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SOCIAL CONTEXT

Essays in Honor of David W. Johnson

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PHILO, ORIGEN, AND THE RABBIS ON DIVINE SPEECH AND INTERPRETATION

In honor of a scholar and a mensch [Yiddish!], David Johnson, S.J.

One of the most important of hermeneutical consequents of Logos theology was a proclivity for allegory as a mode of interpretation. The concept of a Logos as both the site of absolute creativity as well as the revealer of absolute Truth, of Sophia, will promote allegory as a legitimate and choice mode of interpretation. Logos theology, which, as we shall see, is predicated on the notion of an Author, a speaker behind the written text, as well as a dual existence for language as signifier and signified, conduces to interpretation as a hermeneutic of depth. The ontology of human language itself consists in its privileged pairing of its signifiers with the transcendental signified of the Logos. The move toward allegorical interpretation within Christian writing is thus both epistemologically and ontologically (theologically) grounded.

Origen himself finds a hermeneutics ungrounded in the Logos to be the source of disagreement within “Judaism,” and the context is interestingly not polemical in nature: “Any teaching which has had a serious origin, and is ben-

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1. The question of allegory itself deserves a renewed consideration in this context, but this is beyond the scope of the present text — if not beyond the scope of the present inquiry. Mark J. Edwards, Origen against Plato. ASPTLA (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2003), 124–25, makes a gesture in that direction.
official to life, has caused different sects. For since medicine is beneficial and essential to mankind, and there are many problems in it as to the method of curing bodies, on this account several sects in medicine are admittedly found among the Greeks, and, I believe, also among the barbarians such as profess to practice medicine. And again, since philosophy which professes to possess the truth and knowledge of realities instructs us how we ought to live and tries to teach what is beneficial to our race, and since the problems discussed allow of considerable diversity of opinion, on this account very many sects indeed have come into existence, some of which are well known, while others are not. Moreover, there was in Judaism a factor which caused sects to come into being, which was the variety of the interpretations of the writings of Moses and the sayings of the prophets.\footnote{Origen, \textit{Contra Celsum} 3.12. (GCS 21:28). Translation from \textit{Origen: Contra Celsum}, trans. and ed. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), 135.} For Origen, obviously, the written word alone gives rise to multiple interpretation and thus to multiple religious opinions and even sects, all in good faith, similar to the good-faith disagreement and sectarianism of physicians and philosophers.

Origen’s Jewish Alexandrian predecessor Philo had understood the problem and also proposed a solution to it. Philo explicitly expressed a theory of the “magic language”\footnote{The term is Samuel Wheeler’s (\textit{Demonstration as Analytic Philosophy}. CMP [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000], 117–120). Where, for Edwards (\textit{Origen against Platon}, 22) one is called “Platonist” only if Platonism is understood as antithesis to Christianity, my argument is that a certain rough or refined Platonism, insofar as a dual structure of material and spiritual was predicated to the universe, was essential to Christian thinking. In a sense, it only becomes significant then when we see the Rabbis articulating themselves as the antithesis of such Platonism. I shall have much more to say about this in my ongoing project, D. V. Edwards himself is the tree upon which I can hang my point; for he writes, “there was some contention in Clement’s time as to whether Christ assumed the ‘psychic’ fleshy of all men receive from Adam or the spiritual fleshy of the resurrection; even those who held the first position as the grounds that only a ‘psychic’ Christ would be truly human, would not have taught that the measure of humanity is the despotism of the alimentary canal” (\textit{Origen against Platon}, 22), but this, I speculate—having defended the point elsewhere—is precisely what the Rabbis would have taught, and did.} of the Logos and its possible recovery. For Philo, only prelapsarian Adam among men had had direct access to the Logos. He had “been able to see the nature of each thing” (\textit{Ehr.} 167), and had, therefore, been able to name everything with its perfect name, the name that corresponds perfectly to the language of \textit{nous} or Logos. David Dawson explains that for all that human language is, however, inadequate for describing reality, one human, Moses, had the capacity for accurate knowledge of what he wished to say:

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“…But Moses is no language at his disposal that has to do with the very indirect indeterminacy,\footnote{Edwards, \textit{Origen} 7. I think, somewhat compelling analysis of the literal reading of the description on to the biblical interpretation were drawn from Origen’s \textit{Irenicae}, Philo’s own \textit{On the Citta and Gender and Difference in \textit{Lightning}} of Minnesota Pre.} it is precisely that which is dispensable tool for the make use of the spurious perusal of the text of the Prophets”\footnote{Dawson, \textit{(Jewish Spirituality from the 1988), 198–234.}\cite{Edwards, Origen}}
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"But Moses is not like 'most men,' because his perceptions are superior to the language at his disposal. His name-giving flows from an accurate 'knowledge that has to do with things'; consequently, he 'is in the habit of using names that are perfectly apt and expressive' (Agr. 1–2). Even so, Moses is forced to use ordinary language to express his extraordinary insights. As a result, his message is always clear and determinate once it is perceived, but it lies hidden in the very indirect linguistic expressions marked by various forms of semantic indeterminacy." The role of the interpreter—necessarily, then, an allegorist—is to perceive and then describe this clear and determinate message. The allegorist reaches this level of interpretation through a process of contemplation, as described in Philo's On the Contemplative Life. Thus too for Origen: "Even while we remain on earth the Christian life is grounded in a faithful and assiduous perusal of the scriptures, the depths of which cannot be mined unless we make use of the spiritual as well as carnal senses."

Philo was an important model for Origen, but a problematic one. As Mark Edwards has written, "From Paul to Clement allegory had been an indispensable tool for Christian expositors, all of whom, including Origen, were bound to hold that Philo's canon was incomplete and that no interpretation of the Prophets could be authoritative unless it yielded testimony to Christ."

6. Edwards, Origen against Plato, 111.
7. I think, sometimes, it is underevaluated how much Origen draws from Philo. Thus, in an otherwise compelling analysis of Origen's doctrine of the two humans, insisting that it derives from an "overly literal" reading of the doubled creation narrative of Genesis 1 and 2 and is not, therefore, grafted artificially on to the biblical tradition, Edwards seemingly ignores the evident fact that Origen's doctrine and interpretation were drawn from Philo (ibid., 89), which does not, of course, vitiate his point at all. The citation from Origen's Homilies on Genesis, offered on p. 104, is practical word for word a quotation from Philo's own On the Creation. For discussion, see Daniel Boyarin, "On the History of the Early Philo," in Gender and Difference in the Middle Ages, eds. Sharon Farmer and Carol Patterson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 1–44.
8. Edwards, Origen against Plato, 16–17. In another iteration of this argument I hope to show that it is precisely that which is common to Paul, Clement, Origen that constitutes something that is definitive (by privation) of rabbinic hermeneutics (Daniel Boyarin, "Originists Aren't the Only Christians," manuscript, 2005). See too Edwards, Origen against Plato, 119. In that planned essay, I shall also engage Elizabeth Clark's important critique of my earlier work. I had intended to include this discussion here but reasons of (real) estate prevent me.
Philosophy, of course, was also an allegorist, so where precisely can the incompleteness be, unless we simply say that what was incomplete in Philo was simply that he was not a Christian?—a weak answer in my opinion. What seems to me lacking in Philo’s thought is a way of accounting for the fact that he, via interpretation, can accomplish that which Moses himself could not. Christian theories of the Logos Incarnate seem better equipped to address this issue. For Christians, the magic language has appeared on earth and spoken itself, thus answering to both Philo’s aporia and Nietzsche’s nostalgia. The prologue to the Gospel of John makes this point in its utterance that through the Torah it had proved impossible to communicate Logos to humans and that only through the Incarnation was God made knowable to people. Christian revisions of Philo’s theory of the text and of interpretation thus had another answer than Philo’s to the question of the source of knowledge of the allegorical meaning.

The Origins of Christian Allegory

In Origen’s hermeneutical theory, Logos theology functions in two ways. On the one hand, it provides a philosophical structure. In his *First Principles*, Book IV, we can find one version of his threefold theory of interpretation, whereby the “obvious interpretation” is called the flesh of the scripture, but there are two more levels, the “soul” and the “spiritual law”: “For just as man consists of body, soul and spirit, so in the same way does the scripture.”11 In an eloquent passage, Origen “gives us the cosmological-theological key to his exegesis”11

All the things in the visible category can be related to the invisible, the corporeal to the incorporeal, and the manifest to the hidden: so that the creation of the world itself, fashioned in this wise as it is, can be understood through the divine wisdom, which from actual things and copies teaches us things unseen by means of those that are seen, and carries us over from earthly thin.

