

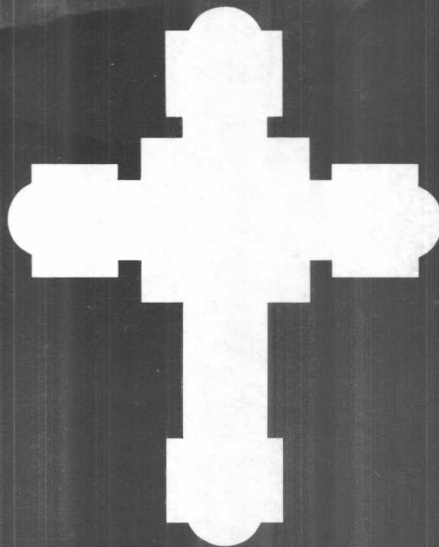
# COPTIC CHURCH REVIEW

Volume 1

Number 2

Summer 1980

- ★ **Modern Coptic Saints: Anba Abraam of Fayoum**
- ★ **Spiritual Insights into the Daily Office**
- ★ **The Transfiguration of Christ in the Writings of the Fathers**



*Society of Coptic Church Studies*

# COPTIC CHURCH REVIEW

*A Quarterly of Contemporary Patristic Studies*

Volume 1      Number 2      Summer 1980

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- 46    *About this issue*
- 48    *Saint Abraam of Fayoum*  
His Holiness Pope Shenouda III
- 49    *Modern Coptic Saints:*  
*Anba Abraam, Bishop of Fayoum*  
Henry Adams
- 53    *Spiritual Insights into the Daily*  
*Office of the Coptic Church*  
Father Matta El-Meskeen
- 60    *Fathers of the School of Alexandria:*  
*Origen*  
Father Tadros Malaty
- 73    *A Review of Origen's Commentary*  
*on The Song of Songs*  
Fikry Meleda, M.D.
- 78    *The Transfiguration of Christ*  
*in the Writings of the Fathers*
- 92    *Book Review*  
St. Mary in the Orthodox Concept

## ABOUT THIS ISSUE

We are happy to introduce this summer issue of Coptic Church Review by ***a meditation of His Holiness Pope Shenouda III on the life of St. Abraam of Fayoum***. Anba Abraam (1829-1914), whose feast day is June 10, has been the last to be put in the list of saints commemorated in the Coptic Liturgy. A portrait with a vivid description of the daily life of ***Saint Abraam*** is written by *Henry Adams*, who was born in the Episcopal Church, has been converted to Orthodoxy and is now an active member of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Harrisburg. The prayers cited in the article are a part of the Church Tradition which has been used by it since the first Christian centuries. Though they are taken here mainly from the prayers of anointing the sick, some of these prayers are also used in the Eucharistic Liturgy, in the Sacrament of Confession, and in other prayers of the Church. The next article is ***Spiritual Insights into the Daily Office*** by *Father Matta El-Meskeen*, the spiritual father of St. Macarius Monastery in the old desert of Scete. The Daily Office is an extension and christening of the synagogue prayers. It has been the prayer of the Desert Fathers of Egypt since the fourth century, and from them it extended to the whole Church. Father Matta, through his meditation of the Office as it is practised today, leads us into a spiritual pilgrimage which is not of this world. The article is translated from a book, *“The Daily Office and the Hourly Psalmody”*. Since this book was published, together with a succeeding volume *“The Saint Virgin Mary”*, the Office has been rediscovered by the young generation of the Coptic Church. Many young adults who have learned to share in its singing, are seen in the churches, reciting it by heart in the Coptic language.

We have two articles on *Origen*, who has been considered by some as the greatest teacher in the early Church after the Apostles and as the first Biblical scholar. *Father Tadras Malaty*, a member of our editorial board, writes about his life and his writings. *Dr. Fikry Meleka* gives a review of his ***“Commentary on the Song of Songs”***. St. Jerome said that while in his other works Origen far surpassed all other authors, in his Commentary on the Song of Songs, he surpassed even himself. For the reader who is introduced to Origen for the first time, this review will give him a taste of Origen’s method of dealing with Scripture on the spiritual level.

In the liturgical cycle of the Coptic Orthodox Church, we have two summer feasts, the Feast of Transfiguration (August 19), and the Feast of Assumption of the Body of Saint Mary (August 22). In “*The Transfiguration of Christ in the Writings of the Church Fathers*”, we have tried to give the words of the Early Fathers in their commentary on the Bible verses that deal with the Transfiguration. In it, they saw our Lord in the glory of His resurrection and His parousia, as well as the Church, His luminous Bride.

“*St. Mary in the Orthodox Concept*” (reviewed in the Book Reviews section) is an excellent book to read during the Fast named after our Lady (August 7 to August 21) and during her Feast.

*Editor*

### **Acknowledgement**

Although many people are working to let the Journal reach the reader in this shape, it is difficult not to mention the great assistance offered by the Coptic Orthodox Church of Harrisburg, whose members are for the major part new converts to the Coptic Church. In addition to the various articles contributed by its members, we are very thankful for the help of Mr. Denis Van Tassel for correcting and editing the proofs, and for Mrs. Eleanor Adams for typing the manuscripts.

# **Saint Abraam of Fayoum**

**by**

**His Holiness Pope Shenouda III**

The life of this saint is a poured ointment and a sweet incense accepted by God . . . He appeared as an angel among men . . .

My mouth is sanctified when I utter the name of Anba Abraam, and my pen is blessed when I write about him, . . . and my soul is humiliated before him, and gets smaller and smaller till it finds that it is nothing. Similar to the early patriarchs his beautiful life is a life with a sanctity which is not bound by any special time and place, nor prevented or hindered by hardships or sufferings. The life of Anba Abraam is a living example for all generations, including our present generation.

The life of this blessed saint projects a wonderful icon of a true man of God. Anba Abraam lived a life of attachment to his God in all circumstances. He was as much a true ambassador for Christ in the world, or in the wilderness; in superiority or in submission; in meditation, in service; or both meditation and service practised together. His life is an icon of a saintly bishop—quiet, humble, meek, beloved and respected by all, and an ascetic who knew no need of money except as a right of the poor. It is an icon of the true bishop who governs on earth with the power of heaven. All acknowledge him as a true representative of God, and God assists him in his earthly service with many miracles.

## ***Modern Coptic Saints— ANBA ABRAAM, BISHOP OF FAYOUM***

***Henry Adams***

This is the story of the Bishop of Fayoum. Fayoum is a province in Upper Egypt. The Bishop, who had the deep respect of both Christians and Moslems was born in a village called Galada in the Assiout province. His parents were Christians who in practicing their faith brought him up on sound Christian principles, which he readily adopted. After completing school he joined the Monastery of the Virgin Mary, known as Deir El-Moharrac near Assiout. He proved to be popular at the monastery and was soon voted in as a monk by his brothers. It wasn't long till he was appointed the head of the monastery by the Patriarch. During his tenure, thousands of the poor were sheltered. After a period at another monastery, he was appointed the Bishop of Fayoum and Gizeh in the Coptic year of 1597 (1881 A.D.). His constant concern was the poor and troubled who came to him for help.

The following account is the story of an English journalist who visited the Bishop in his later years.

The Bishop had no intention of seeing visitors for any other purpose than to intercede for them for their specific need. When told that a distinguished Englishman was anxious for an audience, the old man thought this was not His Master's calling. He apparently had no liking for the idea of being sought out by travellers as a celebrity. His attitude was similar to that of the early Coptic Saint Anthony who when sought by persons of rank, would reply, "As a fish dies out of water, so a monk dies out of his cell." Intercession for individual needs was their singular calling.

A Coptic friend whom I have known for some time, now had a brilliant inspiration. I had had a weak throat recently and had remained in Egypt for health reasons. This was less than two years ago. This might be enough. The Bishop was informed that an Englishman out of health sought his blessing. "Bring the poor man to me," he said, and set an appointment for my visit for the next afternoon. My wife would be able to accompany me. My Coptic friends now had one concern, to prepare us for the poor conditions under

which the Bishop lived. I assured them that our only concern was the opportunity to visit the Bishop, who now had become a legend in our lifetime. That seemed to settle their concerns.

The next day we set off in the carriages of my host to be driven to the out-of-the-way-slum in which the church of Fayoum is located. The outer apartment was dark and bare, the floor black with grime. The windows were opaque with dirt and much of the glass was broken.

Soon we were ushered into a chamber larger than the anteroom in the same general condition. On the bed sat the Bishop in the Eastern posture, in a threadbare robe of black, with a black turban on his head. It was difficult to believe that the Bishop was a centenarian; although his body was frail his mind was obviously not touched with age.

After introductions, he asked me earnestly about the church in England with which he knew I was acquainted. Soon we turned to more personal matters.

The Bishop asked our concerns and soon was praying over us using his famous hand cross. He prayed in the Coptic language of which I understood little. The following prayers were translated for me by one of the priests of the church.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Our Father, who art in heaven: hallowed be Thy Name: Thy Kingdom come: Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven: Give us this day the morrow's bread: and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors: and lead us not into temptation: but deliver us from evil: through Christ our Lord. Amen.

#### THANKSGIVING

Let us thank the Maker of all good, the merciful, the Father of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, because He has protected, kept, accepted, and pitied us, and has brought us to this hour. Let us ask Him to keep us for this day, and all the days of our life, in peace. O God, our Lord and Master, the upholder of all, the Father of our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, we thank thee in every case, for everything, and at every time. Thou hast protected, assisted, kept, accepted, pitied, supported, and brought us to this moment. For this we beseech and ask from Thy holiness, O Lover of souls, that Thou wouldst confer upon us to fulfil this holy day, and all the days of our life, in peace and fear. From every envy, trial, evil deed, the counsel of the wicked, the rising up of the hidden enemies as well as those that are seen, preserve us and all Thy people, and Thy holy place. What things are good and helpful grant us, as it is Thou that has given us the power to crush serpents, scorpions, and all the power of the Enemy.

present generation.

The life of this blessed saint projects a wonderful icon of a true man of God. Anba Abraam lived a life of attachment to his God in all circumstances. He was as much a true ambassador for Christ in the world, or in the wilderness; in superiority or in submission; in meditation, in service; or both meditation and service practised together. His life is an icon of a saintly bishop—quiet, humble, meek, beloved and respected by all, and an ascetic who knew no need of money except as a right of the poor. It is an icon of the true bishop who governs on earth with the power of heaven. All acknowledge him as a true representative of God, and God assists him in his earthly service with many miracles.

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil, through the mercy and kindness of Thine only Son, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, whom we love, and to whom, as well as to the animating Holy Spirit, we offer glory and honour now, for ever and the ages of ages.

#### SHORT PRAYERS FROM THE SERVICE OF THE MASS

We ask, God the upholder of all, the Father of our Lord God the Saviour Jesus Christ, we beseech and ask from Thy holiness, O Lover of souls, remember O Lord, the safety of Thy Church, the one holy, universal, apostolic Church, extending from one end of the earth to the other.

Remember, O Lord, our revered Patriarch, the head of the priests, Amba Kryollos, preserve him and us for many years and days of safety.

Remember, O Lord, our meetings, and bless them, and grant that we may not be hindered from complying with Thy holy will.

Grant us, O Lord, and those coming after us, houses of prayer, houses of purity, houses of blessing. Rise up, O Lord, let Thine enemies be scattered, and let all the enemies of Thy Holy Name flee before Thy face. May Thy people increase through Thy blessing to thousands of thousands, and myriads of myriads, and accomplish Thy Holy Will, through the grace and goodness of Thy Holy Son, our Lord God and Saviour Jesus Christ, to whom, and to the Holy Spirit, we offer glory and honour, now and for ever. Amen.

