

THE ALLEGORICAL EXEGETICAL METHOD OF ORIGEN

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Origen stands in the church as one of its great figures. He is perhaps the greatest theologian, since he laid the foundations of christian Theology and developed it into a true science. And such was his influence on it, that after him there is almost no theologian who can do any work without taking into account Origen's writings. The horizons which he opened in Theology embrace almost the entire Christian thought and his teachings still guide the theologians in their research.

But Origen was not a sterile theologian. He was a philosopher; he had studied Greek philosophy, which had impressed him a great deal. However, his differed from the other philosophers in that for him the whole truth, which the other philosophers so painfully had sought without result, might be found in the Scriptures. In them the entire Logos was revealed and he therefore, turned to them to find the truth. It was only in the Scriptures, that «the way to knowledge opened out for a Christian, there spoke the Lord through His Holy Spirit to the spirit which had taken up a dwelling in us; and without the revelation of the logos, it was simply impossible to enter into God's presence»¹. But no matter how faithful a student of the Bible Origen was, he never ceased to be a philosopher; a man whose brilliant mind was an unemptied source of ideas which he wanted to expound, not as a philosopher, not as his own knowledge, but invested with the authority of divine inspiration, as the revelation of God, which was found in the Scriptures. Thus the latter became to him the instrument through which he would express his own philosophy. In the Holy Book he discovered his own teaching, «an entire system of dogmas of which the sacred authors never dreamt»².

1. H. L i e t z m a n, The founding of the church universal, (New York, 1938), p. 413.

2. E. D e F a y e, Origen and his work, (New York, 1929), p. 38.

But how could Scriptures help Origen in such a work? They were for both Jews and Greeks a «stumbling block». They were the national history of a certain people with its materialistic views. The inconsistencies in them appeared to be a disharmony and contradiction. And they lacked the elegance of the texts of Greek literature. Were they then not inferior to the Philosophers? In response to such charges and in order to overcome the difficulties which he faced in finding in each narrative of the Bible a deep, mystical meaning Origen, like Philo, «embraced the allegorical method of Biblical interpretation. For by this ingenious tool, it was possible to emulate the philosophers, solve all inconsistencies of text, and spiritualize and universalize the Biblical message so that it would be adequate for any people, time or place»³.

Thus the Christian philosopher applied himself to interpreting the Scriptures allegorically in the belief that he was explaining them, whereas «he was exploiting them on behalf on his own dogmatic teaching»⁴.

After writing on Lamentations Origen began the creation of a great work which was the Commentary on Genesis. He had serious reasons to work on this biblical book... First in it he might find most of his theological views and secondly this book had been used by heretical theologians, like Hermogenes, who, «unwillingly», as they were «to allow allegory in Holy Scriptures, are therefore tied to the bare literal narrative and invent legends and fictions»⁵. Thus they (the heretics) developed a creed of belief in «a Creator-God often thought of in a very material and corporeal way, in the resurrection of the flesh, in a judgment, fear of which is the main motive in ethical behaviour, in a historical Jesus who has destroyed by his Passion on the cross the power of demons and fate, and in the enjoyment of a hereafter envisaged materialistically»⁶. It was the task of Origen therefore by interpreting Genesis to refute such heretics and repudiate their teachings⁷. However, Origen was compelled to break off this work before he reached Gen. 1, 26⁸. The reasons were probably his cognizance of the scandal which might result from his totally allegorical interpretation of all narrations

3. H. T. K e r r, *The first systematic theologian: Origen of Alexandria*, (Princeton, New Jersey, 1958), p. 12.

4. D e F a y e, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

5. *Comm. on Ps. 18.4*, P.G. 12, 1243.

6. W. V ö l k e r, *Das Vollkommenheitsideal des Origenes*, (Tubingen, 1931), p. 78.

7. Cf. R. M. G r a n t, *The letter and the spirit*, (London, 1957), p. 92.

8. That he did so is evident from *De Principiis* I, 2, 6.

of Genesis and perhaps because of the criticism against his method. He therefore stopped and turned to another work by which to justify theoretically his theology and his exegetical method⁹. This was his treatise on First Principles.

