



# Origen's theological and mystical approach to the Scriptures in the introduction to his commentary on John's Gospel

P.B. Decock  
School of Religion and Theology  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
PIETERMARITZBURG  
St. Joseph's Theological Institute  
CEDARA  
E-mail: decock@sjti.ac.za

## Abstract

### Origen's theological and mystical approach to the Scriptures in the introduction to his commentary on John's Gospel

*This article explores Origen's approach to interpreting John's Gospel as can be seen in the introduction to his commentary. It deals with the points which were usually discussed in the introductions to Aristotle and Plato. It was this educational aim of the philosophical tradition that was Origen's chief concern in commenting on the Scriptures; an aim which was not seen as merely becoming skilled or well-informed. Rather, it was about developing in virtue, in wisdom, in conversion to the Good (Plato); or as Origen understood it, development in love for God. Origen perceived the development of love for God in three basic steps: moral purification, by which the person is enabled to appreciate moral values; enlightenment, by which the person recognises God as the supreme and absolute value; and finally, union with God in love, which is never fully achieved in this life. The New Testament together with the Old Testament (understood in the light of the New Testament), reveals the power of the Gospel "in mirror darkly" while the "eternal gospel" will be the full revelation of it at the eschaton. John's Gospel is the clearest expression of the divine Logos; but no one can understand the text fully as expression of the Logos unless one*

*becomes like John – who was intimately related to the Logos, as the Logos is related to the Father (John 13:23, 25; 1:18).*

## **Opsomming**

### **Die teologiese en mistieke benadering van die Skrif in die inleiding tot Origenes se Johannes-kommentaar**

*Die artikel ondersoek die wyse waarop Origenes die Johannes-evangelie benader soos dit tot uitdrukking kom in die inleiding van sy kommentaar. Hier bespreek hy dieselfde vrae wat gewoonlik in die inleidings tot die werke van Aristoteles of Plato behandel word. Hierdie opvoedkundige bedoeling van die filosofie was die sentrale oorweging vir Origenes in sy kommentaar op die Skrif. Dit gaan nie bloot om ingelig of geskoold te wees nie, maar om te groei en te ontwikkel in wysheid en deugsaamheid, jou tot die Goeie (Plato) te bekeer, of soos Origenes dit beskou het, om liefde vir God te ontwikkel. Origenes beskou die groei in die liefde vir God as bestaande uit drie stappe: eers kom die morele suiwering wat die persoon in staat stel om morele waardes op prys te stel; dan kom die verligting waardeur die persoon God as die allerhoogste en absolute waarde herken; en uiteindelik, die vereniging met God in die liefde wat nie in hierdie lewe ten volle tot vervulling kom nie. Die Nuwe Testament, asook die Ou Testament (verstaan in die lig van die Nuwe Testament), maak die Evangelie “deur ’n spieël in ’n raaisel” bekend, maar die “ewige evangelie” sal in die eschaton tot volle openbaring kom. Die Johannesevangelie is die mees duidelike openbaring van die goddelike Logos, maar ’n mens verstaan die teks as openbaring van die Logos slegs in die mate waarin jy soos Johannes word, wie intiem met die Logos verenig was soos die Logos met die Vader verenig is (Joh. 13:23, 25; 1:18).*

## **1. Introduction**

It may not be inappropriate to honour Professor Tjaart van der Walt with a study on Origen's interpretation of the Scriptures. Although Origen has long been depicted as an allegoriser, a Platonist, even a heretic; nevertheless, today it is increasingly broadly recognised that he has been one of the best foundation members of Christian biblical interpretation.<sup>1</sup> With regard to the accusation that he was a Platonist, most will agree that no interpreter of the Scriptures (then

---

1 Sixty years ago, De Lubac (1950) surveyed in some detail the common complaints against Origen, but then continued by trying to understand what Origen was really aiming at in his biblical interpretation.

