

ORIGEN AND THE INERRANCY OF SCRIPTURE

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Did Origen, the most influential Biblical scholar in the early centuries of the Church, believe in the "inerrancy" of Scripture? Yes. Does this mean that he may be cited as evidence in support of the thesis that "the Church throughout its history has always held to the inerrancy of the literal sense of the text"?¹ No. As we shall see in the following pages, Origen did hold a high view of the divine authorship and inspiration of Scripture, and from this he formulated a theory of the "inerrancy" of Scripture. But for Origen this theory of the full veracity of all Scripture applied only to the spiritual sense of the text, not to the ordinary or literal sense—which in fact, according to Origen, contains numerous errors, impossible statements, and even fictional elements. He held, as it were, to what may be termed the "analogical inerrancy" rather than to the "literal inerrancy" of Scripture. Following a brief discussion of these views of Origen we shall conclude by mentioning some of the implications of these findings for certain aspects of the contemporary "inerrancy debate."

I. ORIGEN'S VIEW OF INSPIRATION²

Belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture was one of the two fundamental presuppositions underlying Origen's exegetical, theological and apologetic efforts. He was firmly convinced that

the holy books are not the compositions of men, but as a result of the inspiration [*epipnoias*] of the Holy Spirit by the will of the Father of the universe through Jesus Christ, these were written and have come down to us.³

The emphasis is on the activity of the Holy Spirit: Origen speaks of the Spirit as the one who "composes" or "supervises" the formation of Scripture.⁴ Ultimately

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¹As has been done, e.g., by H. Lindsell, *The Battle for the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976) 19, 42-43, 51, 69; J. H. Gerstner, "The Church's Doctrine of Biblical Inspiration," *The Foundation of Biblical Authority* (ed. J. M. Boice; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 27-28, 49, esp. p. 50; and conceded by J. Rogers, "The Church Doctrine of Biblical Authority," *Biblical Authority* (ed. J. Rogers; Waco, TX: Word, 1977) 19.

²In the following section our primary goal is to document only the fact and extent of inspiration in Origen's thought. An adequate treatment of Origen's full conception of inspiration (a task far beyond the scope of this brief essay) would require an investigation of not only his use of the term *theopneustos* but also such important and related terms as *epipnoia* ("inspiration," "divine insight"), *enthousiasmos* ("inspiration," "enthusiasm"; an inspired or excited state caused by an agent), *entheos* ("being of divine origin," "inspired") and *katochos* ("under a divine influence"), all of which are used by Origen.

³Origen, *De Principiis* 4.2.2. Greek text: GCS, Vol. 22 (ed. P. Koetschau, 1913). Eng. trans.: G. W. Butterworth, *Origen: On First Principles* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973). However, this and all subsequent translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

⁴*Homily on I Samuel* 2 (PG 12.1017), cited by R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1959) 193; cf. *De Prin.* 4.2.9.

it is the Holy Spirit who is the true author of the holy books.⁵

This phenomenon of inspiration was not limited to certain parts or just one Testament of Scripture. Every part of both Testaments was equally inspired: "The divine character of Scripture extending through all of it" (*eis pasan autên*).⁶ In other words, "the wisdom of God has penetrated to all the Scripture inspired by God [*theopneuston*], even as far as the slightest letter,"⁷ with the result that "in the epistles of the Apostles," for example, "through which Christ speaks, there is not one jot or one tittle that is superfluous."⁸ In sum, the fact of inspiration means that the words one reads in the text "are not the utterances of men" but rather "a discourse of God" (*theou logous*).⁹

At the same time, however, the role of human agency in Origen's thought must not be minimized. Though he occasionally suggests that prophecy was a matter of ecstasy,¹⁰ by and large he rejects such a view. The prophets were not "in a state of ecstasy" (*existamenoï*). Rather they "willingly and consciously assisted the Word that came to them."¹¹ The prophet or apostle "experiences no loss of reason or aberration at all as a result of the immediate inspiration [*ex imminenti adspiratione*] and does not lose the free judgment of the will." It is up to the individual to decide whether or not he will follow God's call.¹² It is a matter of "diverse movements of rational¹³ minds . . . ordered by divine providence."¹⁴ Origen goes so far as to state, with respect to the "countless number of titles" applied to the Son of God, that in some cases the gospel writers set forth "their own understanding [*tên idian dianoian*] of what he is," and "the apostles glorify him in accordance with what they have learned."¹⁵

