

Discerning Eternal Spiritual Meanings: Origen on Ecclesiastes

Marc Grenier

Abstract

Briefly placing Origen's views about Ecclesiastes within the social context of his life circumstances and teachings, we then outline his conception of the entire Solomonic corpus as a backdrop to help understand his particular hermeneutic towards Scripture in general. Then we identify and discuss salient patterns of interpretation which emerged from his sparse writings about various verses scattered across many sources. The most significant pattern of interpretation that emerged is Origen's tenacious pursuit of the hidden spiritual meanings underlying verses within Ecclesiastes as well as all Scripture. Ultimately, his goal of biblical reading was to distinguish the underlying eternal 'spiritual' meanings of verses from the material historical and secular ones. This hermeneutic provided the foundation upon which the second salient pattern of interpretation was grounded, namely, the consistent use of a nascent Christological paradigm to help determine the meaning of verses, both explicitly and via the application of related concepts such as sin, Heaven, Savior, Holy Spirit, soul, and demons. At times, however, Origen's Christological interpretations appeared strained and questionable as well as outside of an ancient Hebraic theology and cosmology. Another significant pattern of interpretation that surfaced was intertextual biblical referencing across both old and new covenants with heaviest emphasis on creation doctrine in Genesis as the organizing principle of interpretation. Here, too, however, sometimes the pertinence of these texts to the verse at hand was also strained and doubtful.

Keywords: Church Fathers; Ecclesiastes; allegory; spiritual reading; Christological paradigm; Heaven; sin; Scripture; materiality; Christian mysticism; hermeneutics.

It is hard to believe that the eminent early Church Father,¹ Origen (185-253 AD), was branded as a heretic in the mid-6th century by the Roman Emperor Justinian I who also issued a decree to have all of his works burned. Evidently, some of Origen's teachings seemed to call into question orthodox beliefs such as the possible salvation of Satan and the pre-existence of souls although it is highly improbable that Origen ever held any of these beliefs himself (Patrides, 1967; Pelikan, 1977). For several reasons, many Christian biblical scholars to this day consider Origen the most brilliant mind that the early church ever generated (McGuckin, 2004). Only a few reasons can be noted here given the sheer volume of his achievements and writings noted below.

The Historical Significance of Origen

Origen established the Christian School of Caesara and taught several subjects there for many years including natural history, theology, cosmology, and logic, earning him an international reputation as master on all matters pertaining to theology. In fact, many of the early Church Fathers were among his devoted pupils such as Thaumaturgus, Dionysius, and Didymus (all reviewed below). What's more, due to the full support of his close friend, Ambrose of Alexandria, a young wealthy man he had converted to Christianity from Gnosticism, Origen was able produce writings even after suffering severe injuries from imperial persecution. The eminent theologian, statesman, and

¹ Variouslly known by contemporary biblical scholars as the Church Fathers, the Apostolic Fathers, the Christian Fathers, Fathers of the Church, and here the early Church Fathers, they were a select group of ancient Christian theologians and writers viewed as most influential in establishing the intellectual and doctrinal groundwork of the Christian faith as we know it today. They lived and worked mostly from the late first to the mid-8th centuries AD, a historical period known as the Patristic Era (Peterson, 2016; Rasmussen, 2011).

later venerated as saint, Bishop Ambrose of Milan, provided Origen with a large team of stenographers, several copyists and calligraphers, a personal secretary, a house, and moneys for all of his writings to be published, among many other forms of material and spiritual support.

Consequently, he was able to produce a monumental quantity of works, somewhere between 2,000 and 6,000 writings (McGuckin, *ibid.*; Trigg, 1983). The eminent Christian historian of the Church, Eusebius, lists around 2,000 of Origen's works, while one of his pupils, St. Jerome, lists about 800 major treatises (Maier, 2007). Among these works was his massive 4-volume magnum opus, *On the first Principles*, in which he was the first to systematically establish and explicate the basic principles of Christian theology, a giant intellectual effort the results of which persist for many centuries thereafter and still impacts Christian doctrine today.

This short list of accomplishments by no means constitutes the sum total of Origen's importance to the early Christian church nor the primary significance of his contributions to Christianity as we understand it now. Many of the concepts and principles taken for granted today as essential components of historical Christian doctrine were first laid out and expressed exegetically by Origen, only a few of which can be mentioned here in brief to demonstrate the point. Consequently, he was the envy and the ire of many Christian scholars and clerics of his time.

Several beliefs and values contained within contemporary Christianity find their source in Origen's early life and teachings. For example: the ideas that Christ was both human and divine, the incorporeality of God, the allegorical interpretation of the Bible, *logos* theology, biblical hermeneutics, Christian apologetics and theology, textual criticism, the fully-developed ransom theory of atonement (which argued that the crucifixion of Christ was more or less a deal made with Satan for humanity's liberation), the preexistence of souls, the belief in the Kingdom of Heaven to come and the duty of every Christian

to live every day as if it was already present, the possibility only of universal salvation after divine purification, the free will human choice for salvation (not election for salvation), the anti-Christian nature of war (pacifism), and above all, the belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture, among other central beliefs, were all undeniable significant contributions Origen made to the development of Christian doctrine (Behr, 2019; Maier, *ibid.*; McGuckin, *ibid.*; Olson, 1999; Runia, 1999).