The allegorical method which Origen employed was not an innovation; it was not an invention of his own. It was practiced long before him. It had been used as a method of discovering one's own philosophical understanding in his master's words. The Stoics had employed it in a large scale in interpreting ancient Greek literature and especially in the religious myths and sayings of poets and thinkers of the earlier ages. In Alexandria Philo had applied allegory to the Jewish Scriptures, but for him, being a Jew, the main use of it was chiefly «to rid the Scriptures of offensive matters and to get Biblical authority for his own teachings¹⁰». Living in Alexandria Origen got acquainted with its philosophical school, the head of which was Ammonios. Origen was a student of his and had personal contact with him. Porphyry, his younger contemporary, pointed out this fact. He records that as a young man he had met the famous Origen, the pupil of Ammonios, who although a Christian in his mode of life, was always in company with Plato, the Neoplatonists, and the Pythagorians; he became a Greek in his doctrine about God and material things; and from the books of Chaeremon the Stoic and Cornutus he derived the metaphorical method of the Greek mysteries, applying it to the Jewish writings: «Παρ' ὧν τὸν μετακλητὸν τῶν παρ' Ἑλλήσιν μυστηρίων γινόμενον τρόπον ταῖς Ἰουδαϊκαῖς προσήγγεγραφαῖς»¹¹. Thus we may say that Origen was a pupil of those old grammarians, commentators and allegorists who through succeeding generations came down to his own times¹² and who taught him this principle and the mode of feeling and thought, which passed as modern learning at the beginning of the third century¹³.

Before Origen, Clement of Alexandria following Philo carried the same method of allegorical exegesis in his treatment of the Old as well as of the New Testament. But in distinction to Philo whose purpose was to defend the Scriptures, Clement employed it in order to discover in them hidden truths for the instruction and delectation of the gnostic and

9. Grant, op. cit., p. 92.

10. A. C. McGiffert, A history of christian thought, vol. I: Early and Eastern, (New York, 1932), p. 195.

11. Eusebius, Historia Ecclesiastica, VI, 19,8.

12. De Faye, op. cit., p. 169.

13. Lietzmann, op. cit., p. 392.

thus «to support his contention that there is a higher stage of knowledge to which Christians should aspire¹⁴. Thus in his use of allegory Clement set the fashion for his pupil Origen. But the latter surpassed his teacher, since he was the first to enter into the genuine tradition of the philosophical school of Alexandria and by taking full possession of the Platonic heritage to develop «a method of allegorical exegesis which was carefully thought out, and was based upon the Alexandrian tradition»¹⁵. His method had such a strong influence on posterity that it became the model for biblical exegesis which was practiced in the entire Greek Church»¹⁶.

No matter how close he adhered to the Alexandrian tradition however, Origen had to defend his exegetical method against the various attacks from heretics, from laymen in the church and from Celsus who attacked the Christian writers because, being «ashamed of these things (which are written in the Bible), they take refuge in allegory»¹⁷. Celsus was the most violent critic of the allegorical method, although he quite inconsistently allowed pagan allegorizing»¹⁸. Origen was particularly sensitive to the attacks «of those who are unworthy and indecent and who are unable to enter into the great thoughts and venerable nature of theology»¹⁹. He answers with arguments taken from the Bible itself; there are utterances in the prophets which are evidently intended to be taken in a figurative sense. Thus one of the prophets expresses himself in words like this: «I will open my mouth in parables, I will utter hard sayings of old» (ps. 78,2). And of the Law it is said by Scripture itself: «Open Thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy law» (Ps. 119,18)²⁰. But for Origen the greatest allegorist was the Apostle Paul. His interpretations of the Old Testament texts are an argument to which he (Origen) constantly returns. In his Epistle to the Galatians he openly says that the Old Testament should be interpreted allegorically²¹ and he «speaks in terms of reproach to those who believe that they are reading the law and yet do not understand it», because they did not see the allegories contained in the Old

14. McGiffert, op. cit., p. 195.

15. Lietzmann, op. cit., p. 413.

16. Ibid.

17. Contra Celsum IV, 48.

18. Ibid. I, 20.

19. Ibid. VI, 18.

20. Ibid. II, 6.

21. Ibid., IV, 44.

Testament, but interpreted the Law «carnally»²². It is quite natural therefore that those who adhere to the letter of the Law and miss the spirit, should consider St. Paul as suspect on account of his interpretations²³. Consequently the allegorical method was not only relevant to the Scriptures, but was also recommended by them.

