

In Him All Things Hold Together

Origen's Hermeneutics as Engaged Systematics

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the spiritual hermeneutics of Origen as presented by Henri de Lubac through the lens of Graham Ward's concept of *engaged systematics*, which can be summarized as the idea that Christian doctrine is meant to be lived. The thesis finds that Origen's central interpretive key for biblical exegesis is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and that his primary criterion of sound exegesis is that it helps the Christian community conform to Christ's example. The conclusion draws implications for the relationship between biblical exegesis and systematic theology, among others that the *telos* of systematic theology is not objective knowledge through information but embodied discernment through inculturation. It also suggests that such inculturation requires instruction and practice in prayer and spiritual guidance and that the Bible's role is best fulfilled through *lectio divina*.

Keywords: *Origen, Henri de Lubac, Graham Ward, allegory, engaged systematics.*

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1. Introduction

Historian Brad S. Gregory has said that “[a]s a historical and empirical reality between the early Reformation and the present, ‘Protestantism’ is an umbrella designation of groups, churches, movements, and individuals whose only common feature is a rejection of the authority of the Roman Catholic Church”.¹ In other words, Protestants of all stripes share *sola scriptura*² in common and really nothing else – not what it means that the Bible is authoritative, how it should be interpreted or even what it actually says. This has in turn given rise to so diverse understandings of who God is, what salvation is, what the Church is and what humans are that ecumenical dialogue sometimes becomes little more than an exercise in equivocation – we all use the same words to express fundamentally different ideas.³ These differences have thereafter been institutionalized in confessional seminaries and theological faculties that have simply not been able to agree upon what theology is finally supposed to amount to.

Whatever one makes of Gregory’s description of Protestantism, he does identify an important problem: in reality, *sola scriptura* is practiced precisely nowhere, because texts do not interpret themselves (unless “1.3. Method” below is completely wrong). So how can the Bible be situated in an interpretive grid that lets us understand it? Academic biblical scholarship responds to the challenge by relating the text, as a whole as well as piece by piece, to its various textual and historical dimensions – genre, structure, philology, intertextuality, compositional history, reception history, contexts cultural, economic, political, religious and so forth – and by applying various interpretive theories from other fields – narrative analysis, discourse analysis, queer theory, feminist theory, Marxist theory, postcolonial analysis and so on *ad infinitum*.

If these various approaches shed light on various aspects of the text as text, the problem of theological diversities and tensions outlined by Gregory remains unresolved, if not exacerbated. It is still unclear how the Bible relates to the theological task as an academically legitimate discipline. What makes the Bible anything more than a historical curiosity, anything more than a testament to how some people in some times and places lived and thought about God and the world? What role does it actually have to play in the search for knowledge about God? Simply put: why is the Bible something we study at theological faculties?

¹ Gregory 2012, 94.

² The idea that the Bible is the only necessary and sufficient authority for Christians for truth and morality against which all other purported authorities must be tested.

³ See Gregory 2012, esp. chapter 2 “Relativizing Doctrines” for an overview.

1.1 Research Question

What is the place and role of systematic theology and how does the Bible fit into the theological task? That is the question we will begin to explore in this thesis – but it is too big to give a clear answer here. We will therefore begin that exploration by investigating whether the ‘premodern’ approach to theology and exegesis exemplified in the Church Fathers can provide resources for theology and exegesis in our current ‘postmodern’ cultural context.

Due to space limitations we will obviously need to look at select examples. In regard to premodern theology and exegesis, a good place to start may be the Church Father Origen (185–254) whose allegorical interpretation was highly influential on subsequent theology. At the same time, allegorical exegesis is roundly rejected in modern biblical research due to its purportedly arbitrary character. Is that rejection wise and warranted, or might a closer look at Origen reveal a hidden treasure that may enrich the work of theology?

Looking to the postmodern context we find the theologian Graham Ward, who stands in some continuity with the Radical Orthodoxy project which seeks to articulate theology out of a “critical reception of postmodernism”.⁴ Another feature of Radical Orthodoxy and Ward’s work is their continuity with the *nouvelle théologie* movement and its ideal of *ressourcement* (see “1.2 Material”), which means that Ward has some familiarity and affinity with the Church Fathers. Thus, Origen and Ward, jointly forming a theological bridge between premodern and postmodern contexts, will provide the material for this thesis.

The research question thus becomes: Can Ward’s concept of *engaged systematics* shed light on Origen’s exegetical approach? Can that exegetical approach in turn yield fruitful resources for systematic theology today? There are a few different parts to this question that must be unpacked. First, what does Ward mean by *engaged systematics*? What characterizes it and what is its purpose? Second, what characterizes Origen’s biblical hermeneutics? Where does it come from and what does it lead to? And third, how does *engaged systematics* relate to Origen’s hermeneutics? How does it problematize or clarify Origen’s hermeneutics as a resource for contemporary theology?

1.2 Material

In 1950, French Catholic scholar Henri de Lubac (1896–1991) published *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*.⁵ The work was born out of de Lubac’s conviction that a *ressourcement*⁶ of the writings of the Church Fathers was imperative to revitalize contemporary

⁴ Milbank and Ward 2008, 156.

⁵ de Lubac 2007.

⁶ *Ressourcement*, French for “return to the sources” and one of the central themes for the *nouvelle théologie* movement here described.

Catholic theology and bring it into contact with the practical life of faith. In this conviction he was joined by several others in a movement known as *nouvelle théologie*. The book has proved an influential study on its topic and shaped much of later Origen scholarship by questioning and clarifying many earlier misconceptions, and his views have remained relevant in later research (see “1.4 Research Overview”). It is a 500-page thematization and critical analysis of Origen’s exegetical approach based on a broad reading of the extant primary sources in Latin and Greek – systematic works, biblical commentaries and homilies – and conducted in dialogue with the full breadth of scholarship on Origen up to that time. While working with the primary sources would have been preferred, the limited space of this thesis makes a robust direct engagement with Origen’s work impossible due to his expansive authorship and my own lack of proficiency in Latin and Greek. *History and Spirit* will therefore serve as our window on Origen’s thought.

How the Light Gets In: Ethical Life I was published 2016 by Graham Ward (1955–), an Anglican priest, Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Oxford and one of the most prominent contemporary systematic theologians.⁷ The book is the first and, as of this writing, only published volume of a four-part systematic theology in the making – the first systematic theology to be written in the vein of Radical Orthodoxy, a school of thought that began as the joint project of Graham Ward, John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock with their publication of *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* in 1999.⁸ Radical Orthodoxy is also inspired by the *nouvelle théologie* movement and shares especially its concern with bringing together doctrine and life, which means that we may expect strong theological agreements between de Lubac and Ward. Ward has also met recent interest among Swedish theologians, as shown by Peter Carlsson’s doctoral thesis⁹ at Göteborg University and Samuel Åsbergs master’s thesis¹⁰ at Åbo Akademi. The main focus of the first volume of *How the Light Gets In* is to present Ward’s way of writing theology, primarily through a historical and theological exploration of the interconnectedness of doctrine and cultural practices, in which he outlines the concept of *engaged systematics*.

1.3 Method

This thesis is a literature study, which is never an entirely straightforward enterprise. Philosopher Paul Ricoeur spoke of the interpretation of texts as a “hermeneutical arch” which consists of three logical (though not necessarily chronological) steps: first, “an immediate and uncritical listening to the text”; second, “a methodical analysis of some kind”; and third, “a critically examined

⁷ Ward 2016.

⁸ Milbank, Pickstock and Ward (ed.) 1999.

⁹ Carlsson 2017.

¹⁰ Åsberg 2018.

understanding, which can lead to [...] the formulation of new texts, which lead the interpretive process onward”.¹¹

Following these insights, my method is to attempt as careful and inductive a first reading of *History and Spirit* as possible (knowing full well that the ‘inductive’ part is, strictly speaking, *impossible*). Then, a second reading of the same after having appropriated Ward’s concept of *engaged systematics* through a thorough reading of *How the Light Gets In* with a view to how it presents the idea of *engaged systematics*. In the second reading I thus try to see if Ward’s insights into the nature of theology as *engaged* can help shed light on aspects of Origen’s hermeneutic such as de Lubac presents it.

It is perhaps necessary to acknowledge the complex nature of texts as such and the difficulty this creates for establishing their meaning(s). Vikström notes that the meaning of a text cannot be reduced to its origins (as though it were rigidly bound to its author), its contents (as though it were perfectly self-contained in a vacuum) nor its reception (as though it were utterly subject to the whim of the reader), while at the same time it subsists somewhere in the interplay of all three at once.¹² For this reason it is important not only to read the text but also to get some sense of the background of the text as well as what the author of this bachelor thesis brings to the conversation. The main text of this thesis, *History and Spirit*, is all the more complex for being a secondary source whose object, in turn, is the many texts of Origen. Some context necessary for understanding both Henri de Lubac and Origen and guarding against anachronisms will therefore be provided in “1.4 Research Overview”, and my interpretation of *History and Spirit* must be attentive to the fact that the book contains two different voices and try to discern which is which so as not to misrepresent either one.

As for my own perspective, let me be upfront and say that I resonate deeply with the *nouvelle théologie* and Radical Orthodoxy movements’ central concern of integrating theology with life by moving beyond the premises of modernity to learn from the Church Fathers. As such I am predisposed to sympathize with both Ward and de Lubac, and so my foremost ambition in this thesis is not so much to critically examine and learn *about* them but to carefully engage and learn *from* them. The latter presupposes something of the former, to be sure, and while the conclusion of this thesis involves critical evaluation, it attempts mainly to see what the implications for exegesis and theology may be if one accepts what Ward and de Lubac say. As such, I am aware that there is quite a lot of room, and need, to ask further critical questions to Ward and de Lubac, but for now I leave that to other times and places.

¹¹ Vikström 2005, 28, my translation.

¹² Ibid., 63f.

1.4 Research Overview

1.4.1 Jean Daniélou

One of Henri de Lubac's most important interlocutors was his student Jean Daniélou (1905–74). Daniélou wrote against the split he saw, in the strictly neo-Thomistic theological mainstream of the early 1900s, between the Catholic academy and lived spirituality. He published an article in 1946 that became symbolic of the *nouvelle théologie* movement, in which he proposed that theology must treat God not as object but as subject. This necessitated avoiding all tendencies toward objective systematizing and explanation as though the goal was to “grasp and overcome mystery”, and instead fulfilling the proper task of theology to “enter into mystery’s hidden depths”.¹³ This would require a proper retrieval of Scripture and its spiritual interpretation by the Church Fathers which, with the selective aid of contemporary philosophy regarding the significance of history and of personal subjectivity, would effect a reintegration of theology and lived spirituality.¹⁴ The “general framework” of this spiritual exegesis he traced via Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395) and Origen back to the Hellenic-Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25 BC–AD ca. 40).¹⁵

In Origen's spiritual exegesis, Daniélou perceived two parallel yet distinct interpretive modes: one was typology, which meant that the symbolic significance of certain earlier historical realities (‘types’) in the Bible was both retained in and further revealed by certain later ones (‘antitypes’) – ultimately climaxing in Christ and the Church – and which he deemed thoroughly biblical.¹⁶ The other mode was allegory, which, unlike typology, Daniélou criticized for spiritualizing every little detail of the text and disconnecting its significance from the historical realities it described, veering too close to Gnosticism.¹⁷

1.4.2 Henri Bouillard

The work of Henri Bouillard (1908–81), another *nouvelle* theologian, centred on the nature of theological language, particularly on the ontological and epistemological implications of Thomas Aquinas's doctrine of *analogia entis*. His interlocutor Karl Barth (1886–1968) rejected the doctrine because he understood it as saying that God and Creation are so essentially *similar* that the conceptual content of words is the same when applied to God as when applied to created things, so that truthful speech about God is univocally descriptive; if I know what it means to say that my wife is good, I thereby know exactly what it means to say that God is good – only that God is more so. Bouillard

¹³ Boersma 2009, 5.

