



READING SCRIPTURE WITH THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS



LESSON 1 - Origen of Alexandria and Christological Exegesis

By Bishop Robert Barron

We begin with Origen of Alexandria. He is not a household name, but given his place among Christian thinkers and practitioners, he should be. I would rank him with Aquinas and Augustine as one of the three or four greatest thinkers in the Christian tradition. Quirky? Yes. Did he say some things the Church eventually repudiated? Yes, he did. For example, *apocatastasis*, the view that he knows that all people, even the spiritual creatures, even the devil himself, will be saved—the Church backed away from that position. He’s a bit subordinationist in his Trinitarian theology, and his Christology is also a little bit off kilter, so the Church did back away from some things that Origen said.

Having said that, there’s so much depth and beauty and richness in Origen. Go back to the nineteenth century, beginning with John Henry Newman, then coming up into the twentieth century with Balthasar, with de Lubac, with Bouyer, with so many of the great figures. There was an Origen revival, a deep interest in this magnificent figure. In many ways, I call him the ur-poet of the tradition. He’s a great theological thinker and loves high philosophical discourse, but he is above all a poet. He’s a mystic, someone who appreciates the rich literary quality of the Scripture and whose mind ranges in this associative, deeply poetic way.

Let me just say a few things about him to set up his biography. He’s Origen of *Alexandria*, and that matters. Alexandria, founded by Alexander the Great (hence the name), a port city, a cultural crossroad, was from the beginning a place where a lot of different ideas came together.

An awful lot of intellectual creativity took place in Alexandria. Think, for example, of Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus himself, who had a big impact on Origen. Philo presented deeply allegorical readings of the Bible. My point is that this young man, obviously brilliant, grows up in a city that's marked by a lot of intellectual and theological creativity.

He's born around the year 185, so we're talking about a very ancient figure. When he's born, Irenaeus is coming toward the end of his life and career. So Origen is not quite in contact with the apostolic generation, the way even Irenaeus was. Remember, Irenaeus tells us that he was taught by Polycarp, who was taught by the Apostle John. Origen is not quite that close, but he's pretty close to the origins of Christianity. His name is interesting—Origen, we call him. *Origenus*. It's a good Egyptian name, *Horus genus*, born of Horus. It signals the deep pagan background of his Egyptian heritage. A brilliant kid. His father was an ardent Christian, and he brings young Origen into the thought-world of Christianity. Origen's father dies a martyr, and one of the things we know about the very young Origen is that he encouraged his father to become a martyr. He said to him, basically, "Dad, don't worry about Mom and me. We'll be okay, but you need to make this great public witness," which he did. So from the beginning he was an intense, passionate figure. That remains true the whole of his life.

Because of these early persecutions of the Church in that part of the world, a lot of the leadership had faded away. So Origen, at the impressively young age of eighteen, is appointed head of the catechetical school in Alexandria. In our terms, that's like becoming the head of the theology department at a major university.

Now, what marks his style and his thinking? I'd say, first of all, he's a man of the Bible. That's why I'm looking at him in this course. Vatican II famously said that the Bible is the soul of theology. Nobody in the great tradition knew that better than Origen of Alexandria. Maybe with the exception of Jerome, no other Father knew the Bible as well as Origen. One of his great accomplishments was to line up all of the extant versions of the Bible, and then do a careful textual comparison. He was in dialogue with rabbis at the time. He knew the Jewish tradition, and his knowledge of Hebrew allowed him to interpret the Old Testament in very creative ways. So he's a man of the Bible.

Here's the other thing though, and it's massively influential on the rest of the tradition. Origen knew that if he was going to proclaim the Bible in his cultural setting, he had to know the dominant forms of cultural articulation. And so, the young Origen became a student of the regnant philosophy of that time, which was what we now call Middle Platonism. Here's a notable connection. Plotinus, maybe the greatest of the Neoplatonic philosophers, and Origen

had this in common: they both were students at one time of Ammonius Saccas, who was the leading Neoplatonist teacher at the time. And so, Origen, maybe the greatest Christian theologian of the time, and Plotinus, the greatest Neoplatonic philosopher, shared the same teacher.

I'm telling you that story to signal that Origen, deeply immersed in Scripture, was also deeply acquainted with the dominant philosophy of his time. Think of someone today who would know the Bible back and forth and would also know the best and the greatest of the postmodern philosophers writing today. That gives you an idea of Origen's frame of mind. In that, he influenced the whole tradition. Without that move of Origen, you don't have Augustine dialoguing with Platonism. You don't have Aquinas dialoguing with Aristotle, etc. That's a hugely important contribution that he makes.

By the year 232—now into his maturity—he runs afoul of the bishop of Alexandria, a man called Demetrius, and he's more or less exiled to Caesarea Philippi in Palestine. While he's there, he's ordained a priest. He also set up this extraordinary library—they say the greatest of the time—and he produced book upon book upon book. Most of Origen's work didn't survive over the centuries, and yet what we have is enough to stagger us today, so he is definitely one of the most productive, prolific writers in the whole tradition.

He dies somewhere between 251 and 254, during the Decian persecution. So his entire life is marked by persecution of the Church. As a young man, his father was a martyr, and then he himself dies as a consequence of persecution. They'll call him a martyr sometimes because he died as a result of the injuries he sustained while he was tortured during that Decian persecution. I always find that poignant to think of this now older man, maybe the leading intellectual of his age, being tortured basically to death. It shows you the world he was coming of age in, and the opposition that he endured.

