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# The Origin of Origen's Origins

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THE ORIGIN OF ORIGEN'S ORIGINS

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A Research Paper Presented to the  
Faculty of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis  
Department of Historical Theology  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Bachelor of Divinity

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by

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## CHAPTER I

### THE QUESTIONS OF CREATION

#### The Purpose of the Paper

The Creator once asked man the question, "Adam, wo bist du?" Man must eternally ask the questions of his creation, "Where do I come from?" and "Why am I here?" and "Where am I going?"

It is the purpose of this paper to trace a small piece of the history of man's answers to these eternal questions of Whence? Why? and Whither? We shall see how Origen, one of the early Christian church fathers, answered these questions in a work the vastness and completeness of which is exceeded only by the genius of its author.

Why spend time studying the answers of a man whose own church condemned as a heretic? Because, in the first place, this heretic brings together in his doctrine of creation some of the most significant answers that have ever been given to these questions; and in the second place, because he brings them together in a clear, meaningful, and unique way. Origen stands at one of those watersheds of history at which old answers and old systems are being discarded and significant new answers and systems are being formulated. A man who could synthesize the dying answers of Hellenistic philosophy with the emerging answers of Christian thought certainly deserves careful consideration.

The concise formulation of his synthesis is found in his monumental work, De Principiis, written sometime between 200-230 A.D. We study this early work not because it is only in the De Principiis that Origen

answers our basic questions but because it is here that Origen answers our questions in the most complete and organized way. Our answers from this early work can be said to be characteristic of Origen in that he did not at a later time materially alter the views of his De Principiis.<sup>1</sup>

We shall focus on Origen's doctrine of creation not only because our questions are answered in association with this doctrine, but because this doctrine is the heart of all his views on existence. This doctrine naturally answers the question, "Where did I come from?" and it is significant in Origen's thought that his doctrine of the creation of the universe also answers the question, "Why am I here?" Finally, inasmuch as Origen considers the end of this universe to be essentially the same as the beginning,<sup>2</sup> his doctrine of creation, of "First Principles," can also be said to answer the question, "Where am I going?"

#### The Scope of the Paper

The thesis of this paper is that in his answers to the questions of creation Origen is an original, Christian Neo-Platonist.

In the first part of this paper we shall ask the question of where Origen claims to get his answers to our questions of Whence? Why? and Whither? We shall conclude that although Origen claims to be totally Scriptural and ecclesiastical in his answers, he does in fact open a wide door to the answers of pagan philosophy and walks through that door with a careful but concerned confidence.

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<sup>1</sup>W. Emery Barnes, "The Third Century and Its Greatest Christian: Origen," The Expository Times, 44 (1932/33), 295.

<sup>2</sup>Origen, De Principiis, iii, 6. 8.

In the second part of this paper we shall briefly but critically summarize Origen's answers to our three questions. These answers will of course be our point of departure for a discussion of the origins of Origen's origins.

In the third part of this paper we shall trace the influence of Plato and his followers on the answers of Origen. Here we shall see that Origen is a Neo-Platonist in the sense that his answers are Platonic, eclectic, and abstract.

In the fourth part of this paper we shall trace the influences of various other schools of thought on the answers of Origen. Here we shall conclude that Origen is eclectic in borrowing from them and in this sense also Neo-Platonic.

In the final part of this paper we shall by a further study of the influence of his times and his Christianity conclude that Origen is indeed a "Christian Neo-Platonist" and his originality consists to the greatest degree not of any special new answer to the questions of creation but of the vastness of his plan and the genius with which he put it all together.

## CHAPTER II

### THE ANSWERS ARE ELUSIVE

#### The Answers of the Translators

Before we can discover what Origen's answers are or from where he actually derived his answers, we must stop to ask where Origen claims to get his answers.

Here we are confronted with a special problem, because we have to deal not only with Origen's claims but also with the methodology of his translators. All that remains of the Greek text of the De Principiis are a few fragments in the Philocalia and in two edicts of the emperor Justinian I.<sup>1</sup> The text has been preserved complete, however, in a very free-rendering Latin translation by Rufinus of Aquileia (ca. 400 A.D.), who made countless changes and additions and depletions in order to make Origen seem to conform to a more orthodox point of view.<sup>2</sup> It has never been proved that Rufinus ever substituted his own answers for Origen's, but he freely admits that he has watered down some of Origen's more rash answers in order not to offend the Christian reader.<sup>3</sup>

Another free-rendering translation was undertaken by Jerome, a contemporary of Rufinus, and this translation suffered much the same fate

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<sup>1</sup>Johannes Quasten, Patrology (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1953), II, p. 57.

<sup>2</sup>G. W. Butterworth in his introduction to Origen's De Principiis (New York: Harper & Row, c.1966), lxii.

<sup>3</sup>Rene Cadiou, Origen. His Life at Alexandria (St. Louis & London: B. Herder Book Co., 1944), p. 210.

as the first. Jerome also must be watched because he has a tendency to make Origen say what Jerome wants him to say.<sup>4</sup>

Other parts of Origen's text are supposedly found in certain propositions that were condemned under the emperor Justinian I (ca. 540 A.D.). These parts are even more untrustworthy, since many of them are taken from other works of Origen or else are glosses made by some of Origen's more enthusiastic followers.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, when we deal with the text of the De Principiis, with the answers that Origen has given to the questions of our creation, we must beware lest we find ourselves giving the answers of Rufinus or Jerome or one of Origen's followers. Although certain dubious passages will be cited, a conscious effort has been made to base no final conclusions about Origen's answers on these passages.

#### Origen's Own Evaluation

Since Origen claims to be a Christian, one would expect to find him drawing on the Scriptures, especially the first chapters of Genesis, for the answers to his questions. From early youth Origen had been taught to go to this source for his answers to life. His father made sure of that. Eusebius tells us that his father "constantly urged him not to give any time to secular subjects till he had steeped himself in religious studies, and every day he required him to learn passages by heart and repeat them aloud."<sup>6</sup> And Origen himself tells us, "In regard, then,

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Eusebius, History ii, 2.



to the creation of the world, what other book of scripture is more able to enlighten us than that which was written by Moses concerning its origin?"<sup>7</sup>

Critics differ as to how serious Origen is about taking his answers directly from Scripture. Kelly says that "Origen was a thorough-going Biblicist who appealed again and again to Scripture as the decisive criterion of dogma."<sup>8</sup> Cadiou claims that Origen used Scripture only to add weight to his own deductions.<sup>9</sup> The truth is undoubtedly somewhere between these two views, as we shall see later. Perhaps it would suffice here to state simply that Origen was an exegete who regarded the Holy Scriptures as authoritative and felt that he was teaching nothing that was contrary to them.<sup>10</sup> We might say that Holy Scripture is one side of a box in which he chose to place himself. It is one of the limits he places on the bounds of his thought.

But Origen was a churchman as well as an exegete. Another side of his box is formed by what he calls the "rule of faith," the concensus of the church. His starting point in the De Principiis is the simple faith of the creed, and he will not contradict that in any way.<sup>11</sup> He feels that the church alone, especially its most gifted members, has the right

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<sup>7</sup>Origen, iii, 5. 1.

<sup>8</sup>J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 42.

<sup>9</sup>Cadiou, p. 217.

<sup>10</sup>Adolph von Harnack, History of Dogma (New York: Russell and Russell, c.1958), II, 335.

<sup>11</sup>G. L. Prestige, Fathers and Heretics (London: S.P.C.K., 1948), p. 60.

to determine its tradition and interpret its tradition, especially by a proper use of the allegorical method.<sup>12</sup> And so while it is true that Origen claims to find all of his answers in Scripture, he yet finds these answers by putting this allegorical method to good use, a method which had been first extensively used by Philo and was at the time of Origen in common use in the eastern reaches of the Christian church.<sup>13</sup>

Origen feels that Scripture contains many dark and enigmatical statements and has different levels of meaning in order to exercise the understanding of its readers. This leads the Christian not only to interpret allegorically but also to use his God-given reason to the full extent of its ability to gain a greater grasp of the answers God has revealed in Scripture. In a sense, Origen subordinates faith to reason.<sup>14</sup>

God-given reason may be exercised outside the confines of the text of Scripture. In order that the man of God might be fully equipped to handle life as God has laid it before him, it is necessary for sanctified reason to define and articulate and expand and adapt to human needs the faith once delivered to the church.<sup>15</sup> And where faith and authority prescribe no particular view, the theologian is free to discuss the issues

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<sup>12</sup>R. P. C. Hanson, "Origen's Doctrine of Tradition," Journal of Theological Studies (1948), 17-27.

<sup>13</sup>Butterworth, p. lvii.

<sup>14</sup>William Fairweather, Origen and Greek Patristic Thought (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), p. 89.

