

THE *DIALEKTOS* OF ORIGEN AND JOHN 20:17

One of the windfalls of war's storm, the newly-published dialogue of Origen with Heracleides, Maximus, and other bishops, was found by a working-party in an Egyptian quarry when preparations were being made to resist Rommel and the Afrika-korps. The papyrus may have been hidden by a monk when another invading army, Moslem this time, was about to sweep over Egypt. J. Schérer, its editor,¹ judges the writing to be of the sixth century, and of the later part of that century, so that the book was not old when it was stored away for its long spell of oblivion.

It was previously known from Eusebius that Origen had made a journey into Arabia to interrogate a bishop named Beryllus at Bostra on account of his uncertain theology.² Eusebius seems to have known that records of other similar dialogues existed, but they were small beer to him. At such meetings the great man could not soar aloft on the wings of speculation, but was held down by the narrow minds of his companions. Now while it is true that the *Dialektos* is largely taken up with some rather elementary catechizing of a muddled bishop by Origen, its effect on the present-day reader is just the opposite. He is compelled to say: I should never have thought that Origen could be so simple. How are the Father and Son two, if God is one? The bishop could not answer that one, so Origen encourages him by examples. In Eden God told Adam and Eve that they, though they were two, were to be one flesh. St. Paul says that the just man who clings to Christ is made one spirit with Him. Cannot the bishop raise his mind one stage further and see how the Father and the Son, though two, may be one, not in flesh nor even in spirit but in some higher way? What could be simpler than that as an exposition of trinitarian doctrine? Even St. Patrick's sham-rock is left to one side by such an exposition.

Where Origen does soar aloft, even in this simple conversation (which was conducted in the presence of all the faithful), is in his interpretation of John 20:17, the famous "Touch me not" of Christ to Mary Magdalen on Easter morning. The view of the text which Origen here sets forth is in order of time the first that is known to us in the works of the Fathers.* Showing that Christ assumed all three parts of man—body, soul, and spirit—in order to redeem all three, Origen goes on to say:

¹ J. Schérer (ed.), *Entretien d'Origène avec Héraclide et les évêques ses collègues sur le Père, le Fils, et l'âme* (Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie, 1949).

² Cf. Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica*, VI, 33 (GCS, IX/2 [Eusebius, II/2], 588).

³ *Dialektos*, 8.

If He committed His spirit to the Father, He gave it as a deposit. It is one thing to give as a present, another to give back something, and another still to give as a deposit. The depositor makes his deposit so that he may receive it back again. Why then had Christ to give His spirit as a deposit to His Father? This question is beyond me, beyond my powers and my mind. I am not the kind of man to give you as answer that just as His body could not go down to hell (even if those who make out that His body was spiritual say it did), just so His spirit was not able to go down to hell because He had given it as a deposit to His Father until He rose from the dead. He made this deposit and received it back from His Father. When? Not at the moment of the resurrection but immediately afterwards. Call me as witness the text of the Gospel. Christ Jesus rose from the dead. There met Him Mary Magdalen and He said to her: "Touch me not." He wanted those who touched Him to touch a complete man, in order that, touching one who was complete, they might be helped, their bodies by His, their souls by His, their spirits by His. "I have not yet ascended to my Father." He ascends to His Father and then goes to His disciples. So He does ascend to His Father. But why? To recover His deposit.

Origen seems to be poking fun at theologians who produce a *ratio convenientiae* by pointing to the symmetry between the cases. His body could not go to Hades because that is not the place for bodies. His spirit could not go likewise, but His middle part, His soul, did go. Origen himself holds back with an excuse, perhaps ironical, that such questions are beyond him. He then goes on immediately to this bold speculation about the manner of Christ's resurrection. M. Schérer remarks, in his notes *ad loc.*, that Origen does not elsewhere give this ingenious explanation of the words "Touch me not." The other places in his writings where the words are discussed are: *In Jn.*, VI, 55-57;⁴ *In Levit. hom.*, IX, 5;⁵ *De orat.*, XXIII, 2.⁶ In the first of these Origen says: "The Lord mighty and powerful in war, having destroyed His enemies by His Passion and being in need of the cleansing which the Father alone is able to give Him for His noble deeds, prevents Mary from touching Him with the words: 'Touch me not: I have not yet gone up to my Father.'" M. Schérer finds this explanation very different from the new one in the *Dialektos*, but with a little trouble the two explanations can be seen to amount to the same thing. Here Origen is saying that Christ had to receive, after His Passion, His final baptism, that of which He said: "How am I straitened till it be accomplished." To be endued once more with His (human) spirit which in death He had committed to the Father could, to Origen's mind, readily be regarded as a final baptism "of the spirit." If that

⁴ GCS, X (Origenes, IV), 164.