and now), can ignore contemporary philosophy if they want to engage the people of their times. In any case, all interpreters are – with lesser or greater awareness – influenced by philosophical currents. Such an interaction can be both enriching and challenging, but Origen, a very well-trained philosopher himself, was not intimidated by the various philosophical schools. In stead of feeling that the Christian faith was threatened and besieged by the various philosophies, he had the conviction of a conqueror. For instance, he interpreted Jericho in the Book of Joshua as the city of philosophers, besieged and conquered by the new Joshua (*Hom. Jes. Nav. 7.1 & 7*). However, after the victory, not everything has to be destroyed, only perverse doctrines and idolatry, “but not philosophy in general. So it is permitted for the disciples of Jesus to look for booty in the Jericho of the philosophers, provided that they do it discreetly and prudently” (Crouzel, 1989:159).<sup>2</sup> He saw Christian teaching as the true philosophy, the love for true wisdom – the Logos. As one of his disciples, Gregory Thaumaturgus (*Letter of Thanksgiving 15.173*; cf. Crouzel, 1969) witnessed: “On this subject he advised us not to become attached to any philosophy, not even to one that enjoyed among men a great reputation for wisdom, but to be attached to God alone and his prophets.” (Crouzel, 1989:161.) In this article, I will first draw attention to the way in which Origen’s introduction to the Gospel of John is modelled after the contemporary philosophical introductions to the works of Plato and Aristotle.<sup>3</sup> It will become clear that the understanding Origen is aiming at is educational, in the sense of the Greek *paideia*; the aim of education was not seen as merely becoming skilled or well-informed, but as developing in virtue, in wisdom, in conversion to the Good (Plato), in love of God (Origen).

---

2 Deuteronomy 21:10-13 and Exodus 11:2; 12:35 are explained in similar ways (Crouzel, 1989:159). As Crouzel (1989:156) points out:

So Origen takes his place in a tradition mainly centered in his native city. But he is less enthusiastic than Clement for Hellenic philosophy: he does not, like his predecessor, regard it as a Testament given to the Greeks as the Bible to the Jews and he was more reticent about the salvation it brings; many of his judgements on it are harsh.

3 Of course, Clement and Origen learnt from Philo how to relate Platonism to the Scriptures. “... Origen’s own library is the source of the manuscript tradition of all of Philo’s surviving works” (Trigg, 1998:11).

## 2. Origen's introduction and the pattern of philosophical introductions

After Hadot (1987) and Neuschäfer (1987), Heine (1995) considers the topics discussed in the introductions to ancient philosophical commentaries of Aristotle, as a means of understanding Origen's introductions. From the works of one of Origen's contemporaries, Alexander of Aphrodisias, he shows that there was an established pattern to introductions in the philosophical schools of Alexandria "as early as the beginning of the third century" (Heine, 1995:7), and that they could have been part of Origen's education. In Origen's Introduction to his *Commentary on John* (*Comm. Jo.*), Heine finds four of the six standard topics discussed in the philosophical introductions: the order (τάξις), the division into heads, the aim of the work (σκοπός, τέλος), and the reason for the title. As in the general introductions to Aristotle, Origen also discusses "what sort of person the interpreter must be, and perhaps also the qualities necessary in the student" (Heine, 1995:12).

In this discussion of the Introduction, I will follow the divisions as given by Heine (1995:8). According to him, *Comm. Jo.* 1.1-13

... may be Origen's circuitous way of saying something about the *qualifications* necessary in one who would study the Gospel of John, i.e. he or she must be morally pure (capable of being classed among 'the virgins of the tribes'), and dedicated to 'the things which are superior'.

The second section (*Comm. Jo.* 2.14-23a) discusses the question of *order*, the place of the Gospel of John within the entire Bible, and concludes: "We might dare to say, then, that the Gospels are the first fruits of all Scriptures, but that the first fruits of the Gospels is that according to John" (*Comm. Jo.* 2.23) Heine (1995:9) comments:

Like his Christology, which begins from above and understands the life of the earthly Jesus in the light of the divine Christ, so his reading of the Bible begins from above, with the divinity of Jesus presented most clearly in the Gospel of John, and seeks this divine Jesus of John in all the other books of the Bible.

Origen has included two other common topics in his discussion on the order, the *division into heads* and the *aim* or *theme*. The first can be seen in Origen's discussion of the distinction between the four Gospels (*Comm. Jo.* 1.21-22); the second, the *theme* or τέλος, is the fuller manifestation of Jesus' divinity (*Comm. Jo.* 1.22; Heine, 1995:9-10). The third section (*Comm. Jo.* 1.23b-26), returns to the

question “what kind of person the interpreter must be?” (Heine, 1995:10). The answer is that they must have the mind of Christ (1 Cor. 2:12, 16). The final and longest section (*Comm. Jo.* 1.27-88) discusses the question of the *title*, what is a “gospel”?

