

2003

The Relationship Between Trinity and Soteriology in Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* and *On First Principles*

Michael L. Chiavone
Cedarville University, mlchiavone@cedarville.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/
biblical_and_ministry_studies_presentations](http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_presentations)

 Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Chiavone, Michael L., "The Relationship Between Trinity and Soteriology in Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* and *On First Principles*" (2003). *Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Presentations*. 132.
http://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/biblical_and_ministry_studies_presentations/132

This Conference Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@Cedarville, a service of the Centennial Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Biblical and Theological Studies Faculty Presentations by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Cedarville. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@cedarville.edu.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRINITY AND SOTERIOLOGY
IN ORIGEN'S *COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN*
AND *ON FIRST PRINCIPLES*

A Research Paper

Presented to

Dr. Andreas Köstenberger

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for

0575 Integrative Seminar

Michael L. Chiavone

Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary

May 9, 2003

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRINITY AND SOTERIOLOGY
IN ORIGEN'S *COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN* AND
ON FIRST PRINCIPLES

Only a courageous man should write theology. The Christian in the pew can entertain within his own mind heresies in every portion of his faith, but the man who writes his thoughts down opens himself to criticism, not only by his contemporaries, but by generations of succeeding believers. This criticism is almost certain to become increasingly unfair as time passes. The meanings of words will change, new standards of orthodoxy will be established, and the words and works of students and opponents alike will distort the position of the theologian in the eyes of his later critics, to whom he will be unable to respond.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that Origen of Alexandria was perhaps the most prolific author of the early church, for he was a man of unquestioned zeal and courage.¹ Because he was courageous, he was willing not only to write what Christians believe, but also to speculate about how these things they believe may be. This mixture of orthodox exposition and seemingly heretical speculation has mystified those who follow Origen.² As Fairweather puts it:

Love and Hatred encircle the name of Origen This was the case already in his lifetime.
Some distrusted him as a heretic, others invoked his aid to silence heretics; by some he was

¹Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 8–11, 37; Joseph W. Trigg, “Origen and Origenism in the 1990s,” *Religious Studies Review* 22 (Oct 1996): 301; Henri de Lubac, “Origen: *On First Principles*,” *Communio (US)* 25 (Sum 1998): 343; William Fairweather, *Origen and Greek Patristic Theology* (New York: Scribner’s, 1901), 39–42.

²Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994), 48.

almost worshipped [sic], by others he was bitterly disliked. And sometimes he suffered as much at the hands of his injudicious partisans as from the opposition of his deadliest enemies; for if the latter unscrupulously misrepresented his views, the former frequently refined upon them.³

Even Rufinus, who translated many of Origen's extant works into Latin with apologetic glosses, was puzzled by Origen's ability to be both orthodox and unorthodox.⁴

Usually, this vacillation between orthodoxy and heterodoxy occurs when he moves from one doctrine to another. When dealing with the Scriptures, Origen argues that they are divinely inspired, and therefore inerrant; humanly authored, and therefore personal; and that their meaning, even when it is allegorical, is based on authorial intent.⁵ All in all, this is an impressively orthodox position. When dealing with anthropology, however, Origen holds that men are pre-existent souls which became embodied on earth when they fell from their original state.⁶ Few Christians today would agree with anything Origen says about the origin of man. Like his ancient successors, one can therefore find in Origen some doctrines with which one heartily agrees, and others which are patently unacceptable.⁷

³Fairweather, *Origen and Patristic*, 238.

⁴G. W. Butterworth, introduction to Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper&Row, 1966), liv.

⁵Fairweather, *Origen and Patristic*, 68–70; Ronald E. Heine, introduction to Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Books 1–10, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 80, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), 13.

⁶Citations from Origen's *On First Principles* will henceforth be designated with the abbreviation *DP*, and will be cited by book, chapter, and paragraph, along with the page on which they appear in Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (New York: Harper&Row, 1966).

⁷Elizabeth A. Clark, "Elite Networks and Heresy Accusations: Towards a Social Description of the Origenist Controversy," *Semeia* 56 (1991): 94.

When one comes to Origen's doctrine of the Trinity, however, true doctrine and heresy seem to exist side by side. Origen moves away from the materialistic conceptions of God common to Tertullian and Justin Martyr and states that God is truly incorporeal. This allows for a generation of the Son which neither divides the Godhead nor diminishes the Father, and lays the foundation for Cappadocian thought.⁸ Yet serious subordinationism is also evident in Origen's scheme.⁹

One must wonder why. Origen's works overflow with love for the Son as Savior, so it is unreasonable to believe he demeans his deity for no reason.¹⁰ It is obvious that Origen did not intend to be a heretic, for he considered himself a man of the church, and in fact wrote to convert heretics.¹¹ Admittedly, at the time of his writing clear criteria like those of Nicea had not yet been established. But he maintained a subordinationist doctrine of the Trinity despite holding to a philosophical scheme which allowed his immediate successor, Gregory Thaumaturgus, to understand the members of the Trinity as ontologically equal.¹²

This paper will argue that Origen's doctrine of the Trinity, as presented in *On First Principles* and his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, is subordinationist primarily for soteriological reasons. More precisely, it will propose that Origen constructed a trinitarian

⁸Bernard Lonergan, *The Way to Nicea*, trans. Conn O'Donovan (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), 60; Herbert Musurillo, "The Recent Revival of Origen Studies," *Theological Studies* 24 (Je 1963): 261; Crouzel, *Origen*, 182.

