

Origen's Figural Reading of the Scripture: The Process from the Literal to the Spiritual

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1. Introduction

Admittedly Origen Adamantius (AD 185-251) is one of the most fascinating and controversial figures of the ancient Church.¹⁾ His work caused much admiration but was also heavily criticized in the ancient Church leading to controversies and to his posthumous condemnation in the 6th century.²⁾ Although he was a prolific writer not much of his vast work has been preserved probably due to the controversies related to his person.³⁾ However, even this small sample of it, in most cases Latin translations of the original Greek writings, provides a clear demonstration of his good Hellenistic education and his profound knowledge of the Scripture. Origen's impact on the next generations was certainly significant; his admirers, like Gregory of Nazianzus, described him

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1) For a critical biography of Origen see the classical study of P. Nautin, *Origene: Sa vie et son oeuvre*, Christianisme antique 1 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1977) as well as the more recent study of J. W. Trigg, *The Early Church Fathers* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998).

2) See, for example, H. Couzel, *Origen: The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian*, A. S. Worrain, trans. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), xi, who describes Origen with the biblical quotation from Lk 2:34 as "a sign that is opposed." For a brief review of the controversies in the ancient Church, see J. W. Trigg, *Origen*, 65-66.

3) Eusebius, *hist. ecl.* 6, 24-25, 32, 36 provides an extensive list of Origen's writings, many of which have now been lost.

as “the stone that sharpens us all” and even some of his bitter opponents, like Jerome for example, did not hesitate to cite him extensively. Thus, Richard Simon’s remark that most Church Fathers after Origen used his work-especially his exegetical one-seems to be justified.⁴⁾

The present article will focus on Origen’s method of exegesis and his figural reading of the biblical text in particular. Origen has been regarded as the major representative of allegorical exegesis and his interpretive enterprise has drawn both admiration and criticism since his lifetime. Accordingly, in the first part of the article the structure of Origen’s figural exegesis as well as its theological framework will be discussed briefly and will be placed within the broader context of the patristic exegetical tradition. In the second part Origen’s exegetical procedure as it is developed in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* will serve as a concrete example of his method and some useful conclusions will be drawn. Following Karen Jo Torjesen’s words an attempt will be made to demonstrate that “Origen’s exegesis is fundamentally oriented around the three-way relationship of text, interpretation and heart.”⁵⁾

2. Origen’s exegetical work

Origen’s keen interest in the biblical text itself is clearly demonstrated in his major text-critical work *Hexapla*. It was a 15-volume work covering approximately 6,500 pages that in six columns compared the Hebrew text of the Old Testament⁶⁾ to that of the

4) R. Simon, *Histoire critique du Vieux Testament* (Rotterdam: Leers, 1685), 403: “La plus part des Peres qui ont vécu après Origene, n’ont fait presque autre chose que copier ses Commentaires et ses autres Traités sur l’ Ecriture. Ceux mêmes qui étoient les plus opposés à ses sentiments, ne pûrent’ empêcher de les lire et d’ en profiter...”

5) K. J. Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen’s Exegesis*, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 28 (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1986), 14.

Septuagint and to other Greek translations of Origen's time (those of Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion or other when available⁷). It was kept in the Library of Caesarea till its destruction in the 7th c. Unfortunately, due to its vast length it was never fully copied. Its impact, however, seems to have been great since it was consulted for the correction of manuscripts. Origen's description of the objective and his method in *Hexapla* reveals his critical mind and his concern to restore the original text of the Septuagint that was the current text of the Church.⁸ From his other exegetical work it is also made clear that Origen was interested in the restored text of the Septuagint not only in the context of his dialogue with Jews. His text-critical comments in some cases as well as his willingness to accredit spiritual value even to some mistranslations of the Septuagint reflect his interpretive concerns, on the one hand, and his efforts to remain faithful to the tradition of his Church, on the other, a contradiction, indeed, as has already been pointed out, since it is made clear that Origen preferred the Hebrew text to the Greek translation.⁹

6) The first two columns contained the Hebrew text and its transliteration in Greek. Origen learnt Hebrew for this purpose and with the consultation of Jewish scholars in particular cases he was able to handle the Hebrew text and compare it successfully with the Septuagint.

7) According to Eusebius, *hist. eccl.* 6.16 in the case of the Psalms, for example, he was able to compare seven different versions of the biblical text.

8) Origen, *Comm. in Mat.* 15, 14 (CGS 10, 388): "With the help of God's grace I have tried to repair the disagreements in the copies of the Old Testament on the basis of the other versions. When I was uncertain of the Septuagint reading because the various copies did not tally, I settled the issue by consulting the other versions and retaining what was in agreement with them. Some passages did not appear in the Hebrew; these I marked with an obelus as I did not dare to leave them out altogether. Other passages I marked with an asterisk to show that they were not in the Septuagint but that I had added them from the other versions in agreement with the Hebrew text. Whoever wishes may accept them; anyone who is offended by this procedure may accept or reject them as he chooses."

