

# The origin in Origen : christian creation or platonic demiurgy?

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie = Revue philosophique et théologique de Fribourg = Rivista filosofica e teologica di Friburgo = Review of philosophy and theology of Fribourg**

Band (Jahr): **54 (2007)**

Heft 1-2

PDF erstellt am: **14.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-760533>

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## The Origin in Origen: Christian Creation or Platonic Demiurgy?<sup>1</sup>

With regard to the origin of the world, where does Origen stand? Is the world the product of Reason and Necessity, as in Plato's *Timaeus*, or was it created by a benevolent paternal divinity? I think that ultimately Origen attempts to harmonise the two: Biblical revelation provides him with the authority that he needs, but in fact his toolkit is inherited from philosophy. In Origen's peculiar amalgam of Christian and Platonic thought, God the Father is ultimately the Demiurge, since He continually generates the noetic realm. The Holy Spirit lies beyond the scope of this paper since, unlike the Father and the Son, it does not have a metaphysical function within the Origenian system, where its role is confined to the Saints.<sup>2</sup>

The Son is contained within the Father, who as First Principle has generated Him atemporally.<sup>3</sup> Since it is part of God's nature to be a Father (this, I think, needs no justification from a Christian perspective, nor does Origen give it any), he must have always been the Father of a Son.<sup>4</sup> The Son is identified with the Wisdom and Logos of the Father, and also contains the intelligible world of Platonic ideas.<sup>5</sup> This clearly places the Father above the Intelligibles and modifies the traditional view that the ideas are the thoughts of God.

The *logoi* which Origen locates in the Son are a Stoic borrowing corresponding to the seeds of the beings that will emerge at the creation of the world. There is no contradiction between the identification of the Son with Logos and then subsequently with Wisdom. Origen collects the different

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for an invitation to speak at the Fribourg Conference to Professor Dominic O'Meara and Dr. Pascal Mueller-Jourdan, as well as to my supervisor at Trinity College, Dublin, Professor John Dillon and Prof. O'Meara for their invaluable suggestions. I also wish to acknowledge the award both of a Swiss Confederation scholarship from the Eidgenössische Stipendienkommission für ausländische Studierende, and a Trinity College Postgraduate Studentship.

<sup>2</sup> BERCHMAN, Robert: *From Philo To Origen - Middle Platonism in Transition* (= Brown Judaic Studies 69). Chicago/California: Scholars Press 1984, 123.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *De Principiis* I, 4, 4, 72 -77.

<sup>4</sup> For an excellent discussion of the relationship between Father and Son see WIDDICOMBE, Peter: *The Fatherhood of God: From Origen to Athanasius*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994.

<sup>5</sup> As Mark EDWARDS notes in *Origen Against Plato* (= Ashgate Studies in Philosophy and Theology in Late Antiquity). Aldershot: Ashgate 2002, 64, however, the Son does not proceed directly from the Father but from his power.

names given to the Son in Scripture and uses them as the basis for his Christology; applying the different names to different *epinoiai* (Greek = thoughts, purposes). These *epinoiai* are essentially denominations of Christ, each of which corresponds to a particular aspect of His activity, usually either demiurgic or soteriological.

Origen mentions God's Wisdom here, partly because it is what he perceives to be the central *epinoia* to which the others are subordinate, but also because it relates so strongly to the creation of the demiurgic Son; since there could never have been a time when God existed without His Wisdom, the Son must always have existed.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, to claim that there had ever been a period when God existed without His Wisdom would be to deny His perfection. Origen is perhaps also attempting to score a hit here against the Valentinian Gnostics, who posit Sophia (Wisdom) as the last of the aeons, while he places it first. The notion of a pre-temporal noetic image of creation contained in the Son also allows Origen to avoid the illogicality of positing a sudden divine temporal creation (and here we really are discussing creation in a Judaeo-Christian sense, rather than simply Platonic demiurgy), while at the same time permitting him to remain loyal to the account of *Genesis*. Wisdom contains all of future creation, which exists in it as descriptions and pre-figurations ("descripta ac praefigurata").<sup>7</sup>

Origen regards the Logos as subordinate to Wisdom, since at *Prov.* 8.22, Wisdom is said to be the main *ἀρχή* of God's Will and *Jn.* 1.1 reads "in the Wisdom (the Principle) was the Word."<sup>8</sup> While God the Father parallels the absolute simplicity of the Platonic monad or the Plotinian One, the Son contains the binary nature of the dyad - a single hypostasis with multiple aspects: Wisdom, Truth, Logos and Resurrection. This multiplicity of nature would seem to make him inferior in many respects to the Father, something that emerges elsewhere in Origenian thought; a position which would seem to be supported not only by the New Testament, but also by the Platonic positing of secondary gods.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>6</sup> "Dicitur autem et primogenitus, sicut dicit apostolus Paulus: Qui est primogenitus omnis creaturae. Nec tamen alius est primogenitus per naturam quam sapientia; sed unus atque idem est." (*De Principiis* I, 2, 1).