⁹Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, trans. John Bowden, 2^d ed., vol. 1 (Atlanta: John Knox, 1975), 166; Musurillo, "Revival," 261.

¹⁰de Lubac, "Origen," 345–46; Crouzel, *Origen*, 197.

¹¹de Lubac, "Origen," 347, 344; Crouzel, *Origen*, 13.

¹²Grillmeier, *Christ*, 166.

doctrine which allowed him to protect the nature of the Father while allowing the salvation of men. First, Origen's doctrine of the Trinity in these works will be examined. Then, several proposed methods for understanding the errors in his thought will be considered. Finally, Origen's doctrine of salvation will be examined, and the manner in which it depends upon the Origenistic Trinity will be highlighted.

Origen's Doctrine of the Trinity

It is interesting to note that, despite centuries of study, there is still disagreement about the exact nature of Origen's trinitarian thought. The reasonable place to begin in examining anyone's doctrine is his own writing, yet at this point difficulties arise. The vast majority of his original works were destroyed under Justinian.¹³ Because only a few Greek fragments remain, the modern reader must rely primarily on the Latin translations of Rufinus and Jerome, both of which are suspect.¹⁴ There are places where Rufinus's text, when compared with Greek fragments, reveals that Rufinus has clearly made changes to make Origen more orthodox.¹⁵ Other textual variants indicate that some sections of Origen's Greek text were left out of the Latin translation, and these are often distinctly heretical.¹⁶ Rufinus assumed that the text had been tampered with by heretics, and as such felt free to make emendations necessary to restore what he believed had to have been Origen's original thought.¹⁷ In light of these difficulties, no attempt will be made to

¹³Crouzel, *Origen*, 41; de Lubac, "Origen," 341.

¹⁴Musurillo, "Revival," 252–53.

¹⁵*DP*, 1.2.6, 20.

¹⁶*DP*, 3.1.5, 33.

¹⁷Butterworth, *On First Principles*, xxxiv.

analyze Origen's language in a technical sense. Instead, the general flow of his thought, his consistent emphases, and his major themes will be observed. In this examination, *On First Principles* will serve as the primary text, with additional material being drawn from the *Commentary on the Gospel of John* as appropriate.

Origen's Own Thought

Origen presents his doctrine of the Trinity throughout his writings. Here, five aspects of that thought will be examined. Origen's thoughts on the basic nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit will be observed. Then, the manner in which they are united will be presented. Finally, the distinctions between them, distinctions which imply ontological subordination, will be examined.

The Father

Origen rehearses his understanding of the apostolic teaching about the Father in the preface to *On First Principles*:

First, that God is one, who created and set in order all things, and who, when nothing existed, caused the universe to be. He is God from the first creation and foundation of the world, the God of all righteous men, of Adam, Abel...Moses and the prophets. This God, in these last days, according to the previous announcements made through his prophets, sent the Lord Jesus Christ, first for the purpose of calling Israel, and secondly, after the unbelief of the people of Israel, of calling the Gentiles also. This just and good God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, himself gave the law, the prophets and the gospels, and he is God both of the apostles and also of the Old and New Testments.¹⁸

¹⁸*DP*, preface.4, 2; That this refers to the Father is obvious in light of the following paragraphs, which discuss Christ and the Holy Spirit.

This presentation clearly intends to refute the heresies of the time. To refute Gnosticism, it rejects any concept of pre-existent matter.¹⁹ It also refutes the Marcionite position that distinguishes the just, creator God of the Old Testament from the good, redeeming God of the New Testament.²⁰

This description of God is also notably silent about God's nature. Other than stating that he is good and just, God the Father is described primarily in terms of his relation to the world. This reticence is characteristic of Origen; the Father remains somewhat obscure.²¹ Two factors contribute to Origen's unwillingness to comment about the Father's nature. First, he conceives of God as inherently unknowable, at least to men. No one is able to speak worthily about the Father.²² A second, and perhaps more important, reason for his relative silence is his assumption that he and his reader will share certain ground about what it means to be God. For example, Origen argues that there has always been a creation based on the notion that for God to be good, provident, and omnipotent, he would always have needed a creation over which to exercise these attributes.²³ He does this without any obvious warrant, which indicates that he assumes his reader will agree that this is just how God is. Other than the heretics mentioned above, the church held a consensus about the nature of God. Origen confidently proclaims that "all who in any way believe in the existence of Providence admit that God, who created and set

¹⁹Citations from Origen's *Commentary on the Gospel of John* will henceforth be noted by *CGJ*, and will be cited by book, paragraph, and the page number on which they appear in *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Books 1–10, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 80, trans. Ronald E. Heine (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1989); cf. *CGJ*, 1.103, 55.

²⁰*CGJ*, 1.253, 85.

²¹Fairweather, *Origen and Patristic*, 150.

²²*CGJ*, 1.92–93, 52; *DP*, 1.1.5–6, 9–10; 1.3.1, 29.

²³*Ibid.*, 1.4.3, 41–42; 1.2.9, 23.

in order the entire creation, is unbegotten.”²⁴ The nature of the Son was the present point of controversy.