9) B. F. Wiles, "Origen as Biblical Scholar," *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1: *From the Beginnings to Jerome*, P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, eds. (Cambridge:

The rest of his exegetical work falls under three different types: a) scholia, that is short notes that deal with points of particular obscurity, b) commentaries on various books of the Old and New Testament.¹⁰⁾ They reflect Origen's time in the Didaskaleion and were probably addressed to a small circle of disciples, and c) homilies,¹¹⁾ that is sermons dated in the time of Origen's stay in Caesarea. They were meant for larger audiences, probably to be read in the church.

Although the last two types, at least, may give the impression that they are very similar to each other, a close examination of the exegetical patterns and of the theological presuppositions of each type makes it evident, as Torjesen has already noted, that despite some common features there is still a diversity of exegetical procedures differing from type to type.¹²⁾ These different exegetical procedures, are dictated by the type of the text that is under discussion (whether it is an Old or a New Testament book), by its specific subject and by Origen's audience. Underlying them, however, there is a common exegetical thread that can be traced in all his exegetical work: the point of departure is always the literal sense of the text (ῥητὸν)-that is its formulation and the historical or narrative circumstances of the situation described-and the end point is the spiritual meaning of it (Βούλημα), namely the deeper

Cambridge University Press, 1970), 461.

10) According to Jerome's 33rd letter Origen wrote a commentary on Genesis, on the Psalms, on the Song of Songs, on Romans, on 1 Corinthians, on Galatians, on Philippians, on John, and on Matthew. It seems, however, that Origen did not interpret in some cases the whole books but only part of them. Moreover, most of them are not fully preserved but only in fragments and in catenae or in their Latin translation.

11) Origen also wrote homilies on many books of the Old and New Testament: e.g. on Exodus, on Leviticus, on Numbers, on Deuteronomy, on Joshua, on Kings, on Matthew, on Luke, on the Acts, on 2 Corinthians, on 1 Thessalonians, on Galatians, on Titus, and on Hebrews. Again, much has been lost and only part of them is preserved either fragmentarily or in only Latin.

12) Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 59-60, 68.

meaning and teachings of the text and their application to the reader or hearer.¹³⁾ This uniform strategy of approaching the biblical text actually reflects Origen's perception of the Bible and his theological system. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the individual steps of Origen's exegesis within his theological structure.¹⁴⁾

3. Origen's understanding of the Bible

Origen deals with the Scripture and its interpretation in his 4th book of his *De Principiis* (chapters 1-3) where he outlines his theology of exegesis. The main position of the first chapter is that the Scripture is divine because it contains divine doctrines that have a transformative impact on the lives of those who embrace them. These divine doctrines are revealed in Jesus' teachings in the New Testament who was prophesied in the Old Testament. Thus, a connection between the two Testaments is being established.¹⁵⁾ This unity despite diversity is a common feature in the patristic tradition. It is reflected in three major features of the two Testaments: a) their hypothesis, i.e. their unifying message, b) the economy, i.e. the divine plan for the world revealed in them, and c) the figure of Jesus who is the centre and the point of reference (ἀνακεφαλαιώσις) in both of them.¹⁶⁾ Origen's exegetical

13) Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 68.

14) See, for example, Torjesen's (*Hermeneutical Procedure*, 11) justified remark: "A genuinely hermeneutical structure for Christian allegory must also be a theological structure. However if such a theological structure is proposed... it must be shown to actually direct the individual steps of exegesis..."

15) This is very clearly summarized in *de princ.* 4.1.6 (CGS 22, 301, 8-13): "Since we have demonstrated briefly the divinity of Jesus and we have used the prophecies about him, we have also proved that the Scriptures that speak of him prophetically (i.e. the Old Testament) and those that with power and authority announce his advent and his teachings (i.e. the New Testament) so that they won over the elect among the heathen are divinely inspired."

16) For a detailed discussion of these three aspects see R. M. Grant, *Irenaeus of Lyons*,

approach of Old and New Testament texts presupposes this unity in diversity.¹⁷⁾ His patterns for exegesis in each case are different, since in the Old Testament the experience of Logos Christ is made possible through mediators whereas in the New Testament the proclamation of Christ is direct.¹⁸⁾ Nevertheless, one can notice an analogous exegetical procedure because the ultimate task of interpretation in both cases is the reader's or hearer's knowledge of Logos and their participation in God.

Origen also lays emphasis on the fact that the Scripture is the work of the Holy Spirit, something that is made evident both by the fulfillment of the prophecies and by Jesus' teachings. This inspiration, which is understood as the activity both of Logos and of the Spirit, does not diminish the self-consciousness or personality of each author. Therefore, the particularities of each text and author are taken into consideration in the interpretation procedure.

Inspiration of the Scripture has two different but interconnected aspects. The first refers to the purpose of the Scripture, which is the education (*παιδεία*) of the soul. The second refers to the content of the Scripture, which is the deeper spiritual meaning that lays underneath the surface. Thus, it is the task of exegesis to bring out these doctrines so that those who hear them will be led to perfection.¹⁹⁾ Inspiration, on the other hand, does not guarantee an attractive appearance of the biblical text.²⁰⁾ On the contrary, the reader will come across many "stumbling stones" and impossibilities²¹⁾ and she or he has to connect the dots and establish a hidden but coherent meaning of the biblical text.²²⁾

The Early Church Fathers (London: Routledge, 1997), 35-38

17) Origen, *Comm. in Job*, 10,13 (SC 157, 446).

18) Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 66-67.