If we put the date of his death at 254, which is a possibility, what I like about that is that it would be exactly 100 years before Augustine was born in 354. Origen's born at the very end of Irenaeus' life, and he dies 100 years before Augustine is born—that gives you a sense of his time.

What I want to do before we get into the homilies themselves is to talk a little bit about Scripture interpretation from Origen's point of view. Again, here he's been hugely influential on the tradition.

Here's the first thing: Origen read the entire Bible Christologically—that is, from the standpoint of Jesus Christ. Now, let me tell you a story about my own formation in reading the Bible. I came of age in the 1970s and 1980s. It was the high-water mark, both in seminaries and universities, of what's called the historical-critical method of reading the Bible, which involves the attempt to understand as fully as we can the intention of the human authors of the various biblical books.

So you look at the books of the Bible and try to determine the intention of the human author—Isaiah or Jeremiah or Paul—as he was addressing a particular audience at a particular time. All the tools of historical criticism are designed to get you to understand that. Is this a worthwhile thing? Yes—it's good to know that. What's the danger of it though? The danger is losing the forest for the trees. As you're looking at all these particular instances, you can lose a sense of the overarching purpose of the Bible as a whole.

In one sense, the Bible is like a library. It's made up of many books. But there is another way in which it is one book. What makes it one book? Here's Origen now, back in the third century. Yes, there are individual human authors, but working through those human authors is the divine author. It's not just the word of Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Paul, etc.—it's the Word of God. This is not an either/or, but a both/and. God works through the human authors; but it is God who is producing the Bible as a whole, according to his purposes.

So Origen takes that for granted and then makes a second move. If Christ is described as the Logos, as the very Word of God—"In the beginning was the Word . . . and through [that Word] all things were made" (John 1:1, 3)—then Christ is the unifying principle of creation. Through him, all things were made. But this means also that Christ is the unifying principle of the entire Scripture. Because, as God speaks his Word—through Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Paul, etc.—he's speaking fundamentally Christ.

Therefore, it's appropriate to read the entire Bible through the lens of Jesus and from the standpoint of Jesus. Jesus is the Alpha and the Omega of the entire Bible. Now, was the historical author of the book of Isaiah or the book of Daniel aware of this? Well, no. Even Origen would admit that. But is God aware of what he is doing as he inspires the totality of the Bible? Yes—and Origen took that for granted. Today, we often call this "canonical criticism." As opposed to historical criticism, which I described as seeking the intention of the human author, canonical criticism is looking at the whole canon, the totality of the scripture, and

seeing it from that perspective.

Origen, if you want, is the father of canonical criticism, because he reads the Bible in a relentlessly Christocentric way. That's the overarching principle. Now, let's make it a little more specific. Origen of Alexandria gives us the four senses of Scripture, which have been hugely influential in the tradition. Here again, I want to give the lie to all those new atheists who think the Bible was just read in a flatly literalistic way by a bunch of pre-scientific goat herders. This is simply not true. Here you've got one of the most sublime minds of his time proposing a very sophisticated template for the reading of the Bible, and it's according to these famous four senses: (1) the historical or literal sense, (2) the moral or tropological sense, (3) the allegorical or Christological sense, and (4) the anagogical or eschatological sense.

When we approach the Bible, Origen says, we should be attentive first to the literal or historical sense. Typically, the Bible is telling us something that happened. For example, the story of the Exodus is an account of the Israelites leaving Egypt in search of the Promised Land. Is that describing a literal historical state of affairs? Yes, he thinks it is. But then we have to dig deeper, and we dig deeper with the Christological lens in front of us.

We see, he says, these three further spiritual senses of the Bible. First, the tropological, the moral sense of the Bible. Does the given biblical passage also tell us something about our moral lives—about sin, about grace, about how we should live? Yes. In this example, the exodus of Israel from Egypt is the story of our exodus from sin to grace. It's how we conquer sin, how we move to a better way of life.

The second of the great spiritual senses is the allegorical or the Christological sense. The Bible is inspired by God and therefore has a Christological form. It can be read as allegories of Christ. Return to our example: the escape of Israel from Egypt. Well, that's the story of Jesus, the new Moses, leading his people from the slavery of sin to salvation.

The third spiritual sense, called the anagogical, comes from a Greek term for leading us up, leading us beyond. The anagogical sense has to do with the eschatological fulfillment of all things. Again return to our example. In addition to the literal, tropological, and allegorical senses, it's a story of our ultimate fulfillment as we leave behind the chains and captivity of this world and come to the Promised Land of heaven.

As we look at Origen, master homilist and master biblical commentator, we're going to see him roaming around these various senses of the Bible. He does not always do this in an explicit

way— “Here I’m doing history. Now I’m doing anagogy. Now I’m doing Christology. Now I’m doing the moral sense”—rather, he’s effortlessly gliding among these various senses of the Scripture and pulling out their spiritual significance. This is why it’s so important for us to read Origen again. Because, when we sit down to read the Bible, we can get stuck sometimes. Often today, in the literal and historical sense: “Did it really happen?” I’m not saying it’s an unimportant question. It is an important question, but see, Origen would say, the ultimate purpose is to get to these underlying spiritual senses that reveal to us the real richness of the Bible. And so, that’s what I’m going to do in the ensuing lectures, is take us through some of Origen’s great homilies, especially on Genesis and Exodus, and show you how he’s bringing these interpretive forms to bear.