New Blackfriars

DOI:10.1111/nbfr.12277

Can Origen Help Us Understand Adam?

David W. Opderbeck

Abstract

This paper examines Origen's views of "Adam" and considers whether aspects of Origen's views might prove helpful in contemporary debates about Adam and original sin. The question "who was Adam" presents difficult issues for Christian theology. In response to these concerns, many contemporary theologians suggest that "Eastern" traditions, which are less connected to the "Western"/Augustinian view of original sin, can more easily manage these tensions. These gestures towards "Eastern" thought are helpful in the sense that they do highlight the "mythic" dimensions of the Biblical creation narratives and the irreducibly social construction of human identity. They tend, however, towards broad generalizations that often do not account for the more nuanced and complex philosophical matrix that informed many of the Eastern Church Fathers as they thought about creation, humanity, and the Fall. In this regard, Origen is an interesting figure to study because of the historic anathemas against his supposedly aberrant neo-Platonic views about the pre-existence of souls. Origen did indeed draw heavily on Platonism, but his views about Adam and the Fall were far more subtle than is often supposed. Elements of Origen's views could be useful to a contemporary Christian theology of Adam and original sin.

Keywords

Origen, Adam, Sin, Science, Theology, Anthropology

1. Introduction

This paper examines Origen's views of "Adam" and considers whether aspects of Origen's views might prove helpful in contemporary debates about Adam and original sin. The question "who was Adam" presents difficult issues for Christian theology. Following the lead of St. Augustine, "Western" Christian theology historically has emphasized the implication of each human being in the primordial sin of Adam – that is, Western theological traditions tend toward

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

robust versions of the doctrine of "original sin."[1] There are significant philosophical, critical, and scientific problems with this approach.[2] Philosophically, it is unclear why it is just for God to hold the rest of humanity accountable for Adam's actions.[3] Critically, it is unclear that the Hebrew scriptures ever meant to suggest any doctrine of "original sin" or whether the *locus classicus* for the doctrine in the Pauline New Testament literature was properly translated and understood by Augustine.[4] Scientifically, it is now clear from various lines of evidence that the population of anatomically modern humans evolved gradually over millions of years from a common ancestor shared with the great apes, and that the present human population could not have genetically derived from a single common ancestral pair.[5] In other words, a flatly literal "Adam and Eve," which seems to be required by the Augustinian view, is scientifically impossible.

In response to these concerns, many contemporary theologians suggest that "Eastern" traditions, which are less connected to the "Western"/Augustinian view of original sin, can more easily manage these tensions.[6] Some of these writers seek to bring Eastern views into conversation with modern liberal or neo-orthodox theology, which tends to emphasize the metaphorical nature of the Biblical creation accounts, and with the trend in recent theology towards social Trinitarianism, which can map onto a social (rather than Western "individualistic") ontology of what it means to be "human."[7]

[1] For a good summary of the doctrine and its Augustinian roots, see Ian McFarland, "The Fall and Sin," in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: OUP 2007), 140-157.

[2] For a general discussion of contemporary objections to the Augustinian doctrine of original sin, see Alistair McFadyen, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: CUP 2000), at pp. 40-41.

[3] Concerning objections to the Augustinian doctrine, see McFarland, "The Fall and Sin." For a more in-depth discussion, see David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology, Vol. 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2009); Veli Matti Karkainnen, *Creation and Humanity: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2015), Chapter 15.

[4] *See, e.g.,* Peter Bouteneff, *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2008).

[5] For a general overview of the evidences for human evolution, see Steve Jones, Robert Martin, and David Pilbeam, eds., *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Human Evolution* (Cambridge: CUP 1996). For a series of articles on why population genetics precludes a single genetic ancestor of all modern humanity, See Dennis Venema, BioLogos Forum," Letters to the Duchess," available at http://biologos.org/blogs/dennis-venema-letters-to-the-duchess/series/adam-eve-and-human-population-genetics.

[6] For a general discussion of the "Eastern" view, see Peter Bouteneff, "Christ and Salvation," in Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokrotoff, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: CUP 2008), 94; Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books 1997), 222-225.

[7] *See, e.g.,* Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*; Karkainnen, *Creation and Humanity*, Chapter 15.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

These gestures towards "Eastern" thought are helpful in the sense that they do highlight the "mythic" dimensions of the Biblical creation narratives and the irreducibly social construction of human identity. They tend, however, towards broad generalizations that often do not account for the more nuanced and complex philosophical matrix that informed many of the Eastern Church Fathers as they thought about creation, humanity, and the Fall. In this regard, Origen is an interesting figure to study because of the historic anathemas against his supposedly aberrant neo-Platonic views about the pre-existence of souls.[8] As we shall see, Origen did indeed draw heavily on Platonism, but his views about Adam and the Fall were far more subtle than is often supposed. Indeed, I will argue that elements of Origen's views could be useful to a contemporary Christian theology of Adam and original sin.