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from earthly things to heavenly. But this relationship does not obtain only with creatures: the Divine Scripture itself is written with wisdom of a rather similar sort.\textsuperscript{12}

The very existence of allegory as a hermeneutical theory is made thus dependent on a Platonic universe, just as it had been in Philo’s work as well.\textsuperscript{13} There is nothing new in \textit{this} aspect of Origen’s theory of interpretation other than the clarity of its articulation.\textsuperscript{14} For Origen, as for Philo, the external words of scripture are mere “copies” of words and meanings in the “magic language.” I would argue that some version of this ontology of language makes possible all thought of interpretation as translation and not only those methods that we would term allegory proper. Interpretation is always dependent on some articulated or postarticulated Logos. The ultimate figure for the ontotheological structure of scripture is the Incarnation. In the words of R. P. Lawson: “If the Logos in His Incarnation is God-Man, so, too, in the mind of Origen the incarnation of the Pneuma in Holy Scripture is divine-human.”\textsuperscript{15} There is a virtual doubled Incarnation, then, in Origen’s thinking. The Logos is incarnate in Jesus Christ and in scripture as well.\textsuperscript{16}

However, Logos theology and in particular the notion of Christ as the Incarnation of the Word does more work for Origen.\textsuperscript{17} For one could imagine

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\item[13.] For the richest and most developed version of this argument for allegory in general, see Angus John Stewart Fletcher, \textit{Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964), a work that has had an enormous, formative impact on my thinking from the moment I read it in the mid-1980s. It should be emphasized, moreover, that in speaking of Origen’s Platonism here, I am not referring to those aspects of his theology allegedly derived from Plato, as disputed in Edwards, \textit{Origen Against Plato}, but rather to a general understanding of the reality as doubled in structure. In this sense I would agree with Edwards (19) that “Paul was as much a Platonist as Clement”—or Origen. The question is surely not, then, whether it is the case that “whatever Origen learned from the Platonists it was not the art of commentary” (Edwards, \textit{Origen against Plato}, 135) but whether the art of commentary itself is subordinated by Platonistic structures of understanding of world and Word. I submit that it is, but further discussion will have to remain for another day. Suffice it to say here that I think there is nothing in my intention here contradicted, let alone refuted, by Edwards’s excellent book, although such may appear at first glance.
\item[16.] Rolf Götzler, \textit{Zur Theologie des bibliischen Wortes bei Origenes} (Düinsckofl: Patmos Verlag, 1966), 264.
\item[17.] For the transitions between Word theology and later Trinitarian formulae within which the
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an ontological structure to both world and Word that would provide theoretically for the presence of a spiritual sense but not guarantee that anyone has access to that sense, as is virtually the case for Philo. However, as Karen Torjesen has written, for Origen "it is the power of the words of the Logos that makes the progression possible. It is the effect of his teaching which causes progress in the soul. If the word of the Logos were not effective, or he were not present teaching, then the steps of the progression would be an empty scaffolding into which the soul could gaze, but not climb." Not only, therefore, does Origen's Logos provide a theological structure and hermeneutical horizon for understanding the nature of scripture and its dual and triple levels of meaning; I wish to suggest that the Logos Incarnate in the actual "person" of Jesus, born in the cradle and on the cross, also provides Origen with a theoretical answer to the question of the source of allegorical meaning:

This being so, we must outline what seems to us to be the marks of a true understanding of the scriptures. And in the first place we must point out that the aim of the Spirit who, by the providence of God through the Word who was "in the beginning with God," enlightened the servants of the truth, that is, the prophets and apostles, was pre-eminently concerned with the unspeakable mysteries connected with the affairs of men—and by men I mean at the present moment souls that make use of bodies—his purpose being that the man who is capable of being taught might by "searching out" and devoting himself to the "deep things" revealed in the spiritual meaning of the words become partaker of all the doctrines of the Spirit's counsel.

Origen explicitly addresses the implicit problematic of Philo's theory, namely, how may it be possible for a human writer to write in such a way that spiritual truths are, indeed, communicated; how, we might put it, can Origen hope to do better than Moses? Origen exposes this issue when he writes:

As to the secret meaning which these things contain, however, and the teaching that these strange words labor to express, let us pray the Father of the Almighty Word and Bridegroom, that He Himself will open to us the gates of this mystery, whereby we may be enlightened not only for the understanding of these things, but also for the propagation of them, and may re-

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ceive also a portion of spiritual eloquence, according to the capacity of those who are to be our readers.20

I am taking this, of course, as more than just a pious wish for divine assistance such as any religious writer might invoke, but rather as a specific plea for the Father through the Word to solve a theoretical problem in Origen's hermeneutical theology. In yet another work Origen articulates this clearly: "May you help with your prayers, that the Logos of God may be present with us and design himself to be the leader of our discourse."21 This is the way that we need to understand also Origen's talk of interpretation as being via possession of the "Mind of Christ," referring, of course, to Paul's own Wisdom Christology.

