



Origen Albert Stöckl

Origen was born in the year A.D. 185, most probably in Alexandria. His parents were Christians, and Origen received from them a Christian education. At an early age he attended the lectures of the Catechists Pantaenus and Clement, and laid the foundation of that erudition for which he was, later, so remarkable. His father, Leonidas, suffered martyrdom in the persecution of Septimius Severus, and thenceforward Origen devoted himself with new ardour to his studies. In these he made such progress that, at the age of eighteen, and while still a layman, he became the head of the Catechetical School of Alexandria. With his assumption of this office began his marvellous literary activity. His position as teacher required from him an accurate knowledge of the systems of philosophy; he therefore read the works of the Greek philosophers, and in his twenty-first year attended the school of Ammonius Saccas, the founder of Neo-Platonism, and in this way made acquaintance with Neo-Platonism itself, as well as with the doctrines of Philo. At a later period, he came into conflict with his bishop, because of his having delivered public discourses in churches, at the solicitation of his friends, Alexander, Bishop of Jerusalem, and Theoctistus, Bishop of Caesarea, and obtained priestly ordination in spite of the opposition of his bishop, who probably resented some erroneous opinions which he held. He was deprived of his position as teacher by a synodical decree, and by the decree of another synod expelled from the ranks of the clergy. But he found a new home in Palestine with the friends already named, and there established a new school, from which many famous men went forth. He was imprisoned in the persecution of Decius, A.D. 249, and after his liberation died in consequence of the hardships he had endured during his captivity, A.D. 254.

Origen's chief work was his interpretation of Holy Scripture. He composed Commentaries on many Books, the most important of which are his Commentaries on *Matthew* and *John*. He exhibits a marked liking for allegorical interpretation, without, however, sacrificing the literal. We have further, his work *Contra Celsum*, in eight books, a defence of Christianity against that Philosopher. In this work Origen gives proof, in an extraordinary degree, of intellectual subtlety and erudition. The work of chief importance in determining the special character of his scientific views is his *De Principiis (peri archôn)*, a treatise on the fundamental truths of Christianity, in four books. This work may be regarded as at least a first attempt at scientific exposition and justification of the doctrines of Christianity in systematic order. Clement had sketched the Gnostic ideal in its several outlines, Origen set himself to determine in greater minuteness the knowledge possessed by the Gnostic. In doing this he expounded the rational grounds which confirmed the teachings of the Faith, and endeavoured to reduce them to a well-ordered system of connected truths. In the latter part of his task, his success was only partial, and as to the first, the attempts at a development of the Christian teaching which he here offers us are not at any point very successful.

Origen recognises the fact that it is only from the standpoint fixed by Christian Faith that a right comprehension of things human and divine is attainable. To avoid error it is essential that there should be no departure from ecclesiastical tradition. In spite of these salutary principles

Origen did not succeed in avoiding the danger he was providing against. The philosophical opinions which he had borrowed from the Greek philosophers, and chiefly from the followers of Philo and from the Neo-Platonists, became blended in his mind with the dogmas of Faith and affected his appreciation of Christian truth. The errors thence arising became distinctly manifest in his work *De Principiis*. In his translation of this work, Rufinus has toned down or wholly changed many of the more objectionable passages; but even with this improvement the errors are not wholly put out of sight. Origen himself seems to have felt at times that his assertions were at variance with truth, for he desired that this work — one of the earliest he composed — should not be published; many propositions contained in it he reprobated later, and many he put forward as mere surmises — mere opinions, about which every one may form what estimate he will. This, however, is not sufficient excuse for erroneous assertions, the more so that we find him speaking of an esoteric teaching not intended for the people, but only for the wise and the initiated.

According to Origen, God is exalted in nature above all things, ineffable, and incomprehensible. He is above truth, wisdom, being. He is not fire, nor light, nor air, but an absolute incorporeal unity (*monas* or *henas*). He is neither part, nor a totality, He does not admit in Himself a greater and a less, He is unchangeable and without limit, space and time are excluded from His Being. He is omnipotent, but His omnipotence is qualified by His wisdom and His goodness; He cannot act in opposition to these attributes. We cannot contemplate God immediately in His own being. How could our weak vision bear the effulgence of His light? We have knowledge of Him only from His works.