This introduction indicates how Origen approached his task as a biblical commentator by drawing on the tradition of philosophical commentaries, a field with which he was certainly familiar (cf. Runia, 2004:171-175). His approach to the study of the Scriptures can be compared to that of the established approach to the study of the works of a philosopher like Aristotle, whose oeuvre consisted of a variety of works. It was a question of recognising this variety and to know how each work was to be used in the process of introducing a student to the ideas of Aristotle. Origen looked upon the Scriptures in a similar way, as a body of literature coming from the one great teacher, the Logos. Like the Aristotelian corpus, it also consists of a variety of works, which needed to be carefully distinguished and used in the correct way in the education process (*παίδεῖα*). Modern biblical scholars recognise various opinions present in the Canon, and some have elevated particular books as the Canon within the Canon (Brown & Collins, 1990:1052-1054). Origen, however, tried to accommodate this diversity in the form of a divine educational process. This process of *paideia* was a lively concern in the Hellenistic world (Marrou, 1950:139-313), and Origen clearly understood his interpretation of the Scriptures as the Christian version of this *paideia*. Before him, Philo, in his interpretation of Genesis 16, drew attention to the Greek educational system and the specific order in which various subjects had to be taught.<sup>4</sup> According to Philo, the ultimate aim of education is wisdom or virtue, but Abraham (the soul) is unable to procreate with Sarah (virtue) until he has “knowledge” of the lower forms, represented by the concubine (Hagar): grammar, music, mathematics, geometry, rhetoric, dialectics, and

---

4 For instance in *Mating with preliminary studies*:

For some have been ensnared by the love of the lures of the handmaids and spurned the mistress, ... some doting on poetry, some on geometrical figures, some on blending of musical colours, and a host of other things, and have never been able to soar to the winning of the lawful wife (Philo, 1932:77). ... Now philosophy teaches us control of the belly and the parts below it, and control also of the tongue. Such powers of control are said to be desirable in themselves, but will assume a grander and loftier aspect if practiced for the honour and service of God. (Philo, 1932:80.)

Origen follows this same line in *Philocalia* 13.

astronomy. However, these are only preliminary studies (handmaidens) and should never take the place of the true aim (the wife), wisdom and virtue. Similarly, Origen draws our attention to the established order of procedure in the study of philosophy, where the sequence of ethics, physics and enoptics guides him to view the sequence of the three books of Solomon in precisely that way: Proverbs (ethics), Qohelet (Ecclesiastes) (physics) and Song of Songs (enoptics). The aim of this *paideia* is to lead the believers towards the highest goal, wisdom, or love of God (see *Comm. Cant.* Prologue 3; Lawson, 1957:44-45).

Put differently, Origen approaches and interprets the biblical texts within the perspective of Greek *paideia*, by which all subjects are geared towards the highest goal of the human person, moral quality, virtue or wisdom (Marrou, 1950:302-303). For Origen, as a Christian, this highest goal can only be love of God.

### **3. Origen's vision of the Scriptures**

First of all, Origen's understanding of the Scriptures is theological. All forms of knowledge must be made subservient to the one purpose of guiding the love dynamism of the readers in the right direction, that is, towards the love of God.

Moreover, when this passion of love is directed on to diverse skills, whether manual crafts or occupations needful only for this present life – the art of wrestling, for example, or track running – or even when it is expended on the study of geometry or music or arithmetic or similar branches of learning, neither in that case does it seem to me to be used laudably. (*Comm. Cant.* Prologue 2; Lawson, 1957:36.)

All skills as well as the entire study programme of the Greek education system, must become the means by which to explore the literal meaning of the Scriptures.<sup>5</sup> However, all this should only be seen as a preparation or a handmaiden to ascend to the full, spiritual meaning of the Scriptures – the love of God.