That the allegorical method of interpretation is indispensable is proven from the fact that the literal understanding of the Old Testament resulted in «impoverished notions» which led to three kinds of errors: 1) The hard-hearted Jews because of their reliance on the literal meaning of the Messianic passages in the Old Testament refused to believe in our Saviour because He did not, in the literal sense of the words, «proclaim release to captives» (Is. 61,1 and Luke 4,18) or build what they consider to be a real «city of God» (Ps. 46,4). They rejected Christ because the prophecies were not fulfilled in that literal manner in which they thought they should be fulfilled. 2) The heretics, Marcion and his school, contrast the God of Jesus Christ and they consider him to be the author of all evils because they take the hard words of the Scriptures in a literal sense when they read such passages as «I am a jealous God, visiting the sins of the fathers upon the children» (Exodus 20,5), or «I, God, make peace and create evil» (Is. 45,7), and elsewhere «There is no evil in a city, which the Lord did not do» (Deut. 32,22; Jer. 15,14). 3) The simple believers who do not differentiate between the God of Moses and the prophets, and the Heavenly Father of the Gospels; but as they also misunderstand the Scripture, they naively attribute cruelty and injustice to the supreme God²⁴. Their fault is a partiality for taking literally and in an anthropomorphic sense things said figuratively or analogically about God.

We must therefore search under the surface of the letter and find the deep, the mystical truths of the Scriptures, which are «concealed under a poor and humble style»²⁵. In the Scriptures we shall find the whole truth, because it was inspired by God. Origen had employed in his Theology reason, logic and arguments of various kinds, but for him the final authority is the Bible, because it is «divine». «We do not rest satisfied with common opinions and the evidence of things that are seen, but we use in addition, for the manifest proof of our statements, testimonies

22. De Principiis, IV, 2, 6. English translation by G. W. Butterworth, (London, 1936).

23. Hom. in Exod. IX, I.

24. De Principiis, IV, 2, 1.

25. Ibid., IV, I, 7.

drawn from the Scriptures which we believe to be divine»²⁶. To prove his theory of the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, Origen uses two arguments. These are the effectiveness and swift spread of Christianity, and the fulfillment by Christianity of prophecy in the Old Testament. The first chapter of the fourth book of the *De Principiis* is largely devoted to this theme. That the Scriptures «are divine writings», is proved by the fact that while many other lawgivers and teachers «proclaimed doctrines which they professed to be the truth» without succeeding «in implanting an enthusiasm for the acceptance of their teaching among nations other than their own... or even among any number of persons worth mentioning in a single nation»²⁷, yet «all over Greece and in the barbarian part of our world there are thousands of enthusiasts who have abandoned their ancestral laws and their recognised gods for observance of the laws of Moses and of the teaching contained in the words of Jesus Christ»²⁸. And all this happened «in spite of the fact that those who submit to the law of Moses are hated by the worshippers of images and that those who accept the word of Jesus Christ are not only hated but in danger of death»²⁹. Moreover, if we consider that Christianity prevailed despite the persecution and that «Greeks and barbarians, wise and foolish have adopted the religion of Jesus, we shall not hesitate to say that this achievement is more than human.» And the «daring venture of the Apostles», who being «sent by Jesus to preach the Gospel sojourned everywhere, was not merely human»; «the command was from God»³¹.

The inspiration of the prophecies of the Old Testament is proved by their fulfillment: «For the characteristic of divinity is the announcement of future events, predicted not by human power, but shown by the result to be due to a divine spirit in him who made the announcement»³². The spiritual nature of Moses' law comes to light through Christ: «Now the light which was contained within the law of Moses, but was hidden away under a veil, shone forth at the advent of Jesus, when the veil was taken away and there came at once to men's knowledge those

26. *De Principiis*, IV, I, I.