#### THE LAW OF FAITH (Recited by the Bishop in Arabic).

We believe indeed in one God, the Father, the upholder of all, the creator of heaven and earth, and what is seen and what is not seen. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, who is born from the Father before all ages, light out of light, a true God from a true God, born and not created equal to the Father in essence, by whom everything existed, who, for our sake, we, the people, and for our salvation, descended from the heaven, took a body from the Holy Spirit, and from Mary the Virgin, was born a man, and was crucified on our behalf in the time of Pilate. He took pain, was entombed, and rose up from among the dead in the third day, as it is recorded in the books. He rose up to the heavens and sat on the right of His Father, and will come in His glory to redeem the dead and the survivors; whose kingdom never ends.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the animating Lord, springing from the Father, and to whom, as well as to the Father and the Son, we prostrate ourselves. We believe in one holy, universal, and apostolic church. We confess one baptism for the forgiving of sins.

We expect the resurrection of the dead, and the revival of the next age. Amen.

Kyrie Eleison! Kyrie Eleison!! Kyrie Eleison!!! (Repeated in threes, twelve times.)



### THE LORD'S PRAYER

#### A PRAYER CALLED THE JUSTIFICATION (Recited in Coptic)

O Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, the Word of God the Father, who hath cut all the bonds of our sins by His redeeming and life-giving pains, who hath breathed in the face of His righteous Apostles and pious disciples, saying to them, "Accept the Holy Spirit. Those whose sins you forgive, are to be accordingly forgiven." Now also, our Master, Thou hast before Thy righteous Apostles conferred upon those who work in the priesthood in Thy Holy Church the power to forgive sins on earth, and to tie and to untie all the bonds of oppression. Now also, we beseech and ask from Thee, O Thy glory, to endow them and us with Thy mercy, and to cut, on our behalf, all bonds of oppression or injustice. If they have sinned towards thee in anything, either knowingly or unknowingly, by doing or saying, Thou, O Lover of men, knowest their weakness. O God, grant us the forgiving of our sins! Let us fear Thee! Lead us according to Thy righteous and holy will, because it is Thou who are our God, to whom, as well as to the life-giving Holy Ghost, we prostrate, and offer glory and honour, now and for ever, and to the ages of ages. Amen.

### THE LORD'S PRAYER

The blessing over, the gentle old man inquired in tones of tender solicitude, as to the welfare of all, myself and my family. He spoke of the pleasure such a visit had given him. The Bishop then gave us blessed handkerchiefs as souvenirs of our visit. We thanked him for his thoughtfulness and concern and withdrew. The chief priest accompanied us to the outer gate and our visit was over.

There are many other stories that have added to the fame of the Bishop of Fayoum including events of exorcisms, answers to prayers and self sacrifice.

His memory lives on in the church calendar and in the hearts of all who read about him.

#### *Reference*

*Modern Sons of the Pharaohs, by S. H. Leeder, 1918. Hodder and Stoughton, London, New York. (Reprinted by Arno Press, New York, 1973)*

# ***SPIRITUAL INSIGHTS INTO THE DAILY OFFICE OF THE COPTIC CHURCH***

*Father Matta El-Meskeen.*

The Church begins her daily service of worship at the hour of midnight to project the great occasion of faith which it experiences as the belief in the second coming of Christ. The Church has learned from the Lord in a parable that he would come in the middle of the night, 'and at midnight there were shouts the groom is come'. This is why the Church wishes to be forever ready and waiting for this hour as the five wise virgins - so it can behold the coming of Christ and live it every day.

## **Order of the midnight office (Nocturns)**

We find that the *first nocturn* of the midnight service revolves around the gospel of the ten virgins where waiting is crowned with hope. It is then followed by the *second nocturn* of the service which revolves around the gospel of the 'weeping sinner' whose many sins the Lord forgave because with great energy, she unceasingly kissed the Lord's feet, thus professing her great love. Here the Church actually experiences an encounter with the Lord in which every soul uncovers its sins in the same manner, while showing its great love through the energy of prayers and gratitude in the same manner (though unseen) of kissing the Lord's feet: the heart's sighings in place of the tears, and the successive adoration in place of wiping his feet with the hope of forgiveness. "So I also can hear that voice full of joy saying, 'Your faith has saved you' ".

Then follows the *third nocturn* of the service which revolves around the gospel of the "little flock" to whom the Lord promised the kingdom of Heaven (Luke 12:32) so that they may have no fear. In this gospel the Church lives reassured of God's promise to actually give her the Kingdom of heaven and by this reassurance she lives her day in the Father's delight. The third service is concluded with the Gospel verse 'Release your servant in peace because my eyes have seen thy salvation'. Here the Church expresses a state of transfiguration which she lives, as if she has been assumed to the Kingdom and became transfigured in the divine Presence.

### ***Matins***

At this point the Church choir begins the beautiful long chant, "*Ten Theno*" which is "Arise ye children of the light let us praise the Lord of Hosts". This is a long chant of a half-hour, and one of the most beautiful chants of the Church. It is as though the Lord has appeared and the Church cries out 'The Lord has come, arise ye children of the light'. In response the children of light with burning lamps start to get ready with shouts of praise.

Then the children of light actually start the office of the first hymn (*First Howce*<sup>1</sup>) which is the song of Moses - without change or modification - the song which the people sang with Miriam accompanied with cymbals and dancing. By this song the Church proclaims that she has been given the mystery of the eternal song referred to in the book of Revelation, 'The song of Moses servant of God, and the song of the Lamb - sung in the spirit of transfiguration as one who stands before the throne on the glass sea, and with her the harps of God (Rev. 15:1 & 2)'. It is clear that with this hymn, the Church declares that she now lives in the faith of her complete salvation and her victory over this world, as one who has actually gone through death, praising and giving thanks for her share of glory.

Then the *Second Howce*, is recited; it is Psalm 135 to which the chorus verse is 'Give thanks to God because He is good and His mercy is forever'. This is a prayer of thanksgiving which the Church offers to God for his everlasting benevolence and mercy. The Church offers it on the tongue of the people of Israel, according to the Psalm, gratefully remembering how God has brought them out of the land of Egypt, supported them in the wilderness, helped them in their wars, gave them rest and led them to his inheritance in accordance with His promise. In this song, the Church, through faith, is reminded that she

#### *Plan of the Daily Office of Matins*

- Ten thenou: Arise ye children of light.
- First Howce: Song of Moses (Exodus 15)

— Comment

- Second Howce: Psalm 135 (136 in modern versions)

— Comment

- Third Howce: Daniel 3:52-90

#### Chants on the Three Children

- Commemoration of Saints
- Doxologies of Saints
- Fourth Howce: Psalms 148, 149, 150
- Psalia
- Theotokia
- Conclusion Chant

has gone through similar hardships in this world and that the Lord supported her till she came to rest and entered her inheritance. The Church offers this prayer of thanksgiving to God for His eternal benevolence, goodness and mercy. But in her time of rest, the Church recollects both the hard times she has emerged from aided by the Lord through the narrow path, and her entrance into the Holy of Holies where 'Christ has entered as a precedent for us'.

*The Third Howce:*

The third howce is the prayer of the whole creation headed by the Church as a scene from eternity where all things end. In origin, it is the prayer sung by the three holy lads while they were in the furnace of fire. When the Church sings this song, she actually combines in one scene her presence in the present painful times, and her presence in eternal bliss. While the Church is present in the destructive burning furnace of this world, she is preserved by the Son of God, so that fire has no power over her and the gates of hell cannot approach her. In spite of the forty nine arms of the fire of temptation that are directed against her, the Church passes through the flames as though they were drops of dew. Thus the Church lives in accordance with the insights of this song proclaiming the secret behind her power to soar above all suffering, and the secret of living in the Kingdom of Heaven while still on this earth. The Church also believes that the world is conquered and held under her feet by the power of the cross just as the three lads have conquered the flames by the power of the mysterious fourth among them. The Church starts praying and calling on all the creation which groans and travails awaiting the adoption, the redemption of our bodies. It is as though the Church has been given the glory of the first Adam and his power over the creation in the person of Jesus Christ who has the absolute power and sovereignty over all things in heaven and on earth. Hence, the Church calls on all the creation to join her in saying, "Praise him, glorify him in the highest forever" as a precedent proclamation of the new creation with its new heaven and its new earth.

*Commemoration of Saints*

The Church lives the belief in the shared unity between the visible and the invisible churches. The Church, having reached her state of transfiguration in chanting the three howces, now feels that she comes face to face with the invisible Church which is in heaven and which is only obscured from actual sight by reason of the unbelief of this age. Here the Church calls on them through this flimsy screen entreating them for their intercession and prayer. Thus the Church in her state of transcendence does not forget to live the truth of her needy and humble state. The Church is aware that no matter how high she soars and how much she actually lives part of her share of glory and power

of faith and hope, she still is not wholly perfected. However, the Church differentiates between those saints entitled to intercede for us such as the Virgin Mary, the Angels and St. John the Baptist, and the rest of the saints who are entitled merely to ask in our behalf.

***Continuation of the Office:***

The first three howces and the commemoration, with their soft tunes appropriate to the time of night are considered the crux of the Matins, which, according to the order of the original ritual, ends with the “Doxologies” that is, Glorifications of the saints and which starts with the Doxology of the Virgin Mary, followed by the doxology of the saints of the day and the season.

Here, originally, the midnight service (Matins) used to end, and the *daybreak service (Lauds) began*. This service also contained three Psalms (Psalms 148, 149, and 150) and in the Office is called the *Fourth Howce* as it concludes the book of Psalms. The daybreak service used to start as an independent service, . . . . . as we found out in the old Coptic manuscripts. The current proof that this was a prayer complete in itself, is the order in which the ‘Commemoration of Saints’ intervenes between the third and fourth howces; Moreover, the practice of using it for the Vespers office, and singling it out from the rest of the Matins, does prove that it is an independent prayer. However, research in the early origins of the Office has discovered that the daybreak prayer was considered by the fathers as one of the seven daily services, and that after it was added to the midnight prayers, it was replaced by the morning prayer (Prime) to complete the seven prayers.

The *Fourth Howce*: Psalms 148, 149 and 150 (Lauds). This prayer starts with praising the Lord with the coming of light “Praise him ye sun” (Psalm 148) signalling the approach of the light of daybreak; so the words of the Psalm we recite at that time, do come true, “Mine eyes prevent the night watches, that I might meditate in thy word” (Ps. 119:148) Here the Church emerges as a proud forerunner of all things created, in rising at daybreak to worship and give thanks, as a precedent to both light and day. As Psalm 149 says, “Sing unto the Lord a new song, and his praise in the congregation of saints”. As for Psalm 150, it is the Psalm that concludes all the night services (Vigil) and is called the Psalm of sharing or the Psalm of Congregation (Synaxis) “Praise the Lord in all his saints” (or in the congregation of His saints). At this point the Vigil ends - when the light breaks and then the Church begins the *Day’s Psalia*<sup>2</sup> and the *Day’s Theotokia*<sup>3</sup>.

***The Day’s Psalia:***

The word “*Psalia*” means a hymn that has meter and rhyming as poetry and differs from the howces because the howce is the Psalm itself. It is sung with no poetic or metric modifications but stress is placed on the elocution. In most

cases the beginning of each of the four verses is in alphabetical order. The tunes of the psalia and the howces also differ from each other. The tune of the howces is fixed all through the year, but the tune of the psalia is changed twice each week. On Sundays, Mondays and Tuesdays, the tune is short and is called "Adam,<sup>4</sup>" and on Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, the tune is longer and is called "Watos"<sup>5</sup>. The tune also changes according to the season, that is, one tune during fast days and another during feast days.