There is but one God; plurality in God is a contradiction in terms. The one plan which we observe in the world is inconceivable, unless we assume it to have been planned by one mind. Heresy asserts that goodness and justice are incompatible, and for this reason holds the existence of two Gods, the one good and the other just. This, however, is absurd. Goodness and justice are so far from being incompatible that the one perfection supposes the other. God would not be good if He were not just, and would not be just if He were not good. The two perfections are inseparable.

Origen's teaching on the subject of the Divine Trinity was, even in the days of the Fathers, differently viewed by different critics. Some Fathers, as Epiphanius, Jerome, and Augustine, regarded him as the forerunner of Arianism, and reproached him with anticipating in his writings the teachings of that heresy. Others, as Gregory Thaumaturgus, Dionysius of Alexandria, Pamphilus Martyr, and even Athanasius himself, did not question the orthodoxy of Origen's teaching regarding the Trinity. The last named writer did not scruple to quote arguments from the works of Origen, in his controversy with the Arians. Our own opinion is that Origen's doctrine regarding the Trinity is, in substance, orthodox; but we admit that in the scientific exposition of his opinions, he makes use of formulas and phrases which might easily give rise to misconceptions. It is not necessary to enter deeply into this question. We may dismiss it with the following remarks

In expounding the allegorical sense of the Scriptural saying, "Drink water from the fountain of three springs" (Prov. v. 15), Origen remarks: "To the inquiry, What is the one source of these several streams? I would answer: the knowledge of the unbegotten Father is one stream, the knowledge of the Son another, and finally, the knowledge of the Holy Ghost a third. For the Son is different from the Father, and the Holy Ghost different from the Father and the Son. The plurality of streams refers to the difference in person between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. But these several streams have one single source — in other words, the Divine Trinity is one in substance and in nature" (*In Num. Hom. xii. 1*). "We must, therefore, acknowledge one God, but admit in this confession of Faith, the Father, the Son, and the Holy

Ghost. Herein consists the *trias archikê*, the *trias proskunêtê* to which everything that is is subject” (*In Math.* t. 15, n. 31).

The Son is begotten from the substance of the Father, not created from nothing. But our notion of this conception must exclude every corporeal imagination; we must not, therefore, allow that in this generation the Son is separated from the Father’s substance. His personal character is not something extrinsic to the Godhead, it exists within the Divinity. As light goes forth from light, and the will proceeds from the spirit without separation from the source, so does the Son proceed from the Father, for the Divine nature is indivisible. This generation is from eternity. The Son exists from eternity as well as the Father. The generative act is not transient, it is eternally persistent, without any order of sequence, accomplished *simul et semel*. All that is in the Father is in the Son also (*In Jerem.* Hom. 8, n. 2). “The God of all things is not alone in His greatness; He shares His greatness with His Son, the First-born of creatures. This Son is the image of the invisible God, and represents in image the greatness of the Father” (*Cels.* vi. 69).

The meaning of these assertions regarding the Trinity, or rather, regarding the Son of God, is unmistakable. But there are other propositions laid down by Origen, on this point of Christian belief, which are not so irreproachable. For example, he states in one place (*In Joan.* t. 2, n. 2.) that “He who is *autotheos*, that is to say, God of His own nature, is called in the Gospel *ho theos*; whereas everything other than the *autotheos*, all that becomes God by virtue of participation in the Godhead of the latter, (*theopoïoumenon*), is, if we speak accurately, not *ho theos*, but merely *theos*. This latter appellation must be bestowed first of all on the First-born of creatures, for He, being *pros ton theon*, is the first to receive divinity from God, and is, therefore, superior to, and more excellent than, the other “gods,” to whom He (the *theos*) is, as it were, a *ho theos*. They owe it to Him and to His goodness that they are gods, for He derives *apo tou theou* the fulness of the nature which renders them gods. The true God is, therefore, *ho theos*; the beings who receive the form of God are images of this divine archetype. But of these images the first and primal image is that Logos which is *pros ton theon*, that Logos which has been from the beginning amid ever remains *pros ton theon*, which would not, however, possess Divine Being were He not *pros ton theon*, and would not remain God did He not eternally continue to contemplate the depth of the Father’s being.”

Another passage (*In Joan.* t. 13, n. 25) seems to be still more explicitly in favour of the subordination of the Son: “Although the Son of God,” says Origen, “surpasses all (created natures) in essence, dignity, power, and divinity, inasmuch as He is the living Word and the living Wisdom, yet He is in no wise the equal of the Father. For He is (merely) the image of the Father’s goodness, the reflection, not of God, but of God’s glory and eternal radiance — a pure emanation from His glory — the untarnished mirror of His action.” The Son and the Holy Ghost surpass all created things, but they are themselves surpassed by the Father, of whom the Redeemer says: “The Father who hath sent Me is greater than I.” In accordance with this teaching is the view put forward by Origen (*In Joan.* 32, 449), that the knowledge possessed by the Son is lower in kind than that possessed by the Father. The Son, he says, has knowledge of the Father, but a less perfect knowledge than the Father has of Himself.

