Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity

The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses

Edited by Hans-Ulrich Weidemann

With an Introduction by Elizabeth A. Clark

Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht


Andrew S. Jacobs

Sordid Bodies

Christ’s Circumcision and Sacrifice in Origen’s Fourteenth Homily on Luke

Origen’s Bodies

Transformed and transforming bodies crowd the writings of Origen of Alexandria (d. ca. 254). From the pulsing bodies of stars, encasing giant souls, to the wispy and insubstantial bodies of demons, fallen farthest from the warming glow of God’s love, Origen’s cosmos teemed with bodies in a state of concerted, organized flux.¹ It was the job of embodied souls, Origen taught, to pursue their own transformation and transcendence, seeking ultimate union and restoration (apokatastasis) with the divine.² Origen’s theology was, in short, fully ascetic: bodies and souls in flux and transformation, charting a careful course back to God.³

Into this welter of fallen and rising bodies, God provided two additional bodies upon which Christians were to model and structure their transformative path: the incarnate body of Christ and the divine body of Scriptures. These two instantiations of the divine Logos (“Word”) were analogous for Origen, both full representations of God which served pedagogical and paradigmatic functions in the human quest for redemption and salvation.⁴ Insofar as these divine bodies constrained perfect divine spirituality in imperfect and limited materiality, they taught their viewers the need for interpretation: the process of rediscovering the sublime divinity hidden in gross, bodily forms. Origen’s ascetic theology was, therefore, eminently hermeneutical. Most obviously, the ascetic work of bodily and spiritual transformation took place in the elevated act of engagement with the text of the Bible, often in figurative forms of exegesis such as allegory.⁵ But if the written Word of God needed spiritual interpretation, so did his fleshly body: Christ’s

¹ Origen, De principiis 2.9 – 10. See the elegant discussion of Scott, Origen and the Life of the Stars, 114–49.
² Although we should not make the mistake of reading Origen’s speculative theology as too fixed and systematic, his linking of individual and cosmic salvation appears to form a continuous thread throughout his writings: see Rabinowitz, Personal and Cosmic Salvation.
⁴ Crouzel, Origen, 70, remarks that, for Origen, “Scripture is, in a way, an incarnation of the Word into the letter analogous to the other incarnation into the flesh”.
⁵ See Torjesen, Hermeneutical Procedure; Dawson, Christian Figural Reading; and Martens, Origen and Scripture.
incarnate form was likewise a “text” Christians might learn to read for their own edification, an object of ascetic exegetical speculation. Both embodied Words of God must be subjected to figurative reading, disclosing the “spirit” within the “flesh” (or the “letter”).

These bodies were also, therefore, paradigmatic, modeling appropriate modes of self-knowledge for the ascetic theologian. Just as divine bodies and texts required diligent labor in order to be made meaningful, so did their more earthly counterparts. The deep, allegorical reading of Scriptures (as many studies have shown) extended the interpretive methods applied to more mundane texts. So too the divine body in the incarnation guided Origen’s understanding of human bodies, which necessitated a similar hermeneutical diligence. The original motion and flux that brought the “diversity of rational beings” into existence persisted, and bodies could not simply be taken at face value. They, too, required sophisticated processes of meaning-making. No wonder Origen’s own body became such a ripe object of speculation after his death, displaced from the security of gendered being by rumors of castration. Origen’s body, like all bodies, resisted fixity, and seemed always to “speak otherwise” (allegorein).

These multiple, unstable bodies collide in one of Origen’s surviving homilies, his fourteenth on the Gospel of Luke. This rather brief homily addresses the circumcision of Christ and his presentation at the Temple, as recounted in Luke 2:21–24:

“And when the days were fulfilled for circumcision him, they called him ‘Jesus’, which he was called by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the days were fulfilled for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law: ‘every male who opens the womb will be called holy to the Lord’) and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of turtledoves and two young doves.”

6 On the ways in which Origen’s biblical interpretation draws on and refines larger questions of meaning-making in late antiquity, see Cavin, Grammar and Christianity, 74–76, 93–86; and eadem, Origen and Christian Naming.

7 Both Origen’s supporters and detractors in the fourth century reported on his castration: Eusebius, Historia ecclesiastica 6.8.1; Epiphanius, Panarion 64.3.11–13; and Jerome, ep. 84.8. On the question of Origen’s castration in a larger discussion of “enunciating the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matt 19:12), see Kuefler, Manly Eunuch, 260–73 (discussion of Origen on 260–61); and more generally Caner, Practice and Prohibition of Self-Castration.

8 Apart from some Greek fragments, Origen’s homilies survive solely in the Latin translation of Jerome, executed sometime in the early 390s (after Ambrose’s own Commentary on Luke appeared, but before Jerome’s anti-Originian turn); Origen probably delivered his homilies in the 230s or 240s in Caesarea, after his emigration from Alexandria; see Lienhardt, Origen, xxiv–xxv and xxxii–xxxvi; and Crozat, Fournier, and Périchon, Origène, 65–91. I cite the text from this French edition, translations are my own.