Given the wide expanse of time that has elapsed from antiquity since Origen's life and work, little extant works remain from the bounteous writings he produced, almost to be considered singularly miraculous with or without help. Consequently, just about everything we now know about his life circumstances, teachings, and writings comes secondhand from one of the many books (Book VI) written by the great historian of Christian antiquity, Eusebius, for whom Origen is a master Christian scholar and an eminent saint (Maier, *ibid.*; Trigg, *Ibid.*).

Origen was so critical to the development of Christianity that hardly an aspect of his life cannot be regarded as a key factor to the development of Christianity in some significant way or another. Arguably, it is doubtful that other great Christian thinkers, such as Augustine and Aquinas, for example, would have achieved such preeminence as they did without Origen's major contributions. Necessarily, we shall have to restrict our attention on the early years of his life and avoid an exhaustive review for the purposes of this study focusing on Ecclesiastes. Our modest goal here will be to briefly review some of the central features of his life to note social influences upon his doctrines and also later perhaps to contrast ideas with other Church Fathers.

Life Circumstances and Teachings

Origen was born in Alexandria in 185 or 186 AD. His father was an acclaimed professor of Greek literature and, as such, a member of the Greek prosperous class. He was also a

reverentially faithful Christian follower who practiced his beliefs openly without fear, while his mother was perhaps a member of the Greek lower classes since Origen could not obtain Roman citizenship. It was Origen's father who personally provided him with comprehensive training in literature and philosophy, something that would stay with Origen for the rest of his life and a key factor to help explain his voluminous productivity.

What's more important than Origen's intellectual schooling, however, is the primary role his father played in his spiritual training. His father also trained him intensively about the Bible and Christian doctrine, compelling Origen to memorize biblical passages on a daily basis. Therefore, very early in his life, Origen became a master of biblical texts few if any could match in his lifetime, so accomplished that even his own father couldn't answer many of his questions (Maier, *ibid.*; McGuckin, *ibid.*; Trigg, *ibid.*).

However, calamity entered Origen's relationship with his father by the time he reached seventeen years old. The Roman Emperor Severus in 202 decreed the execution of anyone who openly practiced Christianity, so Origen's father was promptly arrested and jailed. In response, young Origen prepared to incriminate himself by surrendering to authorities to be martyred alongside his father. In a last-ditch effort that worked, his mother saved his life by hiding all of his clothes, so he was unable to leave the house!

Shortly thereafter, Origen's father was publicly beheaded and the Roman authorities confiscated all of the father's property, throwing the mother and family of nine children instantly into the depths of poverty. This horrible singular event in Origen's life was to forever cement his body, mind and spirit to the Christian doctrine his father had so scrupulously taught him in his early ages (McGuckin, *ibid.*; Olson, *ibid.*; Trigg, *ibid.*).

One year or so following the death of his father, Origen was given a paid teaching position as a catechist at the Catechetical

School of Alexandria, perhaps out of sympathy for the family's dire economic situation after the father's execution. It is here that Origen developed an ascetic lifestyle that would remain with him the rest of his life.² The entire day every day was spent teaching, and the nights were spent penning treatises and commentaries on the Bible. All day long, he walked completely barefoot wearing a lengthy cloak, the only one he owned. No alcohol, a highly restricted diet, and regular intense fasting for lengthy periods of time was the common routine of his daily existence, cloistered and fully embracing to the extent possible the daily life of devotional practice dedicated to Christian worship. Despite its lack of explicit scriptural mandate, it is precisely these monastic practices that would unexpectedly restore and secure his family's well-being as well as literally seal Origen's international fame in later years.

Origen on Ecclesiastes: The Solomonic Books as Backdrop

Despite his known voluminous writings, little remains firsthand. Equally unfortunate, he preferred instead to write extensively on many other biblical texts rather than to provide us with an extensive exegetical commentary on Ecclesiastes unlike some other notable early Church Fathers who followed him, such as Jerome. Other than a very few scattered fragments of remarks on particular verses, no comprehensive Origenian commentaries on Ecclesiastes exist. Many of these fragmentary

² Generally, the aim of asceticism was to practice denial of fleshly desires for the purpose of attaining a higher spiritual level of awareness. Ascetics believed that redemption, salvation, and spirituality could only be pursued by abandoning sensual desires and pleasures. Among the main characteristics of ascetics were withdrawal from everyday society, fasting, continual prayer, living in the desert, fighting demonic forces, and celibacy or virginity. It should be noted here that there are many scriptural examples of asceticism found in the lives of the founders of first-century Christian doctrine: Jesus Christ, John the Baptist, Apostle Paul, and the 12 apostles themselves. Many of the early Christian Fathers who played key roles in developing Christian doctrine actively practiced various aspects of asceticism such as Origen, Chrysostom, Augustine, and even St. Jerome himself as we have learned. Some features of asceticism persist to this day such as fasting before Easter (Murchu, 1983; Wimbush and Valantasis, 2002).

comments were discovered within his magnum opus, *On First Principles* (Behr, 2018), various fragments in homilies (on Luke, Leviticus, and Exodus), sparse reflections on some of the Gospels (mostly Matthew and John), and fragments on Jeremiah 1.1. Fortunately, they have all been accumulated, compiled, and categorized by the eminent Oxford-trained philosopher, Dr. J. Robert Wright, in his masterful work, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (2005). Wright is now the St. Mark's Professor of Ecclesiastical History at The General Theological Seminary in New York.