<sup>7</sup> "In hac ipsa ergo sapientiae subsistentia quia omnis virtus ac deformatio futurae inerat creaturae, vel eorum quae principaliter existunt vel eorum quae accidunt consequenter virtute praescientiae praeformata atque disposita: pro his ipsis, quae in ipsa sapientia velut descripta ac praefigurata fuerant creaturis, se ipsam per Salomonem dicit "creatam esse" sapientia "initium viarum dei", continens scilicet in semet ipsa universae creaturae vel initia vel rationes vel species". (*De Principiis* I, 2, 2, 50-58).

<sup>8</sup> CROUZEL, Henri / SIMONETTI, Manlio (eds.): *Origène, Traité des Principes* (= Sources Chrétiennes). Paris: Éditions du Cerf 1978-1984.

<sup>9</sup> Origen explicitly affirms the inferiority of the Son at *Contra Celsum* VIII, 15, 22-26.

Clearly Origen's Christ-Logos fulfils the role of a secondary demiurgic god and like Numenius' Second God seems to be split.<sup>10</sup> Origen works hard to justify the notion of diversity in unity and so the Son-Logos is more along the lines of the Plotinian Nous (*Enn.* V, 1, 4), the God of Alcinous (*Did.* 10.3) or that of Philo (*Her.* 23) and Clement (*Strom.* IV, 25, 156, *Exc. Theod.* 7), but unity is not compromised by these multiple aspects (*Contra Celsum* I, 23, 16–24).<sup>11</sup>

The Son is generated eternally and unceasingly by the Father, just as a ray is generated by a source of light. At *Comm. Jn.* II, 2–18, this continual generation of the Son by the Father is compared to His unceasing contemplation of the Father; clearly the Son has moved to occupy the position of the Numenian Second God. In this case, the Son must be ordering Himself in response to the Father and it explains how the Father can still be regarded as the Demiurge, since He is involved in the continual creation of the world of Ideas contained in the Son. At *Contra Celsum* II, 9, 29–36 Christ is described as “a great power and a god beneath God and Father of the universe”. The translation “a god beneath God” is problematic and is not universally accepted as it creates a problem of subordination.<sup>12</sup> I am grateful for Dillon's suggestion of “in the train of” or “coordinated with”, since the Son is God's unnamed assistant during creation: “To him, He said “let us make Man in our image and likeness”.

What complicates the demiurgic imagery in Origen is his use of two distinct Platonic models: that of a Demiurge and the Young Gods to be found in the *Timaeus* and the Numenian concept of a Demiurge who is not himself the supreme principle. Insofar as Christ is actually the Demiurge and the Father contemplates the Intelligibles, this would follow the Numenian model. However, these Intelligibles are located in the Son, and created by the Father. In this sense, creation by Christ can be viewed as secondary and the Father plays a more active role than the Numenian First God since he is responsible for the model according to which the sensible world is made (although Numenius' First God does a preliminary sowing). While other Church Fathers such as Clement of Alexandria or Eusebius certainly had access to Numenius' work, whether Origen was aware of his doctrines has unfortunately not yet been conclusively proven.

<sup>10</sup> The second century A.D. philosopher, Numenius, posited three gods; the First God produces the Second God (essentially a Demiurge), who “splits matter and is split by it”, thereby producing the Third God.

<sup>11</sup> CROUZEL / SIMONETTI: *Origène*, 33.

<sup>12</sup> The Greek reads “θεόν κατὰ τὸν τῶν ὄλων θεόν.” Alternative propositions include “gemäss” [Koetschau]. “like” [Chadwick], “par l'ordre de” [Bouhéreau] and “secundo loco post” [Thuillier]. Cf. BORRET, Marcel (ed.): *Origène, Contra Celse* (= Sources Chrétiennes). Paris: Éditions du Cerf 1967–2005.