19) Origen, *de princ.* 4.2.1 (GCS 22, 306,1) describes this exegetical procedure as the "ὁδός" that can lead to the deeper meaning of the Scripture through which redemption is accomplished.

20) Wiles, "Origen," 464.

21) For example, anthropomorphisms, grammatical or syntactical mistakes, problematic texts from the ethical perspective, ambiguities etc.

Although the text might seem chaotic the inner sequence (ἀκολουθία) has to be discovered.²³⁾ In fact the biblical text has an external layer and a deeper and spiritual one that correspond to its literal and to its spiritual meaning.²⁴⁾

This perception of the dual nature of the Scripture is deriving from the analogy that Origen and other Christian writers see between Jesus Christ and the Bible, between the Logos (Word) that became flesh and the Word of God that became a written text.²⁵⁾ In fact, the incarnation of Logos leads to the written word.²⁶⁾ Before his incarnation the Logos was invisible and indescribable. In an analogous way the Scripture is a manifestation of the spiritual truths that can now be made accessible.²⁷⁾

In his work *de principiis* Origen seems to speak of a tripartite division of the text: body, soul, and spirit.²⁸⁾ This division does not appear elsewhere in the work of the Alexandrine exegete. On the contrary, in later chapters of the same book as well as in other works he presupposes two layers of the text. Although some exege-

22) *De princ.* 4.3.5. See, also, M. Ludlow, "Theology and Allegory: Origen and Gregory of Nyssa on the Unity and Diversity of Scripture," *IJST* 4:1 (2002), 50.

23) According to Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 22-34, this sequence is nothing less than the journey of the soul to perfection. Cf. also Ludlow, "Theology and Allegory," 51.

24) In the case of the gospel Origen (*Comm. in John* 1.7) speaks of the "sensible gospel" (αἰσθητὸν εὐαγγέλιον) and the "spiritual gospel" (εὐαγγέλιον νοητοῦ καὶ πνευματικοῦ); See also the distinction made by Clemens of Alexandria between the "body" (σῶμα) and the "mind" (διάνοια) of the biblical text, *Stromata* 6.132.3 (PG 9,157A).

25) M. Friedowicz, *Theologie der Kirchenväter. Grundlagen frühchristlicher Glaubensreflexion* (Freiburg: Herder, 2007), 125.

26) Origen, *Scholias in Matthaeum* frg. 11 (PG 17, 289A): "ἐπειδὴ ἔσαρκώθη, καὶ ὁρᾶται καὶ γράφεται, διὰ τοῦτο ὡς σαρκωθέντος καὶ βιβλος ἐστὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ γειέσεως" ("since he became flesh he can be seen and be described in the written text, and since he incarnated there is also a book of his birth").

27) Origen, *Fragmenta in Jeremiam (e Philocalia)* frg. 2,2 (GCS 6, 198); idem, *In Matthaeum catenae*, frg. 11.

28) *De principiis* 4.2.11 (GCS 22, 312-313).

tes are inclined to understand this tripartite division as referring to the literal, moral and mystical sense of the text,²⁹⁾ it seems that the emphasis should be laid on three successive but distinct stages in the journey towards perfection.³⁰⁾ These phases also correspond to three different groups of members of the Christian communities: the beginners, the advanced and the perfect.³¹⁾ The exegesis should, therefore, address each of them in a way that their needs are met and the process to the next level is ensured.

Undoubtedly, the ultimate goal of the exegesis is the spiritual meaning of the text.³²⁾ At the same time, however, the letter of the text remains valuable and the exegete can use all the available tools in order to approach it.³³⁾ Both elements, the literal meaning³⁴⁾ as well as the spiritual one, are very important and indispensable, since they are dynamically interconnected. The letter of the biblical text, in particular, is important since it refers to the biblical history, it is useful to the simple and uninformed members of the community (especially as it is recited in liturgical contexts),

29) Wiles, "Origen," 467-468.

30) Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 41. Her opinion seems to be justified by the way the body, soul, and the spirit of the Scripture are related to the phases of human transformation through the Scripture. The tripartite division should, therefore, not be associated with the fourfold patristic exegesis (history, allegory, anagoge, and tropology) as this is clearly expressed in the famous passage of Cassian, *conlationes* 14.8 (SC 54, 189-190).

31) H. J. Spitz, *Die Metaphorik des geistigen Schriftsinns. Ein Beitrag zur allegorischen Bibelauslegung des ersten christlichen Jahrtausends* (München: Fink, 1972), 16.

32) H. G. Reventlow, *Epochen der Bibelauslegung*, vol. 1: *Vom Alten Testament bis Origenes* (Munich: Beck, 1990), 176.

33) Origen, *In Leviticum* 1.1 (SC 286, 66-67).