*Structure of the Psalia from a spiritual aspect*

The psalias are arranged according to the seven days of the week—every day has a psalia and usually it is considered a prayer of supplication which the early church and the monks used. To them it is known as the prayer of the heart—it is a direct address to the Lord Jesus to implore His mercy and support. It is composed of short sentences that are repeated thousands of times daily without any boredom. "Lord Jesus Christ help me - I praise ye Lord Jesus Christ." Later, it developed into one sentence, "Lord Jesus Christ Son of God, have mercy upon me I am a sinner" (Luke 18:13) in the manner of the tax collector. From this verse was derived the supplication in the name of Jesus Christ, as the name of Jesus Christ is considered in itself a healing, supporting and preserving power; and this is in fact the general spirit of the psalias.

The development from a prayer of direct addressing of Christ to a prayer in His name is clear in the concluding tune of the "Adam Psalias" that is, the Sunday, Monday and Tuesday psalias, where both the addressing of Christ and the prayer in His name are combined, "And when we gather for prayer, let us bless the name of the Lord Jesus; because we bless Thee Lord Jesus; deliver us in your name for we have relied on Thee."

These psalias are characterized by the nature of mysticism and thus they had a tremendous influence on worship and devotion throughout the world. They emerged from Scete and from the Coptic Church, and spread in all the east and were known later as the "hesychia prayer" which is a Greek word meaning tranquility, because they are recited in tranquility and they do grant tranquility.

The prayers soon developed a special art of elocution and rules for usage outside Egypt, especially on the Sinai Mountain and the Athos Mountain in the 14th century. They were also the cause of much dissension from the theological mystic point of view.

The psalias continued to be practised in the Coptic Church especially by the monks. They have been practised in utter simplicity without any condition, mechanical form or limit on numbers. They are recited constantly, every the moment, with a sincere heart solely as a prayer of entreaty without expecting certain results or rewards of any special gifts or talents.

This simple prayer used to be one of the offices of the illiterate monks instead of the Psalms, especially those of them who could not read or memorize. This simple prayer or the simple psalia, was a great source of consolation to the monks over the ages to the extent that many of the Fathers were satisfied with it to replace all other prayers as is mentioned in "Paradise of the Monks."

The Church still experiences this when praying this daily and in doing so, the Church lives a state of justification similar to that of the tax collector as the Lord said, "went down justified!"

#### *Other psalias*

These psalias are the hymns arranged for the Great Feasts such as the Virgin's feasts, the Apostles' feasts, and other Church occasions.

Unfortunately, there exist other recent psalias composed by persons who do not follow the ancient Tradition of the Fathers. They lack the qualities of the first Coptic psalia with its spirit of mysticism and which revolves around supplication, prayer and repetition. It is easy to differentiate between the true psalia of old, and the new psalia that has been squeezed in without knowledge or value. The old psalia is characterized by the ability to project the subject for which it has been composed, thus referring to the subject in every four verses, without boredom, no matter how many verses there are. For example: in the "Resurrection Psalia", we find reference to the Resurrection in every single quarter (four verses), "Christ is Risen" or, "Christ has risen from the dead", and in the "Fast Psalia", the fast is referred to in every verse; the same applies in all the psalias for the different occasions. The artistic and spiritual reason for this repetition is that it creates concentration in the mind, a deep impression in the memory, and a promising permanence in the heart. Thus has developed the spirit of the psalia so it can help direct the thoughts of the faithful towards the subject and prepare the heart and the intellect to absorb the spirit of the occasion which the Church wishes to implant in the souls of the people. So we find that the seven psalias of the seven days serve the prayer of the heart by concentrating on the name of Jesus Christ. As for the psalias of the occasions, they serve the establishment of the knowledge and the faith that are relevant to the holy occasions that the Church celebrates; and this is achieved by continuous repetition, as the chorus verses are always the part sung by the congregation in answer to the Choir who sings the psalia. Thus we find that the Church uses the prayer as a means of survival through her faith and belief. Even the meter and the tune are selected to fit the theme for which the hymn is sung. That is why the tune is taken into consideration in the course of the Church's traditional rituals. But it is unfortunate when these traditional rules of the office are neglected or ignored, since they bear the

most cherished of the Coptic Church's methods and practises of worship that are characteristic of the Coptic devotion and mysticism.

*The Theotokias:*

Following the psalia of the day and the Feast, the Theotokia is chanted. It is a unique song in praise of the Virgin Mary. Generally speaking, the Theotokias were composed after the Council of Ephesus in the year 431 A.D. and a detailed explanation can be found in the Book 'The Virgin Mary'<sup>6</sup>. Then the Theotokia is concluded with a special tune. The Church then entreats the Angel who is in charge of guarding her, to lift the prayer to the heavens; Angel of this day, rising towards the heavens with this prayer, remember us to the Lord to forgive us our sins'. The Church then chants the conclusion of the prayer—and with it ends the Vigil service.

*Translated by Lily H. Soliman*

*Footnotes*

1. *Howce: A Coptic word that means "praise".*
2. *Psalia—from the Greek word "Psalo" that means to sing, from which comes the word "psalm".*
3. *Theotokia—from the Greek word "Theotakos", signifying the mother of God.*
4. *The name of the tune "Adam" is taken from the name of Adam which comes as the first word of the Monday theotokia.*
5. *Watos—A Coptic word that means "bush". It is the first word of the Thursday theotokia, which describes the burning bush as a type of St. Mary.*
6. *The Saint Virgin Mary— a book by Father Matta El-Meskeen where he extracted the traditional teaching of the Church about Virgin Mary from the liturgy, with special stress on the theotokias.*



# ***FATHERS OF THE SCHOOL OF ALEXANDRIA—***

## ***ORIGEN***

*Father Tadros Y. Malaty*

The School of Alexandria reached its greatest level of importance under St. Clement's successor, Origen, an outstanding teacher and scholar of the early church.<sup>1</sup> Origen, who was a man of spotless character and encyclopedic learning, was considered one of the most original thinkers the world has ever seen.<sup>2</sup> He bore the surname "Adamantios" (Man of Steel) to signify the irresistible force of his argument as well as his diligence.

### *Origen's Childhood*

Origen was born in or about Alexandria around 185 A.D. His father St. Leonides gave him a careful education in Scripture and secular subjects. "Every day he would set him to learn a passage from the Bible by heart . . . . however, the child was not content with a straight-forward obvious meaning of Scripture; he wanted something more, and even at that time would go in pursuit of the underlying sense. He even embarrassed his father by the questions he asked."<sup>3</sup>

Eusebius, the historian, tells us that Leonides, seeing his son's fondness for the Word of God as a child, was accustomed to go up to Origen's bed while he was asleep, uncover his chest and reverentially kiss it as a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. He thought himself blessed to be the father of such a boy.<sup>4</sup>

### *The Martyrdom of Leonides*

In addition to an early introduction to the Holy Scriptures, Origen was also exposed to the influence of martyrdom. The persecution against Christians which arose in the tenth year of Septimus Severus (202 A.D.) bore with special severity upon the Egyptian church and Leonides was arrested and thrown in prison.<sup>5</sup> Although Origen was only seventeen years old at this time, he ardently desired to attain the martyr's crown with his father. He was prevented from achieving this desire by his mother who, at a critical moment,

hid all his clothes and convinced him of the necessity of remaining at home to look after his six brothers. Origen assumed this responsibility and was able to strengthen his father by writing him a letter in which he strongly urged Leonides to accept martyrdom and “not dream of changing your mind on our account.”<sup>6</sup>

#### *Teacher of Literature*

After his father’s martyrdom, Origen and his family took refuge with a noble lady of Alexandria who helped him for a time. Unfortunately Origen could not remain there comfortably, for a heretical teacher called “Paul of Antioch” had so captured this simple lady by his eloquence that she harbored him as her philosopher and adopted son, and gave him permission to propagate his heresies by means of lectures held in her house. As a result of his strong Orthodox beliefs, Origen left the house and maintained himself and his family by teaching secular literature.

While teaching to the pagans, Origen’s faith found expression as he often had occasion to refer to the theological position of pagan writers. As a result some pagans applied to him for instruction in Christianity. Among others who applied were two brothers, Plutarch and Heraclas. Plutarch was soon martyred, but Heraclas later assumed the Bishopric of Alexandria.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Origen and the School of Alexandria*

During this time the Catechetical School of Alexandria was dispersed by the persecution and departure of St. Clement, leaving it without a teacher. As a result St. Demetrius, Bishop of Alexandria, recognizing Origen’s zeal to preach and catechize, appointed him as Head of the School even though he was only eighteen years of age. Origen immediately gave up all other activities, sold all his beloved books, and devoted himself exclusively to his new duties as Catechist.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Origen assumed a significant role in the development of this school. Origen threw himself with the utmost ardour not only in studying and teaching the Holy Scriptures but also in offering his life as an example to follow. His disciple St. Gregory the Wonder-Worker says that “He stimulated us by the deeds he did more than by the doctrines he taught.”

Eusebius also tells us that, “He taught as he lived, and lived as he taught; and it was especially for this reason that with the cooperation of the divine power, he brought so many to share his zeal.” He adds: “that he persevered in the most philosophical manner of life, at one time disciplining himself by fasting, at another measuring out the time for sleep, which he was careful to take never on a couch, but on the floor, and by following the Gospel declaration which exhorts us not to provide two coats nor to use shoes, nor indeed, to be worn out with thoughts about the future.”<sup>9</sup> This conscientious

attitude along with the presence of women at his lectures and the consequent possibility of scandal, suggested to him a literal acting on the words of the Gospel, "there are eunuchs who made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake." (Mat. 19:12) This self mutilation was used against Origen by Bishop Demetrius in later years.

At the beginning, Origen concentrated on preparing the catechumens to receive baptism, not only by teaching them the Christian faith but also by giving them instructions on the practical Christian life. He emphasized that, "If you want to receive baptism, you must first learn about God's Word, cut away the roots of your vices, correct your barbarous wild lives and practice meekness and humility. Then you will be fit to receive the grace of the Holy Spirit."<sup>10</sup> Origen's more compelling task, however, was not to prepare those people who flocked in increasing numbers to sit at his feet to be baptized, but rather to prepare them to be martyred, for those who were close to him knew that they were running the risk of martyrdom.

Eusebius the historian describes the part Origen played in that time of persecution by stating that , "He had a great name with all the faithful, because of the way he always welcomed the holy martyrs and was so attentive to them, whether he knew them or not."<sup>11</sup> He would go to them in prison and stay by them when they were tried and even when they were brought out to die . . . . . Many times he would go up to the martyrs unconcernedly and kiss them regardless of the consequence. On these occasions the pagan crowd would fly into a passion and very nearly make an end of him.<sup>11</sup>

As his crowd of disciples flocked to him from morning to night, Origen realized that he had to divide them into two classes, and he chose his disciple Heraclas, an excellent speaker, to give the beginners the preparatory subjects of Christian doctrines, while he devoted himself to instructing the advanced students in philosophy, theology and especially Holy Scriptures.

Origen gained great numbers of pupils from the pagan school of philosophy. He felt that he was in need of a deeper philosophical training and found this training in the lectures of Ammonius Saccas. Saccas, who was a well-known Alexandrian philosopher (174-242 A.D.), taught Platonism; and from him Plotinus (205-270 A.D.), learned Neo-platonism, but he was soon attracted by the Theological School of Alexandria, converted to Christianity and consequently wrote several books about the school.