¹⁴ Ibid., 2–4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 169.

¹⁶ Ibid., 171–178.

¹⁷ Ibid., 171, 184–188.

defended the doctrine as instead saying that, because Creation *participates* in God's existence such that God and Creation are radically different yet intimately close, we only use certain words about God because their conceptual content analogically *approximates* the truth about what is signified, while we can never fully know that truth. The conceptual similarities are in fact there, but they are always accompanied by an even greater dissimilarity. Thus, truthful speech about God is never anything other than metaphorical; if I know what it means to say that my wife is good, I thereby have a sense, and a sense only, of what it might mean to say that God is good.¹⁸

Even though the concept of *analogia entis* is not directly related to our research question, it is included here as a significant part of Ward's theological background which will prove important for understanding aspects of his thought. It also serves to elucidate the basic logic of the allegorical-interpretive tradition. Whenever the word 'participation' appears in the text below, it is with this principle of *analogia entis* in mind.

1.4.3 Andrew Louth

On allegorical interpretation, Andrew Louth, Emeritus Professor of Patristic and Byzantine Studies at Durham University, writes that the early Christians, in line with the common way of approaching 'inspired writings' in general at that time, read the Old Testament (OT) allegorically because they insisted it spoke prophetically about Jesus – not just the prophets, but all of it regardless of genre – since he was its fulfilment. This interpretive tradition began not with Origen but with the New Testament (NT) itself.¹⁹ Reading the Bible in such a way was a matter of spiritual discipline, "of entering more deeply into the 'mystery' of Christ [...], and that entry is effected as much by faithful Christian living as by deeper theological interpretation (indeed for Origen the latter requires the former)".²⁰ Christ and the Church he had founded was the given reality; Scripture provided the language to live in and reflect on that reality, and allegory "was a way of freeing the text of scripture from the confines of its original context of utterance so that it could be a vehicle for the word of Christ to the contemporary church".²¹ As history then led to a ruptured Church tradition (the East/West split as well as the later Reformation), there was no common tradition upon which to reflect in a common language, only rival traditions upon which to insist, and so the poetic nature of allegory made it problematic – perhaps impossible.²²

¹⁸ Ibid., 104–108.

¹⁹ Louth ADBI, 12.

²⁰ Ibid., 13.

²¹ Ibid., 14.

²² Ibid.

1.4.4 Frances Young

Frances Young, Emeritus Professor at the University of Birmingham specializing in the history of doctrine, summarizes, in an overview based on the works of about thirty different Origen scholars, five characteristics ascribed to Origen's exegetical approach that are "repeated in standard literature":

- 1) Literalism is for the Jews, spiritual interpretation for the Christians;
- 2) Scripture has three levels of meaning analogous to the three parts of the human creature (body, soul, spirit). Before Origen, Philo of Alexandria said something similar (but with only two parts, body and soul), and so he likely got it from him;
- 3) Some things in the Bible are just obviously false, and the Holy Spirit put them there to provoke readers to search for deeper meanings;
- 4) In Jewish interpretive tradition, every little detail of the text is significant, and Origen adopted this view, resulting in manifold allegories of little substance;
- 5) The unity of the Bible consists in the Holy Spirit's inspiration of it, whose goal was to impart spiritual truths in narrative dress.²³

Young then notes that it is common to see Origen's allegorical approach as appropriated from Greek thought, when in fact he got it from the Bible itself, not least Hebrews and the letters of Paul.²⁴ One problem that causes misunderstandings in much scholarship on Origen's exegesis is that it usually begins with Origen's book *Peri Archon*, which is a problematic text because of its apologetic character and because it does not actually aim to outline any interpretive method.²⁵ Methodologically, Origen tended rather to work with the same exegetical tools as were commonly used in "the schools of grammar, rhetoric, and philosophy in the Greco-Roman world": textual criticism, philology, relating the text to any and all other kinds of knowledge, the distinction in rhetoric between content and wording, refutation or confirmation of the plausibility of texts and, finally, moral judgment.²⁶

Elsewhere, Young remarks that Origen simply takes for granted, due to what he has been taught by the Church, that Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit and therefore has a deeper level of meaning than only the immediate one.²⁷ If he draws parallels between scriptural interpretation and a tripartite anthropology (see 2) above), in practice he rarely expounds three distinct interpretations of any scriptural text; "He favours a multiplication of meanings and possibilities, and eschews any criteria for deciding what is the 'right' meaning".²⁸ This does not, however, mean that Origen disregards the literal, or historical, meaning of the text; he mostly accepts it as historically true and significant, while

²³ Young 2003, 335.

²⁴ Ibid., 335f.

²⁵ Ibid., 338.

²⁶ Ibid., 339–41.

²⁷ Young ADBI, 501.

²⁸ Ibid., 502.

sometimes finding details in the text so obviously impossible for him (not least among the OT laws) that their only purpose must be to force the reader to search for deeper meanings.²⁹

Young outlines three reasons behind Origen's exegetical approach. One reason is the precedent already set in the NT by interpretations of OT texts in letters such as Romans, First Corinthians, Galatians and Hebrews, as well as Christians of earlier generations.³⁰ Here Young notes that "the allegorical approach to the OT was far from arbitrary, drawing its themes and finding its justification by precise cross-reference to other biblical texts".³¹

A second reason is apologetical, particularly in response to the then-current Marcionite tendency to read both Testaments strictly literally, thereby finding the OT to describe one, wrathful god and the NT another, loving god. Origen replies that God always communicates in a historically contextualized way: "just as a doctor inflicts pain in order to heal, so God appears to be angry and to punish, but it is all for the salvation of his loved ones".³² Therefore the anthropomorphic language of the OT must be taken figuratively if we want to understand who God truly is.

Thirdly, while Origen wholeheartedly accepted the truth of the apostolic witness, that apostolic witness did not say everything about everything; "many questions remained unanswered" such as regarding "providence, free will, etc."³³ These issues he considered legitimate and necessary to explore further in order to connect the Gospel to all other human knowledge about the world.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 502f.

³¹ Ibid., 502.

³² Ibid., 503.

³³ Ibid.

2. Graham Ward's *Engaged Systematics*

This chapter aims to present Graham Ward's theological approach, which he calls *engaged systematics*, as concisely yet fully as possible. That approach will then serve as the basis for trying to understand Origen's biblical hermeneutics in chapter 3.

2.1 *Engaged Systematics* through History

Theological discourse always comes from somewhere, is spoken by someone, and is legitimated or delegitimated by some institution implicated in particular sets of social and cultural relations. But theological discourse [...] can pretend it comes from nowhere. It can even announce that it comes directly from God. It can forget the multiple mediations that both effect and provide the possibility for its production. When this happens dogmatics becomes abstract and its truth-claims propositional.³⁴

Ward shows how this tendency toward theological abstraction is a recurrent theme in the story of the Church by looking at three distinct examples of systematic theological education, which together also sketch the historical development of systematic theology. Briefly recounting these examples will help us understand Ward's idea of *engaged systematics*.

2.1.1 The Creeds and Cyril of Jerusalem

The “earliest forms of systematic theological reflection” were the creeds – those formalized confessions of the faith of which the Nicene (and perhaps the Apostolic) Creed has proven the most central for subsequent theology.³⁵ These creeds had their material roots in various sources – rules of faith, personal confessions and baptismal questionings – all of which came about as part of the ongoing attempt to understand how “what is believed can be held as believable and practiced”.³⁶ They then came together through a long, tumultuous process of ecclesial and political struggle played out in the whole complex of discourses of the time, all while Church relations to the Roman emperors vacillated between explicit enmity and ambivalent alliance: “The gospel had to announce itself from within myriad belief-systems, ideologies, and superstitions”.³⁷ The point here is that the early creeds cannot be understood as comprehensive “sets of formal and declaratory propositions” summarizing in timelessly objective terminology the essential data points of Christianity, discovered through systematic analysis by coolheaded reason, cognitive assent to which equals being Christian. Rather,

³⁴ Ward 2016, 116.

³⁵ Ibid., 8.

³⁶ Ibid., 9.

³⁷ Ibid., 12.

the creeds as a whole were “grammars for the faith; maps to the territory to be explored existentially and intellectually as one grew and was formed in the faith”, thoroughly embedded in their historical circumstances and somewhat fluid in their wordings for quite some time.³⁸ The semantic fields of words such as “peace” or “salvation”, “born” or “flesh” – all part of those early theological debates – were informed not only by Scripture and Judeo-Christian tradition but also political considerations (not least imperial claims of *Pax Romana* as the salvation of the world) and medical knowledge (such as the Aristotelian understanding of sex and physiology), to name only a few examples.³⁹ Thus the creedal formulations are better understood as fumblingly grasping after the least problematic way to articulate, in particular historical circumstances, why the Church believes and lives the way it does, rather than perfectly encapsulating in impeccable phrasing what everyone must forever think in order to be Christian; and indeed it was only later, as “the Nicene Creed was increasingly detached from its liturgical basis in baptism”,⁴⁰ that it took on the latter role and eventually became “a public declaration of theo-political allegiance”.⁴¹

But before this disembedding of the creeds, Ward considers Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 313–386) as an example of *engaged systematic* pedagogy. When Cyril taught theology to the catechumens under his charge, something similar to the Nicene Creed was indeed part of their education, but “‘orthodoxy’ for Cyril was less a matter of obedience to Nicene doctrine than of right worship”.⁴² His lectures were purposefully given inside the basilica built near Golgotha, a place of historical and spiritual significance; focused on biblical examples of repentance understood as “turning to Christ in enquiry” and the biblical background of the language in the creedal formulations; involved all the bodily senses of the catechumens in liturgical practices; and always “move[d] towards a concluding doxology”.⁴³ Indeed:

the system and order of the creed itself becomes the vehicle for a participation in which those being illuminated glimpse their true destiny, eternal life. Deliberated upon, the creed performs a preparation of the soul to ‘enjoy its spiritual and heavenly mysteries’ and ‘discover in each particular the greatness of the gifts bestowed on you by God’.⁴⁴

In short, the goal and form of the theological education – including the use of the creed – was embodied formation rather than intellectual information; engaged entry into the life of faith rather

³⁸ Ibid., 13.

