

Origen and Scripture

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Careful, contemplative reading of a short passage of Scripture is very much part of the Benedictine tradition. Many of us in the Community may finish our meditation period in this way. The origin of this kind of reading lies in the early first centuries of Christianity, when followers of Jesus were trying to understand who he was and what his teaching signified. Origen was the first to clearly express the relationship between Scripture, spiritual experience and understanding.

Rev. Professor Andrew Louth in his chapter on Origen in *'Journey to the Heart'* explains: "Everything Origen wrote, and he wrote prolifically, was concerned with the interpretation of Scripture and took the form of commentaries and sermons. It was the heart of his scholarship and his mystical theology; in fact this formed the foundation of his teaching. He probably wrote commentaries on every book of the Bible, most of which are now unfortunately lost, as some of his teaching was considered to be 'heretic' after his lifetime.

His most important extant work *'On First Principles'* contains a systematic account of how to read Scripture. Much of modern biblical scholarship concerns itself with critical analysis of individual words. Even though Origen did indulge in this to some extent, he stressed the importance of going beyond the first level of reading, that is, concentrating solely on the surface meaning of the text. The real point of reading Scripture for Origen was to

bring us to an encounter with Christ; it was essentially a spiritual experience. The voice we hear in the Scriptures is Christ speaking to us and our understanding of Scripture is a way to union with Him.

The tradition of '*Lectio Divina*', the slow meditative reading of the Scriptures that eventually leads to the marrow of the text. may be traced to him. He expresses the experience of discovering spiritual and theological meaning in Scripture through allegory often in mystical language; he speaks of a 'sudden awakening', of 'inspiration', and of 'illumination'. It is quite clear that Origen's mysticism is centred on the Word, and that the eternal Word is apprehended in Scripture.

Christianity in his view was the fulfilment of the Old Testament. Glimpses of the truth seen through Moses and the prophets were actually made flesh in Christ. The Old Testament was the history of God's dealing with his people, but Christ was the truth and the key to understanding Scripture. If we listen carefully to the Old Testament we will hear there the Gospel of Christ: for instance, Origen talks of Christ's love for his Church in his introduction to his commentary on '*The Song of Songs*': Christ is the bridegroom seeking us in love. However, the liturgical context is never far away, for Scripture would mainly have been heard in Church and most of Origen's work consisted of sermons. In the 4th century Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus made a selection of the writings from Origen, the '*Philokalia*'. Towards the beginning (in Chapter 6) they select a passage in which Origen suggests that listening to the Scriptures is like trying to listen to a symphony; you won't be able to understand it if you haven't grasped the principles of harmony. How do we learn these principles? From our life as Christians and through the Rule of Faith. With this understanding, we can hear the harmony."

Rev. Professor Andrew Louth

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