
Origen and the New Testament Canon

WILLIAM G. OLIVER

Abilene, Texas

Introduction

GENERALLY SPEAKING, histories of the New Testament canon include such topics as the influence of the Hebrew scriptures on the formation of Christian scriptures, the formation of lists to combat heresies and heretics, the standard(s) used in the determination of the status of a book, and an examination of the various lists of the books of the New Testament.¹ The views of various ancient authors are also examined in these histories, but modern scholarship has produced little conclusive evidence on the topic of this paper.

In order to picture the historical circumstances which influenced Origen's religious concepts, a brief biography forms the first part of this paper. The views and conclusions of modern authors with respect to Origen and the New Testament Canon make up the second part of this paper. An extensive examination of Origen's works, looking especially for words used to signify scripture, is the third part. The last section presents passages from Origen's writings which are significant to this study. These works are presented in their chronological order in order to determine if there is any evidence that Origen over time changed his perception of a "New Testament Canon."

¹ The earliest list that corresponds to our list of twenty-seven books is found in Athanasius' *Festal Letter* 39, written in 367. For the text of this letter, in which Athanasius also gives the Old Testament canon with the exception of Esther, see Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series. Vol. IV: *St. Athanasius* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1953), pp. 551-552. For surveys of the history of the formation of the canon see Hans von Campenhausen, *The Formation of the Christian Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1972); William R. Farmer and Denis M. Farkasfalvy, *The Formation of the New Testament Canon* (New York: Paulist, 1983); Bruce M. Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

*Origen's Life and Works*²

Origen was born to Christian parents in 185, most likely at Alexandria. His father, Leonides, educated him in the scriptures. Origen bewildered his father with questions concerning the deep meaning of scripture. While Origen was still a teenager, during the Severan persecution his father suffered martyrdom, and Origen desired martyrdom; but by hiding his clothes his mother prevented him from turning himself over to the authorities. Origen, the oldest of seven children, was able to support the family by teaching Greek language and literature.

The bishop of Alexandria, Demetrius, appointed the young Origen to take charge of instructing catechumens. Origen began to practice a strict asceticism, sleeping on the ground and fasting frequently. While in Alexandria he took advantage of educational opportunities, and his fame as a teacher spread beyond the borders of Egypt. Having become acquainted with the various philosophical systems, both heretical Christian and pagan, Origen was very successful at converting intellectual heretics and pagans. One such convert became quite important to Origen. Ambrose had been a Valentinian Gnostic before Origen rescued him from this heresy. The wealthy Ambrose later subsidized Origen in his literary efforts, supplying him with a library, stenographers, and copyists.

In 211 Origen traveled to Rome to hear the famous Hippolytus. When trouble arose in Alexandria in 215, Origen fled secretly to Palestine,³ where bishops Alexander of Jerusalem and Theoctistus of Caesarea in Palestine asked him to publicly expound on the scriptures. Upon hearing this, Demetrius, bishop of Alexandria, called Origen back to Alexandria and wrote the two bishops that for a laymen to teach publicly was forbidden by the church. In 218

² Unless otherwise noted the following information was selected from P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Vol. II: *Ante-Nicene Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 785-796; W. Smith and H. Wace, *Dictionary of Christian Biography* (London: John Murray, 1887); s.v. "Origenes," by B. F. Westcott. See also Henry M. Gwatkin, *Early Church History* (London: Macmillan, 1912), Vol. 2, pp. 180-212; Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church*, trans. by Bertram L. Woolf, Vol. 1: *The Beginnings of the Christian Church* (Cleveland: World, 1977-78), pp. 295-317; F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), s.v. "Origen." For recent studies of Origen see J. Danielou, *Origen*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955), and the bibliography compiled by H. Crouzel, *Bibliographie Critique d'Origen* (Hague: Nijhoff, 1971 and 1982).

³ *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, John McClintock and James Strong, eds., (Harper & Brothers, 1877; Baker reprint, 1970), Vol. 7: s.v. "Origen."

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Origen went from Palestine to Antioch at the invitation of Julia Mamaea, the mother of Emperor Alexander Severus, to teach to her the Christian faith.⁴

Back in Alexandria, Origen commenced great literary efforts, which Ambrose supported. Following is a list of books written during this period:⁵ *Commentary on John* (Books I-X), *Commentary on Genesis* (Books I-XIII), *Commentary on Psalms* (I-XXV), *Commentary on Lamentations*, *On the Resurrection*, *Concerning First Principles*, and the *Stromata*. His great textual study of the Old Testament, the *Hexapla*, was begun in Alexandria.

