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ALLEGRO

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Within an early Christian context, one finds allegory judged by at least two quite different measures. It is, on the one hand, the powerful engine of Pauline reinterpretation that makes the Hebrew Bible into an “old” testament. On the other, it is a non-literal way of reading that raises a certain anxiety within a set of traditions that at regular intervals insist on different forms of literalism. Both kinds of measures are regularly applied to the vast corpus of Origen (185–c. 254), the formative thinker of early Christian allegorical exegesis. Among the anxieties that his non-literal interpretations have raised is that he too quickly abandons the literal sense of a text and is more informed by the spirit of Platonism than by the Scriptural letter. Frequently we even find him described as if a prior commitment to Platonic philosophy drove his theological enterprise and thus “distorted” his Christian theology, as well as his interpretative practice. This aspect of Origen’s work highlights the transition of allegory from a pagan practice of interpreting difficult passages in Homer and Hesiod to a foundational piece of an emerging Christian biblical hermeneutics.

I would now propose that we think of this consequential relationship between Plato and Origen differently, in nearly opposite fashion: Platonism provided a framework within which Origen could think about the question of how we interpret; and Christian Logos theology, the notion of Christ as the incarnation of the Word, provided a solution to problems left unsolved by Platonism, precisely in that crucial area of epistemological theory, as well. Revised understandings of Christian Logos theology itself, as not even primarily a product of Platonism, fuel this re-vision. A crucial point that I will make early and often is that rather than seeing allegory as some bastard love-child or step-brother of interpretation, something marginal and bizarre, in my view allegory is in fact the very archetype, the purest form of interpretation. Another way of saying this is that all interpretation is allegorical in the sense that it says implicitly: This is the text and this is its meaning, but only the interpretation that people call allegorical does so
frankly and openly, laying bare, as it were, the device. Let's get into a text here, and a gorgeous one at that. In a passage of Origen's commentary on Canticles, he writes:

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. If, therefore, in accordance with the principles that we have now established all things that are in the open stand in some sort of relation to others that are hidden, it undoubtedly follows that the visible hart and roe mentioned in the Song of Songs are related to some patterns of incorporeal realities, in accordance with the character borne by their bodily nature. And this must be in such wise that we ought to be able to furnish a fitting interpretation of what is said about the Lord perfecting the harts, by reference to those harts that are unseen and hidden.1

In this passage, Origen lays out with perfect clarity and concision both his interpretative theory and its practice. Invoking an analogy that would later become commonplace, Origen remarks that the ontological structure of Scripture is analogous (homologous) to that of the universe. Just as the latter is of a dualist structure with corporeal/visible related by analogy to incorporeal/invisible, so is Scripture too. The visible events narrated (the literal truth of which Origen does not deny) in both the Old Testament and the Gospels find their true meanings in correspondence to “hidden things.” Moreover, just as in the case of the world, the hidden things are superior to the visible, “carry[ing] us over from earthly things to heavenly,” so too the apprehension of the unseen meanings of Scripture.

David Dawson comments quite rightly that “Origen undermines any suggestion of radical separation of inner from outer by emphasizing the relation of a visible roe to ‘the patterns of incorporeal realities’ to which it is

related."2 Dawson details the analogous relation and the fact that it has to do with a visceral fluid present in the heart that improves eyesight and "the vision that Christ both has and affords." Now, the crux:

Although a Platonic worldview is a congenial context for such an analogy, there is nothing specifically Platonic about its details. Indeed, at the root of the analogy is specifically Christian theological reflection on the Son’s capacity to know the Father and afford knowledge of the Father to others.3

I would, however, argue for a deep connection between the actual content of Origen’s comment and a "Platonic" problematic – reversing precisely, as I’ve already mentioned, the usual pejorative intent of such an imputed nexus and proposing it rather as a celebration of the profundity of Origen’s thinking about the epistemology of interpretation itself. Indeed, that very knowing of the Father and affording knowledge of the Father to others are, at least on one reading, the very essence of a hermeneutical dilemma, perhaps the hermeneutical dilemma.