<sup>15</sup>Charles Bigg, Christian Platonists of Alexandria (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1886), p. 152.

open to him without having to conform to any rule of faith.<sup>16</sup> Thus certain philosophical doctrines could find their way into the legitimate thought structure of the Christian, and as we shall later see in more detail, it is to certain of these presuppositions or doctrines that Origen does indeed bind himself as he answers the questions of creation.

Finally, Origen boxes himself in, or perhaps lets himself out of the box, by freely admitting his own limitations. He claims that his doctrines are far from settled and are put forth merely as subjects for inquiry and discussion.<sup>17</sup> In many instances Origen presents more than one side of an answer and allows the reader to freely choose between the existing possibilities.<sup>18</sup> If the reader has a better alternative, Origen would be happy to hear and consider it. His De Principiis is not an air-tight systematics, and he admits it.

In summary, then, we see that in answering the questions of his creation Origen boxes himself in on at least three sides: he will not go beyond Scripture, at least not as he interprets it; he will not go beyond the rule of faith, the consensus of the church; and he will not move outside certain philosophical categories of thought. He leaves several matters open for discussion and does not claim to have absolute truth. He claims that his work is more exploratory than dogmatic. Better than "Principles," "Soundings" might be a better description of his work.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Henry Chadwick, Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, c.1966), p. 80.

<sup>17</sup>Origen, ii, 8. 4.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., iii, 4. 4.

<sup>19</sup>Chadwick, p. 72.

## CHAPTER III

### THE "SOUNDINGS"

#### The Expanse of the Answers

When Origen asks the questions Whence? Why? and Whither? he does not stop answering them until he has finished his entire De Principiis, and even then he doesn't claim to have all the answers. When we talk about Origen's origins we are involved in a whole cosmic drama that begins with a quite transcendent God, runs through all of existence in time and eternity, and ends with the transcendent God becoming "all in all."

In this chapter we shall take a rather brisk walk through the gamut of Origen's "Soundings" in order to see how Origen answers our three questions. In the remainder of the paper we shall more thoroughly analyze these "Soundings" and determine their origins.

#### A Brief Summary

Although the questions Whence? Why? and Whither? center in man, for Origen man is not the center of the answers. The center of interest for Alexandrians at the time of Origen is not this life and this world and the achievements of man. Their interest is centered in the transcendental world.<sup>1</sup> They live more with angels and daemons and powers than with men on earth. Their systems and theories are drawn past time into

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<sup>1</sup>Richard B. Tollinton, Alexandrine Teaching on the Universe (New York: The Macmillan Company, c.1932), p. 133.

eternity. They are vast systems, and Origen's is no exception. Yet the systems are simple. Danielou finds it to be a mark of Origen's genius that he can boil down his system into two basic principles: that there is a beneficent providence and that creatures are free.

Absolutely everything in his system can be deduced from these two principles. Spiritual persons, being free and mutable, were capable of falling and did actually fall. The universe was a consequence of their fall, an arrangement made in view of the different degrees to which the various creatures had fallen. History shows that God respects the liberty of creatures, i.e., that he never forces anyone but acts by persuasion and that in this way he is gradually bringing the entire spiritual creation back to its original unity and after countless aeons will have restored it completely.<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most clear and concise statement of Origen's answers is found in Book II of the De Principiis. As a preview of Origen's answers we shall quote this statement here and then move on to a more complete explanation of his answers.

Now when 'in the beginning' he created what he wished to create, that is rational beings, he had no other reason for creating them except himself, that is, his goodness. As therefore he himself, in whom was neither variation nor change nor lack of power, was the cause of all that was to be created, he created all his creatures equal and alike, for the simple reason that there was in him no cause that could give rise to variety and diversity. But since these rational creatures, as we have frequently shown and will show yet again in its proper place, were endowed with the power of free will, it was this freedom which induced each one by his own voluntary choice either to make progress through the imitation of God or to deteriorate through negligence. This, as we have said before, was the cause of the diversity among rational creatures, a cause that takes its origin not from the will of the Creator, but from the decision of the creature's own freedom. God, however, who then felt it just to arrange his creation according to merit, gathered the diversity of minds into the harmony of a single world, so as to furnish, as it were, out of these diverse vessels or souls or minds, one house, in which

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<sup>2</sup>Jean Danielou, Origen (New York: Sheed and Ward, c.1955), p. 206.

there must be 'not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and of earth, and some unto honour and some unto dishonour.'<sup>3</sup>

This is a brief summary of the answer especially to the question, "Where do I come from?" We expand that answer and bring in answers to the other questions in what follows.

#### The Transcendent Father

The entire extent of our existence begins with a very transcendent God, seemingly far removed from our world. He is pure and simple and contains no particle of matter.<sup>4</sup> Tollinton believes that this removed and abstract conception of God that was held by all the Alexandrians at the time of Origen was in the nature of a Theodicy:

From all contact with the imperfect, from all responsibility for evil in the world, they preserved their conception of the deity free. From every liability to question or criticism he is left immune. Verily "Thou art a God that hidest thyself."<sup>5</sup>

However far this transcendent God was removed from this world and all contact with it, He was nevertheless always busy, and here we pass from the hidden God to His creatures.

We can therefore imagine no moment whatever when that power was not engaged in acts of well-doing. Whence it follows that there always existed objects for this well-doing, namely, God's works or creatures, and that God, in the power of his providence, was always dispensing his blessings among them by doing them good in accordance with their conditions and deserts. It follows plainly from this, that at no time whatever was God not Creator, nor Benefactor, nor Providence.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Origen, De Principiis ii, 9. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., i, 1. 6.

<sup>5</sup>Tollinton, p. 38.

<sup>6</sup>Origen, i, 4. 3.

So we see that creation is in some way the consequence of an overflow of divine goodness. The first creation was a number of rational, equal beings.

#### The Position of the Logos

But before we go on to discuss these first objects of God's eternal good will, we must make a very important stop: the "Soundings" must take account of an important principle that was in the "rule of faith" and that is very crucial to Origen's answers to creation--that God creates these beings through His Son or Wisdom or Logos.

Prior to creation, prior to time, the Logos existed along with the transcendent Father. In fact, all creation was tucked away in this Logos.

In this Wisdom, therefore, who ever existed with the Father, the creation was always present in form and outline, and there was never a time when the pre-figuration of those things which hereafter were to be did not exist in Wisdom.<sup>7</sup>

Although we will not swim through all the intricacies of the Son's relation to the Father, perhaps we can simply with Cadiou and others state that Origen regards the Son, this Logos, as subordinate to the transcendent Father, not inasmuch as he proceeds but inasmuch as created things proceed from Him.<sup>8</sup>

It is through the Logos, the second member of the Trinity, that created things proceed, and the place of the Spirit is not well defined. "In order to comply with the rule of faith, and for this reason alone, for his

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., i, 4. 4.

<sup>8</sup>Rene Cadiou, Origen. His Life at Alexandria (St. Louis & London: B. Herder Book Co., 1944), p. 179.

speculation did not require a Spirit in addition to the Logos, Origen also placed the Spirit alongside of Father and Son."<sup>9</sup>

#### The Equal Essences

We move on to the creation of the equal, rational intelligences that God created through the Logos from eternity. Though these beings existed from eternity, they are nevertheless subordinate to the Son. The Son is not created as they are and is more "prior" in the scheme of emanation.

And here we encounter the strange doctrine that God has limits, or at least has limited Himself. This idea of a limited God, as we might expect, is absent from the text of Rufinus, but we find it in a fragment from Justinian:

In the beginning, as we contemplate it, God created by an act of His will as large a number of intelligent beings as he could control. For we must maintain that even the power of God is finite, and we must not, under pretext of praising him, lose sight of his limitations.<sup>10</sup>

It seems that Rufinus tones down this statement by making Origen say that God created as many intelligent beings "as he foresaw would be sufficient."<sup>11</sup> In any case, Origen does at least say that there is a definite number of beings that were created "in the beginning."

Again, by "in the beginning" Origen seems to mean "from eternity," even though these beings are not as "prior" as the Son, and they at one time existed in the mind of the Son. Their eternal existence is a

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<sup>9</sup>Adolph von Harnack, History of Dogma (New York: Russell and Russell, c.1958), II, 357.

<sup>10</sup>Origen, ii, 9. 1.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.



necessary postulate of the power of God.

For if anyone would have it that certain ages, or periods of time, or whatever he cares to call them, elapsed during which the present creation did not exist, he would undoubtedly prove that in those ages or periods God was not almighty, but that he afterwards became almighty from the time when he began to have creatures over whom he could exercise power.<sup>12</sup>

There never was a time when He was not creating. "Undoubtedly all genera and species have forever existed, and possibly even individual things; but either way, the fact is made clear that God did not begin at a certain time to be Creator, when he had not been such before."<sup>13</sup>

But these created equals did not always remain equal. The next step in Origen's answer to our questions is the fall of these rational, individual intelligences.