Origen’s general silence about the nature of the Father may suggest that he considers what he does say about him to be crucial, or at least controversial. The best way to understand the Father is as totally incorporeal. Arguing from John 4, “God is spirit,” Origen properly notes that Jesus says this to oppose attempts to locate God for worship. The fact that God is a “consuming fire” in Deut 4:24 does not require that he have a body, for he consumes evil thoughts and intentions of the mind, not physical objects. God is, in fact, “simple intellectual existence.”²⁵ God has no material characteristics whatsoever, and therefore is completely invisible. This pure incorporeality is a key aspect of divinity; only God is completely bodiless.²⁶

The Son

While Origen assumes most aspects of the nature of the Father, he argues for an understanding of the Son based upon the titles given him in the Bible. While many of his contemporaries focus on the Son as Word, Origen warns against exclusively thinking of the Son as Word. It is true that the Son is God’s Word, his rational organizing principle, but that is not all he is.²⁷ While Origen treats many of the titles of the Son, central to Origen’s understanding of the Son’s nature are the titles wisdom, only-begotten, and image.²⁸

²⁴Ibid., 1.3.1, 29.

²⁵Ibid., 1.1.2–6, 8–10.

²⁶Ibid., 1.1.5–8, 9–13.

²⁷CGJ, 1.151, 64; 2.38, 104.

²⁸DP, 1.2.1, 15; 1.2.5–6, 18.

The Scriptures call the Son wisdom because he is “God’s wisdom hypostatically existing.” As such he is incorporeal, for wisdom possesses no physicality. He is also eternal, for God has never existed without his wisdom. God eternally and continually begets his wisdom, the Son.²⁹ This is one of Origen’s crucial contributions to the development of a doctrine of the Trinity, for he is one of the first to draw upon Prov 8:22 and use the equation of the Son with wisdom to argue for his eternity.³⁰

It is in this sense, as the existence of the Father’s wisdom, that he is the only-begotten. He is not begotten in a way similar to human or animal begetting. In the Godhead, begetting implies neither physical division nor temporal occurrence, for “God was always the Father of his only-begotten Son.”³¹ This is not a necessary occurrence, for the Son is begotten by the will of the Father. Nor is the begetting of the Son like the Gnostic notion of emanation, for the Father’s nature is not divided by the begetting of the Son.³²

Because he is begotten by his Father, the Son is related to the Father as Seth was to Adam, and therefore bears his image. The Son is a reflection of all the Father is. He is incorporeal and invisible. The Father and Son share a unity of nature and substance, and the Son does all that the Father does. As the Father is essentially good, so also the Son is essentially

²⁹Ibid., 1.2.2, 15.

³⁰Barbara Newman, “Sergius Bulgakov and the Theology of Divine Wisdom,” *Saint Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1978): 95; Maurice F. Wiles, “Eternal Generation,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 12 (Oct 1961): 286.

³¹DP, 1.2.4, 17; 4.4.1, 313–14.

³²Ibid., 1.2.6, 19.

good, and not accidentally so, like created beings. The Son's goodness is not a different goodness than the Father's, for he draws his goodness from the father.³³ Likewise their power is one, for:

As regards the power of his works, then, the Son is in no way whatever separate or different from the Father, nor is his work anything other than the Father's work, but there is one and the same movement, so to speak, in all they do...there is absolutely no dissimilarity between the Son and the Father. Some indeed have said that the Son's acts are to be compared with a pupil's work in likeness to or imitation of his master...yet how can these opinions be reconciled with the Gospel.³⁴

Therefore the Son can also be called the Almighty. The Son is in every way the image of the Father, for he participates in the Father and draws his divinity from the Father. Origen chastens those who deny that the Savior knows all that is true to serve a "delusion of glorifying the Father."³⁵

The Holy Spirit

While Origen's systematic treatment of the Holy Spirit is rather brief, it is clear that he likewise draws who he is from the Father and the Son.³⁶ Like them he is a strictly incorporeal intellectual existence, and therefore deity. He has a personal existence, and is not just a force or energy. That he merits high honor is obvious, for his name is included in the formula of saving baptism. Against those who propose that the Word educates the Holy Spirit, Origen guards his immutability, which is an attribute only God possesses. While the Holy Spirit is not greater than

³³Ibid., 1.2.6, 19; 1.2.10, 26; 1.2.13, 27; *CGJ*, 1.62, 46.

³⁴*DP*, 1.2.12, 26.

³⁵*CGJ*, 2.17, 99; 1.187, 71.

³⁶Ibid., 2.75–76, 114.

the Son as Word, Origen allows the Holy Spirit to occupy a position higher than that of the incarnate Son, for against the Holy Spirit no blasphemy will be forgiven.³⁷

Unity

Given the clear distinctions Origen draws between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one might wonder how they are one God. In addressing this, Origen notes several ways in which the three are united. As has already been noted, the Son shares in the Father's nature, substance, goodness, and power. The Holy Spirit likewise shares in the nature of the Father and the Son. "There is nothing that was not made except the nature of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit."³⁸ Only the Trinity possesses incorporeality, and only these three are essentially and unchangeably good. While each member has his own role within God's dealings with men, "there is no separation in the Trinity."³⁹

While embracing the unity of the Godhead, Origen is careful to reject a modalistic concept of the Trinity. When discussing both the Son and the Holy Spirit, he points out that each is a personal individual, and not just an empowerment or force.⁴⁰ He also responds specifically to those who believe in the Father and the Word, but consider the Holy Spirit to be an activity of the Father. "We, however, are persuaded that there are three hypostases, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."⁴¹

³⁷*DP*, 1.1.3, 8; 1.3.2, 29–30; 1.3.4, 33; *CGJ*, 2.81–82, 115.