Secondly, Origen's approach to the Scriptures is theological, or even mystical, in that they are understood as part and parcel of his understanding of God, the universe, and the divine work of salva-

---

5 Origen compares this to the spoiling of the Egyptians by the Israelites during the Exodus or the digging of wells in the land of the Philistines (cf. Crouzel, 1989:56-57, 61-62).

tion.<sup>6</sup> Central to this vision is the Logos as God's Word and God's Wisdom, the true and perfect in image and likeness to God. God created human intelligence in this image of God and humans were given the potential to strive towards God's likeness<sup>7</sup> (cf. Crouzel, 1956). After the Fall from their ardent love for God, the present material universe was created through the Logos as a means of salvation, and therefore this material universe is also a reflection of the Logos. Furthermore, the Logos is involved in the work of salvation in history before the incarnation, and, therefore, the theophanies of the Old Testament are, in fact, manifestations of the Logos.<sup>8</sup> In Jesus, the Logos has become incarnate and was presented to human beings in a physically perceptible form, adapted to human beings in their present-day condition. Jesus as the embodied Logos, therefore becomes the key to understanding the presence of the Logos in creation and in the history of Israel. In concert with these, Jesus in his humanity is the visible manifestation, the symbol, through which God draws human beings little by little closer to Himself.<sup>9</sup>

---

6 Origen's interpretation of the fall as the falling away of the intelligences from union with the Logos in their contemplation of God and the new embodiment of some of these intelligences, who have now become souls, as human beings is a well known but complex aspect of Origen's theology (cf. Crouzel, 1989:205-218).

7 McGuckin, 2004:132-133 quotes:

The fact that Moses said 'He made him in the image of God' [Gen 1:27-28], and was then silent about the earlier issue of 'likeness' [Gen 1:26], points to nothing else but this, that man received the honour of God's image in his first creation, whereas the perfection of God's likeness was reserved for him at the consummation. The purpose for this was that Man should acquire it for himself, by his own earnest efforts to imitate God. In this way, while the possibility of attaining perfection was given to Man in the beginning, through the honour of the 'image', even so he should, in the end, obtain for himself 'the perfect likeness' by the accomplishment of these works. (*Princ.* 3.6.1.)

8 Crouzel (1989:193) postulates:

... doctrine generally held by the ante-Nicenes ... it is in this context that Origen declares that the Christ made Himself man among men and an angel to angels [*Hom. Gen.* 8:8; *Comm. Jo.* 1:216-218]. The explanation seems to be as follows: He then shows Himself in his humanity, both angelic and human, since, not having sinned, He is not affected by the distinction resulting from the fall.

9 As Crouzel (1989:107) expresses it:

It is of the nature of created things that they must be left behind: the soul in its soaring must aim far beyond them. So it is in so far as we

The Scriptures are now the privileged “symbols”, the “embodiment”<sup>10</sup> of the Logos. They must be understood as symbols in that they point beyond themselves and lead to the invisible God.<sup>11</sup> The Old Testament announces the future but not yet the present Logos, and therefore it must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament.<sup>12</sup> However, the New Testament itself is only the temporal gospel, contrasted with the eternal gospel (Rev. 14:6).<sup>13</sup> While in the latter we will see the Logos “face to face”, in the temporal gospel, the Logos is perceived through “a glass darkly” because He is hidden in his humanity (cf. Crouzel, 1989:109-112). The full revelation is still to come in the eschatological fulfilment of God’s work, on that future seventh day, the great sabbath, the *apokatastasis*.<sup>14</sup>

---

will to get beyond them that the created things show the Creator and arouse in us a desire for Him.

10 Simonetti (1994:41) writes:

He does not limit himself to thinking of Scripture as a book inspired by the Holy Spirit, but as the divine word he effectively identifies with Christ (= the Logos), the Word of God: the letter of the sacred text functions, like the human body assumed by Christ, as the envelope which encloses the divine Logos (*C. Celsum* VI 77; *Comm. Ser. in Mt.* 27): Sacred Scripture is the permanent incarnation of the Logos.

11 Crouzel (1989:109) states:

But if one stops at the symbol, ... if one makes the symbol an end in itself, an autonomous entity, ... in that case the literal meaning, although historically true, is myth, because it does not follow the will of the Spirit, because it refuses to efface itself before that which it represents.

12 The Old Testament as “symbol does not lie, so long as it participates in its model” (Crouzel, 1989:109).

13 *Comm. Jo.* (1.40) states:

And that which John calls an eternal gospel, which would properly be called a spiritual gospel, clearly presents both the mysteries presented by Christ’s words and the things of which his acts were symbols, to those who consider all things face to face [cf. Proverbs 8:9] concerning the Son of God himself.

It is hard to understand how Keefer (2006:72) can refer to this passage and claim that Origen calls John a spiritual Gospel.