In Origen’s public exegesis of this Lucan passage, God’s two earthly bodies, the carnal and verbal, become objects of speculation, interpretation, and imitation for the ascetic exegete and his audience. Yet these are remarkably strange bodies for God to inhabit: circumcised, offering sacrifice, ostensibly approving of Temple sacrifice in a way that seems to countermand not only the thrust of the rest of the Gospel of Luke ("The Law and the Prophets were until John the Baptist; from then the good news of the Kingdom of God is preached, and all are forced into it": Luke 16:16), but Origen’s own figurative attitude toward Old Testament legalism. Why should Origen draw attention to such an uncanny divine body?  

I contend that through his interpretation of Christ’s circumcision and Temple offering, Origen engages with the broader theological and social problems of asceticized, Christian bodies. Christ’s body, in this text, is an eminently strange body: vibrating uncertainly between the divine and human, fully inhabiting neither. In this, the divine body reflects and refracts the bodies of Origen’s congregations, likewise modulating hopefully between the mundane and the celestial. But not only does Origen’s exegesis of Jesus’ infant body reveal the Christian body as a site of questioning and uncertainty, ostensibly resolvable by the astute interpreter, but as a site of profound boundary confusion. That is, not only do Origen’s bodies exist in a state of vertical flux (moving up and down a chain of cosmic being), but also horizontal flux: surprisingly permeable to the effects of an Other. Christ’s divine bodies, made present again by Origen from his lectern before his Caesarean congregation, not only reinforce the present instability of the Christian body, but inscribe the uncanny openness of Christian personhood and community to an Other.

Christ’s Body

Although the homily treats a moment from Christ’s infancy, Origen curiously begins with Christ’s death. “When Christ died”, Origen begins, quoting Romans 6:10, “he did not sin”. Immediately Origen introduces another passage (1 Peter 2:22), revealing some of his own (or his listeners’) preoccupations and apprehensions: “Now he himself did not sin; and he committed no sin, nor was deception found in his mouth” (hom. in Luc. 14.1).

Christ’s sinful death, Origen explains, was vicarious:

9 Expressed most succinctly – but not uniquely – in Origen’s apologetic treatise Contra Celsum (e.g., Contra Celsum 2.2–5).

10 My use of “uncanny” deliberately, but not fully, evokes Freud’s unheimlich, but also the “object” of later psychoanalytic theorists. See Royle, Uncanny, 289–306, which attempts to explore the uncanny through “the private parts of Jesus”, in an intertextual reading of Derrida, Leo Steinberg, and Henri de Vries.

11 See the helpful discussion of Burrell, Saving Shame, 64–72.
"But he died so that we, who were dead, when he has died to sins (illo moriente peccatis), might no longer live in sin and vices [...]. So therefore we died when he died and we rose up when he rose; thus with him we were circumcised and after circumcision cleansed with a solemn purification" (hom. in Luc. 14 1).

This attention to Christ's vicarious death to sin - a death "for us" - helps to explain why Origen has begun not at Christ's birth, but at his death: because these twin moments - his circumcision and his crucifixion - capture for Origen the uncanniness of Jesus' earthly existence, the divine embodiment that which is by nature alien to it (sin, death, impurity). From the beginning Christ's body is a challenge: it must "die to sin" (in order to free humanity from sin), but as the body proper to God, it cannot commit sin. Origen has commenced his homily by framing a body in paradox: by nature free of, yet contaminated by, sin and pollution.

Yet although Christ's body is (uniquely) by nature free of what contaminates all human bodies, he nonetheless takes on what is not proper to his body on behalf of sinful humanity: "therefore his death and resurrection and circumcision were done for us (pro nobis)" (ibid.). Death and circumcision together point to the central question with which this homily is concerned: how human was God in his human body? To what extent can we see our own human fallibility reflected in his human body? The opening of the homily suggests that the answer is: "not much". At those points when his body seems to reflect our own imperfections - impure, subject to sin, in need of purgation - we learn that Christ's body adopted what was not native to God: death, curtailment, clipping.

Origen's opening sentences - domesticating Romans with the citation of 1 Peter - likely speak to his audience's discomfort with the idea that God's body might be innately sinful (like their own bodies). When Origen approaches the passage on the purification, this discomfort becomes more acute. Luke 2:22 speaks of "their purification" (purgationem eorum): "Who are 'they'"? Origen asks. Scripture cannot merely be talking about Mary, or else it would have said "her purification". Origen somewhat timidly asks: "So did Jesus need purification, and was he unclean (immundus) or polluted with some kind of stain (aliqua sorde)?" (hom. in Luc. 14 3). It is useful to remember, at this point, that Origen is delivering his homily before a live, and presumably reactive, audience: his timidity may capture some of the ambience of his rhetorical delivery.12 We might imagine his voice having to rise over the shocked susurros of the congregants as he continues,

"Maybe I seem to speak rashly (temerariae forsitan videor dicere); but I am compelled (commotus) by the authority of Scriptures" (ibid.).