³⁸*DP*, 4.4.8, 323.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 2.1.2, 81; 1.5.3, 47; 1.3.7, 38.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 1.2.2, 15; 1.3.1, 29.

⁴¹*CGJ*, 2.75, 114.

Origen seems to steer the straight course between modalism and tritheism. His commentary on John 1:1 cautions the reader not to deny a distinct “individual nature” in the Son, but also not to “make his individual nature and essence as an individual to be different from the Father.”⁴² In terms of his language and general thought, Origen seems to be an early proponent of Nicene Trinitarianism. He states that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three persons who share one nature. What could be wrong with that?

Subordinationism

The problem with Origen’s Trinitarianism is that, while the three share the one divine nature, Origen sees them sharing a nature that is inherently the nature only of the Father. The Son and Holy Spirit share in this nature only by his permission. This ontological inequality is evident in Origen’s treatment of both the Son and the Holy Spirit.

From Origen’s discussion of the Son’s generation, it is clear the Son is not inherently God the way the Father is. The Son is begotten eternally, not by the necessity of the divine nature, but by the will of the Father. He is truth because, “according to the will of the Father, he has embraced the whole principle of the universe.”⁴³ In fact, the Son is only God contingently. He is God because he is with God, “and he would not remain God if he did not continue in unceasing contemplation of the depth of the Father.”⁴⁴ The Son does not exist necessarily, is not true necessarily, and is not God necessarily.

⁴²Ibid., 2.16, 98.

⁴³*DP*, 1.2.6, 18; *CGJ*, 1.186, 71.

⁴⁴Ibid., 2.12, 98; 2.18, 99.

As the Father controls the Son's possession of the divine nature, so he himself possesses it more perfectly than the Son. The Savior is not purely and simply good in himself, but draws goodness from the Father. Origen states that the "Saviour...is the image of God's goodness, and not goodness itself."⁴⁵ The Father, in fact, is greater than the Son in every way, for "the saying, 'My father who sent me is greater than I,' is true in all respects."⁴⁶ This inequality, despite the fact that the Son shares in the Father's nature, is due to the fact that one who participates in the nature of another, like the Son does in the Father, cannot do so to the point of complete absorption. The Son cannot equal the Father in whose nature he shares.⁴⁷

If Origen does a disservice to the Son, his treatment of the Holy Spirit is far worse. For Origen, while the Holy Spirit is a member of the Trinity, he is "the most honored of all things made through the Word."⁴⁸ He is the first in rank among made things, but a made thing nevertheless. The Holy Spirit also needs the Son to exist, and his existence is dependent upon the continued ministry of the Son.⁴⁹ While Origen reserves the title, "the God," for the Father, and allows the Son and other heavenly beings to be "Gods," Fairweather observes that he nowhere calls the Holy Spirit, "God."⁵⁰

Origen is unwilling to allow the Holy Spirit the power of God either. The Father is the authority over everything that exists, and the Son permeates the universe he created and rules

⁴⁵*DP*, 1.2.13, 27.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 4.4.8, 324.

⁴⁷*CGJ*, 2.52, 107.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 2.75, 75.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 2.75–76, 114.

⁵⁰*CGJ*, 2.13–17, 98–99; Fairweather, *Origen and Patristic*, 156.

over all the rational creatures. The Spirit, beneath the Son, acts only in the lives of the saints. His authority is only over those “who abide in God.”⁵¹ Despite this limited purview, the Holy Spirit is unable to accomplish his task unaided. When the time came to redeem man, the Son had to be the one to do so.⁵²

There is, then, a clear ranking in Origen’s Trinity. It is not just a ranking of authority, but of nature. While the Son and the Holy Spirit share the Father’s nature, they do so contingently, and imperfectly. Justin Martyr and Tertullian had struggled to get past the temporal priority of the Father implied by the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit. Origen removed this stumbling block by positing an eternal generation, but then replaced temporal priority with a causal and ontological priority which resulted in a subordinationism more radical than that held by his orthodox predecessors.

Possible Explanations

It is surprising that Origen avoided the conclusion of his successors, the conclusion that the three members of the Godhead who share a single incorporeal nature must be equal. There are several possible explanations for Origen’s subordinationism. Perhaps Origen was not subordinationist at all, as Crouzel contends. It may be that his dependence upon Platonism forced a subordinationist conclusion. Or, given the fact that he developed his theology from the Scriptures, it is possible that his errant theology may have gone astray due to his errant exegesis. These possibilities will now be considered.

⁵¹Ibid., 6.107, 198; *DP*, 1.3.5, 33–34.

⁵²*CGJ*, 2.83, 116.

No Subordinationism

Crouzel has written what amounts to a modern defense of Origen. He argues that, of the ancient charges against Origen, only the one leveled against Origen's doctrine of pre-existent souls had merit. However, this doctrine was not dogma, but was speculation in an area in which the church had yet to formulate dogma, so Origen remained orthodox. Crouzel states:

If care is taken to study exactly the trinitarian doctrine of Origen, it will first be seen that the unity of the Father and the Son is expressed fairly exactly by formulae that are of an order more dynamic than ontological and that in spite of a few clumsy expressions his subordinationism is not heterodox...he affirms, as Athanasius and Hilary themselves were to do, both the equality of power of the Persons and a certain subordination of the Son to the Father.⁵³

Origen has an acceptable view of the Trinity because he maintains an essential unity among the members, he states they are equal in power, and he presents a subordination at the level of authority.