27. *Ibid.*, IV, I, I.

28. *Ibid.*, IV, I, I.

29. *Ibid.*, IV, I, I.

30. *Ibid.*, IV, I, 2.

31. *Ibid.*, IV, I, 5.

32. *Contra Celsum*, VI, 10.

good things of which the letter of the law held a shadow» (Heb. 10,1)³³. «The sacred books» therefore «are not the works of men, but they were composed and have come down to us as a result of the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the will of the Father of the universe through Jesus Christ»³⁴.

After having established the divine inspiration of the Scriptures Origen proceeds to discuss «the manner in which they are to be read and understood, since many mistakes have been made in consequence of the method by which the holy documents ought to be interpreted»³⁵. He will explain therefore «the methods of interpretation that appear right to us»³⁶. Origen derives his «right way» of interpretation of the Holy Scriptures from the Scripture itself. «The right way, as it appears to us, of approaching the Scriptures and gathering their meaning, is the following, which is extracted from the writings themselves. We find some such rule as this laid down by Solomon in the Proverbs concerning the divine doctrines written therein: «Do thou portray them threefold in counsel and knowledge, that thou mayest answer words of truth to those who question thee» (Prov. 22, 20-21). Then he goes on to prescribe the «threefold way» which corresponds to a traditional triple division of human nature in body, soul, and spirit. «One must therefore portray the meaning of the sacred writings in a threefold way upon one's own soul, so that the simple man may be edified by what we may call the flesh of the Scripture, this name being given to the obvious interpretation; while the man who has made some progress may be edified by its soul, as it were; and the man who is perfect may be edified by the spiritual law, which has a shadow of the good things to come (Heb. 10,1). For just as man consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does the Scripture, which has been prepared by God to be given for man's salvation»³⁷.

The Scriptures accordingly have three meanings—three senses: the literal (or bodily), the moral (or psychic) and the symbolic (or spiritual). Sometimes all three would be found, «since some passages possess in addition to the soul meaning and the spiritual meaning, a bodily sense as well, which is capable of edifying the hearers».

33. De Principiis, IV, I, 6.

34. Ibid. IV, 2, 2.

35. Ibid., IV, 2, I.

36. Ibid., IV, 2, 2.

37. Ibid., IV, 2, 4.

But «since there are certain passages of Scripture which have no bodily sense at all, there are occasions when we must seek only for the soul and the spirit»³⁸. However, in many passages even the bodily sense can be useful and of a «helpful meaning», as it «is witnessed by the multitudes of sincere and simple believers»³⁹.

Of the three senses or ways of interpretation, the highest and most edifying is the spiritual, mystical, or allegorical. Indeed it is through «the spiritual explanation» that one can bring to light «the heavenly things» of which the Jews «served a copy and a shadow» and the «good things» of which the law contains «a shadow» (See Heb. 8,5; Rom. 8,5; Heb. 10,1)⁴⁰. The mystical sense gives the collective and universal meaning of the mystery. «We» therefore, «have to transform the Gospel known to sense-perception into one intellectual and spiritual. For what would the narrative of the Gospel known to sense-perception amount to, if it were not developed into a spiritual one? It would be of little account or none. Anyone can read it and assure himself of the facts it tells—nothing more. But our whole energy is now to be directed to the effort to penetrate to the depths of the meaning of the Gospel and to search out the truth that is in it when it is divested of its prefigurations»⁴¹. But to achieve such a spiritual interpretation we must «lift up (*ἀνάγειν*) and allegorize» the literal expressions of the Scriptures⁴². For Origen the understanding of the Scripture is a gift of grace: «Then there is the doctrine that the Scriptures were composed through the Spirit of God and that they have not only that meaning which is obvious, but also another which is hidden from the majority of readers. For the contents of Scripture are the outward forms of certain mysteries and the images of divine things. On this point the entire Church is unanimous, that while the whole law is spiritual, the inspired meaning is not recognized by all, but only by those who are gifted with the grace of the Holy Spirit in the word of wisdom and knowledge»⁴³. It was to the Holy Spirit that Origen used to lift his hands in prayer when he was struggling to find a right meaning, and he felt His grace descending upon him as a kiss of the lips

