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# A DECADE OF RESEARCH ON ORIGEN'S HOMILIES ON THE PSALMS (*CODEX MONACENSIS GRAECUS 314*)

## INTRODUCTION

In April of 2012 Marina Molin Pradel, while updating the catalogue of the collection of Greek manuscripts of the Bavarian State Library in Munich, came upon a 12th century codex containing 29 homilies on the Psalms. Though annotations on the manuscript seemed to point to Michael Psellos as the author, Molin Pradel noticed the correspondence between four of the homilies on Psalm 36 and Origen's first four homilies on the same Psalm (until then known only in Rufinus's Latin translation). She likewise noted the coincidence of portions of other homilies in the codex with textual fragments attributed to Origen in the *catenae*. These, along with other indicators, led her to suspect that the whole set of 29 homilies was part of the group of long-lost homilies of Origen on the Psalms, of which Jerome had provided a list in his *Letter 33* (Molin Pradel, 2012, 2014).

The patristic scholar Lorenzo Perrone was called upon to assist in the task of ascertaining the homilies' authorship. As Perrone transcribed and studied the

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manuscript, he arrived at a reasonable certainty that the homilies were indeed Origen's. Thus on 11 June 2012 the Bavarian State Library publicly announced the news of the recovery of 29 homilies attributed to Origen. The event set off a flurry of meetings among Origen scholars, as well as the publication of early transcriptions of some homilies and initial research results (Perrone, 2012a, 2012b, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2013d, 2014d, 2015b). One early fruit of the meetings among scholars was an extensive monographic section published in *Adamantius* in 2014 (Barilli et al., 2014), followed by further articles on the discovery and its significance (Perrone, 2016c, 2017b, 2017c, 2017h; Trigg, 2019). Understandably, Perrone figured prominently among the scholars who transmitted the first news and research findings. His most significant publications would later be collated and published in one volume (Perrone 2021a).

The excitement among scholars was understandably great, for not since the finding 70 years earlier of the Tura manuscript (containing, among others works, Origen's *Dialogue with Heraclides* and *Treatise on the Passover*) had a comparable discovery been made in the field of Origenistic studies. With the recovery of 29 homilies on the Psalms, the total number of Origen's homilies available in the original Greek had all of a sudden jumped from 21 to 50.

Perrone proceeded with the preparation of a critical edition of the 29 homilies, with the collaboration of M. Molin Pradel, E. Prinzivalli, and A. Cacciari, and finally published it in 2015, in the Berlin GCS collection (Perrone et al., 2015). Perrone would subsequently publish a two-volume critical edition in Italian, with an introduction and annotations (Perrone, 2020/2021); and in 2020 J. W. Trigg would publish an English translation of the homilies, with notes and an extensive introduction (Trigg, 2020).

As of this writing, more than a decade has elapsed since the discovery of the Munich codex (often referred to in Origenistic circles as the *Codex Monacensis Graecus 314*). The publication of research articles on the rediscovered Origen homilies has not abated after the first years, but rather continued vigorously. Now would seem to be a propitious moment for presenting the *status quaestionis*, an overall view of the studies published to date on the matter, identifying the principal avenues of research opened by the access to Origen homilies previously unknown to scholars. Although the present survey does not pretend to be exhaustive, it does aim to be sufficiently indicative of the different types of studies that the 29 new homilies have given rise to. In broad terms, it may be affirmed that the homilies have provided new and deeper lights on the figure of Origen himself; on his exegetical method; on the milieu in which he lived and worked; on the mode of transmission of his texts to later generations. We shall structure the rest of this article according to these lines of research.

## 1. THE FIGURE OF ORIGEN

The homilies provide, in the first place, a better picture of Origen near his life's end – the “ultimate” Origen, as Perrone would put it (Perrone 2015c, 2015d, 2017g, 2018a). This late dating is possible thanks to diverse clues found in the homilies themselves: e.g. mention by Origen of his experience as a youth (Ps77H2); allusion to a previous work (his *Commentary on Hosea*, counted by Eusebius among Origen's later works) (Ps77H9); rectification of an opinion (earlier expressed in *Contra Celsum*, written in 248 A.D. approximately) relative to the assignment of nations to angels (Ps77H8). Such indications permit the dating of at least some of the homilies to a time shortly before Origen's arrest and torture during the Decian persecution of 251. Even at this late stage of his career, Origen may be seen to maintain a lively, inquisitive mind, ever in search of fresh understanding of the Scriptures (Perrone, 2015d, p. 27). This characteristic is indicative of how Origen lived out his conviction regarding the limitless possibilities of biblical comprehension and spiritual progress.