#### The Fall of Equals

These beings were endowed with free choice, and it was by abuse of this free choice that the beings fell away from their pristine state. Even the good angels are in a sense fallen angels. In discussing the duties of Michael and Gabriel, Origen states:

We must believe that they have obtained these duties for no other reason except their own individual merits and that they entered upon them as a reward for the zeal and virtue they displayed before the construction of the world.<sup>14</sup>

Exactly how they fell away is not completely clear. At first reading it seems that they fell away gradually. "But sloth and weariness of taking

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., i, 2. 10.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., i, 4.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., i, 8. 1.

trouble to preserve the good, coupled with disregard and neglect of better things, began the process of withdrawal from the good."<sup>15</sup> But Cadiou asserts that Origen changed his mind while he was writing the De Principiis. A gradual falling away did not correspond to the Scriptural idea of sin, and so Origen postulated a more immediate fall.<sup>16</sup>

### The Chain of Being

From this fall of the free-willed equals Origen derives all the rest of the created universe. He describes this creation most succinctly in Book I:

before the ages minds were all pure, both daemons and souls and angels, offering service to God and keeping his commandments. But the devil, who was one of them, since he possessed free-will, desired to resist God, and God drove him away. With him revolted all the other powers. Some sinned deeply and became daemons, others less and became angels; others still less and became arch-angels; and thus each in turn received the reward for his individual sin. But there remained some souls who had not sinned so greatly as to become daemons, nor on the other hand so very lightly as to become angels. God therefore made the present world and bound the soul to the body as a punishment.<sup>17</sup>

The chain of being that results from this massive fall includes at least five stages: the supercelestial, including the angels and the sun and moon; the earthly, including men; certain invisible evil powers; certain infernal powers, including the daemons; and animals and birds, although these do not contain souls.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., ii, 9. 2.

<sup>16</sup>Cadiou, p. 238.

<sup>17</sup>Origen, i, 8. 1.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., ii, 9. 3.

This present world from which Origen asks the questions of his existence is a stage of existence that was created at a definite time in the soul's descent. The church teaches that this world was made and began to exist at a definite time and that because of its corruptible nature it must suffer dissolution.<sup>19</sup> It was created according to number in six days,<sup>20</sup> and these are not literal days but periods of time. The purpose of the creation of this world was to provide a place for souls to work their way back to unity with God. It is basically a place of correction, only one stage on the way back to God becoming "all in all." That is why God made it the way He did--with matter.

#### The Nature of Matter

And so we must ask, What is the nature of the bodies that are given to men? Where did these bodies come from? Why were they created? These are difficult questions, and Origen is not always consistent in answering them.

It is easier to determine the purpose of bodies than it is to determine their nature. Their purpose is to give "form" to moral decisions, but it seems that their "form" consists of more than what we can see with our two eyes.

Origen says that matter in some form existed before the world was created. The original rational beings contained some kind of matter. In fact, everything created, every body except God Himself, must

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., i, 1. 7.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., iv, 2. 5.

necessarily have some kind of matter.

it is only in idea and thought that a material substance is separable from them, and that though this substance seems to have been produced for them or after them, yet never have they lived or do they live without it; or we shall be right in believing that life without a body is found in the Trinity alone. Now as we have said above, material substance possesses such a nature that it can undergo every kind of transformation. When therefore it is drawn down to lower beings it is formed into the grosser and more solid condition of body and serves to distinguish the visible species of this world in all their variety. But when it ministers to more perfect and blessed beings, it shines in the splendour of 'celestial bodies' and adorns either the 'angels of God' or the 'sons' of the resurrection with the garments of a 'spiritual body.'<sup>21</sup>

Danielou feels that this is a contradiction to Origen's previous thesis that the rational creatures were pure spirits and will return to that condition. He states that it is more likely that Origen admitted not the creation of matter but its eternal existence as materia prima.<sup>22</sup>

If what Danielou says is accurate, we have here a genuine discrepancy in Origen's system, and a significant one. But Origen would not admit that matter is eternal in the sense that it once existed alongside God, prior to anything else. Only in the sense that God is eternally creative and that He eternally created the rational equals and gave them matter of some sort can matter be said to be eternal. The spirits were pure, yet they had "identity." It is this "identity" which Origen may mean when he asserts that these beings have a body, and each spirit maintains this identity throughout his fall and return to his Creator. It is the quality of the matter in identity that changes as a being runs through the scale of existence. Origen seems to say that matter will be finally

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., ii, 2. 2.

<sup>22</sup>Danielou, p. 219.

dissolved and become as it was in the beginning.

It must be that the nature of bodies is not primary, but that it was created at intervals on account of certain falls that happened to rational beings, who came to need bodies; and again, that when their restoration is perfectly accomplished these bodies are dissolved into nothing, so that this is forever happening.<sup>23</sup>

Origen is quite firm in maintaining that there was a "time" when matter was not, whatever the nature of that matter is.<sup>24</sup>

Perhaps Chadwick is closest to Origen's views of matter when he states that Origen submits three views:

First, there is the view that matter is eternal and that it will suffer an eschatological transformation, in which case the resurrection body will be in form like our earthly body but glorified and radiant. Secondly, it is possible that discarnate spirits can exist without any bodies of any kind whatever, though they may need bodies for a time at a certain stage of their education on the way back to God. If so, the material order will be brought into existence as required, which may be from time to time since progress upward may not be constant and there may be occasional setbacks and manifestations of recalcitrance to the divine will. Thirdly, there is the possibility that the visible and corruptible part of the world will be destroyed, but the glorious spirits in the upper spheres of the cosmos may come to have yet more glorious forms than they already possess. Origen simply submits these three views to the reader's judgment. His own sympathy lies perhaps with either the second or the third than with the first.<sup>25</sup>

The argument about what Origen's view of matter really is has centered in Origen's view of the resurrection body. Some say that the nature of matter is such that man will rise with a spherical body, which might mean with no material body at all.<sup>26</sup> Others say that the resurrection

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<sup>23</sup>Origen, iv, 4. 8.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., ii, 1. 4.

<sup>25</sup>Henry Chadwick, Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, c.1966), pp. 86-7.

<sup>26</sup>W. L. Knox, "Origen's Conception of the Resurrection Body," Journal of Theological Studies (1938), 247-248.

body will not be spherical but that we will have the same physical form that we have on earth.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps Origen sums up the argument best in his own typical way: "But exactly how it will be is known to God alone, and to those who through Christ and the Holy Spirit are the 'friends' of God."<sup>28</sup>

In summary, we conclude that the answers to the Whence? and Whither? of the existence of our bodies cannot be completely answered. It seems that we did at least have bodies after our souls fell and that we will have some sort of body with some sort of qualities until God is "all in all." At least we can be sure that our souls will survive through it all and that we will maintain our individual identities.

#### Whence? Why? and Whither?

And so our basic answers to our questions have been given. Where did I come from? I came from the goodness of the transcendent Father through the Logos. I was once an intelligence equal to all others. I fell with the rest of the intelligences and picked up some sort of material body. In my struggle upward or fall downward I came to the possession of the body I now have, and I live in the world that now exists, a world that was created in time after the first fall.

The answers to the questions Why am I here? and Where am I going? have also been answered. God is calling me home.

God, who, by the unspeakable skill of his wisdom, transforms and

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<sup>27</sup>J. N. D. Kelly, Early Christian Doctrines (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 472, and Henry Chadwick, "Origen, Celsus, and the Resurrection of the Body," Harvard Theological Review, 41 (1948), 99.

<sup>28</sup>Origen, 1, 6. 4.

restores all things, whatever their condition, to some useful purpose and the common advantage of all, recalls these very creatures, so different from each other in mental quality, to one harmony of work and endeavor; so that, diverse though the motions of their souls may be, they nevertheless combine to make up the fullness and perfection of a single world, the very variety of minds tending to one end, perfection.<sup>29</sup>

There is a series of worlds through which I must pass or through which I must work my way by a proper exercise of my free will<sup>30</sup> until God will become "all in all." And what will that be like?

Now I myself think that when it is said that God is 'all in all', it means that he is also all things in each individual person. And he will be all things in each person in such a way that everything which the rational mind, when purified from all the dregs of its vices and utterly cleared from every cloud of wickedness, can feel or understand or think will be all God and that the mind will no longer be conscious of anything besides or other than God, but will think God and see God and hold God and God will be the mode and measure of its every movement; and in this way will be all to it.<sup>31</sup>

I will not be absorbed into God to such an extent that my identity will be eliminated, but I will enjoy the perfection of His creation.