14 This eschatological *kairos* is understood by Origen as the fulfilment of God’s work on the seventh day, in terms of the popular model of God’s works provided by the creation story (cf. King, 2005:234-240, where he discusses the *kairos* of the Song of Songs). The eschaton is the moment when the “rational creature enjoys the ‘power of restoring itself to that condition of fervour in which it was at the beginning’ ...” [*Princ.* 2.8.3 = SC 252:346] (King, 2005:238); for a further discussion on *apokatastasis*, see Norris (2004).



However, it can already now be the object of a spiritual intuition; in fact, the spiritual understanding is a kind of anticipation in the Spirit of the perfect, eschatological understanding (Harl, 1958:140, 151; Crouzel, 1989:112).

Origen has through this approach – in the tradition of the philosophical teachers – attempted to explain the order of the various books of the Old and New Testament for the sake of their proper use in the process of divine education. The Old Testament is the *shadow* of the New; the New Testament (and the Gospel of John in an eminent way) is the *image* of the eternal gospel.<sup>15</sup> One passage in the *Commentary* also seems to see these three as beginning, middle and end of one and the same gospel (*Comm. Jo.* 1.79-86).<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. The order of the different works in the Scriptures and the order of spiritual progress

Origen's concern for the order of the different parts of the Scriptures is guided by his understanding of the stages of the spiritual journey. While the full revelation is given only at the *apokatastasis*, in the present-day the reading of Scripture is meant to lead to an ever deeper anticipation of that contemplation and love of God, which was lost with the Fall.

All Christians are called to progress along the three stages of life. Origen at times qualifies these as the body, the soul, and the spirit. The first stage has as task moral purification (the body); the second stage has as task illumination (which is about recognising the difference between what is eternal and what is passing (the soul)); the final stage culminates in union with God in contemplation and love (the spirit). Different parts of the Bible have special suitability for each of the different stages (Torjesen, 1985). Origen's stages of spiritual progress have nothing to do with "elitism", but with Origen's

---

15 "Thus using Heb. 10:1, Origen sometimes distinguishes between the Old Testament and the New Testament as being, respectively, the shadow and the image of the heavenly realities (*Hom.* 38 *Ps.* 2:2)" (Simonetti, 1994:48). De Lubac (1950:219-220) refers to the *Homilies* on Ps. 38:7, where the law is seen as shadow and the New Testament as image. However, Harl (1958:144-145) argues that most commonly Origen sees shadow and image as synonyms and that the Old Testament and the revelation received by the apostles were both qualified by him as shadow and image.

16 The perceptible (temporal) gospel and the spiritual (eternal) gospel are in fact one and the same gospel with regard to its reality, but different with regard to the human perception of it (Crouzel, 1989:111).

dynamic understanding of the Christian life, in opposition to the gnostic "division" of people into fixed categories.<sup>17</sup> The carnal ones must be met at their own level in order to "lead them forth to better and higher things" (*Comm. Jo.* 1.2). Nevertheless, whenever we find those who are established in the Spirit and are bearing fruit in Him, and desiring the heavenly wisdom, we ought to share with them the Word who was restored from being made flesh<sup>18</sup> to what "he was in the beginning with God" (*Comm. Jo.* 1.43). Origen sees it, therefore, as his task towards this last group of people to "translate the gospel perceptible to the senses into the spiritual gospel" (*Comm. Jo.* 1.44; Heine, 1989:45).

Even John's Gospel, as it appears to us, is still a temporal gospel. However, by considering the words and going beyond the words, as they are symbols, we can anticipate our sharing in the spiritual or eternal gospel. Leading people beyond the words is God's work and requires openness to God's gift. Origen therefore concludes his introduction with the exhortation: "Let us now ask God to work with us through Christ in the Holy Spirit to explain the mystical meaning stored up like a treasure in words" (*Comm. Jo.* 1.89). The goal is to recover that burning love for God which has been lost. The means to restore this love is Jesus, whom we should recognise as the many "good things" (gospel):<sup>19</sup> the way, the door, the truth, the light, the life, ...:

---

17 Crouzel (1989:114-115) notes:

If he had really been the spiritual aristocrat he is accused of being there would not have been in his homilies, preached to all comers among the Christians at Ceasarea, so many exhortations to the moral progress that would fit them to receive illumination from on high. The vigour of his polemic against the 'friends of the letter' shows that he was not resigned to seeing the mass of Christians stopping half-way in this preparation and in this knowledge.

