

## Origen's interpretational framework \*\*

**Abstract:** Hermeneutics is not only a science, detached from the personal life of the interpreter, but is, actually, the basis for one's own development. This is Origen's main argument. Although his genius was never questioned either by his contemporaries or throughout centuries, the focus of his interpretation was not an intellectual but a spiritual one. He believed the interpreter needs to find the transformational truth that lies behind the concepts of the text. Origen was all in favor for the exegesis, for the grammatical-historical approach to the text, and this constitutes the basis for his exegesis. However, he would press the interpretation a step further, as he was looking for principles that would benefit the interpreter. Henri de Lubac named this approach an ontological hermeneutic. I will refer to the work of this French philosopher and theologian, as an authoritative figure in the interpretation of the alexandrine writer.

**Keywords:** Literal, Spiritual, Understanding, Interpretation, Framework, Concept, Image

Speaking of Origen's writings, Renosaid that it is like staying under a waterfall<sup>1</sup>. This refers to the vastness of his works as well as to the difficulty one finds in discovering a model of interpretation within the books he wrote. Origen was quite a controversial personality, most of the times the accusations against him are based on false assumptions in regarding to what he wrote or how he lived. Origen's genius could only be observed only if the context of his writings is taken in consideration. Henri de Lubac said „It is useless to wonder what exactly one of the ancients would do if he were suddenly transported among us, in totally different conditions, discovering curiosities that his era did not know [...] There is no way to respond to such question.”<sup>2</sup> The French theologian commented further on this issue:

Aside from other considerations, the number of centuries that separates us from his work should warn us sufficiently that, in order to conserve or to rediscover the spirit in it, we must consent to drop much of what he says

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<sup>1</sup> Reno R. Russell, „Origen and spiritual interpretation”, in *Pro ecclesia* 15, 2006, p. 108.

<sup>2</sup> Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007, pp. 429-30.

literally, that is, much of all of this appearance on the basis of which we are first tempted to judge it and without which we could most certainly not define it.<sup>3</sup>

Even though the reconstruction of the original situation is a utopia, the interpreter still needs to do his part in understanding it, so that he could be nearly as close to what Origen thought. Henri de Lubac was fascinated by Origen and by his writings that he spent nearly 20 years in understanding his approach to interpretation. In his book *History and Spirit*, De Lubac defends the alexandrine writer and provides the reader a framework to understand the interpretation of Origen.

## 1. Origen's interpretative paradigms

John Mckenzie said that Origen's approach to interpretation is not find only in his two main books on interpretation, namely, *Peri Archonand Contra Celsus*, but also in his homilies.<sup>4</sup> Henri de Lubac agrees with Mckenzie and believes that the interpreter needs to also approach Origen's homilies in order to understand his interpretational framework. The reason why is that these are exegetical applications for the principles mentioned in the books above.<sup>5</sup>

Henri de Lubac provides three paradigms to understand Origen. The interpreter needs to dig in deeply in the work of Origen in order to discover his system of interpretation as this is not very obvious. He labeled these paradigms, but he was not very concerned about the form as for the content. De Lubac even said that „for he who is the concerned with the truth names and terminologies are less important”<sup>6</sup> (Origen 1885, 376). He understood, however, the need for systematization and these three schemes that would be presented below try to capture Origen's interpretational system. The first one is known, being specifically mentioned by Origen but the other two are deduced by Henri de Lubac.

First system is mentioned in both *Peri Archon*<sup>7</sup> (Origen 1885, 359) and Origen's homilies. It takes the form of “historical-moral-mystical”:

By itself, the historical sense has a limited usage and, sometimes, it does not nourish the soul; the moral sense is like milk, very useful for children, and the mystical sense is the food for the mature, for the one who is grown up. First —

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 427.

<sup>4</sup> John L. McKenzie, „A Chapter in the History of Spiritual Exegesis: De Lubac's *Histoire et Esprit*”, in *Theological Studies*, 11, 1950, p. 365.

<sup>5</sup> Henri de Lubac, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-38.

<sup>6</sup> Origen, *Peri Archon*, 4.27. Edited by Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1885, p. 376.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 359.

*moralis locus* (moral lesson) – is proper for the Christians from Corinth; the second– *misticus intellectus* (mystical lessons) – for those of Ephesus.<sup>8</sup>

The second, “historical-mystical-moral”, even though is terminological similar to the first paradigm, it is conceptually different. It appeared as a necessity in the interpretation of the Old Testament. The first element, historical, is mutual to the first scheme. The difference comes with the other two components. Thus, the “mystical” element implies a typology, while “moral” would take the same element from the first paradigm but at a different level, that of typology. In dealing with Gospels, Origen thought that the same interpretation needs to be sought out as with Old Testament. The most important component is the spiritual one. Even if in the New Testament the things are much clearer the meaning is deep, „some passages are simple and easy to understand but in reality they are profound and mysterious”<sup>9</sup>.