This emphasis on the human activity involved in the production of Scripture should caution us against attributing to Origen a "dictation" theory of inspiration, even though his language sometimes tends in that direction.¹⁶ Origen him-

⁵Cf. the *Philocalia*, 2. 4 (ed. J. A. Robinson; Cambridge: University Press, 1893). Eng. trans.: G. Lewis (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911). Cf. also F. Prat, *Origene, Le Theologien et L'Exegete* (Paris, 1907) 117-120.

⁶*De Prin.* 4.1.7.

⁷*Philocalia*, 2. 4.

⁸*Commentary on Romans*, 2. 6 (PG 14.883).

⁹*De Prin.* 4.1.6.

¹⁰Cf. *Commentary on John* 28.13 (PG 14.705), cited according to the edition of A. E. Brooke, *The Commentary of Origen on S. John's Gospel* (2 vols.; Cambridge: University Press, 1896).

¹¹PG 13.709—a catenae fragment to *Hom. on Ezek.*, 6. 1. Cf. *Contra Celsum* 7.3.

¹²*De Prin.* 3.3.4.

¹³Cf. to this *Comm. on Matt.*, 2 (= *Philocalia*, 6. 1): *heis de poimên tôn logikôn ho logos*. This stress on reason or rationality is important for Origen and plays a key role in determining whether or not the literal meaning of a particular text is sensible; cf. *De Prin.* 4.3.1-4.

¹⁴*De Prin.* 4.1.7.

¹⁵*Comm. on John* 1.22.

¹⁶Cf. B. Vawter, *Biblical Inspiration* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 26.

self never dealt systematically with the precise nature of the divine/human interaction involved in the inspiration of Scripture, and thus seemingly paradoxical statements¹⁷ may be found in his writings. The paradoxical force of many of these statements is lessened, however, if we take into account Origen's concept of *epinoia*, "point of view."¹⁸ Subjectively, or from a human point of view, the human authors of Scripture were free to write according to their own insight and understanding. Therefore Origen can speak of them as composing or writing Scripture. But objectively, or from the divine point of view, God's sovereignty is such that he is able to use whatever they wrote to accomplish his purposes. Thus ultimately, whatever their source, the words of Scripture become God's words because it is his message that is communicated through them. While the anthropological aspect of Scripture's origins never disappears in Origen, he nevertheless stresses the dominant role of the Holy Spirit in both initiating and carrying out the process of inscryption.

If the fact of inspiration does not eliminate the human element in the writing of Scripture, neither does it mean that it was composed according to the best standards of rhetorical skill or philosophical cleverness. In fact the "hidden splendor" of Scripture "is concealed under a cheap and contemptible style."¹⁹ This was God's way of accommodating²⁰ his revelation to the weakness of human understanding and has as a parallel in Origen's thought the doctrine of the incarnation.²¹ Moreover, Origen is able to turn what some (e.g., Celsus²²) considered a defect in Scripture to positive advantage. Citing 2 Cor 4:7 he argues that Scripture's lack of comeliness insures that one's faith rests not on the wisdom of men but in the power of God speaking through his Word.²³

In support of his belief in inspiration, Origen was able to bring forward a number of proofs. One of these proofs had to do with the inherent majesty of Scripture. In *De Principiis*, for example, he writes: "He who encounters the prophetic writings with careful diligence and attention will experience as he reads the evidence of inspiration" (*enthousiasmou*).²⁴ This particular proof, however, often assumes in Origen's hands a circular form. That is, he can also argue that even though a passage may seem to be very difficult or obscure, or at first sight totally lacking in spiritual character, nevertheless one should persist in the attempt to comprehend it because every passage does have a spiritual meaning as a result of inspiration even if one may feel otherwise.²⁵

¹⁷Compare, e.g., *De Prin.* 3.3.4 (arousing the prophets by divine suggestion, with final choice remaining with the individual) to *Contra Celsum* 7.7 (Holy Spirit drafts those through whom it wants to speak).