A defense of this sort can fail at either of two levels. First, it seems that the standards advanced for orthodoxy are inadequate. Specifically, is equality of power the only equality which orthodoxy demands? It has been noted, for example, that while Origen states the goodness of the Son is the goodness of the Father, the Son does not possess it as the Father does. If equality of power is all that is important, one could argue that the Son is evil and still be orthodox. Orthodoxy demands that the members of the Trinity be equal in every respect, and not just power.⁵⁴

However, Crouzel correctly notes that this definition of orthodoxy is anachronistic for Origen. The rule of faith had not elucidated a doctrine of the Trinity with this sort of specificity

⁵³*Origen*, 268.

⁵⁴Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2^d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 361–62.

when Origen wrote, and had not even identified whether the Holy Spirit was created or made.⁵⁵ It is fairer to judge Crouzel's defense at another level. Does he accurately characterize Origen's thought and writing?

The greater problem with Crouzel's argument is that he himself reads Origen anachronistically, reading into Origen's statements about the members of the Trinity sharing one nature a clear indication of a belief in essential unity. If Origen posits such a unity, statements which suggest ontological subordination of the Son and Spirit are only apparent heterodoxy, and can be reconciled with orthodoxy. Because Origen argues that the essence of the Son is not different from that of the Father,⁵⁶ Crouzel assumes his understanding of essence is that of the later ecumenical creeds.

But Origen has a less precise understanding of essence. When discussing the nature of rational creatures, he states:

Everyone who shares in anything is undoubtedly of one substance and one nature with him who shares in the same thing. For example, all eyes share in the light, and therefore all eyes, which share in the light, are of one nature. But though every eye shares in the light, yet since one eye sees clearly and another dimly, every eye does not share equally in the light.⁵⁷

This passage shows that Origen's doctrine of shared substance requires neither genuine unity nor equality. The eyes of all men, obviously distinct and separate, are nevertheless of "one substance and one nature." Also, the fact that they share a nature does not guarantee that they are equal in the nature they share. Others have noted this imprecision in the way Origen uses *ousia*. As it can

⁵⁵Ibid., 200.

⁵⁶*CGJ*, 2.16, 98.

⁵⁷*DP*, 4.4.9, 326.

for Aristotle, for Origen *ousia* can mean either a particular species or a more general genus.⁵⁸

While none of these arguments proves that Origen does not believe in the essential unity of the Trinity, taken together they remove the credibility of a position which seeks to justify the subordinationist statements noted above in light of an obvious belief in an essential unity in the Godhead. While Crouzel may be correct in trying to soften the criticism against Origen, he is wrong to reject it altogether.

Platonic Influence

Admitting, then, that Origen does hold to an unorthodox subordinationism, one might wonder if he was forced into it by his reliance upon a philosophical system. He was, after all, a brilliant intellectual, living in a Christian community of philosophers, for whom the intellectual side of Christianity was important.⁵⁹ Platonism is evident throughout Origen's teaching, so some suggest that he simply applies a Christian veneer to Platonism.⁶⁰ Others admit that his thought is genuinely Christian, but maintain that he uses "Platonic ideas to reinterpret the whole range of Christian teaching on God, Christ, and salvation."⁶¹ Lonergan states that Origen is deceived by the Platonic concept of ideals, which forces him to say the Son has divinity only by participation.⁶² Origen's use of false philosophy results in his heterodox conclusions.

⁵⁸Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers: Faith, Trinity, and Incarnation*, 3^d ed., vol. 1 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 321, 329.

⁵⁹Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, 42–43; Fairweather, *Origen and Patristic*, 7.

⁶⁰Musurillo, "Recent Revival," 253.

⁶¹Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1968), 16.

⁶²*Nicea*, 9; cf. Bromiley, *Historical Theology*, 49.

Attributing Origen's subordinationism primarily to his philosophy mistakes the role philosophy plays in Origen's scheme. He is not a blind follower of philosophy, but a learned, critical eclectic, who understands that philosophy is at best a hazardous tool for the Christian.⁶³ He is convinced that philosophy is inadequate to ascertain absolute truth, and so is not so much a philosopher as a theologian who uses philosophy.⁶⁴

His use of philosophy belies his dependence upon it, for he is willing to state things contrary to Greek philosophy. The concept of another world was common in Greek philosophy, and usually took the form of a world of ideas. For Origen, however, this world is not just a world of ideas, but of personal, spiritual beings, including God. While both Plato and the Stoics denied any concept of individual providence, Origen heartily endorses it.⁶⁵ Origen is aware that Platonic thought made no allowance for the Holy Spirit, and while Origen's treatment thereof is lacking, he nevertheless argues for a distinctly Christian concept in espousing a Trinity. His God is likewise more personal than the god of Greek philosophy, who was strictly impassible. Origen denies that God is strictly impassible, allowing him the passion of love.⁶⁶ Origen even disagrees with Plato about the origin of the universe. Plato argued that it was crafted out of pre-existent matter,⁶⁷ but Origen affirmed creation *ex nihilo*. Therefore, while it would be foolish to deny that philosophy had any impact on Origen's thought, it would be equally foolish to suggest it

⁶³Richard A. Norris, Jr., trans. and ed., *The Christological Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 15; de Lubac, *Origen*, 349–50.

