasons. Therefore, he does not admit, as in other cases, that the Septuagint is at this point at least not as accurate as the other Greek renderings.

<초록>

오리겐의 주석에서 70인경과 히브리 성경의 관계:

이사야 7:14을 중심으로

크리스토스 카라콜리스

(아테네 대학, 신학부 교수)

오리겐의 성경 해석에서 어휘를 선택하는 것은 매우 중요한 역할을 하고 있으며, 이것은 그가 70인경과 히브리어 본문 사이의 관계를 어떻게 설정했느냐는 문제와 직결된다. 우리는 먼저 이 두 본문에 대해 오리겐이 어떤 이론적 관계를 설정했는지 살펴야 하며, 구체적으로 이사야 7:14에 나오는 히브리어 알마(הָעַלְמָה)와 그리스어 파르테노스(parqenoj)의 번역 문제를 어떻게 다루었는지를 고찰하고자 한다.

오리겐은 먼저 히브리어 본문이 가장 정확한 헬라어 번역만큼 중요하다고 보았다. 가끔 오리겐은 70인 경의 번역이 잘못되었거나 히브리어 원문의 의미를 모호하게 만들었다고 주장한다. 두 본문 사이의 매우 작은 차이점까지도 그는 서로 비교하며, 원문에 더 가까운 독법을 선택하려고 한다. 그는 때때로 자신의 어휘연구와 주석의 방법론이 부족함도 인식하고 있다. 그는 자신의 기독론적이고 구원론적인 관점으로 모든 본문 상의 차이점들을 통합하며, 예수 그리스도를 전하는 한 관점으로 수렴하려고 한다.

오리겐은 70인경이 이사야 7:14의 히브리어 알마(הָעַלְמָה)를 네아니스(neaÏj)가 아니라 파르테노스(parqenoj)로 번역되었음을 관찰하며 신명기 22:23-26에서 알마(הָעַלְמָה)와 베툴라(בְתוּלָה)가 동일한 의미로 사용

되었으므로, 이사야 7:14에서 알마는 '젊은 여인'과 '처녀'의 두 의미를 모두 가질 수 있다고 본다. 그는 문맥적, 윤리적, 역사적, 알레고리적 논증으로 자신의 분석에 대한 결론을 맺는다. 결론적으로 그는 이사야 7:14에서 70인경이 다른 그리스어 번역만큼 정확하지 않다는 점을 인정하지 않는다.