A sequence of events beginning in 231⁶ greatly altered the rest of Origen's life. He had opportunity to visit in Caesarea with his friends Theoctistus and Alexander, who ordained him.⁷ Origen's ordination caused Demetrius to be furious. There are three general reasons given for Demetrius' outrage. First, although there was no canon prohibiting ordination of a eunuch, apparently there was such a custom in Alexandria. Second, the first five books of Origen's *Commentary on John* had been published and had caused suspicion in orthodox circles. Third, Demetrius may have felt that his authority was threatened and even undermined by the action of the Palestinian bishops. Demetrius called a synod of bishops and presbyters and ruled that Origen could no longer teach in Alexandria. A second synod, attended by bishops only, deposed him from his office.

Origen spent the remainder of his life in Caesarea teaching and writing. For five years he continued to be supported by Ambrose, until the persecution of Maximinus (235-237) claimed Ambrose's life. Origen addressed his *Exhortation to Martyrdom* to Ambrose and Protoctetus, a presbyter of Caesarea. In 237 or 239 Gregory Thaumaturgus delivered his *Farewell Address*, from which we obtain our best picture of Origen's life as a teacher. Origen traveled extensively in Palestine during this time. He also returned to Athens, where he completed his work on Ezekiel and begins work on the Song of Songs.⁸ He was summoned twice to Arabia⁹ to give his understanding of a dispute—both times successfully

⁴ There is disagreement as to the date of this visit. In Book VI of his *Ecclesiastical History* Eusebius discusses Origen. If Eusebius presented Origen's life chronologically, which seems likely, then the visit should be dated 218. Yet it is possible that the visit occurred in 231/32 shortly after Origen permanently retired to Caesarea.

⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.24, 2-3; *NPNF* 2nd ser., Vol. 1, pp. 271-272.

⁶ There is disagreement concerning this date. The trip could have been as early as 228. See the discussion by A.C. McGiffert in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, P. Schaff and H. Wace, eds., 2nd series. Vol. 1: Eusebius (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1952), pp. 395-397.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.32; *NPNF* 2nd ser., Vol. 1, pp. 277.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.33.37; *NPNF* 2nd ser., Vol. 1, pp. 277-280.

bringing the ones in error back to the truth. When Origen reached sixty years of age, he allowed his discourses to be recorded.¹⁰ Most of the surviving homilies were derived from this procedure. Decius succeeded Philip as emperor in 249 and began a vicious persecution. Origen's friend Alexander, bishop of Jerusalem, died in prison. Origen was subjected to various tortures including the iron collar, dungeon, and the rack. He was freed in 251 at the death of Decius, but the cruel punishment had weakened him. He died at the age of sixty-nine.

In Caesarea Origen had continued his literary production. Following is a chronological list¹¹ of his works from this period which were scrutinized in this study: *Commentary on John* (Books VIff.; Letter Julius Africanus; Homilies on Genesis, Exodus, and Joshua; *Commentary on Matthew*; *Against Celsus*. The *Hexapla* was completed toward the close of his life.¹²

Origen and the Canon in Modern Scholarship

R. P. C. Hanson devoted chapter eight of his *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* to Origen's concept of the canon of scripture.¹³ Hanson begins by studying Clement of Alexandria, Origen's immediate predecessor. He concludes that Clement of Alexandria "has almost no conception of what we mean by the Canon of Scripture, in the sense of a list of books guaranteed as authentic tradition in contrast to others whose genuineness is not certain."¹⁴ Hanson then examines Origen's view of the Old Testament Canon, especially the Apocrypha. Hanson's method is to present passages where Origen refers to or quotes from Jewish writings, especially looking for comments concerning their genuineness. He concludes this section with a statement that "he [Origen] acknowledges the right of the Jews to decide their own Canon, and yet he also recognizes the authenticity of any tradition outside the Jewish Canon that appeals to him."¹⁵ The next section deals with Origen and the New Testament Canon. Hanson uses

¹⁰ Ibid., 6.36; *NPNF* 2nd ser., Vol. 1, pp. 278-279.

¹¹ Westcott, "Origenes," pp. 103-104.