¹⁸This important concept is developed most clearly in the early chapters of his *Commentary on John*.

¹⁹*De Prin.* 4.1.7.

²⁰On this concept see Hanson, *Allegory*, 210-231.

²¹Cf. Hanson, "Origen as Biblical Scholar," *Cambridge History of the Bible* (ed. P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans; Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 1. 464.

²²Cf. *Philocalia*, 15. 2.

²³*De Prin.* 4.1.7.

²⁴*De Prin.* 4.1.6.

²⁵Cf. *Philocalia*, 15. 1-2.

Beyond this, though, Origen is able to set out three other and perhaps more convincing proofs in support of his position. Drawing his first proof from the history of the Church, Origen argues that the ability of the Word to be preached everywhere "in spite of the fewness of its teachers" and to win to "the worship of Jesus" (*Iēsou theosebeia*) Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish, is evidence of a more than human achievement.²⁶

Origen's second proof, and one on which he places great weight, involves the fulfillment of prophecy. The fact that the ancient prophecies about Christ have been fulfilled in Jesus proves that these prophetic writings are inspired:

For prior to the advent of Christ it was not at all possible to present clear arguments concerning the divine inspiration [*theopneustous*] of the ancient Scriptures. But the advent of Jesus has led anyone who might have suspected that the Law and the Prophets were not divine [*theia*] to the evident conclusion that they were written by means of heavenly grace.²⁷

In the same chapter Origen provides as his third proof a Christological basis for his view. When we "demonstrate the divinity of Jesus . . . we demonstrate at the same time that the writings that prophesied concerning him are divinely inspired" (*theopneustous*).²⁸ In other words the one of whom Scripture speaks is divine, and therefore the Scriptures themselves are divinely inspired. Elsewhere he suggests that the process of inspiration is somehow parallel to or even a continuation of the incarnation: "The Word 'is as it were incarnate in the Bible'."²⁹ A statement in the *Philocalia* is even stronger: "We see in human form the Word of God on earth, ever since he became a man, for eternally in the Scriptures the Word became flesh, in order that he might dwell among us."³⁰

II. INSPIRATION AND INERRANCY

Given Origen's high view of the nature, extent and basis of the inspiration of Scripture it is not surprising to find that he also believes that Scripture is perfect and free from internal conflict—i.e., without error. This comes out clearly in the *Commentary on Matthew*:

There is in the holy discourses [*theiois logiois*] nothing crooked or perverse, for all are clear to those who understand. And since there is nothing crooked or perverse to such a person, on this account he sees an abundance of peace in all the Scriptures, even those that seem to contain a contradiction and to be opposed to one another.

²⁶*De Prin.* 4.1.2; cf. 4.1.5.

²⁷*De Prin.* 4.1.6.

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹*Comm. on Matt.*, frag. 11 (in GCS, 41. 1), as translated by Hanson, *Allegory*, 194 (his reference to *Comm. on Matt.* 15. 3 is incorrect); the Greek is *en bibliō graphē kai hoionei sōmatōthē*. See further on this point about the incarnation H. von Balthasar ("Le Mysterion d'Origene," *RSR* 26 [1936] 535-545); Hanson, *Origen's Doctrine of Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1954) 184 n. 3.