18 Origen here distinguishes Jesus in his earthly existence, subject to crucifixion, from his heavenly existence after his resurrection (*Comm. Jo.* 1.43).

19 We have to bear in mind that in the last part of the introduction (*Comm. Jo.* 1.27-88), Origen is exploring the meaning of the word *gospel* as a title for John's work, and as a title which is even appropriate for the whole of the Scriptures, even of the Old Testament, if one understands it well. "But since the Savior has come, and has caused the gospel to be embodied in the gospel, he made all things gospel, as it were." (*Comm. Jo.* 1.33; see also 1.36-38.)

But just as Christ visited the perfect before his sojourn which was visible and bodily [the patriarchs, Moses, the prophets], so also has he not yet visited those who are still infants after his coming ... because he awaits the preparation which must take place in men of God who are about to receive his divinity. (*Comm. Jo.* 1.38.)

... Isaias ... praises the 'feet' which proceed over the intelligible way, which is Christ Jesus, and go in to God through the door (*Comm. Jo.* 1.51).

Jesus is also Wisdom, in whom the father rejoiced,

... rejoicing in her manifold spiritual beauty which only spiritual eyes can see. Wisdom's divine heavenly beauty invites the one who contemplates it to love. (*Comm. Jo.* 1.55.)

The beginner learns to die to sin:

... [he] should ... receive him who became man because of us, he is at 'the beginning' of good things when he becomes a 'man of God' by the man Jesus and dies to sin by his death, for he too, 'in that he died to sin, died once for all' (*Comm. Jo.* 1.58).

Everyone, however, who has become conformed to his resurrection receives power to live unto God from his life since Jesus, 'in that he lives, lives unto God'. (*Comm. Jo.* 1.59.)

In other words, being attracted by the beauty of Christ, the dedicated reader becomes closely associated with Christ, the man; by which he becomes a man of God, dies to sin, and receives the power to live for God through this close association with Christ in his death and in his resurrection.

Origen then reminds us of John 21:25: that no writings, not even the whole world, would be able to contain the fullness of divinity which dwelt bodily in Jesus (Col. 2:9; 1:19). The "good things" Origen constantly refers to in this section is the gospel, the good news, which is actually Jesus himself, the gift of the Father to us so that we may "engage in good things".

For he [Jesus] is the one who received from the good Father that he be good things, in order that each one who received through Jesus the thing or things he is capable of, might engage in good things. (*Comm. Jo.* 1.62.)

## **5. Requirements to understand the Gospel of John: 1:22-28**

The following selection of passages illustrates the kind of understanding Origen is envisaging and how we are able to reach it.

... that according to John, whose meaning no one can understand who has not leaned on Jesus' breast nor received Mary from Jesus to be his mother also. But he who would be

another John must also become such as John, to be shown to be Jesus, so to speak. For if Mary had no son except Jesus, ... and Jesus says to his mother, 'Behold your son', and not, 'Behold, this man is also your son', but he said equally, 'Behold this is Jesus whom you bore'. For indeed everyone who has been perfected 'no longer lives, but Christ lives in him', and since 'Christ lives' in him, it is said that of him to Mary, 'Behold your son', the Christ (*Comm. Jo.* 1.23).

How great, then, must be our understanding, that we may be able to understand in a worthy manner the word which is stored in the earthen treasures of paltry language, whose written character is read by all who happen upon it, and whose sound is heard by all who present their physical ears? What also must we say? For who will understand these matters accurately must say truthfully, "But we have the mind of Christ, that we may know the graces that have been given us by God." (*Comm. Jo.* 1.24.)

But if the writings of Paul were gospel, it is consistent with that to say that Peter's writings also were gospel and, in general, those which present the sojourn of Christ and prepare for his coming and produce it in the souls of those who are willing to receive the Word of God who stands at the door and knocks and wishes to enter their souls. (*Comm. Jo.* 1.26.)

Each gospel teaches about the saving sojourn with men of Christ Jesus, 'the firstborn of every creature,' a sojourn which occurred on account of men. But it is clear to everyone who believes, that each gospel is a discourse which teaches about the sojourn of the good Father in his Son with those who are willing to receive him. (*Comm. Jo.* 1.28.)