There is some doubt as to whether when God becomes "all in all" there will be another fall of rational essences. From the above it would seem that when God is "all in all," that is the way it will stay. And yet, if these creatures that are "all in all" have free will, and they must, since that is the way they were created, and when they were originally created they were the best possible universe that God could have created, then there must logically be the possibility of the whole circle of existence starting all over again. Although the writer holds this to be an opinion

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., ii, 1. 2.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., iii, 5. 3-4.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., iii, 6. 3.

from which the reader might choose, the opinion is substantiated in a quote that Butterfield concludes as having been deleted by Rufinus but found in Jerome:

Nor can we doubt that after certain periods of time matter will exist again and bodies will be created and a world of diversity constructed in conformity with the varying wills of rational creatures, who after becoming perfect in blessedness at the end of all things have gradually fallen to lower levels and have admitted evil to so great an extent as to be turned into the opposite of what they were, by reason of their unwillingness to preserve their first estate and to retain their blessedness uncorrupted.<sup>32</sup>

As to the place of Christ in the transformation or salvation of mankind, we can here refer to two articles which deal very succinctly with the question.<sup>33</sup>

We have in brief seen what Origen's "Soundings" are, what the answers to the questions are, and we must now proceed to see where Origen gets all these answers. What are the specific origins of Origen's origins? What answers did he copy or adapt or bring together or invent to give his particular answers?

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<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>T. E. Pollard, "Logos and Son in Origen, Arius, and Athanasius," Studia Patristica, edited by Kurt Aland and F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1957), pp. 282-287, and Hastings Rashdall, The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology (London: Macmillan & Co., Limited, c.1919).



## CHAPTER IV

### ORIGEN'S PLATONIC ORIGINS

#### The Influence of the Master

We must now try to discover any outside influences that may have led Origen to answer these questions the way he did. Why have we called him an "original Christian Neo-Platonist"? De Faye very adequately sums up our approach in the following words:

Now, as we have seen, the thought of Origen is wholly permeated with Greek philosophy; apart from this, it cannot possibly be understood. His way of propounding and formulating a problem, of seeking its solution, is that of a mind moulded and fashioned in the school of Greek thinkers. Porphyry was not mistaken in regarding him as a Greek philosopher who had gone astray among the Christians. Consequently, to understand why Origen adopted some particular doctrine and formulated it in a particular way, regarding it as a true and legitimate interpretation of a Christian belief, one would have to be imbued oneself with the doctrine and methods of Greek philosophy.<sup>1</sup>

Of all the answers that influenced Origen, the answers of Plato and his followers were the most influential. In order to determine exactly what some of those influences may have been, we will discuss certain themes or categories that Plato and his followers use that seem to draw Origen either to them or away from them. It is very difficult to determine the exact effect these may have had on Origen, and it is just as difficult to determine exactly from whom he took what and how he used what he took. In a discussion of Origen's origins Fairweather remarks that, "Although the great Alexandrian owes his idealism to Plato, whether

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene De Faye, Origen and His Work (New York: Columbia University Press, c.1929), p. 179.

directly or through the medium of the Gnostics, it is not according to this view permissible to go into detailed analysis so as to say of particular doctrines, 'This Origen borrowed from the Stoics, that from Plato.'<sup>2</sup>

We shall begin our discussion with the influence Plato himself may have had on Origen, and then we shall proceed to the influence of his followers, the Middle-Platonists and the Neo-Platonists. We shall conclude that whatever elements Origen "borrowed" from Platonic thought, he borrowed the majority of these from the general philosophic consensus of opinion existing at the time of his writing in Alexandria, and that consensus happened to be Platonic, eclectic, and abstract.

First, then, what answers did Plato give that may have led Origen to answer our questions the way he did? The first of Plato's answers that we shall discuss is his doctrine of God. Although Origen could well have picked up the doctrine of God's transcendence from the Old Testament, the extremity of that transcendence is an idea that Plato particularly emphasized, and Plato's views may have led Origen to regard the Father as transcendent as he did. Plato's primary God is the ultimate, changeless, simple, unmoved, hidden God. De Faye argues rather confidently, "It was Plato who inculcated in him that transcendence which he regards as an essential character of God. The connection is so clear that there is no need to dwell on it."<sup>3</sup> Although the dependence may not be that simple, we may at least attribute to Plato or to Platonic influence that

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<sup>2</sup>William Fairweather, Origen and Greek Patristic Thought (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>De Faye, p. 60.

extremity of God's transcendence which Origen at times recognizes in his De Principiis.

Also, as far as the doctrine of God is concerned, Origen may have borrowed from Plato the view that the transcendent world is more real than this material world. Again, Origen could have drawn this view from the Old Testament, but the extremity of that view seems to have filtered down from Plato to Origen's answers to the questions of creation.

So penetrating and far-reaching a genius as that of Origen could not remain indifferent to the Platonic visions. Under the influence of Plato he accustomed himself to believe that the transcendent world not only exists, but that it is more real than the material world. The latter perishes, the 'intelligible world' can never die.<sup>4</sup>

These Platonic emphases on things transcendent remained in all who called themselves Platonists down to the time of Origen.

In Plato's Timaeus the transcendent God from eternity created or emanated four distinct things: the Demiourgos, the world of forms, space, and random events in space.<sup>5</sup> We shall deal with each of these in turn, subsuming the categories of space and random events in space under a discussion of Plato's view of matter, in order to see what effect these views may have had on the answers of Origen.

We begin by describing the operation of the Demiourgos in Plato's thought. After creating from eternity the four entities mentioned above, the transcendent God "retired" and left everything in the hands of the Demiourgos. He became completely detached from all created things. The Demiourgos, although he was far removed from the transcendent God, was

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 82.

<sup>5</sup>Plato, Timaeus, 30a, 3-5.

good, and he desired that all things should come as near as possible to being like him.<sup>6</sup> He therefore took over the three other things that existed coeternally with him, the forms and space and events in space, and brought them from disorder into order.<sup>7</sup> Since nothing that is without intelligence can be better than that which has intelligence, and since intelligence cannot be present without soul, in framing the universe he fashioned reason within soul and soul within body.<sup>8</sup> As a model for creating the universe, the Demiourgos used the world of forms, which existed alongside himself, "for the original of the universe contains in itself all intelligible beings, just as this world comprehends us and all other visible creatures."<sup>9</sup> In other words, the generic form he used for creating life on earth must have been the generic form of "living creature," together with all its species and subspecies.<sup>10</sup> After a description of the creatures in this present world, Plato proceeds to tell us of the world soul, which, like the sensible world, was created by the Demiourgos. This world soul is intermediate between the world of forms and the sensible world and we derive our souls from it.

The universe consists of several grades or stages, then, ranging from the transcendent God to the lowly animals of the earth.<sup>11</sup> Man is somewhere

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 29e, 1-3.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 30a, 3-6.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 30a6-b6.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 30c2-d1.

<sup>10</sup>Sir William David Ross, Plato's Theory of Ideas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 120.

<sup>11</sup>Plato, 39e7-40a2.

in the middle of this gradation, and it is the purpose of his soul to free itself from its body, to which it does not properly belong, and escape once more into pure soul.

We can see from this brief summary of Plato's doctrine of creation in the Timaeus that there are certain answers first given here that are similar to the answers of Origen. Although it is obvious that Origen does not draw his doctrine of creation directly from the Timaeus, there are here certain ways of thinking about creation that found their way down to Origen. That souls pre-exist and that the world was created through an intermediary between the transcendent God are emphases which play no small part in the answers of men who follow Plato.

But what influence did Plato's other basic doctrines have on Origen through Plato himself or through his followers? How did Origen deal with this eternal world of forms and these eternal events in space?

First, then, we can see that Origen is not clear in his doctrine of ideas. At different times in his writing he seems to say different things about the ideal world. At times he seems to say that ideas did exist, and that they eternally existed in the mind of the Logos:

Now just as we have learned in what sense wisdom is the 'beginning of the ways' of God and is said to have been created, in the sense, namely, that she fashions beforehand and contains within herself the species and causes of the entire creation, in the same manner also must wisdom be understood to be the Word of God.<sup>12</sup>

The creation was always present in form and outline, and there was never a time when the pre-figuration of those things which hereafter were to be did not exist in Wisdom.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Origen, De Principiis i, 2. 3.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., i, 4. 4.

But in one passage Origen seems to expressly deny that he believes in a world of forms:

We have already said that it is difficult for us to explain this other world; and for this reason, that if we did so, there would be a risk of giving some men the impression that we were affirming the existence of certain imaginary forms which the Greeks call 'ideas'. For it is certainly foreign to our mode of reasoning to speak of an incorporeal world that exists solely in the mind's fancy or the unsubstantial region of thought.<sup>14</sup>

The difficulty in trying to determine whether Origen really held a doctrine of ideas in a way similar to Plato is compounded by two things: the fact that Origen never made up his mind about this world of ideas, and the fact that Plato himself was never consistent in speaking about the forms.