It is noteworthy that Origen, unlike St. Clement, was not a philosopher who had been converted to Christianity, nor was he in sympathy with philosophy. In fact, Origen was a true missionary who saw that he must study philosophy just to be able to expound Christianity to the leading minds of his day and to answer their difficulties and stress the factors in Christianity most likely to appeal to them.<sup>12</sup>

In a letter written in defense of his position as a student of Greek philosophy he says: "When I had devoted myself entirely to the Scriptures, I was sometimes approached by heretics and people who had studied the Greek sciences and philosophy in particular. As a result I deemed it advisable to investigate both the doctrinal views of the heretics and what the philosophers claimed to know of the truth. By doing this I was imitating Pantaenus who, before my time, had acquired no small store of such knowledge and had benefitted many people by it."<sup>13</sup>

In his study of philosophy and pagan learning Origen developed a consistent point of view. According to Origen, "all wisdom is from God,"<sup>14</sup> "whether it be knowledge of philosophy, geometry, medicine or music,"<sup>15</sup> but he warns against converting the deceptive food philosophy provides, as it may turn you away from the truth;<sup>16</sup> it is because the pagans spoiled it by introducing their errors, that it learns nothing from God's will."<sup>17</sup> Origen also developed a system for teaching philosophy and pagan learning which was concentrated in the following two points:

1. Origen would start his teaching with "rhetoric," then turn to some scientific knowledge such as physics, mathematics, geometry, and astronomy.<sup>18</sup> This was only a preparation which was soon followed by the study of philosophy.
2. He took care that his disciples might have a working knowledge of all the philosophical theories except that of the Epicureans, but warned against placing too much stress on any one of them. St. Gregory the Wonder-worker gives us an account of this method by saying, "In every philosophy he picked out what was true and useful and set it before us, while what was erroneous he rejected . . . He advised us not to give our allegiance to any one philosopher even though he should be universally acclaimed as perfect in wisdom, but to cleave to God alone and the prophets."<sup>19</sup>

### *Origen's Journeys*

About the year 212 A.D. Origen went to Rome where he met St. Hippolytus.

Shortly after the year 215 A.D., he journeyed to Arabia to instruct the Roman governor at his request. He was also called to Arabia several times for discussions with bishops.<sup>20</sup> Eusebius mentions two of these debates. In the year 244 A.D. an Arabian synod was convened to discuss the christological views of Beryllus, Bishop of Bostra. The synod, which was largely attended, condemned Beryllus, because of his monarchianism (One person in the Godhead), after they had vainly tried to bring him round to the Orthodox position.<sup>21</sup> Origen hurried to Arabia and succeeded in convincing Beryllus, who seemed even to have written a letter of thanks to Origen.<sup>22</sup>

While in Arabia Mammaea, the mother of Emperor Alexander Severus, summoned Origen to come to Antioch. According to Eusebius Origen abode for some time at the royal palace and “after bearing powerful testimony to the glory of the Lord and the worth of divine instructions hastened back to his school.”<sup>23</sup>

Around the year 216 A.D., when the Emperor Caracalla looted the city of Alexandria, closed the schools, persecuted the teachers and massacred them, Origen decided to go to Palestine. He was welcomed there by his old friend Alexander, Bishop of Jerusalem, and subsequently by Theoctistus, Bishop of Caesarea, who jointly invited him to expound Scriptures in the Christian assemblies. Upon hearing this news St. Demetrius, Origen’s Patriarch, became very unhappy for according to the Alexandrian church custom, a layman should not deliver discourses in the presence of the bishops. He ordered the immediate return of Origen to Alexandria, and Origen obeyed. Demetrius seemed satisfied for the moment.

Origen’s next journey was into Greece, which involved two years absence from Alexandria. He went apparently to act the part of peace-maker, and was the bearer of written credentials from the Bishop Demetrius.<sup>24</sup> His route went through Caesarea, and while staying there for a short season, he was ordained a priest by the bishop of that area. To this bishop and others in the area, it seemed unfitting that a spiritual counsellor of such a high authority as Origen should be no more than a layman. They also hoped to avoid the risk of further rebukes from Demetrius by licensing Origen to preach in their presence. Unfortunately Demetrius counted Origen’s ordination as an offense of greater severity than the former offense of teaching without proper authority, and considered the ordination to be invalid on two accounts; Origen had received priesthood from another bishop without the permission of Demetrius, and Origen’s self-mutilation prevented his eligibility for until this day no such person (who practices self-mutilation) can be ordained.

#### *Banishment from Alexandria*

As a result of Origen’s ordination Bishop Demetrius banished him from Alexandria and called for a Council of bishops and priests. Although they refused to abide by his decision that Origen must leave Alexandria, Demetrius was not to be denied.<sup>25</sup> He called for another Council of bishops alone in 232 A.D., which deprived Origen of the priesthood claiming that the ordination was invalid, thus making him invalid for catechizing. In addition some errors were used against him. A list of these errors follows:

1. He believed that souls were created before the bodies, and that they are bound to bodies as punishment of previous sins which they had committed.<sup>26</sup>

2. The soul of Christ had a previous existence before the Incarnation and it was united with Divinity.
3. All creation will return back to its origin in God, and all mankind will be saved. (Eternal punishment has an end.)<sup>27</sup>
4. Satan and all evil spirits will be saved in the end.<sup>28</sup>

The sentence of the Council was enforced in Egypt and recognized in the West, but it was disregarded by the churches of Palestine, Arabia, Phoenicia, and Achaia, where Origen was well-known,<sup>29</sup> but Origen, who abhorred any thought of schism, obeyed the order of Demetrius, and counted his expulsion from the place that was dearer to him than any other on earth, as not too great of a sacrifice in order to maintain the unity of the Church. Although he had powerful friends in Alexandria and other countries and might have become the leader of a great party to fight the bishop, Origen calmly left Alexandria feeling that no one could deprive him of his beloved church. As he said, "It sometimes happens that a man who has been turned out is really still inside, and one who seems inside may really be outside."<sup>30</sup>

#### *A New School*

Origen left Alexandria and made his new home at Caesarea in Palestine, where he was warmly received by the bishops. Bishop Theoktistus soon induced Origen to found a new school of Theology at Caesarea, and he presided over this school for almost twenty years. In this school he taught St. Gregory the Wonder-Worker. In addition to his duties as Head of the School of Caesarea, the bishops also asked Origen to expound the Scripture and nearly everyday from the pulpit in the Church of Caesarea he faithfully performed this task. This new task increased Origen's humility, for he believed that the preacher had to be first and foremost a man of prayer. Many times when he was faced with an especially difficult passage, he would stop and ask his hearers to pray with him for a better understanding of the text.<sup>31</sup> While at Caesarea Origen was reunited with a wealthy friend that he had converted from Gnosticism. This friend, Ambrose, pressed Origen to write and provided him with seven stenographers who worked with him in turns, seven copyists and sundry girls to make readable copies. St. Epiphanius tells of six thousand books writted by Origen.

#### *Later Years of Origen*

During the persecution initiated by Maximin, Origen took refuge in the Cappadocian Caesarea. When his old friends Ambrose and Protoctus, a priest of Caesarea, were seized and thrown into prison, Origen wrote and dedicated to them his treatise, "Exhortation to Martyrdom", in which he regarded martyrdom as one of the proofs of the truth of Christianity, and a continuation of the work of redemption. However Ambrose and Protoctus were set at liberty and Origen returned to Caesarea in Palestine.

From Palestine Origen travelled to Athens through Bithynia, where he spent several days at Nicomedia, and received a letter from Julius Africanus, who asked him about the story of Susanna as an authentic portion of the book of Daniel. Origen replied in a lengthy letter from Nicomedia.

Under the reign of Decius (249-251), persecution rose again and Origen was arrested. He was tortured; he was tormented with a heavy iron collar and kept in the innermost den in the prison. For several days his feet were restrained on the rock and he was threatened with being burned at the stake.<sup>32</sup> Origen bore all these sufferings bravely. He did not die of this persecution, but he did succumb shortly afterwards perhaps as a consequence of his experience. Before he died St. Dionysius of Alexandria, who had succeeded Heraclas as Pope of Alexandria, sent him a letter on martyrdom encouraging renewal of Origen's old relation with the Alexandrian Church.

### ***Origen's Writings***

The greater part of Origen's writings has perished as a result of the violent quarrels which broke out concerning his orthodoxy. Reading or preserving his works was considered an illegal deed. The few remains are mostly preserved, not in the original Greek, but in Latin translations, notably those by Rufinus of Aquileia and St. Jerome.

The complete list of his writings that Eusebius added to the biography of his friend and teacher Pamphilus was lost. According to St. Jerome<sup>33</sup> Origen's treatises number two thousand. St. Epiphanius estimates his literary productions at six thousand, perhaps an exaggerated figure.<sup>34</sup> In any event, St. Jerome's question, "Which of us can read all that he has written?" is a sufficient testimony to the magnitude of Origen's literary works.

### ***The Latin Translations***

The Latin translations of Origen's works, especially those made by Rufinus, are not accurate. In his desire to adapt his author to the Latin-speaking public, he did not hesitate to abridge some passages that seemed to be too long or to add explanations when he thought it advisable. Rufinus thought that Origen's books had been altered by heretics, and he had the right to expurgate the text.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Textual Criticism***

Origen's *Hexapla* (Six-fold Bible) was the first attempt to establish a critical text of the Old Testament, and was an immense task to which Origen devoted his entire life.<sup>36</sup>

He arranged in six parallel columns the following texts:

A. The Hebrew text of the Old Testament.

B. The Hebrew text in Greek characters to fix the pronunciation.

C. The Greek translation of the Septuagint.

D. The Greek translation of Symmachus, an Ebionite, compiled the towards the end of the 2nd Century, for the non-Jewish reader.

E. The Greek translation of Aquila of Pontus a convert from Christianity to Judaism, with literal fidelity to the original, as a counterblast to the Christian use of the Septuagint translation. (C. 128 A. D.)

F. The Greek translation of Theodotion (C. 180 A.D.), a Jew from Ephesus.

In addition to these versions, Origen includes an additional three anonymous versions in a part of the *Hexapla*, increasing the columns to nine, and changing the *Hexapla* into an *Enneapla*.

#### *Exegetical Works*

In this field Origen's labors are prodigious and range over nearly the entire field of Scripture. They take three different literary forms:

Scholia: Brief notes, mostly grammatical, upon obscure and difficult passages.

Homilies: Sermons on select chapters or passages of the Bible which he delivered in liturgical meetings, aimed at popular edification.

Commentaries: which in spite of their allegoric and dogmatic elements, in many respects still serve as models for commentators.

These exegetical works are a strange mixture of philological, textual, historical, etymological, and theological and philosophical observations.<sup>37</sup>

#### *APOLOGETICAL WORKS*

The most important apologetical work is his "Contra Celsus", a treatise composed of eight books written in answer to a detailed and far reaching attack by Celsus (C. 180 A.D.). Celsus was a highly cultivated man, possessing in particular an excellent knowledge of Plato. He was familiar not only with Greek thought and literature of the period, but also had some acquaintance with the Old Testament, knew the Four Gospels, and had an idea of the main truth and thread of the Pauline Theology. He attacked the Old Testament and at the same time used the Jewish arguments against Christianity. Origen's apology against Celsus is of great value as it is marked by keen spiritual insight, vast erudition, masterly ability and mature thought.<sup>38</sup>



*DOGMATIC WRITINGS*

A. *De Principis*, a dogmatic treatise in four books, is the first attempt to construct a system of Christian theology.<sup>39</sup> These books deal respectively with God, the Creation of the World, the Fall of Man, Redemption through Jesus Christ, Sin, Human Freedom, and the Holy Scriptures as a source of belief. The Greek original of this work has perished, along with the literal Latin translation made by St. Jerome. Although a surviving version by Rufinus remains, he evidently tampered with it by expurgating dubious passages here and there.

B. *Discussion with Heraclides*.<sup>40</sup> Among a number of papyri found at Toura near Cairo in 1941 is a codex from the end of the sixth century containing the text of a discussion between Origen and Bishop Heraclides. It represents a complete record of an actual discussion, which took place in a church in Arabia in the presence of the bishops and the people about the year 245. In this account Origen seems to be in full possession of his authority as a teacher.

