

FIDES ET HUMILITAS:
THE JOURNAL OF THE CENTER FOR ANCIENT
CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Summer 2015 * Issue 2

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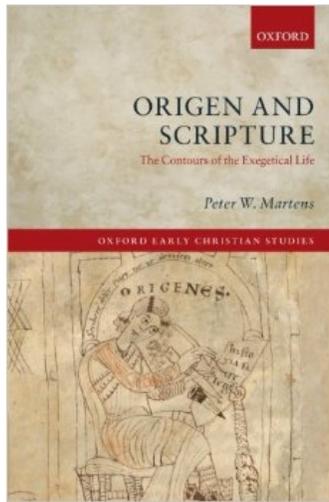
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Peter W. Martens

Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life (Oxford Early Christian Studies)

Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

Pp. xii + 280. ISBN: 978-0-19-871756-0. \$40.00
[Paperback]. Purchase

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“He memorized the Scriptures, and he toiled day and night in the study of their meaning. He delivered more than a thousand homilies in church, and also published innumerable commentaries which are called ‘tomes.’ Who of us can read everything he word? Who can fail to admire his enthusiasm for the Scriptures?” (Jerome, Letter 84.8).

Peter Martens’s work on Origen seeks to shed light on Origen’s scriptural interpretation patterns through use of biography. *Origen and Scripture* not only should renew interest in Origen, but it also demonstrates a broader schema of Origen’s exegetical vision as an interpreter. Upon such read, one will have a better understanding of what Origen is attempting to accomplish as a reader; and hopefully, overturn such notion of viewing Origen *via* allegory or philology.

Martens’s thesis both focuses upon the biography, ethics and virtue, and exegetical disciplines of Origen. In this way, it is an attempt

to move beyond myopic assessment of one or two features of his exegetical enterprise. “I will advance a new and integrative thesis,” argues Martens, “about the contours of the ancient exegetical life as Origen understood it, and as best we can gather, also practiced it” (p.6). Thus, Martens contends that the exegetical life is not merely a scholarly enterprise, though certainly favored, but the *ideal scriptural interpreter* is one who also sets out upon a “way of life, indeed a way of salvation, that culminated in the vision of God” (p.6). Under the auspice of such argument, scholars of Origen can use this to make sense of Origen’s *anthropological* three-fold reading of Scripture: bodily, soul, and spiritual readings (*Princ.* 4.2–3). So, interpreting Scripture, according to Martens’s reading of Origen, is both exegetical, technical, while also leading to virtue and having an experience with God.

The argument of the book is detailed in two parts. Part one argues how Origen identifies the scholarly credentials of the *ideal interpreter*. In this part, Martens notes the contours of Origen’s educational requirements. Graeco-Roman philological techniques were to influence, what Origen calls, the *simpliciores*; that is, the “simple ones.” In his *Letter to Gregory*, Origen exhorts Gregory in the following way, “I pray that you productively draw from Greek philosophy those things that are able to become, as it were, general teachings or preparatory studies for Christianity,” also including geometry, astronomy, music, philology, and rhetoric (*Letter to Gregory*, 1). For Origen’s paradigm, Martens rightly identifies, “The culmination of the *paideia* is not Roman law or Greek philosophy. This educational system has been reconceived as a propaedeutic, a course of introductory study, for a new *telos*, the examination of the church’s Scriptures” (p.30). Beyond Graeco-Roman classical education, Martens lays forth numerous procedures in Origen’s exegesis that include text criticism, historical analysis, and literary analysis. These philological categories, as

Martens argues, “were unquestionably integral to Origen’s vision of the ideal interpreter of Scripture” (p.66).

Part two of Martens argument correlates the components of Philology and Christianity. That is, Origen’s portrait of the *ideal interpreter* extends beyond the bounds set by the educational system and moves the interpreter in to the drama of salvation, finally culminating in the vision of God (p.67). In order to support this argument, Martens first highlights how Origen conveys philology as part of the wisdom of God, including allegory (p.77), and how Origen envisioned the interpreter with specific exegetical virtues. Moving from a positive argument, Martens then progresses to Origen’s boundaries of orthodox readings—critiquing Gnostic and Jewish readers. He identifies interpretive and problematic theological commitments of the Gnostics and Jewish readings of Scripture. Martens concludes part two by noting the “moral character and conduct of the Christian philologist influenced scriptural interpretation” (p.161) and how the Scriptures and final act of interpretation leads to salvation and a vision of God, culminating in an encounter with God (p.242).

Two particular arguments are worth noting in more detail. First, I want to note his thesis and main contribution in *Origen and Scripture*. “My central thesis,” clarifies Martens, “in this book is that Origen contextualized interpreters—himself included—within the Christian drama of salvation...biblical interpretation afforded these philologists an occasion through which to express various facets of their existing Christian commitment, as well as to receive divine resources for their continued journey in their faith” (p.xi). Moreover, Martens states that he will “advance a new and integrative thesis” regarding the exegetical life (p.6). Especially familiar with major monographs on Origen’s hermeneutical enterprise, de Lubac’s *History and Spirit*, Hanson’s

Allegory and Event, Torjesen's *Hermeneutical Procedure and Theological Method*, as well as Lauro's *Soul and the Spirit of Scripture* do not envision an *ideal reader*, but rather focus upon features of Origen's hermeneutics. Martens's work is one-of-its-kind in that he takes a step back from hermeneutical features to detail the entire exegetical vision of Origen. At best, this work is a new reading of Origen; at worst, Martens presents a renewed vision Origen's exegetical vision that has been missed in previous pieces of literature. If Martens is right, and in my estimation there is a lot of agreement, then his thesis is not only a dramatic shift from previous scholarship but has the potential to paradigmatically shift the future of Origenian scholarship. I estimate that all subsequent work on Origen, in order to overturn or noticeably shift Martens's thesis, must thoroughly engage Origen's literature afresh and suggest where Martens has veered astray.

A second argument worth noting is the exegetical critiques of Gnostic and Jewish interpretation. Martens notes how focusing upon important themes of literal and allegorical exegesis or scriptural authorship do not capture the entire contour of Origen's exegetical vision (p.5). Thus, some in scholarship (as noted by Martens) and, I would also add, popular opinion, focus upon one or two features of Origen's hermeneutical enterprise—philology or allegory. Thus, others typically see Origen's critique of Gnostic or Jewish readings as a charge of overt literalism, as if Origen does not read literally (p.107, 133). However, Martens has carefully noted how the claim of literalism, as a *cardinal exegetical defect*, is unhelpful and misleading (p.107). Not only does Origen show signs of literal readings to invalidate this charge (cf. *Cels.* 1.51; *Comm. Matt.* 10.7–8; *Hom. Lev.* 3.2.6, 9.9.1, 14.2.3; *Princ.* 4.2.4–4.3; also, Paul Blowers, "Origen, the Rabbis, and the Bible"), but Martens notes how *theological a priori*s bear upon their systemic interpretive differences. More broadly, Origen's critique of Gnostic

readings stem also from an uncritical acceptance of erroneous teachings from Graeco-Roman philosophy and a lack of adherence to the Church's rule of faith (p.119). His charge against Jewish readings is they continue along with the central tenets of Judaism and, thus, a critique of Christian convictions (p.134). Martens helpfully and carefully walks through mounds of primary texts to sustain this argument: theological presuppositions, not hermeneutical patterns, reflect the primary problem that Origen has with Gnostic and Jewish readings of Scripture.

Overall, I cannot praise this volume enough. It is insightful, cogently argued, and gives new insights into Origen, the person, and Origen's exegetical vision. I trust this text will be a staple for years to come in Origenian scholarship.

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