The homilies likewise provide us with a more detailed picture of the cultural milieu and ecclesial context in which Origen lived and moved. There are indications in his homilies that Christian believers gathered regularly – at least weekly (Trigg, 2020, p. 21), possibly daily (Monaci Castagno, 2014), to listen to the reading of Sacred Scripture and their explanation, at times in the context of a eucharistic celebration. The attendees would seem to have comprised a mixed lot, of both catechumens and the initiated (Monaci Castagno, 2014).

The homilies often reflect Origen's lofty conception of his role – not so much that of a philologist or grammarian (though he did put such aspects of expertise into play when preaching), as that of a man of prayer and wisdom – a *didáskalos*, a master of scripture, after the model of Jesus Christ himself (Perrone 2014a, 2017b, 2017h). The homilies reveal a preacher possessing a vast culture, familiar with the Hellenic tradition in areas such as music, astronomy, games, zoology, as well as with the Philonian tradition of interpretation. Still, Origen employed this knowledge not to impress his listeners, but with a view to providing them with salutary guidance for daily conduct (Solheid, 2019). At the same time, he shared with his contemporaries certain attitudes. One study (Niehoff, 2020) on his consideration of biblical women shows how Origen, essentially following Paul (but possibly also influenced by Hellenistic Jewish oral tradition as well as his own mentality regarding women) interprets biblical characters like Eve, Sarah, and Hagar allegorically, as representing waypoints towards the goal of being a true Christian. This contrasts with his more literal interpretation of the biblical patriarchs, whose persons and conduct he takes as exemplars of the perfection to which every Christian must aspire. Still,

in at least one instance (Judith and her prayer) Origen does present a woman as a paradigm of piety.

The homilies likewise provide a more detailed picture of Origen's exegetical method – his careful consideration of discrepancies among extant biblical versions (Cacciari, 2014; Mitchell, 2017; Perrone, 2013d, 2016c) and his use of the Hexapla to dilucidate doubts (Trigg, 2020, p. 12). Such examples of Origen's methodical proceeding reinforce the long-established view that he took textual criticism extremely seriously, with a view to extracting spiritual meanings that were valid and beneficial to his audience (Perrone, 2018c, 2019, 2020a). Origen consistently sought to offer to his listeners a *theología*, or discourse on God, that would nourish them in their spiritual pilgrimage. In Perrone's words, "theology' (θεολογία) leads to 'sanctification' (ἀγιασμός)" (Perrone, 2017d, p. 150); for Origen, theology and life were tightly bound.

An in-depth study (in the form of a whole book) of Origen's exegetical procedure as reflected in the 29 Psalms has been published recently by M. R. James, who corrects the impression of "arbitrariness" provoked by Origen's allegorical method. James argues that Origen followed certain rules in pursuit of an objective: not so much the understanding of the meaning of particular texts, but –more deeply– learning to speak in a fashion that emulated Scriptures' use of language: "For Origen, the goal of interpretation is to acquire the capacity to speak according to the example of the Scriptures, which I refer to as 'learning the language of Scripture'" (James, 2021, p. 4).

The homilies also confirm that the question-and-answer method was Origen's preferred way of going about the verse-by-verse commentary of biblical texts, as it had the didactic advantage of keeping alive the audience's interest (Mitchell, 2016). Some homilies contain clear instances of Origen employing rhetorical methods to render his discourse more forceful and effective (Cacciari, 2019a; Nieścior, 2022; Trigg, 2020, p. 8). Yet other homilies reveal how conscientious he was in his choice of terms and comparisons (drawn from nature, human anatomy, music, biblical narratives), as he constantly searched for those that were particularly eloquent or effective in transmitting his ideas (Limone, 2019; Perrone, 2016a, 2019; Somos, 2019).