The first part of the talk includes a discussion about the Father and the Son, in which Origen refers to Scripture in order to show in what sense two can be one:

1. Adam and Eve were two but one flesh. (Gen. 2:24).
2. He (the just man) who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him. (I Cor. 6:17).
3. "Our Lord and Savior is in his relation to the Father and God of the universe not one flesh, nor one spirit, but that which is much higher than flesh and spirit—One God."

At the end of the discussion he deals with a question concerning the immortality of the soul, asked by Bishop Philippus. Origen replies that the soul is on the one hand immortal, on the other mortal, depending on three different kinds of death: death to sin; death to God; death to life (natural death). To the third death, the Soul is not subject; though those in sin desire it, they cannot find it. (Rev.9:6) The Soul may be subject to the first or second kind of death and thus may be called mortal.

C. On the Resurrection.

D. MISCELLANEOUS. This work has been lost except for small fragments. The title indicates a variety of subjects discussed without any particular order.

*Practical Writings*

- A. *ON PRAYER*: This treatise addressed to Ambrose and an unknown lady, Tatiana, perhaps the sister of Ambrose, deals with prayer in general and the Lord's Prayer in particular. In it, Job is held up as "the athlete of virtue." It reveals more clearly than any of his writings the depth and warmth of Origen's religious life.
- B. *EXHORTATION TO MARTYRDOM*: This exhortation was written at Caesarea during the persecution of Maximin (235 A.D.) and was addressed to Ambrose and Protocetus, who were cast in prison. In the account he explains that by martyrdom a man can offer himself as a true priest in sacrifice to God, for "Just as Jesus redeemed us by his precious blood, so by the precious blood of the martyrs others may also be redeemed." Martyrdom is a "golden work", the cup of salvation.
- C. *ON EASTER*: The same codex, found at Taura in 1941, that contains the "Discussion with Heraclides", also preserves fragments of a treatise of Origen on Easter of which little was previously known.
- D. *LETTERS*: Jerome cites four different collections of Origen's correspondence. One of them counted nine volumes and must be that which Eusebius edited which contained more than one hundred epistles.<sup>41</sup> Only two of these letters have survived in completed form:
  - 1. A communication to Origen's former student St. Gregory the Wonder-Worker is included in the Philokalia, Chapter 13.
  - 2. The second letter to Julius Africanus has been already referred to.

## ORIGEN AND ALLEGORISM

*Origen and the Holy Scriptures*

St. Gregory the Wonder-Worker praises Origen as an interpreter of the Scripture by saying, "The Spirit who inspires the prophets honored him as a friend, and had appointed him as an interpreter . . . He had power to listen to God and understand what he said and then to explain it to men that they too might understand."<sup>42</sup>

Eusebius tells us that Origen spent the greater part of his nights in studying the Holy Scriptures.<sup>43</sup> It was the center of his life, the well-spring of his personal religious life and the instrument for striving after perfection.<sup>44</sup> He made a close study of the text, and in order to fit himself for the task learned Hebrew, and made a collection of current versions of the Old Testament from which he exposed his "Hexapla."<sup>45</sup>

### *The Literal Meaning*

Origen discussed two problems faced by the early church concerning the Old Testament:

1. The Jews were expecting that the Messiah would literally fulfill the prophecies of the Old Testament and become their King, who reigns over the entire world; therefore, they refused Jesus as the true Messiah.<sup>46</sup>
2. The Gnostics rejected the Old Testament, for they were upset by some passages which refer to God as being angry, or that he regretted or changed his mind. They were upset because they interpreted these passages literally and not spiritually.<sup>47</sup>

Origen sees that these two sets of people misinterpreted the Scripture by holding the literal sense exclusively. For this reason he established his theory that there are various meanings in Scripture: the literal, the moral, and the spiritual.

### *Origen's Theory*

"The words of Scripture should be printed in the soul in one of three ways."<sup>48</sup> The uneducated should be edified by the letter itself, the literal or obvious meaning. People at a higher level should find edification for their souls from the the moral meaning of Scripture. The perfect should be edified by the spiritual law, as it contains the shadow of the blessings to come. Man is composed of body, soul, and spirit, and the structure of Scripture has been planned by God for man's salvation in the same way.

Origen found in the ark of Noah material for his theory, as it was built in three stories. The bottom served as the foundation, which referred to the literal or historical explanation of Scripture. The higher level of the ark referred to the spiritual or mystical, and the middle level of the ark referred to the moral sense.<sup>49</sup>

### *Allegorism*

According to Origen the understanding of Scripture is the "Art of Arts", and the "Science of Sciences."<sup>50</sup> The words of the Scripture are its body, or the visible element, that hides its spirit, or the invisible element. This spirit is the treasure hidden in a field, hidden behind every word,<sup>51</sup> every letter, but even behind every iota used in the written Word of God.<sup>52</sup> Thus every word in Scripture is mystery.<sup>53</sup>

This spiritual understanding of Scripture is a grace given to the perfect believers by Christ, for only those who had the Spirit of Jesus could understand their spiritual meaning. (Could enter this chamber of eternal marriage between Christ and the Soul.)<sup>54</sup>

We obtain this grace through praying, as we must weep and beg the Lord to open our inner eyes like the blind man sitting by the road side at Jericho. (Matt. 20.30). Origen says that we must pray for we are often beside the wells of the running water of God's word but we fail to recognize our opportunity.

*FROM THE LAW TO THE GOSPEL:*

The Law is a shadow of the Gospel, and the Gospel is a shadow of the Kingdom to come. In his commentary on Cantic of Canticles, Origen explains this relationship between the Law and the Gospel by saying: "When Christ came, He first stayed a while on the other side of the wall. The wall was the Old Testament, and he stayed behind it until He revealed Himself to the people. When the time appointed came, He began to show Himself at the windows. The windows were the Law and the Prophets, the predictions that had been made about Him. He began to be visible through these windows. He then began to show Himself to the Church, who was sitting indoors, i.e., engrossed in the letter of the Law, and asked her to come out and join Him, for unless she went out, and left the letter for the Spirit, she would never be able to join Christ, would never become one with the Bridegroom. That was why He had called her and asked her to leave the things she could see for the things she could not see. That was why He wanted her to leave the Law for the Gospel."<sup>55</sup>

*Footnotes:*

1. *Origen means "Sons of or (Horus), the Egyptian Sun-God."*
2. *Quasten: Patrology, vol 12, p. 37.*
3. *Eusebius: H.eg; 6:2:7-11*
4. *Ibid. 6:2:11*
5. *W. Fairweather: Origen and Greek Patristic Theology, Edinburgh, 1901, p. 37.*
6. *Benjamin Drewery: Origen and the Doctrine of Grace, London, 1906.*
7. *Fairweather, p.39*
8. *Eusebius, 6:3:1-8*
9. *Ibid. 6:3:9,10*
10. *Hom. Levit 6:2*
11. *Eusebius, 6:3:3-7*
12. *Danielou J.: Origen, 1953, p. 73.*
13. *Eus. 6:9:12,13*
14. *Hom. Numb. 18:3.*
15. *Hom. Gen. 11:2.*
16. *Hom. Levit. 10:2*
17. *Hom. Psalm 36:3,6.*
18. *Or. Paneg. 6:8. P.G. 10: 1072 a-c.*
19. *Ibid. 6:14, 15. P.G. . 10:1902c, 1903b.*
20. *C. Knetschmar: Origen Und dei Arber, Zeilsch, Theolo, Kirsh 50 (1953) p. 258-280.*
21. *Fairweather, p. 60.*
22. *Jerome: Catal c.90.*
23. *J. Danielou: The Christian Centuries, Vol. 7, p. 184.*
24. *Fairweather, p. 50.*
25. *H. M. Gwatkin: Early Church History, London 1909, Vol. 2, p. 192.*

26. *De Princ.* 1:8:1.
27. *Ibid.* 1:6:2,3:6:6.
28. *Ibid.* 3:6:6; *Contra Cels* 8:72.
29. *Gwatkin*, p. 192.
30. *Hom. Levit.* 14:3.
31. *Hom. Gen.* 2:3.
32. *Eus. H. E.* 6:39:5.
33. *Adv. Ruf.* 2:22.
34. *Adv. Haer.* 64;63.
35. *J. Danielou: Origen*, 1953, p. x-xii.
36. *Quasten*, V. 2, p. 44.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 48.
38. *Fairweather*, p. 110, 111.
39. *Drewery*, p. 6.
40. *Quasten*, Vol. 2, p.62-64.
41. *Eus. H. E.* 6:36:3.
42. *St. Gregory Thaum. O. P.* 15. pg. 10: 1093c, 1906a.
43. *Eus.* 6:3:9.
44. *Danielou: Origen*, p. 131.
45. *Jerome: De Vir. Illustr.* 54.
46. *De. Princip.* 4:2:1.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *De Princip.* 4:2:4.
49. *Hom. Gen.* 2:6.
50. *Comm. John* 13:46.
51. *Hom. Levit.* 4:8.
52. *Hom. Jerm.* 39.
53. *Hom. Gen.* 10:1.
54. *Hom. Ezek.* 11:2.
55. *Com. Cant.* 3.

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# A REVIEW OF ORIGEN'S COMMENTARY ON THE SONG OF SONGS

*Fikry Meleka, M.D.*

Origen, the great Alexandrian philosopher and speculative theologian, made several important contributions to the early church and to Christian spirituality in general. Among other contributions, Origen was the first individual to systematize an allegorical and pneumatic interpretation of scripture. This commentary, written in the Greek language, consisted of ten books, five of which were composed while he was visiting Athens, and five while residing in Palestine. Of these ten books, only three were found and translated to Latin by Rufinus. An additional two homilies translated by St. Jerome carry the original style and tone of the original commentary. Origen's commentary, the first great work of Christian mysticism, was considered by St. Jerome as the best ever written on the Song of Songs.

In the Song of Songs, Origen introduced the central concept of the Church as being the mystical bride of Christ, through a nuptial union of the Logos with the human soul. The majority of exegetes were in full agreement with this interpretation. Another important concept was Origen's comparison of Solomon to Christ, and the Gentile Church to the Queen of Sheba, who came from afar laden with gifts in spite of the hardships of the journey to listen to Solomon's wisdom and receive enlightenment on numerous questions about which pagan philosophy was uninformed. A third concept evident in Origen's commentary is the idea that the Soul and the Church are inseparable and participate in the divine human nature of the Logos. Each individual soul has the same relationship as that seen between Christ and the Church.

## ***THE COMMENTARY PROLOGUE:***

The Song of Songs is a marriage hymn which reveals the high beauty which can be achieved under the stimulus of love's desire. This heavenly love is not related to earthly passions, "*For in Christ there is neither male or female, but all are one in Him.*" The use of feminine terminology throughout the Canticle must be interpreted metaphorically to avoid this confusion of

earthly and spiritual. The language is directed to the mature. Only those who can hear love's pure language can be nourished with this heavenly food.

God's essence is love, and the Spirit of Truth who proceeds from the Father seeks souls worthy and able to receive this love. The soul which is moved by heavenly love is ready to receive from the Word the dart of heavenly love and become kindled with the blessed fire of God's love. The soul needs time for the maturation necessary to receive this gift from God, and Origen gives examples of this maturation process from the lives of Old Testament patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Abraham's obedience to God was the first step of the maturation process. Isaac's search for the "root of all things" was a further step of maturation, and Jacob's vision of the camps of heaven and the angels ascending and descending on the ladder reaching up from earth to heaven was the fulfillment of the third step in the maturation process.

The title "Song of Songs" was given by Solomon. There were six introductory songs sung before this canticle by the Bridegroom's friends (Prophets and Angels) under the Law to the Bride when she was still a child not ready to offer herself entirely to her Bridegroom. These six songs follow in chronological order:

1. Israel's song of freedom when they were released from Egyptian bondage. (Exodus 14:31 - 15:21)
2. Israel's emergence from the Valley of Zared. (Numbers 21:12-18)
3. Israel's song of testimony. (Deuteronomy 31:19 - 32:3)
4. Debra and Barak's song of victory. (Judges 5:1-31)
5. David's song upon being delivered from Saul and his enemies. (II Kings 22:1-5)
6. David's song of praise unto the Lord (I Chronicles, 16:7-36)

The seventh and most excellent song was the Song of Songs, named so because of its surpassing greatness.