³⁹ Ibid., 16–24.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 15.

⁴¹ Ibid., 25.

⁴² Ibid., 33.

⁴³ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 33.

than detached reflection on the articles of faith; learning how to speak of all things Christianly rather than learning how to say certain Christian things.

2.1.2 The *Summae* and Hugh of Saint-Victor

Fast forward to the 1100s: in a Europe that is finally exiting “a time of conquest and invasion, insecurity and change”, ideals of reformation and universal order are becoming all the rage.⁴⁵

A new language for what it was to be a Christian emerged; to learn this language was to see the world in a new and ordered way. This soteriology drew together reflections upon the operative power of the Trinity, upon Christ as the Wisdom of God and His incarnation, upon human beings as plastic and fashionable under the restorative powers of grace, and upon the Church as participating in and as an extension of the mystery of life in Christ.⁴⁶

In this context the Bible was primarily read as testifying to a cosmic order which in itself was understood as the expression of Christ – God’s Wisdom – so that the universe was seen as suffused with his salvific presence.⁴⁷ The proper place of the Bible was for it to be read and meditated upon by diving deeper through three consecutive levels – from the literal through the moral to the spiritual – and this practice gave rise to “a world that is itself sacramental”, because in everything as in the Scriptures, it was understood that “the material is symbolic”.⁴⁸ Thus, contemplation of the cosmic order through *lectio divina* meant participating in and being transformed by Christ.

But something happened. New theology schools cropped up in the European cities, and they needed textbooks. These textbooks, beginning with *Sic et Non* by Peter Abelard in the 1120s, gathered together the vast scope of often conflicting biblical commentary from Fathers and theologians throughout history and organized it according to the order of the articles in the old creeds. Instead of trying to resolve the contradictions, Abelard left these to serve in the “two educational methods developed by the schools: the *quaestio* and the *disputandi*”.⁴⁹ The pedagogical goal was to provoke endlessly detailed debate; theological abstraction was afoot yet again.

Hugh of Saint-Victor (1096–1141) responded with his own educational material, “the first of the great *Summa* [*sic*] of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries”.⁵⁰ *De sacramentis*, published around 1132. For Hugh, who lived in feudal France where societal stability was ever subject to the violent whims of aristocratic rivalries, theological order was strongly tied to justice; theological education

⁴⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 42–45.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 46f.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 48.

must help the Church to “inculcate an ethical living beyond the monastery and into public life”.⁵¹ To this end, Hugh’s theology took the shape not of creedal exposition but rather of “a theological presentation of the bible [*sic*]” by means of the threefold exegesis mentioned above, and it all followed the “twofold structure” of *creation* and *restoration*.⁵² Especially the creation of humanity and its restoration in Christ became important here, concretely understood as the Church: a renewed humanity continually transformed through its participation in Christ – and that participation, significantly, amounted to “the vision of God” through scriptural contemplation, of which *De sacramentis* was itself an example.⁵³ In other words, “Hugh himself as author is being taught, is being transformed, by his own project”; his theological work is not a rationalistic exposition of the contents of the faith, but is his own participation in the life of faith and an invitation to his students into that life.⁵⁴ It performs what it teaches – transformative participation in Christ through *lectio divina* – as it aims at the embodiment of justice in a chaotic country.

All the same: the budding schools of theology would thenceforth take root not in the *engaged* pedagogy of Hugh but in the intellectualist, disputative tradition of Abelard.⁵⁵

2.1.3 Dogmatics and Philip Melanchthon

Four hundred years later the Reformation is well underway, a religious and political revolution so expansive and intense that it evoked a cultural mood not inappropriately called apocalyptic – unless, *au contraire*, it was the apocalyptic mood that prepared the way for the revolution. In fact, Ward writes, artists like Albrecht Dürer, Hans Holbein the Younger and Lucas Cranach had already, before the Reformation really broke out, captured in their bleakly forlorn paintings of Jesus and scathingly vitriolic illustrations of the Pope something of a hopeless and disillusioned atmosphere pervading all of Europe; “It is as if the human race has grown tired of waiting for the returning Messiah”.⁵⁶

So, Ward asks, “what is necessary to start a revolution?”⁵⁷ For in his view, Martin Luther wanted to do exactly this; neither to found an alternative church nor to reform the existing Church, but rather – breathing the same air of apocalyptic anticipation as everyone else – to actively provoke the papal Antichrist to fully embrace his beastly role and initiate the final cataclysm which would separate the wheat from the chaff and show forth the hidden, *true* Church.⁵⁸ The cause would require widescale revolution. But for revolution to happen, “an alternative social and ecclesial existence had to be

⁵¹ Ibid., 50.

⁵² Ibid., 51.

⁵³ Ibid., 52–58.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 58.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 63.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 77. See also pp.76–84.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 86f.

conceived”, because society was the Church and the Church was society – how could anyone be convinced even to imagine the true Church as anything other than the established Church with “its monopoly of symbolic and financial resources”?⁵⁹

But there were two resources not completely under the control of the old Church. Each of them had the potential to engender a new social imaginary and a moral order. Luther and Melanchthon recognized and deployed them to create new religious allegiances: the Bible and religious emotion. The key to marshalling support was a way of articulating a theology, orally and scripted, that was viral; that is, getting their belligerent German and visceral Latin into the life-stream of cultures, giving urgency to religious conviction. It energized; it enthused.⁶⁰

Against this background, Ward discusses *Loci communes*, a textbook for university students first published in 1521 as part of the revolutionary cause by Luther’s colleague Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560).⁶¹ In it, “doctrine is not propositional”,⁶² because the book was shaped in content and style by Melanchthon’s basic conviction that humans are entirely determined by their *affections*; bondage to sin is bondage to disordered affections, and the goal of theological education is therefore to restore affective order through – another conviction of his – the transformative power of eloquence, especially that of biblical truth and its structure of sin–law–grace.⁶³ These convictions, in turn, Ward shows to have been rooted in certain “enchanted” notions of the time; Melanchthon’s high view of eloquence is not unrelated to his uncle’s involvement in kabbalah, which centres on the spiritual power of certain words.⁶⁴ His understanding of the power of affections was informed by humoral pathology, which in its turn was tied to astrology: the affective temperament of a person was directly caused by the balance of four visceral fluids in the body, and this balance was itself directly caused by the positionings of stars and planets at the time of that person’s birth.⁶⁵ In other words, Melanchthon’s book was not intended to neutrally describe theological facts, but quite the opposite: it was meant to engage, and the expectation that reading it would *do* something was based on a historically contingent understanding of how the world works.

As time went on, however, *Loci communes* would give way to denominational confessions, articles and statements that “function[ed] more like contracts of allegiance or loyalty” by “circumscrib[ing] the parameters of orthodoxy, with a clear sense of the ‘enemy’ outside (Roman Catholicism)”, and the Bible took on a new role of providing (often decontextualized) proof-texts for pre-established

⁵⁹ Ibid., 88.

⁶⁰ Ibid.. The term “social imaginary” here employed by Ward is taken from Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor. See Taylor 2007, 171–176.

⁶¹ Ward 2016, 95.

⁶² Ibid., 107.

⁶³ Ibid., 92, 96–98.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 99–102.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 102–104.

dogmatic formulations.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Melancthon became increasingly outspoken against the “unlearned theology” that kept resulting in new ecclesial offshoots, and he started working to professionalize theology within the boundaries of the university, partly by significantly revising *Loci communes* “from a highly charged piece of eloquence to a more considered dogmatic manual”.⁶⁷ In the revised edition, theology had become a matter of method “extrinsic to the material; the formalism of the arrangement of that material [was] independent and not accountable to the theology”.⁶⁸ Or differently put: in the revised edition theology no longer performs anything that accords with what it says, nor are its students expected to be driven by their studies to live the faith studied. It flatly presents the cognitive constituents of a theological system. It has become disengaged description and lost all affective action. It has yet again become abstract.

According to Ward, all these tendencies – “the detachment of a theological science from *lectio divina*, the shift towards adversarial confessionalism, the professionalization of ‘theologians’ in the development of university education, etc” – have thereafter laid the foundation for the academic discipline of systematic theology as it would develop in modern times, tendencies which more or less persevere unto this day.⁶⁹ At the very least we saw, in “1.4 Research Overview”, that they were alive and well when Jean Daniélou and the *nouvelle* theologians reacted against exactly these things – theology’s loss of spiritual readings of Scripture, its strict adherence to one theological system over against others and its restriction to the universities – in their own theological context.

2.2 How to Do *Engaged Systematics*

So far, I have tried to draw a contrastive sketch of historical examples to get the general idea of *engaged systematics* (and its opposite). But what exactly has been shown as far as the work of theology is concerned, and how might we understand its characteristics and implications?

2.2.1 The Engaged Nature of Theology

Ward reflects that what we have seen so far exemplifies that, as with all human searching, the task of theology – *especially* that of theology – begins from a state of “lostness”,⁷⁰ of being exiled and adrift in an unhinged world where communion with God is disrupted, of endless questions without answers, of insecurity and fear, just as we see in Adam when God calls out to him right after the Fall.⁷¹ No other starting point is available this side of that Fall, and as far as starting points go it is quite an

⁶⁶ Ibid., 108.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 108f.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 110, emphasis original.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 115.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 148.

⁷¹ See *ibid.*, 147–155.

indefinite one. It does not allow for claims of certainty or solid epistemological foundations; the only thing we can know for certain is that we are lost, and just as with the prodigal son, only once we realize that (a formidable challenge unto itself) can we begin finding the truth.⁷² So you and I must inevitably begin our theological work somewhere *in medias res*, right in the messy middle of things and not from the ground up. From there we try to find communion – we try to communicate – in a wild matrix of relations and myriad discourses, which themselves all subsist in the all-encompassing relationship between Creator and creation, and that is where theology emerges as “a creative communication. It has to be [creative], partly because in being lost, there is an active seeking that is part of communicating and partly because the object of such seeking is not readily available.”⁷³ The truth is not simply given to us as passive recipients, nor do we theologize by just regurgitating the ‘plain facts’ of things. Yet that creative communication of ours is not self-generative, either; it is only possible as a creative *response* to that prior question God posed to Adam – “Where are you?” – because the first word always belongs to God, that out-of-nothing-creative Word by which everything else exists at all.⁷⁴ And even then,

[w]e cannot seize upon this communication. It does not immediately put a full stop to our sentences; put an end to our questions, seeking, and groping. Rather, this communication establishes the sphere within which we glimpse at first (because sin has to be faced, acknowledged, and renounced) the depths of our lostness, and gives it articulation. It is God’s communication that comes into the world to lighten its darkness; to enlighten our darkness. In and as creation, in and as Christ, through and by the Spirit, it establishes a communicative relation.⁷⁵

Thus, theology cannot be separated from, or be anything other than, our response to God. We never speak *about* God without at the same time speaking *to* God. Ward objects to Karl Barth’s description of theology as detached *Nachdenken*, “a thinking *after*”⁷⁶ (an afterthought?) because theology is never disengaged from the relationship between God and Creation it seeks to articulate. So,

while not denying [that] the task of dogmatics is to examine the ‘grammar of the faith’ so that the Church might articulate its beliefs most clearly and use words like ‘God’, ‘Lord’, and ‘creation’, and ‘salvation’ in the best and most appropriate manner, that is not all that the discourse of

⁷² Ibid., 155.

