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The Bible in Early Christianity: Audiences, Projects, and Agendas

Peter Martens

Contested terrain

ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING—though by no means uncontroversial—academic developments in the past hundred years has been the renaissance of interest in how the Bible was interpreted by early Christians. If we are to adequately characterize this renaissance, it is crucial to acknowledge that it has often been motivated by more than an antiquarian interest in reconstructing a dusty corner of late antique Christianity. On any view of the long history of scriptural interpretation, it is readily acknowledged that this discipline underwent a profound transformation in the modern era. Precisely when, how, and why this revolution took place is debated. But no one contests *that* it happened and that its two main protagonists—the premodern and modern iterations of this discipline—often stand in a disjunctive, even hostile, relationship to one another.

This paper was delivered as a lecture sponsored by the Center for the Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts and the Ancient Near Eastern Studies program at Brigham Young University (March 27, 2015). I am grateful to Carl Griffin for organizing the event and for the hospitality extended to me during my stay. I delivered a lengthier version of this talk at the quadrennial international Origen conference held in Aarhus, Denmark (August 26–31, 2013). That version is being published in the conference proceedings: *Origeniana Undecima: Origen and Origenism in the History of Western Thought*, ed. Anders-Christian Jacobsen (Leuven: Peeters, 2016).

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In his Bampton lectures delivered at the University of Oxford in 1885, Frederic W. Farrar gave classic expression to the modern, withering critique of premodern biblical interpretation. Farrar presented a view of early Christian scriptural scholars that is still representative of how many biblical scholars today, over 125 years later, view these figures. “The task before us,” Farrar wrote,

is in some respects a melancholy one. We shall pass in swift review many centuries of exegesis, and shall be compelled to see that they were, in the main, centuries during which the interpretation of Scripture has been dominated by unproven theories, and overlaid by untenable results. . . . Exegesis has often darkened the true meaning of Scripture, not evolved or elucidated it. This is no mere assertion. If we test its truth by the Darwinian principle of “the survival of the fittest,” we shall see that, as a matter of fact, the vast mass of what has passed for Scriptural interpretation is no longer deemed tenable, and has now been condemned and rejected by the wider knowledge and deeper insight of mankind.¹

Farrar continues, calling to mind recent developments in archaeology, history, and comparative religion, and concludes that these disciplines

have resulted in the indefinite limitation, if not the complete abandonment, of the principles which prevailed for many hundreds of years in the exegesis of Scripture, and in the consignment to oblivion—for every purpose except that of curiosity—of the special meanings assigned by these methods to book after book and verse after verse of the sacred writings.²

For Farrar, “the history of interpretation” was “to a large extent a history of errors,”³ and it was Origen—a figure I will discuss at greater length in

1. Frederic W. Farrar, *History of Interpretation: Eight Lectures Preached before the University of Oxford in the Year 1885 on the Foundation of the Late Rev. John Bampton* (London: Macmillan, 1886), 8–9.

2. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 9–10.

3. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, xxxv.

this essay—who helped establish these “errors” of exegesis for more than a thousand years.⁴ While very important exceptions to this dismissive attitude exist today, I suspect that Farrar’s sentiments would probably still ring true to many professional biblical scholars, for whom patristic biblical interpretation is at best a distraction and, at worst, an obstacle to sound, biblical exegesis.

A number of disciplinary, ecclesiastical, and institutional factors have contributed to the renewal of interest in patristic exegesis. But it is important to appreciate that this renaissance has transpired against the backdrop of a long and deep suspicion about the value of premodern exegesis in Christian circles. This becomes especially clear when we turn to the early historical studies in the field. They were authored by Christian intellectuals who were not only familiar with this suspicion, but whose studies were also marked by this suspicion—either reiterating its veracity or calling it into question. I offer two brief and contrasting examples as they pertain to Origen, the towering third-century scholar of the Bible and lightning rod for many subsequent debates about biblical exegesis.

In *History and Spirit*, Henri de Lubac, a Jesuit priest, threw into sharp relief the competing perspectives from which Origen’s exegesis had often been approached.⁵ On the one hand, most readers saw nothing of interest or importance in Origen. They rejected his approach to scripture as an “aberration” that did not even deserve “from the historian a glance of sympathetic curiosity, an effort to rediscover its soul.”⁶ The voice of Farrar is unmistakable. On the other hand, de Lubac warned, “It would be no less an error . . . to admire these ancient constructions so much that we wished to take up permanent residence in them.”⁷ Resisting unqualified rejection as well as naïve retrieval, de

4. Farrar, *History of Interpretation*, 190.

5. Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit: L’Intelligence de l’Écriture d’après Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1950). Translated by Anne E. Nash and Juvenal Merriell as *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007).

6. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 429.

7. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 429.

Lubac's project lay somewhere between these two extremes. It aimed for a disposition that was apparently quite rare in his day: an appreciative analysis that steered clear of the debilitating prejudice that saw from the start nothing of value in Origen, as well as the avoidance of an "excessive enthusiasm that would lead us to imitate their [i.e., the ancients'] methods."⁸ De Lubac ultimately concluded that Origen's exegetical project was of mixed value. Beneath its discardable husk lay an enduring kernel: "at the heart of their [the fathers'] exegesis dwells a sacred element that belongs to the treasure of the faith."⁹

R. P. C. Hanson, later Anglican bishop of Clogher, published *Allegory and Event* nine years after de Lubac's *History and Spirit*.¹⁰ Hanson's book raised the alarm about the increasingly sympathetic ways in which the French Jesuits were approaching Origen's biblical scholarship. Hanson overtly aligned himself with contemporary historical-critical biblical exegesis. On the opening page of his study he raised the question that would shape his entire inquiry: "Has the interpretation of the

8. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 491. A handful of projects today more or less align with, and extend, de Lubac's agenda to the actual practice of scriptural reading. There is a growing sentiment in some pockets of the English-speaking world that patristic (and medieval, reformation, and early modern) exegesis has become a crucial resource for understanding and gaining inspiration from the Bible. The aim of these projects is to utilize patristic interpretations of scripture to help today's readers determine what the Bible meant, or means. See especially Thomas C. Oden, ed., *The Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998-); and Robert L. Wilken, ed., *The Church's Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003-). Both projects gather patristic biblical interpretations on a particular biblical book—we might call these "neo-catenas"—with the view to supplementing modern critical scholarship on the Bible. Another notable series, the Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible, ed. R. R. Reno (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009-), contains a number of volumes that mediate the patristic exegetical legacy through a wide spectrum of contemporary theologians and ethicists who seek to clarify the Christian doctrinal message of scripture; see R. R. Reno, series preface to *1 and 2 Peter*, by Douglas Harink (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2009), 10–14.

9. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 491. For more on de Lubac's project, see Susan K. Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

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

Bible as it is practiced today anything seriously in common with the interpretation of the Bible as Origen, and indeed as the early Church generally, practiced it?”¹¹ As becomes increasingly clear to the reader of Hanson’s book, the answer to this question is, with few exceptions, “no.” Origen’s biblical exegesis was vastly inferior to contemporary biblical scholarship, whose “guiding principle” was “the question of what any given text meant when it was first written or uttered to the first audience for which it was intended.”¹²

It is helpful to have these two studies in mind. They are two of the most important books on Origen’s exegesis, and astonishingly both still remain in print, an indication of their significance for the continuing interest in Origen. These books also demonstrate how research into Origen from within theological departments has rarely been motivated by simple antiquarian interests. De Lubac and Hanson were genuinely interested in helping their readers understand Origen’s exegesis, but this did not preclude contemporary debates about biblical scholarship from seeping into the pages of their works. Even if we seldom encounter research on Origen—or on other early Christian figures today—that is characterized by such undisguised, normative inquiries (whether in the form of Hanson’s brazen call to reject or de Lubac’s plea to retrieve a vital essence), the topics that scholars have chosen, the ways in which they have handled them, and indeed, even the topics that have been ignored have often reflected the evolving debates within contemporary biblical scholarship, and increasingly, debates outside this discipline.

From topic to field

But before turning to some of these trends in the research, it might be useful to briefly sketch a narrative of the rise of interest in early Christian biblical interpretation, or “the reception history of the Bible.” A good point to begin this narrative is in the years following World War II,

11. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 7.

12. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 362, 368.

where interest in this topic experienced a pronounced revival. Among continental European Catholics a growing dissatisfaction arose with the strongly Thomistic and rationalistic orientation of their theological program, a program often devoid of a clear connection to scripture. New sources for thinking the faith were sought, and so these *ressourcement* theologians turned east. An important vehicle for this new orientation within Catholic theology was the series Sources Chrétiennes, founded in Lyon, France, by the Jesuits Jean Daniélou, Claude Mondésert, and Henri de Lubac. This series aimed to expand the canon of texts for doing Catholic theology.

