

Origen and Gnostic Christianity

[second draft]

One thing must, as an introduction, be made clear: Important origenistic texts, as they are handed down to us, have been censored and manipulated!

The learned Origen

The Church in its present form was founded at the Council of Nicaea in 325. One, therefore, often discerns between prenicæanic and postnicæanic fathers of the Church. Origen was one of the foremost prenicæanic fathers of the Church and one of the most learned men of his time. He wrote at least two thousand texts that were all destroyed, the last ones at the end of the 6th century. What is left for us are only a few fragments of the original texts in Greek and a few quotations from his opponents, and beyond that Latin translations. One of the texts that are most important in this context is *Peri Archōn* (“About the Principles” or “the Origins”) [1], which was translated by Rufinus (approx. 345 – approx. 410). Some parts of a Latin translation by Hieronymus (340-419 or 420) are also available, but almost nothing has been preserved of the original text.

New discoveries reveal manipulation of the translations

Rufinus openly admits in the preface to his translation that he has “adjusted” the text to the dogma of the Church. As an excuse for his censorship, he alleges that heretics and evil-minded persons would have manipulated the Greek text he had. Rufinus claims that he would have “returned the text to its original state.” We will soon see how true this is. What is in any case certain is that any positive remark by Origen about reincarnation will – if it was there – have been “adjusted” by Rufinus.

In the year 1941, 28 papyrus sheets of an original text by Origen were found in [Tura](#) in Egypt, a text about another subject: his comments to the Epistle to the Romans. One could now for the first time compare a translation with the original, which was very revealing. The work was done by the French scientist Jean Scherrer [2], and he demonstrates that Rufinus has:

- added text passages that Origen did not have,
- too much simplified complex passages,
- shifted passages to other locations in the manuscript,
- left passages out, and
- altered passages, in a few cases even to the extent that Rufinus’ version says the opposite to what Origen had actually written.

“A personal, far-reaching and multiple encroachment in the text ... has been undertaken ... it is a mixture of authentic origenistic elements, altered origenistic elements and non-origenistic elements.” [2] It is beyond doubt to be taken into account that the same will be valid also for other texts that have been handed down only in Latin translations, and not the least for *Peri Archōn*.

Did Origen teach reincarnation?

The dogma of the Church claims that the great Origen (184 or 185 to 253 or 254) was an opponent to the doctrine of reincarnation. Is that really true?

When we in his texts want to try to find out whether Origen actually did advocate reincarnation, or not, we have certain difficulties. Certain gaps in the text do, however, turn out to be unexpectedly helpful. What has been removed becomes useful (through what could fill the gap)... besides that, a few passages in the text apparently escaped the censorship of Rufinus. This lets us conclude that Origen really did advocate the reincarnation doctrine (the denial of this by theologians of the Church is loosely based on manipulated texts). About this, see Chapter 3 in my book [Reincarnation, Christianity and the Dogma of the Church](#) (translation of my German-language book [Reinkarnation, Christentum und das kirchliche Dogma](#), Ibero, Vienna, 2001). I have discussed this also in Chapter 3 of my German-language book [Unsichtbare Einflüsse](#) (Amra, Hanau, 2012).

Origen writes in *Peri Archōn* that we in a way are fallen angels. We all were there in the original creation, but some of the entities in that creation – that is: we – turned away from God and wanted to have other experiences than what God’s harmonic and loving world of light had to offer. Therefore,

God brought us into lower states of consciousness on various levels in a hierarchy under him. The souls that fell on the second lowest level were – according to Origen for punishment – brought into human bodies like into prisons. On the lowest level, so he writes, are demons and adversaries. Even though that lowest level appears like a kind of hell, whoever may fall there only has to stay as long as needed for achieving insight, regret and reversal.

According to Dionysios the Areopagita (Dionýsios ó Areopagítēs, [3]) there are nine (thrice three) angelic hierarchies between God and the humans. The level of the humans would then be the eleventh and the lowest level the twelfth (counting God's level as the first).

References

1. Origen: *De Principiis* – English translation available here: <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0412.htm> and here: <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/origen.html>. These texts do, however, not have the two prefaces of Rufinus, which are included in the probably *best* and most complete modern translation (even though it is in German). This translation is: Origenes: *Vier Bücher von den Prinzipien*, translated by Herwig Görgemanns and Heinrich Karpp, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt, 1985.
2. Jean Scherrer: *Le Commentaire d'Origène sur Rom. III.5-VJ*, Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, Cairo, 1952.
3. <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/CelestialHierarchy.html>.

This worldview agrees in several aspects with the one of the Christian Gnostics. The Origenistic tradition, however, in several points differs from the Gnostic and even has contradictions to it, though it must here be born in mind that corresponding text passages could also have become alienated through ecclesiastical censorship.