³⁰*Philocalia*, 15. 19. For all this, however, Origen is no proto-Barthian. Revelation for Origen involves "propositions, written or spoken, inspired directly by God" (Hanson, *Allegory*, 188). Cf. also A. Zöllig, *Die Inspirationslehre des Origenes* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herdersche, 1902) 76-82.

er. . . . For he knows that the whole Scripture is the one perfect and harmonious instrument of God.³¹

To this may be added the following example:

Just as the words of the Lord [*ta logia kyriou*] are pure [*hagna*] words, like fire-tested silver, universally approved, purified seven times, so also the Holy Spirit most strictly and with deliberate precision dictated them via the ministers of the Word [*hypobeblēken auta dia tōn hypēretōn tou logou*].³²

That is, the words of Scripture are as error-free as those of the Lord himself. Lest the implications of such statements for the Christian's approach to Scripture be missed, Origen, when discussing Mark's and John's accounts of the Baptist, states quite categorically that "believers cannot say that either of the evangelists makes any mistakes or misrepresentations."³³ There is no question, then, but that Origen held firmly to what Hanson goes so far as to call a "rigid" theory of inerrancy.³⁴

III. THE THREEFOLD SENSE OF SCRIPTURE

It would seem, thus far, that Origen's view of the inerrancy of Scripture coincides with the view held by some contemporary theoreticians, and so it is claimed.³⁵ But it is precisely at this point that Origen has been seriously misunderstood. In order to accurately grasp Origen's real view of inerrancy one must evaluate his view not only in light of his doctrine of inspiration—the first of Origen's two fundamental axioms—but also in light of his second axiom: the belief in the threefold sense of Scripture.

That Origen believed all of Scripture to be possessed of multiple senses is a commonplace. What is less well appreciated is how crucial a role this particular belief plays in his thought and how it affects the way one views his doctrine of inerrancy. Virtually everything depends on this belief. Even his views of inspiration and of the fulfillment of prophecy cannot be maintained without it. Neither his view of multiple senses nor the allegorical exegesis³⁶ required by it were at all novel. In this respect he was only one in a long line of notable Alexandrian Biblical scholars who employed this approach. Origen's contribution is the thorough and systematic manner in which he developed the theoretical basis underlying this method.

The reason, claims Origen, why some people make "ignorant assertions" or

³¹*Comm. on Matt.*, 2 (= *Philocalia*, 6. 1-2).

³²*Philocalia*, 2. 4.

³³*Comm. on John* 6.34; cf. Hanson, *Allegory*, 191-193.

³⁴Hanson, *Allegory*, 193.

³⁵Cf., e.g., Gerstner, "Doctrine," 27-28, 49, esp. p. 50; Lindsell, *Battle*, 19, 42-43, 51, 69.

³⁶While this approach had become traditional to Alexandrian Biblical scholarship, Origen nonetheless had no trouble in providing a scriptural—especially a Pauline—justification for his approach. Cf. *De Prin.* 4.2.6; Prat, *Origene*, 133-134.

hold "false opinions" about God is that "Scripture is not understood according to the spiritual sense but is interpreted in terms of the bare letter."³⁷ Says Origen:

The necessary way of approaching the Scriptures in order to understand their meaning is the following, which is derived from the writings themselves. We find that a rule such as this has been laid down by Solomon in Proverbs concerning the divine doctrines that have been written down: "Declare them in a threefold manner [*trissōs*], in counsel and in knowledge, that you may answer with true words those who question you." Therefore one must set forth the meanings of Holy Scripture in a threefold way to one's own soul.³⁸

The "more simple man" benefits from what is called the "flesh of Scripture" (*sarkos tēs graphēs*)—this being the name given to "the ordinary interpretation" (*tēn procheiron ekdochēn*). Anyone who has made "some progress" is edified by the "soul" (*psychēs*) of Scripture, while the "perfect"—in the sense of 1 Cor 2:6-7—comprehend "the spiritual law" (*tou pneumatikou nomou*). "For just as a person consists of a body [*sōma*] and a soul and a spirit, so in the same way does the Scripture, which was prepared by God to be given for the salvation of all people."³⁹ The bodily sense is the literal or ordinary sense of the text, while the "soul" meaning and the "spiritual" meaning are higher senses that go beyond the literal sense. The difference between the latter two may be illustrated by Origen's treatment of the ark. His exegesis may be summarized as follows:

The spiritual meaning of Noah's building of the ark concerns Christ and the Church. The moral meaning applies to the man who turns from the evil world around him and in obedience to the commands of God prepares an ark of salvation in his own heart.⁴⁰