⁷³ Ibid., 160.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 163f.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 164.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 169.

theology is. What remains, and eclipses by far such epistemological cogitations, concerns theology as *poiesis*.⁷⁷

All of this means that God is “the first and only teacher”, and the heart of all doctrine is faith, faithful listening, “the gift of being able to entrust ourselves to this divine operation”, involving every corporal and corporate aspect of our lives.⁷⁸ Therefore theology “is a genre of prayer”,⁷⁹ because it is to reach out in response to God’s teaching and engage in a relationship with God, which requires the interactive and creative effort (intrinsic to all relationships) to interpret and come to know God as person through Christ and the Spirit.⁸⁰ Thus theology decidedly “cannot take place outside of contemplation” but is itself embedded within God’s self-communication “to the Church and to the world”,⁸¹ and so it cannot be anything but public, “nurtur[ing] and generat[ing] further communication”.⁸² In short, theology is both and inseparably “a participation in truth” and “a proclamation or continuing dissemination of the communication of that truth”.⁸³

Theology, performed inexorably within this cosmic dialogue and multiplex of entanglements, profoundly needs “the cultivation of discernment that combines the attentiveness of prayer with judgement, an active and responsive deep listening with a critical testing”.⁸⁴ Such discernment means “an attentiveness to Christ since the content of what we discern must further a recognition of Christ”,⁸⁵ because Christ not only *has* but *is* the Truth.⁸⁶ Yet he is not, this side of the eschaton, the *naked* truth – he is Creator present in and as creation, and thus he is manifest in hiddenness, which makes all claims to “pure doctrine [...] delusional”.⁸⁷ Instead, “doctrine is messy. It has to be, because life is messy”,⁸⁸ and that direct connection between doctrine and life’s messiness means that “theological proclamation, [...] cannot be divorced from ethics [...] and politics”.⁸⁹ It shapes and is shaped by life as a whole, just as the present never exists without relations to the past (in the form of memory) and the future (in the form of anticipation).⁹⁰

Therefore, says Ward, Scripture and Church can never in theological practice be separated from one another or the world, because all communication that has issued and continues to issue from the

⁷⁷ Ibid., 170. *Poiesis*, literally “making”, here means an act of creative communication.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 170f.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 173.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 171–177.

⁸¹ Ibid., 177.

⁸² Ibid., 178.

⁸³ Ibid., 179.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 179f.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 180.

⁸⁶ See *ibid.*, 181–188.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 190.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 194.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 201.

Christ Event into the world is inescapably connotated with both – not least because the New Testament was written as an address by men of the Church to the Church, but more broadly because the present is unintelligible without church history which is unintelligible without the biblical canon which is unintelligible without church history.⁹¹ One cannot be “the ultimate authority” apart from the other, and neither can replace the need for discernment because the Truth – a Person, Christ – must be met, experienced and recognized; no other option is available:

No ecclesial office and no sacred text can bestow this recognition, this religious experience. It only issues from and in a right relation to the truth itself. But the Church, and all its ecclesial offices, is absolutely central to the discernment of this recognition and the Scripture is absolutely key to identifying the characteristics of such a recognition for it is the testimony of those who have themselves experienced and been in that right relation to the truth.⁹²

So Ward illustrates the work of theology by reference to a 1475 painting by Antonello da Messina depicting the Church Father Jerome: “the dogmatician watches, like Jerome, by keeping his and her eyes reading the Scriptures in and through a Church that is open to the world. And that means that sometimes the Church has to hear and receive a judgement upon itself made by that world; because the Spirit blows where it will”.⁹³

2.2.2 Some Practical Implications for Theology

Where does this leave us? Negatively speaking, it means that an *engaged systematics* must avoid articulating theology in opposition to this or that confessional tradition, because “the contents of the Christian faith are not an end in themselves,” and the goal is not an absolutistic defence of some theological articulations against others.⁹⁴ Nor does it allow for the “intellectual elitism” of academic professionalism and technical jargon, which removes theology from the concrete and public realm of the everyday, because, positively speaking, theology concerns itself with “*lived doctrine*” – it “is doxological in its orientation and liturgical in nature”.⁹⁵

Thus, Ward declares, there can never be a finished systematization of theological knowledge where all the right emphases are struck; that cannot be the theologian’s ambition. The theological articulations of the past can – yea, *must* – teach the theologian many things, but it is futile to adhere to them as though they were ‘objective’ or the final word on the matter.⁹⁶ That would make about as much sense as a brain transplant; theology always springs from, and remains embedded within, a

⁹¹ See *ibid.*, 195–212.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 218.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 223f.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 117f.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 118, 119, emphasis original.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

particular context in order to address and reshape that particular context.⁹⁷ That involves making a creative attempt to communicate a glimpse of the Truth, and the task of the theologian is to do just that in a discerning and truthful manner. This also means that, epistemically, theology is incapable of reaching the ideals of “secular reasoning: transparency, total accountability, pure reason etc.”⁹⁸ Instead, as Ward quotes from Sarah Coakley, “theology’s ‘*epistemological*’ task [is] cleansing, reordering, and redirecting the apparatuses of one’s own thinking, desiring, and seeing”.”⁹⁹ It results not in rock-solid facts but rather in the transformation of the language, imagination and action of the theologian and those receiving the theologian’s communication.¹⁰⁰ Ward exemplifies this transformation with the account of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in which the author describes Polycarp’s gruesome death neither with strictly biographical historicism nor with direct reference to any Bible text, but with a language containing many multi-layered biblical echoes, effecting a “transmutation of traumatic experience” so that “[f]lesh baked and smelted in fire is seen, but it is seen *as*”.¹⁰¹ That is, the biblical language of the Church has been internalized in a way that opens up new possibilities for experiencing, interpreting and narrating life altogether. We might rephrase Ward’s point by quoting the title of one of Stanley Hauerwas’s books: theology is all about “learning to speak Christian”.¹⁰²

In this transformation, “it is to Christ we are conformed and through the Spirit that that conformity [...] comes about”, and therefore Ward suggests beginning in Christology and Pneumatology rather than any other area of theology.¹⁰³ He also proceeds in interdisciplinary dialogue, because if theology is to be performative and transformative, as opposed to merely descriptive, it must find its own place in relation to its concrete historical circumstances and discourses, and from there it must speak with rhetorical finesse as well as a self-aware impermanence.¹⁰⁴ Such interdisciplinarity is also necessary because of the indirect nature of theological studies, well understood through Henri Bouillard’s exposition of *analogia entis*: God is not a directly available object, but the Giver indirectly and subtly available through what is given – the world – which is studied in all its variegated aspects by all the sciences.¹⁰⁵ Sound discernment requires such interdisciplinarity because, just as Ward points out, Christian theology, or “speaking of Christ”, needs to be understood in a dual sense, both as humans

⁹⁷ See *ibid.*, 131–135.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 136, emphasis original.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁰² Hauerwas 2011.

¹⁰³ Ward 2016, 137.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 139–143.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 142. Ward employs the concept of *analogia entis* not with reference to Bouillard but to the Polish theologian Erich Przywara.

speaking *about* Christ as well as Christ's speaking *to* humans, and his voice cannot be circumscribed by anyone but himself.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 127.

3. Henri de Lubac on Origen's Hermeneutics

This chapter attempts to thematically present Henri de Lubac's analysis of Origen's hermeneutics. In the course of that presentation, our findings are related back to Ward's *engaged systematics* in order to show that Origen's hermeneutics fits well at home in Ward's prescriptions for the theological task.

3.1 Why All this Allegory? (Origen's Origins)

The Greek philosophers would not touch the old Homeric epics without their allegorizing gloves on:

in all the stories that serve as material for their theories, [...] the tangible individuality of the heroes or gods is transformed [...] into the nature of things or of the human soul or of divinity diffused everywhere; their 'allegory' [...] dissipates all history, all real drama; it makes everything 'vanish into the elements of the world'.¹⁰⁷

Similarly, in Philo's approach to the Hebrew Bible, "the things and even the people of whom the sacred text speaks are above all symbols—whatever their own reality might be—of the faculties or interior states of the soul".¹⁰⁸ What mattered for these thinkers was leaping into the heights of philosophical contemplation, and the old venerable writings were their springboards – helpful to get in the air but then left behind on the ground.

Origen's hermeneutic has often been placed squarely within this Greek philosophical tradition, as we saw in both Daniélou's judgment and Young's survey above. But while Origen's exegesis is allegorical, de Lubac contends that it differs fundamentally from that of Philo and the philosophers in that "it is always essentially a question of history because it is always a question of actions and personal relationships".¹⁰⁹ Here I present de Lubac's analysis of the historical embeddedness of Origen's hermeneutics.

3.1.1 The Battle for the Bible

Origen does draw parallels between his own interpretive approach and the allegorizing of the Greeks – and this has caused much confusion – but de Lubac finds that he does so only in explicitly apologetical polemic, such as in his book *Contra Celsum*. Origen's point then is not that his own allegorical approach is even similar to that of the Greeks, but simply that it is unfair of detractors of the faith to hold Christians to a flatly literalistic treatment of their scriptures while granting allegorical treatment of their own texts.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ de Lubac 2007, 21.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 22.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 33–36.

Besides responding to the mockery of Christianity's critics, Origen found himself in the middle of a trench war where the Scriptures were the coveted prize. On one side, "the Jews", who rejected the NT because Jesus had not fulfilled every OT prophecy in its literal sense. On the other side, "the heretics" – especially Marcion – who rejected the OT because they could not square its violent depictions of God as sin-hating judge with the self-sacrificing saviour of the NT.¹¹¹ De Lubac explains that Origen, refusing to give up a single letter of the Scriptures (a solution otherwise quite tempting), sought to defend the life and teaching of the Church against these two fronts using the "weapon of spiritual interpretation" bestowed by the example of "[t]he Apostle of the Gentiles", Paul.¹¹²

Origen describes Paul as "the first imitator of Christ".¹¹³ It is with reference to many of his sayings that Origen finds justification for the principle of allegory: "The letter kills, but the spirit brings life [2 Cor 3:6]; the law is spiritual: it contains the shadow of goods to come [Heb 10:1, Col 2:17]; all that happens to the Israelites happens to them in figure and was recorded for our instruction [1 Cor 10:11]: that is the principle".¹¹⁴ The very word 'allegory' (though de Lubac notes that it is actually not Origen's favoured designation)¹¹⁵ he takes directly from Galatians 4:24, in which we find one of several examples of spiritual interpretation given by Paul.¹¹⁶ To Origen, the model set by the infallible apostle must be normative for all Christian exegesis.¹¹⁷ And indeed, such spiritual interpretation is what Origen has received as "the method traditionally accepted in the Church. The whole Church, in fact, has but one voice in proclaiming it: in addition to their obvious meaning, the Scriptures contain another, more hidden one".¹¹⁸ Long before Origen, de Lubac points out, Irenaeus of Lyon had already found the Church allegorically present in the OT, and at large there had even been typological "dossiers [...] drawn up fixing a number of interpretations [...] particularly with respect to the Cross of the Savior".¹¹⁹ Origen, in other words, is not at all the one who introduces allegorical exegesis into Christian tradition – at most he develops it.