An important group of studies have focused on Origen's identification of the speaker (*prósōpon*) of the Psalms. Though Origen often identifies this speaker as Christ, on occasion he understands that it is the Church who is speaking, thereby producing a kind of dialogue between Christ and his members (Grzywaczewski, 2022; Perrone, 2016b, 2018c; Trigg, 2020, pp. 13-14).

The notable richness of Origen's style as a homilist may be explained not only by the vast culture he possessed, but also by the challenge he faced of making

himself understood by the variegated audience of 3rd-century Caesarea – listeners coming from very diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. This required of him, as a preaching scholar, sometimes to adapt texts, to paraphrase, to quote from memory, to compare and evaluate divergent biblical versions (Barilli, 2014b; Neri, 2016), and at times even to coin new expressions (Cacciari, 2018).

## 2. ORIGEN'S THEOLOGY

The newly-found homilies provide a more detailed look into key aspects of Origen's theological thinking – first and foremost, his Christology. Two homilies on Ps 15 employ the framework of *katábasis-anábasis* to expound the mystery of Christ. This mystery begins with the Logos's descent, first into the world (at incarnation) and then (upon death) into the underworld (*háidēs*); and is subsequently completed with the resurrected Christ's ascent to heaven. All the while, when describing this trajectory, Origen insists on the double (heavenly/earthly) character of Jesus – on the one hand, his full communion (as the Son) with the Father; and on the other, his authentic humanity (maintaining in his body the traces of the passion, even after his resurrection and ascension) (Perrone, 2014b, 2014c; Simonetti, 2016). Even as he asserts Christ's divinity, Origen expresses his unique relation to the Father in disputable bold terms (Ps15H1.3): only the Father is *anendeés*, needing no one else; whereas Christ is *endeés*, dependent, on the Father (Perrone, 2014b, p. 330).

Intricately linked to Origen's Christology is his pneumatological doctrine. In his homilies Origen talks of the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in the sanctification/deification of the human person (composed, in typical Origenistic fashion, of *pneûma*, *psûkhé* and *sôma* – a trichotomic schema that allows Origen to defend the idea of human connection with the divine Spirit–, as well as the Holy Spirit's role in Sacred Scripture and in the lives of the faithful empowered by the Spirit's gifts) (Perrone, 2018b). This divine action raises humans to a new mode of being – familiar, filial relation with the Father (Cacciari, 2020).

The homilies also reflect Origen's conception of creation – in the first place, of the cosmos as a reality permeated by the presence of angels (Perrone, 2017f). As regards the human creature, Origen insists in his homilies on the importance of the body, maintaining that it is the entire human person who is destined for deification. Thus, while it is true that Origen puts the material body in the lowest rung of his tripartite schema, he yet holds that virtuous use of the body plays a crucial role in a person's salvation. As Origen eloquently says in his homily on Psalm 81, the body is like an instrument on which we make music for God (Interi, 2019; Somos, 2019; Trigg, 2020, p. 27).

The human body will finally be bestowed with incorruption by God, to complete the divine project of glorification of the human creature. This mystery is linked by Origen to that of the resurrected Christ, who is ever the archetype for the human being (Perrone, 2017a). We thus see how Origen's eschatology and anthropology connect deeply with his Christology and soteriology, for it is the resurrected Christ who is the paradigm in which human beings will participate as glorified creatures.

Origen's ecclesiology likewise appears with profundity in the homilies. Although no monographic study has yet focused on this subject, J. W. Trigg has already pointed out the interest offered by a number of homilies that develop the idea of the Church as the body of Christ:

In four separate homilies Origen affirms that, since all believers constitute Christ's body, what we do or fail to do for any other believer, we do or fail to do to Christ. Thus any offense committed against another Christian believer, is done against Christ (Ps15H1.3, Ps36H3.12, Ps73H3.6, Ps81H.4). The Church is one "place" (*tópos*) where God dwells because we are all one in Christ (Ps67H2.8). The gathering of believers in unity is a prefiguration of eschatological unity when God will be all in all (Ps67H1.6). Still, before the final consummation, the Church is only "in part" the body of Christ (Ps15H1.6, Ps67H1.6) living the same experience short of perfection in which "we know in part" and "we prophesy in part" (Ps67H1.6, Ps67H2.3, Ps77H4.9) (Trigg, 2020, pp. 28-29).