Given the literal dearth of available reliable source material, we are compelled to depend heavily on Wright's text. This should not pose too much of an obstacle for objective analysis and evaluation since we do have Origen's stated views on what he believed to be all three Solomonic books of the Bible taken as a whole: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs.³ It may perhaps be possible to use these views to confirm other views about particular contentious verses in Ecclesiastes stated in other source material. As a pertinent backdrop to understanding Origen's views about particular verses, we shall begin by reviewing his overall views on the Solomonic books in general.

More to the point, Origen believed that these three books were literally spiritually written in order to enlighten and coach humanity about the nature of spiritual life. The starting premise was that spiritual life occurred in three stages, and each Solomonic book was actually an instructive guide about one of these three successive but distinctive stages. Proverbs, the beginning stage of spiritual living, was written in order to impart to humanity how to live virtuously during earthly life;

³ Song of Songs is also known as the 'Canticles', so there should be no confusion. The term Canticles itself is a derived shorthand abbreviation for the Latin phrase 'Canticum (song) canticorum' which are hymns or chants commonly used with a biblical text employed in various Christian liturgies as short pieces of sacred choral music (motets) and for daily morning and evening prayers (Alter, 2011; Garrett, 1993; Norris, 2003).

Ecclesiastes, the next spiritual stage, was aimed at teaching mankind to despise the vain and fleeting things of earthly existence; and the last spiritual stage of Song of Songs was intended to initiate spiritual human beings into the love of God (King, 2005).

It is worth reciting here Origen's more precise terms in order to fully appreciate the much broader spiritual perspective Origen is bringing to bear upon the reading of Ecclesiastes, not to mention Scripture as a whole. Origen explicitly states the following in the introduction to his Commentary on the Song of Songs:

“First, in Proverbs he (Solomon) taught the moral science, putting rules for living into the forms of short and pithy maxims, as fitting. Secondly, he covered the science known as natural in Ecclesiastes; in this, by distinguishing the useless and vain from the profitable and essential, he counsels us to forsake vanity and cultivate things useful and upright. The inspective science likewise he has propounded in this little book that we have now in hand – that is, the Song of Songs. In this he instills into the soul the love of things divine and heavenly, using for his purpose the figure of the bride and bridegroom, and teaches us that communion with God must be attained through the paths of charity and love” (Lawson et al, 1957, p. 41).

After reading these remarks, it is understandable why St. Jerome considered Origen's Commentary of the Song of Songs the best of all his commentaries, one in which he excelled himself beyond measure. It is the first Christian commentary to expound a mystical allegory (the 'bride and bridegroom' view) and the first great work of Christian mysticism (Lawson et al, *ibid.*).⁴ Perhaps a brief concluding statement or two about how

⁴ Without getting too complicated, specifically Christian mysticism is usually defined or viewed as a feeling of having some form of contact or

Origen's biblical perspective and hermeneutics fits into his general theological approach.

Several scholars have pointed out that despite Origen's masterful knowledge of secular philosophy, the foundation of his theology lies on the solid spiritual footing of the Christian Bible, with only secondary appeal to philosophical claims only if confirmed by Scripture (Greggs, 2009; Ludlow, 2013; MacGregor, 1982; McGuckin, *ibid.*; Olson, *ibid.*; Scott, 2012). For Origen, the Bible was divinely inspired overall, and in some cases like Solomon's books, divinely written without any human intermediary. The Old and New Testaments should be read together and understood according to the same prescriptive rules, not one separated from the other or studied one from the other.

In Scriptures, both the old and new covenants, he claimed that there were two distinctive types of literature: the concrete historical material narrative (*historia*) and the legislated moral guidance (what he called, *nomothesia*). Therefore, biblical text can be interpreted in three fundamentally different ways. The literal historical interpretation of scriptural passages was deemed the 'flesh' reading of those passages. The 'soul' reading was the moral or ethical message which the passage contains. The 'spirit' reading of the biblical text is the incorporeal or eternal reality which the text revealed (Ludlow, *ibid.*; McGuckin, *ibid.*).

From our review above, it's evident that he represented the three Solomonic books as examples of each of these three ways of reading Scripture. Origen felt that the 'spiritual' reading of Scripture was the most profound and significant meaning of the biblical text because those meanings are allegorical, not literal, even though historical passages are far more numerous than spiritual or allegorical ones. Often times, there are

communion with the Creator God the Father from Genesis. More generally, it is simply viewed as effecting contact with a divine or transcendent being (Gellman, 2011; Hollenback, 1996; Underhill, 1911).

contradictions between the literal interpretations, but not between the spiritual meanings underlying those passages. The ultimate test for the biblical reader is to discern the eternal 'spiritual' meanings from the material secular ones.