De Lubac's analysis fits well with those of Louth and Young presented above: Origen gets his spiritual mode of exegesis from Paul via the Church, and his concern is to keep the Bible intact at a time when it risks being torn in half. It is thus evident that, just as Ward asserts, the importance of allegorical interpretation is not a mere doctrinal point for Origen; for him it is crucial for making the

¹¹¹ Ibid., 53–55.

¹¹² Ibid., 58f.

¹¹³ Origen's 10th commentary on Matthew, cited in *ibid.*, 77.

¹¹⁴ de Lubac 2007, 78f, Bible references added.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 141.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 78, 139.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 79–81.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 76.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 203.

life of faith intelligible without compromising the Church's claim on the Bible as their Scriptures. It must also be said that there is an element of confessionalism in Origen's ambitions, since he theologizes explicitly against "the heretics" – the Gnostics who he deems got Christianity wrong. To some extent this is contrary to Ward's warnings, but there are some important considerations: Origen is not primarily concerned with some established theological formulations (which in my understanding is what concerns Ward) but with the right to read the OT and NT together as part of the practice of the Church. The ecclesial context is also different: the tradition of the Church is relatively young with far less already given, unlike the postmodern condition where the tradition is – though perhaps lost sight of – long and full. There are more voices in the choir today than there were then, and Origen, having far fewer theological predecessors, stood in something of a pioneer's position.

3.1.2 The Anatomy of Scripture

Quite a lot is made by Origen of the parallel between human anatomy, understood as body, soul and spirit, and the threefold structure of Scripture: "The divine Scriptures have three senses: historical, moral, and mystical; so we say that they have a body, a soul, and a spirit".¹²⁰ This drawing of parallels is accounted for by de Lubac in view of "the general taste for correspondences that was so lively during that period" as well as "the analogy of microcosm and macrocosm, a commonplace of ancient thought".¹²¹ What is not obvious, however, is what leads to what: does Origen invent a threefold sense because it fits his anthropology, or does he apply an anthropology because it fits his already maintained threefold sense?

Many, as we saw in Young, have attributed the parallelism to the influence of Plato and Philo, but de Lubac points out that Plato spoke only of the human *soul* as tripartite (which Origen rather disapproves of),¹²² and Philo likened the Bible to body and soul only, despite otherwise holding to a tripartite anthropology.¹²³ The picture is more complex than any such simple genealogy. Some aspects of both Origen and Philo's search for hidden meanings de Lubac traces back to older rabbinic tradition – specifically "the symbolism of numbers and [...] names"¹²⁴ – and the way to approach 'inspired texts' in general was, as we saw in Louth, to regard "the ancient poets [as ...] bearers of a kind of primitive revelation that they had left as enigmas in their verse".¹²⁵ Indeed, Origen holds

¹²⁰ Origen's 5th homily on Leviticus, cited in *ibid.*, 174.

¹²¹ de Lubac 2007, 174.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 177.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 185f.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 182.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 183f.

Moses in very high regard as the prophet of prophets, fully initiated into the divine mysteries he enigmatically disclosed.¹²⁶

But that is where the similarities end. In de Lubac's estimation, the allegorical sense is ultimately made possible for Origen only "by the coming of Christ", because it is to that coming, and its actualization in the souls of believers, that the "soul" and "spirit" of the threefold sense of Scripture refers (more on this in "3.2.2 The Image of the Invisible God").¹²⁷ This in turn suggests what Origen elsewhere makes clear: Scripture does not merely house "a spirit" – it is the dwelling place of the Spirit, with and by whom it is inspired and in and by whom alone its unity consists.¹²⁸ It is only thus that the many disparate words by different authors come together as one Word, as "but a single testimony of the Spirit of Christ".¹²⁹ This then makes it possible for Origen to scour the books of the Bible, despite their differences in terms of human authorship, for recurring words, phrases and motifs on the assumption that they are deeply and meaningfully interconnected.¹³⁰

Thus, in de Lubac's view, it must be said that Origen's allegorical interpretation is at heart neither Greek nor Philonian; "[i]t is basically a doctrine of wholly Christian inspiration".¹³¹ Certainly, as we saw, and as Young showed regarding Origen's method, there are points of contact with the surrounding world, and Ward's *engaged* understanding of theology suggests that "wholly Christian inspiration" is an unrealistic claim to make. Whatever the case, it seems reasonable to assert at the least that the substance of Origen's view of Scripture is congruent with Christian tradition and Scripture itself.

3.2 Shadows, Images and Reality

We now have a decent understanding of the shaping context in which Origen's work is embedded. Now we turn to the contents and characteristics of his hermeneutics.

3.2.1 A Shadow of Things to Come

Origen was no docetist; he would never deny the full-fleshed humanity of Christ. In the same way he would never deny the general historicity of the things recounted in the Bible. De Lubac summarizes:

Certainly, just as one must not stop in Christ at the man who is seen but, through the flesh that veils him to carnal eyes, perceive by faith the God who is in him, so one must go through the external history that is offered to us in the Holy Books, particularly in the Old Testament, in order

¹²⁶ Ibid., 298–300.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 187f.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 337–340.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 346.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 354–357.

¹³¹ Ibid., 182.

to penetrate to the ‘spiritual mystery’ that is hidden there. But this truth presupposes its opposite.

One must believe, first of all, in general, that the things happened as they are recounted.¹³²

To behold Jesus and see nothing more than a human being is to misunderstand him; to read the Old Testament and see nothing more than history is to make the same mistake. But it is precisely because Jesus is God and precisely because the Old Testament has hidden depths that Jesus’s humanity matters, that the history of the Old Testament matters. That, says de Lubac, is Origen’s basic contention.¹³³ This is strikingly clear, to name but one example, in Origen’s treatment of Noah’s ark, where he does not even try to dig deeper before having established and justified the historicity of the account in its literal sense.¹³⁴ It is only on the basis of what is clearly written that any hidden mysteries might be discovered; as Origen himself states, “[a]lthough the tale seems obvious, still the inner meaning will hardly be clear to us unless we more carefully grasp what the literal sense contains”.¹³⁵ He explicitly rejects the idea that the spiritual sense allows us to ignore the literal as though one were meant to replace the other, even in the face of miraculously implausible or morally repugnant texts, because “just as he draws good out of evil, God draws our edification from the least edifying accounts”.¹³⁶

Even so, Origen explains, there are some rare instances when the biblical text includes details “that did not take place, others that were impossible, others that might have happened but that did not in fact happen”.¹³⁷ Their purpose is rather to provoke the reader to dig deeper.¹³⁸ In practice, de Lubac finds, Origen is often much too quick to identify such textual “stumbling blocks” – evidently in his overzealous polemizing against those who reject allegory altogether, especially “the Jews” – and in such cases he “follow[s] the example of Clement [of Alexandria] and Philo” rather than Paul.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, they are far from the norm, and the only instances de Lubac deems really notable concern the beginning and the end of history: the creation account and the eschatological vision (more on this in “3.2.3 The Eternal Gospel”).¹⁴⁰ Many other times it is just Origen’s way of saying that what is obviously intended as metaphorical – such as the abundant anthropomorphisms applied to God – should be read as metaphorical.¹⁴¹

¹³² Ibid., 105.

¹³³ Ibid., 103–106.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 107.

¹³⁵ Origen’s 14th homily on Leviticus, cited in *ibid.* (n.30), 108.

¹³⁶ de Lubac 2007, 111.

¹³⁷ Origen, *Peri Archon* 4:2:5, cited in *ibid.*

¹³⁸ de Lubac 2007, 113.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 112–114.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 116f.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 129–131.

Still, had Origen been aware of the research available in modern times on the ancient Hebrew literary context of the Bible, de Lubac does not doubt that he would have agreed to its usefulness for understanding the literal sense. But, child of his time, he was not and could not have been, and this led him to numerous anachronisms and misjudgements in his attempts to understand the literal level of the text.¹⁴² Moreover, as noted above, Origen was mostly concerned with the authorial intent of the Spirit, not that of the human author, and he emphatically rejected any notion of inspiration as ecstatic or trance-inducing intervention at the expense of “the whole normal play of [the author’s] faculties”.¹⁴³ In de Lubac’s judgment, this ought to

have led him to a better discernment of the human element of the Bible in all its variety. In fact, we note nothing of the kind. This element did not interest him enough to make him think of emphasizing it or even at first of noticing it. So his justifiable conviction of the overall inspiration, too forgetful of the inevitable infirmities of the human author, often led him to seek profound intentions beneath minuscule particularities of the text that did not have any such intentions.¹⁴⁴

So de Lubac finds in Origen’s exegetical practice a somewhat pronounced tendency to misunderstand the OT text in its various details due to ignorance of its historical context and an overambitious polemic against “the Jews”, yet certainly a fundamental aspiration to *try* to understand it, because the history of it matters. Applying Ward’s terms to what de Lubac already observes, Origen seems often to have gravely underestimated the *engaged* nature of the OT as a human production, such that he could not appreciate it as a literary work with culture-bound literary qualities. Thus, he tends to judge the literal sense on a strictly descriptive level rather than seeing that the OT authors, too, are engaged in a creative communication, a prayerful *poiesis*.

3.2.2 The Image of the Invisible God

Origen, then, regards the literal sense of the Scriptures very highly – but, as we have seen, not simply for its own sake. For him it is “the spiritual sense, which gives the text its true value, [that] justifies the letter of it in its very literalness”.¹⁴⁵ There *are* strange things in the text, and to think that the Holy Spirit wanted the Church to read about, say, the details of some census long ago or the violence done under Joshua’s command for no deeper reason than ‘because it happened’ is preposterous to Origen – as is the idea that God would have commanded such things in the first place.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴² Ibid., 281–283.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 343.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 348.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 121.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 121–126.