The moral sense, then, is that which relates to human experience, while the spiritual sense has to do with Christ and God's salvific plans for his people.⁴¹

In practice, however, this theoretical threefold distinction often collapses into a dichotomous approach to the text.⁴² Frequently no differentiation is made between a "moral" and a "spiritual" sense. The only distinction is between the literal and the allegorical. In his discussion of Matt 18:21 ff., for example, Origen after dismissing the literal meaning goes on to give only a single allegorical explanation of the text.⁴³ For the most part, then, one may speak of a twofold or dichotomous approach to the text. The terms may vary—literal versus figurative or

³⁷*De Prin.* 4.2.2.

³⁸*De Prin.* 4.2.4; the scriptural citation is from Prov 22:20-21 (LXX).

³⁹*Ibid.* With respect to this threefold sense Origen readily admitted that not all texts had three meanings; some passages "have no bodily sense at all" but are possessed of "soul" and "spirit" only. But this is no problem, for it too is explained in Scripture. One need only to recall that the ceremonial water jars at the wedding in Cana (John 2:6) each held two or three *metretes*. Clearly, says Origen, this means that in some cases only two meanings will be found, while in others all three are present(!). Cf. *De Prin.* 4.2.5.

⁴⁰Cited by Hanson, "Origen," 1. 468. Cf. further *Comm. on Matt.*, 16. 1-4, for another example.

⁴¹Cf. J. Danielou, *Origen* (trans. W. Mitchell; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1955) 188-189.

⁴²Cf. Danielou, *Origen*, 188-191, 139-173, esp. p. 161; Hanson, *Allegory*, 236-237.

⁴³*Comm. on Matt.*, 16. 5.

mystical, bodily versus spiritual, historical versus anagogical—but the result is the same: a differentiation between the literal sense of the text and some kind of higher, allegorical sense(s) that transcend(s) or lie(s) beyond the limits or boundaries of the former.⁴⁴

IV. THE ERRANT CHARACTER OF THE LITERAL SENSE

This distinction between the literal and the spiritual senses of Scripture is absolutely crucial to a correct understanding of Origen's view of inerrancy, and for this reason: It is only the spiritual sense of the text that is free from error. The literal sense, on the other hand, contains errors, contradictions, unreasonable elements, impossibilities, and even fictional elements. The following examples clearly demonstrate this last point.

In a discussion of the composition of the historical portions of the OT, Origen writes:

Because the guiding purpose [*proēgoumenou skopou*] was to declare the connection that exists between spiritual events, both those that have happened and those that are yet to occur, wherever the Word found historical events that were capable of being accommodated to these mystical events he made use of them, concealing from the many the deeper sense [*noun*]. But wherever in the interpretation of the relationship of the intellectual truths the consequence of certain actions (which were previously recorded for the sake of the more mystical aspects) did not correspond, the Scripture [*hē graphē*] wove into the history something that did not happen: either something that could not possibly happen or something that could happen but in fact did not. Sometimes a few words which are not true according to the bodily sense are inserted, and sometimes a larger number.⁴⁵

In other words, in order to accomplish its primary goal the Word utilized whenever possible actual historical events. But when these were not suitable, the Word worked fictional elements into the narrative in order to get the desired message across. A similar phenomenon occurs in the Law: "Even impossibilities [*adynata*] are recorded in the Law" so that dedicated readers might be convinced that "it is necessary in such cases to seek a meaning worthy of God."⁴⁶

Nor are the gospels exempt from such difficulties:

Not only did the Spirit oversee the writings which were prior to the advent of Christ, but inasmuch as he is the same Spirit and is from the one God he has worked in a like fashion on the gospels and the apostolic writings. Not even the history of these is altogether pure: They have, woven into the bodily sense, events that never actually happened. Nor do the law and commandments contained therein always manifest that which is reasonable.⁴⁷

⁴⁴Zöllig, *Inspirationslehre*, 101-102.

⁴⁵*De Prin.* 4.2.9.