2. Locating Origen's Views on Adam, Sin, and the Fall

Today Origen is widely recognized in both the Western and Eastern branches of the Church as one of Christianity's great early thinkers, even if some of the details of his protology and eschatology remain suspect, or at least subject to historical dispute.[9] However, several problems confront anyone who seeks to understand "Origen's view" of Adam, sin, and the Fall.

First, like all of the early Church Fathers, Origen did not produce a definitive "systematic theology" treatise.[10] Origen is, of course, recognized as one of the first "systematic" Christian thinkers because of his effort to produce a sustained, philosophically and Biblically integrated argument in his treatise *On First Principles*, from which this paper will draw heavily. Much of what we know today about Origen's thought, however, is derived from more occasional, less systematic sources, in particular his extensive Biblical commentaries and homilies. As Peter Bouteneff has argued, Origen's theology primarily was an exercise in Biblical exegesis in

[8] For a discussion of the historical disputes over Origenism, see Joseph Trigg Wilson, *Origen* (London: Routledge 2002).

[9] *See, e.g.,* Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen: Spirit and Fire*, trans. Robert J. Daly, S.J. (Washington D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press 1984), 1 (stating that "[i]t is all but impossible to overestimate Origen and his importance for the history of Christian thought"); Pope Benedict XVI, Great Christian Thinkers: From the Early Church Through the Middle Ages (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2011), 19-25 (stating that Origen was one of the most "remarkable" and "crucial" figures in the history of Christian thought).

[10] For a good discussion of the nature and sources of Origen's corpus, see von Balthasar, *Origen: Spirit and Fire*, 1-23.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

conversation with the Church's experience with Christ and the Rule of Faith.[11]

A second problem is that the textual tradition for some of Origen's key writings sometimes is ambiguous. For some key writings, such as his *Commentary on Genesis*, only isolated fragments survive. For other key writings, such as *On First Principles*, there is a Latin translation by Rufinus that might gloss some potentially heterodox passages, and some Greek fragments preserved in the *Philocalia* that may or may not always be faithful to the lost original Greek text.[12]

A third problem is a significant reason for the textual issues: some of Origen's ideas, which were controversial even in his lifetime, were seemingly anathematized by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553 C.E. upon the urging of the Emperor Justinian, about three hundred years after Origen's death.[13] The circumstances leading up to the anathemas included numerous intellectual and political disputes and intrigues between "Origenist" and "anti-Origenist" schools that developed after Origen's death. There is considerable question today about whether the concepts condemned at the Second Council of Constantinople could really be fairly traceable unalloyed to Origen himself.[14] The result is that Origen's intellectual legacy is somewhat obscured.

These three problems suggest that we cannot truly claim to know "what Origen thought" about Adam, sin and the Fall. We cannot cite Origen as some sort of counter-authority to Augustine, even if an argument from authority in this context could otherwise be valid. What we can do, and what this paper seeks to do, is peek into the workings of this great early Christian mind for insights that might help us make sense of these questions today.

3. Origen, Adam, and the "Literal" Sense of the Biblical Creation Narratives

3.1 Origen's Interpretive Strategies: Impossibilities and "Stumbling Blocks"

Any discussion of Origen's view of Adam and the Fall must begin with Origen's strategies for interpreting the Biblical creation narratives. Origen is often cited, and faulted, for an excessive reliance

[11] Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 94-96. For a good discussion on debates in contemporary Origen scholarship about how to read Origen, see Wilson, *Origen*.

[12] von Balthasar, *Spirit and Fire*, 21-22; Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 95.

[13] An English translation of the Acts of the Second Council of Constantinople is available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3812.htm.

[14] For a discussion of this history, see Wilson, *Origen*, 64-66.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

on fanciful allegorical Biblical interpretation. But Origen's method was crafted in significant part because of the challenges the Hebrew scriptures presented to any highly educated Greek Christian in the Second or Third Centuries. Origen read the Biblical texts carefully and knew, well before modern historical criticism or Darwinian science, that many of the narratives could not constitute literal history. At the same time, Origen did not simply write off those narratives as merely non-historical.[15] Instead, Origen suggested that elements of the narratives should be taken as essentially historically accurate, while other elements should be understood as "stumbling blocks" intentionally included by the Holy Spirit.