Rather than seeing a commitment to a Platonic universe driving Origen’s allegorical practice, I propose instead a reading of this relation in which a much subtler, finer, and more interesting relationship inheres between the Christianity of one such as Origen, and Platonism. This is a reading that reverses the previously imagined relation and makes philosophy the beneficiary of Christianity and not its benefactor. Rather than Platonism controlling and distorting (or even aiding) Christian theologizing, I am suggesting that Christian theology provided significant answers to philosophical problems. Dawson argues beautifully that,

Just as Platonic eróς can be understood as a striving of the world of particulars for the forms of the Good and the Beautiful that would complete them, so allegorical reading can be seen as the striving of a reader confronted with incomplete or "thin" literal readings for the fuller or deeper meanings that would extend and complete them. Origen argues that allegorical readers should look for the spiritual (which is to say the real) import of the letter, rather than a meaning in place of the letter.4

As Mark Edwards has written too, "allegory in the Christian use of scripture is therefore not an exotic plant but the corollary of faith."5

3 Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, p. 53.
4 Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading*, p. 54.
In a very interesting passage, Origen connects the theoretical problem of "true" interpretation with the general problem of epistemology. He finds a hermeneutics ungrounded in the Logos to be the source of disagreement within "Judaism," precisely analogous to the problematic of philosophy itself:

Any teaching which has had a serious origin, and is beneficial 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 begin, which was the variety of the interpretations of the writings of Moses and the sayings of the prophets.6

For Origen, obviously the written word alone gives rise to multiple interpretations 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. What needs to be noted here is the non-polemical and non-pejorative cast of Origen's characterization of Jewish sectarianism. It is no more fraught - but no less too - than the sectarianism of philosophy itself. Because there is no criterion with which to determine truth in interpretation, sectarianism must needs arise in all good faith.

The problem of interpretation is, accordingly, an epistemological problem, and a very ancient one by the time of Origen, indeed. A remarkable fragment from just about the time of Plato may help us win some insight into a non-platonic or even anti-platonic mode of thinking about language. 7 Refer to the extraordinary text by Gorgias of Leontini which has come down to us under the title, On That Which Is Not or, On Nature. Here is Sextus Empiricus' summary:

Gorgias of Leontini belonged to the same troop as those who did away with the criterion, but not by way of the same approach as Protagoras. For in the work entitled On What Is Not or, On Nature he sets up three main points one after the other: first, that there is nothing; second, that even if there is


9 Enos,
Origen as theorist of allegory: Alexandrian contexts

[something], it is not apprehensible by a human being; third, that even if it is apprehensible, it is still not expressible or explainable to the next person.  

(Sextus Empiricus, Against the Logicians I.65)

In an excellent discussion, historian of rhetoric Richard Enos has interpreted these seemingly nonsensical statements. It would seem, at first glance, that Gorgias is denying the existence of the empirical, physical world, but not only would this be an absurd position, it would contradict everything else we know about his thought. In fact, however, it seems that Gorgias is, through this statement, asserting that there is nothing but the physical world. According to Enos’ account, what Gorgias is denying is precisely existents in the philosophical (that is Parmenidean, thus Platonic) sense, essences, ideas or forms, that enable speech of essences. Gorgias claims that no essences exist, but only the physical reality that we see and touch:

Platonic notions of ontological “essences” . . . were absurdities to Gorgias. He viewed humans as functioning in an ever changing world and manufacturing ideas that lose their “existence” the instant they pass from the mind of the thinker. Accordingly, ideals attain existence only through the extrapolations of the mind and are dependent upon the referential perceptions of their creator. As such, they cannot exist without a manufactured antithesis or anti-model. By their very nature, they can form no ideal at all since each individual predicated ideals based on personal experiences.  

The latter two points are closely related to the first. Based on his fundamental sensibility or understanding that the only objects of human cognition are sense-perceptions, Gorgias simply argues that even if there were some essence or idealities, there is no way that humans could perceive and understand them. In other words, we have here a statement of the limitations of human knowing because of the “human media of understanding – sense perceptions.” Beyond the positive experience of humans lie only the extrapolations of the mind, once again a system of representation or signification in which nothing exists except by virtue of that which it is not. Gorgias’ third tenet is, then, simply a further statement about the inability of human language to communicate even sense perceptions, let alone whatever truths about reality that it might have been able (again contrary to plausibility) to divine. As must be obvious, Gorgias’ rhetorical, or Sophistic, thought leads us in very different directions from the thought of philosophy. Plato

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9 Enos, Greek Rhetoric, p. 82 (emphasis original).
desired to discover, and believed he could, truths that would be always true without reference to speakers, hearers, or situations. Gorgias’ thought leads us to understand that we must allow “for the contingencies of interpretation and human nature that are inherent in any social circumstances, which inherently lack ‘ideal’ or universally affirmed premises.”

