

Origen of Alexandria (185-254)

One of the luminaries of the Alexandrian school. Origen bridged Christian theology and Greek philosophical traditions. More than a defender of the faith, Origen emerges as the archetype of Christian philosopher/scholar/theologian. Here are some excerpts from his *De principiis*, which is an early attempt at creating a systematic theology (peruse the TOC sometime).

Link: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.toc.html>

14. This being the state of the case, we have to sketch what seem to us to be the marks of the (true) understanding of Scriptures. And, in the first place, this must be pointed out, that the object of the Spirit, which by the providence of God, through the Word who was in the begin-ning with God, illuminated the ministers of truth, the prophets and apostles, was especially (the communication) of ineffa-ble mysteries regarding the affairs of men (now by men I mean those souls that make use of bodies), in order that he who is capable of instruction may by investiga-tion, and by devoting himself to the study of the profundities of meaning contained in the words, become a participator of all the doctrines of his counsel. And among those matters which relate to souls (who cannot otherwise obtain perfection apart from the rich and wise truth of God), the (doctrines) belonging to God and His only-begotten Son are necessarily laid down as primary, viz., of what nature He is, and in what manner He is the Son of God, and what are the causes of His descending even to (the assumption of) human flesh, and of complete humanity; and what, also, is the operation of this (Son), and upon whom and when exer-cised. And it was necessary also that the subject of kindred beings, and other ration-al creatures, both those who are divine and those who have fallen from blessed-ness, together with the reasons of their fall, should be contained in the divine teaching; and also that of the diversities of souls, and of the origin of these diver-sities, and of the nature of the world, and the cause of its existence. We must learn also the origin of the great and terrible wickedness which overspreads the earth, and whether it is confined to this earth only, or prevails elsewhere. Now, while these and similar objects were present to the Spirit, who enlightened the souls of the holy ministers of the truth, there was a second object, for the sake of those who were unable to endure the fatigue of in-vestigating matters so important, viz., to conceal the doctrine relating to the pre-viously mentioned subjects, in expressions containing a narrative which conveyed an announcement regarding the things of the visible creation,²⁸⁹⁵ the creation of man, and the successive descendants of the first men until they became numerous; and other histories relating the acts of just men, and the sins occasionally committed by these same men as being human beings, and the wicked deeds, both of unchastity and vice, committed by sinful and ungodly men. And what is most remarkable, by the his-tory of wars, and of the victors, and the vanquished, certain mysteries are indi-cated to those who are able to test these statements. And more wonderful still, the laws of truth are predicted by the written legislation;—all these being described in a connected series, with a power which is truly in keeping with the wisdom of God. For it was intended that the covering also of the spiritual truths—I mean the “bodi-ly” part of Scripture—should not be with-out profit in many cases, but should be capable of improving the multitude, according to their capacity.

15. But since, if the usefulness of the legislation, and the sequence and beauty²⁸⁹⁶ of the history, were universally evident of itself,²⁸⁹⁷ we should not believe that any other thing could be understood in the Scriptures save what was obvious, the word of God has arranged that

certain stumbling-blocks, as it were, and offences, and impossibilities, should be introduced into the midst of the law and the history, in order that we may not, through being drawn away in all directions by the merely attractive nature of the language,²⁸⁹⁸ either altogether fall away from the (true) doctrines, as learning nothing worthy of God, or, by not departing from the letter, come to the knowledge of nothing more divine. And this also we must know, that the principal aim being to announce the “spiritual” connection in those things that are done, and that ought to be done, where the Word found that things done according to the history could be adapted to these mystical senses, He made use of them, concealing from the multitude the deeper meaning; but where, in the narrative of the development of super-sensual things,²⁸⁹⁹ there did not follow the performance of those certain events, which was already indicated by the mystical meaning, the Scripture interwove in the history (the account of) some event that did not take place, sometimes what could not have happened; sometimes what could, but did not. And sometimes a few words are interpolated which are not true in their literal acceptance,²⁹⁰⁰ and sometimes a larger number. And a similar practice also is to be noticed with regard to the legislation, in which is often to be found what is useful in itself, and appropriate to the times of the legislation; and sometimes also what does not appear to be of utility; and at other times impossibilities are recorded for the sake of the more skilful and inquisitive, in order that they may give themselves to the toil of investigating what is written, and thus attain to a becoming conviction of the manner in which a meaning worthy of God must be sought out in such subjects.