The Theory of Forms is a faith: a faith expressed in general terms and not explained in detail. Plato himself, at sundry times in his life, suggested ways of understanding its relevance, but he probably did not regard even his final opinions as conclusive.<sup>15</sup>

At different times in his career Plato located these ideas in different places and thought of them in different ways. As we have seen, in the Timaeus he makes them completely separate from sensible things and existing as one of the four eternal along with the Demiourgos and space and random events in space. Yet the ambiguity of Plato's views on the location of the forms led his followers to interpret them in different ways:

The Fathers, beginning with Justin Martyr, occasionally make reference to the Platonic ideas. It happens, however, that by the time references to the Platonic ideas begin to make their appearance

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid., ii, 3. 6.

<sup>15</sup>John M. Rist, Eros and Psyche (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), p. 3.

among the Fathers there existed three distinct interpretations of these ideas. One of them is the Aristotelian interpretation. According to this interpretation, the Platonic ideas are self-subsistent real incorporeal beings, among which one of the ideas, the idea of the Good, is identified with God. According to another interpretation, which is first mentioned by Albinus but must have been current among Platonists before him, the ideas are not real beings; they are only thoughts of God. According to a third interpretation, that of Philo, the ideas, which constitute the intelligible world and are contained in the Logos, have two successive stages of existence, first as thoughts of God and then as real beings created by God. In view of this, whenever any of the Fathers happens to refer to the Platonic ideas, the question may be raised as to which of these three interpretations he refers to.<sup>16</sup>

It does seem that Origen retains the idea of a world of forms, but he could never make up his mind about the location of that world. Wolfson shows that the passage in De Principiis II,3,6, found only in Rufinus' translation, does not refer to the ideas as they were held by the Platonists. Rather, Origen is here criticizing a Stoic position that held that ideas are nothing but thoughts in the human mind.<sup>17</sup>

But Origen could still not make up his mind as to the location of the ideal world. At times he is inclined to place this ideal world within the limits of this world and hence not in the Logos, and at other times he claims that the ideas were in the mind of the Logos.<sup>18</sup> All through his life Origen was wrestling with this problem.

Wolfson believes that Origen most nearly adopted the doctrine of a world of ideas as having existed once in the Logos and now existing somewhere outside this world. It is the world about which Origen speaks when

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<sup>16</sup>Harry Austryn Wolfson, The Philosophy of the Church Fathers (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, c.1956), I, 257-8.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., I, 271-4.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., I, 275.

he comments on the words of Genesis 1:1 that "in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Origen received this view of Plato's ideas through Philo, who held exactly the same views.<sup>19</sup>

In summary, about all we can say is that Origen did hold a doctrine of ideas and that he inherited this view not through his Christian philosophy but through some kind of Platonic influence on his thought--perhaps through Philo, perhaps from the master himself, not from the Neo-Platonists, but from somewhere. In any event, Origen does not consider this doctrine to be as crucial as Plato made it, and Origen's system does not rise or fall on a distinct interpretation of the location of the world of ideas.

Next, we ask how Plato's view of matter may have influenced Origen. At times Origen seems to reflect Plato's attitude toward matter directly: "In the same way our mind is shut up within bars of flesh and blood and rendered duller and feebler by reason of its association with such material substance."<sup>20</sup> For Plato matter was eternal and before being worked on by the Demiourgos existed in a chaotic, unformed and unordered way. As we have seen, it is difficult to determine in what sense Origen believed matter to be eternal. If we agree with Danielou that for Origen matter existed eternally as a materia prima, then we certainly are very close to Plato's views and we could argue a conscious borrowing. On the other hand, we have seen that Plato does not make the Demiourgos as "prior" to matter as Origen does the Logos to matter. For Plato matter is always evil and hostile to man in the sense that it is always attempting to

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., I, 276.

<sup>20</sup>Origen, i, I, 5.



return to its chaotic state. For Origen matter is a tool that is subject to the use of the Logos and serves to give form to moral decisions. For Origen the major source of evil is not matter itself but the free will of the creatures. Matter may be inferior to man, but it is not actively hostile. This emphasis is certainly different from that of Plato, and so we must conclude that there was not a conscious borrowing.

Finally, there are, of course, certain of Plato's core doctrines that Origen does not use. Origen makes no use of the Platonic doctrine of reminiscence, that learning is recollection. He has not attempted to get rid of the break in consciousness that comes between this life and a previous life, as Plato has done through his idea of reminiscence.<sup>21</sup> Nor does Origen make any serious use of Plato's doctrine of reincarnation.<sup>22</sup> However, he does, as we have already noted in passing, line himself up on the side of Plato's idea of pre-existing souls.

So essential is the belief in pre-existence to his whole theory of the universe that he is not even careful, either by means of Plato's expedient of partial recollection or otherwise, to offer an explanation of the lack of any connecting link in consciousness between the present and the former life. By the position he takes up with reference to the pre-existence of the soul he of course ranks himself as an opponent of both the creationist and traducian theories as to the origin of the human soul.<sup>23</sup>

In summary, we must say that Origen borrows no doctrine directly from Plato, although there certainly are Platonic themes in his writing. We may say that Plato's doctrines, especially of the transcendence of the

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<sup>21</sup>Charles Bigg, Christian Platonists of Alexandria (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1886), p. 199.

<sup>22</sup>Henry Chadwick, Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, c.1966), p. 115.

<sup>23</sup>Fairweather, p. 172.

Creator, the pre-existence of the soul, the role of the Demiourgos, and the chain of beings have played an important part in the development of Origen's thought. As we shall see, it is possible and quite probable that Origen received these emphases from the Neo-Platonic atmosphere of his time, an atmosphere that certainly was Platonic, but also more eclectic and abstract than Plato ever was.

### The Influence of the Platonists

Since we have concluded that Origen's doctrine is not the pure doctrine of the master, and that there are many themes that he omits or adds to Plato's doctrines, we must look a little further in our search for Origen's origins. Danielou,<sup>24</sup> Koch,<sup>25</sup> and others<sup>26</sup> find the origins of Origen's thought in the school that they define as Middle-Platonism, comprising such men as Antiochus of Ascalon, Albinus, and Plutarch of Chaeronia.

They find support for their position first of all in the statement of Porphyry about Origen:

He associated himself at all times with Plato, and was at home among the writings of Numenius and Cronius, Apollonhanges, Longinus, and Moderatus, Nichomachus, and the more eminent followers of Pythagoras. He made use, too, of the books of Chaeremon the Stoic and Cornutus, which taught him the allegorical method of interpreting the Greek mysteries, a method he applied to the Jewish Scriptures.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Jean Danielou, Origen (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955).

<sup>25</sup>Hal Koch, Pronoia und Paideusis (Berlin und Leipzig: Walter De Gruyter & Co., 1932).

<sup>26</sup>Among them, T. E. Pollard, "Logos and Son in Origen, Arius, and Athanasius," Studia Patristica, edited by Kurt Aland and F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), pp. 282-287.

<sup>27</sup>Eusebius, History ii, 12.

Danielou defines this eclectic school in the following words:

The influence of Antiochus of Ascalon thus appears as decisive. It was under him that Middle Platonism, the school that lasted until Plotinus and provided the environment in which Origen's mind was trained, took shape. Middle Platonism was fundamentally Platonist in inspiration, but what is kept of the Platonic system was the general outlook rather than the details. The theory of ideas played no part in it at all. And it included eclectic elements. This eclectic Platonism was followed by most philosophers from the first century to the third.<sup>28</sup>

That covers a lot of territory, and yet Danielou insists that there is a difference between this school and the later school of Neo-Platonism. We can, then, in part agree with the conclusions of Danielou to the extent that he includes in this school all Platonists up to the time of Plotinus. However, we shall distinguish between the two schools by defining Neo-Platonism as a school, founded by Ammonius Saccus, which was the direct continuation of Middle-Platonism and yet was even more eclectic and more abstract.

The heroes of this Middle-Platonism, more than any others, were Albinus, who wrote around the end of the second century and could almost be termed a Neo-Platonist, and Plutarch of Chaeronia, who wrote at the end of the first century A.D.