⁴⁶*Ibid.* It should be noted that part of Origen's trouble with the literal sense stems from a lack of feeling for metaphorical and figurative statements. He often insists on reading literally what is clearly a metaphor and thus reads unnecessary difficulties into the text. This problem, however, accounts for only a small number of the total difficulties Origen finds in the literal sense and in no way alters the point we are making about Origen's view of the errant character of the literal sense.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

Even the Pauline epistles contain contradictions and discrepancies.⁴⁸ In sum, Origen's goal in adducing all these examples is to show that

the aim [*skopos*] of the divine power that gave to us the Holy Scriptures is not that we receive only the things found under the literal sense, for some of these in a literal sense are not true [*ouk alēthōn*], but are unintelligible and impossible. Even in the history that really happened and the law that is in its literal sense edifying, certain other matters are interwoven.⁴⁹

These theoretical statements are confirmed in practice. In his discussion of John 2:12-25, Origen contrasts John's narrative of Jesus' arrival in Capernaum and the cleansing of the temple with that of the synoptics, and concludes that here, and at "many other points,"⁵⁰ it is impossible to reconcile the conflicting narratives. One could, he says, renounce the effort to find all four gospels true and randomly select one of them as a guide to one's faith in the Lord. But this is inconsistent: Unless the discrepancy between the gospels is solved they are neither true nor written by a divine Spirit, and trust in them must be abandoned. Rather one should accept all four and acknowledge that their truthfulness lies not in their bodily characteristics but in that which is reserved for the mental sphere of activity, contends Origen. The discrepancies are to be solved, as it were, analogically (*dia tēs analogōgēs*).⁵¹

This type of approach to the gospels accords with what Origen considers to be the intention of the evangelists when they wrote their gospels:

They made full use of the things done and said by Jesus. . . . But sometimes, to serve their mystical aim [*mystikou skopou*], they changed things from how they historically occurred, speaking of a thing that happened at a certain place as if it happened at another, or of what took place at one time as if it had occurred at another time, or introducing into what was spoken in a certain way some changes of their own. Where possible they proposed to speak the truth both materially and spiritually, but where this was not possible it was their intention to prefer the spiritual to the material. The spiritual truth was often preserved in the material form, as one might say, by means of a lie.⁵²

The spiritual sense of the text, then, is undoubtedly of primary significance for Origen. Only the ability to obtain from the sometimes errant literal sense of a text a spiritual meaning by means of allegorical exegesis made it possible for him to believe in the inspiration and the perfection—i.e., the "inerrancy"—of Scripture. Because the quality of perfection applies only to the higher sense of the text, Origen may perhaps be considered to hold to what may be termed the "analogical" rather than to the "literal" inerrancy of Scripture. This is not to say that the

⁴⁸*Comm. on John* 10.7.

⁴⁹*De Prin.* 4.3.4.

⁵⁰Cf., however, to this statement about the large number of errors in Scripture *De Prin.* 4.3.4, where Origen, seeking in advance to refute those who would accuse him of saying "some things did not happen, therefore none of it happened," asserts that in many cases "we are clearly aware that the historical fact is true. . . . For the passages which are historically true are far more numerous than those which are composed with purely spiritual meanings."

⁵¹*Comm. on John* 10.3.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 10.5.

literal sense is without value, for Origen retains it wherever possible. It attracts people to the study of the Bible⁵³ and is profitable to and capable of improving the simple believers who are "unable to endure the toil of investigating such important matters" as the higher sense.⁵⁴ Nevertheless it is clearly subordinate to the spiritual sense of the text, "the deeply hidden meaning of the Spirit of God concealed under the language of ordinary narrative."⁵⁵

V. CONCLUSION

We are now in a position to bring the results of this brief investigation to bear on certain pertinent aspects of the current discussion about inerrancy.

First, and most obviously, Origen cannot be cited by proponents of inerrancy in support of that position. The current debate clearly centers around the question of the inerrancy of the literal sense of the Biblical text. Origen's negative opinion of the inerrancy of the "bodily" or literal meaning of Scripture and corresponding emphasis on the spiritual sense is all too clear. To argue that Origen meant by "inerrancy" the same thing that Lindsell, for example, means is to introduce both error and confusion into the discussion.