16. It was not only, however, with the (Scriptures composed) before the advent (of Christ) that the Spirit thus dealt; but as being the same Spirit, and (proceeding) from the one God, He did the same thing both with the evangelists and the apostles,—as even these do not contain through-out a pure history of events, which are interwoven indeed according to the letter, but which did not actually occur.²⁹⁰¹ Nor even do the law and the commandments wholly convey what is agreeable to reason. For who that has understanding will suppose that the first, and second, and third day, and the evening and the morning, existed without a sun, and moon, and stars? and that the first day was, as it were, also without a sky? And who is so foolish as to suppose that God, after the manner of a husbandman, planted a paradise in Eden, towards the east, and placed in it a tree of life, visible and palpable, so that one tasting of the fruit by the bodily teeth obtained life? and again, that one was a partaker of good and evil by masticating what was taken from the tree? And if God is said to walk in the paradise in the evening, and Adam to hide himself under a tree, I do not suppose that anyone doubts that these things figuratively indicate certain mysteries, the history having taken place in appearance, and not literally.²⁹⁰² Cain also, when going forth from the presence of God, certainly appears to thoughtful men as likely to lead the reader to inquire what is the presence of God, and what is the meaning of going out from Him. And what need is there to say more, since those who are not altogether blind can collect countless instances of a similar kind recorded as having occurred, but which did not literally²⁹⁰³ take place? Nay, the Gospels themselves are filled with the same kind of narratives; e.g., the devil leading Jesus up into a high mountain, in order to show him from thence the kingdoms of the whole world, and the glory of them. For who is there among those who do not read such accounts carelessly, that would not condemn those who think that with the eye of the body—which requires a lofty height in order that the parts lying (immediately) under and adjacent may be seen—the kingdoms of the Persians, and Scythians, and Indians, and Parthians, were beheld, and the manner in which their princes are glorified among men? And the attentive reader may notice in the Gospels innumerable other passages like these, so that he will be convinced that in the histories that are literally recorded, circumstances that did not occur are inserted.

17. And if we come to the legislation of Moses, many of the laws manifest the irrationality, and others the impossibility, of their literal²⁹⁰⁴ observance. The irrationality (in this), that the people are forbidden to eat vultures, although no one even in the direst famines was (ever) driven by want to have recourse to this bird; and that children eight days old, which are un-circumcised, are ordered to be exterminated from among their people, it being necessary, if the law were to be carried out at all literally with regard to these, that their fathers, or those with whom they are brought up, should be commanded to be put to death. Now the Scripture says: "Every male that is uncircumcised, who shall not be circumcised on the eighth day, shall be cut off from among his people."²⁹⁰⁵ And if you wish to see impossibilities contained in the legislation, let us observe that the goat-stag is one of those animals that cannot exist, and yet Moses commands us to offer it as being a clean beast; whereas a griffin, which is not recorded ever to have been subdued by man, the lawgiver forbids to be eaten. Nay, he who carefully considers (the famous injunction relating to) the Sabbath, "Ye shall sit each one in your dwellings: let no one go out from his place on the seventh day,"²⁹⁰⁶ will deem it impossible to be literally observed: for no living being is able to sit throughout a whole day, and remain without moving from a sitting position. And therefore those who belong to the circumcision, and all who desire that no meaning should be exhibited, save the literal one, do not investigate at all such subjects as those of the goat-stag and griffin and vulture, but indulge in foolish talk on certain points, multiplying words and adducing tasteless²⁹⁰⁷ traditions; as, for example, with regard to the Sabbath, saying that two thousand cubits is each one's limit.²⁹⁰⁸ Others, again, among whom is Dositheus the Samaritan, condemning such an interpretation, think that in the position in which a man is found on the Sabbath-day, he is to remain until evening. Moreover, the not carrying of a burden on the Sabbath-day is an impossibility; and therefore the Jewish teachers have fallen into countless absurdities,²⁹⁰⁹ saying that a shoe of such a kind was a burden, but not one of another kind; and that a sandal which had nails was a burden, but not one that was without them; and in like manner what was borne on one shoulder (was a load), but not that which was carried on both.