As Ronald Heine points out, Clement had identified the mind of Christ with the Holy Spirit.22 Origen followed his alleged teacher in this identification. The richest text of Origen's for my purpose is also adduced by Heine:

In this way, we can understand the Law correctly, if Jesus reads it to us, so that, as he reads, we may receive his "mind" and understanding. Or is it not to be thought: that he understood "mind" from this, who said, "But we have the mind of Christ, that we may know the things which have been given to us by God, which things also we speak," and [did not] those [have the same understanding] who said, "Was not our heart burning within us when he opened the Scriptures to us in this way?" when he read everything to them, beginning from the Law of Moses up to the prophets, and revealed the things which had been written about himself.23

This key passage for Origen's hermeneutical theory needs to be read in the context of its several citations. The first is, of course, from Paul's letter to the Corinthians and the second from the Gospel of Luke. In the second chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul explains the difference between Christian knowledge and that of Jews previous to himself:

1 When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and

20. Origen, Commentarius in Canticum 2.8.11 (Origen, Commentaire sur le Cantique, SC 175:414); translation from Origen, Song of Songs, trans. Loomis, 154.
him crucified, and I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul continues a bit further on in the chapter:

10 God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11 For what person knows a man's thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. 13 And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit.

And finally Paul completes the argument with the verse crucial for Origen's reading:

16 "For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

It seems to me entirely plausible to read Paul's reference to "gifts" here as an allusion to the Torah, and he is, therefore, producing the earliest version of a Christian hermeneutical theory of allegorical reading, one that insists that scripture can only be interpreted with the direct aid of the Holy Spirit, identified with the mind of Christ who alone knows the mind of the Lord and can, therefore, interpret the Torah as "a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification.

Even more crucial, however, is the amazing narrative in the last chapter of Luke, in which:

27 And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scripture: the things concerning himself. ... 32 They said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" ... 36 As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them. 37 But they were startled and frightened, and supposed that they saw a spirit. 38 And he said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do questionings arise in your hearts? 39 See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see: for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." ... 41 And while they still disbeliefed for joy, and wondered, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" 42 They gave him a piece of broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate before them. 43 Then he

24. But, of course, we must remember that Origen writes: "Certain people of the simpler sort, not knowing how to distinguish and differentiate between the things ascribed in the Divine Scriptures to
said to them, "These are my words which I spoke to you, while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures.

These two passages together, I suggest, gave Origen everything he needed to "solve" the hermeneutical/epistemological problem that allegorical reading presented. The Spirit of God, identified in Paul’s testimony with the mind of Christ, is, for any Christian Logos theologian, necessarily the Logos himself. The passage in Luke provides Origen with an actual correlative for Paul’s claim; both the incarnate Logos before the crucifixion and the resurrected but embodied Logos afterward provided the disciples with the only possible and true interpretation of scripture. Torjesen argues for three forms of the mediating activity of the Logos in Origen: the preincarnate activity of revelation to the Old Testament saints and prophets, the Incarnation itself, and the "present activity of the Logos, which is the disclosure of himself to us through the spiritual sense of Scripture." What, I think, she doesn’t sufficiently emphasize is the privileged nature of the Incarnation insofar as that is the only moment when the living voice of the Logos is directly present on earth, thus providing through Jesus’ pedagogy precisely the hermeneutical guide that enables the "present activity of the Logos." In other words, the Incarnation is not only the "paradigm for this pedagogy," as Torjesen would phrase it, but that which

the inner and outer man respectively, and being deceived by this identity of nomenclature, have applied themselves to certain absurd fables and silly tales. Thus they even believe that after the resurrection bodily food and drink will be used and taken—food, that is, not only from the True Vine who lives forever, but also from the vines and fruits of the trees about us." Origen, Commentarius in Cantica, prologue 2.4 (Origen, Commentaire sur le Cantique, SC 375:200); translation from Origen, Song of Songs, trans. Lawson, 29.