Origen's listeners rankle (or, at the very least, he expects that they will do so) at the idea that Christ - even incarnate in a human body - might need purification, that his human body does not at every level reflect his divine perfection.

Yet Origen's particular theology of personal transformation - his asceticism - requires Christ's body to be fully human and, if human, imperfect. Christ's paradigmatic and pedagogical body must demonstrate to Christian readers what the ideal transformation looks like and it must teach the means of that transformation. But if that body is not human like our bodies - labile, potentially impure, possibly in need of purification - its paradigm is unattainable and its pedagogy is fruitless. Yet, at the same time, Christ's body must say more than it appears on the surface: like all terrestrial bodies, Christ's body must also speak otherwise, indicate spiritually the celestial realm from which it comes and to which it returns. Much of the rest of the homily, then, is an attempt by Origen to maintain this impossible paradox and tension: on the one hand, to domesticate the uncanny and alien human body of Christ; on the other, to elevate that body beyond the normal corporeal experience of humans. In this way, Origen interprets Christ's human body, embedded in the textual body of Scriptures, as a body able to convey ascetic lessons to Origen's congregation.

Circumcision, like death, only partially domesticates Jesus' human body, pointing instead to Christ's superhuman acts of redemption: a too human (and as we will see, too Jewish) act is understood as an act of divine redemption, along with the crucifixion and resurrection.13 So, too, the giving of Christ’s name maintains this uncanny tension between the human and the divine. When, in Luke 2:21, the Son of God is given his human name "Jesus", as ordained by an angel, Origen sees reflected there not normal humanity but extrahuman divinity: "It was not fitting that he should first be called this by humans, nor that it should be brought into the world by them, but by some more excellent and greater being (excellenteri quadem maiorique natura)" (hom. in Luc. 14 2). The human act of naming is removed to the celestial realm of the angelic. Yet even as Origen elevates both of these acts (circumcision and naming) beyond the norm of human experience, they inevitably drift downward. Notably absent from this opening section of Origen's homily is any recourse to allegory, through which he might fully rewrite Christ's unpalatable acts (circumcision, death, impurity) in a more spiritual register14 (we will see

12 The particular social contexts of early Christian rhetoric are entering a new era of study; see Mayer, Homiletics. On Origen's homiletics (and the relation of his numerous homilies to his numerous commentaries), see Junod, Homilien des Origenes.

13 Origen can usefully cite here Colossians 2:11-12, which draws these ideas together, as well. I have discussed Origen and Christ's circumcision more fully in Jacobs, Christ Circumcised, 50-54 and 122-25.

14 Origen does not hesitate elsewhere in the Homilies in Luke to allegorize narrative sections of the Gospel, particularly when the literal text defies sense. In Hom. in Luc. 33.1, Origen explains Luke 4:23, in which Jesus in Nazareth inexplicably refers to "miracles in Capernaum" that have not yet been recounted. Read allegorically, "Capernaum is a type of the gentiles, and Nazareth a type of
Origen approach direct allegory only toward the end of the homily). To be sure, Origen was a capable interpreter who did not always and inevitably turn to allegory in order to make sense of the Bible. But allegorical interpretation, the ability to move past the letter’s “flesh” to its “spirit,” resonates strongly with Origen’s ascetic endeavors elsewhere. David Dawson has remarked that “for Origen, allegorical reading is the peculiar literary form taken by the soul’s effort to live through its embodiment as both fall and redemption.” In the ascetic work of bodily interpretation, making sense of the corporal flux scripted and redeemed in Scripture, allegory was one of Origen’s most useful tools. Yet he leaves Jesus’ circumcision literal and historical, as well as his naming “in the womb” (Luke 2:21). Already then Christ’s celestial super-humanity has been somewhat curtailed.

This dual treatment of Christ’s body as somehow set apart and yet entirely analogous to ordinary human body charactersizes the sermon as a whole. In his interpretation of Christ’s Temple purification, Origen seeks to describe Jesus’ body in such a way as to make it legible to human ascetic endeavor, but still distinct in its divinity. Even if Christ’s body does not share human sinfulness, Origen still insists his humanness entails some degree of innate impurity. Origen cites Job: “No one is clean of stain (mundus a sordi), not even if his life has lasted just one day” (Job 14:4). Origen notes that Scripture here speaks of “stain” and not “sin”: “Stain (sordes) and sin (peccatum) do not mean the same thing”, Origen assures his listeners (hom. in Luc. 14 3). If the latter cannot characterize God’s Son in human flesh, the former can.