⁶⁴Fairweather, *Origen and Patristics*, 85; Crouzel, *Origen*, 16.

⁶⁵Wolfson, *Philosophy*, 274, 88, 90.

⁶⁶Fairweather, *Origen and Patristic*, 155, 87, 144.

⁶⁷Ronald H. Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Personal Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 36.

determined his thought. Rather, Origen used philosophy to aid him in developing and expressing his understanding of the biblical message.

Biblical Interpretation

If this is true, it may be that an error in his method for determining the biblical message drove Origen to subordinationism. After all, the study of the Bible was central to Origen's life; the vast majority of Origen's writings are exegetical, either homilies or commentaries.⁶⁸ His extension of Jesus' contention, that the Father was greater than he, to all aspects of the relationship of the Father to the Word implies Origen's subordinationism may be based solely on his interpretation of Scripture. However, while Origen's theology may be based upon Scripture,⁶⁹ his use thereof is far too flexible to force him to hold a position with which he otherwise disagrees.

Origen's use of allegorical interpretation is well known, and will not be discussed here.⁷⁰ What is instead pertinent is the fact that allegorical interpretation is not the only interpretive method which Origen uses. At times his exegesis is hyperliteral. In discussing the heavenly beings, he argues that the principalities, authorities, powers, and dominions are specific titles ascribed by Paul, and that the list is not exhaustive because there are some who "will be

⁶⁸Heine, *CGJ*, 3.

⁶⁹John R. Sachs, "Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology," *Theological Studies* 54, no. 4 (Dec 1993): 621.

⁷⁰See Moisés Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible?*, in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation: Six Volumes in One*, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 53–59; Karen J. Torjesen, "'Body,' 'soul,' and 'spirit' in Origen's Theory of Exegesis," *Anglican Theological Review* 67 (Jan 1985): 19–22; Heine, *CGJ*, 11–21.

named in the world to come.”⁷¹ Likewise he sees a conflict which must be reconciled between John 1:17 and John 14:6. In one the truth comes through Jesus, in the other he is the truth, and one cannot be the channel through which one’s self comes.⁷² When contrasted with the allegorical interpretations for which Origen is better known, these and similar passages show that Origen uses variable amounts of literal exegesis in his homilies, and is too imprecise in his use of Scripture for it to force him into a position which he finds disturbing.⁷³ In fact, one of the reasons he resorts to allegorical interpretation is to explain passages that he believes would otherwise be unworthy of God.⁷⁴ Therefore, one cannot say Origen holds to a subordinationism simply because he finds it in the Scripture. If he finds it in the Scripture, it is because he is willing to believe it.

The Influence of Origen’s Soteriology on his Doctrine of the Trinity

It has been demonstrated that Origen believes in a doctrine of the Trinity which posits a genuine, unnecessary ontological subordination of the Son and Holy Spirit. It has also been shown that this subordinationism is not forced upon Origen by an unfair reading of his works, nor was it imposed on him by a foreign philosophical system, or by a single determinative hermeneutic. This leaves a final proposed cause of Origen’s heterodox trinitarianism, his soteriology. Before this is dismissed, it should be recognized that the doctrine of the Trinity was not historically the basis from which early Christians developed a theology. Historically, the

⁷¹*DP*, 1.5.1, 44.

⁷²*CGJ*, 6.37–38, 179.

⁷³Crouzel, *Origen*, 61; Fairweather, *Origen and Patristics*, 65.

⁷⁴Heine, *CGJ*, 12–13.

doctrine of the Trinity developed from Christology, and the propriety of a Christology was often tested in respect to its soteriological implications.⁷⁵ The Cappadocians, for example, were unwilling to accept Apollinarius's Christology in part because they did not see how the Son could save the rational soul of man if he did not assume it. The point of departure for Athanasius's Christology in *On the Incarnation of the Logos of God* is the question, "Why did the incarnation occur?" Because the Word became incarnate to restore man, doctrine must recognize him as the God-man.⁷⁶ Soteriology, then, has historically played a key role in the development of both Christology and trinitarian theology.

Origen's Soteriology

Like any good soteriology, Origen's begins with the creation and fall of man. However, the creation and fall which Origen has in mind are radically different from the modern evangelical understandings thereof. In the beginning, God created a vast number of rational minds. These included all the minds of spiritual beings, including what are now angels, demons, and men. The Bible refers to angels as men, as in Genesis 19, so it is clear that all spiritual, rational beings, are generically dubbed men.⁷⁷ These men were created "according to the image of God," that is, according to the Son, who is the image. As such, all these minds shared in the nature of the Son, and therefore have wisdom and rationality from him.⁷⁸ These spiritual beings were also created with free will, and were able to choose whether or not to remain in

⁷⁵Grillmeier, *Christ*, 9.

⁷⁶Norris, *Christological*, 18–19.