38. Ibid., IV, 2, 5.

39. Ibid., IV, 2, 6.

40. Ibid., IV, 2, 6.

41. In *John Commentary*, I, 8. Origenes Werke, vol. 4 (ed. Leipzig, 1903), p. 13.

42. Ibid., I, 26. Or. Werke, p. 33.

43. *De Principiis*, Preface, 8.

of the Logos when a divine secret was revealed to him without worldly learning⁴⁴.

According to the three senses of the Scripture there are three classes of Christians distinguished by their spiritual capacity of understanding the meaning of the Scriptures. First «the simple believers»⁴⁵ who are content with the letter or «the flesh of the Scriptures». But even «those» Origen admits, «who follow the letter of the Gospel (that is, its literal account) are saved, because even the bare literal narration of the Gospel is adequate for salvation of the simpler fold»⁴⁶. Second, those «who have made some progress and «may be edified by the soul»⁴⁷, that is that moral sense. These are the more mature, or the pious and ordinary Christians. And third the «perfect» ones «who are mentioned by the apostle» (I Cor. 2,6-7) who says: «we speak wisdom among the perfect; yet a wisdom not of this world... but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery»⁴⁸. Those are the ones who have received» the higher gifts of the Spirit and in particular... the graces of language, wisdom and knowledge; these are the «lovers of wisdom»⁴⁹. They are «illuminated with more divine inspirations, by the spirit which surpasses the nature of the letter»; to them «the Gospel is not veiled». They «see the veil of the Scriptures rent in twain from the top to the bottom and see what is inside» and are, therefore, «filled with a greater knowledge»⁵⁰.

However, the triple division of the Scriptures fades away in Origen's later works. In fact, it breaks down immediately after he has defended the threefold way of interpretation. Trying to allegorize the Shepherd of Hermas he is compelled to admit only two senses, the literal one represented by Grapte and the spiritual which is symbolized by Clement «who has already gone beyond the letter» and deals with «the souls that are outside all bodily and lower thoughts»⁵¹. It is true that in his Homilies and occasionally in his Commentaries Origen completes the threefold interpretation by drawing out the moral sense as well along with the other two senses, but on the whole the former «plays no signi-

44. Commentary in Canticum Canticorum, Prol. Patrologia Graeca, vol. 13, col. 63 and lib. I, P.G. 13,91.

45. De Principiis, IV, 2,6.

46. In Matth. Commentary ser. 27. Or. Werke, vol. II, (ed. Leipzig, 1933), p. 47

47. De Principiis, IV, 2,4.

48. Ibid.

49. De Principiis, Preface, 3.

50. In Matth. Comm. ser. 139, Or. Werke, vol. II, p. 289.

51. De Principiis, IV, 2,4.

ficant part in his exegesis» and the reasons is, as Hanson points out, «not because he had no occasion to draw edifying or devotional lessons from the text of the Bible, but because in the practical work of expounding Scripture he found it impossible to maintain the distinction between the moral and the spiritual sense, and the former became absorbed in the latter»⁵².

The spiritual sense of the Scripture is identified with its allegorical sense, since the inner meaning of the biblical books is found only through allegory. Allegory therefore is for Origen something distinct. It is not an ingenious play with words or thoughts, nor is it an exegetical method aside from other methods. «In his eyes it is the only method of interpretation which is worthy of the Holy Scriptures. It is the *conditio sine qua non* for understanding the Scriptures, and those who do not accept it, are excluded from grasping the contents of the divine sayings»⁵³.