This concept of “stain” allows Origen to bring Christ’s body more in line with every other human body in need of purification: “Ivery soul”, he tells his audience, “which has been clothed in a human body (qua humano corpore fuerit indata) has its own stains.” Even Jesus bears these stains, as a clever citation from Zechariah proves: “As you know that Jesus was stained by his own free will (sordidatum propria voluntate), since he took on a human body for our salvation, give ear to the prophet Zechariah, who says: ‘Jesus was clothed in stained garments’ (Zech 3:3)” (hom. in Luc. 14 4).16 Jesus bears this corpus sordidum just like all other human beings, without the qualifications necessary when describing the relationship of Christ’s body to sin. This “sordid body” is by nature just like all human bodies. Even the qualification that Jesus took on a stained body “by his own free will” (propria voluntate) does not really distinguish it from the stained bodies of his fellow human beings. All human minds, Origen taught, fell away from God by their own will, and God in his benevolence provided appropriate bodies in which human beings might strive to restore their primeval union with God. All human beings, Origen might say, have taken on stained bodies “of their own free will”.17

Having assumed these stained bodies, Christians must now strive to purify their bodies of stains and, in this, Christ’s infant act of self-purification in the Temple stands as an example:

“It was fitting, therefore, that these offerings should be made for our Lord and Savior, who had put on ‘soiled garments’ and taken on an earthly body (terrenum corpus), [these offerings] which by custom, according to the law, purified stains” (hom. in Luc. 14 5).

That all human bodies are “stained”, and require purification, is already evident in the need for baptism, even of small children: “and so through the mystery of baptism the stains of birth are put down, so even little ones (parvuli) are baptized” (Ibid.).18 The baptismal font highlights the willfully and inherently stained nature of human bodies, and their need for purification.

But Origen’s interests are not merely sacramental. He begins to consider the language of the “presentation” scene in Luke from a broader perspective. When the Gospel says that the “days of their purification were completed (expleti)”, Origen muses, “Days are completed mystically, too” (hom. in Luc. 14 6). Purification and purity (puratio and puritas), he pronounces, are not achieved in a single moment. Leviticus requires weeks for purification (Lev 12:2 – 8, the legal passage that structures Luke 2:21 – 24), suggesting in a “mystical” sense that “true purification will come to us after a time” (ibid.). The purification of Christ’s ascetic body now becomes a clear model of ascetic striving for Origen, the continuing efforts of “spiritual rebirth” that extend through this lifetime and beyond:

“I myself think that even after the resurrection from the dead we will need a mystery to cleanse us and purify us (sacramento eluente nos atque purgante) […] So in the rebirth of baptism a mystery is taken up that, just as Jesus was purified by an offering according to dispensation of the flesh, so also we will be purified by spiritual rebirth” (Ibid.).

As Origen makes clear, “spiritual rebirth” is not merely baptism: it is the ascetic life modeled by Christ even in his infancy which continues throughout the life of the soul – even beyond death.

At this point in his homily, Origen has succeeded in balancing the uncanny body of Jesus, poised between divine perfection and human imperfection, an ascetic model before his congregation: the sordid body that seeks purification

---

15 Dawson, Allegorical Reading, 26. More recently Dawson has argued even more strongly for links between Origen’s transformative ideas about embodiment and his use of figural language in: Christian Figural Reading, 47 – 80.
16 The scriptural passage involves a vision of the high priest Joshua delivered to the prophet Zechariah; the names Joshua and Jesus were, of course, identical in Origen’s Greek Bible.
17 Origen, De principiis 3.1; and see the discussion of Frede, A Free Will, 102 – 24.
18 On Origen and infant baptism, see Ferguson, Baptism in the Early Church, 367 – 70, who makes it clear we are still far off from Augustine’s theology of original sin and infant baptism.
in God’s presence. He has addressed his congregations’ fears of demeaning the
divine body of Christ—“stain is not “sin”—without sacrificing the homology
between human and divine bodies that his pedagogical, ascetic hermeneutics
demands. Origen does not stop here, however. His continued contemplation of
the multilayered Word of God pushes him to contemplate further the
mulifaceted Word of God in flesh: the ambivalent and paradoxical corpus

Preaching on the “fulfillment of the Law” (in Luke 2:23), Origen asks:
“What commandments of Scripture were they fulfilling?” The preacher comes
up with two laws at work here. The first, from Exodus 13:12, is explicitly cited
by Luke 2:23: “every male who opens the womb shall be called holy to the
Lord”.19 Origen also supposes the holy family are obeying Exodus 34:23,
“This time in the year every male shall appear in the sight of the Lord God.”
It is the first passage – on the opening of the womb – that draws Origen’s
attention, and further allows him to contemplate the ways in Jesus’ human
body is both unique but at the same time more like our own than his
congregation might think, at first blush.20