As we can see from this brief description of Origen's biblical hermeneutics, Origen was very much preoccupied with how to read the Bible correctly. For him, the only legitimate Christian way to read the Bible is to try to discern the hidden spiritual meaning believed to underlie it. In reading biblical texts, Origen was not so much interested in reading Scripture through the eyes of one philosophical, theological, or theoretical school or another, as many contemporary biblical scholars might be. The Bible has its own perspective and we have to tap into it.

On the other hand, nor was he interested in Scripture from a particular cultural viewpoint nor necessarily even from the author's perspective, unless it coincided with what he viewed as a legitimate spiritual hermeneutical approach. The aim was to distinguish what God was saying (spiritual reading) from what biblical writers wrote (secular material reading), and certainly not to apply one theoretical or philosophical school or another to try to understand the Bible. We need to hold this contrast firmly in mind as we pursue our review of Origen's sparse writings on Ecclesiastes below.

Origen's Fragmentary Comments on Ecclesiastes

As noted above, Origen's sparse commentaries on various verses in the Book of Ecclesiastes are widely scattered among many of his writings in the form of fragments contained mostly in various homilies, commentaries on some of the Gospels and on Jeremiah, and brief remarks within his magnum opus, *On First Principles*. Since there are well over a dozen of these fragmentary remarks on various verses written in varying lengths and for a variety of purposes, we shall have to focus our attention on a small number of contentious verses in an effort to identify and discuss salient patterns of interpretation. (Please

refer to the Appendix for a complete list of fragments about Ecclesiastes derived from Wright's book cited above.)

The first set of remarks we shall examine are various comments that were made about the vanity of human life and wisdom contained within the verses of Chapter 1 in Ecclesiastes (1: 2, 9, 14), all of these remarks sourced in First Principles and in the Prologue to Song of Songs. In his lengthy commentary in that Prologue, Origen makes several explicit analogies between the symbolism of the name of Ecclesiastes and Christ:

“I do not think it can be doubted that in a great many respects Solomon bears a type a Christ...Christ also rules in Israel because he is called Son of David...and because he is called King of kings...Christ is made for us, as well, our Ecclesiastes...” (Origen in Wright, 2005, p. 191)

Here there can be no doubt that Origen is interpreting the general meaning of Ecclesiastes from within a Christological paradigm by making analogies between Ecclesiastes and Christ. There can also be no doubt that Origen does not question the Solomonic authorship of Ecclesiastes nor the sacred status of its text.

The next four verses in Ecclesiastes that Origen looks at are all contained in his First Principles and deal with the vanity in the materiality of this world, God's creative power, and 'other worlds' existing before and after the present one. In terms of the meaning of vanity, Origen makes clear what he thinks the term means coming straight out of Genesis. From the beginning, creation 'was subjected to vanity', Origen, and goes on to explain:

“My own opinion is, that this is nothing else than the possession of bodies, for even though the stars are composed of ether they are nevertheless material. This, it seems to me, is the reason why Solomon

arraigns the whole bodily universe as being in a way burdensome and as impeding the activity of spirits...” (Origen in Wright, pp. 194-195)

As perhaps another veiled reference to what was believed to have occurred in Genesis, Origen implicitly refers to Adam and Eve’s fall from God’s grace in spiritual paradise into the material world of the Earth replete with material bodies destined to die as other material organisms. Origen’s prior emphasis that creation was subjected to materiality seems to make this interpretation plausible.

His other remarks on materiality also seems to point to the subjection of creation intimated in parts of Genesis. In Origen’s remarks on Ecclesiastes 1: 14 which underscores the vanity of all human works, he explicitly refers to the materiality of this world and all of creation as an intentional or deliberate subjection to a “bondage of corruption and vanity” by God the Father Creator Himself. In other words, everything material in creation, including human beings, has been necessarily clothed in material bodies that are corrupt precisely because they are material. Therefore, creation ‘groans’ because “it is in pain”, as Apostle Paul said, until “the time of redemption” comes when all of material creation shall be delivered, as God has promised. Vanity, then, is the result of the materiality of everything created in this world (Origen in Wright, pp. 202-203).

Origen’s two separate commentaries on the ‘nothing new under the sun’ verse in Ecclesiastes (1: 9) further elaborates upon these ideas by emphasizing how God has always exercised creative power long before earthly creation and will continue to do so afterwards. Acknowledging this fact is the way to “maintain a reverent belief in God”, he begins. “Before this world others also existed is shown by Ecclesiastes”, explains Origen. This suggests that everything that which exists ‘under the sun’ has “already existed in the ages that were before us”.

Furthermore, Origen believes that this verse in Ecclesiastes makes it “clear that God did not begin to create after spending a period of idleness”. Since there were ages and worlds before us in the present, therefore, other ages and worlds will follow ours. Drawing on support from other biblical texts like Romans, Psalms, and Isaiah, Origen asserts: “For that there will be another world after this is taught by Isaiah (Origen in Wright, pp. 199-200).