From Albinus, Danielou argues that Origen developed his doctrine of the Logos. That the Logos is begotten from the first God by contemplation and that the world was made from the world of ideas in the Logos rather than in the mind of God or in objective existence, were both held by Albinus. Albinus' views that the Logos set the world in order, that the heavenly bodies were living beings, and the soul of man pre-existed

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<sup>28</sup>Danielou, pp. 86-7.

are all main points of the view of Origen.<sup>29</sup>

From Plutarch Origen is said to have developed the idea that punishment is medicinal, that there are many more intermediaries between God and man than Plato posited, and that the allegorical method is an absolute necessity for true scholarship.<sup>30</sup> Zeller also states that this Plutarch held the creation of the world to be an event in time, and that the idea of daemons played an important part in his system.<sup>31</sup>

All these Middle-Platonic emphases are certainly closer to Origen than the views of Plato, but we are here faced with the same problems that we were faced with when we tried to determine what Origen borrowed from Plato. Could it not more reasonably be said that Origen adopted these emphases from the more advanced consensus of his times, which were Platonic and even more eclectic and abstract? These men certainly contributed to that philosophy, but their views are not in so final a form as those which swayed the minds of the philosophers in the first part of the third century A.D.

And so we move on to see what influence the Neo-Platonist school of Origen's time, as far as such a school existed, had on his answers. Here we shall see in what sense the answers of Origen correspond to the answers of his contemporaries, and in the final chapter we shall review this correspondence and determine in what sense Origen can be called a Neo-Platonist.

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., pp. 97-8.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., p. 88.

<sup>31</sup>Eduard Zeller, Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, c.1931), p. 307.

For several years before he left Alexandria, Origen attended the lectures of the Neo-Platonist Ammonius Saccas. Since Ammonius left no writings and Origen never refers directly to any aspect of his thought, it is impossible to determine exactly what Origen learned from him. However, Plotinus also sat at the feet of Ammonius for almost eleven years, and while the two never met, it is not improbable to say that if they seem to agree occasionally or seem to solve certain problems in the same way, this may at least in part be due to the influence of their master.<sup>32</sup>

It is very improbable that Origen and Plotinus ever met, and since Plotinus himself wrote nothing and taught at Rome, it is impossible to say that Origen depends on the thought of Plotinus.<sup>33</sup> Yet their theories have many similarities. It can be supposed that they drew their questions and the way they framed their answers from the same thought world, from the Platonic consensus of the times.

The genius of these Alexandrian philosophers lay in the way they bridged the gap between the transcendent God of Plato and His creatures. In conscious opposition to the Stoics, they did not believe that the world originated by accident, by the aimless flow of atoms. Rather, the universe extends from an emanation of the divine, from His very nature rather than by an act of His will. This doctrine is most clear in Plotinus' doctrine of his Trinity.<sup>34</sup> However, whereas the divine intelligence of the Neo-

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<sup>32</sup>Rene Cadiou, Origen. His Life at Alexandria (St. Louis and London: B. Herder Book Co., 1944), p. 166.

<sup>33</sup>Danielou, p. 78.

<sup>34</sup>Richard B. Tollinton, Alexandrine Teaching on the Universe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), p. 45.

Platonic Trinity proceeds through the world soul to the beings that are in the world and the emphasis is on the third member of the Trinity,<sup>35</sup> the emphasis of Origen and all the Christians is of course on the second person of the Trinity.

The purpose of man's existence is to become as similar to God as possible, as Plato had already reasoned. The Alexandrian scheme of the progression of the universe is like a circle which begins with the hidden God, descends by emanation through the hierarchies until the soul of man on earth is reached, and from there the soul ascends again to the highest One, and Plotinus says that in ecstasy a man on earth can actually reach that goal for a brief moment.<sup>36</sup> Although to men like Plotinus and Celsus and Porphyry the world is an unending cycle, punctuated by floods and conflagrations, and there will never be a time when God will become "all in all," Origen sees no difficulty in accepting the story of Genesis that the world was created less than 6000 years ago<sup>37</sup> and that it will end with a conflagration. But this will not always be the case, because God is drawing everything to Himself.

Another similarity between the Neo-Platonists of Alexandria and Origen is their common disapproval of the Stoic doctrine of immanence, and they of course reacted to this doctrine in the direction of the dualistic alternative.<sup>38</sup> God was far from matter, He was a transcendent God,

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., pp. 78-79.

<sup>36</sup>Paul Tillich, A History of Christian Thought, edited by Carl E. Braaten (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, Publishers, c.1968), pp. 54-55.

<sup>37</sup>Chadwick, p. 117.

<sup>38</sup>Tollinton, p. 95.

and He had to bridge to the world through intermediaries. The chain of being that bridges the gap between the transcendent God and His creatures is more elaborate than it ever was in Plato or in any of the Middle-Platonists.<sup>39</sup>

In another reaction against the Stoics, these philosophers upheld the doctrine of free will against the Stoic determinism, a doctrine that is found in some form or another in all the writers of the third century.<sup>40</sup>

Again, that primary being that allows free will in man is without limit, form, or definition.<sup>41</sup> Their world is primarily the world of this transcendent God and his intermediaries and man on earth holds little interest for them. They read the Timaeus and left the Republic on the shelf.

Another important emphasis of these Neo-Platonists is the importance they place on numbers. Everything that the world soul creates is arranged according to numbers and ideas.<sup>42</sup>

We find great similarities between the answers of Plotinus and Origen, and while we do not say that Plotinus and Origen borrowed from one another, we do say that they based their answers on similar views that were floating around in the air of the times, air that men like Ammonius Saccus must have breathed. And these views were Platonic and more eclectic and abstract than the views of those who came before them.

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<sup>39</sup>Zeller, p. 312.

<sup>40</sup>Cadiou, p. 157.

<sup>41</sup>Tillich, p. 154.

<sup>42</sup>Zeller, p. 319.

We can see that Origen was Neo-Platonic in the sense that Neo-Platonism was Platonic and abstract, but before we conclude that Origen was at heart a Neo-Platonist, we must also emphasize the eclectic side of Neo-Platonism as it is found in Origen. What answers did he pick and choose from systems other than those of Platonists?



## CHAPTER V

### ORIGEN'S ECLECTIC HINTS

#### The Influence of the Stoics

We begin that eclectic search with the Stoic systems. What answers did Origen get from them? Here again we find disagreement among the critics. Some of them say he got next to nothing from them.

Apart from a whole vocabulary of stoic terms . . . which had become part of the common tradition and been adopted by the neo-Platonists, the only point with regard to which Origen seems to depend on them is, as Porphyry points out, their allegorical interpretation of the Homeric poems.<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, there are those who argue that Origen did indeed receive very much from the Stoics.

Origen, like Clement his master, was profoundly influenced by Stoicism. He employs its philosophical terminology, as we may see from the first few paragraphs of the third book of the De Principiis. He also borrowed from it his psychological analysis and the essential part of his cosmology.<sup>2</sup>

The "profound influence" men say that he borrowed especially the idea of the universe as a living creature from the Stoics, or at least they taught him the organic unity of the universe.<sup>3</sup> Origen's language about the universe may be similar to that of the Stoics, but his basic conception of the universe is far removed from them. The Stoics taught a mechanistic, divine immanence in the world, but Origen was too Platonic

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<sup>1</sup>Jean Danielou, Origen (New York: Sheed and Ward, c.1955), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>Eugene De Faye, Origen and His Work (New York: Columbia University Press, c.1929), p. 65.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 89.

to develop that side of the argument. It has been said that their divine immanence led Origen to temper his idea of transcendence,<sup>4</sup> but the Biblical influence could well have predisposed his mind in that direction also.

Another place where the "profound" critics argue that Origen borrowed some of his answers was from the Stoic conception of the succession of worlds. Origen himself seems to deny this completely.

Moreover, as for those who maintain that worlds similar to each other and in all respects alike sometimes come into existence, I do not know what proofs they can bring in support of this theory. For if it is said that there is to be a world similar in all respects to the present world, then it will happen that Adam and Eve will again do what they did before, there will be another flood, the same Moses will once more lead a people numbering six hundred thousand out of Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

While it is true that the successive worlds in Origen don't resemble one another, yet De Faye argues that Origen gets from the Stoics the idea of an ebb and flow of things, to which Origen is unwittingly indebted for the essence of his own doctrine.<sup>6</sup> Tollinton concludes that Origen's whole idea of a cosmic succession of worlds was largely derived from the earlier teachings of Zeno, Cleanthes, and Chrysippus.<sup>7</sup> We can see the Stoic influence here, and it would not be unreasonable to conclude that Origen did adopt this idea of succession, probably unconsciously, to fit his own views of the universe. Yet he definitely rejects their actual doctrine. It is impossible to say in what way Origen may have picked up this argument.

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<sup>4</sup>Richard B. Tollinton, Alexandrine Teaching on the Universe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), p. 30.

<sup>5</sup>Origen, De Principiis ii, 3. 4.

<sup>6</sup>De Faye, p. 149.

<sup>7</sup>Tollinton, p. 97.