“Every male that opens the womb”, he repeats, and muses: “Something
sounds spiritual (sacratum quipiam sonat)”. As Origen points out, Jesus
opens his mother’s womb in a way that is unlike any other first born: “for all
women not the birth of an infant but sex with a man unlocks the womb (non
partus infantis sed viris coitus vulvam reserat)” (hom. in Lec. 14 7). Mary’s
body was sealed shut before, during, and after her conception, Origen
explains.21 A miracle, to be sure, that sets the genesis of Jesus’ human body
apart: for a moment, Origen cedes to his audience’s desire, that Jesus’ divine
body should by nature be distinct from the ordinary bodies of humans. Yet, at
the same time, the logic of the commandment at work in Luke 2:23 presses
Origen to contemplate the phrase “opens the womb”: “the womb of the Lord’s
mother was unlocked when her offspring emerged” (hom. in Lec. 14 8). Jesus’
body, so briefly set apart, is suddenly even more “sordid” than before: the
virgin birth paradoxically sexualizes the infant Jesus and his virgin mother,
portraying him as the male who opens Mary’s womb in lieu of her husband.
Lest we think Origen does not intend by this interpretation to underscore

the sordidness of Jesus’ body, we note that Origen lingers on this carnal
defilement:

“He saw in his mother’s womb the uncleanness of bodies, surrounded by her viscera
on this side and that, he suffered the constraints of earthly waste (terrenae faecis)”
(ibid.).22

Origen introduces Psalm 22, whose various passages had been read
christologically even in the canonical gospels.23 Origen assumes, as many
third-century Christians did, that the entire Psalm was spoken in Christ’s
voice, including Ps 22:6: “I am a worm and not a man, reproached by
humankind and rejected by the people.”24 Like his interpretation of the
circumcision and the purification in general, Origen’s dilution upon the
womb-opening Jesus once more holds his divine body in exquisite tension. On
the one hand, it confirms the deep sordidness of Jesus in his human body:
degraded, wormlike, sunk in the muck. On the other hand, it conveys once
more the strangeness and uniqueness of Christ’s body. In full rhetorical flight,
Origen briefly speaks in Jesus’ voice:25

“I am a worm and not a man”. Now usually a person is born from a male and a female,
but I was not born from a male and female, according to nature and the method of
humans (secundum ritum hominum atque naturam), but like a worm, who gets no
seed from another source, but its origin is in itself and of itself, and it coalesces out of
its own bodies” (hom. in Lec. 14 8).26

Origen’s antiquarian turn to natural history makes Christ’s body both
superhuman and subhuman at once: a miraculous generation “without seed”
(non aliunde semen) that makes him comparable to the lowliest of creatures.27

22 Tertullian used similar graphic language about Christ in the womb to shame docetic Christians
in his treatise De carne Christi: see GLANCY, Law of the Opened Body.
23 In Matthew and Mark, Jesus cites from Ps 22:1 on the cross (“My God, my God, why have you
 forsaken me?”) and John 19:23 – 24 alludes to Ps 22:19 (“They will divide my clothing among
them and for the things that I wear they will cast lots.”). See REUSSMANN, Psalm 22 at the Cross; for
the Psalm’s development in third- and fourth-century Christian polemic, see KOLTUN-FROMM,
Psalm 22’s Christological Interpretive Traditio. As Koltun-Fromm points out (p. 554n47),
Origen, De principiis 2.8.1 refers to Psalm 22 at “spoken about him [Christ],” specifically in the
context of Christ’s embodied soul. Origen’s preoccupation with the nature of Christ’s embo-
diment in this homily would perhaps naturally bring Psalm 22 also to mind.
24 This verse was applied to Christ as early as the late first century (1 Clement 16:15): see BER-
TRAN, Le Christ comme ver.
25 On ethopoeia or prosopopoeia (“speech-in-character,” as defined by Theon, Progymnasmata 10),
see STOWERS, Rereading of Romans, 16-21 and 264 – 69; HARRILL, Slaves in the New Testament,
18 – 21.
26 The scientific notion that some kinds of creatures, such as eels, were self-generating was
common enough in ancient naturalistic literature: see Aristotle, Historia animalium 6.12 and
Pliny, Naturalis historia 9.74.
27 BERTRAN, Le Christ comme ver, 226 – 28, claims that Origen originates this particular chris-
tological reading of Ps 22:6, which proliferates in eastern and western biblical exegetes.

19 Luke 2:21 – 24, which pairs the circumcision and the purification, is clearly structured around
Leviticus 12:2 – 8.
20 It’s unclear why Origen feels that he needs to refer to Exodus 34:23, since the commandments in
Exodus 13 seem sufficient to bring Jesus to the altar for purification. Exodus 34:19 also contains
a verse on males “who open the womb”, which is what probably drew it to Origen’s prodigiously
scriptural, cross-referencing mind. It is also possible that Origen – who typically delivered his
homilies ex tempore – had intended to dilate more fully upon Exodus 34, which also contains
one of Origen’s favorite verses on the “veil of Moses” (Exod 34:34; cf. 2 Cor 3:16); see, iner aia, Origen, hom. in Exod. 12.
21 CROUZEL, Origen, 141, identifies Origen as the first clear proponent of Mary’s perpetual vir-
ginity, and discusss the matter at length in his introduction to the Sources chrétiennes volume of
Origen’s interpretation of the bird offerings of Luke 2:24 is likewise poised between the lowly and the sublime, both elevating Christ’s human body and dragging it down. He has already noted that these were real birds, sacrificed “according to the dispensation of the flesh” (hom. in Luc. 14 6). Nonetheless, Origen pronounces, these were blessed birds which were offered “before the altar for our Lord and Savior (hom. in Luc. 14 9). He grows uncomfortable thinking of these as actual birds, killed on an altar:

Perhaps I might seem to bring in something which is new, but little worthy of the majesty of the matter. Just as the new birth of the Savior [was] not from a man and woman, but only from the Virgin alone, so also the ‘pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons’ were not the kind we see with fleshy eyes” (hom. in Luc. 14 10).