Although Origen's zeal for expounding orthodox doctrine is in the foreground of his preaching, we also get a glimpse in his homilies of the variegated backdrop of heresies then in vogue, particularly Marcionism, Valentinianism, and Basilideanism. The mention of these heresies, in the context of Origen's denunciation of all heterodoxy, reveals how ebullient was the theological atmosphere in Origen's time, and how strong was his concern over the rise of theories incompatible with Christian doctrine (Le Boullec, 2014).

In some homilies we find indications of Origen's contact with Jews and Jewish doctrines and traditions – a sign of the proximity between Jews and Christians in the multicultural environment of Caesarea. Significantly, though Origen shows some familiarity with Jewish feasts, he considers these as superseded by the new dispensation. Thus he holds that the only way to celebrate such feasts is to meditate on their spiritual meaning, seeking their deeper significance (Fürst, 2014; Prinziavalli, 2015a). Interestingly, though Origen sometimes holds the Jews ultimately respon-

sible for the fall of Jerusalem, at other moments he maintains that it is the “opposing powers”, i.e. the power of evil, which is the root cause of the destruction of the holy places as well as of the actions of the Jews against Christ (Cacciari, 2019b).

As for Origen’s relation with philosophy, it is possible to detect elements of Greek thought that are present in his homilies on the Psalms, thanks to his use of certain words or set of words; his linguistic register; his employment of particular images and metaphors; his recourse to specific concepts or doctrines (Barilli, 2014a). In particular, it is possible to detect the presence of the Platonism of his time (as formulated by Philo), and other notions of Hellenistic culture, as from the fields of cosmology and music (Perrone, 2015a).

On an intertextual level, a number of studies have brought to the fore the connections established by Origen in his homilies, between the Old Testament and the New – in particular, between the Psalms and Genesis (more specifically, the cosmogenic narrative in Genesis 1) (Perrone, 2017a), as well as between the Psalms and New Testament books (Gospels, Acts, Pauline epistles) (Perrone, 2021b). Origen’s interpretative principle of the unity between the Old and New Testaments infuses dynamism and opens new horizons in his quest for the deepest spiritual meaning of biblical texts. He works with the conviction that the Psalms may be better understood in the light of their Gospel fulfillment and, conversely, that the person and action of Christ are illumined by the Psalms quoted in the Gospels as referring to him.

### 3. THE STORY OF THE TRANSMISSION OF ORIGEN’S TEXTS

The homilies have, furthermore, allowed a more in-depth analysis of the connections between Origen’s original texts and their transmission through Rufinus, Jerome, and the compilers of the *catenae*. In the first place, they have permitted something hitherto infeasible – the direct, side-by-side comparison between Rufinus’s Latin version of four homilies on Psalm 36, and Origen’s four homilies in the original Greek, thereby facilitating a more grounded evaluation of Rufinus’s role as a translator of Origen into Latin. This intriguing comparison has been carried out principally by Prinzivalli (Prinzivalli, 2014, 2015b, 2016), to reveal that Rufinus did not perform a servile translation of the original texts. As becomes evident from the edition in parallel columns of the Greek and Latin versions, Rufinus sometimes shortened and at other times added to Origen’s original text, and this for varied reasons. Certain alterations he made from practical motives, e.g. eliminating untranslatable terms or redundant biblical quotations. Other changes he introduced with what we might call editorial motives: simplification of a complicated discussion, ar-



gumental enhancement (i.e. amplification of a paragraph, or substitution of one biblical citation for another more suitable). In yet other instances, Rufinus performed more significant textual operations to circumvent doctrinal ambiguities (e.g. hints of subordinationism or of ontological fusion between the Logos and the human soul). This proactivity in working with Origen's texts suggests that Rufinus understood his role as being more than that of a translator from Greek into Latin. He considered himself, rather, as a renderer of Origen's teaching to an audience with a different cultural and theological outlook. In Prinzivalli's words, his work was one of "cultural mediation" (Prinzivalli, 2014, p. 196). This conclusion – largely validating Rufinus's role as a transmitter of Origen's works, yet recognizing the liberties he took with Origen's texts – is similar to that reached by other scholars regarding other translations by Rufinus (e.g. of Origen's *De principiis* – see the recently published critical edition in Spanish by Fernández, 2015, p. 81).

