

Is it enough to be thinking good thoughts? – Thoughts on Origen's hermeneutic

During the early days of learning Greek back in college, one of our professors, a tender-hearted man, did not like to destroy students' confidence completely, and so, when someone offered a less than correct answer he often said, "You're thinking good Greek thoughts." In other words, "You're wrong, but at least you're wrong for the right reasons."

Meanwhile, over in the Hebrew department, another equally tender-hearted professor had another way of dealing with subpar answers. When offered an incorrect form or exegetical insight, rather than crush the student, he met the answer either with silence, followed by turning to someone else for the right answer, or, if he wished to mimic, in his own way, his colleague from the Greek department, he would say, "Better would be..." and the student was supposed to fill in the blank left by the rhetorical ellipses with a more correct answer.

In many ways, the Church father Origen (185-254 AD, North Africa) elicits similar responses. You read so much that is good. You encounter a man who gets the blessed exchange of the Gospel: "God gave an exchange for the life of us all, 'the precious blood of Christ Jesus'" (*Commentary on Matthew [CM]*, Bk. 12:28) and who finds Jesus in every word of Scripture: "Christ is written about...in all the Scriptures" (*Commentary on John [CJ]*, Bk. 5:4). You hear someone describe the Scriptures as "divine" with a "divine meaning" enclosed in human words (*First Principles [FP]*, Bk. 4:7, 26), who reminds

us that "the divinity of Scripture, which extends to the whole of it" is not "lost on account of the inability of our weakness to discover in every expression the hidden splendor of the doctrines veiled in common and unattractive phraseology" (*FP*, Bk. 4:7). You see an exegete perhaps without parallel, who while he can conjure almost anything out of Greek and Hebrew, still cautions us that the comparisons in Jesus' parables do "not extend to all the features of that to which the kingdom is compared, but only to those features which are required by the argument at hand" (*CM*, Bk. 10:11). You encounter a man, who without the benefit of concordances, lexicons, Biblical software, or even a fully established New Testament canon masters the Scriptures at an almost apostolic level. And yet...

And yet, you run into a man who ponders whether John the Baptist's soul was older than his body or not (*CJ*, Bk. 2:24); who surmises that the father of the demon-possessed boy in Matthew 17 may have been an angel (*CM*, Bk. 13:5); who asks about the building of Solomon's temple, "Is all this recorded as it really was?" (*CJ*, Bk. 10:24); who says maybe some people don't need redemption (*CJ*, Bk. 1:22); who says that the "saints were living a blessed life apart from matter and from anybody" before the fall into sin (*CJ*, Bk. 1:17); and who would firmly fall into the "all dogs (and demons and every part of creation, for that matter) go to heaven" (*CJ*, Bk. 1:24) camp. Such speculations and exegetical conclusions flowing forth from Origen's pen opened the door to

centuries of asking: Is Origen an orthodox father, or a heretic?

Worst of all (and most germane to the actual topic of this paper: Biblical hermeneutics), you encounter a theologian who while holding to the divinity of the Scriptures has a bad tendency to refer to the “bare letter” (*CM*, Bk. 10:14) and the “mere letter” (*CM*, Bk. 12:41) of Scripture, and looks down upon those who can only see or grasp that; a theologian who’s willing to speculate that perhaps there was no Gospel, as we know it, before Jesus came (*CJ*, Bk. 1:18); a theologian who says boldly that the Bible contains “material falsehoods” (*CJ*, Bk. 10:4) because “the bodily meaning is in many places proved to be impossible” (*FP*, Bk. 4:20) and “those who are not altogether blind can collect *countless* instances of a similar kind recorded as having occurred, but which did not literally take place” (*FP*, Bk. 4:16, emphasis added).

So great a tendency is this that church historians label it his greatest defect: “the neglect of the grammatical and historical sense and his constant desire to find a hidden mystic meaning” (Schaff, *A History of the Christian Church*, II:XIII:187:2). Likewise, Henry Chadwick writes, “It is not clear that he seriously regarded the literal sense as being important in itself” (*Penguin History of the Early Church*, 108). Even a great friend and apologist for Origen, his Latin translator, Rufinus, writes in an unintentionally ironic way about Origen: “In these books while he aims at representing the Apostle’s thoughts, *he is carried away into a sea of such depth that one who follows him into it*

may well be afraid of being drowned in the greatness of his thoughts as in the vastness of the waves” (Rufinus, “Preface to the Translation of Origen’s Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans,” emphasis added). This writer agrees wholeheartedly.