The text of John is the fruit of the working of the Logos in John and no one can understand the text fully as expression of the Logos unless one becomes like John, who was intimately related to the Logos as the Logos is related to the Father (John 13:23, 25 recall 1:18; *Comm. Jo.* 32.264). Furthermore, becoming John-like means in fact even to become Jesus,<sup>20</sup> as Jesus gave John to his mother as Mary's son, and his mother to John as his mother. Origen first

---

20 The theme of Christ living in us (Gal. 2:20) is very important for Origen. According to him, Christ must be born and develop in each of us: "If the soul is to give birth to the Word, then Mary is the model: 'And every soul, virgin and uncorrupted, which conceives by the Holy Spirit, so as to give birth to the Will of the Father, is the mother of Jesus' (*Fr. Matt.* 281)." (Crouzel, 1989:124.)

explains this kind of identity by referring to Galatians 2:20: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” In the next paragraph he adduces 1 Corinthians 2:16 and 12, where Paul speaks of us having the “mind of Christ” which enables us to know the gifts of God. The understanding of which Origen speaks is not a question of understanding certain ideas about the Logos, but of communion with the Logos, as he sojourns in the soul (*Comm. Jo.* 1.26).

We see this process of transformation first of all in the inspired writers of the Scriptures and this same process has to be repeated in the readers of the inspired writings. For instance, in the Prologue to *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, Origen presents Solomon as the inspired writer of the Song of Songs, as one who has been fully transformed into a full participant in the love song of the Logos.

And the fact that in the Song of Songs, where now perfection is shown forth, he [Solomon] describes himself neither as Son of David, nor as king, enables us to say further that, since the servant has been made the lord, and the disciple as the master, the servant obviously is such no longer: he has become as the lord. Neither does the disciple figure as a disciple when he has been made as the master; rather, the sometime disciple is in truth as the master now, and the sometime servant as the lord. (Lawson, 1957:54; SC 375, 166.)

This transformation into the likeness of the Logos as a result of the indwelling in the believing readers must be understood in the light of the eschatological fulfilment, which Origen understands by means of 1 Corinthians 15:28, “so that God may be all in all”. In *On first principles* (3.6.2 and 4), he emphasises that “this condition ... in which God is said not only to be *in* all things but even to *be* all things”, “or in other words, when they have been rendered capable of receiving God, then God will be to them ‘all in all’” (King, 2005:237).

## 6. Conclusion

In line with the traditional philosophical introductions Origen was concerned to situate the Gospel of John in the whole corpus of the Scriptures. The concern was not only to find a central issue (like our modern Canon within the Canon), but to place all the works in their proper order – not a chronological order but a pedagogical order. The emphasis is not on the origin of the books but on their usefulness and effectiveness in the educational enterprise (the *Paideia*).

This concern for the pedagogical order and interpretation of the books can be clearly seen in Origen’s guiding principle. He works

with a precise view of the stages of spiritual development: from moral quality (purification), through discernment of what is absolute (God) and what is relative (enlightenment), to total commitment to, and love for, God (union).

The order of spiritual progress of the person is embedded in a perspective on the order of God's work of salvation through the Logos: from the creation of human intelligences (later to become souls); through the creation of the material universe; the Old Testament (as shadow) and the New Testament (as image); to the eternal (spiritual) gospel. This last stage refers to the full presence of human beings to the Logos and to God at the *apokatastasis* (face to face knowledge of God).

The Old Testament is the beginning of the gospel (the firstling of the harvest). The New Testament writings are the first fruits, and the Gospel of John is the first fruits of the Gospels, as the Logos is most clearly expressed in it. However, even John's Gospel cannot contain all (John 21:25).

While the spiritual gospel is an eschatological reality, human beings can already now anticipate this face to face knowledge through a spiritual reading of the Old and New Testament: an ever deeper contemplation of the Logos through the veil of the letter of the Scriptures, a contemplation which transforms the persons more and more to the likeness of the Logos, into whose image they were created (2 Cor. 3:18).

Origen pays very close attention to the texts and uses all the methods at his disposal, but all these human methods are only preparation for the *translation* (μεταλαμβάνω) of the gospel perceptible to the senses into the spiritual gospel (*Comm. Jo.* 1.44-46). This translation is a "mystical" process (*Comm. Jo.* 1.89) in that it is ultimately the work of God who leads us (through Christ and the Spirit) to an ever deeper encounter with the transcendent Logos, and a corresponding transformation of the person into the likeness of the Logos.