34) D. G. McCartney, "Literal and Allegorical Interpretation in Origen's *Contra Celsum*," *WThJ* 48 (1986), 287, n. 17 offers a helpful definition of "literal meaning": "By 'literal meaning' I mean the communicative value that adhered to a statement in its own sociocultural context, whether regarded as the 'author's intent' or the 'original hearers' understanding' (thus, an allegorical meaning could also be the literal meaning if the text in its original setting indicated that it was of an allegorical genre)."

and it can also have an apologetic value. On the other hand, the historical study of the text cannot be sufficient; the biblical text has also a deeper meaning that is meant for the mature and this has to be dredged up.³⁵⁾

4. Origen's figural reading of the Scripture

Origen's method of discovering and bringing to light this hidden spiritual doctrines of the Scripture is usually described as "allegory." There has been a long discussion among scholars about its nature as well as about its precursors. Jean Daniélou and Henri de Lubac, two of the most prominent Origenists of the 20th century, are also the two main representatives of this scholarly discussion.³⁶⁾ They have devoted much of their work in debating about the Christian or non-Christian provenance of Origen's method and in determining whether Origen's exegetical method could be described as allegory or as typology. Daniélou who was convinced that allegory was a form of exegesis deriving from the Hellenistic and Jewish environment of the ancient Church, made a clear distinction between typology and allegory in Origen and claimed that both could be found in Origen's exegesis.³⁷⁾ On the other hand,

35) Origen, *c. Celsum* 5.42 (SC 147, 124-126): "These truths were proclaimed still under the form of a story because they were children... but now to those who seek for the meaning and wish to advance in it, what hitherto were myths, if I may use the word, have been transformed into the inner truth which had been hidden from them."

36) For a detailed discussion of this debate see M. Fédou, "Les débats sur le "sens spirituel" dans les *Recherches de Science Religieuse* (années 1940-1950)," *RSR* 99:2 (2011), 195-205.

37) J. Daniélou, "Traversée de la Mer Rouge et baptême aux premiers siècles," *RSR* 33 (1946), 402-430; Idem, *Origene* (Paris: La table ronde, 1948), 145-205; Idem, "Les divers sens de l'Écriture dans la tradition chrétienne primitive," *ETL* 24 (1998), 119-226.

de Lubac and others³⁸⁾ criticized this strict distinction between typological and allegorical reading of the text and stressed the Christian origins of the method.³⁹⁾ He noted that both terms, allegory and typology can be found in the Scripture (“τύπος”; Gal 4:24: “ἀλληγορούμενα”) and that they refer to the early Christian exegetical procedure of discovering the divine doctrines in it. Both readings also presuppose that Christ is concealed in the Old and is revealed in the New Testament. Thus, the strict distinction between typology and allegory introduced by the School of Antioch cannot be valid in the case of Origen.⁴⁰⁾

Typology comes from the word τύπος, which means “impact”, “strike”, “imprint”, “relief”, “stamp”, “model”, and “image.”⁴¹⁾ The term became a terminus technicus in Christian interpretation and it denoted a person, an event, a thing or a rite that finds its realization in a different historical moment or person(s) (*anti-type*, “ἀντίτυπος”). It presupposes the scheme promise-fulfillment and a christological reading of the text when it refers to the Old Testament. This interpretation can also be found in the New Testament and it is widely applied by the early Christian writers.⁴²⁾ They also laid emphasis on the “symmetry” between the type and the anti-type and they always tried to establish the proper proportions of similarities and differences between them and to ensure that this symmetry is real

38) For example, R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance in Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1959).

39) H. de Lubac, “‘Typologie’ at ‘Allégorisme,’” *RSR* 34 (1947), 180-226.

40) H. Crouzel, “La distinction de la typologie et de l' allégorie,” *BLE* 65 (1964), 161-174; Hanson, *Allegory*, 126-128. However, Hanson claims that allegory is not Christian.

41) W. Seelbach, “Bemerkungen zu τύπος, ἀντίτυπος und ἀρχέτυπος, sowie zu den Inschriften der Verduner Atlas,” *Glotta* 62 (1984), 175-182.

42) See, for example, Mt 12:39-40; Lk 11:29-30 (Jonah as a typos of resurrection); John 3:14 (the bronze snake as a typos of the cross; John 6:30ff. (“manna” as a typos of the bread of life, Jesus); 1 Cor 10:4(the rock in the wilderness as a typos of Jesus); Gal 4:21-31 (Abraham's two women as a typos of the Testaments); Heb 6:20(Melchisedek as a type of Jesus) etc.

and substantial.⁴³⁾ Apparently, the purpose of typology is to trace the analogies and relations between different events and persons in the history of salvation in order to determine the unifying truth of the salvation that is hidden behind them.

Nevertheless, the principle of analogy is also applied by allegory. Similarly to typology allegory presupposes that there is a deeper spiritual meaning behind the letter of the biblical text and that the exegete has to get under the upper layer of the words in order to reach it. Instead of the horizontal dimension of typology (the establishment of a connection between two different points in the historical continuum) allegory presupposes a vertical dimension of interpretation. It is the task of those who are spiritually mature to follow the path of the signs that the text provides them with and to reach its deeper divine meaning.⁴⁴⁾ De Lubac was right when he highlighted the Christian context of Origen's allegorical reading of the Scripture. Although the origins of this exegetical understanding can be found in the Greek and Jewish environment of early Christianity, its features are certainly Christian and its aim is to trace and understand the divine truths that lay hidden in the text.⁴⁵⁾ Furthermore, its use in the New Testament (Gal 4:21-24) makes it evident that its borders with the so-called typology are blurred.⁴⁶⁾ As it has already been noted the difference between typology and allegory is to be found in the objects they compare and not to its structure.⁴⁷⁾

43) J. N. Guinot, "La typologie comme technique herméneutiques," *Cahiers de Biblia patristica* 2 (1989), 15-18.