Since Origen’s brief response to the ‘a time for every event’ verse in Ecclesiastes (3: 1) is found in his commentary to Matthew’s Gospel (10: 10), it is important to provide the biblical context here. In that section of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is giving precise instructions to his twelve disciples about how to conduct themselves before commissioning them across the world. In Matt 10: 9-10, Jesus forbids his disciples to acquire any gold, silver, or copper... “or a bag for your journey, or even two coats, or sandals, or a staff; for the worker is worthy of his support”.

How Origen moves from Matthew 10:10 to ‘a time for every event under heaven’ in Ecclesiastes is challenging, to say the least, unless we focus heavily on the terms ‘time’ and ‘heaven’. However, even then the connection appears strained and speculative. Here is Origen’s full reference as cited in his commentary on Matthew:

“To everything then is its season, and a time for everything under heaven,” a time to gather the goodly pearls, and a time after their gathering to find the one precious pearl, when it is fitting for a person to go away and sell all that he has in order that he may buy that pearl” (Origen in Wright, p. 220)

Presumably, Origen here is borrowing ideas and concepts from one or two of the eight parables told by Jesus that Matthew mentions in Chapter 13 and then applies it to verse 3: 1 in Ecclesiastes, perhaps the twin parables about the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl.

In both of these parables, Jesus is trying to convey what the kingdom of heaven (God) is like, namely, a treasure hidden in a field and a precious pearl of great value. The treasure hidden in the field and the fine pearl of great value that the merchant is looking for is the Kingdom of Heaven. Since Origen mentions the term 'pearl' three times in the fragmentary comment on Matthew's Gospel cited above, arguably he is trying to tie at least this parable allegorically to the heaven concept in the Ecclesiastes verse in question: "...And there is a time for every event under heaven—" (Eccl 3: 1). How Qohelet's existential list of events that tend to occur in the earthly life of human beings becomes Origen's a time to find the invaluable 'pearl' or 'hidden treasure' of the Kingdom of Heaven (God) is peculiar, to say the least.

Since the writer of Ecclesiastes is presumably an Old Testament author writing from within an ancient Hebraic theological and cosmological paradigm, it is doubtful at best that Qohelet is here referring to the 'Kingdom of Heaven' as reflected within the Hidden Treasure and Pearl Parables expressed by Jesus in Matthew 13. It is questionable whether Qohelet's multiple and successive 'a time to' verses each refer to Origen's pearl or hidden treasure of the Kingdom of Heaven in Matthew.

In these verses, there doesn't appear to be any explicit reference to nor intimation of the present Kingdom of Heaven in everyone's hearts as the place where God rules nor the expected future Kingdom of God all assumed from the New Testament. In fact, the term 'heaven' only appears but once in the beginning of the entire Chapter 3 of Ecclesiastes to connote events that occur during earthly existence, not specifically a reference to God's abode nor present or expected kingdom.

The next two fragmentary commentaries about Ecclesiastes by Origen both refer to verse 2 in Chapter 5, a chapter which addresses the notions of fearing God reverentially, keeping your vows, and the vanity of a self-seeking life on earth:

“Do not be hasty in word or impulsive in thought to bring up a matter in the presence of God. For God is in heaven and you are on the earth; therefore, let your words be few”.

Origen’s first comment on this verse comes from his fragments where God informs the prophet Jeremiah 1 that He knew him before He formed him in the womb and consecrated him as prophet before he was born. In other words, God knew Jeremiah before there was a ‘Jeremiah’ to be known by anyone else. Origen’s take on the let-your-words-with-God-be-few advice by Qohelet is that human beings should not be so quick to discuss theology or ideas about God.

Origen’s take on God being ‘in heaven’ and humans being ‘on the earth’ is drawn from his treatise, *On Prayer*. This distinction is simply “...intended to make clear the distance between those who are in ‘the body of lowness’, and Him who is with the angels...” The implication here is that from the viewpoint of God in Heaven, the human body itself is lowly. In other words, Origen is implying that the verse is not only a reference to location. What’s more, he asserts, it’s not absurd to think that Christ is “allegorically termed ‘heaven’ “ in the quote above, and the term ‘earth’ is the church as “...the footstool for His feet.” (Origen in Wright, p. 240).

However, in the verse in question within *Ecclesiastes*, Qohelet was perhaps advising human beings to adopt a reverential and respectful attitude towards God the Father Creator of the universe, as would be expected from within an ancient Hebraic theological and cosmological paradigm. Fear God reverentially and show respect by keeping vows made to God and by choosing words wisely and carefully rather than being rash and unthoughtful or harsh, not to spew words in rapid fire mechanically or formulaically without rational filter or control. Was Qohelet talking about Christ? Probably not.

The next fragmentary remarks that Origen makes about Ecclesiastes all refer to 7: 16 and 7: 20 on the contrast between wisdom and folly, and they are spread across homilies on Luke 25 and Leviticus 12 as well as commentaries on John 20. Ecclesiastes 7: 16 states: “Do not be excessively righteous and do not be overly wise. Why should you ruin yourself?” Within his homilies on Luke 25, Origen derives from this verse the injunction of the first and greatest commandment to love only God alone with your whole heart and your whole soul and all your strength, and ‘not to love any other man or angel in the same way’.