In *On First Principles*, for example, Origen states that

> If the usefulness of the law and the sequence and case of the narrative were at first sight clearly discernible throughout, we should be unaware that there was anything beyond the obvious meaning for us to understand in the scriptures. Consequently, the Word of God has arranged for certain stumbling-blocks, as it were, and hindrances and impossibilities to be inserted in the midst of the law and the history, in order that we may not be completely drawn away by the sheer attractiveness of the language, and so either reject the true doctrines absolute, on the ground that we learn from the scriptures nothing worthy of God or else by never moving away from the letter fail to learn anything of the more divine element.[16]

These "stumbling-blocks," Origen said, included things "which did not happen, occasionally something which could not happen, and occasionally something which might have happened but in fact did not."[17] In particular, Origen argued that parts of the creation narratives obviously were not literal: "who is so silly," he asked, "as to believe that God, after the manner of a farmer, 'planted a paradise eastward in Eden,' and set in it a visible and palpable 'tree of life,' of such a sort that anyone who tasted its fruit with his bodily teeth would gain life; and again that one could partake of 'good and evil' by masticating the fruit taken from the tree of that name?"[18] Nevertheless, he thought parts of the narratives might still be historically true: "[s]ometimes a few words are inserted which in the bodily sense are not true, and at other times a greater number."[19]

[15] *See* Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 103-107.

[16] Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G.W. Butterworth (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press 2013), IV.II.9. Following scholarly convention, this text will be referred to hereafter as *DP*, the initials for the Latin title of the text, *De Principiis.* The Section, Chapter and Paragraph numbers to the standard scholarly division of the text will be provided. Unless otherwise indicated, Butterworth's translation is from a Greek version of the text.

[17] *DP* IV.II.9.

[18] *DP* IV.IV.1.

[19] *DP* IV.II.9.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Origen never fully articulated a method for separating the historical from the non-historical other than to "carefully investigate how far the literal meaning is true and how far it is impossible" and then to "trace out from the use of similar expressions the meaning, scattered everywhere through the scriptures of that which when taken literally is impossible."[20]

3.2 Adam and Eve as Historical, Or Not

Although Origen did not regard the "Trees" in the "Garden" as literal things, in *On First Principles* he did seem to suggest that Adam and Eve were *both* real individuals *and* symbolic of larger dimensions of humanity. For example, in *DP* IV.III.7, in a complex passage commenting on Paul's distinction between physical and "spiritual" Israel in 1 Corinthians 15, Origen traces the historical lineage of the Israelites and says Jacob was "born of Isaac, and Isaac descended from Abraham, while all go back to Adam, who the apostle says is Christ. . . ." Origen then noted that "the origin of all families that are in touch with the God of the whole world began lower down with Christ, who comes next after the God and Father of the whole world and thus is the father of every soul, as Adam is the father of all men."[21] Further, Origen suggested, "Eve is interpreted by Paul as referring to the Church [and] it is not surprising (seeing that Cain was born of Eve and all that come after him carry back their descent to Eve that these two should be figures of the Church; for in the higher sense all men take their beginnings from the Church."[22] In texts such as these Origen seemed to assume that Adam and Eve were real people even as they symbolize larger truths.

Yet it is unclear whether in these texts Origen was simply reading off the literal sense of the Biblical text without commenting on its historicity. In other texts, Origen seemeed to limit the historical content of the Biblical references to Adam. Most notably, in his major apologetic work, *Against Celsus*, Origen responded to an early philosophical objection against what would seem a forerunner of Augustine's biologistic view of original sin by noting that the Hebrew term "Adam" is used generically for all of humanity.[23] Here Origen said that "the subjects of Adam and his son will be philosophically

[20] *DP* IV.III.4.
[21] *DP* IV.III.7.
[22] *Ibid.*
[23] Origen, *Contra Celsus*, trans. Frederick Crombie (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing 1884), available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0416.htm, 4:40. Citations to this text will use the standard scholarly abbreviation *C. Cels.* and will refer to the standard scholarly section and paragraph divisions.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dealt with by those who are aware that in the Hebrew language Adam signifies man; and that in those parts of the narrative which appear to refer to Adam as an individual, Moses is discoursing upon the nature of man in general."[24] He concluded that "[f]or in Adam (as the Scripture says) all die, and were condemned in the likeness of Adam's transgression, the word of God asserting this not so much of one particular individual as of the whole human race."[25]

Even here, Origen seemed to hedge his bets about the historicity of Adam. The apparent qualification in the translation quoted above from *Contra Celsus* that scripture asserts the universality of sin "*not so much* of one particular individual as of the whole human race" is interesting. This could suggest that the historical reference is real, or probably real, but of secondary importance. In Migne's Greek version text, this phrase reads "οὐχ οὕτως περὶ ἑνός τινος ὡς περὶ ὅλου τοῦ γένους" – "truly in this way about anything belonging to the former as about the entire race" (my literal translation).[26] Whether Origen meant here that the reference to Adam signifies primarily the entire human race and only incidentally a historical man, or that the reference is "truly" only symbolic of the entire human race, is unclear. In any event, as Bouteneff notes, Origen could on different occasions speak of "Adam" both as a generic term for humanity and as an actual person in the genealogical line of Israel.[27] It is probably best to conclude that Origen saw no reason to think a historical Adam was "impossible" and that therefore that the literal sense should be taken as historical.