But everything has changed because of Jesus. God's salvific action in history, recounted in the OT, was about Jesus Christ all along, and the Saviour casts his shadow all across that history.¹⁴⁷ As the sculptor first makes a model of clay before setting the chisel against marble, so de Lubac explains that the literal sense of the OT law, for Origen, is "an *outdated* sense" – a preparatory semblance of the real deal, necessary but provisional.¹⁴⁸ That is not to say that the OT *itself* is outdated – in fact the whole point is that it is not: "Understood spiritually, expounded in the evangelical sense, 'it is ever new, and both Testaments are always for us a new Testament, not through temporal age, but through newness of understanding.'"¹⁴⁹ Precisely because the perfect image of God has arrived it has become possible to read the OT and discern that it shows his silhouette; not only in that its true meaning was hidden but is now revealed, but that its proper meaning has been transformed – it has come to mean something new, and the new is Jesus Christ.¹⁵⁰ "If Scripture is full of mysteries [...] these mysteries are basically always the same. [...] The mystery of Christ hidden and revealed."¹⁵¹ De Lubac brings up numerous examples:

If, for example, it is said in this book that Joshua conquered the whole earth, that is less a hyperbole to designate Palestine than a prophecy to announce the kingdom of the gospel; if the text adds that all war ceased at that time, we must understand that in reality this is accomplished only by the one Lord Jesus. And if the tribes of Israel were at that time gathered together from the four winds by the successor of Moses, it was an announcement of what would happen when the elect are gathered together from everywhere by 'our Jesus' in order to enter into their inheritance.¹⁵²

Jesus is the revealed face of God, and what shows forth above all in his life, death and resurrection is that even if "the heart of the Divinity is an abyss [of infinite incomprehensibility], [...] it is a paternal abyss; the abyss of a Goodness, invisible in itself, that is made visible for us in Jesus".¹⁵³ Through Jesus we know that God – Father, Son and Spirit as perfect unity – "is Love in person".¹⁵⁴ Therefore, despite the protestations of Marcion that "[t]he God of the Old Testament often seems a cruel god, irascible and vindictive", it must be the case that "in the Old Testament itself, *if one understands it well*, everything 'breathes the goodness of God' [...] even what seems at first the most contrary to him".¹⁵⁵ God punishes indeed, but never without the good of the one punished in view, never with

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 190.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 144, emphasis original.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 194.

¹⁵⁰ See *ibid.*, 306–316.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 194.

¹⁵² Ibid., 197. For more examples see pp.194–199.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 265f.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 267.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 272f, emphasis added.

“any goal but to start men on the path of salvation”.¹⁵⁶ The cross is the interpretive key that lets Origen see that it is always a matter of pedagogy, not of vengeance.

Now, as described above, Origen makes clear that there are not two but three levels to the text, corresponding to the body, soul and spirit of humans, but de Lubac finds that Origen never gives “a rational methodological explanation” of this concept, and that he actually puts it to work in two completely different ways.¹⁵⁷ On the one hand, the Scriptures have a literal, a tropological and an anagogical sense; it retells history, it teaches a moral lesson, and it indicates the mystery of Christ. “If the historical sense by itself often has only a weak usefulness, at times not even offering the soul any nourishment, the moral sense is like milk that is suitable for children, while the mystical sense is the solid food of the Christian who is at least on the way toward perfection.”¹⁵⁸ In practice, says de Lubac, this becomes quite messy: sometimes the moral lesson is drawn directly from the historical sense, other times it is superimposed through Philonian allegory, and the three levels tend either to collapse into two or have little logical interconnection.¹⁵⁹

On the other hand, Origen sometimes reverses the order of terms, moving from the “historical sense”, through the “mystical sense, relating to [...] the mystery to be fulfilled in future ages” toward the “spiritual sense, relating to the soul”.¹⁶⁰ The difference may not be immediately obvious, but in fact it is radical. Commenting on Psalm 3:3, Origen finds that “[i]t is David who is speaking, and these words express well the faith of the prophet; but it is also Christ, who knows in his Passion that God will exalt him and make him soon enter into his glory; it is, finally, every just soul who, through his union with Christ, finds his glory in God”.¹⁶¹ Here the two deeper senses are clearly distinguished: the mystical sense is essentially prophetic of the life of Jesus Christ, while the spiritual sense speaks of how that life of Christ manifests in the souls of the faithful.¹⁶² The city of Jericho fell under Joshua’s command and Israel rejoiced; Jesus Christ, the true Joshua, razed the satanic Jericho and the Apostles rejoiced; the Christian, with Christ as leader within, must conquer the inner Jericho to live in jubilant victory.¹⁶³ In de Lubac’s judgment this “is incomparably more organic” than the approach described in the previous paragraph, and he is happy to say it is “much more frequent”.¹⁶⁴

In a way we are still dealing with only two senses, though – a literal and a spiritual – because “the mystery of the Christian is none other than the Mystery of Christ”.¹⁶⁵ The Christian’s conformity to

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 273.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 161.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 162.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 167f.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 163.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 165.

¹⁶² Ibid., 164f.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 165f.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 169.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 188.

Christ is effected through union with him, participation in him. The Church is the body of Christ, and so just as Christ is present in the OT, so is the Church and her sacraments there with him.¹⁶⁶ The spiritual sense simply has multiple aspects.

We may in fact distinguish (if only analytically) between two ways in which the OT points Origen to the NT: one is the mystical symbolism just described, whereby Jesus is *present in* the OT; the other is the historical development whereby Jesus is *prepared for* in the OT, a notion Origen shared with Irenaeus, for instance.¹⁶⁷ Just as we saw in “3.2.1 A Shadow of Things to Come”, it also intimates a sense of history completely foreign to the Greeks and radically different from Philo’s view that “[s]ince the time of Moses, [history] unfolds without leading anywhere”.¹⁶⁸ God must work patiently and adaptively to lead humanity towards the full truth:

If we have to do with a two-year-old child, we use childish language, for it is impossible for children to understand us unless, leaving aside the dignity of maturity, we condescend to their language. [...] If we show an angry face to children, it is not from an inner feeling but from reason. . . . Thus God is said to become angry in order for you to be converted, but in reality he is not angry.¹⁶⁹

For instance, Origen reasons that God bestowed the sacrificial legislation of the OT so that the Hebrews – accustomed to sacrifices from their time in Egypt, as the golden calf incident revealed them to be – would avoid idolatry by allowing them to direct their sacrifices to himself.¹⁷⁰ It is the humble beginnings of the eventual arrival of the Son of God; a seed destined to grow into a tree while nevertheless having first to be planted in rough soil; the initiation through Moses of a long process that will unfold via the later prophets towards the Gospel.¹⁷¹ Not that Origen considers ignorant every living soul before the advent of Christ, but he deems that only the select few – the patriarchs and prophets – who ahead of time proclaimed the incarnate coming of the Word of God were exempt from “the necessities of the law of progress”,¹⁷² since their proclamation would have been impossible “if that Word of God had not been present to them”.¹⁷³

And that is what it all comes down to: there is only one Word of God, and his name is Jesus. That is the difference between the Bible as history and the Bible as theology. The Bible as the Word of

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 200. For several examples see pp.200–202.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 283–295.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 319.

¹⁶⁹ Origen’s 18th homily on Jeremiah, cited in *ibid.*, 289.

¹⁷⁰ de Lubac 2007, 291.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 291–293.

¹⁷² Ibid., 303.

¹⁷³ Origen’s 9th homily on Jeremiah, cited in *ibid.*, 302. At the same time Origen (or de Lubac?) leaves ambiguous just what such a claim might entail. Just how much do the patriarchs prove to know about Christ, anyway? And are there not texts that flatly contradict him, such as Matt 13:17 or Eph 3:5–6? Indeed he knew of all these things and pressed the point no further. See de Lubac 2007, 304f.

God can *only* be the Bible as a “speaking of Christ” in the dual sense that Ward suggests – human words *about* Christ and Christ’s address *to* humans. Here we have explored the former of these; the Bible as words about Christ, as a creative, poetic witness to the Truth. As de Lubac concludes, commenting on Origen’s treatment of the road to Emmaus in Luke 24: “Jesus Christ himself, through his personal presence, through his work, through his sacrifice, is the living and concrete exegesis of Scripture”.¹⁷⁴

3.2.3 The Eternal Gospel

From what we have seen so far it might be thought that Origen’s spiritual interpretation is confined to the OT, but it is not. Origen, according to de Lubac, finds that “it is not a rare occurrence for Jesus to speak ‘mystically’”, and that “[w]hat happens to him also bears a mystical significance. Nothing around him is ‘devoid of mystery’”.¹⁷⁵ In de Lubac’s view this is not without its problems, especially when we observe that tendency of Origen’s to find “stumbling blocks” at work – but that tendency, de Lubac continues, is often enough kept within reasonable bounds.¹⁷⁶ Who would not agree, anyway, that Satan showing Jesus every kingdom on earth from a mountaintop is physically impossible?¹⁷⁷ Or that “if we wanted to take ‘literally’ the precept of the Lord to sell our clothing in order to buy a sword or the one never to greet anyone, ‘we would adopt inhuman and absurd behaviour, far removed from the intention of the discourse’”?¹⁷⁸ Even so, Origen takes the vast majority of Jesus’s injunctions to be straightforward and literally serious; the spiritual secrets also contained therein do not absolve us from the clear call to economic justice, for instance.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, most of the events reported in the Gospels are not *only* spiritually deep but also historical.¹⁸⁰

Now, if the spiritual sense of the OT speaks of Jesus and the Church, the spiritual sense of the NT – which is *literally* about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus – speaks of Jesus’s continuing spiritual presence in the Church. De Lubac tries to emulate Origen’s thought thus:

For if he came once in the flesh, it was in order to come into our souls, and we have prayed to him that his coming will continue to be realized. Each day, in fact, he is born in each of the just. [...] He spoke not only in the assemblies of the Jews, in Galilee, but he speaks even today, in this assembly, present in the midst of us. [...] And when any member of the Church is injured, it is still he who is struck in the face, as he was struck in the praetorium by the Roman soldiers.¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁴ de Lubac 2007, 316.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 224f.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 225f.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 226.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid.

¹⁸⁰ For several examples see *ibid.*, 228f.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 236, 237f. For more examples see pp.236–239.

It is the community living this mystical reality that concerns Origen most. But not even the historical Church is its own self-sufficient end. We have not arrived at the full blossoming of cosmic salvation.