These expressions, to which many others of the same kind might be added, do not affect the general orthodoxy of Origen’s opinions regarding the Trinity, for Origen in numberless other passages expresses himself with unequivocal correctness on the subject, and the doubtful passages must be interpreted in the light of the others, as meaning not a subordination of essence or nature but of person. Origen would appear to signify by these phrases that the Father is the *primum principium*, from whom the Son receives the Divine nature, being generated by Him. He attributes to the Father merely the *auctoritas primi principii* in the Divine Trinity,

and, in this respect only, puts Him above the Son and the Holy Ghost, without establishing in the latter a subordination of essence or nature to the Father. This becomes still more evident from the passages in which he expressly describes the Son as *autologos*, *autodunamis*, *autodikaiosunê*, *autoalêtheia*, etc., and teaches that the Son does not participate in Wisdom, Justice, etc., but that He is these things (in essence). (*C. Cels.* vi., c. 64.) But it is not to be denied that the expressions we have quoted are not above reproach as they stand, and might easily give occasion to misunderstanding. It is hardly surprising that, at a later period, the Arians appealed to the writings of Origen in support of their doctrines, and that many of the Fathers expressed themselves dissatisfied with Origen's views regarding the Trinity.

To proceed in our exposition. The Logos is the hypostatical Wisdom of God, and is, by the fact, the Archetype of all things, the *idea ideôn*. Through the Logos which thus, in archetypal fashion, contains all things in Himself, are all things created. By His power the universe exists. He penetrates and permeates the entire creation, giving being to and maintaining everything. He is the comprehensive force which embraces and upholds all things. He is, as it were, the soul of the universe. To Him is every revelation due. He is the source of reason in man; all knowledge of truth is, in the last analysis, attributable to Him. The motive which led to the creation of the world by the Logos is the Divine Goodness. God created the world out of love. He did not find matter already existent and fashion it into the universe; He is the author of matter also. "Otherwise some providence older than His must have been at work to give thought expression in matter, or some happy chance must have played the part of providence."

Creation has, however, had no beginning; it is eternal. The Divine omnipotence and goodness require that it should be so. God's omnipotence and goodness are eternal as God Himself. But God could not be eternally omnipotent if there were not from eternity something on which He could exert His power and His sovereignty; nor could He be eternally good if there were not from eternity creatures towards which His goodness might be exercised. Created. being must, therefore, have existed from eternity. This the more, that to admit a beginning in time of this created world would suppose a change to have taken place in God at the moment when He began to create. Furthermore, since God could not have a foreknowledge of everything, if the duration of the world were without limit, we must assume an endless *series* of *worlds*, or cosmical aeons, in which the end of one period is the beginning of the next. There has been no cosmical period in which a world did not exist. These numberless worlds are all different from one another; no one of them is wholly like another (*De Princ.* I. 2, 10.; III. 5, 3.; II. 5, 3.; II. 3, 4).

The created universe consists of two component parts — the world of spirits and the material world. Matter is only notionally different from the qualities that modify it; it cannot exist without these qualities. Therefore, in determining the nature of corporeal things as such, the Neo-Platonists are not far from the truth when they assert that a body is nothing more than a sum of qualities; for, if we separate the qualities from it, there is absolutely nothing left of the body. (*De Princ.* II. 1, 4.; IV. 34). With regard to spiritual beings, they are not distinguished by specific differences. God has made them all alike. If any differences are observed in them, these are to be attributed, not to their natural constitution, but to the free determining of their own condition. Created spirits are not, like God, essentially good; they can choose good or evil of their own free will, and, according to their choice, and their consequent merit or culpability, is their place in the universe assigned them. No being is of itself evil; its own action makes it whatever it is. All rational creatures resemble, at the outset, a homogeneous mass, from which God forms vessels for honour or dishonour, according to their several deserts (*De Princ.* III. 1, 21. ; III. 5, 4.; II. 9, 6).