It is unclear whether Origen is preaching that the Scripture speaks allegorically of birds (like later homilists who were influenced by Origen). We can only sense that thinking of these as real birds, killed on an altar, somehow damages the dignity of Christ. So he continues,

“Something divine and more majestic than human contemplation appeared under the form of the pigeon and the dove” (ibid.).

Like Jesus’ own body, these birds are stuck somewhere between the celestial and the mundane, real birds who must also at the same time be “something more”.

Origen concludes his homily with these strange birds, a fitting ending to a homily about a strange body in which the central question remains unresolved: to what extent is Christ’s body a human body? A “sordid” body like ours, it becomes a model for ascetic development (represented by the “purification” at the Lord’s altar); a sublime body, born of a virgin, untouched (except by a special dispensation) by human sin, it is a divine body entirely unlike our body. Sexualized, Christ’s body “opens” Mary’s womb, but in so doing demonstrates his (and Mary’s) unique holiness in her preserved virginity. Like a worm, Christ emerges from the mire; like a worm, he transcends human reproduction altogether. We must assume that Origen’s intends Christ’s body to remain in this uncanny state, poised delicately between the sublimity of virginal conception and the muck of the virgin’s womb. In this tensile state, Christ’s body condenses and reflects the ideal state of the Christian body, likewise poised between the mud of this earthly existence and ultimate reunion with the divine.

— 28 —


29 Similar opinions about Christ’s body are ascribed to these groups by Tertullian in his treatise de carne Christi, and later by Epiphanius in his Panarion. The editors of the Sources chrétiennes edition of Origen’s Homilies on Luke note the similarities between Origen’s arguments in hom. 14 and Tertullian’s treatise on Christ’s flesh, but reject the possibility that Origen is directly dependent on Tertullian (CROUZEL et al., Origène, 226–27n. 2).

Yet the ambiguity surrounding Christ’s body in this homily is not simply a reflection, or idealized icon, of the ascetic body of Christians. It is also shaped, in part, by Origen’s own concern for and anxiety surrounding the proper boundaries of orthodox Christianity. Indeed, in its ambiguous state “in-between” Christ’s body has been left uncomfortably, and uncannily, open to the unorthodox otherness.

We have already seen that Origen’s homily seeks to address the concerns of Christians uncomfortable with the idea that Christ’s body might be sinful (and, therefore, insubjectively godly). Origen also explicitly addresses theological speculation about Jesus’ body that he deems beyond the pale in other ways. At two points in the homily he addresses aberrant beliefs about Christ’s incarnate body. When he introduces Zech 3:3, and the idea that Jesus – while “sinless” – was nonetheless “stained” like every other human being, he remarks:

“He [Zechariah] said this in response to those who deny that our Lord had a human body, but say that it was woven together out of heavenly and spiritual stuff (de caelestibus et spiritualibus suis contextum). If indeed his body was from celestial and (as they falsely claim) out of sidereal or some other more sublime and spiritual nature (alia quadam sublimiori spirituali natura), let them answer what spiritual body could be stained (sordidum) or how to interpret what we just quoted, ‘Jesus was clothed in stained garments’” (hom. in Luc. 14 4).

Scholars typically try to give a sectarian label to these christological heretics – followers of Valentinus, perhaps, or Marcion, or Apelles — but it is noteworthy that for Origen these are simply “they”, unnamed Christians. Their attempts to cordon off Christ’s body as made of special “stuff” would presumably resonate with Origen’s audience, who likewise find the idea of Christ’s human, fleshly body a bit too much to swallow. Indeed, Origen too, in his depiction of the “sordid” and purifying body of Jesus, attempts to demonstrate the specialness, the uniqueness of Christ’s body: born “without seed”, from a womb otherwise “unopened”, “not from a man and woman, but only from the Virgin alone” (hom. in Luc. 14 10). The selfsame impulse against which Origen warns his congregation – to imagine Christ’s body was somehow utterly other and different from our bodies – he subtly recuperates in the course of his homily.

Likewise, later in the homily, Origen bristles at those “who deny the God of Other Bodies
the Law, who say that it was not him but another whom Christ preached in the Gospel" (hom. in Luc. 14.7). Not so, Origen protests: wasn’t Christ born “under the Law to redeem those who were under the Law” (Gal 4:4–5)? Did he not subject himself precisely to the Law of circumcision and purification and so demonstrate that there is one Law and one God? Yet Origen once more subtly undermines his own objections: he notes that Christ came to

“redeem those who were under the Law and to subject them to another Law (et aliae legi subicet), about which it was already written, ‘Listen, my people, to my Law’ (Ps 78:1), and so forth” (ibid.).