In an analogous way, the recovery of Greek homilies of Origen has facilitated a more nuanced evaluation of Jerome's homilies on the Psalms (of which 74 are conserved). Jerome's authorship of these homilies has in the past been questioned by scholars who claimed that Jerome merely translated, and did some minor redaction work on, Origen's homilies on the Psalms. It has now become possible, thanks to the discovery of the Munich codex, to perform a comparison between some of Origen's homilies on the Psalms and the corresponding homilies by Jerome. The conclusion, in brief terms, is that, while Jerome does show some dependence on Origen, he also uses a fair bit of originality in commenting the Psalms (Bogataj, 2021; Orlandi, 2018).

The discovery of the Munich codex came at a propitious moment, for an ambitious effort had earlier been launched (principally by a team of researchers at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities) to reconstruct Origen's interpretation of the Psalms, on the basis of the *catenae* fragments. This laborious undertaking was greatly helped by the new availability of a sizable set of homiletic texts by Origen on the Psalms. In the Berlin GCS edition, for instance, homily texts coincident with *catenae* fragments are highlighted in bold letters. Even a cursory glance shows that the compilers of the *catenae* did indeed extract from Origen's original texts... but also often abbreviated them. Thus, the *catenae* fragments are a valuable source for the reconstruction of Origen's exegesis of the Psalms, but need to be treated with some caution.

## CONCLUSION

In 1998 an Origen scholar, R. Heine, had made the following perceptive assessment (in a paper that was published years later: Heine, 2015, p. 48): “This entire corpus (of Origenistic works on the Psalms) has perished in its original form. And that, I think, is one of the greatest losses of Christian literature.” Now, after the finding of *Codex Monacensis Graecus 314*, scholars may congratulate themselves over the fact that, all at once, a significant portion of this lost treasure has been recovered. From the studies already published on the recently recovered material, and which we have briefly surveyed in this article, we may affirm that what another scholar of early Christianity (M. Fédou) forecast in his review of the CGS edition of the homilies has been fulfilled: “The entire collection should surely give rise to important studies in the years or decades to come” (Fédou, 2019, p. 143).

The *status quaestionis* that we have here offered serves to illustrate effectively the enrichment of Origenistic and early Christian studies that the new collection of Origen homilies has brought about. Even within the short time frame of scarcely more than a decade, important research results have already been obtained. We now have a more complete picture of Origen as preacher, exegete, and theologian; of the milieu in which he lived and exercised his ministry (cultural environment, ecclesial setting, heretical currents); of the manner in which his texts were transmitted to later generations, through the mediation of Rufinus, Jerome, and the *catenae* compilers. On a deeper level, we now have a reinforced impression of the underlying unity in Origen’s thinking, for all its 3rd-century limitations. He viewed theology and Christian life as mutually dependent; saw the Old and New Testaments as intertwined; understood the human creature’s final destiny as intrinsically linked to the person and saving work of Christ.

The impact of the discovery of the new homilies, we may therefore say, was not limited to the explosive moment of the 2012 announcement; even now it continues and grows deeper in the world of Origen scholarship.

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# A DECADE OF RESEARCH ON ORIGEN'S HOMILIES ON THE PSALMS (*CODEX MONACENSIS GRAECUS 314*)

## SUMMARY

Slightly more than a decade has passed since the momentous discovery in Munich of 29 Greek homilies by Origen on the Psalms. In all this time, the new material has been the object of intense study on the part of scholars. The present article offers a description and classification of the research published to date, identifying the principal avenues of investigation opened by access to Origenistic texts hitherto unknown to modern scholars.

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