From these principles important consequences are deducible. In the first place, Origen finds

in them a proof of the pre-existence of souls. Rational beings were, he holds, all created at once by God, alike in nature and alike in perfection. Of these many remained faithful to God, and by their faithful service preserved their original union with God. These are the angels. Others were too indolent to make the effort of will necessary to maintain their union with good, and in this way have separated themselves more or less from God. This separation, being a deliberate act on their part, and being a violation of the divine law, was an abandonment of God, and, as such, implied guilt in them. In punishment of this fault, the fallen spirits were repelled from God, and became reduced to a condition out of accord with their ideal state and destiny. Those that had separated themselves from God by the longest interval became demons; those whose fault was less were imprisoned in human bodies, and became human souls. It is, therefore, to this separation from God that we must attribute the origin of the demon world and of the human race. And to this separation must be attributed not only the origin of the human race, but also the differences which exist between men, as well in their individual qualities as in the external conditions of their existence — these differences being determined by the various degrees of the guilt which occasioned their entrance into the life of earth.

The consequences of this fall extend yet further. To it is also to be traced the origin of the material world of our experience. God created at once not only all spirits but all matter also, and, foreseeing the fall of the spirits, He created it in quantity sufficient for the formation of the world. Matter, however, existed at the outset, in a higher, supersensuous state, not exhibiting those rude sensible qualities under which it presents itself now. The possibility of such a higher state is intelligible from the fact that matter is, in its essence, merely an aggregate of intelligible qualities, which only in combination become sensible and corporeal. But when the spirits fell away from God, and in punishment of their offence were invested with bodies of flesh, all matter was reduced to a condition perceptible by sense; and out of this matter God formed the various objects of the sensible world for the use of man, and for the fulfilment of His plan of the universe. This is the “vanity” to which, according to the words of the apostle, even irrational things are made subject in consequence of the fall (*De Princip.* III. 5.; IV. 5).

These are the general principles of Origen’s system. Let us now examine the details of his teaching: Origen asserts the human soul to be of a spiritual nature, and endeavours to establish the same truth by demonstration. For this purpose he appeals to the essential qualities of the human faculty of cognition, urging that the range of human cognition, as well as the supersensuous character of the objects with which it is concerned, are inexplicable unless we admit the spiritual nature of the principle at work. Further, if real objects respond to the perceptions of sense, so also must a real object respond to that intellectual cognition which has for its object the *ego* itself, and this proves the soul to be no mere accident of the body. Lastly, if man were merely a body, God should also be regarded as a corporeal being, for man has knowledge of God, and the corporeal can have knowledge only of the corporeal (*De Princ.*, I. 1, 7).

Distinctly as Origen asserts the immaterial, and spiritual nature of the soul, he, nevertheless, will not admit it to be possible that a created spiritual substance could exist without a body. This prerogative, he holds to belong exclusively to God. He, therefore, maintains that all created spirits — human souls included — are, in their extramundane state, invested with a glorified body, and that this bodily adjunct is separate from them in thought only — not in fact. On these principles is based his teaching regarding the immortality of the soul. He holds it for indisputable that the soul is, of its nature, immortal; for, being a spiritual essence, it is, in a certain sense, like God, and must, therefore, be immortal like Him. A further argument is found in the fact that there would not be a perfect manifestation of the divine goodness if God did not bestow His benefits on rational creatures throughout eternity. Lastly, man could not be said to

be made to the image of God, if the immortality of that *image* — *i.e.*, of the Logos — had not its counterpart in man. But the soul, on quitting its earthly body, does not enter into a purely incorporeal state; it still preserves that ethereal body which is essential to it, and which, during this life, is hidden under the veil of the flesh (*Ib.* II., 2, 2).

Regarding the relations which subsist between soul and body, Origen teaches expressly that the body of flesh has life, sense, and movement from the soul. He cites the arguments currently used in support of the theory of three constituent elements in man's nature, but he sets forth the reasons which prove them ineffectual. As for the conflict between "the spirit and the flesh," which was a favourite argument with the supporters of that theory, he observes that "the flesh" denotes merely the sensual tendencies and appetites, and that the conflict between "spirit and flesh" refers merely to the antagonism between these desires and reason. Origen, indeed, distinguishes between *nous* and *psuchê*, but the distinction is a distinction of relations, and is explained by Origen in a peculiar fashion. In the Greek language, the term *psuchê* is connected with the idea of cold, and Origen is of opinion that the spirit (*nous*) becomes *psuchê* or vital principle of the body, because of its having grown cold in the love of God. It is, therefore, the present duty of the soul so to advance in the love of God, that it may divest itself of this character, and thus at length become the spirit again (*Ib.* II., 8, 3).