Its first volume was saturated with significance: the aforementioned Jean Daniélou—one of the leading *ressourcement* theologians—published an edition of Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses*.¹³ Here readers were presented with a patristic text, not a medieval one; a Greek text, not a Latin one; one made accessible to the reading public with a facing French translation, not simply an edition accessible only to the classically trained scholar; a text focused on the spiritual or mystical life, not on the subtle distinctions of fourth-century Trinitarian theology; and a text that integrated scriptural exegesis into its theological program, not one in which the Bible retreated into the background. In his *Life of Moses*, Gregory invited readers to enter the rich world of early Christian allegory and join Moses in the ascent of Mount Sinai, an allegory of the Christian's never-ceasing ascent to the eschatological face-to-face encounter with God.

Today Sources Chrétiennes remains an important vehicle for transmitting patristic biblical interpretation, but it has been joined by a number of other series that merit attention. Patristic commentaries and homilies on scripture are continually being edited within the major series of critical editions, such as the Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca or Oxford's Early Christian Texts, where my own edition of Adrian's *Introduction to the Divine Scriptures* will be published. Perhaps the most notable development in coming years will be the new editions

13. *Grégoire de Nyssa: Contemplation sur la Vie de Moïse*, ed. Jean Daniélou, Sources Chrétiennes 1 (Paris: Cerf, 1943).

and studies on Alexandrian and Antiochene biblical exegesis coming out of the Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften.¹⁴

Much of this foundational textual work has been translated into an array of modern European languages.¹⁵ English speakers have been generally well served, and there is even an anthology of early Christian biblical interpretation that remains serviceable.¹⁶ I should note, however, that *many* really important early Christian treatises on the Bible, as well as homilies and commentaries on it, remained unedited, or if edited, have never been translated into English. Much textual work remains to be done.

As this textual work progressed, specialized articles and books naturally followed. A journal in Italy is devoted to the history of exegesis,¹⁷ and Brill publishes a monograph series called the Bible in Ancient Christianity.¹⁸ A very important research tool, *Biblia Patristica*, is currently developing from its original print format to a digital format. This reference work allows readers to identify the places in the writings of early Christian authors where they discussed a particular verse.¹⁹ And not a few important overviews of the field have been authored.²⁰ I regard

14. <http://www.bbaw.de/forschung/biblexegese/uebersicht>.

15. Begin with Adalbert Keller, *Translationes Patristicae Graecae et Latinae = Bibliographie der Übersetzungen altchristlicher Quellen* (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1997). See also Charles Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 39–44.

16. Karlfried Froehlich, trans. and ed., *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

17. *Annali di Storia dell'Esgesi* (1984–).

18. <http://www.brill.com/publications/bible-ancient-christianity>.

19. <http://www.bibindex.mom.fr/>.

20. Jean Daniélou, *Sacramentum Futuri: Études sur les origines de la typologie biblique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1950); Robert M. Grant, *The Letter and the Spirit* (London: SPCK, 1957); Henri de Lubac, *Exégèse Médiéval: Les quatre sens de l'Écriture* (Paris: Aubier, 1959–64); Bertrand de Margerie, *Introduction à l'Histoire de l'exégèse* (Paris: Cerf, 1980); Manlio Simonetti, *Profilo storico dell'esgesi patristica* (Rome: Istituto patristico "Augustinianum," 1981), and *Lettera e/o allegoria: Un contributo alla storia dell'esgesi patristica* (Rome: Institutum Patristicum "Augustinianum," 1985); James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986); Frances M. Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge:

Frances Young's *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* as the most important of these. The work is becoming dated but still remains the point of departure for any serious research in the field.

As we follow the life cycle of this emerging field of study we arrive, finally, at the reference works. Charles Kannengiesser's *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis: The Bible in Ancient Christianity* receives the notable distinction of becoming the first reference work devoted exclusively to biblical interpretation in early Christianity.²¹ The *Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation* is currently in development under the editorial supervision of Paul Blowers and myself.²²

Several indications show that work in the field is still accelerating today. Perhaps the most compelling evidence for the establishment of the study of patristic exegesis as a scholarly discipline at the beginning of the twenty-first century is that this topic is surfacing beyond the traditional boundaries of early Christian studies. Arguably the most striking development has been the editorial decision at Walter de Gruyter to integrate the reception history of the Bible, patristic exegesis included, into its *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (EBR)*.²³ In the encyclopedia's introduction, the editors remark that interest in the reception history of Bible has many roots so that "a now well-established branch of biblical studies, *the history of exegesis*, continues to contribute to the debate about the meanings of the biblical texts as they have been

Cambridge University Press, 1997); Henry Chadwick, *Antike Schriftauslegung: Pagane und christliche Allegorese. Activa und Passiva im antiken Umgang mit der Bibel* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998); John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Ronald E. Heine, *Reading the Old Testament with the Ancient Church: Exploring the Formation of Early Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007).