44) Clemens of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI 124,6: "...for neither prophecy nor the Saviour himself announced the divine mysteries simply in such a way that they would be easily apprehended by everybody; they rather spoke in parables."

45) Ἀλληγορία comes from the Greek phrase "ἄλλα ἀγορεύειν" and is attested for the first time by Plutarch who also notes that the word replaced the older one of ὑπόουαι (Plutarch, *Quomodo adolescens poetas* 19e). It was widely used in the ancient Greek world, especially from the Hellenistic times onwards, in the interpretation of the Homeric poems, Heraclitus, *Quaestiones homericæ* 5.2.1.

46) Hanson, *Allegory*, 127-128.

It is also evident that allegory is an interpretive device that is applied in order to reveal and not to conceal the spiritual meaning of the texts. In fact the motives for using allegory are two: a) it can provide inspired illustration of doctrines and b) it can explain the impossibilities and difficulties of the biblical text.⁴⁸⁾ The role of the exegete is, therefore, to perceive, determine and describe the invisible meaning that lies behind the visible language of the text and translate it with the help of allegory into the language of ideas and experiences of the contemporary reader.⁴⁹⁾ Furthermore, according to Origen such a figural understanding of the Scripture is justified because it is ancient⁵⁰⁾ and because it is also found in the New Testament itself.⁵¹⁾

The nature of allegory presupposes a close relation between the literal meaning and the allegorical understanding of its spiritual truth. Consequently, the text itself demands its allegorizing. However, the value of the literal sense of the text cannot be diminished. On the contrary, Origen seems to advocate that the letter of the Scripture is good and true and can transform the lives of those who read it.⁵²⁾ Moreover, Origen does not negate the historicity of the events narrated in the biblical text and the accusation that he “despises the history, ignores the poetry, and turns all that is warm and human into frigid intellectual reasonings” is unjustified.⁵³⁾ In fact a careful investigation of his work reveals

47) J. R. Wilkinson, “A Defence of Origenist Allegory,” *Studia patristica* 6 (1962), 264: “Thus in typology we choose to compare two situations on the same level of being, states or events in the historical unfolding of the Christian Covenants, while in allegory we compare such historical objects with truths of a different level, extra-historical and often extraneous to the Bible.”

48) McCartney, “Literal and Allegorical Interpretation,” 298-299.

49) D. Boyarin, “Origen as theorist of allegory: Alexandrian contexts,” R. Copeland and P. T. Struck, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 45.

50) *c. Celsum*, 2.6; 3.45.

51) *Ibid.*, 4.42-44; 6.70.

52) *c. Celsum* 1.17.

a keen interest in the historicity of the biblical events and persons and even a defense of it when it was denied by others.⁵⁴⁾ Origen also declares that the passages that are historically true (τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἱστορίαν ἀληθεύμενα) are far more numerous than those that bear only a spiritual meaning.⁵⁵⁾ His figurative interpretation does not intend to replace or abolish the historical layer of the text but rather to supplement it.⁵⁶⁾ The Alexandrine exegete remains faithful to his theological presuppositions regarding the inspiration of the Scripture and its organic connection to the doctrine of incarnation. He can thus combine the pedagogy of Logos as it is expressed in the literal sense of the text and manifested itself in the original historical context with the contemporary pedagogy of Logos offered to the reader of the Scripture through its spiritual reading.⁵⁷⁾

This theological system of exegesis is also reflected in his exegetical method. In the Old Testament events and persons Origen discerns the presence of Christ and of truths that form the content of Christian faith. His attitude towards the New Testament is similar; he does not deny the historicity of the events but attempts to find the same sanctifying and salvific truths. On the practical level this is demonstrated in the individual steps he undertakes when discussing a scriptural text. First, he quotes the verse(s) under discussion. There follows a short clarification of the historical sense of the text and of the events narrated. He then compares the text with other biblical texts in order to clarify probable ambiguities or contradictions. In the last part of his exegesis he offers a spiritual teaching developed in two interrelated levels: a figural under-

53) G. W. Butterworth, *Origen: On First Principles* (London: SPCK, 1936), lvii. Cf. also J. F. Dennis, *De la philosophie d' Origène* (Paris: Imprimerie nationale, 1884), 33.

54) See, for example, *Hom. in Gen.* 2.1-2; *Hom. in Josb.* 11.1.

55) *de princ.* 4.3.4.

56) For a detailed discussion of the relation of Origen's figural interpretation to history see P. W. Martens, "Origen Against History? Reconsidering the Critique of Allegory," *Modern Theology* 28:4 (2010), 635-656.

57) Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 13.

standing of the text and its contextualization and ethical application in the lives of his readers or hearers.⁵⁸⁾ In the second part of the paper this procedure will be exemplified through an example from his Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew.