#### **BOOK ONE: THE SONG OF SONGS** *Canticle 1:2-4*

The Song of Songs is actually a dramatic production of a marriage hymn for Christ and the Church, describing the soul's union with the Word of God. There is a continuous change of characters as the Bride speaks to either the Bridegroom, his friends or to the daughters of Jerusalem. As the Bride matures she continually hears accounts of the beauty and power of the Bridegroom from the Angels and Prophets. She becomes grieved and asks her lover to speak from his own lips. "... *Let Him kiss me with the kisses of His mouth.*" Christ bestowed kisses on His Church as well when He came in the flesh, and the perfected soul receives words from His mouth to unravel what had previously been tangled. The timing for this revelation is decided by the

Lord and the Bridegroom reveals the knowledge and wisdom concealed in his breasts and the Bride realizes that, "*Thy breasts are better than the wine,*" served to her by the Prophets. She was moved by his beauty and possessed by the fragrance of his ointment, which surpassed any spices she had previously received. Everything in the Bridegroom surpassed the previous wisdom and teaching she received as a spiritually immature child. A parallel spiritual type of the latter surpassing the former is admitted by the steward of the wine at the marriage at Cana, when the Lord "*saved the good wine until last.*" The Queen of Sheba provides a symbolic resemblance to this idea when she became dumbfounded at Solomon's wine pourers and at his teaching and wisdom and exclaimed, "*The fragrance of thine ointment is above all spices.*" Origen makes an analysis of the mystical meaning of this ointment in Exodus 30:22-25. The ointment contained the following:

1. The flower of pure myrrh, signifying death. This flower of myrrh referred to the Bridegroom as the first to be raised from the dead.
2. Sweet (spotless) cinnamon referred to the Church which he cleansed and made to be without spot or wrinkle.
3. The calamus (cane or reed) denoted the graciousness of his teaching.
4. Cassia is hot and burning, representing the fervour of the Holy Spirit and describing His future occurrence.
5. The numbers 500 or 250 may be a multiplication of the five senses as perfected that much in Him, or a multiplication of the pardonable number 50 (Lev. 25:10).
6. Blended with pure oil, signifying that the only *mercy* was His incarnation, or it is the *Holy Spirit* with which Christ was anointed.

**"*THY NAME IS AS OINTMENT POURED FORTH*"**

There is a change of characters in the drama at this point as the Bride is now face to face with the Bridegroom and addresses Him by saying, "*Thy name is as ointment poured forth.*" For the sake of these maiden souls, God emptied Himself from His fullness and humbled Himself to the form of a servant so that all can receive Him according to the measure of their capacity. ". . . *therefore do the virgins love thee. Draw me, we will run after thee . . .*" Once the power of perception senses the sweetness of the ointment of Christ's presence, it soon learns to follow the Bridegroom. The Bride, after running with others, is now alone with the Bridegroom in the King's chambers, where she can see all the royal riches of his wisdom and knowledge and behold all the hidden mysteries of the King. The other maidens rejoice with her and desire to follow in her steps. These maidens represent souls which have received the first fruits, but have not yet matured to the point where they might receive the Word of God.



**BOOK TWO: THE BRIDE TALKS TO THE DAUGHTERS OF JERUSALEM** (*Canticle 1:5-14*)

*"I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon."*

The Bride has previously been described as ugly and black, as the tents of Kedar and the curtains of Solomon, but now the Church gathered from among the Gentiles can come to the heavenly Jerusalem and become beautiful through penitence and faith, due to the failure of Israel. *"Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me."* In this quote she apologizes for her blackness and explains the cause of past sin and neglect and then assures them that she knows the way. *"My mother's children were angry with me."* Her mother was Jerusalem, and the Apostles, who were the sons of the mother, helped her to overcome these former dispositions by giving her an assignment so that the old things did not creep back. *"They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept."* She did not keep the old things even as Paul did not keep the Jewish traditions after he received the faith of Christ. The Bride then talks to the Bridegroom describing Him as a shepherd and impatiently asking Him for the place of His retreat so that she might come to Him and be enlightened with the full light of His wisdom, as intense as the sun at midday. She also expresses the fear that she may lose her way or may come upon other flocks in her search. The Bridegroom cautions her that she must understand Herself, because if she is not clear of her way, she may unknowingly follow footsteps of other flocks which have no remedy for sin and end by feeding the goats and not the sheep.

***"TO A COMPANY OF HORSES IN PHARAOH'S CHARIOTS"***

The Bridegroom comforts the Bride by reminding her that there are more with us than with them as Elisha prayed to the Lord to open the eyes of his servant to see the unseen forces and chariots of his Lord on the mountain as Pharaoh's chariots were drowned by far superior horsemen belonging to the Lord. So likewise you, my neighbor and my Bride, the soul, surpass all souls against you, like the Lord's horsemen compared to Pharaoh's horsemen.

***"THY CHEEKS ARE COMELY WITH ROWS OF JEWELS, THY NECK WITH CHAINS OF GOLD."***

The drama now moves to a different scene after the Bridegroom uses some sternness in cautioning the Bride. She blushed at the severity of His correction, and the redness of shame that suffused her face made her cheeks more lovely and fair than they had ever been before. Her neck was rendered more beautiful as if it were adorned with necklaces of jewels. The beauty of her cheeks represents modesty and loyalty. This relationship parallels the special bond that the Church enjoys with Christ, and the adornment of the neck is a symbol of her engagement and obedience.

***“WE WILL MAKE THEE BORDERS OF GOLD WITH STUDS OF SILVER”***

As the Cherubim in the Temple, the Jewish religion, and all things written in the law are in the likeness of gold, so are the friends of the Bridegroom. True gold symbolizes the incorporeal, the unseen, spiritual, heavenly and truthful things. In contrast the likeness of gold is bodily, earthly, visible and similar to truth. The likeness of gold projects an idea of true gold which cannot be revealed to every person or at any time. The timing for the revelation of true gold is linked to Christ's passing through His Passion, when the secrets and mysteries are brought to light. The studs of silver are a token of spiritual meanings involved at His Resurrection.

***“WHILE THE KING SITTETH AT HIS TABLE.”***

The Word of God takes pleasure in reclining in perfect souls.

***“MY SPIKENARD SENDETH FORTH THE SMELL THEREOF.”***

The Bride anointed the Bridegroom with her ointments, which were without scent when she was away from Him and yielded its aroma only when she touched the Bridegroom's body. As the Bride receives a blessing only when she is near the Bridegroom, we too can only appreciate the fragrance of spiritual teachings as we approach the Lord.

***“A BUNDLE OF MYRRH IS MY BELOVED UNTO ME: HE SHALL LIE ALL NIGHT BETWIXT MY BREASTS.”***

The Bride speaks to the maidens and expresses the sweetness and strength of the odor of Christ, which is bound to her between her breasts. In the Latin version she refers to him as nephew, as she is the Gentile Church and He was born from the Jewish people. *“My beloved is unto me as a cluster of camphire in the vineyards of En-gedi.”* Her nephew like a cluster of grapes surpasses everything in its aroma and scent.

**(To be completed in the next issue.)**

## THE TRANSFIGURATION OF CHRIST IN THE WRITINGS OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

Rodolph Yanney, M.D.

—1—

### ***Transfiguration and the Paschal Mystery***

*"For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works. Verily I say unto you, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."* (Mat. 16:27-28)

*"... of him also shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels. And he said unto them, verily I say unto you, that there be some of them that stand here, which shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power."* (Mark 8:38-9:1)

*"... of him shall the Son of Man be ashamed, when he shall come in his glory, and in his Father's and of the holy angels. But I tell you of a truth, there be some standing here, which shall not taste of death, till they see the kingdom of God"* (Luke 9:26-27)

The importance given to the Transfiguration of our Lord in the writings of the Fathers and in the liturgic cycle of the Church shows that it has been a very significant moment in the earthly life of Christ, and it is a focal point in the revelation of the Kingdom of God. It looks backwards to the Old Testament as fulfilled in Christ, and forward to the great events of Pascha, the new Exodus (Cross, Resurrection, Ascension and Parousia.)

A few days before His transfiguration, Christ prepared the disciples by speaking about all these events:

Directly after the disciples confession of faith in Christ as the Son of God at Caesaria Philippi, He proclaimed His death and resurrection. (Matt 16:21) A few moments later He spoke about His parousia, *"For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels . . ."* (Matt 16:27) Origen comments about the different aspects of the two "Comings" of Christ,

*"Now, indeed the Son of Man has not come in His glory; 'for we saw him and He had no form nor beauty; but His form was dishonoured and defective compared with the sons of men; He was a man in affliction and toil . . . He was dishonoured and not esteemed' (Isa. 53:2-3) And it was*

necessary that He should come in such form that He might bear our sins (Isa. 53:4) . . . ; for it did not become Him in glory to bear our sins and suffer pain for us. But He also comes in glory, having prepared the disciples through that epiphany of His which has no form nor beauty; and having become as they that they might become as He, 'conformed to the image of His glory' (Rom. 8:29), since He formerly became conformed to 'the body of our humiliation' (Phil. 3:21), when He 'emptied Himself and took upon Him the form of a servant' (Phil. 2:7) He is restored to the image of God and also makes them conformed unto it."

But Christ concludes his discourse with the disciples saying that some of them (*standing here*) "*shall not taste of death, till they have seen the kingdom of God come with power*" (Mark 9:1), or "*the Son of Man coming in His kingdom*" (Matt. 16:28).

All this was fulfilled in the Transfiguration according to the Fathers. St. Ephraim of Syria says,

"The men of whom he said that they shall not taste of death until they have seen the type of His coming; these are they whom He took up to the mountain and showed how he will come on the last day in the glory of His divinity and in the body of His humanity."

Origen accepts this interpretation only as the literal, more simple one,

"Now this interpretation about the three Apostles not tasting of death until they have seen Jesus transfigured is adapted to those . . . 'new born babes longing for the reasonable milk . . .' (I Peter 2:2), to whom St. Paul says, 'I have fed you with milk, not with meat.' (I Cor 3:2)"

He compares the disciples standing by the Saviour, to Moses when he "stood on the mountain forty days and forty nights" (Deut. 10:10), and from this to every soul standing in contemplation of the Word of God.

—2—

#### ***Witnesses of the Transfiguration***

"*And after six days Jesus taketh Peter, James and John his brother . . .*" (Matt. 17:1)

"*And after six days Jesus taketh with him Peter, and James and John . . .*" (Mark 9:2)

"*And it came to pass about eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James . . .*" (Luke 9:28)

*How many days?*

The number of days between the last discourse of Christ and His transfiguration was not left without comment by the Fathers. Even the apparent contradiction between the evangelists was a cause for deeper meditation. St. John Chrysostom gives the apparent solution to the number of days,

“For one expressed both the very day on which He spoke, and that day on which He led them up; while the other included the days between them only.”

But for Origen, the six days, reminiscent of the six days of creation, are a symbol of this world; he continues,

“If therefore anyone of us wishes to be taken by Jesus and led by Him into the high mountain, and deemed worthy of beholding His transfiguration apart, let him pass beyond the six days, because he no longer loves the world, nor the things in the world . . . For when he has passed through the six days, . . . he will keep a new Sabbath, rejoicing in the lofty mountain . . .”