3.3 A Dual Fall, Or Not

At the same time, in this passage in *Contra Celsus* Origen also hints at a notion of the human fall that extends beyond the "historical":

> And the expulsion of the man and woman from paradise, and their being clothed with tunics of skins (which God, because of the transgression of men, made for those who had sinned), contain a certain secret and mystical doctrine (far transcending that of Plato) of the

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] *Ibid.*

[26] Jaques-Paul Migne, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* (Parise: Imprimerie Catholique 1857), Vol. 11, available on Google Books athttps://books.google.com/books?id=qAkRAAAAYAAJ. A Greek text file from Migne, from which I made my translation, is available at http://khazarzar.skeptik.net/pgm/PG_Migne/Origenes_PG%2011-17/Contra%20Celsum.pdf. A good article describing Migne's collection is available on Wikipedia at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patrologia_Graeca.

[27] Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 111.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> souls losing its wings, and being borne downwards to earth, until it can lay hold of some stable resting-place.[28]

References such as this one led many ancient critics, and still convince many modern scholars, to conclude that Origen believed in a two-stage Fall: a first fall of preexistent souls from paradise and "into" physical bodies, and a second fall of physical "Adam."[29] Bouteneff, however, sides with another line of scholarship that views these apparent "stages" of the human fall simply as different modes of discourse through which Origen seeks to explain the spiritual meaning of the diverse Biblical texts.[30]

A full effort at resolving this interpretive disagreement is beyond the scope of this paper, but there are passages in *On First Principles* that could support either or both views. For example, at one point Origen seems to understand the cycle of fall and return as an allegory of every person's spiritual journey: "when each one, through participation in Christ in his character of wisdom and knowledge and sanctification, advances and comes to higher degrees of perfection," God is glorified.[31] Because God always offers forgiveness, "[a] fall does not therefore involve utter ruin, but a man may retrace his steps and return to his former state and once more set his mind on that which through negligence had slipped from his grasp."[32] In other places, though, Origen's text seems to echo the Platonic mythology more literally. For example: "All rational creatures who are incorporeal and invisible, if they become negligent, gradually sink to a lower level and take to themselves bodies suitable to the regions into which they descend; that is to say, first, ethereal bodies, and then aeriel."[33]

3.4 The Importance of "Matter"

One hint at a constructive resolution of the ambiguities in Origen's views about the Fall might lie in Origen's lengthy discourse on "matter" in Book IV, Chapter IV of *On First Principles*, which serves as a summary of the entire treatise. Origen understood "matter" to be "that substance which is said to underlie bodies."[34] Origen noted

[28] *C. Cels.* 4:40.

[29] *See* Bammel, Caroline P. Hammond, "Adam in Origen,' in Rowan Williams, ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, 62-93 (Cambridge: CUP 1989).

[30] Bouteneff, *Beginnings*, 108.

[31] *DP* I.III.8.

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] *DP* I.IV.1. He continues: "And when they reach the neighborhood of the earth they are enclosed in grosser bodies, and last of all are tied to human flesh." *Ibid.*

[34] *DP* IV.IV.6.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

that humans exist bodily in various states, such as "awake or asleep, speaking or silent," that do not comprise a human person's "underlying substance."[35] The philosophical problem Origen was confronting here is the relationship between the "one" and the "many" (or the "universal" and the "particular"), which is so central Greek thought, and his division between substance and particulars was classically Platonic.[36] However, in this part of his treatise, Origen also was attempting to show how the Christian doctrine of creation differed from the Aristotelian idea, which may also be present in Plato's *Timaeus*, of the eternity of the cosmos.[37] Origen, like other early Christian writers, sought to counter this reasoning in light of the Biblical revelation about the temporality of the material creation.[38]

Although Origen wanted to deny the eternity of the material cosmos, he recognized that a radical disjunction between God's eternal being and the purposes of creation – as though at some defined point in time God suddenly decided to create matter – would compromise God's eternity and simplicity by introducing a temporal sequence into God's own life. Origen therefore borrowed another move from Platonism that would become a classically *Christian* – indeed, eventually an *Augustinian* – move: he located the unchangeable substance, the "one," in the eternal mind of God, and separated it from the created

[35] *DP* IV.IV.7.

[36] For a discussion of this problem in Platonism generally, see Gerald A. Press, "Plato" and Lloyd P. Gerson, "Plotinus and Neo-Platonism" in Richard H. Popkin, ed., *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press 1999). For a discussion of the problem of particulars and universals in Platonism, see Balaguer, Mark, "Platonism in Metaphysics", in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition, Sec. III ("The One Over Many Argument"), available at http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/platonism/#3.