¹² The works in the two listings constitute only a small portion of the writings of Origen. Using a complete list of Origen's writings which Eusebius compiled and appended to his Biography of Pamphilus, Jerome wrote that Origen's treatises numbered two thousand (*Against Rufinus* 2.22). Epiphanius estimated Origen's literary production at six thousand volumes (*Panarion* 64, 63). Most of the Greek texts were destroyed. The majority of what we now have is due to the Latin translation of Rufinus.

¹³ R. P. C. Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1954), pp. 127-156.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 133.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 137.

the same method with respect to the New Testament as he did with the Old. He concludes that, although Origen had a more strict attitude toward the New Testament especially in regard to the number of the Gospels, than he did with the Old,

fundamentally Origen's attitude to the Canon is the same as Clement's; he will accept as Christian evidence any material that he finds convincing or appealing. Neither of them shows any signs of being conscious of the existence of a list of canonical works, apart from the list of four Gospels recognized as more authoritative than any others.¹⁶

Hanson's methodology has a problem. He indicates that an author's use of a passage implies acceptance of the work quoted as authoritative. The following quote is an example of this.

Prat is not quite accurate when he says that Origen "recognized only four canonical Gospels, because tradition recognized no more besides." The tradition received by Origen from Clement at least would not have been as exclusive as this, and in fact, as we shall see, Origen does sometimes quote from other gospels than the Four.¹⁷

Hanson does not consider how Origen was using the reference. Origen quotes Tobit in order to help define a word.¹⁸ In doing so his appeal is linguistic not doctrinal. Consequently, in this passage Origen's use of Tobit does not reveal his attitude towards its being recognized as scripture. Origen mentions the *Gospel of Peter* and the *Book of James*¹⁹ as sources for the tradition that Jesus' siblings were only half siblings; Joseph had been previously married. The purpose of this tradition was the preservation of Mary's virginity. Hanson mentions this reference by Origen and states that Origen "seems inclined to believe a tradition which he finds in it."²⁰ It is difficult to determine if Origen believed the tradition, but even if he did believe it to be true, his belief in the historicity of the tradition says nothing about his acceptance as scripture of the work in which the tradition is found. As a matter of fact, Origen believed that the four evangelists, who were inspired and whose works Origen accepted as

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁸ *Against Celsus* 5:19.

¹⁹ *Commentary on Matthew* 10:17: ANF Vol. 10, p. 424.

²⁰ Hanson, *Tradition*, p. 138.

scripture, were not above changing the historical truth to serve the spiritual truth.²¹

Sundberg accepts Hanson's conclusion without question.²² His article approaches the canon from the concept of inspiration. He notes that many early Christian authors, including Origen,²³ considered themselves inspired. He concludes that inspiration was not used to distinguish accepted from rejected books and consequently was not determinative for canon.²⁴ Furthermore, in discussing Origen's comments on accepted books, preserved by Eusebius,²⁵ Sundberg remarked: "Originally these comments were related to collections, and there is no evidence that Origen ever thought of a New Testament list."²⁶ The first part of this statement is valid. Eusebius quotes from three of Origen's works: *Commentary on Matthew*, concerning the four Gospels; *Commentary on John*, concerning the epistles of the apostles; and *Homilies on Hebrews*, concerning the authorship of Hebrews. These passages from Origen are extant only here in Eusebius, and it is possible that Origen is referring to a collection of the Gospels and one of the epistles. The second part of Sundberg's statement is not valid. These passages do not represent Origen's mature thought on a New Testament list. The passage from the *Commentary on John* was written about thirty years before the other two. It is significant that this passage omits James and Jude, which Origen later accepted, and omits *The Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*, which he later rejected. Therefore, the conclusion that Origen never thought of a New Testament list cannot be made from these passages. In another article Sundberg rejects the second century dating of the Muratorian Canon in favor of a fourth century date.²⁷ Having eliminated both the second and third century lists, Sundberg believes that there was no list until the fourth century.²⁸

²¹ *Commentary on John* 10.4; *ANF*, Vol. 10, pp. 383-384.

²² A. C. Sundberg, "The Bible Canon and the Christian Doctrine of Inspiration," *Interpretation* 29 (October 1975): 361-362.

²³ *Homilies in Ezekiel* 7.10; *Homilies in Luke* 38.