The introduction of “another Law” (alia lege) and the citation from Psalm 78 quietly recuperate the underlying rejection of Judaism and its Law against which Origen is arguing. Psalm 78 is a scathing retelling of Israelite history, the disobedience of Israel, and the punishments of God: precisely the kind of passage Origen might invoke in order to draw a sharp boundary between the Old Israel and New Israel (Christianity). Yet in this evocation of a Jewish-Christian boundary, doesn’t Origen undermine his larger point about Christ and the Law? Doesn’t he draw closer, even in the midst of refutation, to the same heretics he rejects? Origen’s half-hearted allegory of the birds of offering, which follows soon after in the homily (hom. in Luc. 14 9–10) likewise weakens the link between Christ and Law, making Christ’s body more amenable to “heretical” speculation.

Yet if Origen’s resistance to Judaism makes his Christ (and his Christianity) vulnerable and open to suspect theological speculation, his resistance to heresy engenders a Christ-body that is surprisingly open to Judaism. This homily is, after all, an interpretation of the circumcision and Temple offerings of Jesus in his infancy: acts which are at no time allegorized or removed from the realm of history. Christ’s circumcised body is real, and that body remains paradigmatic for all Christians: “We were circumcised along with him”, Origen declares (hom. in Luc. 14 1). Of course, this vicarious circumcision means that Origen’s contemporary Christians no longer need to submit to this indubitably Jewish mark of covenant membership (“we have no need for a circumcision of the flesh” [ibid.]). But they no longer need to acquire this mark precisely because they already have it, through and with Jesus: their own bodies have been spiritually circumcised by Christ’s literal, physical circumcision. Throughout this homily Christ’s human (but not too human) body provides an exemplum of the ascetic Christian body. Is that body a circumcised body? Is the Christian ascetic endeavor somehow also a Judaized endeavor?

30 Again, we might presume that Origen is speaking about Gnostics or Marcionite Christians, but we also note he chooses not to absolutely separate them from his congregation by giving them a sectarian label.

31 LeBHRANG, Mysterium Ecclesiae, 400, finds Origen using Ps 78:1 for precisely this purpose in a fragment of a Psalm commentary preserved in the catechism.

The purification rituals are subject to layers of interpretation: they recall baptism, which itself recalls the elongated process of purgation that stretches throughout this life and beyond. The birds offered at the Temple are also not just Old Testament offerings, but “something divine”, as Origen concludes: “just as his dispensation contained all new things (nova omnia), so he had new offerings, according to the will of Almighty God in Christ Jesus, to whom is glory and power for ever and ever, amen” (hom. in Luc. 14 10).

Lingerage at the beginning of the homily, however, is that circumcision: unreconstructed, literal, historical, and always, potentially Jewish. Just as Origen’s Christ remains open and porous to otherwise “heretical” speculation, so too he remains hauntingly permeable to the Jewish “other”, as well. If Christ’s body remains dangerously poised between heaven and earth, between celestial perfection and terrestrial “stain”, so too it remains open and exposed to all manner of difference. So, by extension, do the bodies of Origen’s Christian congregation.

Often we understand early Christian asceticism as a discourse of distinction and (ultimate) perfection of the self, over against an other. Yet Origen, in his own act of ascetic exegesis, understands Christ’s paradigmatically distinctive body as fundamentally porous and open to a variety of disavowed others: Jews, heretics, even nonascesic Christians (as Jesus is figured as Mary’s quasi-sexual partner). If Christ’s body is sordidus – “soiled” by the Other – perhaps we need to rethink the function of asceticism in early Christianity, at least in Origen’s pervasively ascetic theology. It may be more accurate to read Origen’s asceticism not as a discourse of distinction but as a discourse of union: as souls rise back toward union with God, they also seek union with each other. Humans, demons, angels, stars – even, if Origen’s posthumous detractors are to be believed, the Devil – will find union in synchronous contemplation of the Father. Such a view of the cosmos necessarily entails imagining not just rejection of but ultimate joining with the Other as part of the progress to salvation.

Origen’s vision of the ascetic life – one that could acknowledge and disavow the “Other”, but still remain open to him or her – was ultimately rejected by normative Christianity. Asceticism persisted as a discourse of distinction, and ascetic exegesis served to promote a religious elite within the larger body of Christianity (and, of course, as a mark of distinction between orthodox and

32 Even more recent, more broadly conceived definitions of “asceticism” (such as VALENTIS, A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism) view the ascetic endeavor as fundamentally transformative and distinctive.