52. Let us be tempted to make a distinction here between Christ who incarnates the Logos (second person of the Trinity) and scripture as the incarnation of the spirit (third person), let us not forget that such fully developed Trinitarian doctrine was yet to come. In other passages it is clear that for Origen it is precisely the Logos who is incarnate in scripture as well: as in the Last Days, the Word of God, which was clothed with the flesh of Mary, proceeded into this world. What was seen in him was one thing; what was understood was something else. For the sight of his flesh was open for all to see, but the knowledge of his divinity was given to the few, even the elect. So also when the Word of God was brought to humans through the Prophets and the Lawgiver, it was not brought without proper clothing. For just as there it was covered with the veil of flesh, so here with the veil of the letter." Origen, Homiliae in Levitatem, 1:3 (Origen, Homélies sur le Levítique, ed. and trans. M. Burrel, SC 286 (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1981), 66. Translation in Origen, Homiliae in Levitatum, trans. Gary Wayne Bailey, PCNP (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 29. See discussion in Torjesen, Origen’s Exegetes, 110.

53. See on this point the important observations of Edwards, Origen against Plato, 114–15.

54. Torjesen, Origen’s Exegetes, 114.
makes it possible because he taught how to read scripture. It is not only that “in the taking on of flesh the Logos makes himself comprehensible to all those who wear flesh,” a formulation that sounds almost Athanasian, but that in taking on flesh he could speak the magic language directly to human flesh and thus make himself, for he is the magic language, comprehensible to all those who speak human language.” In the Incarnation, the Logos “offered himself to be known,” in a way, I would add, that nothing but a physical body and voice can be known.

Let me pursue this point just a bit further, for it is perhaps too subtle a distinction. Torjesen remarks on the duality in which “Scripture is both a mediating activity of the Logos and at the same time has doctrines of the Logos as its content.” What I am suggesting is that it is only the presence of the actual living Logos on earth in the incarnate form of the pedagogue Jesus that enables “us” to discover the Logos as the content of scripture. In this way Origen answers the aporia that Philo’s work presents. Indeed, “the mediating activity of the Logos in his historical education of the saints provides the source for Scripture as a written document. What they wrote and what they understood originates from their own experience with the pedagogy of the Logos. They wrote by the Spirit what the Logos taught them in order to teach us the same truth. This is true for the New Testament writers as well as for the prophets.” I would just add that the teaching of the New Testament writers has a special dispensation and precedence, for it was for them that the Logos directly and without mediation, in his own voice through Jesus’ human vocal mechanism, taught them (and thereby us) how to read scripture as referring to him and him alone. “The Logos announces himself, he is the subject matter of his own proclamation,” most fully, however, I would add, when he is present on earth in the body of Jesus.

28. Ibid., 119.
29. Origen, Commentaries in Cantica 2.8.13 (Origen, Commentaire sur le Cantique, SC 175:448); translation from Origen, Song of Songs, trans. Lawson, 153.
30. Torjesen, Origen’s Exegesis, 119.
31. Cf. “The Logos taught the saints the truths of himself in symbolic form, in the form of law, or of historical events. This pedagogy was designed for all those to whom it was delivered. But it was the saints alone who grasped the spiritual truth presented in this symbolic form. And they repeated it again in symbolic form, this time writing in Scripture the symbolic forms of the universal truth, so that the succeeding generations might be able to grasp the spiritual truth through the medium of its symbolic form.” Ibid., 140.
32. Ibid., 119.
33. Ibid. See Commentarius in evangelium Joannis 11.18 (GCS 102:45-51).

I am not claiming Origen different illuminated a particularity for articulating theology was to reveal “Christianity.” As speaks with his own prophets and saú living voice of the incarnation provides access to truth and of meaning. This is speaking direct his own,” but as seems plausible, direct or the Holy Spirit a solution to metaphorical interpretation (rected) in Jesus, did revealed the true reach the spiritual soul’s allegorical the created the human.

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I am not claiming, of course, to have uncovered a new interpretation of Origen different from or even supplemental to Torjesen's but only to be highlighting a particular element in his hermeneutical thought that I find crucial for articulating the way that the particular form of incarnational Christology was to reveal itself as the ma(ter)ker of difference between "Judaism" and "Christianity." As Torjesen herself has put it, "In the incarnation the Logos speaks with his own voice. In Scripture he speaks through the mouth of the prophets and saints." Given the universal Platonic understanding that the living voice of the teacher is superior to any "inscription" of that voice, the Incarnation provides, then, for Origen the guarantee of Christian allegorical access to truth and the Incarnation is a hermeneutical moment of full presence of meaning. This is why, again in Torjesen's words, "in the Gospels the Logos is speaking directly to the hearer, not mediated through a history other than his own," but also equally not mediated through a text other than his own. It seems plausible, then, that for Christian writers, the Incarnation of the Word, or the Holy Spirit that provides direct access to the Logos as well, provides a solution to what must remain a problem for Philo the Jew's theory of allegorical interpretation. The presence on earth of the Word incarnate (or resurrected) in Jesus, the spiritual reader who read scriptures to the Christians and revealed the true interpretation, has made it possible for other Christians to reach the spiritual meaning themselves, thus answering the question that Philo's allegorical theory must needs leave unsolved: "In the incarnation he has created the human conditions of his own perfect intelligibility for all time."