²⁴ Sundberg, "The Bible Canon," p. 370. See also Everett Kalin, "The Inspired Community: A Glance at Canon History," *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42 (September 1971): 541-549.

²⁵ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.26; *NPNF* 2nd ser., Vol. 1, pp. 272-273.

²⁶ A. C. Sundberg, "The Making of the New Testament Canon," in *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary on the Bible*, Charles Laymon, ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971), p.1223.

²⁷ "A. C. Sundberg, "Canon Muratori: A Fourth Century List," *Harvard Theological Review* 66 (January 1973); 1-41. For a rebuttal of Sundberg see Everett Ferguson, "Canon Muratori: Date and Provenance," *Studia Patristica*, Vol. 17, Elizabeth Livingstone, ed. (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1982), pp. 677-683.

²⁸ Sundberg, "Canon Muratori," p. 37.

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Hanson and Sundberg represent a departure from an earlier tradition. Westcott believed that Origen received the books recognized by the church but that he used the others “with a certain reserve and hesitation, arising from a want of information as to their history, rather than any positive grounds of suspicion.”²⁹ Goodspeed held that Origen’s canon was closed, but it was longer than the canon of the universally accepted books.³⁰ More recently Grant made this rather emphatic statement:

We see that the influential list which Eusebius provided was largely based on the views current at Alexandria and Caesarea a generation or two before this time. This is almost to say that in his old age Origen created the final form of the New Testament canon.³¹

Modern scholars are somewhat divided on the question of Origen and the canon. Some see him more restrictive and reserved than others. Nevertheless, they all agree that Origen did not have a specific list of books which were the only ones accepted by the church. Furthermore, scholars generally employ the same methodology; namely, they select passages where Origen lists or quotes from works and draw conclusions based upon the assumption that Origen’s citation of a work implies his acceptance of that work as authoritative. As has already been shown, this is not the case. The modern historian needs to consider how Origen was using the quoted text before conclusions can be drawn from its use.

There is another approach to the study of the New Testament Canon that has been for the most part neglected. This approach involves the in-depth study of various words and phrases which were used to refer to the scriptures. The evaluation and interchange of these words reveal significant positions of Origen on the completeness of scripture. This section of the paper will be devoted to an intensive examination of Origen’s use of various words signifying “scripture.” In order to see if a change in word selection or usage occurs, the material will be presented in the chronological order of composition.

²⁹ B. F. Westcott, *A General Survey of the History of the Canon of the New Testament*, 7th ed. (London: MacMillan, 1896), 370.

³⁰ Origen’s canon included *The Epistle of Barnabas* and the *Shepherd of Hermas*. Edgar J. Goodspeed, *The Formation of the New Testament* (Chicago: University Press, 1926), pp. 92-93.

³¹ R. M. Grant, *The Formation of the New Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 175.

*Origen's Words Used to Denote "Scripture"*³²

In the first book of the Commentary on John Origen examines the relationship of the Gospels to the rest of scripture. Several times in this examination Origen wrote that the "Gospel is the first fruits of all the Scriptures." The word used here is γραφή.³³ Further down in the passage the following is found:

Now of the Scriptures (γραφῶν) which are current and are believed to be divine in all the churches, one would not be wrong in saying that the first growth is the Law of Moses, but the first fruits the Gospel (1.4).

In this passage Origen uses the word to refer to all writing, both Jewish and Christian, accepted by the churches. Furthermore, he acknowledges that there were limits on the books received by the churches. Commenting on John 1:4, Origen remarks that anyone living outside the faith of Jesus is living a dead life. He then remarks, "Consider, however, whether the divine Scriptures (*ai theiai graphai*) do not in many places teach this;..." He then quotes Mark 12:26 and Psalm 143:2. Origen again uses the word to refer to both old and new scriptures.

Very little of *Concerning First Principles* has survived in Greek. Modern editions are based primarily on Rufinus' Latin translation. Since he is suspected of altering Origen's text,³⁴ I will quote only those passages extant in Greek. *Concerning First Principles* consists of four books. In book four Origen discusses the inspiration and interpretation of scripture. In his early youth he interpreted scripture literally, but when some literal interpretations produced physical impossibilities,³⁵ these forced Origen to turn to allegory.

For our contention with regard to the whole of divine Scripture [*peri pasēs tēs theias graphēs*] is, that it all has a spiritual meaning, but not all a bodily meaning; for the bodily meaning is often

³² It is necessary to limit the presentation to a few representative passages. Particular attention is reserved for διαθήκη, "will testament, covenant."