21. Kannengiesser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*.

22. See the layout of the volume at <https://slu.academia.edu/PeterMartens>.

23. <http://www.degruyter.com/view/db/ebr>. Note as well the new series *Lives of Great Religious Books* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011–), which includes contributions on individual biblical books, as well as on other religious writings. Its aim is to "examine the historical origins of texts from the great religious traditions, and trace how their reception, interpretation, and influence have changed—often radically—over time" (<http://press.princeton.edu/catalogs/series/lgrb.html>).

expounded in the histories of Judaism and Christianity.”²⁴ The willingness of this encyclopedia to consider not simply the current state of scholarship on the Bible, but also the Bible’s reception in the patristic period, reflects emerging scholarly agendas and will undoubtedly also set them. On this issue of reception history, the contrast between the *EBR*, which will be the major reference work on the Bible for coming decades, and its predecessor, the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, is striking: the latter rarely attended to the topic, and its aversion to anything premodern is suggested by the absence of an entry on “allegory,” even though the apostle Paul used the word in his letter to the Galatians.

I hope to have conveyed through this very schematic orientation to research on early Christian biblical interpretation that what began as a narrow topic of academic interest around the middle of the twentieth century has gradually blossomed into a full-fledged, international field of study—perhaps even a discipline in its own right. It has its editions and translations, research tools, monograph series, a journal, and several reference works. From my viewpoint, this field of study is animated by three major stakeholders who approach it with often disparate motivations: (1) professional biblical scholars who, perhaps due to a growing exhaustion with, or simply the exhaustion of, traditional approaches to scripture, find in reception history new avenues that supplement how they have examined canonical texts; (2) historians of Christianity who increasingly recognize the importance of scripture and the scribal, interpretive, and institutional cultures that emerged around it for reconstructing the world of early Christians; and (3) scholars and preachers with normative theological programs who, not unlike the *ressourcement* theologians of the mid-twentieth century, wish to integrate scripture more obviously into their own projects. In patristic biblical exegesis they find such an ally.

24. Hans-Josef Klauck et al., eds., introduction to *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), 1:xi.

The middle stakeholder group

I belong to the second of these stakeholders. I am a historian of early Christianity, and while interested in how the other two stakeholders view my work, my research remains firmly tied to the field called patristics, or early Christian studies. Most of my work has been on Origen, the famous third-century Christian. Origen was many things—an educator, priest, apologist, ecclesiastical diplomat, churchman, and heretic, among others—and subsequent generations, ours included, have struggled to offer a coherent portrait of this complex, late antique figure. Yet among friends and foes alike, few have lost sight of Origen, the biblical scholar. With only a touch of exaggeration, Adolf von Harnack quipped, “There has never been a theologian in the church who desired to be, and indeed was, so exclusively an interpreter of the Bible as Origen was.”²⁵ Hardly surprising, then, is this larger renaissance of interest in patristic exegesis, often focused specifically on Origen, that I have briefly sketched here. He was an extraordinarily prolific biblical scholar, whose exegetical writings exercised influence and stirred much controversy among subsequent Christians in both the Greek- and Latin-speaking worlds. It is my contention that if we attend to the major trends in the research on Origen, we will have a good sense as to the larger trajectories that run through the research on patristic scriptural exegesis as a whole.

While the literature on Origen’s biblical scholarship is notoriously large, it tends to follow well-worn paths. Two prominent trajectories merit detailed examination: the focus on Origen’s literary scholarship—by which I mean his philological procedures, including the quest for the literal and allegorical referents of scripture—and the growing interest in the social dynamics of Origen’s biblical scholarship. Let’s begin with Origen’s literary scholarship.

25. Adolf von Harnack, *Der Kirchengeschichtliche Ertrag der exegetischen Arbeiten des Origenes*, 2. Teil: *Die Beiden Testaments mit Ausschluss des Hexateuchs und des Richterbuchs*, Texte und Untersuchungen 42.4 (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1919), II.4 A3.

Origen the philologist

In the preface to his *History of Classical Scholarship*, Rudolph Pfeiffer announced his quest to identify a *philologia perennis*—that is, a literary scholarship that was “still enduring,” while omitting what was “obsolete and past for ever.”²⁶ Pfeiffer did not explicitly identify this chaff, though he tipped his hand when he referred later in his preface to the “Alexandrian scholar poets” as “our ancestors” and underscored that they did not, in fact, practice allegorical interpretation.²⁷ Allegorical exegesis played a small role in Pfeiffer’s narrative and he was not alone among scholars of his generation in relegating it to the margins. Allegory was not scholarship, or at least, a *philologia perennis*.