Chadwick gives a long list of Stoic influences on Origen, including his use of their dictionaries, illustrations, and terminology; but he concludes that it is misleading to attribute the idea of the cycle of worlds to Stoicism, that Origen got little that was essential for his system from them, and that what he did get from them he got through the eclectic Middle-Platonist Antiochus of Ascalon.<sup>8</sup>

Although Origen may have incorporated a few Stoic emphases or at least terms into his thought and used Stoic ethics, his metaphysic was still basically Platonic.<sup>9</sup>

#### The Influence of the Other Schools

Besides the Stoic, what other schools may have influenced Origen? Which other systems of thought with their answers turned him either off or on?

The Epicureans turned him off the most.

The Epicureans made open profession of atheism. In consequence, of course, they denied the existence of any sort of Providence. They were the people Origen was chiefly thinking of when he talked about 'atheists' and forbade his disciples to read their books. He was further away from the Epicureans than from any of the other schools of philosophy.<sup>10</sup>

And yet, so did the Epicureans turn off about everyone else at the time, especially the Neo-Platonists.

One might expect that Origen received much from his Christian teacher

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<sup>8</sup>Henry Chadwick, "Origen, Celsus, and the Stoa," Journal of Theological Studies (1947), 34-49.

<sup>9</sup>Henry Chadwick, Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition (New York: Oxford University Press, c.1966), p. 107.

<sup>10</sup>Danielou, p. 82.

Clement, but we find few if any specifics. Perhaps their closest agreement was in their receptive attitude toward Greek culture and the light of reason. The statement of Gregory Thaumaturgos about Origen could have well applied to Clement:

I beseech thee to draw from Greek philosophy such things as are capable of being encyclic or preparatory studies to Christianity, and from geometry and astronomy such things as will be useful for the exposition of Holy Scripture, in order that what the sons of the philosophers say about geometry and music and grammar and rhetoric and astronomy, that they are the handmaidens of philosophy, we may say of philosophy itself in relation to Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

Photius claimed that Clement "talked marvels about transmigration of souls and about many worlds having existed before Adam,"<sup>12</sup> and this might be a possible hint of some kind of influence. But because of the lack of any other substantiation for this view, it must remain a hint. For sure, at least, Origen and Clement are far apart as regards the doctrine of Pre-existence.

Clement alone leaves us in no doubt that he believed each soul existed by separate creation. "God made us; we did not pre-exist. Had we pre-existed we should have known where we had been and how and why we came here. If we did not pre-exist, God alone is responsible for our birth."<sup>13</sup>

When we turn to gnosticism, especially as seen in the system of Valentinus, we again run into some controversy among the critics. Chadwick claims that the De Principiis is primarily in intention an anti-gnostic polemic.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Origen himself seems to put the gnostics

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<sup>11</sup>Johannes Quasten, Patrology (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, c.1953), II, 41-42.

<sup>12</sup>See footnote in Origen, On First Principles, translated by G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, c.1966), p. 84.

<sup>13</sup>Tollinton, p. 136.

<sup>14</sup>Chadwick, Early, p. 72.

completely out of the picture when he says:

It is proved by many declarations throughout the whole of scripture that the universe was created by God and that there is no substance which has not received its existence from him; which refutes and dismisses the doctrines falsely taught by some, that there is a matter which is co-eternal with God, or that there are unbegotten souls, in whom they would have it that God implanted not so much the principle of existence as the quality and rank of their life.<sup>15</sup>

His polemic against them extended to many aspects of their thought. Origen is of course opposed to the gnostic belief that the material world was a big mistake. The gnostic system posited that "One of the Aeons, Sophia, fell by her unholy curiosity, and out of the pangs and pains of her frustrated desire arose matter, which was fashioned by the demiourgos into this lower world."<sup>16</sup> Origen rather believed that all the gnostics, including Marcion and Apelles and Valentinus, were caught up in two essential fallacies:

The first of those fallacies was a theological error: to regard the author of this world as opposed to the Father revealed in the Gospel. The second was a moral error: to believe that evil is something as old as the world itself and to teach the natural predestination of the elect.<sup>17</sup>

This view led to the doctrine of the total depravity of man, a doctrine which Origen obviously rejects.<sup>18</sup> However, the answers of Origen and Valentinus were not without their similarities. They were alike in their theory of final bliss:

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<sup>15</sup>Origen, 1, 3. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Tollinton, p. 98.

<sup>17</sup>Rene Cadiou, Origen. His Life at Alexandria (St. Louis & London: B. Herder Book Co., c.1944), p. 107.

<sup>18</sup>Henry Chadwick, "The Evidences of Christianity in the Apologetic of Origen," Studia Patristica, edited by Kurt Aland and F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), II, 338.

Valentinus and his school, along with most of the Gnostics of the Philosophumena, think that the consummation will take place when all the divine elements that are lost in matter have been recovered, restored to their source, and, as it were, reabsorbed into the inmost heart of the supra-sensible world. . . . What prevents any confusion between the doctrine of Origen and that of the Gnostics is that, in depicting the state of final bliss, our theologian largely retains the Bible terminology.<sup>19</sup>

Harnack feels that Origen borrowed, or at least had affinities to, the plan of Valentinus. Both systems contain three parts: (1) the doctrine of God and His unfoldings or creations, (2) the doctrine of the Fall and its consequences, (3) the doctrine of redemption and restoration.<sup>20</sup> Origen and the Gnostics are alike in their connection of the deity with the world through all kinds of intermediaries:

The Father is the fount and origin of all being, and is pure spirit. The problem is to connect him with the existent material world. The Gnostics bridged the gulf by a series of descents from spirit into matter, to be followed at last by a restoration of the spiritual seeds or sparks imprisoned in matter to their original home. On this theme they played with all manner of fantastic variations. The Christian theology, as expounded by Origen, severely avoids these extravagances; yet the process of descent and ascent runs through it all.<sup>21</sup>

All these gnostic emphases, as we have seen, Origen could have taken from the eclectic Platonism of the times, and we need not necessarily argue any direct gnostic influence.

From Philo the Jew Origen receives certain emphases that led him to answer the way he did. Most prominently, Origen received from Philo his use of the allegorical method, although this method was in common use by

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<sup>19</sup>De Faye, pp. 149-150.

<sup>20</sup>Adolph von Harnack, History of Dogma (New York: Russell and Russell; c.1958), II, 345.

<sup>21</sup>G. W. Butterworth in his introduction to Origen's De Principiis (New York: Harper & Row, c.1966), liv.

the church of the times. Origen just puts it to more expert use. As already stated, Origen received Plato's theory of ideas from Philo, but this theory played a very minor part in Origen's answers. The mediation theme as further developed by Philo of course had its influence on Origen, but again, this emphasis is not found in Philo alone. The mediaries of Philo are what he calls the Powers. "These are heavenly and spiritual entities which share the divine nature and yet are subordinate to the supreme God, acting as his ministers, manifesting his character, accomplishing his purposes."<sup>22</sup> Also, Origen may be indebted to Philo for further developing the concept of the goodness of God in the creation of the universe.<sup>23</sup>

In summary, we can only conclude that Philo added really nothing new to Origen's answers to the questions of creation, although he perhaps clarified certain themes and gave them additional emphasis.

In his answers to the questions of creation, Origen gave certain answers that were first proposed by Pythagoras. However, at the time of Origen's writing, Pythagoreanism was basically an eclectic school and had to a great extent been fused with the Neo-Platonic school.<sup>24</sup> The answers that Origen picked up from them were particularly their emphasis on numbers. Origen writes, "But he made all things by number and measure; for to God there is nothing either without end or without measure."<sup>25</sup> Cadiou asserts that when Origen wants to meditate on the meaning of the steps on the ladder

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<sup>22</sup>Tollinton, p. 55.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>24</sup>Eduard Zeller, Outlines of the History of Greek Philosophy (Cleveland and New York: The World Publishing Company, c.1931), p. 301.

<sup>25</sup>Origen, iv, 4. 8.

of paradise, he turns to the Pythagoreans,<sup>26</sup> although this view too had been long adapted and fused into the common eclectic Neo-Platonism.

From Aristotle Origen takes little that he hasn't found somewhere else. Perhaps his most obvious similarity to Aristotle was in relation to Aristotle's doctrine of the fifth essence. Origen seems to explicitly reject this doctrine. "For the faith of the Church does not accept the opinion derived from certain Greek philosophers, that besides this body which is composed of the four elements, there is a fifth body which is entirely other than and diverse from our present body."<sup>27</sup> Yet Origen's description of rarefied matter seems to approach Aristotle's conception of the fifth essence. It was in the air of the times. Origen went along with the Aristotelian Alexander in his discussion about fate and free will,<sup>28</sup> although this does not mean that it was a specifically Aristotelian trait to do so.