[37] *See ibid.* (noting that "we absolute deny that matter should be called unbegotten or uncreated"). For Aristotle's discussion of the eternity of the cosmos see Aristotle, On the Heavens, trans. J.L. Stocks (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1927), Books I and II, available at http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/heavens.2.ii.html. The Hellenistic Jewish philosopher Philo, with whose work Origen was well-acquainted, was also very concerned about this question. *See* Philo, *On the Eternity of the World*, in The Works of Philo, trans Charles Duke Yonge (London: H.G. Bohn 1854-1890), available at http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book35.html. For a discussion of the relationship between Origen's thought and Philo's, see David T. Runia, *Philo and the Church Fathers: A Collection of Papers*, Chapter Six (New York: E.J. Brill 1995).

[38] *See*, *e.g.*, Harry A. Wolfson, *Patristic Arguments Against the Eternity of the World*, Harvard Theological Review 59:4 (Oct. 1966), 351-367. The received view is that Origen believed in an eternal pre-material cosmos akin to the Platonic realm of forms. *See* Mark S.M. Scott, *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: OUP 2012), 58-60. More recently, some scholars, including John Behr, have argued that Origen's concept of pre-existence relates only to God's foreknowledge and not to a separate realm of being. *Ibid.,* 60-61. Scott suggests Origen thought the creation existed proleptically in the *Logos*, the eternal Son, before the material cosmos. *Ibid.,* 56-57. For the purpose of my argument in this paper, the distinction between Behr and Scott is not very significant, so long as the ontological difference between the Godhead and creation is maintained.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

matter that will receive its form. Here is how Origen summarized his conclusion:

> since, then, as we have said, rational nature is changeable and convertible, so of necessity God had foreknowledge of the differences that were to arise among souls or spiritual powers, in order to arrange that each in proportion to its merits might wear a different bodily covering of this or that quality; and so, too, was it necessary for God to make a bodily nature, capable of changing at the Creator's will, by an alteration of qualities, into everything that circumstances might require. This nature must needs endure so long as those endure who need it for a covering; and there will always be rational natures who need this bodily covering.[39]

Concerning Adam, in other words, from eternity past God knew Adam would fall, and therefore God created a material body for Adam appropriate to a fallen creature. While "Adam" is a changeable and imperfect being, God's intellect and foreknowledge are perfect and unchanging. Consistent with the "two-stage fall" reading of Origen, then, it is probably true that Origen envisioned the pre-material fall of Adam as an actual event in the ontology of creation, but there is also a sense in which that pre-material ontology of creation for Origen is an *ideal* in God's eternal mind rather than a series of events in the "historical" timeline of creation. The "pre-material" fall therefore was not so much part of a sequence of "historical" events as a trans-historical reality that is manifested in history. As discussed below, this ontological connection between the trans-historical and the historical ties directly into the relationship between Christology and theological anthropology.

4. Contemporary Appropriation

4.1 A Postmodern Christian Platonism?

In the Introduction to this paper I noted the philosophical, critical, and scientific problems with an "Augustinian" view of Adam, the Fall and original sin. Origen's approach to the problem can help us navigate through these treacherous shoals. Philosophically, the ontological idealism suggested by Origen's selective use of Greek thought can help us articulate how the universal of "human nature" is to some extent corrupted by the sin of the "one man," Adam. In response to modern historical criticism, Origen's hermeneutic centered on the Rule of Faith can help us understand how Paul, and the later Patristic tradition, "read backward" into the Hebrew Scriptures and

[39] *DP* IV.IV.8.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

saw the sign both of universal human depravity and universal human redemption in the "one man," Adam. And, scientifically, Origen's affirmation of "matter" as the created temporal substrate of higher levels of reality located ultimately in the Divine Ideas can help us affirm the scientific evidence concerning development of the human body and genome from our hominid ancestors while refusing the reductionism entailed by modern materialism.

Before unpacking these three claims, it is important to note that there is no suggestion here of a return to the actual details of Origen's Platonic-Christian synthesis. The Tradition was right to reject the Gnostic speculations of later Origenism concerning the preexistence of souls, the diversification of souls into humans, angels, demons, and other beings, and the necessary *apokatastasis* in which all souls return to their original source (different, it should be noted, from the hopeful notion of *apokatastasis* generally), whether or not Origen actually held those views firmly himself. The Biblical narrative of creation, fall, and redemption is vastly different from the neo-Platonic and Gnostic ideas that were at issue in the fourth century debates over Origin's legacy. Nevertheless, Origen correctly saw that the Biblical texts that outline this grand narrative extend outward from themselves, out from the gritty history in which they are grounded, and point toward transcendent truths, without losing their grounding in the literal sense, precisely because they are both human and divine texts. The same is true, Origen saw, in human nature: what makes us "human" is the donation of matter-with-*Logos* by the eternal wisdom of the transcendent God, that the fall is a turn away from this transcendent *Logos* and a dissolution into mere matter, and that our redemption entails our return to participate in God's transcendent life and to receive his *Logos* again.