³³ *Commentary on John* 1.4, 5; ANF, Vol. 10, pp. 298-299. All the Greek is taken from ΒΙΒΛΙΟΘΕΚΕ ΕΛΛΕΝΟΝ ΠΑΤΕΡΟΝ ΚΑΙ ΕΚΚΛΗΣΙΑΣΤΙΚΟΝ ΣΥΓΓΡΑΦΕΟΝ, 18 Vols. (Athens, 1957). The present passage is from Vol. 11; Origenes, p. 249, lines 22, 23.

³⁴ For a discussion of Rufinus' translation see G. W. Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles* (London: SPCK, 1936), pp. xxxi-lii.

³⁵ Origen disbelieved the historicity of the temptation of Jesus in which he was shown "all the kingdoms of the world in a moment," because such was physically impossible. *Concerning First Principles* 4.3.1; Butterworth, pp. 288-290, etc. Later in his life Origen allegorized passages which recorded events he believed to be historically accurate.

proved to be an impossibility. Consequently the man who reads the divine books [*theiais biblois*] reverently, believing them to be divine writings [*theiois grammasi*], must exercise great care.³⁶

From the context it is clear that Origen is using *γραφή* comprehensively of Jewish and Christian writings. In this passage he uses two other words denoting scripture, *βιβλος* and *γράμμα*. The phrase “the whole of divine Scripture” implies a limit on them. Origen also uses *γραφή* to refer to individual passages of scripture. Speaking of Mosaic regulations Origen wrote, “But as it is, the Scripture says”; he then quotes Genesis 17:14.³⁷

After Origen moved to Caesarea, his first work was the continuation of the *Commentary on John*. In one passage *γραφή* refers to a portion of the sacred books, *ἀγίον βιβλίων*.³⁸ In another passage Origen allegorizes the sacrificial lamb of the Old Testament system of sacrifices.

Nor must we fail to deal with the entrails, which are within and hidden from us; we must approach the whole of Scripture [*τῆ ἀπασῆ γραφῆ*], as one body, we must not lacerate nor break through the strong and well built connections which exist in the harmony of its whole composition, as those do who lacerate, as far as they can, the unity of the Spirit that is in all the Scriptures [*ἐν πασαις ταις γραφαις*].³⁹

Although this passage is allegorical, it still reflects how Origen used the word *γραφή*. He views the scripture as one body. This passage discusses the harmony of scripture and not its completeness. Consequently, although the scripture is to be regarded as a body, it is quite possible that the body does not yet have all its members. These passages show that Origen uses *γραφή* to refer to individual pericope and to the whole of scripture. He also used *βιβλος* to refer to books of scripture.

In the *Commentary on Matthew* Origen uses three words to refer to scripture: *γραφή*, *γράμμα*, *λόγιον τοῦ θεοῦ*. Overwhelmingly the most frequent word is *γραφή*. In discussing the word death, Origen cites both Old and New Testament passages. Of his examples he writes, “Things of this kind were intended by the Spirit who caused these things to be written in the oracles of God [*ἐν τοις λογίοις του θεοῦ*].”⁴⁰ Here Origen affirms inspiration of the written word, which may or may not be complete. The word *γράμμα* is used of all the

³⁶ *Concerning First Principles* 4.3.5; Butterworth, p. 297.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.3.2; Butterworth, p. 290.

³⁸ *Commentary on John* 6.5; *ANF*, Vol. 10, p. 354.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.13; *ANF*, Vol. 10, p. 390.

⁴⁰ *Commentary on Matthew* 12.35; *ANF*, Vol. 10, p. 469.

Scriptures once and of the Old Testament twice.⁴¹ A little over half of the instances of γραφή refer to the whole of scripture. The rest are divided equally between Old and New Testament references.

Origen's great apologetic work was his answer to Celsus' work *True Word*. Celsus had written this about seventy years before as an attack on Christianity. Origen's patron, Ambrose, wanted Celsus' work refuted, and he prevailed upon Origen to accomplish this task. Origen completed his *Against Celsus*⁴² in 248.

In this work Origen used four words to refer to Scripture: γράμμα, λογος, γραφή, γεγραμμένα. Θειος, divine, was sometimes used with each of the first three words.

