

Axial Scribal Hermeneutics: Origen and Dionysius

1. Welcome to this next video-lecture on the Co-evolution of Religion and Technology. Today we shall be exploring axial approaches to the interpretation of Sacred Scriptures in early Christianity. I have divided this lecture into two parts. In this first part we shall look at the first great Christian philosopher and theologian, Origen of Alexandria. In the second part, we shall look at how a sixth century Syrian monk, Dionysius, uses Origen to try to understand the nature of religious language, and especially what we mean when we talk about God.
2. Speech is an event. It is effervescent. It takes work to hold it still, to pay attention and to remember what has been said. Writing on the other hand leaves a mark, it creates a permanent record. (1) A text is an object that endures. To change a text you must create a new one. Thus while sacred sayings takes work to preserve down through the generations, sacred *scriptures* take work to *revise, to change, to correct*.
3. So what ought axial scribes treat traditional sacred scriptures when the their calling shifts from preserving the past to criticizing and systematizing it? As sacred texts, these have been central resources for community members to reconnect with what the community holds sacred and how it situates and defines itself in the world. They can hardly be simply be “modernized” let alone replaced. So too how radical should axial scribes take the revolution from communal identity (us vs them) and public reputation (honor/shame) to universal individuality and private interiority? Does new wine call for new wineskins?
4. This will be one of the principle controversies in early Christianity. Already within a few years after the death of Jesus, Paul would put the traditional sacred scripture of Israel, the Torah, or the “Law” and the prophets, and the new Gospel of Jesus in opposition, while seeking to preserve continuity between them through a distinction (1) between the “letter” of the sacred scripture and its “spirit.” In other words, while scripture was still true, (2) what the law and the prophets *meant* had changed. Underneath its apparent, “fleshly” meaning, Jesus revealed deeper, spiritual insights. Understanding of that spiritual specifically Christian meaning for any given passage was no longer obvious. Interpretation must become an “art.” Now approaching interpretation as an art, is the craft of hermeneutics. (3) Thus the calling of the axial Christian scribe was a hermeneutical one: not to dispute the literal truth of sacred scripture, but to divine its spiritual meaning.

5. This tension between letter and spirit proved unstable, however. As we explored in the last video lecture, within a couple of generations, disciples of the disciples of Paul would call for a radical break with the Torah. The God it depicted in its stories and voiced in its sayings was (1) not the Father of Jesus, the true God of love and mercy but a lesser, punitive God of Law and Justice. For Valentinus the truth of the Torah could not be spiritually re-interpreted, it was rather (2) a material wisdom for this material world governed by the God of mimetic desire, status and violence who demanded sacrificial scapegoating. (3) It's the world that the Father sent Christ to liberate us from.
6. Origen, on the other hand, *would* keep Torah and Gospel in tension, as two complementary, symbiotic interpretations of the same God, addressed to different audiences with different religious needs and sensibilities. (1) The Gospel was not a repudiation of the Torah but its fulfillment. Origen, classically trained in the literate categories of Axial Hellenistic philosophy, would use Plato in particular to (2) systematize Paul's spiritual hermeneutics of the Torah into a Christian philosophy.
7. Origen was born around 185 CE in Alexandria, the leading cultural center of the Roman Empire. He was one of the first Christian thinkers not to have been a convert, but to have been born into an already Christian household. In fact Origen's father was his first teacher in the spiritual interpretation of the Scriptures. As a teenager he witnessed his father being arrested and martyred for being a Christian. There is even a story that Origen's mother hid his clothes to prevent him from running after his father when he was led away from home, that he not suffer the same fate. In his last years Origen was himself arrested and tortured during a later Christian persecution. He survived the ordeal, but, already elderly, his health was broken and did die a couple of years later. Thus he suffered for Christ but was "robbed" of following in his father's footsteps as a martyr.
 - a. (1) As mentioned, Origen received a first class Greek scribal education. After the death of his father, he was sponsored by a wealthy Christian woman benefactor who had gathered a salon of Christian thinkers around her and clearly appreciated both his intellectual promise and his passion for Christianity. Another Christian teacher she sponsored was a Valentinian. He gave regular lectures on Christianity at her home, that the young Origen studiously attended. Much of his own theology can be seen as a critical reception of Valentinianism..