As mentioned above, it is primarily regarding texts with their gaze set on the eschatological horizon of history that Origen questions the validity of any literal interpretation. That is not to say that these texts speak of anything *other* than the apocalyptic end of history, only that they do so in symbolic language.¹⁸² But in fact there are eschatological depths not only in these texts, for just as the OT points forward to the NT, “so each object of the [NT] is in its turn a sign whose reality is found ‘in the ages to come’”.¹⁸³ Again de Lubac paraphrases Origen:

Only then will the water that Jesus gives us flow for us, in all its pure and transparent clarity. Only then will ‘all that concerns the Son of God be clearly revealed’. After having replaced the first Easter by the second, we must thus still, through the latter, tend toward the third—for there is a third Easter: the passage from mirror or from enigma to the face-to-face vision, eternal Easter, which alone is ‘full’ and ‘definitive’, ‘celebrated among myriads of angels in a perfect assembly, in a blessed exodus’.¹⁸⁴

If the OT sketches a silhouette and the NT fills out a detailed portrait, we are still waiting to meet the one portrayed face to face. The NT reveals to us heavenly realities whose full revelation nonetheless remains in the future – or rather beyond the end of history, since “[i]nsofar as we remain in time, we do not leave the region of signs altogether”.¹⁸⁵ The eschatological dimension is important here, because it means that the OT points to the NT in one way while the NT points to the “third Easter” in quite another: “The words of Moses and those of the prophets needed to be fulfilled, and once fulfilled by Christ, they had only to disappear. But the words of Jesus Christ are and will always remain full—without that fullness ever becoming something past”.¹⁸⁶ Similarly, if “[c]ut off from its relation to Christ, adopted as sufficient in itself, the Old Testament is truly lethal. But a similar separation is not possible for the New: whoever holds to the letter of it with honesty keeps the latent spirit of it.”¹⁸⁷

It is this eschatological dimension that makes it clear that precisely because history for Origen is neither self-fulfilling nor self-exhaustive, it is of the utmost importance – it is never merely ‘the past’, left behind by the present in the shadowy abyss of irrelevance, but rather aimed at and suffused with eternity.¹⁸⁸ Here is some accord but also some tension between Origen and Ward’s descriptions of

¹⁸² Ibid., 227.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 248.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 249f.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 253.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 261.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 263.

¹⁸⁸ See *ibid.*, 322–336.

things. On the one hand, there is a clear agreement in both that, as I wrote above, Christ is the truth but not the *naked* truth. The fully revealed truth will never be available to us within history, but only on the eternal side of the eschaton. That means the work of discernment – the willingness to look to the hidden depths of things – is inescapable. The tension, on the other hand, consists in the fact that whereas Origen accords no value to history that can be wholly separated from its symbolic participation in eternity, Ward underscores that the past has an intrahistorical value insofar as it defines the present. God’s communication is not *only* a matter of radical irruption into the present, but the historical event of Christ initiated countless chains of communication that continue to this day and which thereby participate – however partially – in the Truth. In other words, God’s past communication continues to speak through tradition, both Christian and otherwise, such that the past, as history, never *could* be irrelevant. As far as the Christ Event is concerned, Origen would agree with this, but his treatment of the OT seems to disregard it.

3.3 The Way, the Truth and the Life

For Origen, then, the key to history as to Scripture is Jesus Christ, the living marriage of the temporal and the eternal. What remains for us now is to learn to live in that history in anticipation of the full arrival of ultimate Reality – to live as his body, the Church. As we shall see, it is here that Origen finds the Bible’s proper place and also here that the affinities with Ward’s *engaged systematics* become unmistakable.

3.3.1 The Living Temple of the Spirit

“In [Origen’s] most exalted meditations as in his most practical exhortations, his was (to use a current expression) an engaged Christianity”,¹⁸⁹ which is why his homilies are no less central to his thought than his commentaries are to his spiritual life.¹⁹⁰ As noted above, the spiritual sense has many aspects, and it is “[t]he intermediary, practical, ‘moral’, properly ‘spiritual’ aspect [...] that occupies most space with Origen”.¹⁹¹ Usually he speaks to a baptized audience already familiar with the doctrinal content of the faith, and so rather than dwelling on those matters he tends to focus on what it means to *live* the faith.¹⁹² Scripture is given for the upbuilding of the Church. “Each day it nourishes Christ’s faithful with its eternal substance”,¹⁹³ not just as a databank of knowledge but as a living actor, for “[l]ike God himself, the Scriptures effect what they say”.¹⁹⁴

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 143.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 205.

¹⁹² Ibid., 205f.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 342.

In fact, Origen finds that the truth of the Bible is only available when it remains embedded within the Christian community:

[n]ot content with invoking ‘the rule of Scripture’ or ‘the evangelical and apostolic rule’, [Origen] appeals constantly to ‘the rule of the Church’, to ‘the faith of the Church’, to ‘the word of the Church’, to ‘the preaching of the Church’, to ‘the tradition of the Church’, to ‘the doctrine of the Church’, to ‘the mind and teaching of the Church’.¹⁹⁵

Origen even speaks of the human body of Jesus, the collective body of the Church, the literary body of Scripture and the body and blood of the Eucharist – all four – as embodiments of one and the same “subsistent Word”.¹⁹⁶ Or, perhaps better, as *the one embodiment*, for in all four cases reality cannot be reduced to what is superficially seen, and none of them can be separated with integrity.¹⁹⁷ It is the living, breathing, sacramental body of Christ that concerns Origen, and as the Spirit is its breath the Scriptures are its lungs. Thus, as de Lubac says, “Scripture is to be understood as a single whole: But who can understand it thus? Who can sift out its meaning by reconstituting its profound unity?”¹⁹⁸ Origen’s answer is that just as the Holy Spirit inspired it, so only the Holy Spirit – and hence only those who have received the Spirit, the Church – can receive and understand it *as* inspired.¹⁹⁹ It cannot be understood through “human processes”, except as mere human words.²⁰⁰ But in truth it is God’s ever new address to his people, and “the purpose of seeking the ‘spiritual meaning’ of Scripture is to nourish oneself from it [...] It is to receive it from the hands of Jesus and to have it read by him”.²⁰¹ Origen “wants us to question [Jesus] and to listen to his responses—and that, for him, is the same as searching out the meaning of Scripture”.²⁰²

Origen knows well what this means, and so, “[a]s firm as he is about the principle, he shows himself to be equally hesitant in its applications”.²⁰³ Knowing what Scripture is, it is inherently impossible to establish by means of some method or criteria how any given text should be finally interpreted and truly understood. As such, Origen mostly offers multiple interpretive *suggestions* while insisting that he is actually incompetent to know.²⁰⁴ In fact, on his own terms he is, as de Lubac explains:

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 68f.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 416.

¹⁹⁷ See *ibid.*, 417–420.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 346.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 347f.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 361.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 73. See also p. 418.

²⁰² Ibid., 65.

²⁰³ Ibid., 369.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 369–371.

Since exegesis of necessity is concerned with particular texts, and since it is also of necessity the work of particular individuals, [...] it is impossible to affirm that it uncovers, in its authenticity and particularly in its fullness, the divine Meaning. For this Meaning [...] is concerned [...] with the whole of Scripture, and, on the other hand, the Spirit does not communicate it to any particular individual but to the whole assembly of the faithful.²⁰⁵

All in all, it is clear that Origen's interpretation of the Bible is strongly tied to a sense of tradition; the Bible can neither be disembedded from the whole Body of Christ (in both its diachronic and its synchronic aspects) nor read by any singular cell of that Body if the Truth of it is to be discerned. Because ultimately we are not dealing with human words made public property, but the constant call of the divine Word to his chosen people. Ward helps us see that while it is true that the Word is not public *property* (for it is nobody's property) nevertheless it is public (more on this in "3.3.2 A Public Mystery"), and its proliferation cannot be contained or controlled by the Church. This raises questions of how one discerns the presence of the Spirit in the world and how the word 'Church' relates to that discernment. On the other hand, Ward clearly agrees that Scripture and the Church are inseparable, as we saw above, and that the Church body is vital precisely to cultivate the discernment of the Spirit's presence.

3.3.2 A Public Mystery

For Origen, all truth is certainly God's truth – the same Logos informing Scripture also informs the entire universe²⁰⁶ – and so worldly wisdom can be useful, but nothing can be true that is contrary to Jesus Christ crucified, and so worldly wisdom is *a priori* suspect and must be cleansed by the purifying light of the Gospel and used with prudence.²⁰⁷ In fact, de Lubac says, he sceptically likens the Greek poets to "the frogs of the second plague of Egypt" and the philosophers' dialectics to mosquitos.²⁰⁸ True wisdom, instead, is faith in the Gospel of Christ and Christ crucified – a wisdom that is folly according to worldly standards.²⁰⁹ For this reason, Origen has so little patience with intellectual elitism as to assert that, in de Lubac's words, "a true apostle of Jesus is recognized insofar as he 'does not scorn the simple' [nor] disdains what the world considers senseless and yet God has chosen".²¹⁰ That, Origen contends, is why the Scriptures are written the way they are; as he says of the Gospels in particular, "they appear pedagogically simple to the simple, but for those who can and wish to understand them in a more penetrating way, wise teachings worthy of the Logos are hidden

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 371f.

²⁰⁶ Ibid., 401ff.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 86–91.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 91.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 97–100.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 94.

in them”.²¹¹ The Scriptures were given to reveal unfathomable mysteries to all who would enter the life of Christ, not just for the learned.

One might say that Origen advocates a certain kind of interdisciplinarity so long as the Gospel remains regulative, and once again we may raise the question: does the Church then *own* the Truth? Clearly not, says Ward – the Church is not the Gospel – and therefore the Church must also be ready to listen to and receive judgment from the world. In practice the line between Church and world is always perforated; as we saw above, Origen himself certainly had sympathies with the general culture of his time as far as inspired writings were concerned. Indeed, what both Origen and Ward assert is that proper discernment searches first and foremost after Christ, the Truth, and discernment is necessary precisely because the Truth is not obviously ‘here’ or ‘there’, neither by invoking Scripture nor the Church. The cruciform Truth can come through the secular biologist no less than the uneducated Hindu child – but if it is the Truth, it is inevitably Christlike. The role of the Church is then not to have and dispense the Truth, but rather to pedagogically effect that therapy of our senses that lets us discern what Christlikeness is – to know the Truth when we see Him.

3.3.3 *Via Dolorosa, Via Vitae*

With these things in mind, some people *are* more fit to understand Scripture than others, though the difference is not one of intellect but of maturity in faith. Long before the wedding between Church and empire, when being Christian came to mean being Roman, there was already a great diversity of spiritual seriousness among believers. “For every one who was truly ‘renewed in spirit’, how many others remained carelessly ‘conformed to this age’!”²¹² In the same way that God had pedagogically prepared his people through history, so Christian life had to be understood as a path of progression from infancy to maturity, as intimated already by the apostle Paul.²¹³ For Origen, that path had to be tread with seriousness by all Christians, because participation in Christ’s eternal life is inseparable from participation in his *way* of life, so much so that “all those who have washed with water are not by that very fact washed with the Holy Spirit”.²¹⁴ To be baptized was only to be recruited for war; from that moment on, the Christian stood in perpetual combat against every heresy and – most importantly – every vice and passion within and every evil spirit without.²¹⁵ Here the primacy of the spirit over the letter was vital: it must be understood that the Palestinian cities conquered by Joshua are really the souls of believers liberated by Jesus; that the conflict between Jerusalem and Babylon

²¹¹ Origen’s 10th commentary on Matthew, cited in *ibid.*, 224.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 172.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 172f.