33 Although we can sense these Origenist influences on the corporeal theologies of Ambrose, who, in very different contexts, viewed Christian bodies as “fundamentally open to extension, transformation, and multiple instantiation” (CHR, Bishop’s Two Bodies, 532). One difference, I would suggest, is that Ambrose viewed Christian bodies as “fundamentally open” to each other, not to outside bodies (of Jews, heretics, or pagans).
heretics, and between Christians and non-Christians). As the Origenist controversy exploded in the latter part of the fourth century, one consistent charge against Origen concerned his universalist view of the apokatastasis, which suggested that even the Devil would, in the end, enjoy reunion with the divine. As studies have shown in detail, however, the concerns of anti-Origenists such as Epiphanius or Jerome were not merely cosmological or eschatological, but also ascetic and social. Jerome, especially, could not let go of a hierarchy of achievement in his ascetic theory, a gradation that would separate (as Elizabeth Clark remarks) not only “the sheep from the goats, but [...] a further division among the sheep themselves.” I do not think we can ascribe this merely to personal predilection, as if Jerome were somehow more status-conscious than Origen; nor should we imagine, I think, that Jerome in the fourth century inhabited a world of boundaries that had hardened and sharpened after the legalization of Christianity. To be sure, Origen also had few kind words to say about pagans, heretics, and Jews, and we should not attribute his porous bodily boundaries to warm feelings of fellowship.

Instead, I suggest, in the failed vision of Origen, and the later, hardened boundaries of the body of Christ, we are witness to a fundamental shift in ascetic theory. Origen’s ascetic vision of the cosmos was sweeping and totalizing, more similar, perhaps, to the ascetic theology of Origen’s slightly younger contemporary, Mani, than to later Christian ascetics. For Origen, all bodies must and will undergo the ultimate transformation that will return them to their primal state, and it is incumbent upon all bodies in this cosmos – at whatever level they are capable – to pursue that transformation. This universal possibility and obligation of personal transformation meant that all bodies were in a state of flux and permeability, open not only to the divine but to the “other”.

34 On these issues, see Clark, Reading Renunciation, as p. 155: “Ascetic exegesis, I will suggest, is precisely about the creation of hierarchy and distinction” (emphasis theirs). Notably, in this chapter, Clark looks at John Chrysostom, Jerome, and Origen, and concludes that the latter’s ascetic exegesis effects a “leveling” not at evidence in the later ascetic exegesis (p. 173).

35 See Lyman, Origen as Ascetic Theologian.

36 Clark, Origenist Controversy, 99; see also 129 – 32 and 140 – 47. Beduhn, The Battle for the Body, 513, remarks: “As distinct from most other religious movements, which contain ascetic traditions as one option of expression, Manichaeism is ascetic at its core, and to be a Manichaean is, by definition, to be ascetic.” I would argue that Origen’s asceticism was similarly ascetic “at its core”, and not just for select elites.

37 Origen, always the skilled teacher, recognizes different levels of educability among Christians: some are able to eat “meat,” others must still subsist on intellectual “milk.” (1 Cor 3:1-2, cf. Heb 5:11 – 14; see, for example, Origen, De Oratione 27:5). On Origen’s pedagogy, and its imbrication into his ascetic views of the cosmos, see Joseph W. Tigges, God’s Marvelous Oikonomia.


Virginia Burrus

“The Passover Still Takes Place Today”

Exegesis, Asceticism, Judaism, and Origen’s On Passover

For Origen of Alexandria, the endeavors of exegesis and asceticism are, at their heart, one and the same: the labor of reading brings about the material transformation of both text and reader. The spiritualization of the letter – the goal of exegesis – and the spiritualization of the embodied soul – the goal of asceticism – are inseparable processes, in other words: revelation is salvation, and revelation takes place in and as the interpretation of the divine Word. Implicit in such a view is a non-linear theory of temporality that eschews the logic of before-and-after, as well as a non-oppositional conception of spirit and matter, being and becoming, eternity and time.

Where does such an understanding of Origen leave the already much-discussed question of his exegetical supersessionism and its relation to his anti-Judaism? David Dawson has addressed this issue at some length, arguing that Origen, and the Christian tradition of figural reading more generally, is falsely charged with a “simple repudiation of letter, law, and Judaism”. For the figural reader, “the spirit does not undermine but instead draws out the fullest meaning of the letter; the letter must remain in the spirit because the spirit is the letter fully realized.”1 Dawson rightly acknowledges, however, that a version of hermeneutical supersessionism nonetheless operates in Christian figural exegesis, insofar as “letter, law, and Judaism” are understood to await fulfillment. Such supersessionism clearly can be anti-Jewish, and in Origen it unquestionably is.2 Yet is it inherently so? Does allegoresis mark a decisive parting of the ways for Christianity and Judaism, or is that very suggestion an illusion born of Christian supersessionism?

Nowhere is the ascendency of figural interpretation more powerfully on display than in Origen’s homilies and commentaries on the Song of Songs. J. Christopher King has argued that for Origen the Song of Songs is a uniquely transcendent text “in which the ‘body’ of Scripture has become not merely translucent to the ‘spirit’ but transparent to it”. As Origen encounters it,