### **List of references**

- BROWN, R.E. & COLLINS, R.F. 1990. Canonicity. (*In* Brown, R.E., Fitzmyer, J.A. & Murphy, R.E., eds. *The new Jerome Biblical commentary*. London: Chapman. p. 1034-1054.)
- CROUZEL, H. 1956. *Théologie de l'image de Dieu chez Origène*. Paris: Éditions Montaigne.

- CROUZEL, H. 1969. Grégoire le thaumaturge: remerciement à Origène, suivi de la lettre d'Origène a Grégoire: texte Grec, introduction, traduction et notes. Paris: Cerf. (SC = Sources Chrétiennes 148.)
- CROUZEL, H. 1989. Origen. Trans. by A.S. Worall. Edinburgh: Clark.
- DE LUBAC, H. 1950. Histoire et esprit: l'intelligence de l'écriture d'après Origène. Paris: Éditions Montaigne.
- HADOT, I. 1987. Les introductions aux commentaires exégétiques chez les auteurs néoplatoniciens et les auteurs chrétiens. (*In* Tardieu, M., ed. Les règles de l'interprétation. Paris: Cerf. p. 99-122.) (Patrimoine religion du livre.)
- HARL, M. 1958. Origène et la fonction révélatrice du verbe incarné. Paris: Seuil. (Patristica Sorbonensia 2.)
- HEINE, R.E. 1989. Origen: commentary on the Gospel of John according to John, Books 1-10. Washington: Catholic University of America. (The Fathers of the Church.)
- HEINE, R.E. 1995. The introduction to Origen's commentary on John compared with the Introductions to the ancient philosophical commentaries on Aristotle. (*In* Dorival, G. & Le Boulluec, A., eds. Origeniana Sexta: Origène et la Bible/Origen and the Bible. Actes du Colloquium Origenianum Sextum, Chantilly, 30 Août-3 Septembre, 1993. Leuven: Peeters. p. 3-12.) (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium = BETHL 118.)
- KEEFER, K. 2006. The branches of the Gospel of John: the reception of the Fourth Gospel in Early Church. London: Clark. (Library of New Testament Studies, 332.)
- KING, J.C. 2005. Origen on the Song of Songs as the spirit of Scripture: the bridegroom's perfect marriage-song. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Oxford Theological Monographs.)
- LAWSON, R.P. 1957. Origen: the Song of Songs: commentary and homilies. Westminster: Newman. (Ancient Christian Writers = ACW 26.)
- MARROU, H.-I. 1950. Histoire de l'éducation dans l'antiquité. 2nd ed. Paris: Seuil.
- MCGUCKIN, J.A. 2004. Image of God. (*In* McGuckin, J.A., ed. The Westminster handbook to Origen. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. p. 131-134.) (Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology.)
- NEUSCHÄFER, B. 1987. Origenes als philologe. Basel: Reinhardt. (Schweizerische Beiträge zur Altertumswissenschaft 18.)
- NORRIS, F.W. 2004. Apokatastasis. (*In* McGuckin, J.A., ed. The Westminster handbook to Origen. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. p. 59-62.) (Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology.)
- PHILO. 1932. On mating with preliminary studies. Vol. 4. 10 vols. Trans. by F. E. Colson & G. H. Whitaker. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. (Loeb Classical Library = LCL.)
- RUNIA, D.T. 2004. Philosophy. (*In* McGuckin, J.A., ed. The Westminster handbook to Origen. Louisville: Westminster John Knox. p. 171-175.) (Westminster Handbooks to Christian Theology.)
- SIMONETTI, M. 1994. Biblical interpretation in the Early Church: an historical introduction to patristic exegesis. Edinburgh: Clark.
- TORJESEN, K.J. 1985. "Body", "Soul" and "Spirit" in Origen's theory of exegesis. *Anglican theological review*, 67:17-30.
- TRIGG, J.W. 1998. Origen. London: Routledge.

**Key concepts:**

church fathers  
exegesis, history of  
Gospel of John  
Origen

**Kernbegrippe:**

eksegese, geskiedenis van  
Johannesevangelie  
kerkvaders  
Origenes