⁵ GCS, XXIX (Origenes, VI), 424.

⁶ GCS, III (Origenes, II), 350.

is so, then the two places fit together and are parts of the same exegesis of John 20:17. As a matter of fact, a little higher up in the commentary on John, Origen does speak of this final baptism, in connection with Luke 12:50.⁷

The text from the homily on Leviticus, where Origen is dealing with the regulations of Levit. 16 about the scapegoat, and in particular with the ritual prescription that the priest should wash his body and be clothed again with his own garments after the sacrifice, fits in well enough with what has so far been seen of Origen's exegesis. He says: "Lavit ergo in vino . . . stolam suam in vesperam et factus est mundus. Et inde fortassis erat quod post resurrectionem Mariae volenti pedes Eius tenere dicebat: Noli me tangere." ("He washed His robe in wine at eventide and was made clean. And this is perhaps the reason why after the resurrection, when Mary wanted to take hold of His feet, He kept on saying: Touch me not.") The cleansing and re-clothing of the high priest was spoken of in Zach. 3:1-3 also, and Origen's mind runs from one picture to the other and back to the risen Christ with a rapidity which we cannot now challenge. Certainly he seems to think that at the resurrection Christ underwent some transformation that was not instantaneous. What Mary clasped was a Christ of body and soul but not yet possessed again of the spirit that had been deposited with the Father. The reclaiming of this spirit could be described as a baptism or as the re-summption of His own garment at will. To us who are unfamiliar with the threefold division of the human compound, it is all a little bewildering, but we cannot say that it was so to Origen himself. He applies the Platonic trichotomy of the soul to the doctrine of the three senses of Scripture.⁸ The final text on John 20:17 from *De oratione* is not of great value, as it tells us little more than that the passage is to be taken in a mystical sense.

This same idea of a threefold division of Christ at His death appears in a more elaborate form in one of the sermons on the Pasch wrongly ascribed to Chrysostom.⁹ Here the preacher cries out: "Let the heavens receive thy spirit, paradise thy soul—for He said: This day I will be with thee in paradise—and the earth thy blood." Again the reason assigned for the three days in the tomb is, according to the preacher, to secure a threefold rising of body, soul, and spirit. The abuse of the Platonic trichotomy by such heretics as Apollinaris may well have led to a reluctance on the part of later writers to exploit the rhetorical possibilities of all this schematization.

⁷ *In Jn.*, VI, 43 (GCS, X [Origenes, IV], 152).

⁸ Cf. *De principiis*, IV, 2, 4 (GCS, XXII [Origenes, V], 312-13).

⁹ *In pascha*, VI (PG, LIX, 744). It is hard to say to whom these sermons ought to be ascribed; hardly to Hippolytus, as has recently been suggested.

One cannot here pursue the theological development into the Middle Ages, when discussion was rife on the status of Christ during the *triduum mortis*; it must suffice to recall that St. Thomas held that Christ was not man in those three days.¹⁰ What is much more pertinent to the subject is to notice how certain modern Scripture scholars were coming round to Origen's opinion about this text just before it became known to be Origen's opinion by the finding of the papyrus. Michaelis was the first to reopen this line of speculation, though Lagrange apparently turned to it independently at some date later than the compiling of the first edition of his *Évangile de s. Jean* in 1925. Père Braun, O.P., adopts it enthusiastically.¹¹ These writers agree with Origen in saying that Christ goes up to the Father after meeting Mary Magdalen and before He appears to His disciples on the Sunday evening. They do not assign any purpose for this going to the Father, save to point out that it agrees better with what He said at the Last Supper (e.g., in John 14:28) than any other view. They are then concerned to square their view with the obvious fact that the Ascension took place on the fortieth day. This they do with dexterity, appealing to St. Thomas, who regards the Ascension merely as the public departure of the Lord from this earth, without wishing to make it His only one.¹² Whether the view of these writers will now be extended to cover Origen's reason for the ascent to the Father remains to be seen. If they do not, it may with fairness be urged against their view that the idea of Christ's immediate ascension after the resurrection explains the word to Magdalen very well but remains without a purpose itself.