⁷⁷*DP*, 2.9.1, 129; *CGJ*, 2.144, 133.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 2.148, 133–34; 1.105, 55; *DP*, 4.4.9, 326; 1.3.6, 35.

contemplation of God. Because they were created, and therefore passed from a time of non-existence to a time of existence, they were mutable. The goodness they enjoyed in the presence of God was not their own essentially, but only an accidental goodness granted by the Father.⁷⁹

Over time, these created minds lost interest in their contemplation of the Father, and began to drift slowly away from him.⁸⁰ This movement away from perpetual devotion to the Father was the fall, and in it man fell in several ways. Because God is good, moving away from him can be nothing other than evil. Because God is life, they fell into death. Because God is rational, moving away from him is movement into the irrational, and therefore sin. This movement into wickedness on the part of these spiritual minds was a movement into non-being.⁸¹ Not all minds fell to the same extent, and the depths to which they fell determined the density of the bodies they received. Those that fell less, received angelic forms. Those who fell to the present state of man, however, were given solid physical bodies. Now, through both the habit of contemplating evil and the passions inspired by bodies, these minds are trapped in sin.⁸²

It is unreasonable to think, however, that these souls, a part of which constitute the present race of man, could utterly thwart God's plan for them. The soul of man was created by God and is able to know him, and therefore shares in his incorporeality, so it cannot utterly perish.⁸³ So, while every soul will be punished for its sins, the end result of that punishment is

⁷⁹*DP*, 2.9.2, 130.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 1.4.1, 40.

⁸¹*Ibid.*, 1.2.4, 17; 1.5.2, 44; *CGJ*, 2.119, 96.

⁸²*DP*, 1.8.4, 73.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 1.2.4, 17; 4.4.9, 327.

positive subjugation to the Father.⁸⁴ In this respect the proclamation of 1 Cor 15:28, that in the end God will be “all in all,” encapsulates Origen’s thought. He quotes all or part of the verse thirteen times in *On First Principles*, and four times in the extant of the first ten books of his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. For Origen, the only logical end that the universe can have is a restoration to a unity of all rational beings in willing subjugation to the Father.⁸⁵ This final restoration, the apocatastasis, is not so much a certain dogma for Origen as a hopeful speculation based upon the sovereignty of God and his total victory over evil.⁸⁶ To achieve this victory, God took action.

Because of his love for man, the Son became man to save all the spiritual beings.⁸⁷ Man needed a savior to do two things to accomplish this. Man needed to be freed from the power of sin and evil under which he had put himself. Christ did that by his death, by which he expiated sin before the Father, triumphed over the forces of wickedness, and bought men back from the sin to which they had sold themselves.⁸⁸ Man also needed to be restored to the life which he had before he fell. This restoration is only achieved when men participate in the Son through whom they were created.

Participation in the Son, and indeed the Godhead as a whole, is the key element in Origen’s soteriology. It is by participation in the Son that men are pardoned, that they receive

⁸⁴Ibid., 1.6.1, 52.

⁸⁵Ibid., 1.6.2, 55.

⁸⁶Trigg, “Origen,” 301; Leo Scheffczyk, “Apocatastasis: Fascination and Paradox,” *Communio (US)* 12 (Wint 1985): 395; Celia Rabinowitz, “Personal and Cosmic Salvation in Origen: *De Principiis*,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 38, no. 4 (Dec 1984): 319.

⁸⁷*CGJ*, 2.145, 187; 1.58, 46.

⁸⁸Ibid., 6.242, 274; 6.245–46, 285–6.

life, and that they receive rationality.⁸⁹ This participation is not an absolute affair, but a gradual process by which men reascend to their proper place. But the goal of all is to ascend back to the Father, and participate in the divine nature itself.⁹⁰

But direct contact with the Father is impossible. One cannot partake of the Father or the Son except by the Holy Spirit.⁹¹ Nor can one partake of the Father except through the Son. That is why he is the door, because one must “ascend from below to the divinity of the Son through which one can be led also to the blessedness of the Father.”⁹² Each member of the Trinity has a role in salvation. The Holy Spirit purifies the saint, the Word provides knowledge for proper living, and the Father perfects, so “that which exists shall be as worthy as he who caused it to exist,” because it will be “unceasingly and inseparably present with him who really exists.”⁹³ Yet, in all this, the Son remains the channel through which men can be deified.⁹⁴

Trinitarian Implications of Origen’s Soteriology

The salvation of men requires three functions impossible for God the Father himself. First, it requires men to be genuinely united to God, and Origen posits a dramatic union. The perfect believer in fact becomes Christ, like the apostle John did in front of the cross. There Jesus

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 2.87, 115; 1.187, 71; 1.268, 88.

⁹⁰*DP*, 1.6.2, 54.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 1.3.5, 33.

⁹²*CGJ*, 1.189, 72.

⁹³*DP*, 1.3.8, 38–39.

⁹⁴*CGJ*, 2.17, 99.

proclaimed to Mary the John was her son, i.e., Christ himself.⁹⁵ The union is such that sins against the disciples are reckoned as sins against Christ.⁹⁶ Second, it requires for God to be multiple things, an impossibility for an essentially simple God. The Son, however, is made many things because men need so much to be saved. Finally, the salvation of man requires that the savior be sullied with sin. While this is an impossibility for the Father, the Son is able to be darkened by the sin for which he atones and then purified by the Father.⁹⁷

It is this first requirement, the need to be genuinely united with the Son to participate in the Father through him, which is at the root of Origen's trinitarian problems. On the one hand, men have to become Christ to receive the divine nature. On the other hand, men obviously do not become Christ, for none of them can become God. Origen resolves this dilemma by making the unity of participation between the Father and the Son the same as the unity of participation between the Son and the saint. After all, no one participates in another to the point of equality, neither the Son in the Father nor the saint in the Son.⁹⁸ One place Origen clearly suggests that he intends this parallel of relationships is in a Greek fragment omitted from Rufinus's translation. He says, "We, therefore, having been made according to the image, have the Son, the original, as the truth of the noble qualities that are within us. And what we are to the Son, such is the Son to the Father."⁹⁹ A similar passage discusses the role of Father as the source of divinity and the Son as the source of reason, stating, "The reason which is in each rational being has the same position

⁹⁵Ibid., 1.23, 38.