On the other hand, both Origen and his Cappadocian disciple Gregory of Nyssa well understood that given the conditions of human speech, however much Christian speech has been learned from the Logos, it will be imperfect and thus multiple. Martin Irvine has recently made this point well: "The unity of the Logos is fragmented into a multiplicity of temporal discourses which simultaneously attempt and fail to return to its unity; no repetition or multiplication of logoi is Logos. The transcendental signified remains beyond the reach of all temporal sign relations yet is immanently manifest in all of them." For midrash, however, in its final development, there is no transcendental signified.
God himself, as we have seen, can only participate, as it were, in the process of unlimited semiosis and thus of limitless interpretation. The result will be not simply a multiplicity of interpretations that we cannot decide between, or even a plethora of interpretations that all stand in the Pleroma of divine meaning, but finally a rabbinic ascetic that virtually eliminates the practice of interpretation entirely. Midrash, in its culminating avatar, eschews not only allegory and a discourse of the true meaning but renounces "interpretation" altogether. It will take, however, some further nuancing and exploration of background before we can arrive at this point. Although Origen's work on the Song has been shown to have close thematic affinities with the interpretations of the midrash, his linguistic strategies are nearly opposite to them. In excess of Philo, for whom the flesh (and fleshly language) are understood as necessary helpers to the spirit (and the allegorical meaning), for Origen the carnal and the spiritual meanings do not parallel each other but are actually opposed to each other, as the body is opposed to the soul. For Origen the very process of allegorical interpretation constitutes in itself and already a transcendence of the flesh. Accordingly he understands the divine kiss to refer to the experience of the soul, "when she has begun to discern for herself what was obscure, to unravel what was tangled, to unfold what was involved, to interpret parables and riddles and the sayings of the wise along the lines of her own expert thinking." Since in Origen's Platonism the world of spirit is the world of the intelligible, for him "intellection and loving are one and the same," and the discovery of the true and pure spiritual meaning behind or trapped in the carnal words constitutes the divine kiss. It enacts that "overcoming carnal desires [which] ultimately enables the soul to return to its original state and become once more a mens."


41. Astel, _Song of Songs_, 4.
God's Oral Torah: The Kisses of His Mouth

Suggesting that Origen is a Platonist has recently become a matter of some contention, it seems, as it is understood as participating in an anti-Origenist heresiological discourse, a sort of Witch of Endor hunt. Very sophisticated analysis in recent years has shown up the facileness of the usual simplistic accounts of Origen that do in fact draw, even if innocently, on the heresiological tradition. It will be of purpose, therefore, to show what it is that Christian readers from Paul to Origen have in common with each other and with such non-Christians as Philo. One of the best ways that I know of to make that hermeneutical *koine* manifest is to contrast it with another, the seemingly very different tradition of the slightly later Rabbis.

In the midrash on Song of Songs, the kiss is understood quite differently from Origen's reading, albeit still as divine. In Origen, the erotic meanings of the kiss in the first verse of the Song, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth" are sublimated into intellec, because of his doctrine that the body is a sign of a fall of the soul from God and must be transcended to be reunited with him. In the midrash it is that very body, the actual mouth, that experiences God's kiss:

*He will kiss me with the kisses of his mouth*: Said Rabbi Yohanan, "An angel would take the Speech from the Holy, Blessed One, each and every word, and count every member of Israel and say to him: Do you accept this Speech? It has such and such many requirements, and such and such many punishments, such and such many matters which are forbidden, and such and such many acts which are mandatory, such and such many easy and difficult actions, and such and such is the reward for fulfilling it. And the Israelect would say to him: Yes! And then he would further say to him: Do you accept the Divinity of the Holy, Blessed One? And he would answer him: Yes and again yes. Immediately, he would kiss him on his mouth, as it

42. For my frivolous conceit, see the very unfrivolous and important Patricia Cox Miller, "Origen and the Witch of Endor: Toward an Iconoclastic Typology," in her *The Poetry of Thought in Late Antiquity: Essays in Imagination and Religion* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001), 100–120.

43. Miller, *Poetry of Thought in Late Antiquity: David Dawson, Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001); Edwards, *Origen against Plato*, in which I will treat all of these works at some length. Deo volente.