Gorgias’ views clearly reflect a strong theoretical opposition to philosophy. I wish to suggest that Gorgias’ three challenges to Parmenides and thus to philosophy raise the fundamental problems that a Judaeo-Christian theory of hermeneutics sets out to solve. Whatever Platonic or nonplatonistic particular philosophical tenets we wish to ascribe to Origen, it seems to me absolutely clear that his quest for certainty in interpretive as well as theological knowledge puts him into the epistemological camp of Parmenides and not Gorgias, of philosophy and not of rhetoric. But Gorgias’ challenges had to be answered, implicitly or explicitly.

Origen’s Jewish Alexandrian predecessor Philo had understood the theoretical problem, and also proposed a solution to it. For Philo, something, of course, exists for sure, namely God and his Logos. Philo explicitly expressed a theory of the “magic language” of the Logos and its possible recovery. The philosophy of the “magic language” is essentially Platonism. This Platonism, however, has to be understood as including Aristotle, as exemplified most fully in his On Interpretation. This notion of ideal language bears a complicated relationship to the Stoic-Platonic Logos on the one hand and to the Judaeo-Christian Logos on the other. For Middle-Platonists, such as Philo, it is the Logos as the independently divine Word of God. 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, and had, therefore, been able to name everything with its perfect name, the name that corresponds perfectly to the language of nous or Logos. For Philo, God’s language is entirely different from the language of humans:

For this reason, whereas the voice of mortals is judged by hearing, the sacred oracles intimate that the words of God are heard as light is seen, for we are told that *all of the people saw the Voice* (Ex. 20:18), not that they heard it; for what was happening was not an impact of air made by the organs of mouth and tongue, but the radiating splendor of virtue indistinguishable from a fountain of reason. . . . But the voice of God which is not that of verbs and names yet seen by the eye of the soul, he (Moses) rightly introduces as “visible.”


10 Enos, *Greek Rhetoric*, p. 73.
In his book on allegorical readers in Alexandria, 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:

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.11

The role of the interpreter – necessarily, then, an allegorist – is to perceive and then describe this clear and determinate message, to somehow divine the invisible "magic language" that underlies or lies behind the visible language and then to translate it in the form of allegorical commentary. 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."12

Or as Dawson has, once again, well put it, "Origen's imagination [as well, I would add, as his theoretical passion] is captured by Moses' ability to see God without a veil and by Moses' transformation in body no less than in spirit by virtue of his direct knowledge of the divine."13 For Origen, as well, the biblical author(s) see God by "understanding him with the vision of the heart and the perception of the mind."14 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."15 Philo, 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

12 Edwards, Origen, p. 111.
15 Edwards, Origen, pp. 36-37.
weak answer in my opinion)? What seems to me lacking in Philo’s thought, the “incompletion” – following out the implications of Dawson’s account of Philo – is a way of accounting for the fact that he, via interpretation, claims to accomplish that which Moses himself could not. Christian theories of the Logos in flesh seem better equipped to address this issue. For Christians the divine language has appeared on Earth and spoken itself, thus answering to Philo’s aporia. 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 Logos’ actual taking on of human flesh 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. If this reading has any cogency, then we can see that the “congenial context” that Platonism is for allegorical interpretation is actually much more than that: the problem of the Son’s knowing of the Father and the question of how the Father can be made known to humans is a Christian formulation of a general fundamental problem in epistemology and language theory, and also a brilliant Christian solution to that problem. The Platonism and the Christianity of Origen’s harts and roe-deers are actually tightly bound, and also more complexly integral to each other than earlier crude accounts of Origen’s allegory would have had it. A coincidence, perhaps, of the elaboration of a Jewish theory of the Divine Word, the Logos as the given-to-know-and-be-known: Logos, when met with Greek thinking about language, provided very happy theoretical results in the imaginability of interpretation.

In my view, incarnational theology was crucial in the development of Origen’s hermeneutical/allegorical theory and thus arguably for text interpretation in the West altogether. In Origen’s hermeneutical theory, Logos theology functions in two ways. In his First Principles, Book IV, we can find one version of his three-fold 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.” The very existence of allegory as a hermeneutical theory is made thus dependent on a Platonic universe of correspondences (not antagonisms) between things seen and things unseen, copies and originals, just as it had been in Philo’s work as well. There is nothing new in this aspect of Origen’s theory of interpretation other than the clarity of its articulation. For Origen, as for Philo, the external words of Scripture are “copies” of words and meanings in the esoteric language, there is only the burden of the body. It is always the body that impedes.