⁹⁶Ibid., 1.69–73, 48.

⁹⁷Ibid., 1.114, 158–59; 6.287, 246; 2.163, 138.

⁹⁸Ibid., 2.52, 107.

⁹⁹*DP*, 1.2.6, 20.

in relation to the Word which is in the beginning with God, which is God the Word, which God the Word has with God.”¹⁰⁰

This parallel could have developed in two ways. Origen may argue for a simultaneous unity of essence and ontological inferiority within the Godhead so that he can legitimately argue that men are saved by being united with the Son while remaining ontologically inferior to him. Or, it could be, that in attempting to understand the unity of the Son with the Father, he drew upon the form of unity he already believed to exist between the Son and the saints. That his view of the Trinity was not the prior position which influenced his soteriology seems evident from the high esteem in which he held the Savior; he would not have diminished the Son without a reason.

Conclusion

It has been argued that Origen holds to an ontological subordination primarily because of his belief in the restoration of man to unity with God, at least as these doctrines are presented in *On First Principles* and the *Commentary on the Gospel of John*. His subordinationism is impossible to deny, and it cannot be satisfactorily explained by appealing to Origen’s philosophical or biblical methods. The remarkable parallel between the way in which the Son is God and the way in which men are saved is difficult to ignore. Whether this connection was made consciously or subconsciously is unknown. What does seem clear is that Origen constructed an intricate body of doctrine, in which the crucial element of soteriology could not help influencing other doctrines, especially his doctrine of the Trinity.

¹⁰⁰ *CGJ*, 2.20, 99.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bromiley, Geoffrey W. *Historical Theology: An Introduction*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1994
- Brown, Colin. *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 1968.
- Clark, Elizabeth A. "Elite Networks and Heresy Accusations: Towards a Social Description of the Origenist Controversy." *Semeia* 56 (1991): 79–117.
- Crouzel, Henri. *Origen*. Translated by A. S. Worrell. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.
- de Lubac, Henri. "Origen: *On First Principles*." *Communio (US)* 25 (Sum 1998): 340–56.
- Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. 2^d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.
- Fairweather, William. *Origen and Greek Patristic Theology*. New York: Scribner's, 1901.
- Grillmeier, Aloys. *Christ in Christian Tradition*. Translated by John Bowden. 2^d ed. Vol. 1. Atlanta: John Knox, 1975.
- LaPorte, Jean. "Forgiveness of Sins in Origen." *Worship* 60, no. 6 (Nov 1986): 520–27.
- Lonergan, Bernard. *The Way to Nicea*. Translated by Conn O'Donovan. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976.
- Musurillo, Herbert. "The Recent Revival of Origen Studies." *Theological Studies* 24 (Je 1963): 250–63.
- Nash, Ronald H. *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Personal Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988.
- Newman, Barbara. "Sergius Bulgakov and the Theology of Divine Wisdom." *Saint Vladimir's Theological Quarterly* 22, no. 1 (1978): 39–73.
- Norris, Richard A., Jr. trans. and ed. *The Christological Controversy*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980.
- Origen. *Commentary on the Gospel of John: Books 1–10. The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*. Vol. 80. Translated by Ronald E. Heine. Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1989.
- _____. *On First Principles*. Translated by G. W. Butterworth. New York: Harper&Row, 1966.

- Osborn, Eric. "Origen and Justification: The Good is one, there is none Good but God." *Australian Biblical Review* 24 (Oct 1976): 18–29.
- Rabinowitz, Celia. "Personal and Cosmic Salvation in Origen: *De Principiis*." *Vigiliae Christianae* 38, no. 4 (Dec 1984): 319–29.
- Sachs, John R. "Apocatastasis in Patristic Theology." *Theological Studies* 54, no. 4 (Dec 1993): 617–40.
- Scheffczyk, Leo. "Apocatastasis: Fascination and Paradox." *Communio (US)* 12 (Wint 1985): 385–97.
- Shin, Daniel. "Some Light from Origen: Scripture as Sacrament." *Worship* 73, no. 5 (Sum 1999): 399–425.
- Silva, Moisés. *Has the Church Misread the Bible? In Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation: Six Volumes in One*. Edited by Moisés Silva. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996.
- Torjesen, Karen J. "'Body,' 'soul,' and 'spirit' in Origen's Theory of Exegesis." *Anglican Theological Review* 67 (Jan 1985): 17–30.
- Trigg, Joseph W. "Origen and Origenism in the 1990s." *Religious Studies Review* 22 (Oct 1996): 301–08.
- Wiles, Maurice F. "Eternal Generation." *Journal of Theological Studies* 12 (Oct 1961): 284–91.
- Wolfson, Harry Austryn. *The Philosophy of the Church Fathers: Faith, Trinity, and Incarnation*. 3^d ed. Vol. 1. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970.