For many of the Fathers, the eighth day is a figure of everlasting life. St. Augustine says,

“After (our age), God shall rest as on the seventh day, when he shall give us rest in Himself . . . The seventh day shall be our Sabbath, which shall be brought to a close, not by an evening, but by the Lord’s Day, as an eighth and eternal day, consecrated by the Resurrection of Christ, and prefiguring the eternal repose not only of the Spirit, but also the body. There we shall rest and see, see and love, love and praise.”

*Witnesses of the Transfiguration*

St. John Chrysostom, as well as Origen, says that those who beheld the transfiguration were superior to the rest,

“Peter indeed shows his superiority by exceedingly loving Him; but John by being exceedingly loved by Him; and James again by his answer with his brother, saying, ‘We are able to drink the cup,’ (Matt. 20:20,22) an answer fulfilled later.”

—3—

***Mountain, Solitude and Prayer***

*“Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them”* (Matt. 28:16)

*“... and bringeth them up into an high mountain apart”* (Matt. 17:1)

*“... and leadeth them up into an high mountain apart by themselves”* . . .  
(Mark 9:2)

*“... and went up into a mountain to pray.”* (Luke 9:28)

*“And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the Holy Mountain”* (2 Peter 1:18)

*“Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice in thy name”* (Ps. 89:2)

Tradition as far back as the fourth century gives the site of transfiguration as Mount Tabor (in Galilee). Three churches were built there before the sixth century to commemorate the event. Newer commentators preferred Mount Hermon, because of its greater height and proximity to Caeseria Philippi. More important than its name, for the Fathers the high mountain has been a symbol of solitude with God. St. Gregory of Nyssa, in his “Life of Moses” says,

“ . . . the one who is going to associate intimately with God must go beyond all that is visible and (lifting up his own mind, as to a mountain top, to the invisible and incomprehensible) believe that the divine is there where the understanding does not reach.”

In the same book he describes the spiritual life as an ascent,

“For this reason we also say that the great Moses, as he was becoming ever greater, at no time stopped in his ascent, nor did he set a limit for himself in his upward course. Once having set foot on the ladder which God set up (as Jacob says), he continually climbed to the step above and never ceased to rise higher, because he always found a step higher than the one he had attained.”

Later Western Fathers, like St. John of the Cross took the same thought and used the phrase “Ascent of the Mount” for the mystic ascent towards union with God.

—4—

***Beholding His Glory***

*“And was transfigured before them: and his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light.”* (Matt. 17:2)

*" . . . and he was transfigured before them. And his raiment became shining, exceeding white as snow; so as no fuller on earth can white them." (Mark 9:2-3)*

*"And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening." (Luke 9:29)*

*" . . . and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father." (John 1:14)*

All the Fathers unanimously agree that the body of Christ did not change in its substance in the transfiguration. St. Jerome says, "There is no change of substance, but of Glory." St. Cyril of Alexandria explains further,

"We say there is a transfiguration, not that the human body changes to another body, but a glorious light enveloped it. The form of the body stays the same, but its aspect is penetrated by a radiant light."

But what is this glorious light of transfiguration? St. Clement of Alexandria calls it "a spiritual light." Origen sees that the transfiguration is an eschatological scene; our bodies in the Kingdom of Heaven will be of the same kind as that of Christ, Moses and Elijah on the mount. St. Basil writes that the divine beauty of Christ seen by the disciples was a prelude to His glorious Parousia. The same is said by St. Chrysostom,

"But if we will, we also shall behold Christ, not as they then on the mount, but in far greater brightness . . . For whereas then, to spare his disciples, He uncovered so much only of His brightness as they were able to bear; hereafter He shall come in the very glory of the Father, not with Moses and Elijah only, but with the infinite host of the angels, with the archangels, with the cherubim, with those infinite tribes, not having a cloud over His head, but even heaven itself folded up."

Other Fathers saw no difference between the glory of the transfiguration and that of the Parousia. St. Cyril of Alexandria described it as a revelation of the Kingdom of God. St. Dionysius of Alexandria, speaking about the general resurrection says,

"We shall always be with the Lord . . . and will see distinctly, such as the disciples had in that most divine Transfiguration."

Then we come to an important theological question. Did Christ's body really change in glory at the time of Transfiguration? Here we have two completely different answers from the Fathers.

A. St. John of Damascus says,

“The glory of the Logos and of the flesh was one and the same thing; nevertheless, the glory was concealed in the visible body and was invisible to those in bondage to the flesh, who cannot receive what is invisible even to the angels . . . He is transfigured . . . not by receiving something which He is not, but by revealing to His intimate disciples that which He really is, opening their eyes and enabling them to see out of their blindness . . . He remained the same, but appeared different to the disciples . . . One has to be light to see the Light. One has to be holy to see the Holy. Blessed are the pure in heart to see the Purity.”

St. James of Serugh goes along with the same interpretation,

“It is written that He was altered, and became shining and white so that it might appear that He is the light of all the world . . . He was altered, while remaining the same without alteration . . . For them He appeared changed so that they might see the glory instead of the contempt. He is the great light as well as the rays and the rising of the great sun of righteousness.”

To these Fathers, the change has not been in Christ, so much as it has been in the disciples who were enabled to see the divine glory. Origen proves this view, from the words of the gospels,

“He appeared to them in the form of God, in which He formerly was, so that He had to those below the form of a servant, but to those who had followed Him after the six days to the lofty mountain, He had not that form, but the form of God. . . . It is not said simply, ‘He was transfigured,’ but with a certain necessary addition, which Matthew and Mark have recorded; for according to both, ‘He was transfigured *before them*.’ . . . It is possible for Jesus to be transfigured before some . . . , but before others at the same time not to be transfigured.”

B. Other Fathers have a different interpretation. St. Francis de Sales, the western Father of the Counter-reformation says that the kenosis which eclipsed His glory during incarnation ceased for a time at His transfiguration.

St. Cyril of Alexandria, commenting on Phil. 2:6-8 more fully explains this thought:



“Why did the Word not descend from heaven with a divine glory? Why did He not appear to men shining with an inaccessible light? No . . . He accepted generously to take the form of a servant . . .”

### ***Spiritual Exegesis***

By resorting to the allegorical method of interpretation, the Fathers have more to say about the transfigured Christ: St. Augustine sees in His brilliant face the enlightenment of the Gospel, and in His garments the Church in all her purity. Origen advises us, if we wish to see the transfiguration of Christ and know Him in His divinity, Who is no longer known ‘according to the flesh,’ we have to use as a means of ascent the uplifting words of the Gospels, put off the works of darkness, and put on the armour of light. When we become thus children of light, Christ will shine unto us not simply as the Sun, but as the Sun of Righteousness. According to Origen, Christ’s garments which appeared white, are the expressions of the words of the Scripture, which become white to those who go up into the high mountain along with Him.

By viewing the transfiguration as a resurrection scene, some of the Fathers saw the spiritual resurrection of the believer in Baptism. St. Gregory of Nyssa shows the baptised as wearing the tunic of the Lord, shining like the Sun, which clothed Him with purity and incorruptibility. But St. Ambrose sees in this tunic, not the white baptismal robe, but the baptized himself,

“He who is baptized is pure, according to the Gospel, because the garments of Christ were white as snow when, in the Gospel, He showed forth the glory of His resurrection.”

—5—

### ***One Church***

*“And, behold, there appeared unto them Moses and Elias talking with him”*  
(Matt. 17:3)

*“And there appeared unto them Elias with Moses; and they were talking with Jesus”* (Mark 9:4)

*And behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease (exodus) which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him.”* (Luke 9:30-32)

Tertullian observes that the presence of both prophets and disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration bears testimony to the unity between the Old and the New Testaments. St. Ephraim of Syria regards the Mount as a type of the

Church where not only both testaments are united, but also the heavenly members of the Church are united with its earthly members in the overshadowing presence of the Holy Spirit.

For St. James of Serugh, the transfiguration is a sign of the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New. The power once given to Moses and Elijah is now given to the disciples:

‘Because He wanted to change the stewards, He brought them so that the elders might give the keys to the young . . . He mixed the Old Dispensation with the New, so that the world might feel that He is Lord of all . . . He brought to the Mount, Moses, teacher of the Law, to show that he approved of the gospel of John.’

But why Moses and Elijah in particular? Father Matta El-Meskeen says,

“There is a new theological depth in the events of this feast, to which the Apostle Paul invites us in a marvelous summary composed of only a few words, ‘But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ . . . ’” (Rom. 3:21 and 22) . . . According to the revelation of faith of the Apostle Paul, the appearance of Moses and Elijah talking with Christ on the Mount of Transfiguration was a witness that carries in its depth a meaning of submission and delivery. The law has reached its end, and the prophets have reached their fulfillment.”

St. Cyril of Alexandria has the same teaching,

“Moses and Elijah stood beside Him and talked with Him, so as to declare that the Law and the Prophets serve our Lord Jesus Christ, and prove evidently that He is Lord of the Law and the Prophets, and together they spoke of Him.”

St. John Chrysostom explains this further,

“But wherefore does He also bring forward Moses and Elijah? One might mention many reasons. And first of all this: because the multitudes said He was Elijah, some Jeremiah and some, one of the old prophets; He brings the leaders of His choir, that they might see the difference between the servants and the Lord . . . One may mention another reason also; that because men were continually accusing Him of transgressing the Law, and accounting Him to be a blasphemer (John

9:16, 10:33) . . . He brings forth them who had shone out in each of these respects: Moses because he gave the Law: Elijah too for his part was jealous for the glory of God . . . ”

Another reason is mentioned both by St. John Chrysostom and St. Cyril,

“To inform them that He who has power both of death and life, is ruler both above and beneath, . . . He brings forward both him that had died, and him that never yet suffered this.”

The Fathers also saw in the case of Moses, that his two desires which were not fulfilled during his earthly life, were fulfilled on the Mount of Transfiguration. St Irenaeus observed that the fervent desire of Moses to see the face of God (Ex. 33:18-33), remained unfulfilled till the time of Transfiguration, when he was allowed to see God and enter the land of Canaan. St. James of Serugh's meditation follows along the same line,

“From Mount Nebo He called Moses. He raised him and admitted him to the Land of Promise, which he had been ordered not to enter by solemn decree. As Lord of all, He showed His ability to absolve a sentence of the Father, and return the exiled to their inheritance. He admitted Moses to show forth how to admit Adam, because he also is exiled and sentenced out of Paradise.”

—6—

### ***Flying from the Cross***

*“Then answered Peter, and said unto Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here: if thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias”* (Matt. 17:4)

*“And Peter answered and said to Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias. For he wist not what to say; for they were sore afraid.”* (Mark 9:5,6)

*“And it came to pass as they departed from him, Peter said unto Jesus, Master, it is good for us to be here: and let us make three tabernacles; one for thee, and one for Moses, and one for Elias: not knowing what he said.”* (Luke 9:33)

The words of St. Peter were completely misguided. On the one hand he desired to prolong the disciples' state of contemplation. He even alluded to the Feast of Tabernacles—a figure of the rest of the life to come. The Gospel speaks about “eternal tabernacles” (Luke 16:9), to designate the dwelling of the Just in Eternity. On the other hand St. Peter was trying to avoid the cross,

searching for other means to establish the Kingdom of God. In the words of St. James of Serugh,

“Simon was happy and amazed by the speech of Moses. He liked the light and his soul was delighted in the glory of the Father. He loved the place and asked not to descend from it. Peter learned that when he descends, he would find the cross. So he earnestly desired to stay on the mountain. Simon longed to remain quiet there, for he felt the approach of suffering and was afraid to look at it. He heard the prophets talking about the cross and he trembled to come down and face the great war.”