5. Origen's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew

According to Eusebius Origen's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew was written sometime between 244 and 249.⁵⁹⁾ The significance of the first canonical gospel for Origen is made clear by the fact that it is the Gospel that he cites in his works twice as often as he does those of Luke and John (with Mark being the less cited). Apart from these sparse references to the Gospel of Matthew Origen devoted a series of homilies as well as commentary to the interpretation of the first Gospel. Whereas the former seems to presuppose a bigger audience, the latter must have been addressed to a smaller circle of disciples and it was meant to be a catechesis not for the beginners but for the advanced.⁶⁰⁾

Out of the 25 books of the commentary only 8 (book X-XVII) have been preserved in Greek. There is also an ancient Latin translation of books XII to XXV.⁶¹⁾ However, the differences between

58) Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 65. She also mentions some variations to this general pattern: Origen sometimes discusses only the literal meaning of a text, he offers a detailed explanation of a question regarding the contradiction between the two biblical texts pointing out at the same time to a deeper spiritual meaning that the text might have, and, finally, he expands the literal sense by material taken from natural history.

59) *Hist. eccl.* 6, 34 (SC 41, 137). According to Robert Girod in his introduction of the *Sources chrétiennes* edition of the Commentary on Matthew this commentary can be safely dated in 246, R. Girod, *Origène. Commentaire sur l'évangile selon Matthieu. Tome 1 (livres X et XI)* (SC 162; Paris: Cerf, 1970). It was preceded by his commentary on Romans, which was written in 244 and it was followed by *Contra Celsum* in 248.

60) Girod, op.c. 15-18.

the two texts are so striking that some scholars suggested that there must have been two versions of the commentary both written by Origen, whereas others have claimed that these versions are due to redactions that the original text underwent through ages.⁶²⁾ In his commentary Origen applies the same exegetical texts that can be found in his other commentaries and homilies. This can be made evident in the case of his interpretation of the parable of the hidden treasure in Mt 13:44.

In the beginning of his commentary the verse under discussion, namely that of the parable of the hidden treasure (Mt 13:44), is narrated. Origen proceeds then in discussing briefly the historical context of the parable. He observes that the parable of the hidden treasure, along with the two that follow it (Mt 13:45-46.47), were told by Jesus in the house (cf. Mt 13:36). Herewith he alludes to his previous discussion⁶³⁾ of the word “οἶκος” and its deeper meaning. The text is then compared with other biblical texts. In this case Origen discusses the parable of the hidden treasure in the context of the parables of chapter 13 and distinguishes this and the two following from the previous ones (Mt 13:3ff. 24ff. 31ff. 33ff.); the four parables in the beginning of the chapter are addressed to the multitudes outside the house and are described as “παραβολαὶ”(parables), whereas the next three, which Jesus told his disciples in the house, are introduced only by the adjective “ὅμοία”(similar) and are, therefore, understood as similitudes. Origen cites Mk 4:30 (“τίνι ὁμοιώσωμεν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ θεοῦ,

61) According to O. Bardenhewer, *Geschichte der altkirchlichen Literatur*, II (Freiburg: Herders, 1914), 145-146 the translator must have been Cassiodorus.

62) E. Klostermann, *Origenes Matthäuserklärung. Die griechisch erhaltenen τόμοι* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1935), viii. For a detailed discussion of the manuscript and textual tradition of the commentary see L. Bossina, “Le diverse redazioni del *Commento a Matteo* di Origene. Storia in due atti,” T. Piscitelli, ed., *Il commento a Mateo di Origene. Atti del X Convegno di Studi del Gruppo Italiano di Ricerca su Origene e la Tradizioni Alessandrina* (Napoli, 25-26 settembre 2008) (Brescia: Editrice Morcelliana, 2011), 27-97.

63) *Comm. in Mat.* 10.1 (GCS 10, 1-2).

ἢ ἐν τίνι αὐτὴν παραβολῇ θῶμεν;”) where both terms appear in the introductory double question and he claims that according to this verse they should be understood as two different categories. Following the philosophical distinction between “γένος”(genus) and “εἶδος”(species)⁶⁴ Origen explains that a similitude is generic and on a higher level than a parable, which is specific.

The second part of Origen’s analysis (paragraphs 5 and 6) is devoted to the spiritual interpretation of the parable. Origen explains that the field, which contains the treasure, is the Scripture itself. Underneath its words of history, of law and of the prophets⁶⁵ the great treasure of wisdom in mystery and in Christ lies hidden.⁶⁶ He also offers an alternative interpretation according to which the field is Christ himself and the hidden treasure are all these that Paul alludes to in Col 2:3 (“all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in him”). Concluding the first part of his spiritual reading Origen somehow attempts to combine these two interpretations by claiming that both the Scriptures and Christ are the Kingdom of God. This identification is made more evident in the second part (ch. 6) where Origen discusses the practical significance that his interpretation might have for his readers. Although he seems inclined to accept the Scriptures as the concept most probably signified by the image of the field, Origen also discusses with the same ease the possibility of the field being Christ himself. This interpreting flexibility is probably due not only to the fact that Origen often presupposes a limited and provisory character of his interpretation⁶⁷ a concept that makes interpretation an open ended enterprise, but is also due to the intrinsic and complex relation that the Alexandrian exegete sees between the Scripture

64) Aristotle, *Topica* 103a.14.

65) The Old Testament is usually referred to in the Christian tradition as the “law and the prophets”(e.g. Mt 22:40; Lk 16:16). The “ἱστορία” here probably refers to the historical books of the Old Testament.