8. Origen is also reported to have studied under an eminent Platonist in Alexandria, Ammonius Saccas, also the teacher of Plotinus a younger contemporary. And indeed the thought of Origen and Plotinus would have many affinities. But whereas Plotinus grounded his philosophy on reasoned argument, Origen grounded his on his close reading of the sacred scriptures.
9. Origen advocated scriptural hermeneutics as the pinnacle of both the Christian life, and the intellectual life. As a teacher himself, Origen would begin his students with language studies, then advance to the study of Greek philosophy both as aids to their highest calling—scriptural hermeneutics--divining the spiritual sense of both “old” and “new” testaments and prayerfully meditating over them. Through their life of study and prayer, Origen’s students would live the life of the “perfect” or “complete” Christian. Correspondingly most all of Origen’s voluminous writings were commentaries on numerous books of the bible. Even his major systematic work, *On First Principles*, is a collection of scriptural passages and spiritual commentary, organized topically.
10. While Valentinus insisted upon interpreting the Torah in accord with its “letter”, and found it wanting, Origen distinguished three different meanings for any text of scripture:
 - a. (1) First was the historical or narrative meaning of the text, what one might call (2) the meaning of the words as heard by its audience. For remember that the overwhelming majority of people, including ordinary, mainstream Christians, were illiterate. They still lived in an oral world and would only have access to texts through hearing them read aloud communally by scribes and elders in ritual contexts. Origen would also refer to this immediate sense of the text as heard (3) its “bodily” or in Paul’s language, its “fleshly” sense.
 - b. (4) Secondly there was the moral message of a given text. In other words (5) what is the text calling for its audience to *do*? We might call this the (6) “mimetic” sense of the text in that it identifies what the one ought to imitate from a given story or teaching in one’s own life. For example, Jesus’ parables are stories he used to teach ordinary people on how to live and what to hold sacred. They are stories about ordinary people like themselves, doing ordinary things like they do, but with a twist that provokes them to stop and reflect over their habitual way of behaving, and to draw lessons from them on changes they might want to make in

their own life. Simply hearing the story was not enough. For one can hear a story or follow a narrative, without being touched by it. A story can leave you cold. Jesus' stories, indeed the story of Jesus' own life, was meant to provoke, and to motivate change. Preaching the Gospel was not simply storytelling. Preaching was storytelling with a point, and that point was to inspire a change of heart, *metanoia*, a turning around, a *conversio* of one's life. In short, the point of the Gospel was not primarily *informative* but *performative*, by being *transformative* in the lives of its audience, to inspire them to commit to Christ, to imitate him, in a word, to hold *Christ* sacred.

- c. (7) Finally, Origen identifies a third sense of scripture, how the text (8) enables those who pray and reflect over its words to reconnect with the divine. Thus he also calls this the (9) "anagogical" sense, literally the sense that "leads you up" beyond ordinary life, to reconnect us to what we hold sacred. Now as with Paul, the spiritual sense is not immediately accessible to everyone. Its meaning does not lie on the "surface" of the text. Rather it is to treat the words of the text as sacred symbols (10) pointing beyond their ordinary sense to a deeper, transcendent meaning; (11) it is to interpret the story in the text as an allegory pointing beyond its superficial narrative sense to another deeper story, one that does not so much inform as inspire and transform its reader lives, indeed their very being and identity. This spiritual sense of a text was elusive, a mystery, only accessible through prayerful solitary reflection over its words. It is a *lectio divina*, that requires the presence of the text and the ability to read it. Thus if the narrative sense is heard and the moral sense is enacted, that is, imitated, the spiritual sense is read and pondered, written upon the heart.
11. Valentinus' division of people into three different classes correlates with Origen's three senses of scripture.
- a. (1) The narrative sense correlated with material people, who while they could understand the stories and parables, would stay at this level of meaning. For them the stories were *just* stories. (2) They were not moved by what they hear to convert to Christ. They were like seeds bouncing upon the footpath.