Henri de Lubac identifies one more interpretation trichotomy: „shadow-image-truth” or „past-present-future”. This is absolute necessary, especially in the interpretation of the New Testament, as the fulfillment of what is written is a future event and expresses the Christian’s hope.

Origen thought that these three interpretational paradigms do not necessarily corresponds, as they were thought for long, to the structure of human constitution: body, soul and spirit but rather a pedagogical end:

Each one, then, ought to describe in his own mind, in a threefold manner, the understanding of the divine letters,—that is, in order that all the more simple individuals may be edified, so to speak, by the very body of Scripture; for such we term that common and historical sense: while, if some have commenced to make considerable progress, and are able to see something more (than that), they may be edified by the very soul of Scripture. Those, again, who are perfect, and who resemble those of whom the apostle says, “We speak wisdom among them that are perfect, but not the wisdom of this world, nor of the princes of this world, who will be brought to nought; but we speak the wisdom of God, hidden in a mystery, which God hath decreed before the ages unto our glory”<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Origen, *Homilies 1-14 on Ezekiel*. Edited and translated by Thomas Scheck, New Jersey: Newman Press, 2010, p. 108. Christians from Corinth were known to be the most immature of Apostle Paul’s epistles recipients, while those from Ephesus could be entrusted with a more substantial message.

<sup>9</sup> Origen, *Commentary on Matthew*. Edited by Thomas P. Scheck, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008, p. 124.

<sup>10</sup> Origen, *Peri Archon*, ed. cit., p. 359.

## 2. Origen and his Christological interpretation

Origen's threefold interpretation paradigm is a theology rather than an exegesis, in the way we understand this term today. He is likely to take the Scripture as a whole rather than to exegete each individual passage. He thought that the exegetical idea cannot be separated from the overview.<sup>11</sup> Origen tends to ignore the human author of the Scripture. He thought that, even though the prophets or the patriarch had the knowledge of the revelation, they could not express in words, but rather through symbols and typologies.<sup>12</sup> Origen believed that people the authors express themselves through concept but it takes personal discipline, and in the case of Scripture personal devotion, in order to understand the spirit behind the words.

The literalness of the Scripture seems irreconcilable with the abstracts of Origen's theological system and it is easy to presuppose that the unity of the two things in Origen's conception force him into arbitrary interpretation.

Let us not fear to affirm that Origen is in fact a moralist, whose exegesis is constantly oriented toward morality. For what is important in his eyes is, not to speculate on the profound meaning of the Bible, but to receive it with a living faith and to "adapt one's conduct to the words of truth" it contains.<sup>13</sup>

Everything in Scripture is prophetic because it reveals Jesus. In a way, every saint in the Old Testament is a typology for Him. His preoccupation for theophany determines him to make unusual interpretations.<sup>14</sup> Our Lord, one in nature, appears everywhere in the Scripture in different angles, every person or prophetic event showing one of His traits.<sup>15</sup> Spiritual interpretation is necessary especially in dealing with the Old Testament, although here and there, this is true with the New Testament also. With Origen there is no exegesis but rather a Christology. This is more obvious as he lived in the early days of the church. Consequently the Christian tradition, in which he is an authentic link, owes to him more than to any other of its other doctors the forms in which it has been perpetuated down to our times.<sup>16</sup>

Henri de Lubac considers that Origen's master is not Philo but rather Christ Jesus himself, who is the key for the interpretation of Old Testament. All mysteries of Old Testament are hidden in Him.

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<sup>11</sup> Origen, *Commentary on John*, Books 1-10, 1.15. Edited by Ronald E. Heine, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Henri de Lubac, *op. cit.*, pp. 258-59.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 211.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 197-201.

<sup>15</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*. Edited by Ronald E. Heine, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002, p. 196.

<sup>16</sup> Henri de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

He is looking for this unique, general, essential relationship, then, and naturally he finds symbols of it everywhere in the Holy Books. In this, his ingenuity is at its greatest, and we would often like it to be less subtle. But his creative virtuosity of which he gives proofs and which, in most cases, can seem to us as gratuitous as it is personal, is always exercised in a more or less direct way, at the service of the same profound intuition, of the same great fundamental truth received from tradition and perpetually deepened.<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Origen and the relationship between his historical and spiritual interpretations**

Origen is best known for his allegorical interpretation. However, he was not the pioneer of this method. It has its origins in the Alexandrian Jewish community, who tried to reconcile the mosaic writings with the Greek philosophy. It was natural that the Christian interpretation would be influenced by the interpretation of the day, namely, the allegory. This would allow the interpreters to make the Old Testament a Christian book. This is the more important as the church was made up not only of Jews but of non-Jews also. Old Testament would have been useless if it had been only a Jewish book. Clement, before Origen, is the first who would give a scientific form to the allegorical interpretation.