Sir Edwyn Hoskyns made the most forcible reply to the view of Michaelis and Lagrange, saying: "The author did not write: Touch me not for I am ascending to the Father. Yet most commentators proceed as though he had so written."¹³ He then goes on to sketch with much insight a reply on the lines of the more traditional view, that the ban on touching the Lord was for the forty days, and that after that space they should receive Him in the Eucharist to touch and to handle with their hands. This is well enough, but it at once raises the question about Thomas. Why was he allowed to touch the Lord, if the ban was for the forty days? Why were the disciples generally bidden to "feel [Him] and realize that a spirit has not flesh and bones" (Luke 24:39)? Must the ban be meant for the women only, because they were not to be accredited witnesses whose duty it was to preach the resurrection? This might be said, or it might be urged that a change of plan, at

¹⁰ Cf. *Sum. Theol.*, III, q. 50, a. 4.

¹¹ Cf. *Jésus, histoire et critique* (Tournai, 1947), pp. 197-203.

¹² Cf. *Sum. Theol.*, III, q. 57, a. 6, ad 3m.

¹³ *The Fourth Gospel* (London, 1947) p. 542.

least in appearance, is not unknown elsewhere in Our Lord's dealings with His followers. After all, the indulgence of His showing Himself to them at Jerusalem when Galilee had been indicated as the place may well be, as Ambrose said long ago, another case of such a change of plan.

There is a further statement by Origen in the *Dialektos* which bears upon the present discussion. In chapter 4 Origen declares his mind about the public offering of the Church:

Offering (*προσφορά*) is always made to God Almighty by means of Jesus Christ. He is in His Godhead the bearer of offerings to the Father. Let not offering be made twice over, but to God by means of God. To those who have asked me to keep within the bounds of what has been agreed upon [or, perhaps, within the bounds of the creed], I may seem to be saying a bold thing; I may indeed if that saying of Scripture is not to be accepted as true which says: "Thou shalt not regard the person of man nor honour the countenance of the mighty" (Levit. 19:15). Is he perchance a bishop who made that request? In such a (haughty) manner does he actually rise up in the midst of all—if we are not going to keep to the Scripture precept—and thus he might turn these agreements into an occasion of further disturbance. Is he bishop or priest? No, he is not a bishop nor a priest. Is he a deacon? No, he is not a deacon, not even a lesser minister. Is he a layman? He is no layman, and has no part in our assemblies. If you agree with me, let these agreements be made.¹⁴

Origen has been troubled by the cavils of some powerful person who, while not being a Catholic, has undertaken to criticize his theology.¹⁵ His statement, therefore, on the Mass is the more guarded in consequence. Christ is the bearer of offering (*πρόσφορος*, in the active sense of this adjective-formed-from-verb). He is also, and Origen probably intended the play on words, suited to (or apposite to, in the passive sense of *πρόσφορος*) the Father by His divinity. One may wonder if Origen thought of Christ, as God, acting as high priest on behalf of mortal man, depositing His human spirit with the Father in the sacrifice of the Cross and receiving it back at the resurrection. By saying that offering is made to God by means of God, he does seem to want the divine nature of Christ rather than the human to perform the act of sacrifice. In doing so, Origen would be in line with the other Alexan-

¹⁴ The translation given is an attempt to make sense out of a badly-preserved section of Origen's Greek. It supposes the minimum of change from the text as printed by M. Schérer, whose own French version is here very sketchy, leaving whole phrases untranslated.

¹⁵ Origen was called to Antioch to speak about Christianity before Mammaea, mother of the emperor Severus. Had he fallen foul of some imperial *amicus* with an interest in theology?

drines who champion the divine priesthood of Christ. Clement certainly has it¹⁶ and Cyril later on.¹⁷ Gregory Thaumaturgus and Eusebius are also cited by Thomassin for the same view¹⁸ and, though he does not produce a text from Origen, it is fairly safe to say that Origen must have been the link between Clement and posterity for this idea. How far the idea has been abandoned by later theologians as an aberration from the true tradition can be seen by Galtier's article on "La Religion du Fils."¹⁹ It might still be said against Origen that to deposit is not to sacrifice, but he could then reply that Christ did sacrifice His human *pneuma*, only to receive it back again, just as the priest partook of the victim which he had sacrificed to the God of Israel. It will be clear from the foregoing that the new Origen discovery has given theologians something which should cause them furiously to think.

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¹⁶ *Protrepticus*, XII, 120, 2 (GCS, XII [Clem. Alex., I], 84).

¹⁷ *De adoratione et cultu in spiritu et veritate*, IX (PG, LXVIII, 625)

¹⁸ *De Incarnatione*, X, c. 9, nn. 1-6.

¹⁹ *Revue d'ascétique et de mystique*, XIX (1938), 337-75; cf. p. 352.