

Appendix I

Origen's Interpretation of the Creation



During the twentieth century Origen has been credited with coining the Gap Theory,(1) the Preadamite theory,(2) and the Framework Hypothesis(3) and put forward as a model of how Christians today should interpret Genesis. It is obvious from the contradictory nature of these theories that Origen could not have held all of them at one time. Indeed, he never held any of them, as will become clear in the following summary of Origen's doctrine of creation.

In attempting to examine closely Origen's understanding of creation we are faced with considerable difficulty, because his major work on the subject (his *Commentary on Genesis*) has been lost, except for a few fragments and quotations.(4) We are therefore forced to rely on these (remembering the possibility that they may not be representative of Origen's complete thought on the subject) and incidental references in his later works. A further problem is that few of Origen's writings are extant in the original Greek, only in a Latin translation.(5) This goes some way in explaining the different conclusions reached by scholars engaged in this area of research.

Faced with the problem of the origin of the soul, Origen found no clear guidelines in the *Rule of Faith*,(6) so he felt free to speculate using Scripture and reason to fill this gap in knowledge.(7) He felt keenly the force of the objections that intellectuals were making against the Church in this area. Most Gnostics held that each man's condition at birth was predetermined and beyond human control. The Marcionites argued that the Creator God was unjust in allowing some to be born blind or crippled through no fault of their own.(8) Origen's solution to these problems was a development of the Platonic ideas of Philo and Clement of Alexandria.(9)

Origen interpreted the Christian doctrine of creation as follows: in the beginning was the spiritual world of rational creatures, absorbed in the contemplation of God.(10) Two possible explanations are put forward by Origen for the first 'fall'. The souls either became satiated with the contemplation of the divine(11), became bored and so fell away from God. Alternatively, he reasoned using the etymology of the word for soul (*psuche*) that the intelligences moved away from the warmth of God's presence and became cold (*psuchos*). The cooling caused the

intelligences to become souls, but their ultimate form depended up their degree of ‘cooling,’ in a descending order.(12) It might be represented in a simplified form as shown below.



The position of these rational creatures was not static, as Origen conceived that eventually every rational creature would be saved and returned to its original state of contemplative union with God,(13) even the Devil.(14) “For the end is always like the beginning”.(15) The perceptible and terrestrial world was created by God to house the fallen rational beings until they should return to their original status.(16) Indeed the whole point of Origen’s interpretation of the Bible was to show how a believer might return to this original state of union with God.(17) This explanation solved completely the objections of the Valentinians and Marcionites. Man’s present state, even his physical condition and place of birth, is the result of his soul’s original fault committed in pre-existence.(18) Origen found scriptural support for this in such passages as Malachi 1:2-3 and Romans 9:11: “Jacob I loved, Esau I hated...”(19) In his *Commentary on Genesis* Origen argued that the Fall took place, not because of disobedience, but because Adam & Eve’s love for God cooled; they became bored and rebellious, and the result was that they were driven from God’s presence.(20)

Many people make the mistake of assuming that because Origen taught the pre-existent fall of rational beings that he also denied the historicity of Adam as an individual. It is equally inaccurate to argue that he viewed Adam’s fall as being merely symbolic of the fall of every man’s soul.(21) The story of Adam and Eve in Origen’s thought represented a second fall.(22) Eve was deceived (because of her inherent weakness resulting from her fall in pre-existence)(23) by the serpent who envied Adam and deceived him by means of food.(24) Although some scholars have argued strongly that Origen did not believe in the historicity of Adam(25), it appears to me that as we do not have Origen’s complete works it is better for us not to be too dogmatic; for in his surviving works Origen himself does not appear to have had just one view on the subject.(26)

Origen’s doctrine of the pre-existence of souls would not have been considered heretical in his day, because no clear doctrine on the subject had yet been formulated. Only in the centuries that followed did the idea of pre-existence come to be viewed as “not only mythical, but even heretical...”(27) The doctrine was finally declared heretical at the Second Council of Constantinople (AD 553),(28) 300 years after his death! The controversy that later developed in Origen’s name was owed more to the development and systematisation his works by his followers than to Origen himself.(29)

Origen, in contrast to the Platonists, argued that the creation was *ex nihilo*,(30) and that it took

place in time, but postulated that as God could never have been idle it must therefore be one of an endless cycle of worlds (a Platonic concept). He appears to have reasoned that creation was *ex nihilo* because he believed that the end of the world was to be like the beginning. As the end of the world involved a disappearance of all matter, so the beginning must have been the opposite: the formation of all matter.(31)

It seems logical to conclude that Origen should not be taken as a model of how modern Christians should interpret Genesis.

References

- (1) Arthur C. Custance, *Without Form and Void: A Study of the Meaning of Genesis 1:2*. (Brockville, Ontario: Privite Publication, 1970), 18. See above, Chapter 3.
- (2) Christian Pesch, *Des Deo Creante et Elevante, de Deo Fine Ultimo Tractatus Dogmatici*. (Feiburg, 1909), referenced by David L. Livingstone, "Preadamites: The History of an Idea From Heresy to Orthodoxy," *SJT*, Vol. 40 (1987), 42.
- (3) Roger Forster & Paul Marston, *Reason & Faith: Do Modern Science and Christian Faith Really Conflict?* (Eastbourne: Monarch Publications, 1989), 358. For further references see Chapter 3.
- (4) Crouzel, 218.
- (5) C.P. Bammel, "Adam in Origen," Rowan Williams, ed. *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*. (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), 64.
- (6) Origen, *Principles*, Preface 5; (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 240).
- (7) Origen, *Principles*, Preface 10; (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 241).
- (8) Crouzel, 208.
- (9) Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966) 120; Crouzel, 207.
- (10) Trigg, *Origen*, 103; Eusebius, *Against John of Jerusalem* 7.18.21. Origen argued that there must have been a finite number of these rational intelligences as an infinite number would be incomprehensible to God - and this was unthinkable. Trigg, *Origen*, 104.
- (11) Origen, *Principles*, 1.3.8 & 1.4.1; (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 255-256). Crouzel, 210.
- (12) Origen, *Principles* 1.8.1 (J. Stevenson, *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrating the History of the Church to AD 337*. [London: SPCK, 1987], 201.); Crouzel, 210; Trigg, 105;
- (13) Trigg, *Origen*, 105.
- (14) W.H.C. Frend, *Saints And Sinners In The Early Church*. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), 79.
- (15) Origen, *Principles* 1.6.2; (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 260).

(16) Frend, *Saints And Sinners*, 79.

(17) Torjesen, 147.

(18) Crouzel, 208-209. Origen speaks of a preliminary divine judgement preceding birth, analogous to the last judgment, Origen, *Principles* 2.9.8; (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 293). F.R. Tennant, *The Sources of the Doctrines of the Fall and Original Sin*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 297.

(19) Origen, *Principles* 3.1.22 (*ANF*, Vol.4, 328); Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. 3. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 831.

(20) Frend, *Rise*, 377.

(21) Bammel, 63.

(22) Bammel, 83.

(23) Origen, *On Prayer* 2.9.18.

(24) Origen, *Song of Songs* 2.

(25) Hanson, *Event*, 272.

(26) Bammel, 83.

(27) Crouzel, 209.

(28) Schaff, Vol. 3, 831.

(29) Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought*, 120-121.

(30) Origen, *Principles*, 1.7.1 - 2.2.2 (*ANF*, Vol. 4, 262-271); *Commentary on Genesis*, cited by Eusebius, *Preparation*, 7.22; Blower, 240.

(31) Trigg, *Origen*, 110.