One of Celsus' criticisms of the scriptures was their vulgar style. To prove his point he compared portions of scripture with Greek authors, especially Plato. In his defense of Christianity, Origen refers to the same portions of scripture as "extracts from the holy Scriptures [*gramma*]."⁴³ Celsus not only attacked Christianity, he attacked Judaism as well for worshipping heaven and all its residents. Origen agrees with Celsus but points out from Jeremiah that contrary to Celsus' opinion this was sin on the Jews' part. Origen then comments:

And when the Scriptures of the Christians [*oi christianon logoi*] accuse the Jews of their sins, they make it clear that when God forsook that people because of certain sins this sin was among those which they had committed. For in the Acts of the Apostles it is written of the Jews...⁴⁴

Origen then quotes Colossians 2:18-19 as Paul's prohibition of the worship of angels.

Γραφή is again the word for scripture most frequently employed by Origen. In discussing prayer to angels Origen wrote that prayer should "be directed to the supreme God. Concerning God, Origen wrote:

who is sufficient for all things, through our Savior, the Son of God. He is Logos, Wisdom, Truth and every other title which the scriptures [*graphai*] of the prophets of God and the apostles of Jesus give to him.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Ibid., 13.7; Old Testament, 14.1, 16.

⁴² Origen, *Against Celsus*, trans. by Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: University Press, 1953).

⁴³ *Against Celsus* 6.1; Chadwick, p. 316.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 5.8; Chadwick, p. 269.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.5; Chadwick, p. 266.

Origen presents a long passage from Celsus' book in which Celsus points out contradictions between the teachings of Moses and Jesus. Origen begins his reply with the following:

Here Celsus, who professes to know everything, has fallen into a very vulgar error concerning the meaning of the Bible [*graphōn*]. He thinks that in the law and prophets there is no deeper doctrine beyond that of the literal meaning of the words.⁴⁶

In the examples given it is readily observed that Origen used several words to refer to scripture. Although no word is used exclusively of either Testament, that Origen distinguished between the two is obvious. The many other examples of these words which were not included in the text of this paper reflect the conclusions drawn. From Origen's use of various words for scripture, drawing conclusions as to a recognized limitation on the "new" scripture is impossible.

Select Passages from Origen

The final section of this paper is devoted to several passages selected for examination. Particular attention will be paid to those employing the word **διαθήκη**, "will, testament, covenant." These passages, too, will be presented in chronological order.

Several times Origen refers to the Old Testament and New Testament in a manner which shows that he distinguished between them.

Now in our investigation of these important matters we did not rest satisfied with common opinions and the evidence of things that are seen, but we use in addition, for the manifest proof of our statements, testimonies drawn from the Scriptures which we believe to be divine [*theiōn graphōn*], both from what is called the Old Testament and also from the New [*fēs te legomenes palaias diathēkes kai fēs legomenēs kainēs*].⁴⁷

In the first place, then, we must note the passage in connection with the heterodox, who hunt up such portions of the Old Testament [*apo fēs palaias diathēkēs*] because in them, as they make bold to say, the cruelty of the creator shows itself, the spirit of revenge and retaliation which bad men display, or whatever they like to call it, their only object being to prove that there is no goodness in the creator; and in reading the New Testament [*fē*

⁴⁶ Ibid., 7.18; Chadwick, p. 409.

⁴⁷ *First Principles* 4.1.1.; Butterworth, p. 256. This text is also in the *Philocalia*, Chap.

kainē] they do not accord it fair and equal treatment, but dismiss such passages as resemble those they think deserving of censure in the Old Testament [*apo tēs palaias*]... But if they seek a defense of the Gospel, we must ask them whether their inconsistent treatment of similar questions is not culpable, in as much as they take no offense at the New Testament [*tēn kainēn*] but seek to defend it, while they attack the Old Testament [*tēn palaiān*] for such like things, though they ought to defend them like those from the New Testament [*apo tēs kainēs*]. And let us hereby teach them on account of the resemblances to consider all as the Scriptures of one God.⁴⁸

In these two passages Origen's distinction between the two Testaments is obvious. Furthermore, he attests their divine origin. It is also clear from the second passage that the other people, possibly Christians, recognized both Testaments. These people would excise passages in both Testaments that depicted God as cruel. These people also defended questionable statements involving the New Testament while they attacked similar statements from the Old Testament. Origen defends the Testaments as having come from the same God; he, nevertheless, admits and defends a distinction between the two.