An interesting influence may have come from the East. There is an obvious similarity between Plato's and Origen's doctrine of pre-existence and the Buddhist doctrine of Karma. However, it is impossible at this time to reach any conclusions about the nature of this similarity. It is an unsettled question whether on this point eastern and western doctrine arose independently, by a parallel growth, or whether they had a common source.<sup>29</sup>

In summary, we can say that Origen's borrowings from all these schools

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<sup>26</sup>Cadiou, p. 124.

<sup>27</sup>Origen, iii, 6. 6.

<sup>28</sup>Robert L. Wilken, "Fate and Gospel in the Roman Empire," Concordia Theological Monthly, XL (June, July-August, 1969), 382.

<sup>29</sup>Tollinton, p. 136.



to work out his doctrines or answers to the questions of existence is not great, it depends on no school in particular--it is eclectic, it may not have been conscious, and in most instances was already part of the eclectic Neo-Platonism of his times.

## CHAPTER VI

### ORIGEN--THE ORIGINAL CHRISTIAN NEO-PLATONIST

#### Origen the Christian

And now we turn to the answers that Origen may have derived directly from Christianity. What, again, made him a "Christian" Neo-Platonist?

Besides the fact that he claims to find everything in Scripture, that he boxes himself in by certain doctrines of Scripture and by the rule of faith, there are certain doctrines that he draws directly from Scripture.

Again, critics are divided as to the influence that Scripture had on him. De Faye argues that, "Of all the influences that made up his doctrine of the Universe, it is the Biblical influence that is least pronounced. The only trait which Origen retained is the idea of a fall which took place at the beginning."<sup>1</sup> Fairweather hints that a bit more than we might think could come from his Christianity:

He is even more of an idealistic philosopher than Plato himself. At the same time he holds the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments to be the only absolutely reliable sources for acquiring a knowledge of the truth, and there is something to be said for the contention that in Origen much has been ascribed to the influence of Platonism that admits of a simpler and more natural explanation. According to this view the doctrine of the pre-existence of the soul, for instance, was not peculiar to Pythagoras and Plato, but was also current in the East, and may quite well have been suggested to Origen by certain Jewish apocrypha in which there was a large admixture of Oriental ideas. So also with regard to the ultimate triumph of the good, the conversion of the devil, etc. The exaggerated and axiomatic significance attached by Origen to certain New Testament texts is further pointed to as the real basis of many of his semi-Christian, semi-Oriental theories. He finds, e.g., the distinction

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<sup>1</sup>Eugene De Faye, Origen and His Work (New York: Columbia University Press, c.1929), p. 92.

of the upper, intermediary, and infernal worlds in the saying of St. Paul, "that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things on earth, and things under the earth" (Phil. ii.10); and the pre-existence of the soul in the statements: "When Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb" (Luke i.41), and "There was a man sent from God whose name was John" (John i.6).<sup>2</sup>

The truth is that the truth is probably somewhere between these two views. Origen writes, "But we have treated more fully of such opinions in the place in which we inquired into the meaning of the passage, 'In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth.'" <sup>3</sup> Perhaps this commentary will some day be discovered and we will have a more complete answer to this question.

One of the most significant doctrines Origen seems to derive from Scripture alone is his doctrine of creation out of nothing, "that God is one, who set in order all things, and who, when nothing existed, caused the universe to be."<sup>4</sup> Although there is still some question as to the relationship between this doctrine and that of Plato's doctrine of the eternal creation of matter, Tollinton argues that the emphasis that Origen puts on it is unique in the school of Alexandria of his time:

Of the teachers we are considering Origen alone holds the doctrine of creation in this absolute sense. In many respects he departs from the Mosaic cosmogony but in the fundamental principle of creation ex nihilo he is biblical and uncompromising.<sup>5</sup>

According to Tollinton Origen is more biblical than the rest of the

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<sup>2</sup>William Fairweather, Origen and Greek Patristic Thought (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1901), pp. 87-88.

<sup>3</sup>Origen, De Principiis ii, 3. 6.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., i, 1. 4.

<sup>5</sup>Richard B. Tollinton, Alexandrine Teaching on the Universe (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), p. 99.

Alexandrians in his doctrine of the Fall, but this again would depend on which view of Origen about the Fall we accept: the gradual cooling or the sudden Fall. If we maintain that Origen changed his mind and resorted to the idea of a sudden Fall, then there is something to be said about Origen's derivation of this idea from Scripture, and De Faye has said it very well:

It is worthy of note that this idea of a fall, with the suprasensible world as its theatre, is utterly alien to purely Greek systems. We find no mention of it in either Plato, Plutarch or Plotinus. All the same, it appears in every system of Christian origin; it forms even the one preeminent and outstanding event. Remember the speculations of Valentinus, of the Coptic Gnostics and many others. Consequently it was Christianity that gave birth to the idea of a fall, and it was under the influence of the story of Genesis that it was conceived.<sup>6</sup>

In conclusion, we must say that Origen is "Christian" more in the sense that he claims to be and by using the allegoric method considers all his work to be Christian and in no way contradicting Scripture. There are a few emphases which seem to be purely Christian, but these are not determinative.

#### A Man of His Times

And so we must again draw our conclusion that Origen was a man of his times, that he was a Neo-Platonist and in that sense is Platonic, eclectic, and abstract.

In speaking of gnostic influences on Origen, Cadiou remarks:

Little difficulty would be encountered in explaining what the critics call the general resemblances and the literary borrowings which are alleged to indicate Origen's debt to gnosticism, if we assume that

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<sup>6</sup>De Faye, p. 85.

each epoch in the history of human thought has its own special philosophy, what is called the mentality of the period. This mentality is the product of man's effort to adjust himself to the difficulties of the period in which he lives. An adequate description of it is that it is a totality of mental attitudes, or a totality of ways of looking at the problems presented to us from without.<sup>7</sup>

His task is the same as that of the Neo-Platonists in that "for him as for them the problem is how to establish the organic unity of God and the world, and counteract the dualism of Oriental theosophies."<sup>8</sup>

Another common problem:

In the philosophical environment in which Origen labored, men were asking themselves how prediction, prophecy, and foreknowledge under all their forms could be brought into harmony with the work of salvation. The genuine Christian believed in prophecies but put no credence in astrologers. The problem was, therefore, how to safeguard the notion of Providence and how to show the absurdity of fatalism.<sup>9</sup>

They accepted the same axioms:

However weak and clumsy such theories as this might be, they indicate for us the line of thought pursued by the religious philosophies of the period under review. It became an axiom that the totality of things owed its creation to the first principle, and equally axiomatic that evil has an accidental cause.<sup>10</sup>

They made good use of the allegorical method:

This emancipation from particulars left speculation free, and sometimes, especially among the Gnostics, excessive advantage was taken of this liberty. It was one of the perils of allegory that you could escape from statements of fact into a world of unrestrained interpretation, in which the imagination could disport itself without control. The historian rarely appeared in Alexandria.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Rene Cadiou, Origen. His Life at Alexandria (St. Louis & London: B. Herder Book Co., c.1944), p. 120.

<sup>8</sup>Fairweather, p. 96.

<sup>9</sup>Cadiou, pp. 167-168.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>11</sup>Tollinton, p. 18.

And so we conclude that Origen, like the Neo-Platonists, was Platonic, eclectic, and abstract in his answers to the questions Whence? Why? and Whither? of our existence. We have also seen in what way he was Christian, but now we must see in what way he was "original."

He is not particularly original in that he introduced some totally new answers to the questions of mankind. It is true that some of his answers are unique,<sup>12</sup> but his greatest genius lay in the fact that he could put together all these ideas so completely. The De Principiis contains the most thorough "soundings" into the doctrine of creation that up to his time had been found in the Christian church. "Its originality consisted in its vastness of plan, in the unity of its purpose, and in the genius with which it was executed."<sup>13</sup>

He regarded his "soundings" as only partial answers to the questions of existence, but he answered them very adequately.

Accordingly, Origen was able to fulfil the task that falls to the Christian apologist in every age, namely, to create a connecting link between the Gospel and the thought and culture of his own time. Origen allowed himself much liberty in this, and to the more rigidly standardized orthodoxy of the following centuries the freedom he indulged seemed more than intolerable. But perhaps all really successful apologists are regarded by the next generation as having betrayed the faith.<sup>14</sup>

It was by being a man for his times that Origen became a man for all times.

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<sup>12</sup>For instance, the idea that the stars are capable of sin. See footnote in Origen, On First Principles, translated by G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper & Row, c.1966), p. 60.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., xxx.

<sup>14</sup>Henry Chadwick, "The Evidence of Christianity in the Apologetic of Origen," Studia Patristica, edited by Kurt Aland and F. L. Cross (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957), II, 339.

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