4.2 Anthropology, Christology and Justice

In more contemporary terms, Origen rightly concluded that theological anthropology is really Christology. Indeed, the link between the theology of creation, anthropology, and Christology is particularly evident in Origen's first Homily on Genesis.[40] There Origen linked the "in the beginning" of Genesis 1:1 with the "in the beginning" of John 1 and suggested that "[s]cripture is not speaking here of any temporal beginning, but it says that the heaven and the earth and all things which were made were made 'in the beginning," that is,

[40] *See* The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation, Vol. 71, Origen: Homilies on Genesis and Exodus, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press (1982), 47-71.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

in the Savior."[41] Concerning the "image of God" in humanity, he asked rhetorically, "what other image of God is there according to the likeness of whose image man is made, except our Savior who is 'the firstborn of every creature'. . . ."[42]

The link between anthropology and Christology helps mediate the philosophical tensions within the doctrine of Adam's fall and original sin. Western theology after Augustine and prior to modernity generally drew on juridical and political categories to explain why it is just for God to hold all of humanity to account for Adam's sin. At a time when political authority was understood to inhere in the absolute rule of Kings, it made sense to suggest that the King directs the commonweal, for good or ill.[43] For Western people today who reside in Constitutionally ordered nation states, this kind of analogy does not resonate so deeply. Nevertheless, we still recognize the justice of some kinds of collective political responsibility even if a sanction produces injustice in individual cases. For example, if the leader of a modern nation-state engages in acts of genocide, we might expect the United Nations to enact sanctions and perhaps to authorize military intervention, and most people likely would think such action in general is just, even though we know some innocent civilians will be negatively impacted.[44] But even if we can understand the broader justice of upholding the international rule of law and stopping a genocidal leader, we usually do not think justice has truly been served in the individual circumstance of a civilian who loses his livelihood or life as a result of the sanctions. The individual innocent civilian did not *deserve* this fate, even if it was unavoidable to stop the genocide.[45]

At the same time, in our globalized, post-modern context, we have once again become more sensitive to the things that bind us together as human beings beyond juridical categories. As the Rio Olympics recently reminded us, we can speak of a universal "human spirit" that brings people together in a celebration of excellence that

[41] *Ibid.*, 47

[42] *Ibid.*, 65.

[43] *See, e.g.,* Thomas Aquinas, *On Kingship*, Book 1, trans. Gerald B. Phelan and I.T. Eschmann (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies 1949), available at http://dhspriory.org/thomas/DeRegno.htm. This statement is admittedly a significant oversimplification of long and complex historical trajectories in both the Christian East and West about the relative authority of Emperors, Princes, and Popes. *See generally* Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, eds.*, From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999).

[44] For a list of current U.N. sanctions, see Consolidated United Nations Security Council Sanctions List, available at https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/un-sc-consolidated-list.

[45] For a general discussion of contemporary notions of justice, see Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2010).

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

exceeds political, tribal and racial boundaries. And as terrible events like the mass shooting in Orlando likewise recently reminded us, we can experience depths of grief and loss together that exceed even our hottest culture war issues. Notwithstanding the claims of "new atheist" leaders like Richard Dawkins and Michael Graziano, who claim (ultimately, in contradiction with each other) that we are nothing but genes or brain chemicals, most people know there is something transcendent and universal about human nature.[46]

Classical Christian theology, including Origen's theology, reading from the Biblical concepts of the "image of God" and of the universal efficacy of Christ's death and resurrection, understood this universal to reside ultimately in God's own "mind." Of course, classical Christian theology also emphasized God's simplicity, so that the use of a term like "mind" here was analogical. The point is that the source of human nature transcends materiality and indeed that materiality itself derives from this transcendent source. This is why Christian anthropology ultimately is Christology: only in Christ, the incarnate Son, do we really see the meaning of "Adam." As Orthodox theologian and Patristic scholar John Behr reminds us, "[t]heologically speaking, creation and its history begins with the Passion of the Christ and from this 'once for all' work looks backwards and forwards to see everything in this light, making everything new."[47]

This approach can help us see that the implications of Adam's sin for universal human nature are not so much about *juridical* categories of "justice" as they are about *ontology*. If Adam's sin distorts the relationship between the particulars of human experience and the universal ideal form of human nature, and if we each take some of that distortion as derived from Adam, it is easier to see why Adam's sin impacts us all. We could even use here an Augustinian-sounding analogy from modern genetics, though we must be careful to emphasize that the "transmission" of original sin is not "biological." The human genetic code must conform to certain forms, certain sequences of amino acids, if it is to produce a properly functioning human being. If the form is disrupted through a mutation, such as a missing or changed amino acid, a disease can result, and that disrupted form can be passed down through generations and affect an entire community of people. Such is the case, for example, with sickle cell anemia among some people of African ancestry or with "Fragile X Syndrome" and other genetic conditions among people of

[46] *See, e.g.,* Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford: OUP 2016); Michael S. Graziano, *God, Soul, Mind, Brain: A Neuroscientist's Reflections on the Spirit World* (Freedonia: Leapfrog Press 2010).