Second, this first conclusion seriously calls into question the contention that "the overwhelming general consensus of the church and the teaching of her greatest theologians in all branches of her communion has been inerrancy."⁵⁶ Even if Origen was an isolated instance his case nevertheless would require, in light of his well-deserved reputation as one of the major figures in the history of the Church, that the quoted statement be reformulated in a qualified form. But given the influence of Origen on those who succeeded him it is not likely that his was an isolated case. In terms of exegetical and hermeneutical theory Origen was the most influential figure in the Church prior to Aquinas. In the third and fourth centuries Eusebius, Didymus the Blind, Gregory Thaumaturgos, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Evagrius of Pontus, Hilary of Poitiers and Ambrose of Milan were all "disciples" of Origen, exhibiting in varying degrees the impact of his work.⁵⁷ Through the Latin translations of Jerome and Rufinus much

⁵³*Contra Celsum* 7.60.

⁵⁴*De Prin.* 4.2.8. Origen is even able to turn the difficulties or "stumbling blocks" that one encounters in the literal sense of Scripture to good advantage. Origen says that if everything in the literal sense were perfectly clear we would be unaware that there was a deeper meaning to be sought after. To prevent this the Holy Spirit has placed certain "hindrances" in the text. Further, he says, we always appreciate more that which we have struggled to obtain, so the "stumbling blocks," by making us work harder to grasp the true and not just the surface meaning, lead us to value more highly the results that we do obtain by such labor. Cf. *De Prin.* 4.2.9; *Philocalia*, 2. 3.

⁵⁵*De Prin.* 4.2.7. Cf. further on this idea of the literal sense as "a means to" the real message of the Spirit *De Prin.* 4.2.3: With respect to the "apostolic epistles," for example, "what man who is skilled in literary interpretation would think them to be plain and easily understood, when even in them there are thousands of passages that provide, as if through a window, a narrow opening leading to multitudes of the deepest thoughts?" (Butterworth translation).

⁵⁶Gerstner, "Doctrine," 50; cf. Lindsell, *Battle*, 69.

⁵⁷Danielou, *Origen*, vii-viii.

of Origen's work entered and formed an important part of the literary tradition of the west.⁵⁸ Origen was also an important influence on Augustine, one of the major links in the transmission of the traditions of the early fathers to the Middle Ages. Augustine first came under Origen's influence indirectly via the allegorical preaching of Ambrose,⁵⁹ and it is probable that he also knew some of Origen's writings, including *De Principiis*, from his own reading of them in translation.⁶⁰ Finally, the idea of the fourfold sense of Scripture (literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical) that was so characteristic of medieval exegesis ultimately traces back to Origen.⁶¹ It must not be overlooked that there was opposition, sometimes quite strong, to Origen and his methods even within his own lifetime. The rivalry between the Antiochian and Alexandrian schools is perhaps the best-known example. But in the long run it was Alexandria—and thus Origen—and not Antioch that most influenced the exegetical traditions of the west. Therefore given Origen's influence we need to investigate these figures to see if any of them did indeed hold to a view like that of Origen. Moreover, to return to our point, it is not likely that Origen is an isolated example, and so our view of the history of the doctrine of inerrancy will have to be modified accordingly.

Before this can be done, however—and here we come to our third point—there is a pressing need to rework the history of the doctrine of inerrancy in a methodologically sound form. It is certainly legitimate to ask modern questions of historical figures, but the questions must be asked in a way that allows them to respond in their own terms and with their own nuances. It is on just this point that some recent works have fallen short. Two problems in particular may be mentioned. First, in (for all practical purposes) equating the terms "inspiration," "infallibility" and "inerrancy" there is assumed by some precisely what needs to be proven for every figure considered.⁶² Does a particular father or theologian equate or use synonymously these and other relevant terms, or does he distinguish between them? If so, how? These are questions that need to be asked, not presupposed. Second, the effects of the belief in the multiple sense of Scripture on a writer's view of inerrancy must be taken into account. Statements by a given figure about the errorlessness of Scripture must be integrated with his views about the multiple sense of the text. We have already seen the dramatic effect such an integration has on Origen's view of "inerrancy." What effect did it have on the views of others? This problem deserves careful investigation. Obviously not all

⁵⁸Cf. on the extent and influence of Origen's work in the Middle Ages H. de Lubac, *Exegese Medievale: Les Quatre Sens de L'Ecriture* (Aubier, 1959), 1. 207-238.