Yet it seems almost unfair to say these things. It seems unfair, because these conclusions are based on reading just three of Origen’s works: two of his commentaries, on Matthew and John (neither of which have been preserved in their entirety), and one book of his great systematic work, *On First Principles*. It seems unfair, because Origen wrote thousands of works comprising millions of words. He wrote sermons, letters, commentaries, apologetic works (*Contra Celsum*), and dogmatic treatises. He wrote so much, that his patron provided him with seven secretaries to take dictation “and at least as many copyists, as well as girls trained in penmanship” (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, Bk. VI:23). Origen wrote so much that you wonder if it is fair to make any sort of broad sweeping judgments after reading only three hundred pages of his work. Maybe Origen hit a rough patch. Maybe John was too philosophical for Origen and he got wrapped up in his own philosophical speculations. Maybe during the writing of these works he was influenced by a particular stream of thought or author and later shook off that influence. Maybe this, that, or the other thing.

So, on the one hand, we say, “Duly noted.” On the other hand, we lean on the judgment of church historians, who tend

to agree that Origen had a problem sticking to (respecting?) the grammatical and historical nature of the text of Scripture and loved allegorical and spiritual interpretations above all else. As an added confirmation of this judgment, hear again from the first church historian, Eusebius, who says about Origen less than one hundred years after he died: "he gave himself up too completely to these tasks [training in the Scriptures] and, *not content to read the sacred words in their simple and natural sense, looked for something more*, and young as he was devoted himself to profounder investigation; so that *he worried his father with questions as to the meaning and intention that underlay the inspired Scripture*" (*The History of the Church*, Bk. VI:2; emphasis added).

Origen tried to think good thoughts. He really did. He affirmed time and again the divine nature of the Scriptures. He affirmed the central message of Scripture: the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, Him for me, and faith alone in that. He calls the Holy Scriptures one book, with one topic, even though written in a variety of forms by a variety of authors (*CJ*, Bk. 5:4). In everything he wrote he meant to defend the Christian faith and the divine Scriptures.

And yet he could say that the Bible contains material falsehoods and that the inspired authors knew it and used it. He said that many things in the Bible did not literally happen. He put it into the hands of the interpreter to decide which things are historical and which are not (and often demonstrated himself to be as

wildly subjective as such a principle allows, which, ironically, he criticizes in one of his opponents, Heracleon). In other words, he was, in many ways, acting like an historical-critic before there were historical-critics. He even spoke with the arrogant tones of the modern negative critic.

"For who that has understanding will suppose that the first, and second, and third day, and the evening and the morning, existed without a sun, and moon, and stars? and that the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? And who is so foolish as to suppose that God, after the manner of a husbandman, planted a paradise in Eden, towards the east, and placed in it a tree of life, visible and palpable, so that one tasting of the fruit by the bodily teeth obtained life?.... And if God is said to walk in the paradise in the evening, and Adam to hide himself under a tree, I do not suppose that any one doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance, and not literally" (*FP*, Bk. 4:16).

For those things, we roundly condemn Origen and find no defense. Here, he was not thinking good thoughts. Here he refused to take his reason and make it captive to Christ.

What these principals led to in his exegetical and hermeneutical work was allegory, that is, offering spiritual and mystical interpretations that go beyond the historical and grammatical content of a given word of God. Eusebius was not making things up about Origen. This brilliant North African spent much of his

time seeking out ever deeper meanings in the Scriptures. He used a poor reading of Proverbs 22:20 from the Septuagint to affirm his exegetical principle of a three-fold exegesis of Scripture. He read every passage with a fleshly meaning, a soul meaning, and a spiritual meaning (*FP*, Bk. 4:11), each level deeper than the last, assuming that a Christian would eventually ascend past one level to the next. As mentioned above, his high regard for Scripture, combined with his exegetical genius and his philosophical training, led him to consistently go beyond the letter of the Scriptures, or want to go beyond the letter, and find a deeper meaning, something more than what the “bare” or “mere” letters said. He even at times spoke like a good little gnostic: “We must, therefore, be Christians both somatically and spiritually, and where there is a call for the somatic (bodily) Gospel, in which a man says to those who are carnal that he knows nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified, so we must do. But should we find those who are perfected in the spirit, and bear fruit in it, and are enamoured of the heavenly wisdom, these must he make to partake of that Word which, after it was made flesh, rose again to what it was in the beginning, with God” (*CJ*, Bk. 1:9).

