

Origen on 'Adam'¹

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One thing that has become very clear throughout the present course is the inadequacy of any attempt to force 'consistency' upon Origen for the purpose of transforming him into what we would term a more "systematic" thinker. It seems probable that developing a system was not Origen's primary concern; what he sought was understanding. This involved the exploration of various options and the presentation of different 'angles' from which questions could be approached. This need not necessarily imply internal contradictions within the body of his thought, but it does certainly involve tensions.

I would like here to briefly consider one such tension. In considering the figure of "Adam," Origen took different approaches depending on the context of his work and on the particular question which he was addressing. It does not seem possible to conclude that there is one univocal interpretation that is given to the figure/person of Adam; but it does seem that the differing concerns which surface in this context reflect authentic concerns of Origen's thinking, and thus must be held in some dialectical tension.

A complicating factor in this is the fragmentary nature of the works of Origen that are available to us. Rondet notes, for example, that with regard to the present question it is important to remember that virtually nothing of Origen's commentaries on Genesis has been preserved.

A second complicating factor that must be kept in mind in interpreting Origen in this regard is that what we know as the 'doctrine of original sin' had not yet received clear formulation in the third century. His speculations regarding the universality of sin were less attempts to simply express the meaning of generally held doctrine than they were efforts-at-understanding that were to play a role in enabling the eventual emergence of widespread affirmation of a doctrine.

Texts

In his *De princ.*, Origen does not treat of 'Adam' at length. There is, however, a significant methodological reference concerning exegesis (*princ.* 4.3). The concern is with Origen's famous

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allegorical interpretation of the spiritual sense of Scripture. His affirmation here is that there are aspects of the Genesis narrative which obviously did not happen (historically/literally); such passages are included in Scripture to enable the unveiling of a deeper, more profound meaning. Thus, from a methodological point of view it is clear that Origen is not committed *a priori* to the historical existence of Adam; nor, however, does he have any such commitment to a purely symbolic status for Adam.

Thus, it is evident from other passages in the *De princ.* that Origen posits the pre-existence of rational creatures in a state prior to this-world. From this state of contemplation which they enjoyed, the creatures ‘fell’ by lapsing in their attentiveness in contemplation; this-world serves both as punitive result of that fall and as the means for return to the contemplative state. On the exegetical/methodological grounds considered above, the question remains open as to whether ‘Adam’ is interpreted as a symbolic reference to this prior fall, or as a historical figure in this-world in whom there is a this-world solidarity in sin.

For further consideration of these possibilities, it is necessary to look to works written later in Origen’s life. An initial set of texts is from the *Commentary on Romans*; the context is Paul’s parallelism of Adam and Christ. In 5.1, the Pauline assertion that “death reigned over them who sinned...” is held to possibly refer to “some **mystery**,” this seems quite clearly to be a reference to the doctrine of pre-existing rational creatures and their fall from contemplative union with God. Insofar as this is the reference, ‘Adam’ is a symbolic expression of the truth that every rational creature finds himself in this world because of his own prior lapse; death reigns over them because – in their pre-existence – they acted the way that ‘Adam’ does in the narrative.

But later in the same passage (5.1), there is also reference to the fact that “all who were born in this world” bear the “likeness” of Adam’s transgression “not only from his seed but also from his instruction.” There is a sense here of a real this-worldly inheritance of some effect of historical sin. [By way of parenthetical note, it may be noted here that this relates to Origen’s position on the propriety of infant baptism.] The passage does little to clarify the question left open in the *De princ.*; indeed, it seems to leave the same options open. This is also true of subsequent passages in the Romans commentary.

In the *Comm. in Rom* 5.4, a twofold alternative of interpretation is clearly placed. The unquestionable fact is that we find ourselves set “in this place of humiliation;” the unresolved question is how we are to understand the ‘why’ of this. The options are these: (a) all humans “were in the loins of Adam,” and thus were “cast out of paradise” with him; or (b) in “some **mysterious** way” each individual has merited and received this banishment. The second option (b) seems quite clearly to be a reference to the doctrine of pre-existence; the first option, however, has an extremely ‘earthly’ tone to it. It begins more and more to appear that Origen ‘would like to have it both ways.’ But before raising the question as to why, one more text should be considered.

In his *Contra Celsum*, Origen again tackles the question. The apologetic nature of the work sets the context; among other things, there is evident concern to assert clearly that responsibility for evil/sin belongs to man, not God. In his first approach to the question here, Origen equates “Adam” with *anthropos*; thus, “Adam” is considered as figurative speech for the “nature of man.” This seems to involve a certain ‘looking back’ once again to the doctrine of pre-existence. The first explanation for the universality of sin among creatures in this-world is that all have fallen in another world, which is precisely the explanation of their existence in this-world. And yet he goes on to acknowledge that there are “sayings which seem to refer to one individual,” such that “the curse of Adam is shared by all men.” This again appears to be a clear assertion of a this-worldly solidarity in the effects of a this-worldly sin. Rather than looking backwards from “Adam” to the pre-existing rational creatures, this concern would seem to be ‘looking forward’ to the concrete history of this-worldly existence – i.e., to the solidarity of human creatures in sin. This seems to be a fairly strong affirmation of the historicity of Adam.

Accordingly, the options remain. And the question remains as to ‘why?’

Conclusion

There are many dimensions that would have to be considered in any exhaustive attempt to deal with that question; this is not the place (nor is midway through finals week the time!) for such ‘exhaustion.’ Among other things, the various ‘interests’ of the channels through which Origen’s works have been transmitted would have to be considered.

But in a preliminary attempt, it seems that this much can be clearly posited. Early in his thinking, Origen had proposed the doctrine of the pre-existence of rational creatures in a contemplative state of union with God from which they fell. This doctrine retained an attractiveness for him throughout his life. It successfully dealt with many issues: e.g., the fact of creaturely, rather than divine, responsibility for evil/sin; consonance with certain Platonic notions; desire to affirm salvation as a universal possibility. For these and other reasons, a purely allegorical interpretation of Adam as symbolic of the nature of each creature's individual fall was attractive.

But there was also a real difficulty in this. Central to Christian faith is a profound conviction of real **solidarity** of all in Christ. Paul magnificently affirms this salvific solidarity in Romans; but there is also the parallel assertion concerning an initial human solidarity "in Adam." The doctrine of pre-existence (and the purely symbolic interpretation of Adam), in Rondet's perceptive analysis, "makes the solidarity of the human race vanish into thin air." If the fall of each is an isolated act, the reality of redemptive communion seems threatened. The texts in which Origen admits a more literal/historical interpretation of Adam may have been motivated by precisely this concern.

In essence, it seems probable that Origen "did not decide between the several ways in which all mankind shares Adam's sin."² He considered "Adam" in at least two different ways, and for quite different reasons; from the texts that are preserved, it does not seem that any systematic resolution was ever achieved – nor probably ever really attempted. Origen's grappling with mystery, rather, involved a constant dialectical tension between two poles of truth that did not admit of easy resolution.

² Edward Yarnold, *The Theology of Original Sin* (Wisconsin, 1971), p 60.