- b. (3) The moral sense correlated with ordinary mainstream Christians, those moved to devote their lives to the imitation of Christ.
 - c. The spiritual sense correlated with mystical Christians, who not only followed Christ but recognized themselves in Christ, those for whom the stories awakened them to their own true divine nature.
12. Valentinus had argued that spiritual Christian, awakened by the Gospel to their true divine self, (1) were beyond temptation, while material people, outsiders unmoved by Christ's Gospel were beyond redemption. (2) Origen on the other hand correlates these three senses of scripture with (3) Plato's three dimensions of every human being. That is, for Origen, (4) no one in this life is pure spirit, beyond temptation. Even the most spiritual must remain self-critical and vigilant. And no one is beyond redemption, indeed God's plan of creation is to redeem everyone. His transcendent power, wisdom... and patience is such that not even the hardest of hearts, the most material of people, indeed ultimately not even (5) the demons cannot resist God forever. For as Paul writes, in the end, as in the beginning, (5) God will once more be all in all.
13. Indeed, Origen argued that the very purpose of this world was ultimately pedagogical. Whereas for Valentinus, suffering revealed the demonic character of the material world, for Origen suffering (1) revealed the world to be a classroom in which we are schooled in wisdom and compassion. (2) Material creation was not a prison but a net both to catch our fall from God and (3) a ladder by which we could climb back up. (4) Suffering was not a curse but a grace. As with Plato, it was (5) punishment, designed to teach us how to live better, more meaningful lives. Admittedly, its (6) spiritual meaning may not be apparent in the moment, but what appears and feels demonic can be redeemed through solitary, quiet reflection in light of the sacred scriptures.
14. Origen grounds his cosmogony, or story of creation, in a spiritual interpretation of the creation story of Genesis. He argues that the story in Genesis cannot even be (1) *historically* true. For example, (2) how could there be day and night before the creation of the sun and moon? (3) Clearly "day" here has to be a symbol for something else. Origen argues that (4) occasionally the narrative sense of the scriptures was deliberately impossible, precisely for God's Spirit to prod us to think harder and search after a higher meaning to the stories and the words by which the stories were told.

15. Origen will draw upon his extensive classical education to interpret the spiritual truth of creation in the literate categories of Hellenistic Platonic metaphysics.
- a. To begin with Origen argued that creation actually occurred in two stages. (1) The first creation was a purely spiritual cosmos, (2) a *plērōma* of pure spirits, as perfect an image of the divine as a created image could be. This is his spiritual interpretation of the first line of Genesis. It is usually translated as “In the beginning God created heaven and earth” But the word for beginning in Greek, “archē” can also mean principle or cause. Origen understands the verse then as “In the causal principle, that is in the creator, God himself, was created heaven and earth.” Which heaven and earth, as within God, would thus have to be a spiritual, not a material creation.
 - b. However these original spirits, as created and so other than God himself, were limited. They were made in the image of God, that is they too could create, in the sense of possessing free will, but they were not themselves divine, as Valentinus had argued. Eventually they turned away from God of their own volition. But how could pure spirits ever turn away from God? Valentinus had taught that they had been kidnapped and imprisoned through no fault of their own. But for Origen these original spirits were not victims, but agents of their own fall from the divine realm through their own free choice. But why would pure spirits freely choose to turn away from what they held most sacred, God himself? Origen suspected out of boredom or perhaps laziness. And to what could they then turn? To the only other thing then existing, themselves.
16. But as they turned in upon themselves, they became self-absorbed, and their love of God began to cool. (1) They thereby began to fall away from the blinding white hot radiance of the divine being (2) to becoming ever cooler, ever dimmer mirrors of the divine, (3) ever more sluggish, ever dirtier, (4) ever darker reflections. Origen read the second chapter of Genesis with its (5) second account of creation as a (6) second creation, (7) designed by God out of love to (8) catch their fall. He would then send his own son (9) to descend into the material world
17. and inspire his darkened self-images to (1) re-ascend and to re-unite with their Creator and Father. The Christian life was thus effectively a divine pedagogy (2) that served to