And yet (that phrase again), it is interesting to see this in practice. As mentioned above, sometimes it leads Origen off into speculations that we can only label heterodox and false. But rarely, at least in these two commentaries, does Origen use allegory in the way that we usually think of it. We think of allegory as saying this really

means that. To us, allegory often means taking historical events, persons, or things and saying, “It isn’t important if they are real, what’s important is what they stand for.” In so doing, the allegorizer eviscerates the history and grammar of the text; he ignores and then mangles the one, simple sense of the words God’s Spirit gave.

Now, we cannot deny that sometimes Origen does this. For example, in his discussion of Palm Sunday in John 12 he not only practices some of his own brand of negative criticism upon the text, but he goes into great detail about what each detail of this event symbolizes, as if John’s account of Palm Sunday were a parable, or a chapter in Revelation, and not the report of an historical event. But here is the kicker. Origen does this not because he feels that Palm Sunday did not happen. He does it because of the differences between the Gospel accounts. In his own way, He attempts to defend the divinity of Scripture.

The reader of Origen wrestles with this dichotomy. Familiar as we are with the historical-criticism practiced in recent centuries, we expect crass unbelief tearing texts apart, declaring “It just didn’t happen that way,” trying to put an end to the pious frauds taught by generations of hapless Sunday School teachers. But Origen sounds different. Not for a moment would Origen dare to un-divinize the Scriptures. Not for a moment would he call any letter, syllable, word or phrase not God’s Word. So highly does he regard the Scriptures, that in attempting to figure out how to deal with the discrepancies (some of which he might label “material

falsehoods”), that he posits this interesting solution (which sounds a lot like Luther’s words, quoted in the Formula of Concord, dealing with the various modes of presence of God): “The second will report that God appeared at the very time of the foresaid occurrences, in a certain town, to a person who is named, a second person, and in a place far removed from that of the former account, and he will report a different set of words spoken at the same time to this second person. And let the same be supposed to be the case with the third and with the fourth. And let them, as we said, agree, these witnesses who report true things about God, and about His benefits conferred on certain men, let them agree with each other in some of the narratives they report. He, then, who takes the writings of these men for history, or for a representation of real things by a historical image, and who supposes God to be within certain limits in space, and to be unable to present to several persons in different places several visions of Himself at the same time, or to be making several speeches at the same moment, he will deem it impossible that our four writers are all speaking truth. To him it is impossible that God, who is in certain limits in space, could at the same set time be saying one thing to one man and another to another, and that He should be doing a thing and the opposite thing as well, and, to put it bluntly, that He should be both sitting and standing, should one of the writers represent Him as standing at the time, and making a certain speech in such a place to such a man, while a second writer speaks of Him as sitting” (*CJ*, Bk. 10:3).

In another place, Origen says more simply (and perhaps to our ears, more satisfactorily and plausibly and with less potential to create Christological problems than the above offered solution): “Who is so wise and so able as to learn all the things that are recorded about Jesus in the four Evangelists, and both to understand each incident by itself, and have a connected view of all His sojournings and words and acts at each place” (*CJ*, Bk. 10:6)?

To return to Origen’s allegorical method. As I said, his allegories are not often, at least in these two gospel commentaries, crazed flights into fanciful romance. They are often what we might term application. In many ways the spiritual meanings of the texts he interprets are meanings we might find and preach ourselves. Despite his vigorous arguments about material falsehoods and non-literal events, he rarely said things in Matthew or John did not happen. (Again, to be fair, I did not read his commentaries on Genesis or other Old Testament books, perhaps there he did.) What Origen did do, however, was reverse the order in which we should approach texts. He often began with the more spiritual meaning, the allegory, or application, if you will, and then at the end gives the historical meaning, although, sometimes he also forgot the historical meaning, or blew by it. This supports Chadwick’s charge, that to Origen perhaps the “bare letter” was the least important part of the text,

and if he fails to explain it, that is no big deal.