For Henri de Lubac, Origen's interpretation was a response to the tendency of exegesis in his time. He pleaded for the traditional way of interpretation. He thought that both rationalism and liberal Protestantism have brought a new emphasis in the biblical exegesis, a component that is interested more in the mechanics of the exegesis.<sup>18</sup>

Origen identified two attitudes in interpretation: one objective but impersonal, whom he calls correct, but incomplete and the other, dynamic, which considers that Scripture has an alive message. This second approach is dangerous if not based on the former.<sup>19</sup> Both approaches are present in the work of Origen and, for this reason, Henri de Lubac considers him a model one could follow in the interpretation in a time in which biblical exegesis had to suffer as it became a pure scientific exegesis, separated from the personal life of the interpreter and of the community. It is important to notice that one interpretation does not rule out the other, as wisdom could be acquired through different ways of interpretation.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 195.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 432.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 436.

<sup>20</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Joshua*. Edited by Cynthia White, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2002, p. 90.

#### 4. Origen defends the literal sense

It is imperative to state that Origen was not against the literal or historical sense. On the contrary, he considered that we „first need to show the literal meaning of it and then strive to lift the mystical veils from it.”<sup>21</sup> Henri de Lubac believed that Origen’s exegesis was as literal as it could be because it agreed with rabbinical interpretation, which considered that no word is randomly placed in a text; even the word order is essential. Everything that was written, all little details are important, although it is pointless to find meaning in all the details.

I understand this saying to mean that histories are indeed recounted but that the point is not to tell the story but to devise mysteries. In other words, the sacred author or the Holy Spirit himself does not recount these events for the empty pleasure of recounting.<sup>22</sup>

Although Origen pleads for the spiritual sense, as we could see in the following section, he always tried to tie it to the literal sense. He said that the texts: „all contain divine depths, but, the majority also keep their literal sense. Thus, even the text of the story edifies as all.”<sup>23</sup> Only after we have said that we could ask what hidden truths are there in the text “what allegory could be deduced from the passage.”<sup>24</sup>

Origen questioned the literal sense of less passages than it was believed to, and even less than it seems to show: “very far from eliminating or scorning history, Origen is content to maintain it intact and to defend it, so to speak, in its raw state. He seeks to ‘understand’ it, as he himself says to us. He seeks the ‘truth’ of it.”<sup>25</sup>

For Origen, the historical truth of the incarnated Logos is the fundamental presupposition, even though he does not say it very often. He defends the historical truth, a fundamental antithesis with Philo, and with Greeks, in general. A huge difference between the two interpreters from Alexandria is that for Philo history does not make sense, especially in the Jewish practices as he did not believe in a Messiah. Things are different with Origene.

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<sup>21</sup> Henri de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

<sup>23</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Numbers*. Edited by Thomas P. Scheck, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009, p. 122.

<sup>24</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, ed. cit., pp. 57-69

<sup>25</sup> Henri de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 317.

## 5. Origen pleads for the spiritual sense.

### Moving from concept to image

Even though he defended the historical sense, Origen believed that scientific exegesis cannot reveal all the aspects of the text, even though the interpreter exercises faith. Spiritual interpretation is the most important and is also for those who are mature because it reveals mysteries. It is the “breath of Christian life as it translates its rhythm”.<sup>26</sup> The development of the spiritual sense is “more important in his work than the mystical sense, which serve as its basis.”<sup>27</sup>

This reasoning, in substance, goes as follows: If there had not been beneath the letter, a hidden intention of the Holy Spirit that goes beyond what it says, this letter itself would often be unbelievable, whether because what it offers is sometimes shocking or because of its banality. We would then be dealing with a mere fable, a bit of gossip. But – and this is the second point of reasoning, which more than one has failed to note – the spiritual sense, which gives the text its true value, justifies the letter of it in its very literalness.<sup>28</sup>

Origen affirms in *Homilies on Leviticus*: „I believe that the greatness of mysteries exceeds our capacity of explain it. However, even if we are not able to explain all things, we believe that all things are full of mysteries.”<sup>29</sup> He agrees that this characteristic of the text cannot count against its historicity: the Spirit cannot destroy the letter.