⁵⁹In fact, it was Ambrose's allegorical exposition of the OT that first attracted Augustine to Christianity; cf. *Confessions* 5.14.

⁶⁰B. Altaner, "Augustinus und Origenes," *Kleine Patristische Schriften* (Berlin: Akademie, 1967) 224-252 (=TU 83).

⁶¹de Lubac, *Exegese Medievale*, 1. 198-207.

⁶²Cf., e.g., Gerstner, "Doctrine," 26-29; Lindsell, *Battle*, 41-54: He entitles his chapter "*Infallibility in the Church*" (italics mine), cites quotations that for the most part have to do with *inspiration* (see especially those about Origen on p. 51) and draws conclusions about *inerrancy* (p. 69). Even Gerstner's assertion that "we can . . . have inerrancy without dictation but never dictation without inerrancy" ("Doctrine," 29) is a false assumption: Origen, as we have seen above, can speak of the *Spirit himself* "dictating" (*hypobeblēken*) or recording fictional elements in Scripture (*De Prin.* 4.2.7-9).

the early and medieval fathers treated the literal sense the way Origen did. Augustine, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Aquinas, for example, represent various ways of approaching the literal sense, all of which differ from that of Origen. Nevertheless, prior to Luther nearly everyone of any significance employed the concept of the "multiple sense" of Scripture, and the interaction of this idea with their doctrine of inerrancy must be examined.⁶³

Finally, it should be said that our purpose in this essay is not to argue either for or against inerrancy. The sole aim is to correct a misunderstanding about Origen's own view of the doctrine, a misunderstanding that has recently received wide circulation. Admittedly the results of our study have severely weakened a favorite apologetic device of many proponents of inerrancy—the argument that the Church has always held to inerrancy (in the modern sense of the term), at least until recent times. Inerrancy, however, stands or falls to the extent that it is based on Scripture, not history. Moreover, despite the attractiveness and obvious apologetic value of the argument from history, an apologetic that is so obviously wrong—as this one in its traditional formulation certainly is—is worse than no apologetic at all. Any argument for inerrancy that exhibits anything other than a scrupulous regard for accuracy loses most if not all of its credibility in the eyes of those who are not so persuaded and thus hurts the cause more than it helps. Therefore a prime concern of all those involved in the inerrancy discussion must be the achievement of a high standard of accuracy and precision and truth in all that is said or written, and it is in this spirit that this attempt to set forth the true nature of Origen's view of inerrancy is offered.

⁶³Perhaps a third and lesser point would relate to the use of secondary sources. Rogers, Gerstner and Lindsell all rely almost completely—if not totally—on secondary works in their treatment of Origen. While secondary sources have their place they can never be a substitute for firsthand knowledge of the original sources, preferably in the original languages. This is especially true in patristic studies, where the available English translations are often much less accurate than our translations of the NT, for example. The problem of over-reliance on secondary sources, moreover, is hardly improved when even these are misinterpreted: Compare Lindsell's treatment of Origen to that of Lindsell's source, G. D. Barry's *The Inspiration and Authority of Holy Scripture* (London: SPCK, 1919). Lindsell, while quoting from pp. 77, 79-80, 82, 83 (not just pp. 79-80, as his note states), either neglected to read or, if he did read them, chose to ignore the importance of pp. 83-93, where Barry deals with Origen's use of allegory and the threefold sense of the text. Among other things Barry clearly states on p. 86 that Origen believed that there were errors in the literal sense—hardly the conclusion that Lindsell drew from Barry's work.