44. Two important caveats here. One, there is to be taken from here absolutely no implication that the Rabbis are more authentic, purer, less contaminated Jewish than Philo or even Origen. Second—a corollary to the first—the rabbinic tradition only itself emerges in time and can be shown to be later, indeed, than the Christian canons of interpretation.
is written, "You have been made to see in order to know" [Deut. 4:39]—by means of a messenger.

The erotic connotations, overtones, and charges of this description of divine revelation (even the prefiguration of Molly Bloom), as it was experienced by each and every Israelite, are as blunt as could be imagined. Rabbi Yohanan explicitly connects this kiss with the visual experience of seeing God, also a powerful erotic image.

In rabbinic religion there is no invisible God manifested in an Incarnation, God himself is visible (and therefore corporeal). Language also is not divided into a carnal and a spiritual being. Accordingly, there can be no allegory. For rabbinic Judaism, the Song of Songs is the record of an actual, concrete, visible occurrence in the historical life of the people of Israel. When the Rabbis read the Song of Songs, they do not translate its "carnal" meaning into one or more "spiritual" senses; rather they establish a concrete, historical moment in which to contextualize it. It is a love song, a love dialogue to be specific, that was actually (or fictionally, according to some views) uttered by a Lover and a Beloved at a moment of great intimacy, at an actual historical mo-

45. Although, to be sure, a very late glossator has added the words, "It didn't really happen so, but he made them hallucinate it." Shmuel Donskoy, ed., Song of Songs Rabbah (Tel-Aviv: Divri, 1982), 1094.


47. It is important to emphasize, however, that this does not necessarily mean that God has a body of the same substance as a human body. Alon Goshen-Gottstein has contributed an excellent discussion of this issue in "The Body as Image of God in Rabbinic Literature," HTR 87 (1994): 171-94.

48. I would like to add two clarifications at this point. The first is that the category of "allegory," both as a genre (? of text production and as a reading practice, is notoriously slippery one. Therefore, it should be clear that when I say allegorical in this text I mean allegorical reading of the Philonic-Origenian type, which has a fairly clear structure as well as explicit theoretical underpinnings. It is a hermeneutic structure in which narrative on the physical or worldly level is taken as the sign of invisible and spiritual structures on the level of ideas. It follows, therefore, that literal here is not opposed to metaphorical, for metaphor can belong to the literal pole of such a dichotomy, as was clearly recognized in the Middle Ages. Moreover, such reflections on allegory as de Man's or Benjamin's are not relevant for this issue. Note that I am not claiming here that midrash is absent from Christian reading. The Gospels themselves, Paul, and even more recent Christian literature contain much that is midrashic in hermeneutic structure (more, in my opinion, than is currently recognized, e.g., Pierre Bourdieu). My claim is, rather, that allegory (in the strict sense) is absent or nearly so in midrash.


51. Donskoy, Song 51. There are no Rabbis in this resp takes place, as Aqedah no adults, all of whom lan-
ment of erotic communion, when God allowed himself to be seen by Israel, either the crossing of the Red Sea or the revelation at Mt. Sinai.

Rabbi Eliezer decoded [patar] the verse in the hour that Israel stood at the Sea. My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding place of the steep [Song 2:14], that they were hidden in the hiding place of the Sea—Show me your visage; this is what is written. “Stand forth and see the salvation of the Lord” [Exod. 14:15]—Let me hear your voice; this is the singing, as it says “Then Moses sang” [Exod. 15:21]—For your voice is lovely; this is the Song—and your visage is beautiful; for Israel were pointing with their fingers and saying “This is my God and I will beautify Him” [Exod. 15:2].

Rabbi Akiva decoded the verse in the hour that they stood before Mt. Sinai. My dove in the cleft of the rock in the hiding place of the steep [Song 2:14], for they were hidden in the hiding places of Sinai. Show me your visage, as it says, “And all of the People saw the voices” [Exod. 19:14]—Let me hear your voice, this is the voice from before the Commandments, for it says “All that you say we will do and we will hear” [Exod. 2.4:7]—For your voice is pleasant; this is the voice after the commandments, as it says, “God has heard the voice of your speaking; that which you have said is good” [Deut. 5:25].