And yet Origen was not always consistent in this. In commenting on Matthew chapters 13 and 14 he goes back and forth between letting the text stand as it is written (e.g., the explanation of the tares and wheat and the pearl of great price [CM, Bk. 10:1-3, 5-6] and the *Corban* [CM, Bk. 11:10]) and finding allegorical meanings (for example, going to great lengths to say that Jesus meant something other than just “Sit down and get ready to eat,” when he had the crowd of five thousand sit [CM, Bk. 11:3], or blitzing past the young man’s epilepsy and demon possession in Matthew 17 to describe spiritual maladies [CM, Bk. 13:5]). This highlights the danger of subjectivity once you decide to allow for any kind of exegesis, more specifically, when you let these spiritual and allegorical meanings control your exegesis. When you do this you neither let Scripture interpret Scripture nor allow Scripture to say what it means. And in so doing, as mentioned above, you violate the one, simple sense which the Holy Spirit gives to these words.

Luther talks about this in his *Lectures on Isaiah* (*Luther’s Works* [American Edition], volumes 16-17). In the midst of practicing a little allegory himself (oh, the irony!), Luther writes: “Let us forewarn here concerning allegory that it may be handled wisely in the Spirit. For playing games with the Sacred Scriptures has the most injurious consequences if the text and

its grammar are neglected. From history we must learn well and much, but little from allegory. You use allegory as an embellishment by which the discourse is illustrated but not established. Let history remain honest. It teaches, which allegory does not do. But this is what it means to teach: to instruct the conscience about what and how it should know, to nourish faith and the fear of God. In history you have the fulfillment of either promises or threats. *Allegory does not pertain to doctrine, but to doctrine already established it can be added as color*” (LW 16:136-137, emphasis added).

In other words, and this is interesting, Luther did not forbid allegory. And he did not really stop using it in his own exegesis. He put it in its place. He basically meant by allegory the art of application of a text: you do not teach with allegory, you use allegory to help you explain what the Scriptures establish as doctrine. Luther clearly puts the text first. Later in the same lectures he said, “Faith must be built up on the basis of history, and we ought to stay with it alone and not so easily slip into allegories, unless by way of metaphor we apply them to other things in accordance with the method of faith.... Stay with the grammatical and historical sense” (LW 16:327-328). In those last comments on Isaiah 37, Luther specifically names Origen as one of the members of the “allegorical clan” guilty of twisting the Scriptures away from their intended meaning.

That is the great danger of allegory. Origen saw types and shadows in the Old

Testament and made everything a type and shadow in the Old and New Testament. He heard Jesus say, "These Scriptures testify about me," and took it to occasionally absurd lengths. As some do still today. I have heard some accused of finding Baptism in every drop of water in the Old Testament. I recall reading about a hymn which parallels Samson's outstretched arms with Christ's on the cross and draws a connection between them, as if Samson's arms were a Spirit-inspired type of Christ. Likewise, we have Psalms like 23 and 116 that talk about water and cups of salvation and want with all our heart to think of the sacraments. Or John 6 where Jesus says, "Eat my flesh, drink my blood." Or the feeding miracles: "He took bread, broke it, and gave thanks and gave it to them." How can the eyes of faith not see the sacraments there? How can we not see Jesus' sacrifice in every drop of blood, in every outstretched arm, in every piece of wood? In our enthusiasm to find Christ in the Scriptures, to preach sacramentally, we can easily forget the world of difference between saying, "This sounds like," or "This reminds me of," or "This makes me think of," and "This means that."

Daniel Deutschlander, at a recent pastor's institute, in comments on the Gospel of Mark offered an interesting corrective. While noting first that our Lutheran fathers were not averse to practicing allegory now and again (as noted above in Luther above) out of a concern to bring to bear the truth that all of Scripture is a whole and a unit, they also set a limit upon it. "Is what I'm saying in harmony with the *tertium*, the point of the text itself, and is it in harmony with the

analogy of faith, that is the *corpus doctrinae*" (unpublished notes from Pastor's Institute presentation on the Gospel of Mark, chapters 4-5)? When you are faithful to those things, Deutschlander noted, "you do not have to worry too much about allegorizing."

This also recognizes how Scripture works and how Jesus taught. Notice how Christ opens so many parables, "What shall we say the kingdom of heaven is like?" Jesus "invites us in. He invites us to think" (Deutschlander). Obviously, one, like Origen, can think too much. But, on the other hand, Peter calls Christians to grow in grace and knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). As another father of the Church said, the Scriptures are like the ocean, so shallow a young child can walk in them, so deep an elephant can drown. There is more there than a sinful believer can always understand. For example, Luther insists that as you read Isaiah you must always hear about the coming exile, the coming return from the exile, and the coming Christ (*LW* 16:5). At the same time, some passages talk about Israel as it was in the Old Testament and some refer to the New Testament Israel, the Christian Church. Some talk about the return from exile and refer also to the Christian's glorious entrance into heaven. Some focus on one, some on the other, and some both. And yet we do not call that allegory.