[47] *Cf.* John Behr, The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death (Crestwood: St. Valdimir's Seminary Press 2006), 90.

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Ashkenazi Jewish ancestry.[48] In a roughly analogical way, Adam's original disruption of human participation in the Divine life distorts the "moral field" of the human life in which we all subsequently find ourselves as the community of humanity.[49] And Christ, the second Adam, repairs that field and reunites human nature with God.

4.3 Adam and the Rule of Faith

My second claim about how to read the Biblical creation stories relates closely to the Christological emphasis in my discussion of the first claim. Origen read all of scripture through the lens of a Rule of Faith centered on Christ. This is particularly evident in Origen's treatment of the texts from the creation narratives that we examined above. In applying this method, Origen correctly relativized the "historical" dimension of the text's literal sense without denying "historicity" altogether. Origen suggested that interpreters should examine the text carefully to determine if it contains "impossible" elements that we can conclude are not literally historical. With the knowledge the modern natural sciences has provided us concerning the natural history of the cosmos and human evolution, together with what we have learned from Biblical scholarship about the construction of these texts, we can continue to make such judgments, which can help us better understand what God intends to communicate to us in and through the text.

4.4 Matter Still Matters, But So Does the Ideal

My third claim about the natural sciences also relates to the first two claims. On the one hand, Origen acknowledges the necessity and reality of "matter." If we wish to engage fruitfully with the natural sciences, we must do the same. That is, we must adopt some form of metaphysical "realism."[50] The material world we inhabit is real and it possesses an inherent rationality, stability and order that allows us

[48] *See* The Mayo Clinic, "Sickle Cell Anemia," Causes, available at http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/sickle-cell-anemia/basics/definition/con-20019348; Genetic Jewish Disease Consortium Website, available at http://www.jewishgeneticdiseases.org/jewish-genetic-diseases/.

[49] For a compelling use of the "moral field" metaphor, see Oliver O'Donovan, *Self, World and Time: Volume 1: Ethics as Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013) and *Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology: Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2014).

[50] For a good discussion of the issues here, see Alister McGrath, *A Scientific Theology, Vol. 2*: Reality (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2007).

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to investigate its operations and causes and to draw conclusions with reasonable degrees of confidence about subjects such as the evolution of the cosmos and of the creatures of the Earth, including humans. Yet, contrary to the actual or at least methodological posture of the modern natural sciences, Origen understood that "matter" is a created thing and therefore is not all there is.

In many respects, ironically (and contrary to the claims of some naïve modern Christian apologetics about the Big Bang and creation *ex nihilo*) the modern natural sciences are agnostic about the eternity of matter. While mainstream "big bang" cosmology does assert that our universe has a beginning, it also posits a singularity beyond which the concept of "time" is meaningless.[51] In some respects this is similar to Christian ideas about God's relationship to time and creation, but the singularity "before" the Big Bang is not a personal being, or any kind of being at all. The result is that "matter" is all there is, and all there ever "was." Although there is no Aristotelian unmoved mover causing its eternal motions, there is simply nothing "before" matter, or at least nothing that can be known. Other increasingly popular modern cosmologies entail multiverses and repeat "big bangs" that echo Greek opponents of Aristotle who thought matter and the universe were destroyed and recreated in endlessly recurring cycles.[52] In contrast, the Christian doctrine of creation, as understood by Origen, insists that matter has a transcendent source in God. Thus, while this ontology is metaphysically realist, it also draws on idealism, to insist that what is in a sense *most real* is the transcendent, that is, God.

4.5 The Adam of History

Finally, the relationship between the ideal and the actual, or the one and the many, concerning human nature, helps us understand why there could have been an "Adam" of history who was neither a perfect superman nor the literal biological progenitor of all anatomically modern humans. The *ideal* of Adam preexisted the historical first Adam in the *Logos*, the person of the Son. In the incarnate Son, Christ, we see the actualization of the ideal Adam. Looking back from Christ, we see how the first Adam – whoever that representative person may have been in the flow of human biological evolution and

[51] See "Foundations of Big Bang Cosmology," NASA, Universe 101, available at http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/bb_concepts.html. This excellent summary provided by NASA notes that "[i]It is beyond the realm of the Big Bang Model to say what gave rise to the Big Bang. There are a number of speculative theories about this topic, but none of them make realistically testable predictions as of yet."

[52] *See* Mary-Jane Rubenstein, *Worlds Without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press 2014).

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

early human history – was broken and flawed and therefore how humanity apart from Christ is broken and flawed. Looking forward from Christ, we see how humanity can be, is becoming, and will one day be healed.