66) The same imagery can be found in Origen, *de princ.* 4.3.11 (CGS V 340,6) where Origen again refers to the parable of the hidden treasure.

67) See, for example, *Comm. in Mat.* 15,37 (GCS 10, 460).

and the Logos: the Logos creates the Scripture, mediates through it and uses it as a pedagogical means for the contemporary hearer.⁶⁸⁾ Like elsewhere in his writings the analogy of the incarnated Logos to the written word of the Scripture makes the distinction between the evident and the hidden meaning in both of them possible. This analogy is also presupposed here.⁶⁹⁾

It is evident that Origen's point of departure is always the biblical text itself and its literal meaning. This is demonstrated by the citation of the text under discussion, by its comparison to other biblical texts, by the grammatical analysis of terms found in it, and by the information given regarding its historical context.⁷⁰⁾ In some cases, the literal sense of the text is further explored with the aid of information deriving from nature.⁷¹⁾ Both this material as well as the historical context belong to the literal layer of the text but also form the basis for the spiritual reading that will follow. History, as has earlier been mentioned, is not just the narrative and historical framework of the events described in the biblical text. It is rather "a history of the pedagogy of the Logos", since

68) For a detailed discussion of this relation see Trojelsen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 109-118.

69) See for example, *Comm. in Mat.* 10,6 (SC 162, 158): "ἐλθὼν δέ τις ἄνθρωπος εἰς τὸν ἀγρὸν, εἴτε τὰς γραφὰς εἴτε τὸν Χριστὸν τὸν ἐκ φανερῶν καὶ κρυπτῶν συνεστηκότα, εὕρισκει τὸν κεκρυμμένον τῆς σοφίας θησαυρόν, εἴτε ἐν Χριστῷ εἴτε ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς..." (When the man comes to the field, whether to the Scriptures or to Christ—who is constituted by both manifest and hidden—he finds the hidden treasure of wisdom either in Christ or in the Scriptures..." Cf. also Origen, *Hom. in Lev.* 1,1 (CGS 29, 211-213).

70) According to J. Tigcheler, *Didyme d' Avengle et l'exegese allegorique: Etude semantique de quelques termes exegetiques importants de son commentaire sur Zacharie*, Graecitas Christianorum primaeva (Nijmegen: Dekker & van de Vegt, 1977), 51-55 these belong to the first two steps of the allegorical reading of a biblical text, namely to "πρὸς ῥητὸν" (to the discussion of the word, the text itself) and to "καθ' ἱστορίαν" (to the discussion of the historical moment the text refers to).

71) See, for example, the discussion about the different qualities of pearls found in nature in the exposition of the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price, *Comm. in Mat.* 10, 7 (SC 162, 160-168).

it reflects the experience of Logos in the particular moment that can meanwhile function as a model for the succeeding encounters with Logos.⁷²⁾ Thus, history can also become the bridge that can connect the contemporary reader to the spiritual and eternal truth of the text.⁷³⁾

Another example from Origen's commentary on Matthew can be useful. In his discussion of Mt 13:36 Origen informs his readers about the historical circumstances that the text reflects here. After having taught the multitudes Jesus withdrew "to the house" where he revealed the deeper meaning of the parable of the Sower to his disciples. Origen, however, goes further and displays the deeper spiritual meaning of this simple event; the house signifies the intimacy and discipleship with Jesus.⁷⁴⁾ This close relationship with him leads to the revelation and to the comprehension of the deeper mysteries of his teaching. The symbolic understanding of the house in the biblical narrative forms the basis for Origen's figural reading that follows and establishes a model for any further encounters of Logos; Origen's readers should not behave like the multitudes and stay outside Jesus' house but they must prove themselves true disciples, follow him, and seek the deeper meaning of his words.⁷⁵⁾

The transition from the literal to the spiritual, already prepared by the symbolic understanding of the historical events, is achieved

72) Trojelsen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 140-141.

73) Girod, op.c., 141: "It is the historical reality behind the text ...which contains the figurative representation of the spiritual reality, not the naked text."

74) Comm. in Mat. 1.2 (SC 162, 142).

75) Op.cit. 1.1-2 (SC 162, 142): "καὶ ἡμεῖς οὖν, εἴπερ βουλόμεθα μὴ ὡς ὄχλοι ἀκούειν τοῦ Ἰησοῦ οὕς ἀφιέει καὶ ἔρχεται εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν, ἐξαιρέτον τι παρὰ τοὺς ὄχλους ἀναλαμβάνοντες οἰκειωθῶμεν τῷ Ἰησοῦ, ἵν' ὡς μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ ἐλθόντι εἰς τὴν οἰκίαν προσέλθωμεν καὶ προσελθόντες ἀξιώσωμεν περὶ φράσεως παραβολῆς..." ("And if then, unlike the multitudes whom He sends away, we wish to hear Jesus and go to the house and receive something better than the multitudes, let us become friends of Jesus, so that as His disciples we may come to Him when He goes into the house, and having come may inquire about the explanation of the parable...").

through the application of allegory. In the case of the parable of the hidden treasure the field is understood as either the Scriptures or Christ himself. It acquires thus a double meaning, a literal and a metaphorical one. This transposition to a higher, spiritual level of understanding also reveals the universal implications⁷⁶⁾ that the biblical word might have, thus, leading to the last step of the interpretation, namely that of the contemporary significance of the text for its readers.⁷⁷⁾ Since the deeper purpose (the “βούλημα” or “σκοπὸς”) of the Scripture is to lead its reader to perfection, the last step in Origen's exegetical scheme provides the practical application of the doctrinal truths revealed through the previous exegetical work. Therefore, the universal and timeless truth of the biblical text is contextualized in the current situation⁷⁸⁾ and the pedagogical role of the Scripture can be fulfilled.