St. Cyril of Alexandria thought that the desire of Peter to stay there was because he was thinking to assist in the establishment of the Kingdom of God in remembrance of what Christ had said before (Luke 9:27),

“The blessed Peter thought that the Kingdom had come, and he desired to stay on the Mount. Without knowing what he was saying he declared that he would make three tabernacles there on the Mount. But this was not the hour of the end of the world, nor in their time would the saints receive the hope promised to them, for Paul says, ‘who shall change our body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body,’ (Phil. 3:21) that is the body of Christ. Because the economy of our salvation was in its beginning and was not yet fulfilled, it was not possible for Christ, who came to the world through his love, to leave the world and refuse suffering. He redeemed our earthly nature, when He died with our body, and raised it when he rose from the dead. Thus Peter did not know what he was saying.”

St. Ephraim of Syria explains further,

“Oh, what do you say Simon? If we rest here, then who will accomplish what has been said by the prophets? Who abolishes the sins of Adam? Who pays his debts? Who clothes him with a vestment of glory? . . . Simon is sent to establish the Church in the world, but he wants to make tents on the mountain. He considers Jesus merely human and places him in one level with Moses and Elijah.”

But Origen sees Satan behind the words of Peter. A few days earlier when Christ was fortelling his crucifixion, Satan rebuked Him through the mouth of St. Peter (Mark 8:31-33). Now when the prophets were talking to Christ about His exodus, Satan used a lie to prevent this. The lie was in the words of Peter, “It is good for us to be here.” Origen explains,

“ . . . consider whether perhaps with a view to make Jesus stumble, so far as was in his power, and to turn Him aside from the dispensation whose characteristic was suffering that brought salvation to men, which He undertook with great willingness, seeking to effect these things which seemed to contribute to this end, he himself (Satan) also here wishes as it were, by deceit, to draw away Jesus, as if calling upon Him no longer to condescend to men, and come to them; and undergo death for them, but to abide on the high mountain with Moses and Elijah. But he promised also to build three tabernacles, one apart for Jesus and one for Moses and one for Elijah, as if one tabernacle would not have sufficed for the three, if it had been necessary for them to be in tabernacles and in the high mountain.

“And perhaps also in this he acted with evil intent, when he incited him ‘who did not know what he said,’ not desiring that Jesus and Moses and Elijah should be together, and desiring to separate them from one another under pretext of three tabernacles.”

All this is considered by Origen as still “searching into the mere letter” and he proceeds to the figurative interpretation. He finds in this event a time when Christ preferred the active life rather than the contemplative:

“Peter and the sons of thunder who were taken up into the mountain of the dogmas of the truth, and who saw the transfiguration of Jesus and of Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory with Him, wished to make tabernacles in themselves for the Word of God who was going to dwell in them, and for His law which had been beholden in glory, and for the prophecy which spoke of the exodus of Jesus, which He was to accomplish. Peter, as one loving the contemplative life, and having preferred that which was delightful in it to the life among the crowd with its turmoil, said with the design of benefitting those who desired it, ‘It is good for us to be here.’ But since ‘love seeketh not its own,’ (I Cor. 13:5) Jesus did not do that which Peter thought good; therefore He descended from the mountain to those who were not able to ascend to it and behold His transfiguration, that they might behold him in such form as they were able to see Him. It is, therefore, the part of a righteous man . . . to be free from all, but to bring himself under bondage to all those below that he might gain the more of them. (I Cor. 9:19)”

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***The Holy Trinity and the Church***

*“While he yet spake, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them: and behold a voice out of the cloud, which said, ‘This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him.’ And when the disciples heard it, they fell on their face, and were sore afraid. And Jesus came and touched them, and said, Arise, and be not afraid. And when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no man, save Jesus only.” (Matt. 17:5-8)*

*“And there was a cloud that overshadowed them: and a voice came out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. And suddenly when they had looked round about, they saw no man any more, save Jesus only with themselves.” (Mark 9:7,8)*

*“While he thus spake, there came a cloud and overshadowed them: and they feared as they entered into the cloud. And there came a voice out of the cloud, saying, This is my beloved Son: hear him. And when the voice was past, Jesus was found alone.” (Luke 9:34-36)*

The cloud has always been a sign of the revelation of God. St. John Chrysostom says,

“Thus does God ever appear. ‘For a cloud and darkness are round about him;’ (Ps. 97:2) and, ‘He sitteth on a light cloud;’ (Is. 19:1) and again, ‘Who maketh clouds his chariots;’ (Ps. 104:3) and, ‘A cloud received him out of their sight;’ (Acts 1:9) and, ‘As the Son of Man coming in the clouds’ (Dan. 7:13, I Thes. 4:17, Rev. 14:14)”

Moses had to ascend Mount Sinai and enter the cloud and darkness where God was, (Ex. 20:21) in order to see the tabernacle not made with hands, “And look that thou make them after their pattern, which was shewed thee in the mount.” (Ex. 25:40)

Solomon’s Temple was consecrated, . . . “when the priests came out of the holy place, that the cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priest could not stand to minister because of the cloud: for the glory of the Lord had filled the house of the Lord. Then spake Solomon, The Lord said that he would dwell in the thick darkness.” (I Kings 8:10-12).

For St. Ambrose, St. Jerome and other Latin Fathers, the Transfiguration was a revelation of the Holy Trinity. The Holy Spirit that overshadowed St. Mary from the moment of the Incarnation (Luke 1:35) and was manifested as a Dove at the Baptism of Christ, was manifested as the cloud at His Transfiguration, and later in the fire of Pentecost. The voice of the Father was heard three times in the gospel, at three decisive points in the life of Christ: Baptism, Transfiguration, and before the Passion. (John 12:27-33)

But Origen sees in the cloud the manifestation of the three persons of the Holy Trinity,

“But what might the bright cloud, which overshadows the just, be? Is it perhaps the fatherly power, from which comes the voice of the Father bearing testimony to the Son as beloved and well-pleasing, and exhorting those who were under its shadow to hear Him and no other one? . . . And perhaps, too, the Holy Spirit is the bright cloud which overshadows the just, and prophesies of the things of God, who works in it, and says, ‘This is my beloved son . . .’ but I would venture also to say that our Saviour is a bright cloud.”

Still there is another theological meaning which the Fathers found in the cloud of Transfiguration. St. James of Serugh says it is the Church:

“Through the one tabernacle of light which the Father made, He taught him (St. Peter): one is the Church, and one is the Cross which is glorified in it. For the Only Son, there was one tabernacle, not three. For the Son of God there is one Church, not many. The Father figured the Bride of Light by the cloud of light. For she is one whom He betrothed through love by the one mystery. The Father gave the daughter of light the ring of light, and betrothed her to His Son. Because the Bridegroom is all light, the Church was figured by the great light and the one cloud, and the Father ordered her to hear all what His Son told her. She is one both by apostolicity and prophesy, because the Bridegroom is one.”

The same meaning is found in St. Jerome, as he addresses the Apostle,

“Peter, you are mistaken, and as the evangelist says, you do not know what you say. Do not be precoccupied with three tabernacles, while the only tabernacle that should remain is that of the Gospel, where the Law and the Prophets are together recapitulated.”

St. Augustine also says,

“He wanted three tents; the response of Heaven showed the unity of what the judgement of man thought divided into a word of the Law and a word of the Prophets. It is only the Word; it is only Christ. Why do you want to separate, Peter?”

St. Augustine also sees in the falling of the apostles, the conditions of death, and in the touch and reassurance of Christ the resurrection when the Law and Prophets are no longer necessary.

*Conclusion*

The scene of Transfiguration is concluded by the testimony of the Father (John 5:37) and the appearance of Christ alone. St. Ephraim of Syria says,

“By this voice, the Father made known that the economy of Moses was accomplished, now the Son should be heard. Moses was a servant . . . , Jesus is the Son . . . , Master and not servant.”

St. Clement of Alexandria adds,

“Accordingly, of old He instructed by Moses, and then by the prophets . . . For the law is the training of refractory children . . . It was given to be a ‘schoolmaster to bring us to Christ’ (Gal. 3:24). So that from this it is clear, that one alone, true, good, just, in the image and likeness of the Father, His Son Jesus, the Word of God, is our Instructor; to whom God has entrusted us, as an affectionate father commits his children to a worthy tutor, expressly charging us, ‘This is my beloved Son: hear Him.’ ”

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## Book REVIEWS

***St. Mary in the Orthodox Concept*, by Fr. Tadros Y. Malaty.**

First edition, Australia, 1978. Second edition, Alexandria, Egypt, 1979. Pp. 128

Many books about the Blessed Virgin have recently been published. Most are written by Roman Catholic authors, some by Protestants, even one by a collaboration of Protestant and Roman Catholic Scholars.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the importance of Mariology in the ongoing ecumenical discussions, there has been no book in the English language that gives the teaching of the Orthodox Church about St. Mary. With the exception of a small book that deals mostly with history,<sup>2</sup> this is the first book by an Orthodox author on this subject.

The book contains a wealth of information, not only about St. Mary, but also about related subjects like the Incarnation of Christ, and the intercession of saints.

Father Tadros based his treatise on the three main sources of Orthodox teaching, namely, Scripture, Patristic writings and liturgical texts. But the Biblical references have not been exhausted; more references could be cited, and more comment given on those cited.

The book is divided into eight chapters. The first five deal with the main theological themes of Mariology, namely her virginity motherhood to God and to believers, her holiness, and her intercession. The virginity of St. Mary is a Biblical reality. Various Fathers, both from the East and the West, spoke of her perpetual virginity, a teaching which also comes in the Divine Office, "Emmanuel, whom you had brought forth, preserved you in incorruption, and kept your virginity sealed." The title 'Theotokos', or mother of God has been defended by the Church since the third ecumenical council, not as much for her glorification, as for the defense of the real Incarnation of Christ. Since the time of St. Irenaeus (second century), St. Mary has been called the New Eve, but while the disobedient Eve was the cause of death, Mary became the mother of all the living.

By quoting the various Fathers concerning the holiness of St. Mary, Father Tadros gives a summary of the Orthodox belief,

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## BOOK REVIEW

Some Fathers do not believe her to be without faults . . . but these opinions do not represent the widespread Mariological tradition in the Early Church. The Church members believe that St. Mary's holiness is unique, and that it surpasses heavenly creatures—even the Cherubim and the Seraphim. . . .”

Father Tadros also explains the belief of the Church concerning the intercession of St. Mary on our behalf. She prays on our behalf and directs us to do whatever Christ tells us (John 2:5); however, it is unfortunate that the chapter dealing with this doctrine has the title “Our Mediatrix”. This is a Roman Catholic term which is not Scriptural nor ever used by the Early Fathers and gives a false impression about the correct role of St. Mary as intercessor.

Following the doctrinal part of the book are two small chapters: one deals with St. Mary, the Model of Virgins, and the other with St. Mary as a type of the Church.

One third of the book is given to the final chapter, “St. Mary in the Coptic Rite”. In spite of the space given this important theme, the author felt the difficulty of giving a faithful account of this subject, for St. Mary is invoked in every daily hymn, every liturgy, and even every canonical hour, in addition to the various Marian feasts and some of the Lord's feasts. Yet, we feel that the author, himself a liturgist who wrote much about the liturgy and lives it in his daily life, went skilfully through all these references. Neither did he ignore the Biblical basis of the Coptic hymns. He spent seven pages discussing the Old Testament types and symbols of St. Mary in the hymns.

In closing we think that this book should be in every Christian library and should be read by all those interested in Mariology. However, we think that its main value is to aid every believer in his meditation both in private prayer and during the liturgy of the Church.

### *References:*

- (1) *Mary in the New Testament* (Fortress Press and Paulist Press, 1978)
- (2) *The Orthodox Veneration of the Mother of God*, by Archbishop John Maximovitch. (St. Herman of Alaska Brotherhood, 1978)

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### *Questions and Answers*

For the sake of greater communication with and among our readers, this new feature will start in the next issue. Our readers are encouraged to submit questions dealing with Biblical, Liturgical or Spiritual themes. We hope that this new section will follow the same patristic line of the Journal.

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