Further, we know that while the Word doesn't change, it, like Christ, is the same yesterday, today, and forever; yet we change. Our world changes. Our situation changes. Our temptations change. In Deutschlander's words, "We can interpret Scripture according to *our*

Sitz am Leben." We can do this because we know that the Scriptures teach us and encourage us (Romans 15:4, 2 Timothy 3:14-17). They make us wise for salvation and for living (2 Tim. 3:14-17, Psalm 119:97-105). They show us Jesus, convince us of His identity and His saving work, and give us the benefits of that saving work: the forgiveness of sins (John 20:31, Romans 10:17).

Which is why, in a sense, we can forgive some of Origen's allegorical ways. He was thinking good thoughts. He believed the Scriptures to be divine and defended them as such. He looked for and sought after Christ in every word (even so far [and too far] as to say that the shoes John was not worthy to tie figured Jesus' incarnation and descent into hell [CJ, Bk. 6:18]).

In doing so, Origen gives us some practical lessons in our own hermeneutical methods. On the one hand, the Scriptures are no wax nose, made for us to twist this way and that for our own amusement or pleasure. Nor are we allowed to find whatever we want wherever we want in the Scriptures, even if what we "find" proclaims Christ. God's Words have a plain, simple sense. They mean what they say. They interpret each other. Scripture means thus or so because it says so, not because I, or some philosopher or philosophical or theological system says so. We take our own reason captive to Christ, whether it is in understanding the history or the doctrine, whether it is in exposition or application.

On the other hand, you are allowed to ask, "Where am I in this text?" and "What

does this mean?" God has given us the Word for our benefit. We are dependent upon that Word. We have nothing else to tell us about God, Jesus, forgiveness, and salvation. This tells us to interpret the Scriptures carefully, more carefully than even a genius like Origen did, and yet at the same time, to hear seriously the Words of Jesus in John 5:39, Paul in Romans 15:4 and 2 Timothy 3:14-17, and the psalmist in Psalm 119:97-105. God's Word is often more than we make of it. We too often read it superficially and glance over it with barely a second thought. Our devotional reading, our exegetical study, is the thing of a moment, crammed into a spare hour of the week, or the barely awake final moments of the day, or while the kids are antsy hoping to play outside. Luther encouraged his friend Peter the barber to ask of each Word, "What did I forget or learn new? What sin does it show? What does it lead me to thank God for and pray for?" And this not about chapters and books but about single verses or small groups of verses. We are tempted to read Origen and say only, "He thought too much and too hard." And yet we should also say, "Have I meditated even half this much upon the Word of God?"

If great theologians are made by means of *oratio*, *tentatio*, and *meditatio* (prayer, temptation, and meditation), and they are (as Psalm 119 teaches), then we have no excuse not to at least rival Origen in the depth of thought we have given to Scripture, even if not in his conclusions and speculations. And with the gift of the hermeneutical controls given by Scripture itself – the two teachings of Law and Gospel, the sinner-saint dichotomy, the

reality that all of Scripture testifies about Christ, the truth that Scripture is book of historical and grammatical things to be taken at face value and seriously – we have every confidence that we can think as long and hard and deeply as Origen without speculating ourselves outside of the Christian Church (as we must consider some of Origen’s wilder speculations, e.g., about Jesus’ relationship to the Father, the Spirit’s nature, and Origen’s views on universalism).

The work of the Spirit in creating and sustaining our faith gives us the good thoughts to think, and those thoughts, when controlled by the Spirit, when controlled by what the Word says, not what our hearts or reason says, are, in a

sense, enough. If only Origen could have mastered his own thoughts in this way and let the Spirit speak plainly and simply and clearly, as He does. May God grant to us the servant’s heart to submit to the Spirit’s speaking. May He continually enlighten us to understand more and more of what He says in that Word in which we put our hope, words concerning which Jesus said, “[They] are spirit and they are life” (John 6:63). And Peter replied, “You have the words of eternal life” (6:68).

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