In other words, for Origen the verse means that full and complete love is reserved only for God alone. However, the ancient Hebraic meaning of Ecclesiastes 7: 16 is not a reference to the first commandment but, rather, instructing moderation in everything by fearing God reverentially. Qohelet’s advice is not to chase after extremes in human life on earth; don’t be over-wise, over-righteous, over-wicked, or overly foolish. Fearing God will help you to avoid these extremes (Eccl 7: 18).

Ecclesiastes 7: 20 refers to: “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and who never sins”. The traditional Hebraic interpretation of this verse is fairly straightforward. Underlying the meaning of this verse is the belief rooted in the fall noted in Genesis that human beings are by nature flawed, imperfect, and sinning creatures. And since human beings are already sinful by nature, Qohelet appears to be warning us not to embrace it by denying our sinfulness and to avoid sinning intentionally and willfully since we will lose God’s favor in the process.

Origen’s basic response to Qohelet’s advice is to provide whole-hearted support for his emphasis upon the sinning nature of human beings on earth as noted in Genesis, even those people deemed just and righteous. Surely, there is no one on earth that is free from defilement or sin; ‘no one does only good and sins not’, not even those venerated as saints. Only Jesus alone is

perfect and does not sin, Origen asserts. Then Origen goes a giant step further than Qohelet by introducing an implied Satanic element within his interpretation. He notes that this means "...there is no one who has always been free of demons and has never fallen victim to their influence".

The sinful nature of human beings makes it possible for "...demons to delude us and influence us to act according to their will" (Origen in Wright, pp. 254-5). The implication, of course, is that demons exist all around human beings dressed in various guises and forms continually attempting to delude them into additional sinfulness and pull them away from worshipping and loving God.

It should be noted here, however, that ancient Judaism differs markedly from Christianity on the subject of demons. While Christian doctrine is replete with demon mythologies rooted in both the Adamic (the fall of man) and Enochic (the fall of angels) traditions, ancient Judaism did not really have a fixed set of doctrinal beliefs about demons (Mack and Mack, 1998, p. XXXIII). Accordingly, Qohelet does not use the terms demons or devils or Satan or any other term that refers directly to the actual existence of such subversive spiritual beings even though the Satanic is mentioned elsewhere within Judaism, but even there not dwelled upon as it is in Christianity.

Within Judaism, Satan is referred to in certain texts like Job, discussed by rabbis in the Talmud, and explored in the Jewish Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism). In these early Jewish sources, Satan is often mentioned as an opponent or adversary, or viewed as a sinful impulse or a force that obfuscates submission to divine will (My Jewish Learning, 2024). By contrast, what is referred to many times throughout the text of Ecclesiastes nearly from start to finish is the term 'evil'. Within an early Jewish context, it does not focus heavily upon the existence of spiritual beings who are driven by challenging God's goodness or sovereign rule over the world. Typically, evil

in ancient Judaism refers to the wicked prospering at the expense of suffering innocents (Goodman, 2017).

The final remarks about Ecclesiastes made by Origen we will be examining here refer to the final 14-verse Chapter 12. About half of these verses basically concerns the key idea of remembering God in the days of youth before death appears on the horizon, and the other half refers to ‘The Preacher’s’ purpose. Here Qohelet makes a number of interesting statements which have become fodder for much of contemporary biblical scholarship. For example, after death the “spirit will return to God who gave it”; “the words of wise men are like goads”; “excessive devotion to books is wearying to the body”; “fear God and keep His commandments”; “God will bring every act to judgment”. Interestingly enough, the entire chapter and book finishes with the term “evil”.

Origen’s four fragmentary remarks on this chapter are restricted to verses 9-14 (two remarks in his commentaries on Mathew 2 and 14: 4) and verse 12 (two remarks in his commentaries on John 5, Preface and John 5: 4). These few verses represent the final verses of the chapter, so remembering God in the days of youth are not considered by Origen. To avoid potential confusion, first we shall look at what he has to say about verse 12 in Ecclesiastes on the topic of excessive devotion to books.

In the first of two comments, Origen wholeheartedly agrees with Qohelet especially as applied to writing about the Bible. Those who “give themselves to writing on divinity” are unwisely toying with “danger which threatens from God”. But unfortunately, Origen mourns, “we...have directly transgressed the injunction” given by Ecclesiastes (Origen in Wright, p. 283). It is interesting to note here that Qohelet refers to the “devotion” to books, not the “making” of books.

In the second comment, Origen seems to address Qohelet’s reference to “delightful words” in verse Eccl 12:10 and “the

words of wise men are like goads” in verse Eccl 12: 11. We note here that Qohelet does not mention that speaking or writing “many words” is necessarily a problem nor does he relate speaking many words with the likelihood of sinning. However, Origen seems to come to a much different interpretation. He adopts the view that Qohelet is advising people to avoid using too many words because Solomon in Proverbs has previously stated that “in a multitude of words you will not escape sins”. If that is the case, quips Origen, then “Solomon himself has not escaped the sin”. In other words, Solomon contradicts his own advice between different books he has written (Origen in Wright, p. 283).