Origen holds the freedom of the will to be undeniable. The voice of consciousness, he says, speaks decisively on the point. Virtue without freedom is impossible. A being which can distinguish between different actions, which can approve of one and reprobate another, must necessarily be in a position to elect between them. Good and evil are founded on liberty. Evil is a turning away from the fulness of true being to emptiness and nothingness, and is therefore a *privation*; life in sin is a life of death. Evil has not its source in matter, it has its cause in the abuse of human liberty.

We have, in the last place, to examine the eschatology of Origen: The human soul has been condemned to imprisonment in the body, because of its sin in a previous state. This punishment is, however, a saving punishment. Healed of sin, the soul is destined to return to its first state. This return is, in the present aeon of the universe, dependent on the Redemption. Here we have the explanation of the Redeemer's mission. The Logos assumed human nature, and died for us, in order to obtain pardon and grace from God. The soul of Christ, like all other souls, existed antecedently to its union with the Logos; but by the unchanging, enduring love with which it remained faithful to God, this soul merited union with the Logos. In this sense, the union may be said to be the work of this soul itself.

The Redemption from sin is not efficacious for this life only, it extends its influence into the life to come. In that further life too, the punishment suffered is a saving punishment. Purified souls pass into glory immediately after the death of the body; for the others, the process of salvation through suffering is continued after death. This suffering is inflicted by fire, inasmuch as the consciousness of sin, and the stings of conscience resemble the torment caused by fire. This fire will purify the soul; and, the purification accomplished, the soul sooner or later enters into glory. The process of the purification of souls will extend over many centuries, and evil will thus gradually diminish, until at last it disappears wholly, and the mercy of God reaches down to him who has sunk lowest — to Satan. Accordingly, the final restoration will extend to all the spirits which have fallen away from God; to all human souls and to all the demons. The *Apocatastasis* will be universal (*Ib.* I., 6, 3.)

The *Apocatastasis* culminates in the resurrection of the body. When, at length, all souls have been purified, the bodies will be raised from the dead, and united to the souls in a glorified state. When all this has been accomplished, the material world returns again to its higher condition; the differences between material beings cease to exist, and the original unity and perfection of

the entire creation is re-established. God will then be all in all. Then begins a new cosmical period, a new falling off takes place, and a new world appears in place of the old. And so the series of never-ending changes proceeds.

Origen left behind him many famous disciples, from whose ranks came the most remarkable ecclesiastical teachers of the third century. We may mention, as specially worthy of note, Gregory Thaumaturgus, and Dionysius the Great. There were not wanting also many able writers to oppose what they regarded as the errors of his system. To the number of his opponents belongs Methodius, Bishop, first of Olympus, and subsequently of Tyre, who suffered martyrdom, probably, under Diocletian (A.D. 290.) Methodius attacked the theories of Origen regarding the likeness of nature in rational beings and the pre-existence of souls, as also his theory regarding the eternity of creation. Methodius composed two treatises (*Peri genêtôn* and *Peri anastaseôs*), in which he puts forward his refutation of these theories in the form of dialogues.

The specific and generic differences between things, Methodius holds, cannot be the consequence of the fall of the spirits; they are, on the contrary, the original conditions of existence, beginning with the beginning of the world; they are wholly natural, and, therefore, preconceived in the divine idea of things. In his opinion, the human soul cannot be regarded as like in nature to the angels, for the soul is destined to be united to the body, whilst the angelical nature excludes the notion of a body of flesh. Man is not soul alone; he consists of soul and body; both unite to constitute one form of beauty. The soul, therefore, cannot exist before the body; it must, as the form of the body, be created at the moment the body is created. Man exists from the beginning, as man, in the same way as all other things. Origen's arguments for the eternity of creation are worthless. God would possess His entire perfection, without a created world; no necessity whatever constrained Him to create the universe. If we admitted that the beginning of creation in time would imply a change in God, we should also be obliged to admit that the same would be implied in His ceasing to create. Whatever is created supposes a pre-existent cause of its being, is produced by this cause, and must, as thus produced, have had a beginning.

It is evident that Methodius had detected the errors in the teaching of Origen; nor was he deterred by the great reputation which Origen enjoyed from vigorously attacking, in the name of science, what he conceived to be the defects of his system. In this he rendered to Christian science, which was not yet established on a solid basis, a service which it is impossible to estimate too highly.

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