In book one of his *Commentary on John* Origen discusses the application of the word "Gospel." He first refers to the Law of Moses as the first growth and the Gospel as the firstfruits of all the scriptures. The prophets are also fruits, but not firstfruits.⁴⁹ The firstfruits came last. At this point Origen discusses the relationship between the Gospels and the Acts and Epistles. He then states the following:

Must we also show that the Old Scripture [*hē palaiā*] is not Gospel, since it does not point out the Coming One, but only foretells Him and heralds His coming at a future time; but that all the new Scripture [*hē kainē*] is the Gospel.⁵⁰

Having applied the term "Gospel" to Acts and the Epistles, Origen replies to an objection:

As to this second definition, it might be objected that the Epistles are not entitled "Gospel," and that we are wrong in applying the name Gospel to the whole of the New Testament [*kainēn diathēkēn*].⁵¹

⁴⁸ *First Principles* 3.1.16; Butterworth, p. 189; *Philocalia* 21.15.

⁴⁹ *Commentary on John* 1.4; *ANF*, Vol. 10, p. 298.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 1.5; *ANF*, Vol. 10, p. 299.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

It is possible to quote one of Paul's sayings in support of the contention that the whole of the New Testament [*pasan fēn kainēn*] is the Gospel.⁵²

That Origen regarded the New Testament as a unified whole is plainly seen in these passages. The phrases “all the New Scripture” and “the whole of the New Testament” imply that the writing of Scripture had ceased⁵³ but leave open to question the contents of the New Testament. Considering all the passages in this section, the conclusion that Origen, prior to his final move to Caesarea, did not hold to a closed canon seems safe. Yet we must be reminded that we only have a portion of his writings and more conclusive evidence may have been lost.

About fourteen years after his move to Caesarea Origen allowed his homilies to be recorded. There are two significant passages in these homilies. In the first Origen is discussing Jacob's well. He then allegorizes the text:

Isaac, therefore, digs also new wells, nay rather Isaac's servants dig them. Isaac's servants are Matthew, Mark, Luke, John; his servants are Peter, James, Jude; the apostle Paul is his servant. These all dig the wells of the New Testament.⁵⁴

Origen here identifies the authors of the inspired writings of the New Testament. There was nothing in the text of Exodus to force Origen to choose either particular names or a particular number of authors. Given this freedom, the conclusion that Origen here has listed the authors whom he received as accepted writers seems reasonable. The presence of James and Jude in this list is indicative of Origen's changed attitude toward them. In a passage in the *Commentary on John* (5.3) in which he discussed the received epistles these two are missing. The absence of *Barnabas* and the *Shepherd* is also quite significant. Earlier in his life he was ambivalent about their status but seems sure of their

⁵² *Ibid.*, 1.6; *ANF*, Vol. 10, p. 300. Origen then quotes Rom. 2.16, “According to my Gospel.”

⁵³ There is a passage in the *Commentary on John* where the cessation of the writing of scripture is clearly intimated. Origen comments on Mark 1.1: “But the beginning of the Gospel – for in respect of its extent it has a beginning, a continuation, a middle, and an end – is nothing but the Old Testament [*he palaia diatheke*]. John is, in this respect, a type of the Old Testament, or, if we regard the connection of the New Testament [*te kaines*] with the Old, John represents the termination of the Old” 1.14; *ANF* 10.304. By calling the Old Testament “the beginning” Origen is interpreting “the beginning” as a literary beginning. This literary production has a middle and an end.

⁵⁴ *Homilies on Exodus* 13.2; trans. Ronald E. Heine, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 71. Origen: *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), p. 188.

exclusion now. There is a more elaborate listing in a passage where Origen allegorizes the story of the walls of Jericho:

“So too,” he says, “our Lord, whose advent was typified by the son of Nun, when He came, sent His Apostles as priests bearing well-wrought trumpets. Matthew first sounded the priestly trumpet in his Gospel. Mark also, Luke and John, each gave forth a strain on their priestly trumpets. Peter moreover sounds loudly on the twofold trumpet of his Epistles; and also James and Jude. Still the number is incomplete, and John gives forth the trumpet-sound in his Epistles and Apocalypse; and Luke while describing the Acts of the Apostles. Lastly however came he who said: “I think that God has set forth us Apostles last of all,” and thundering on the fourteen trumpets of his Epistles, threw down even to the ground the walls of Jericho, that is to say all the instruments of idolatry and the doctrines of philosophers.”⁵⁵