Henri de Lubac said about Origen’s way of viewing allegory:

When he seeks something spiritual beneath an event or a perceptible reality, it is not at all for him the question of substituting a metaphor for the literal sense, an arbitrary accommodation for the natural sense. It is solely a question of discovering the meaning of this event or this thing, the final reason this event took place, the final reality of which this thing is the anticipated symbol.<sup>30</sup>

This was Origen’s presupposition: „the Scriptures were written by the Spirit of God, and have a meaning, not such only as is apparent at first sight, but also another, which escapes the notice of most. For those (words) which are written are the forms of certain mysteries, and the images of divine things.”<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, 240.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, 247.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, 121.

<sup>29</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, Edited by Gary Wayne Barkley, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990, p. 66.

<sup>30</sup> Henri de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

<sup>31</sup> Origen, *Peri Archon*, ed. cit., p. 241.

Origen believed in the teaching of the Scripture concerned the spiritual interpretation: „how would it be possible to accept his Letters as inspires if one claimed to hold to the letter of Scripture, despite their very clear teaching?”<sup>32</sup> He draws a parallel between the historical and spiritual sense, on one hand and the two natures of Christ on the other hand: human and divine. The Logos of Philo, just as that of the stoics, penetrates as a sharp sword in the amorphous substance, where things are mixed up, in order to organize it and give it an intelligible appearance.<sup>33</sup>

For Origen, the spiritual sense was not just a method of interpretation but a way of thinking. Soul and Scripture inform mutually. I would be a mistake to study one without the other; they are like two books that need to be read together. Not only the soul, but the entire universe needs to be interpreted spiritually, as there is a fundamental connection between universe and Scripture. Thus, Henri de Lubac sees the interpretation of Origen in harmony with the tradition of church in interpretation. De Lubac draws a correspondence between Origen's allegory and that of Apostle Paul in order to rule out any doubt in fitting the former's interpretation within the Christian boundaries.

De Lubac admits that sometimes Origen denies the historicity of the things described in Scripture. He believed that not everything that is in it could be taken literally; some passages, not many, have a solely spiritual sense.<sup>34</sup> These are either more difficult to interpret or contain some historical discrepancies. Origen believed that when there are such things the spiritual sense can solve the dilemma. Celsie comments: „due to his method of interpretation, Origen ruled out the implausible and the contradictions of the literal sense.”<sup>35</sup>

Origen, however, would appeal to the spiritual sense at last.<sup>36</sup> He believed that some events have a strict mystical goal. What is the use of the cruel wars if there would be no mystical sense? Or what is the point of the genealogies, if they don't help out the reader? Origen believed that he who studies the Scripture needs to abandon the objective point of view, which is quite impersonal and too intellectual. Scripture is not a document given to a historian or a thinker, even though he is a believer. It is a word that presupposes the beginning of a dialogue. More precisely, it is God who offers Himself through it and in return He expects more just a simple response, He looks for a change in the attitude.

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<sup>32</sup> Henri de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

<sup>33</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus*, ed. cit., p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Henri de Lubac, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>35</sup> George Celsie, *Gândirea creștin – filosofică a lui Origen în De Principiis și urmările ei până la jumătatea secolului al vi-lea*, Cluj-Napoca: Editura Limes, 2002, p. 37.

<sup>36</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Ezekiel 1-14*. Edited by Thomas Scheck, New Jersey: The Newman Press, 2010, pp. 55-56.



## 6. Conclusion

Origen believed that interpretation is a spiritual exercise. The literal interpretation would be the first step one needs to take in order to understand a text. But the interpreter needs not stop at this level. Even if one examines the letter in the best way possible, he still needs to implore the spirit to understand the mysteries contained in them. Spiritual exegesis is the next step, and the last, in interpretation. The exegete would need to ask God to help him out “to understand the sense of the Scripture.”<sup>37</sup>

Origen’s exegesis is a relational process. The most important relation is with the author, which is Christ, in the case of Scripture. Origen believed that understanding is not a problem of the intelligence of mind but a problem of the purity of heart, of integrity and simplicity. A materialistic loaded heart is incapable of discerning Scripture and the mystery of salvation: “The ambition, spiritual hunger, laborious research and prayers should have priority in the preparation of the soul to receive spiritual nourishment from God that gives it at the right time.”<sup>38</sup> Thus, for Origen, exegesis is not only an exercise to understand the concepts in the text but a discipline in conforming to the image of Christ.

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<sup>37</sup> Origen, *Commentary on John*, Books 1-10, 1.15. Edited by Ronald E. Heine, Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1989, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> Origen, *The Song of Songs Commentary and Homilies*. Edited by Johannes Quasten and Joseph Plumpe, New York: The Newman Press, 1956, p. 62.

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