²¹⁴ Origen’s 3rd homily on Numbers, cited in *ibid.*, 209.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 212f.

is really the struggle between the peace of God and the slavery to Satan within the believer's heart and, by extension, in the world at large.²¹⁶

Not that Origen was some proto-Pelagian moralist, as though baptism were step one and self-sufficient discipline were step two. Rather, de Lubac explains, “[a]chieving in act and in truth what baptism pointed to in figure, Christian asceticism is mysticism at its source. It is the active participation of the baptized in the Combat of the Head of which he has become a member. There is but one single Combat, one single victorious Combatant.”²¹⁷ It is as participants in Christ that Christians can live as he lived. And indeed, as Christ reveals God to be “Love in person”, so too participation in Christ – likeness to Christ – fundamentally means cruciformity, “loving our own enemies and [...] praying for our persecutors”.²¹⁸ This essentially implies that if reading Scripture aright is to see Christ everywhere in it – to have it read to us by Jesus – then we have not understood what Scripture says if it does not make us grow in self-sacrificial love. Origen expects the waters from “the well of our own heart” and “the wells of Scripture” to intermingle – that is, through the Scriptures we read our own souls and grow in wisdom and virtue.²¹⁹ As de Lubac observes, “[t]he causality is reciprocal”: a virtuous life enables understanding of the Scriptures, just as understanding the Scriptures inculcates a virtuous life.²²⁰ It is all one singular and continual act of conversion, of turning toward Christ.²²¹ The sense of the word “understanding” is thus here broader than cognition; it is also affective, ethical, corporal, what Ward calls *engaged*. It is not so much something intellectually conquered and kept in the brain as something continually sought with everything that a person is.

²¹⁶ Ibid., 213–218.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 243.

²¹⁸ Origen's 20th commentary on John, cited in *ibid.*, 278.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 399f.

²²⁰ Ibid., 365.

²²¹ Ibid., 375.

4. Conclusion

The central question I have tried to explore is whether Ward's concept of *engaged systematics* can shed light on Origen's biblical hermeneutics as presented by de Lubac, and whether Origen's hermeneutics may thus yield resources for contemporary theology.

4.1 Origen's Engaged Exegesis

I am initially tempted to venture that Origen's hermeneutic may be (anachronistically) described as Pentecostal, but such comparisons must be careful not to enter the dark labyrinths of confessionalism Ward warns us against. At least it suggests that there may be fruitful connections between Pentecostal and Patristic exegesis worth exploring further elsewhere.

For now, let us say that it is clear that Origen's approach to biblical exegesis offers its challenges, and it is equally clear that it is embedded in history in the manner Ward describes: shaped by, and trying to reshape, its context. Origen's concrete interpretations of specific texts are somewhat 'hit or miss' – sometimes arbitrary and forced, sometimes genuinely profound. Many errors he makes simply because he has little understanding of the ancient Hebrew context informing the OT text. Still, the fundamental principle is of another calibre and strikes me as absolutely right: Origen reminds us that Christianity *presupposes* that the Bible is *not* obvious, and that a simple doctrine of *sola scriptura* (at least as it has come to be employed in the wake of modernity) is as doomed to failure as a strict adherence to Church Tradition. Rather – and in accord with the principle of *analogia entis* – the literal words of the Bible are, just as all words about God must inevitably be, in some sense metaphorical; they *get at* the truth without being able to capture it. Thus, it seems perfectly legitimate to seek hidden depths in the text, and Origen understands that we can only enter those depths if we acknowledge the revelatory pre-eminence of Christ. If there is but one Word of God, then the Bible *must* be about Jesus if it is to deserve a share in that title. Origen deems further that, if the Old Testament is more than a historical curiosity that merely outlines the things that happened *before* Jesus, it must in some sense be said to symbolically *contain* Jesus – it must be possible to behold Jesus even there. Ward disagrees that the OT ever *could* be a mere historical curiosity, because our conversations today go back to conversations that the OT initiated – even conversations that initiated the OT – and are only intelligible in light of that past. Still, both agree that as Christians we believe in Jesus; only therefore do we come to the Bible to hear him speak; not vice versa. This also suggests that, when all is said and done, Origen's concrete exegeses are perhaps not so important to retain. What matters more is his insight that the OT must always be made sense of in relation to the cross of Christ, which reveals that God confronts sin with grace, entering the subjugation of death in order to find those most

profoundly lost and bring them to Life. Beyond that, the challenge confronting Origen's exegesis is the same challenge that confronts all theology: it never finds and grasps, it only fumbles and gropes.

4.2 Engaging the Discipline of Discernment

This dovetails with Origen's insistence on the importance of spiritual maturity for sound interpretation. To know Jesus is to know the Scriptures, and while that relationship is mutual it is not exclusive. That is, reading the Bible *can* help us know Jesus, not least through the Gospels (but then it can just as well be misused and misleading, of which history has its fair share of examples) while we can come to know Jesus through other means as well, which in turn lets us understand the Bible. This complexity suggests that one of the most important virtues for theological knowledge is what Ward calls *discernment* – immersion in a “social imaginary”²²² that lets us “see *as*” – and cultivating that virtue, I suggest, involves the practice of *prayer and spiritual guidance*. It requires spiritual mentorship. It requires, if you will, communion with living saints. This offers profound difficulties for theology as an academic discipline on two fronts: on one side, the academy's demands that theological work remain “objective”, “transparent” or “scientific”, ideals that currently seem to cause problems for the humanities as a whole; on another side, the public and embodied character of the life of faith, which demands that theology cannot be confined to professionalized ivory towers. Does this then mean that the proper institution for the exercise of systematic theology is the church rather than the academy? We shall return to this shortly, but whatever the case, it does *not* mean that theology must be confessional – quite the opposite, for as we have seen, the cultivation of discernment is more hindered than helped by rigid dogmatism. But it does mean that the theologian must retain a sense of wonder, an openness to the final ineffability of reality that relativizes all notions of ‘theological method’ and personally engages the theologian's every spiritual and corporal faculty. Indeed, as Gregory of Nyssa supposedly said: “Concepts create idols; only wonder comprehends anything”.²²³

The only thing the theologian *knows* is the Event of the Gospel: that God has reconciled the world to himself through his Son who lived, died and by the Spirit was resurrected and ascended as Lord of all, and whose Spirit has been given to realize that resurrection in the life of the Church. This Origen seems to have understood in his handling of Scripture. For if it is true that the Spirit blows where it will, and if the Bible is not fundamentally a quarry of data but God's address, then a confident theologian is something of a contradiction in terms. That is not to say that theology needs to bow in humility to other disciplines (though it certainly must seek to understand them), but rather to its own

²²² See note 60 above.

²²³ This quote, or some variant thereof, is widely attributed to Gregory of Nyssa, but I have yet to find it accompanied by an actual reference. If nothing else it seems to be a paraphrase drawn from recurring themes in his writings.

Subject. Indeed, that is the fundamental problem of theology as academic science: it has no object to study, only a Subject to discern and heed. Not least does it need to listen broadly to all those voices through history, all those brothers and sisters, who have tried to speak in different times and places of one and the same ineffable Mystery, and through whom we must believe that that Mystery has occasionally spoken – it needs, in a word, Tradition. As Louth noted above, however, Christian tradition is difficult to navigate due to the sheer confessional diversity and disagreement that besets it. But perhaps it can at least be said that theology needs to situate itself as a fleeting sentence in a long conversation, listening carefully to the past while trying to address the here and now as part of the here and now, and harness the fact that theological articulation is anything but timeless.

4.3 In Him All Things Hold Together

Ward speaks of theology as entering a Christian language and imagination, of faith endlessly seeking understanding. Origen searches the Scriptures to find Christ and listen to his voice. If they are both right, the main role of Scripture in systematic theology might be fulfilled as *lectio divina*, as learning to discern the presence of Christ in the Scriptures in order to discern him in all things. Spiritual allegory may then indeed have a legitimate and important role to play. But it is not and cannot be everything. Rather it is the flower that can only bloom if it grows strong roots, for it presupposes that one understand the text *as text*; one can only access its divinity by accessing its humanity. Those roots grow strong as we consolidate all the theological resources we can find – creeds, Church Fathers, saints, confessions, philosophy, history and every modern exegetical tool – as well as all the interdisciplinary dialogue we can muster. That means that robust academic studies are definitely a vital *aid* to theology, but probably also an important arena for that deep listening that is intrinsic to theology itself – just not the only one. The theologian must thence proceed to put the substance of faith into words in a multiplicity of ways and with such poetic proficiency that, just as with the letter of Scripture, he or she may ultimately transcend them and discern the real, substantive depths behind the words employed by his or her ecumenical collocutors. This does not mean that ‘true theology’ is wordless – again, just as Origen saw, the literal words are not meant to be *replaced* but *fulfilled*. Consider the musician who learns every bit of music theory precisely in order to ‘forget’ all of it as he begins to play, because it all comes to expression not through his mouth but through his fingers – not as verbal recitation but as music. Just as with that musician, whose craft could never endure if his music theory were replaced by charts of astrophysics, theology can never transcend its scriptural and traditional language so much that it stops speaking it. Nevertheless, those words only fulfil their role as they are finally and continually performed. And so theology is the practice of an art; it is poetry performed as worship; it is a dance of prayerful participation in Christ.

Thus, talk of faith is empty apart from the life of faith, and we have understood the meaning of the Lutheran doctrine of *sola fide* not when we can describe it or defend it, but when we live in such peace that arouses others to faith in Christ.

Thus, one's view on Communion signifies nothing if separated from one's celebration of it, and we have understood the meaning of the Catholic teaching of transubstantiation not when we grasp its Aristotelian background or know how to explain its metaphysical mechanics, but when we celebrate the Eucharist together in humility and adoration of Christ.

Thus, all conceptions of salvation are vacuous so long as they do not breed love and grace, and we have understood the meaning of the Reformed theory of penal substitution not when we can justify or reject it on grounds of juridical logic or qualify it with other soteriological theories, but when we find ourselves able to forgive our enemies just as God has forgiven all in Christ.

And when we live all these things, perhaps we can find other creative, poetic ways to communicate our participation in Christ – ways that connect truthfully to the web of discourses in which we and those around us seek communion – if the doctrinal formulations just mentioned do not seem to do proper justice to the Truth. New perspectives on the text of Scripture may open new doors, and personal and communal growth in grace may open ever greater depths. For our speech of God is not a matter of objective exegesis or the definitions of select 'theologisms', but learning to see everything, by learning to speak of everything, Christianly. The theologian's task is, as in the painting of Jerome, "reading the Scriptures in and through a Church that is open to the world", and to do so not only to *know* the truth, but as far as possible to *be* the truth – or rather forever strive to *become* the truth by seeking, finding, losing, seeking, delving ever deeper to participate in Him who is the Truth, the Word expressed in and yet perennially beyond mere words.

In short, and as Origen demonstrates with his own life, the perfect expression of the knowledge of the Lord is not a brilliant academic thesis; it is martyrdom.

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