Here again Origen lists only the authors whose works were later included in scripture. Furthermore, he identifies the type of work each author wrote. Origen seems sure that Peter indeed wrote a second epistle.⁵⁶ As in the previous citation he mentions James and Jude as authors of an epistle each. John is credited with Revelation (if the text, in Latin, is correct) and more than one epistle. Acts was credited to Luke. Paul wrote fourteen epistles, including Hebrews. More often than not Origen considered Paul to be the author of Hebrews.

These two citations show that in his later life Origen was surer of the contents of the New Testament than he had been earlier. In the second passage there is a phrase highly suggestive of a closed collection of scripture: “still the number is incomplete.” Origen then names the remaining authors who brought the number, it is implied, to completion.

There is one more significant passage to be examined. Origen is discussing Jesus’ parable of the fishing net:

And the kingdom of heaven is likened unto the variegated texture of net, with reference to the Old and New Scriptures [*palaian kai kainēn graphēn*], which is woven of thoughts of all kinds and greatly varied. As in the case of the fishes that fall into the net, some are found in one part of the net and some in another part, and each at the part at which it was caught, so in the case of those who have come into the net of the Scriptures (*graphōn*) you

⁵⁵ *Homilies on Joshua* 7.1; cited in Westcott, *A General Survey*, p. 368.

⁵⁶ While in Alexandria Origen doubted that Peter had written a second epistle. He also indicates that the second and third letters of John were in doubt. *Commentary on John* 5.3; *ANF*, Vol. 10, p. 346.

would find some caught in the prophetic net; for example of Isaiah, according to this expression, or of Jeremiah, or of Daniel; and others in the net of the law, and others in the Gospel net, and some in the Apostolic net... And before our Savior Jesus Christ this net was not wholly filled; for the net of the law and the prophets had to be completed by Him who says, "Think not that I came to destroy, but to fulfill." And the texture of the net *has been completed* [italics mine-WGO] in the Gospels, and in the words of Christ through the Apostles.⁵⁷

Commentators on Matthew disagree with Origen's exegesis, but his statement that the texture of the net having been completed stands independent of his interpretation of the net in the parable. The *Commentary on Matthew* was one of Origen's last works, and this passage indicates that he believed the new scriptures to be complete. The writing of scripture had ceased and its contents had been confirmed.

Conclusion

In this paper Origen's life and work have been presented. He was raised with and knew the Scriptures well. His whole life was spent studying, teaching, and writing about them. His various trips allowed him to be aware of the thoughts of his contemporaries on various topics. Consequently, Origen is a very important individual in the study of church history.

Modern scholarship has not reached a definitive position on Origen and his concept of a closed canon of "new" scripture. Earlier scholars saw an early development of the canon and saw Origen as a significant person in this development. More recent scholars have argued for a later development of the canon and see Origen as mainly insignificant in this development.

After a search of Origen's writings for words used to refer to scripture, three conclusions can be drawn. (1) Origen used certain words to distinguish between "divine" writings and other literary efforts. These divine writings were both Jewish and Christian. (2) More important for this study is the conclusion that the way in which Origen used these words indicates that he believed the writing of "Christian" scripture to have ceased. (3) Most important for this study is that there is evidence in passages where one or more of these words are employed that Origen considered the "Christian" scriptures to be "one body." They form a unit. Yet none of these words was used in such a way that would allow a conclusion to be drawn as to the makeup of the body.

⁵⁷ *Commentary on Matthew* 10:12; ANF, Vol. 10, p. 420.

Origen and the New Testament Canon

The select passages that have been examined allow for more definite conclusions. Origen distinguished between two Testaments; yet they both came from one God. Furthermore, some of these passages indicate that Origen believed that the writing of scripture had ceased. After Origen's final move to Caesarea his belief in a limited and identifiable corpus of Christian writings is sure. In two passages he lists only the authors that were soon confirmed as the only authors of accepted works. In the final passage examined he explicitly claims that with the completion of the Gospels and the words of Christ through the Apostles the scriptures had been completed. Although Origen never lists the "canon," this study brings evidence which indicates that he believed that the writing of scripture had ceased and that he knew which writings were accepted as such.

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