But why are the Scriptures supposed to be speaking in allegories? Why should we search everywhere for a mystical sense, as if their meanings were not simple and clear? Origen answers these questions by arguments taken from nature. For «he who believes the Scriptures to have proceeded from the Author of Nature, may well expect to find the same sort of difficulties in them which he finds in Nature»⁵⁴. While in nature there are things which «show themselves most plainly to be works of Providence», there are also other things «so obscure as to appear to afford grounds for disbelief in the God»⁵⁵. Nature therefore is an allegory concealing the hidden operation of Providence. And «as Providence is not abolished because of our ignorance», in the same way «the divine character of Scripture, which extends through all of it» is not «abolished because our weakness cannot discern in every sentence the hidden splendour of its teachings, concealed under a poor and humble style»⁵⁶. And as in nature whose disorders by stimulating men to search bring them from the creation to Creator, so in the Scriptures «the Word of God has arranged for certain stumbling-blocks, as it were, and hindrances and impossibilities to be inserted in the midst of the law and the

52. R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, (Richmond, Virginia, 1959), p. 243.

53. E. Molland, *The Conception of the Gospel in the Alexandrian Theology*, (Oslo, 1938), p. 140.

54. *Philocalia*, 23.

55. *De Principiis*, IV, I, 7.

56. *Ibid.*

history»⁵⁷ in order to stimulate for search, for «the man who is capable of being taught might, by searching out and devoting himself to the deep things (See I Cor. 2,10) revealed in the spiritual meaning of the words, become partaker of all the doctrines of the Spirit's counsel»⁵⁸. «The letter of the Gospel is not simple and clear, as some think it is. It is only simple to simple believers»,— a fact in which we may see the providential order of things. «But to those who are able and willing to hear the deeper sense of the words, they contain wisdom and things worthy of the Word of God»⁵⁹. Only the spiritual believers can penetrate into the deep truth of the Scriptures. Only they can find the hidden sense of the words which is like the treasure hidden in the field, of which our Lord spoke in one of its parables⁶⁰. The mystical truths are hidden everywhere in the Scriptures even under the historical narratives, since the Logos used history at those many points where it «could be harmonised with the mystical events» in order «to conceal from the multitude their deeper meaning». Where the narrative «did not correspond with the sequence of the intellectual truths, the Scriptures wove into the story something which did not happen, occasionally something which could not happen, and occasionally something which might have happened but in fact did not»⁶¹. We must recognize therefore that «occasionally the records taken in a literal sense are not true, but actually absurd and impossible, and even with the history that actually happened and the legislation that is in a literal sense useful there are other matters interwoven»⁶². The mystical truths «have been concealed in the narratives. For «the kingdom of Heaven is like unto a treasure hid in a field» (Matt. 13,44). The outward aspect of Scripture «corresponds to the field as a whole... whereas the truths that are stored away in it and not seen by all, but lie as if buried beneath the visible plants, are the hidden «treasures of wisdom and knowledge» (Col. 2,3). «All the king's glory is within the «frail vessel» of the poor letter» (2 Cor. 4,7). «If, however, a reader is more curious and persists in asking for an explanation of every detail», let him know that «he will never be able to reach the final goal of his inquiries». Even the apostle Paul «scanning by the aid of the Holy Spirit... and yet not being able to reach the end and to attain, if I may say so, an innermost know-

57. Ibid., IV, 2,9.

58. Ibid., IV, 2,7.

59. In Matth. X, I. Or. Werke, vol. 10, (ed. Leipzig, 1935), p. 2.

60. In Matth. Comm. Ser. 18. Or. Werke, vol. II, (ed. Leipzig, 1933), p. 32.

Cf. In Matth. X, 5. Or. Werke, vol. 10 (ed. Leipzig, 1935), p. 5.

61. De Principiis, IV, 2,9.

62. Ibid., IV, 3,4.

ledge, in his despair and amazement at the task cries out and says: «O the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out» (Rom II, 33). For «no created mind can by any means possess the capacity to understand all». And «we may venture to declare that neither the armies of the holy angels... can wholly know the beginnings of all things and the end of the universe», although «those holy spirits and powers... are nearest to the very beginnings of things and reach a point which the rest of creation cannot attain to»⁶³.