In Origenian scholarship, Bernhard Neuschäfer’s *Origenes als Philologe* is a striking parallel to Pfeiffer’s approach.²⁸ Inspired by the scholia on Dionysius of Thrax’s *Art of Philology*, Neuschäfer examines how the four main philological exercises of the typical late antique classroom all surface in Origen’s own work: textual criticism, reading a passage aloud, literary and historical analysis, and finally, aesthetic and moral evaluation. The all-important exercise of literary and historical analysis consisted of several independent inquiries: elucidation of a word’s meaning, grammatical and rhetorical analysis, metrical assessment and style criticism, and finally, examination of the historical realities discussed or alluded to in a scriptural passage. Neuschäfer’s book is one of the towering achievements in twentieth-century Origenian scholarship. It is not without precedent, but it remains the most comprehensive investigation of Origen’s literary scholarship to date.

Neuschäfer raises a question on the closing pages of his study that strongly echoes Pfeiffer’s earlier research: given the long-standing interest in Origen the allegorist, and now Neuschäfer’s own account of Origen the philologist, do we have here two irreconcilable portraits, or is it possible that these two halves can be woven together into a single,

26. Rudolph Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, vol. 1, *From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), vii.

27. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, x, 140, 167.

28. Bernhard Neuschäfer, *Origenes als Philologe* (Basel: Reinhardt, 1987).

harmonious picture?²⁹ Neuschäfer leaves this question unanswered, though I suspect he would favor the latter scenario. Even so, the talk of two halves, and the deliberate exclusion of allegory from the discussion of Origen's philology, suggests that an enduring modern prejudice is still at work: even if we *can* link allegory to philology, allegory is *not* philology. On the whole, my impression is that over the course of the last half century, classicists and historians of literary criticism have increasingly resisted this tendency to divorce allegory from philology or literary analysis. Robert Lamberton, George Boys-Stones, and Peter Struck (to name only a few) have often been more inclined than their counterparts in church history to treat allegory as integral and not peripheral to late antique literary scholarship.³⁰

And this takes us to Origen the allegorist. Never, seemingly, has there been a period in the modern epoch when scholars have not been interested in—or perhaps we should say fixated on—Origen's allegory. Nor is this surprising, since it is precisely here where he stands at his farthest remove from modern biblical scholarship.³¹ As noted above,

29. Neuschäfer, *Origenes als Philologe*, 292.

30. In response to this prejudice, which was not original to Pfeiffer, classicists and historians of literary criticism have issued a number of studies on ancient allegorical practices. Notably, Félix Buffière, *Les mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1956); Jean Pépin, *Mythe et allégorie* (Paris: Éditions Montaigne, 1958); Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); George R. Boys-Stones, *Metaphor, Allegory, and the Classical Tradition: Ancient Thought and Modern Revisions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Robert Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); Peter T. Struck, *Birth of the Symbol: Ancient Readers at the Limits of Their Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Ilaria Ramelli, "Cornutus in christlichem Umfeld: Märtyrer, Allegorist und Grammatiker," in *Cornutus: Die Griechischen Götter: Ein Überblick über Namen, Bilder und Deutungen*, ed. Heinz-Günther Nesselrath et al. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 207–34. On the continually evolving character of philology as a discipline, see Karla Pollmann, "Philologia Perennis: Ever-Green and Ever-Pruning," *Frons: Blad voor Leidse Classici* 30 (2010): 90–98.

31. Rudolf Bultmann, "Die Bedeutung des Alten Testaments für den christlichen Glauben," in *Glauben und Verstehen: Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1933), 1:335.

it was precisely through this lens that R. P. C. Hanson evaluated Origen's exegetical project.³² For Hanson, Origen's biblical interpretation exemplified the "alchemy of allegory" and was deficient in comparison to contemporary biblical scholarship whose "guiding principle" is "the question of what any given text meant when it was first written or uttered to the first audience for which it was intended."³³ Unlike the great expositors of the past who "successfully put themselves into the minds of the biblical author whom they are interpreting," Origen "on countless occasions gives the opposite impression, that he is reading into the mind of the biblical author thoughts which are really his own."³⁴ "The critical subject," Hanson continues,

upon which Origen never accepted the biblical viewpoint was the significance of history. To the writers of the Bible history is *par excellence* the field of God's revelation of himself. The Jewish historians may not have achieved the accuracy of a modern historian, but they did believe that in the events of history God's will and purposes were made plain.³⁵

While Hanson is clear that Origen did not "reject or abandon history" as some scholars insist, he did not have a deep respect for it.³⁶ "History," Hanson summarizes, "is therefore an essential ingredient of revelation; it is an inseparable part of the manner in which God reveals himself. One might almost say that in the Incarnation God has in a sense taken history into himself. To this insight Origen is virtually blind."³⁷ Hanson's argument, then, is that there are two different views of history: history as "event" and history as "parable." "In history as event, in history as

32. This account of Hanson is indebted to my earlier essay, Peter Martens, "Origen against History: Reconsidering the Critique of Allegory," *Modern Theology* 28 (2012): 635–56.

33. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 362, 368.

34. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 363.

35. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 363.

36. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 364. Most of the chapter entitled "Historicity" investigates the passages where Origen denies and affirms historicity (259–77).

37. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 364.

the field of God's self-revelation *par excellence*, Origen is not in the least interested. He is only interested in history as parable," or symbol of eternal truths about God.³⁸ Herein lies the force of his title *Allegory and Event*: the *and* means something like "is opposed to" or "trivializes."³⁹

This book was intended as a rebuttal to the growing sympathies with Origen's biblical scholarship among the *ressourcement* French Jesuits, especially Henri de Lubac. De Lubac, as noted earlier, sought to rehabilitate the tarnished legacy of Origen, particularly the charge that he was a reckless allegorist who was mired in pagan exegesis.⁴⁰ The scholarship of de Lubac and Hanson was reflective of one of the most persistent historiographical distinctions of the modern era: they largely accepted the reigning demarcation of the Hellenistic/pagan from the salutary Hebrew/Christian. For Hanson, Origen missed the Hebraic view of history's significance because he was uncritically Hellenistic; for de Lubac, Origen's allegory, or "spiritual exegesis," was primarily indebted to the traditions of exegesis already seen within the New Testament, especially in Paul's writings, as well as being continuous with the Greek and Latin Catholic exegetical traditions that followed him and were, in some measure, also dependent upon him. But for de Lubac there was more than an external link between Origen and the New Testament authors. There was a "Catholic instinct"⁴¹ that drove Origen's project, which itself could not be disentangled from "a whole manner of thinking, a whole world view . . . [a] whole interpretation of Christianity."⁴² De Lubac's book was ultimately about the relationship between

38. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, 276.

39. For a critique of Hanson's reading, see Martens, "Origen against History," 646–50.

40. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 9–10. "Yet one thing is certain: Origen's effort was inconceivable to a Hellenic mind. . . . For the moment, let us merely observe that, whatever the procedural similarities we might be able to enumerate, whatever the mutual participation we might even be able to observe in the same 'allegorizing' mentality, that effort alone is enough to place an abyss between Origen, thoroughly marked by Christianity, and those Greeks to whom he is at times thoughtlessly compared" (317).

41. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 295.

42. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 11.

the two testaments. When Origen allegorized the Old, he sought to discern Jesus Christ, the church, or indeed the New Testament in the figures, events, and institutions narrated in Israel's scriptures. The *et* in the title *Histoire et Esprit* did not mark conflict, the hostile rejection of the Old *histoire* in favor of the New *esprit*, but a complex, unique, and ultimately mysterious harmony. "The New Testament is hidden in the Old, the Old is made clear in the New."⁴³ This harmony ultimately expressed a christological thesis, with which de Lubac closed his study: "By bringing himself, he [Christ] brought renewal."⁴⁴

Today most of us are aware that the Hellenistic-Hebraic dichotomy is too simplistic and that Origen's exegetical project cannot be situated as neatly in one camp or the other as both Hanson and de Lubac thought. Yet despite the differing agendas of both authors, my impression is that there was a good deal less *debate* between them than first meets the eye. Both de Lubac and Hanson knew that Origen's view of scripture, and the way in which he read it, differed markedly from contemporary scholarly approaches to the Bible. But both remained strongly perspectival in their approach: one viewed this difference sympathetically, and the other critically. Neither author was particularly interested in discovering the full range of presuppositions that informed these disparate approaches to scripture, and so the robust evaluation of both Origen's approach *and* the modern approach to the Bible was decidedly underdeveloped. The reader has the distinct impression that these books belonged more to the world of campaigns than arguments.

Origen and the transformation of society

Probably the most striking shift in the scholarship in the last half century has been a new social contextualization of Origen's scriptural exegesis. In this trajectory—representative of the larger shift in patristics studies, especially in the North American scene—the driving questions have been reoriented; they are simply no longer how did Origen interpret

43. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 503, but see especially 503–7.

44. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 507.

or view the Bible, but how did his exegetical project influence society?⁴⁵ Emblematic of this shift for the whole field of patristic exegesis is the title of Frances Young's landmark work: *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*.⁴⁶ What makes this development so interesting is that it has created unexpected bedfellows. On the one hand, scholars who work within an ecclesiastical and theological framework see this new focus as the exploration of Origen's larger pastoral, spiritual, or pedagogical vision. On the other hand, scholars who dialogue with contemporary literary and cultural studies have seen this inquiry furthering the larger theoretical concern for identifying the ways in which our cultures are, in fact, fluid and constructed, not simply static, given realities.

This new focus on the cultural impact of Origen's biblical scholarship surfaces strongly in Karen Jo Torjesen's *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis*. She insists that we organize Origen's exegesis "around the figure of the hearer/reader."⁴⁷ Torjesen argues for a twofold pedagogy of the Logos: the original, historical teaching, which was located in the literal sense of scripture, and the contemporary pedagogy, which resided in the spiritual sense and was continually being directed toward new audiences. Origen's allegorical project, Torjesen contends, was to reenact the original pedagogical activity of the Logos for a contemporary audience: "Therefore Origen's exegesis moves from the saving doctrines of Christ once taught to the saints (the historical pedagogy of the Logos) to the same saving doctrines which transform his hearers today (the contemporary pedagogy)."⁴⁸ Origen

45. On this shift, see especially Elizabeth A. Clark, "From Patristics to Early Christian Studies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, ed. Susan A. Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7–41.

46. See especially Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 215, where what she means by "formation" becomes clear: "The Bible's principal function in the patristic period was the generation of a way of life, grounded in the truth about the way things are, as revealed by God's Word. Exegesis served this end."

47. Karen Jo Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method in Origen's Exegesis* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 12.

48. Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 13.

arranged these doctrines so that they corresponded to the needs of his audiences, thereby ensuring “a progression of stages in the Christian’s progress toward perfection.”⁴⁹ Simply put, biblical interpretation was “the mediation of Christ’s redemptive teaching activity to the hearer.”⁵⁰ Torjesen sheds genuinely new light on Origen’s exegetical project, and her work has been well received.

John David Dawson has contributed two books to this broader issue of how exegesis shaped society. In *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria*, he argues that Alexandrian allegory was an instrument put into the service not of salvation (as Torjesen had claimed), but of “cultural revision,” where “readers secure for themselves and their communities social and cultural identity, authority, and power.”⁵¹ The study examines Philo, Clement, and Valentinus. More recently, Dawson has published a book on Origen that still expresses his interest in the influence of exegesis on society and culture but that also takes a less cynical view of his subject matter. His *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* is written in the demanding idiom of literary and cultural theory and rarely dialogues with earlier Origenian scholarship.⁵² However, closer inspection indicates that this book is traditional not only in the question that it raises, but also in the answer that it provides. Dawson tackles an old problem in Christian theology, the relationship between the Old and New Testaments and in particular, the familiar charge that Christian allegorical exegesis of Hebrew scripture undermines the literal meaning of the text and thus entails some form of supersessionism. Dawson’s chief interlocutors are Daniel Boyarin, Erich Auerbach, and Hans Frei, three prominent theorists of figural reading. Dawson criticizes all three for imposing a modernist conception of allegory on Origen, according to which

49. Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 12.

50. Torjesen, *Hermeneutical Procedure*, 14.

51. John David Dawson, *Allegorical Readers and Cultural Revision in Ancient Alexandria* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 2.

52. John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

he is thought to have reduced, replaced, or undermined the “Jewish meaning,” “historicity,” or the “literal sense” of the text. In fact, Dawson counters, Origen exemplifies—and serves as an exemplar for—a properly Christian symbolic reading of the Hebrew Bible that builds upon or transforms the literal Jewish sense and thus respects “the independent religious identity of Jews, and, more broadly, the diverse identities of all human beings.”⁵³ Such a symbolic reading deserves the name *figural* to distinguish it from the literal-historical denying *figurative* or *allegorical* exegesis.⁵⁴ To those well-versed in the modern reception of Origen, it is evident that Dawson’s proposal for how Origen linked the two testaments was in many ways already anticipated by de Lubac.⁵⁵

New approaches—integrative

In closing, I ask your indulgence as I map out some of my own work in the field. When I set out to write my book on Origen, my impression was that most of the research had been directed toward specific facets of Origen’s exegetical project but that the overall shape of this project had not been adequately sketched. It was also my impression that, despite the bewildering array of studies on Origen’s biblical scholarship, there was also a glaring omission in the literature: a failure to account for the sort of person doing scriptural exegesis. What had gone missing, in my view, was a biographical approach to Origen’s biblical interpretation. His writings teem with observations about the sorts of credentials required to be a good reader of scripture. And we know from the prologues to

53. Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 3–4.

54. Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, 15.

55. Dawson, though, refers only once to de Lubac (at 125–26). Also note especially Trigg’s critique of Dawson’s reticence to engage earlier scholarship on Origen: Joseph W. Trigg, review of *Christian Figural Reading*, by John D. Dawson, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10 (2002): 524–26.

philosophical commentaries in late antiquity that outlining the reader's credentials was more than a Christian concern.⁵⁶

In my book *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life*,⁵⁷ I adopt such a biographical approach by examining Origen's portrait of the scriptural interpreter. For Origen, ideal interpreters were far more than philologists steeped in the skills and teachings conveyed by Greco-Roman education. Their profile also included a commitment to Christianity from which they gathered a spectrum of loyalties, guidelines, dispositions, relationships, and doctrines that tangibly shaped how they practiced and thought about their biblical scholarship. Not unlike the emerging consensus among historians of late antique philosophy like Pierre Hadot, then, I argue that for Origen scriptural exegesis was a way of life⁵⁸—a particular sort of life. Origen contextualized interpreters—himself included—within the drama of salvation. They did not simply examine this drama as it unfolded on scripture's pages. In doing biblical interpretation well, they also participated in this drama by expressing various facets of their existing Christian commitment: for example, by following Paul's exegetical precedent, reading in conformity with the rule of faith, and exercising a wide range of reading virtues while examining scripture (to name only a few). Ideal interpreters *qua* interpreters embarked upon a way of salvation that ultimately culminated in the everlasting contemplation of God.

In my estimation, one of the great advantages of introducing a biographical approach to the study of patristic biblical exegesis, Origen included, is that it helps us see more than a particular facet of ancient scriptural scholarship. The interpreter was the animating center of the

56. Jaap Mansfeld, *Prolegomena: Questions to Be Settled before the Study of an Author, or a Text* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 23–24, 161–73.

57. Peter Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

58. See, for instance, Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, Belknap, 2004); Alfons Fürst, *Von Origenes und Hieronymus zu Augustinus: Studien zur antiken Theologiegeschichte* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 81–114, 125–62.

entire project of biblical interpretation. To offer a detailed biographical portrait of this person is to hold out the promise of disclosing the sweeping contours of the entire Origenian exegetical project, and, I think, of finding new ways to compare and contrast it with the exegetical projects of his later critics, like Theodore of Mopsuestia. This is precisely the area in which I hope to direct my attention in coming years—the exegetical projects, or perhaps better, exegetical cultures of Alexandria and Antioch. The complex relationship between these cultures cannot be collapsed into who allegorized and who read literally. These cultures were replete with assumptions, indeed convictions, about ideal readers, ideal “pagan” models for interpretation, and notions of textuality, of institutional contexts, of facets or stages of exegesis, and of metaphors for reading, all of which informed the emergence of two different, and sometimes competing, approaches to the authoritative text of Christians.

Conclusion

In the opening pages of Young’s *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture*, she remarks that her two aims are “to challenge accepted generalisations” in the standard accounts of patristic biblical exegesis and “to work with certain key texts and authors to provide living examples of the exegetical process, its principles, underlying assumptions and practice.”⁵⁹ These are still excellent guidelines for working in the field. But I would like to add one more. I often find myself returning to the realization that work on Origen’s biblical scholarship, and the biblical scholarship of other early Christian figures, is easily susceptible to unintentional anachronism. For many of us, our first exposure to biblical scholarship was not what we found in Origen but what we experienced in the classrooms where we were initiated into the guild of contemporary biblical scholarship. Words like *scripture*, *exegesis*, and *scholarship* flow easily off our tongues, their denotations

59. Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 4–5.

and connotations configured by the academic lexicon of the twenty-first century. Yet we use these same words to understand early Christian scriptural exegesis and to translate its writings. Indeed, some of these words are transliterations of the original Greek and Latin terms we study. But the registers of these ancient words rarely overlap tidily with their modern equivalents. This is a challenge in all historical work, but especially one that confronts us historians of biblical exegesis, for this discipline underwent an enduring revolution in the modern era. And we do not stand on Origen's side of that revolution, but on *this* side, where with the passing of time, the old ways become increasingly foreign. This is perhaps the greatest demand placed on the historian of biblical exegesis: to be vigilantly self-aware of the limitations of our language and to be correspondingly responsive to the strangeness of the ancient world that awaits us.

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