Bibliography

Acts of the Second Council of Constantinople, available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3812.htm.

Aquinas, Thomas *On Kingship*, Book 1, trans. Gerald B. Phelan and I.T. Eschmann (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies 1949), available at http://dhspriory.org/thomas/DeRegno.htm.

Aristotle, On the Heavens, trans. J.L. Stocks (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1927), Books I and II, available at http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/heavens.2.ii.html.

Balaguer, Mark, "Platonism in Metaphysics", in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition).

Bammel, Caroline P. Hammond, "Adam in Origen,' in Rowan Williams, ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, 62–93 (Cambridge: CUP 1989).

Behr, John, *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood: St. Valdimir's Seminary Press 2006), 90.

Bouteneff, Peter *Beginnings: Ancient Christian Readings of the Biblical Creation Narratives* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic 2008).

——— "Christ and Salvation," in Mary B. Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokrotoff, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Orthodox Christian Theology* (Cambridge: CUP 2008), 94; Timothy.

Dawkins, Richard, *The Selfish Gene: 40th Anniversary Edition* (Oxford: OUP 2016)
Genetic Jewish Disease Consortium Website, available at http://www.jewishgenetic-diseases.org/jewish-genetic-diseases/.

Graziano, Michael S., *God, Soul, Mind, Brain: A Neuroscientist's Reflections on the Spirit World* (Freedonia: Leapfrog Press 2010).

Greek text file from Migne, from which I made my translation, is available at http://khazarzar.skeptik.net/pgm/PG_Migne/Origenes_PG%2011-17/Contra%20Celsum.pdf.

Jones, Steve, Martin, Robert and Pilbeam, David, eds., *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Human Evolution* (Cambridge: CUP 1996).

Karkainnen, Veli Matti, *Creation and Humanity: A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2015).

Kelsey, David, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology, Vol. 1* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox 2009).

McFadyen, Alistair, *Bound to Sin: Abuse, Holocaust and the Doctrine of Sin* (Cambridge: CUP 2000).

McFarland, Ian, "The Fall and Sin," in John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrance, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: OUP 2007).

McGrath, Alister, *A Scientific Theology, Vol. 2: Reality* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark 2007).

Migne, Jaques-Paul, *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Graeca* (Parise: Imprimerie Catholique 1857), Vol. 11.

NASA, "Foundations of Big Bang Cosmology," Universe 101, available at http://map.gsfc.nasa.gov/universe/bb_concepts.html.

O'Donovan, Oliver, *Finding and Seeking: Ethics as Theology: Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2014).

——— *Self, World and Time: Volume 1: Ethics as Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2013).

——— with O'Donovan, Joan Lockwood, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1999).

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers

https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Origen, *Contra Celsus*, trans. Frederick Crombie (Buffalo: Christian Literature Publishing 1884), available at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0416.htm.
——— *On First Principles*, trans. G.W. Butterworth (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press 2013).
——— "Homilies on Genesis and Exodus," in *The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation*, Vol. 71, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press (1982).
Philo, *On the Eternity of the World*, in The Works of Philo, trans. Charles Duke Yonge (London: H.G. Bohn 1854–1890), available at http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book35.html.
Pope Benedict, XVI, *Great Christian Thinkers: From the Early Church Through the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2011).
Press, Gerald A., "Plato" and Lloyd P. Gerson, "Plotinus and Neo-Platonism" in Richard H. Popkin, ed., *The Columbia History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press 1999).
Rubenstein, Mary-Jane, *Worlds Without End: The Many Lives of the Multiverse* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press 2014).
Runia, David T., *Philo and the Church Fathers: A Collection of Papers*, Chapter Six (New York: E.J. Brill 1995).
Sandel, Michael J., *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux 2010).
The Mayo Clinic, "Sickle Cell Anemia," Causes, available at http://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/sickle-cell-anemia/basics/definition/con-20019348.
Trigg Wilson, Joseph, *Origen* (London: Routledge 2002).
United Nations, Consolidated United Nations Security Council Sanctions List, available at https://www.un.org/sc/suborg/en/sanctions/un-sc-consolidated-list.
Venema, Denis, BioLogos Forum, "Letters to the Duchess," available at http://biologos.org/blogs/dennis-venema-letters-to-the-duchess/series/adam-eve-and-human-population-genetics.
von Balthasar, Hans Urs, *Origen: Spirit and Fire,* trans. Robert J. Daly, S.J. (Washington D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press 1984).
Ware, Timothy, *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books 1997).
Wolfson, Harry A., "Patristic Arguments Against the Eternity of the World," *Harvard Theological Review* 59:4 (Oct. 1966).

David W. Opderbeck
dopderbeck@gmail.com

© 2017 Provincial Council of the English Province of the Order of Preachers
https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12277 Published online by Cambridge University Press