awaken,(3) revive and (4) re-ignite one's (5) original love for God, (6) to restore the divine image at the heart of each of us.

18. Through Word and Sacrament, Christians were to dry out and warm up, moving from languid stupor to purified and liberated spirits aflame for God.

19. Unlike in Valentinus, Christ, the Son of God, (1) was not begotten by the Father in a literal sense, God transcends time as he transcends space and matter, there was then no time the Son was not already in existence. Rather the Son of God was begotten in the spiritual sense that the son's existence is eternally dependent upon the Father whose divine life he shared. Indeed (2) Christ was the very Word or *logos* of the Father, the mind of God, his intelligence or *nous*. (3) Thus, Origen did not differentiate the divinity into thirty divine personae in a cascading hierarchy of begettings as with Valentinus. Rather, Father, Son and Spirit, were the source, intelligence and activity of a single divine being.

20. Origen was a controversial figure even in his own lifetime. But once Christianity became the religion of the Empire, his speculative spiritual hermeneutics of Sacred Scripture would be condemned on several counts.

- a. (1) First, the idea of our being originally created pure spirits, pre-existing our birth and subsequently falling into this material world was rejected. Humanity's Fall was not a cosmic fall from God, through boredom or spiritual lethargy, but a fall from God's grace, through disobedience to his will. Obedience, not prophetic charisma or mystical incandescence was what the institutional church held sacred.
- b. (2) So too Origen's vision of a final universal redemption of all things, even of Satan himself, was also rejected. Having gone from scapegoats to role models, from the bottom to the top of the social hierarchy, Christian leaders were not about to forswear mimetic vengeance against their erstwhile persecutors, human and spiritual. Any who rejected Christ and his church, let alone the devil and his demons, were forever beyond redemption.
- c. And finally, while Christ was divine, Origen did hold that as begotten by the Father, Christ was subordinate to him, a perfect image of the imageless divine abyss, but still an image, submissive to the Father's will. Christ was god (*theos*), but not "the God" (*ho theos*). Prayer ought to be directed not *to* Christ, but

through Christ to the Father, in the Spirit. With the Christianization of the Empire, even this degree of subordination of the Son to the Father became an intolerable denigration of Christ. While begotten of the Father, and sent by him into the world, Christ must be fully equal to the Father. Christ was like a torch lit from a bonfire. He was light from light, true God from true God, of the same, not merely similar, divinity. While distinct, Father, Son and Spirit were not only divine but equally divine persons constitutive of the same divine reality. Christians ought thus not only pray through Christ to the Father, but to Christ directly.

21. After Origen, mainstream, institutional Christianity did eventually reach a *modus vivendi* with the more zealous Christian mystics whose passion for Christ was all-consuming. As the religion of the empire, Christianity had to be a big tent, including both extraordinary as well as ordinary Christians. Mystics could now live apart from society either in solitude or in their own communities, without being thought “divisive,” that is, heretics. In turn these “monks,” devoted to the contemplative life would not condemn as defiled, the “active” life of ordinary Christians raising families in the world but would offer their services as spiritual guides to those who might want to “retreat” from the world periodically for solitary prayer and reflection. In exchange, the mystics received financial support so as to *be* free to devote their lives to unremunerated contemplation. A solitary life of contemplation while closer to the divine was not claimed to be beyond temptation, nor married life, and material engagement in the world, beyond redemption. Christianity was to be inclusive or “catholic,” literally, “according to the whole,” addressed to all ways of life