18. And if we go to the Gospel and institute a similar examination, what would be more irrational than (to take literally the injunction), "Salute no man by the way,"²⁹¹⁰ which simple persons think the Saviour enjoined on the apostles? The command, moreover, that the right cheek should be smitten, is most incredible, since everyone who strikes, unless he happen to have some bodily defect,²⁹¹¹ smites the *left* cheek with his *right* hand. And it is impossible to take (literally, the statement) in the Gospel about the "offending" of the right eye. For, to grant the possibility of one being "offended" by the sense of sight, how, when there are two eyes that see, should the blame be laid upon the right eye? And who is there that, condemning himself for having looked upon a woman to lust after her, would rationally transfer the blame to the right eye alone, and throw *it* away? The apostle, moreover, lays down the law, saying, "Is any man called, being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised."²⁹¹² In the first place, anyone will see that he does not utter these words in connection with the subject before him. For, when laying down precepts on marriage and purity, how will it not appear that he has introduced these words at random?²⁹¹³ But, in the second place, who will say that a man does wrong who endeavours to become un-circumcised, if that be possible, on account of the disgrace that is considered by the multitude to attach to circumcision.

All these statements have been made by us, in order to show that the design of that divine power which gave us the sacred Scriptures is, that we should not receive what is presented by the letter alone (such things being sometimes not true in their literal acceptance, but absurd and impossible), but that certain things have been introduced into the actual history and into the legislation that are useful in their literal sense.²⁹¹⁴

19. But that no one may suppose that we assert respecting the whole that no his-tory is real²⁹¹⁵ because a certain one is not; and that no law is to be literally observed, because a certain one, (understood) ac-cording to the letter, is absurd or impossi-ble; or that the statements regarding the Saviour are not true in a manner percept-ible to the senses;²⁹¹⁶ or that no command-ment and precept of His ought to be obeyed;—we have to answer that, with regard to certain things, it is perfectly clear to us that the historical account is true; as that Abraham was buried in the double cave at Hebron, as also Isaac and Jacob, and the wives of each of them; and that Shechem was given as a portion to Joseph;²⁹¹⁷ and that Jerusalem is the metropolis of Judea, in which the temple of God was built by Solomon; and innumerable other statements. For the passages that are true in their historical meaning are much more numerous than those which are interspersed with a purely spiritual signification. And again, who would not say that the com-mand which enjoins to “honour thy father and thy mother, that it may be well with thee,”²⁹¹⁸ is useful, apart from all allegorical meaning,²⁹¹⁹ and ought to be observed, the Apostle Paul also having employed these very same words? And what need is there to speak of the (prohibitions), “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” “Thou shalt not kill,” “Thou shalt not steal,” “Thou shalt not bear false witness?”²⁹²⁰ And again, there are commandments contained in the Gospel which admit of no doubt whether they are to be observed according to the letter or not; e.g., that which says, “But I say unto you, Whoever is angry with his brother,”²⁹²¹ and so on. And again, “But I say unto you, Swear not at all.”²⁹²² “And in the writings of the apostle the literal sense is to be retained: “Warn them that are unruly, comfort the feeble-minded, support the weak, be patient towards all men;”²⁹²³ although it is possible for those ambitious of a deeper meaning to retain the profundities of the wisdom of God, without setting aside the commandment in its literal meaning.²⁹²⁴ The careful (reader), however, will be in doubt²⁹²⁵ as to cer-tain points, being unable to show without long investigation whether this history so deemed literally occurred or not, and whether the literal meaning of this law is to be observed or not. And therefore the exact reader must, in obedience to the Saviour’s injunction to “search the Scriptures,”²⁹²⁶ carefully ascertain in how far the literal meaning is true, and in how far im-possible; and so far as he can, trace out, by means of similar statements, the mean-ing everywhere scattered through Scripture of that which cannot be understood in a literal signification.

20. Since, therefore, as will be clear to those who read, the connection taken literally is impossible, while the sense pre-ferred²⁹²⁷ is not impossible, but even the true one, it must be our object to grasp the whole meaning, which connects the account of what is literally impossible in an intelligible manner with what is not only not impossible, but also historically true, and which is allegorically understood, in respect of its not having literally occurred.²⁹²⁸ For, with respect to holy Scripture, our opinion is that the whole of it has a “spir-itual,” but not the whole a “bodily” meaning, because the bodily meaning is in many places proved to be impossible.