For the discovery of the hidden treasures we need the help of God, who alone is able to «break in pieces the gates of brass» (Is. 45,2), which conceal them, and... so to make known all the truths»⁶⁴. We therefore ought to pray that we may see the hidden truths of the Scriptures: «May Jesus our Lord put His hand upon our eyes, that we may begin to behold the things which are not seen, not the things which are seen, and may He open those eyes which do not see the things present, but the thing to come»⁶⁵. Thus the words which say: «Ye shall see indeed, and not perceive» (Is. 6,9)⁶⁶ may not be fulfilled for us.

However, one cannot say that Origen kept exclusively to the allegorical method as the only proper one for the interpretation of the Bible. He admits that in the Scriptures along with the spiritual meaning the real historical truth exists and therefore the literal interpretation is not totally rejected. The law is to be interpreted spiritually. But this does not mean that «because some of the history did not happen, therefore none of it happened». For, «in regard to some things we are clearly aware that the historical fact is true; as that Abraham was buried in the double cave at Hebron, together with Isaac and Jacob... (Gen. 49,29-32; 50,13) and that Jerusalem is the chief city of Judaea, in which a temple of God was built by Solomon». Indeed «the passages which are historically true are far more numerous than those which are composed with purely spiritual meanings». And commandments like «Honor thy father and thy mother...» or «thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not steal» (Exod. 20, 12-15) are of course to be observed in their literal sense. It is often difficult to decide «whether a particular incident, believed to be history, actually happened or not, and whether the literal meaning of a particular law is to be observed or not».

63. *Ibid.*, IV, 3, 14.

64. *Ibid.*, IV, 3, 11.

65. Hom. in Gen. XV, 7. Or. Werke, vol. 6, (ed. Leipzig, 1920), p. 135.

66. Hom. in Is. VI, 3. Or. Werke, vol. 8, (ed. Leipzig), p. 273, 274.

«The exact reader» of Scripture, therefore, must «carefully investigate» and distinguish the literal from the spiritual according to «the Saviour's precept which says «search the Scriptures» (John 5,39). Origen's position is found in the following statement: «Our contention with regard to the whole of divine Scripture is that it all has a spiritual meaning, but not all a bodily meaning; for the bodily meaning is often proved to be an impossibility. Consequently the man who reads the divine books reverently, believing them to be divine writings, must exercise great care»⁶⁷.

The main care thus of every one in reading the Scriptures is to transcend from the literal meaning to the spiritual, the deep and mystical one. This is what Origen did. He considered the interpreter's duty «to penetrate into the depths of the Gospel and to seek the bare truth of the patterns contained in it»⁶⁸. But for him, being a philosopher, these truths were his own speculations which he based on passages of the Scriptures by employing allegory; where the Bible did not obviously mean what he had in mind he had only to turn the magic ring of allegory and the desired meaning appeared. But in doing so he did not want to depart from biblical truth or the teaching of the Church. On the contrary he always intended to interpret the Bible and allegorize the Scriptures in the Church's rule of faith. And to use Hanson's words «he was a legal churchman, an encourager of martyrs, an adept in prayer, a constant preacher, and a reconciler of heretics»⁶⁹. By means of the allegorical method he managed to interpret the Scriptures in such a spiritual way as to eliminate the accusations against it from the literalists Jews and the Gnostics and at the same time to elevate it in a position of being a worthy criterion of our faith. It is true that the allegorical method in several cases led Origen into strange and dubious paths of interpretation. But to do justice to its author «we must realize the number of difficulties he faced in this first effort to coordinate the various elements in the deposit of faith and mold them into a complete system»⁷⁰. And he did all this without having any other source or evidence to draw upon except Scripture. Moreover, the allegorical method was never meant to exclude completely the literal or historical meaning. He never «saw the Sacred Scriptures as a set of cryptograms, or as a collection of cabalistic writings... The world of sense, which never leads us entirely astray, thus formed the first stage in the application of the allegorical method»⁷¹.

67. De Principiis, IV, 3,4-5.

68. In John comm. I, 8. Or. Werke, vol. 4, p. 13.

69. Hanson, op. cit., p. 372.

70. J. Quasten, Patrology, vol. II, (Westminster, Maryland, 1964), p. 61.

71. R. Cadou, Origen, his life at Alexandria, (St. Louis, Mo., 1944), p. 34.