In the Incarnation, human and divine language has a theoretical meaning as well.

How is Incarnation not a further development of the esoteric language that has always been the meaning of human language? It is not a religious—

Not only is the Logos brought to us, but it is also present in the body of the Logos himself. The Logos is a living body, the Logos is flesh.

16 Origen, *On First Principles*, p. 276 (IV.2.4).
in the divine 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 post-articulated 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.”17 There is a virtual doubled Incarnation, then, in Origen’s thinking. The Logos is incarnate in Jesus Christ and in Scripture as well.

However, Logos theology and in particular the notion of Christ as the Incarnation of the Word does more work for Origen. For one could imagine 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.18

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, but 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 knowing.

It will take some further work, however, before this point can be made in full. The first step is to show that Origen was aware of the epistemological problem that I attribute to him:

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. 19

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 in another place 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 receive 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 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 deign himself to be the leader of our discourse.” 21 Of course, I have not yet established any role for the Incarnation in this meditation – except, perhaps, in the wording “deign” –, but it is the Logos present with us as the leader of our discourse who would guarantee us truth and insight in our interpretations.

This is, I suggest, the way that we need to understand also Origen’s talk of interpretation as being via possession of the “mind of Christ,” referring, as we shall see, to Paul’s own Wisdom Christology. The richest text of Origen’s for my purpose is adduced by Ronald 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

19 Origen, On First Principles, p. 282 (IV.2.7).
20 Origen, Song, p. 151.
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.\textsuperscript{22}

This key passage for Origen’s hermeneutical theory needs to be read in the context of its several citations. The first is 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 him:

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 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” (1 Corinthians 2:7).

Even more crucial, however, is the amazing narrative in the last chapter (24) of Luke:

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.” 40 […] 41 And while they still disbelieved 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. 44 Then he 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.” 45 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 interpretation presented. The Spirit of God, identified in Paul’s testimony with the mind of Christ is, for any Christian logos theologian, 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 afterwards 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 pre-incarnate 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.”3 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 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.34

In the Incarnation, I would known.

I am not Origen differentiating a part for articulatio-logy was to […] and “Christos Logos speaks- of the prophes- That the living voice, the allegorical ac- of full pres- Gospels the.”

3 Origen, Son 27 Torjesen, O 29 Martin Irv 350-1100 (Ca
In the Incarnation, the Logos “offered himself to be known,” as in a way, I would add, that nothing but a physical body and voice can be known.

I am not claiming, of course, to have uncovered a new interpretation of Origen different from or even supplemental to Torjesen 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 mark 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 then provides 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 which 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.”

Origen, we see, 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 logos is Logos. The transcendental signifies remains beyond the reach of all temporal sign relations yet is immanently manifest in all of them.

27 Torjesen, Origen’s Exegesis, p. 135. 28 Torjesen, Origen’s Exegesis, p. 115.
And yet, on Dawson's own account, "[Origen] identifies the consuming of the lamb with the allegorical reading of Scripture, which is contrasted with various deficient modes of reading, all of which have their subjective, experiential aspects." I suggest that it is in that very drive for certainty, that desire to escape the subjective and the experiential, that we find the Platonic moment in Origen, precisely there, and that such a moment can only be grounded in a two-tiered universe (which is not, I emphasize, necessarily a dualism of value). One finds a useful contrast in another rich body of interpretive writings, the early Rabbinical commentaries collected in midrash. In sharp distinction with Origen's solution to hermeneutic plurality, in midrash, in its final development, there is no transcendental signified. God himself 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, nor even a plethora of interpretations that all stand in the fullness of divine meaning, but finally a rabbincic ascension 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 and eats its Paschal lamb, to once more adopt an Origenist figure, raw.