To be sure, the Lover was a Divine Lover, but the beloveds were actual human beings, and the moment of erotic communion was mystical and visionary. The difference between the midrashic and the allegorical lies not in the thematics of the interpretation but in the language theory underlying the hermeneutic. This is the reverse of what is usually claimed. That is, one typically finds it stated that the method of midrash and of allegory with regard to the Song of Songs is identical, and that only the actual allegorical correspondences have changed, but this is not so in my opinion. In the allegory the metaphors of the language are considered the signs of invisible entities, Platonic ideas of mystical love, while in the midrash they are actually spoken love poetry of an erotic encounter. For many allegorists, the allegorical reading becomes a sublimation of physical love, while for the Rabbis, I would suggest, it is the desublimation of divine love, an understanding of that love through its metaphorical association with literal, human corporeal sexuality. It is not irrelevant to note that the Rabbis all had the experience of carnal love.51 The Song is

52. There are ways in which later Christian allegorical readers of the Song seem to be more like the Rabbis in this respect, at any rate (Askel. Song of Songs, 9-10). It is perhaps no accident that this shift takes place, as Askel notes, when monastic orders are founded who "recruited their members from among adults, all of whom had lived in secular society. Many were drawn from aristocratic circles; a high percentage had been married; most were familiar with secular love literature."
not connected with an invisible meaning but with the text of the Torah, letter with letter, body with body, not body with spirit. This is an entirely different linguistic structure than that of Philo and his followers, even when thematically the readings may turn out to be similar or genetically connected. For the Rabbis, it is the concrete historical experience of the revelation at Sinai that is described by the Song of Songs, while for the allegorists it is the outer manifestation in language of an unchanging inner structure of reality—an abstract ontology, not a concrete history.

The disembodiment of history in allegoresis is most clearly brought out in Origen's brilliant interpretation of the Song of Songs. As the contrast with the midrash helps us to foreground what is distinctive in Origen, the contrast with Origen in turn provides us with an especially effective way of seeing what is different in midrash. In the theoretical justification for allegory in his introduction, Origen remarks:

So, as we said at the beginning, all the things in the visible category can be related to the invisible, the corporeal to the incorporeal, and the manifest to those that are hidden; so that the creation of the world itself, fashioned in this wise as it is, can be understood through the divine wisdom, which from actual things and copies teaches us things unseen by means of those that are seen, and carries us over from earthly things to heavenly. But this relationship does not obtain only with creatures; the Divine Scripture itself is written with wisdom of a rather similar sort. Because of certain mystical and hidden things the people is visibly led forth from the terrestrial Egypt and journeys through the desert, where there was a biting serpent, and a scorpion, and thirst, and where all the other happenings took place that are recorded. All these events, as we have said, have the aspects and likenesses of certain hidden things. And you will find this correspondence not only in the Old Testament Scriptures, but also in the actions of Our Lord and Saviour that are related in the Gospels.55

Origen's text describes a perfect correspondence between the ontology of the world and that of the text. In both there is an outer shell and an inner meaning. The actual historical events described in the biblical narrative are dissolved and resolved into the hidden and invisible spiritual realities that underlie and generate them as material representations.

We can do no better in illustrating the contrast between Origen's hermeneutic understanding and that of midrash than to take his very example. "Because of certain mystical and hidden things the people is visibly led forth from

the terrestrial Egypt and journeys through the desert, where there was a biting serpent, and a scorpion, and thirst, and where all the other happenings took place that are recorded. All these events, as we have said, have the aspects and likenesses of certain hidden things." When a midrash reads this very text, the scorpion remains a scorpion and the biting serpent a serpent:

*And they went out into the Desert of Shur* [Exod. 15:22]. This is the Desert of Kuh. They have told of the Desert of Kuh that it is eight hundred by eight hundred parasangs—all of it full of snakes and scorpions, as it is said, "Who has led us in the great and terrible desert—snake, venomous serpent and scorpion" [Deut. 8:15]. And it says, "Burden of the beasts of the DRY South, of the land of trial and tribulation, lioness and lion, ... of 'eb'" [Isa. 30:6]. *Ef'eb* is the viper. They have told that the viper sees the shadow of a bird flying in the air; he immediately conjoins [to it], and it falls down limb by limb. Even so, "they did not say, 'here is the Lord Who has brought us up from Egypt, Who has led us in the land of Drought and Pits, land of Desolation and the Death Shadow'?" [Jer. 2:6]. What is Death Shadow? A place of shadow that death is therewith.

The hermeneutic impulse of this classical midrashic text is to concretize, to make tangible even more strongly than does the biblical text itself the fear-someness of the physical desert of the physical thirst of the physical fear of snakes and scorpions to which the historical Israel was prey in the desert, and not to translate these into symbols of invisible spiritual truths and entities. For all the similarities and convergences, it seems, midrash and allegory do not yet meet entirely.