76) According to Trojersen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 142-143, a further technique that Origen employs in order to move from the literal to the spiritual meaning of the text is that of generalization and of highlighting its universal significance. This is the technique Origen usually employs in his interpretation of the Psalms.

77) The term usually employed by Origen is that of “πρὸς ἀναγωγὴν,” which refers to the meaning that leads upwards to a higher level of understanding. In this last stage, the second one of the spiritual interpretation, the task is to establish how the deeper meaning of the biblical text can be of relevance for its contemporary readers. See, for example, Origen, *Comm. in Mat.* 10,14 (SC 162, 198): “τὸ εὐαγγέλιον, ὡς εἰδέναι (τηρουμένης τῆς κατὰ τὰ γενόμενα ἱστορίας) τὴν ἐπὶ τὰ πνευματικὰ ἄπταιστον ἀναγωγὴν” (“the same can be applied to the gospel so as, while preserving the historical truth, to ascend to the spiritual realities without erring”).

78) See Trojersen's justified remark (*Hermeneutical Procedure*, 147) that “it is always the same doctrines whose universal validity make it possible for them to be the hidden meaning of the historical sense, the revealed meaning of the universal spiritual sense and the meaning to be applied to the contemporary hearer.”

6. Conclusion

Admittedly, Origen's exegetical system seems very different from our modern understanding of exegesis. There are some aspects, however, of his exegetical work that could be of particular relevance to our contemporary discussion of Bible hermeneutics. The first is the fact that despite his general critical attitude towards the text Origen presupposes the text in its final form and as part of a canon (even though the limits of canon had not been fixed yet in his time). Since the canonical criticism as well as other synchronic approaches to the biblical text are becoming more prominent in biblical scholarship nowadays his exegetical system may not seem that unfamiliar any more. Secondly, his exegetical structure as well his individual exegetical comments provide an invaluable insight in the Bible reception history of ancient Church; they are evidence not only of the ideological trends and the Bible reception of his time but also of that of the succeeding generations of Bible interpreters. Thirdly, even if one is rather critical towards Origen's unifying Christological reading one cannot remain unimpressed by his masterful intra and intertextual readings of the biblical text; the adoption of the postmodern intertextuality theory makes his endeavor much more sympathetic to us. Finally, his commitment to the major purpose of his exegetical efforts, namely the contextualization and actualization of the biblical text for his audience, should also be appreciated. As he many times states in his work since the Scripture is for us it must also have a meaning that is relevant to us. In this respect his figural analysis can remain fascinating and challenging even for modern exegetes.

<주요어>

오리겐, 알레고리, 마태복음, 비유적 해석, 수용사, 해석학

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<초록>

오리겐의 비유적 성경 해석

-문자적 해석에서 영적 해석으로-

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이 글은 오리겐의 주석 방법론과 특히 그의 비유적 성경 해석을 다루고 있다. 오리겐은 지난 2000년 교회사에서 비유적 해석으로 알려진 '알레고리적 해석'의 대표로 여겨져 왔으며, 그가 살아 있을 동안뿐 아니라 지금까지 찬사와 비판을 함께 받아 오고 있다. 따라서 필자는 먼저 오리겐의 비유적 해석과 그의 신학적 체계를 먼저 간략하게 다룬 후, 그가 교부들의 폭넓은 주석적 전통 안에서 어떤 자리를 차지하고 있는지 검토할 것이다. 그리고 나서 오리겐이 그의 『마태복음 주석』에서 전개하고 있는 주석의 과정을 살피면서, 자신의 방법론을 구체적으로 어떻게 적용하고 있는지 제시할 것이고, 끝으로 몇 가지 유익한 결론을 내리고자 한다. 오리겐의 주석적 체계는 우리 현대인들이 이해하는 주석 방법론과 매우 다르지만, 그의 주석 작업 중 어떤 관점들은 오늘날 성경 해석학에 대한 토론 및 쟁점과 밀접한 연관성이 있음을 볼 수 있을 것이다.

<Abstract>

**Origen's Figural Reading of the Scripture: The Process from
the Literal to the Spiritual**

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The present article will focus on Origen's method of exegesis and his figural reading of the biblical text in particular. Origen has been regarded as the major representative of allegorical exegesis and his interpretive enterprise has drawn both admiration and criticism since his lifetime. Accordingly, in the first part of the article the structure of Origen's figural exegesis as well as its theological framework will be discussed briefly and will be placed within the broader context of the patristic exegetical tradition. In the second part Origen's exegetical procedure as it is developed in his *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* will serve as a concrete example of his method and some useful conclusions will be drawn. Although Origen's exegetical system seems very different from our modern understanding of exegesis, there are some aspects of his exegetical work that could be of particular relevance to our contemporary discussion of Bible hermeneutics.