The verse of the Torah says of the Paschal lamb, "You shall not eat thereof anything raw or boiled in water, but only roasted with fire" (Exod. 12:9). "If the lamb is Christ and Christ is the Logos, what is the flesh of the divine words if not the divine Scriptures" (Treatise on Passover 26.5ff), and what is eating them, if not studying the Torah? Origen understands by the three ways in which the Paschal lamb might be consumed three kinds of readers: the first, a literalist who, like unto an irrational animal, violates the law by eating the text raw; the second, a "flaccid, watery, limp" moralizing reader, who eats the law boiled, and a third, the one who eats the Paschal text as it ought to be eaten, cooked in fire. Dawson writes of such a reader: "The ancient Passover continues to be celebrated, then, in the allegorical reading of Scripture, which is not a disembodiment through interpretation but instead a consumption of a body through reading." And as for the one who reads the Torah cooked in fire:

Clearly, the best readers are those who "roast" the meat of the lamb (Exod. 12:9a), that is, read the Word in Scripture "with fire." To read with fire means that the Word, through the reading of the text, becomes a speaker in the reader,

30 Dawson, Christian Figural Reading, p. 72.
32 Dawson, Christian Figural Reading, p. 71.
and the reader receives the Word as the voice of God. For example, Jeremiah received the words of God, who says, “Behold I have placed my words in your mouth as fire,” and those who receive the lamb through reading “say, as Christ speaks in them” (2 Corinthians 3:3), “Our heart was burning in the way as he opened the Scriptures to us.”

The Rabbis imagined their study of Torah in almost identical terms, as we read in the following story from the midrash on the Song of Songs:

Ben-Azzai was sitting and interpreting [making midrash], and fire was all around him. They went and told Rabbi Akiva, “Rabbi, Ben-Azzai is sitting and interpreting, and fire is burning all around him.” He went to him and said to him, “I heard that you were interpreting, and the fire burning all around you.” He said, “Indeed.” He said, “Perhaps you were engaged in the inner-rooms of the Chariot [theosophical speculation].” He said, “No. I was sitting and stringing the words of Torah [to each other], and the Torah to the Prophets and the Prophets to the Writings, and the words were as radiant/joyful as when they were given from Sinai, and they were as sweet as at their original giving. Were they not originally given in fire, as it is written, ‘And the mountain was burning with fire’ (Deut. 4:11)?”

In this text, allusions to the Song of Songs are deployed very skillfully in order to describe the experience of midrashic reading. The essential moment of midrash is the stringing together of parts of the language of the Torah, the Prophets, and the Holy Writings, forming new linguistic strings out of the old, and thereby recovering the originary moment of Revelation itself. The Rabbi was interpreting the Torah in accordance with the methods of midrash, stringing text to text and building new text as he strung. While doing this, he and the listeners had a visual experience indicating communion with God. Rabbi Akiva becomes suspicious that perhaps his colleague was engaging in forbidden or dangerous theosophical speculation and comes to investigate. He phrases his investigative question in the language of Song of Songs 1:4, “The King brought me into His chambers,” the verse that gave rise to the mystical practice known as “being engaged in the inner-rooms of the Chariot.” But Ben-Azzai answers that it was not that verse, that is, not a verse and practice that relate to mystical speculation, that brought him into communion with God but rather the application of another verse of the same Song, “Your cheeks are lovely with jewels, your neck with beads” (Song 1:10). The word for beads means that which is strung together into chains. Ben-Azzai’s “defense” accordingly is that he was engaged in precisely the same activity as that exemplified by Rabbi Akiva’s midrash above—linking “words of the Torah to words of the Holy Writings,” as Rabbi Akiva linked the words of Exodus to the words of the Song of Songs. In
order to recover the erotic visual communion that obtained between God and Israel at Mount Sinai, Ben-Azzai engages not in a mystical practice but in a hermeneutic one, the practice of midrash. This practice is accompanied by the visual experience also beheld at the giving of the Torah and particularly by the appearance of fire. This will be then a hermeneutics of recollected experience and visual perception.

In a striking—and perhaps not coincidental—convergence, both the Rabbi and the Father imagine the practice of holy reading as a moment of fiery encounter with God. Both imagine that through the properly intended study of the holy writ, direct contact with God the Father can be achieved; but the differences are interesting, as well. For the Rabbis, what is found are the words themselves, as radiant, joyful, and sweet—no interpretations and no knowledge of truth—as when given on Mount Sinai; for Origen, it is not finally the words but the Word and with it the Truth that is to be located in the otherwise so kindred a spiritual practice of reading. For Origen, those who find only the words and enjoy the words remain irrational beasts and only those who strip the meanings of flesh off the bones of word and read the text in allegorical fashion, which means in Christ, could ever even have hope for the experience of hot love that both he and his rabbinic interlocutor seek.