In the next two fragmentary comments, Origen appears to respond broadly to Eccl 12: 9-14. However, both the first and second comments again refers more specifically to a phrase contained in Eccl 12: 11: “the words of wise men are like goads...” In both comments, Origen applies a Christological perspective to certain concepts in the verse. “All the Scriptures are ‘Words of the wise are like goads...they are given by one shepherd”, asserts Origen. “But the Word is the one Shepherd of things rational”. But this “Word” may be accepted very well by “those who do not have ears to hear”. Origen here appears to be contrasting Qohelet’s comment on the ‘words’ of wise men with the ‘Word’ of God as represented in the Holy Bible.

In the second comment, Origen employs a reference to the same verse for the purpose of illustrating the harmony between the old and new covenants or “before the bodily advent of the Savior and of the new covenant.”⁵ Again, he introduces a

⁵ The word ‘covenant’ is more or less the ancient biblical equivalent to our modern term, ‘contract’, and it essentially established the terms and conditions of the relationship between God and his chosen people. From Genesis to Revelation in the Bible, many different covenants like this are mentioned, but the five primary ones are: Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic. The expression ‘Old Covenant’ is an archaic biblical reference originally from the Book of Jeremiah 31: 31-34 to the ‘Law’ of the 10 Commandments (plus hundreds more) handed down by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai circa 1400 BCE. As recorded in the Old Testament, these Laws established the rules governing how the people of Israel must

Christological perspective to bridge that harmony through selective use of concepts such as Savior, heaven, Father, and Holy Spirit. “Prayers” unites the Old and New Covenants in the sense that whatever is asked from God “the Father in heaven..., it shall be done”.

The implication here is that praying to the God of the old covenant is the same as praying to the God of the new covenant because it is, in effect, the same creator God. Therefore, prayers (to God) unite the two covenants. But just in case more evidence is needed regarding the harmonious link between the Old and New Covenants: “And if also you desire the third that unites the two” covenants, “it is the Holy Spirit” (Origen in Wright, p. 283).

Here it is clear that Origen is reaching into his reservoir of Christological concepts to forge interpretations of verses within Ecclesiastes. However, as we noticed above, often such interpretations are highly unlikely to be accurate interpretations of a text written from within an ancient Hebraic theological and cosmological paradigm. It almost goes without saying that the author of Ecclesiastes was not a New Testament author. But this is not to state nor imply that Origen was not one of the great original thinkers of the Christian doctrine.

Conclusion

We have now concluded our examination of Origen’s overall and particular views about the Book of Ecclesiastes, and how his interpretation of Ecclesiastes is based on his view of the spiritual meaning of the entire corpus of Solomonic books. We began by placing these views within an appropriate social context of his life situation and general teachings to help us better understand his religious thinking. Then we

live according to God. By contrast, the ‘New Covenant’ refers to the ‘good news’ of Christ’s saving grace for humanity or more accurately, what the Creator God the Father has done for humanity through Christ. Both of these ‘covenants’ derive from the Creator God, therefore (Coogan, 2009; Robertson, 1987).

systematically reviewed and discussed his fragmentary remarks on specific verses scattered across a number of different writings that were restored and compiled in Wright's masterful text. Perhaps we are now in a propitious position to outline key patterns of interpretation that have emerged from our findings.

Generally, Origen's aim was to try to discern eternal spiritual meanings and messages from the secular material historical ones within the text of Ecclesiastes based on a prior belief that Scripture was divinely inspired and, as such, contained hidden spiritual meanings that needed to be uncovered and shared. These eternal spiritual meanings were believed to be largely allegorical in nature rather than literal or historical. There was no real attempt to try to understand Ecclesiastes from within the ancient Hebraic theological and cosmological perspective out of which it had presumably emerged, although many Origenian interpretations seemed to be in agreement or at least consistent with it nonetheless.

Another salient pattern of interpretation that emerged was the explicit application of a nascent Christological paradigm to assist understanding of particular verses often under the influence of allegorical hermeneutics such as the 'bride and bridegroom' view of Christ and his Church, the 'pearl' view of the Kingdom of Heaven, the Christ is 'heaven' allegory, or the Church as 'footstool' allegory. The name of Christ was invoked numerous times throughout these fragmentary remarks and applied to a number of different verses within Ecclesiastes sometimes in ways that stretch imagination.

The application of a Christological paradigm was also done implicitly through using the core principles, values, and concepts attached to a Christological paradigm such as soul, heaven, sin, Savior, Holy Spirit, and so forth). Whether explicitly invoking Christ's name or implicitly through concepts, the aim was to doggedly pursue the spiritual meanings he was already predisposed to believe lay hidden behind the verses of Ecclesiastes.

Lastly, a final interpretative pattern that materialized was a measured tendency to appeal to other biblical texts from both the Old and New Testaments to support a spiritual interpretation of a particular verse or text in Ecclesiastes. Genesis by far appeared to be the central Organizing biblical text underpinning Origen’s interpretative framework. Often times, however, other biblical referencing appeared strained and questionable.