Origen was active at a time and in an environment in which Gnostic Christianity was prevalent. The latter taught that souls could under circumstances become lost and annihilated if they did not develop towards the good. Origen, however, advocated the view that *all* will be redeemed, at the end even the devil. He called the definite universal redemption *apokatástasis* – the restoration of all things (in God's original order). To-day's Gnosticism rather assumes the origenistic view, as it results from modern empirical knowledge about reincarnation (from memories of the past – spontaneous, in regressions and in many near-death experiences).

Origen advocated the view that human beings have a free will. So does also the modern empirical form of Gnostic Christianity. But a free will with conditions, since it is subject to the principle of karma. Our fate (*heimarménē*) becomes positively or negatively determined as a result of our good or bad deeds. However, this is not a matter of punishment, but of learning. To later oneself experience one's bad actions, so that the soul will understand how wrong it was and not do so again. The Gnostics regarded the freedom of will as limited, yet they also taught karmic consequences of one's own actions. This logically does involve a personal free will to choose how we act and with it our future fate. Therefore, the main difference will be that, according to Origen, we humans – when we were souls in the light world before incarnating the first time – out of free will chose to leave that light world so that we could have experiences that we could not have there. The Gnostic Christianity regards our existence in the embodiment as less voluntary.

However, the free will does not allow us to choose to not have the consequences of our actions. We have to eat the whole cake we baked and cannot pick only the raisins out and throw the rest away ...

The Gnostic Christians regarded YHWH as a lower god, who they called Yaldabaoth, since this could be the only explanation for his abominable cruelty, blood thirst, love for violence, revengefulness, pleasure in killing and making people kill – as he is pictured page-wise in the Old Testament – over and over again calling for war and predatory excursions. The true creator God would, therefore, be a higher entity, far above YHWH, and when Jesus talked about the "Father", he meant that highest God. Origen held the two testaments to be more or less equally valid and that YHWH and the "Father" would be the same. As far as I know, Origen did not discuss the cruelty of YHWH. One could, however, imagine that he wanted to take an appeasing position in the tension field between the Gnostic and the later established Paulinian (and yahwistic) Christianity, to avoid conflict and criticism.

Origen is said to have been a pupil of the Gnostic Valentinus (or that he at least knew him personally), and he mentioned him in positive terms (about his personality and qualifications), and yet with time partly distanced himself from the Gnosticism. Nevertheless, his doctrine has kept many a Gnostic feature (which contributed to his late anathematization in the 6th century).

The learned Spanish theologian and professor for Gnosticism Antonio Orbe in his important work [*Christología Gnóstica*](#) (Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid, 1976, two volumes) has around 150 references to Origen (some of them in footnotes). I have not taken the trouble to go through them all, but that will testify as concerns Gnostic elements in Origen's doctrine...

In my view, the doctrines of Origen can be seen as an important completion of Gnostic Christianity if one, so to speak, takes out the "best of two worlds". From Origen, for example, that we do much more have a free will than the Gnostic doctrines wanted to admit, and that there is no definite perdition, but we will at the end all be redeemed. From Gnosticism, among other things, the doctrine about the old-testament god YHWH as a demiurge (who they called Yaldabaoth), who was *not* Jesus' "Father". Origen's identification of the gods of the Old and the New Testament is certainly difficult to combine with the [abominable cruelty](#) of YHWH and the world of the Old Testament! However, there could possibly be a case here of ecclesiastic manipulation of the texts...

The Polish priest and professor [Wincenty Myszor](#) has in his French-language publication [Origène et les gnostiques, état de la question](#) (Śląskie Studia Historyczno-Teologiczne 2005, t. 38 specjalny, S. 48–57) compared investigations of the theologians Hans Jonas, Jean Daniélou, Rolf Gögler, Gilles Quispel and Holger Strutwolf concerning the question of relationships between Origen and Gnosticism. Here is his result (quoted in my translation):

"In this context, the points of contact between the Gnostics and Christian philosophers like Origen are striking. One may pose the question: has there been an influence? In which way did it function? If such a game of influences is not fully excluded, this raises a question that deserves to be more deeply investigated. Is there not a common origin behind the plane of two worlds, that of the Gnostics and that of Origen? More strictly speaking, would not this common background be an aspect of common tradition of the Church, where Gnostics and Christians would find their sources? To pose the question once more, could not the Gnostics be investigated to ask if they are not indirect witnesses of a very old Christian inheritance, of which a part was later lost, a part of an inheritance of which truly some was preserved by a Clement and an Origen?"

This leads me to the following conclusion: like Jean Daniélou opened up a whole field of research for us that he called the Judeo-Christianity and its exegesis, would one not have to undertake a new reading of the Gnostic Christians and their exegesis, to research the trace of a message from the very earliest times? I believe that this work is worth being undertaken. It would be a good way to participate in the study of ancient Christianity and listen more carefully to God's word."