Appendix

Eccles.	Topic	Source
1:1	Name of Ecclesiastes	Com. In Prol., Song of Songs)
1:2	Vanity Possession of Material Bodies	First Principles, 1.7.5
1:9	God Exercised His Creative Power	First Principles. 1.4.5
1:9	On the Ages Beyond This Age	First Principles, 3.5.3
1:14	Vanity Result of Materiality of World	First Principles, 1.7.5
3:1	Time to Find a Pearl of Great Price	Com. on Matt 10: 10
5:2	We Should Not Hasten to Disc. Theology	Frag. on Jeremiah 1:1
5:2	Those on Earth and in Heaven	On Prayer, 23.4
7:13	Total Love is Reserved for God Alone	Homs. on Luke 25: 6
7:20	Be Not Deluded by Demons	Com. on John 20: 32-8
7:20	Only Jesus is Without Sin	Homs. on Lev 12: 3.2
8:11	God Deals with Each as Each Deserves	Against Celsus, 8.52
9:8	Washed in Baptism	Homs. on Exo 11: 7
12:9-14	Reproach May Appear Discordant	Com. on Matt 2
12:9-14	Harmony of the Old & New Testaments	Com. On Matt 14: 4
12:12	Avoid Writing Many Books	Com. on John 5, Pref
12:12	Avoid Too Many Words	Com. On John 5:4

⁵ The word 'covenant' is more or less the ancient biblical equivalent to our modern term, 'contract', and it essentially established the terms and conditions of the relationship between God and his chosen people. From Genesis to Revelation in the Bible, many different covenants like this are mentioned, but the five primary ones are: Adamic, Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic. The expression 'Old Covenant' is an archaic biblical reference originally from the Book of Jeremiah 31: 31-34 to the 'Law' of the 10 Commandments (plus hundreds more) handed down by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai circa 1400 BCE. As recorded in the Old Testament, these Laws established the rules governing how the people of Israel must live according to God. By contrast, the 'New Covenant' refers to the 'good news' of Christ's saving grace for humanity or more accurately, what the Creator God the Father has done for humanity through Christ. Both of these 'covenants' derive from the Creator God, therefore (Coogan, 2009; Robertson, 1987).

Sources

- Alter, R. 2011. *The Art of Biblical Poetry*. New York: Basic Books.
- Behr, J. trans. 2019. *Origen: On First Principles*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chapman, J. 2018 (1909). *Dionysius of Alexandria*. **IN** *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol 5. New York: Robert Appleton Co.
- Coogan, M.D. 2009. *A Brief Introduction to the Old Testament*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Garrett, D. 1993. *Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*. Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group.
- Gellman, J. 2011. *Mysticism*. **IN** E.N. Zalta. ed. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Goodman, L.E. 2017. *Judaism and the Problem of Evil*. Chapter 10. **IN** C. Meister and P.K. Moser. eds. *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Greggs, T. 2009. *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hollenback, J.B. 1996. *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment*. University Park, PA: Penn State Press.
- King, J.C. 2005. *Origen and the Spiritual Reading of the Song of Songs*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lawson, R.P. et al. 1957. *Ancient Christian Writers, Origen: The Song of Songs, Commentary and Homilies*. Westminster, MD: Newman Press.

- Ludlow, M. 2013. Spirit and Letter in Origen and Augustine. **IN** P.S. Fiddes and G. Bader. eds. *The Spirit and the Letter: A Tradition and a Reversal*, pp. 87-102. New York & London: T & T. Clark.
- MacGregor, G. 1982. *Reincarnation as a Christian Hope*. New York: Springer.
- Maier, P.L. trans. 2007 (1890). *Eusebius, The Church History*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic Pubs.
- Mack, C.K. and D. Mack. 1998. *A Field Guide to Demons, Fairies, Fallen Angels and Other Subversive Spirits*. New York: Henry Holt and Co.
- McGuckin, J.A. 2004. *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.
- Meister, C. and P.K. Moser. eds. 2017. *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. My Jewish Learning.com. 2024. Beliefs & Practices. "Do Jews Believe in Satan?" **IN** Newsletter of My Jewish Learning.
- Murchu, D.O. 1983. "Early Christian Asceticism and Its Relevance Today." **IN** *Irish Theological Quarterly* 50 (2-4) June: 83-117.
- Norris, R.A. 2003. *The Song of Songs*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Olson, R.E. 1999. *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Patrides, C.A. 1967. "The Salvation of Satan". **IN** *Journal of the History of Ideas* 28 (4) October-December: 467-478.
- Pelikan, J. 1977. *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition: 100-600*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Peterson, J.B. 2016 (1913). *The Apostolic Fathers*. **IN** C. Herbermann. ed. *Catholic Encyclopedia*. New York: Robert Appleton Co.
- Rasmussen, A. 2011. "Who Are the Fathers of the Church? A Chronological List". **IN** *Catholic Theology*, June 10.
- Robertson, O.P. 1987. *The Christ of the Covenants*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing.
- Runia, D.T. 1999. *Philo and the Church Fathers: A Collection of Papers*. Leiden: Brill.
- Scott, M.S.M. 2012. *Journey Back to God: Origen on the Problem of Evil*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Trigg, J.W. 1983. *Origen: The Bible and Philosophy in the Third-Century Church*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press.
- Underhill, E. 1911. *Mysticism*. London: Methuen.
- Wimbush, V.L. and R. Valantasis. 2002. *Asceticism*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Wright, J.R. ed. 2005. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament IX: Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Zalta, E.N. ed. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.