Creation occurs as the result of the collaboration between the Father and the Son, rather like the partnership that exists between the Demiurge and the Young Gods of the *Timaeus*. The pair have two means of creation. Firstly, the Father can create merely by wishing it, while the Son imitates Him. This is how the Father generated the Son in the first place, by means of Will resulting from intelligence, rather than isolating or dividing a part.<sup>13</sup> He is ultimately the Creator and the Son is his instrument – as Origen expressly states, the Father can only be regarded as all-powerful by means of the Son.<sup>14</sup> In the second scenario outlined in *De Principiis*, Book I, Origen compares God's working on the world to vision. He seems to act on matter by expanding and contracting intelligibly and to set events in motion by this oscillation.<sup>15</sup>

There is one important distinction which needs to be drawn between the partnership of the Father and Son here and the situation in the *Timaeus*. The production of the Young Gods is inferior to that of the Demiurge. Origen expressly rules out the notion that the Son creates the material realm in order to rival or emulate the creation of the noetic realm by the Father – it is not that the Son makes similar works, but that He similarly makes the same works.<sup>16</sup> There is evidently no notion, as in Gnosticism, of the Demiurge being in opposition to the First Principle. In fact, the entire Trinity is referred to as *εὐεργετικὴ δύναμις* and *δημιουργική*, the beneficial and demiurgic power, a term left in Greek in Rufinus' translation, so it was evidently used by Origen himself. Even though Origen uses this term, he is clearly of the view that such a technical image can only be used for the purposes of exposition. He defends, for example, the description of man's creation at *Genesis*, where he is presented as modelled by the hands of God, and the notion that God breathed into man, against the attacks of Celsus.<sup>17</sup> For Origen, Celsus has failed to understand the symbolic sense of the passage. God should not be envisaged as possessing a form similar to our own.<sup>18</sup> In breathing on His creation, God passes on His incorruptible spirit to man.

Of course, both Plato and Numenius posit a World-Soul. Interestingly, Origen does not attempt to equate this with the Holy Spirit, pointing out in-

<sup>13</sup> *De Principiis* I, 2, 6, 161–168. Cf. LYMAN, J. Rebecca: *Christology and Cosmology – Models of Divine Activity in Origen, Eusebius and Athanasius*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993, 71.

<sup>14</sup> *De Principiis* I, 2, 10.

<sup>15</sup> “Sed nec magnitudine corporali mens indiget, ut agat aliquid vel moveatur sicut oculus, cum in maiora quidam corpora intuendo diffunditur, ad parva vero et exigua coartatur et adstringitur ad videndum. Indiget sane mens magnitudine intellegibili, quia non corporaliter, sed intellegibiliter crescit.” (*De Principiis* I, 1, 6, 194).

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *De Principiis* I, 2, 12, esp. “cum in evangelio filius dicatur non similia facere, sed eadem similiter facere”.

<sup>17</sup> *Contra Celsum* IV, 37.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *De Principiis* II, 8, 5, for allegorical references to the arms, legs and eyes of God as well as an interesting discussion concerning His soul.



stead that the Holy Spirit has no counterpart in the writings of pagan philosophers.<sup>19</sup> The closest counterpart to the Platonic World-Soul in Origen is the human soul of Christ. In spite of this absence on a metaphysical level, Origen still draws on the imagery of the World-Soul. In a clear echo of *Timaeus* 30B, the universe is “an immense and enormous animal governed by the power and reason of God as by a single soul”.<sup>20</sup> As Crouzel and Simonetti point out, it is the Son, who, as the Power and Reason of God, constitutes the Origenian World-Soul, since this is the mechanism through which God governs the world.<sup>21</sup>

Origen is also compelled to deal with that most problematic of issues for a Christian philosopher: did God actually create the world at a fixed point in time?<sup>22</sup> He is forced to view his Demiurge as active for all eternity since, as he points out, to say otherwise would lead one to suppose that he had been prevented creating by external powers, which would go against belief in His omnipotence. The other alternative, that God had simply not wished to create until a given moment in time, would go against His immutability. To claim that God is active for all eternity, as Origen does here (an excellent philosophical choice), would be to claim that creation is co-eternal with God; a claim contrary to the Christian faith.

Origen manages to evade this problem: creation is co-eternal with God, but only insofar as this refers to the Intelligible world, containing the blueprint of creation, which itself is contained within the Son, who is produced by continual generation. We are fortunate that Rufinus leaves several of the terms of this section in the original Greek, which reveals the numerous influences which lie behind the composition of this section – that of Philo (a *ποιητική* and *βασιλική* power), and of the Platonic tradition (*Timaeus* 29), in the description of the world as an emanation from divine goodness. This solution is given explicitly at I, 4, 4, 80–85. Here Origen confirms the perpetual existence of the noetic realm. The conclusion to this argument advanced with some caution at I, 4, 5, 100–105 is that if the noetic realm always existed, then the *genera* and *species* must also have done so. This raises the question of whether individualities (*singula*) could possibly have always existed. Origen only mentions the issue, but does not attempt to provide a solution; he is here in an area where the Church of his day had not yet produced a dogmatic response.

In any case, it is the fall of individual souls which prompts God to create the material realm, with the souls of the devil and the demons falling further

<sup>19</sup> *De Principiis* I, 3, 1, 18–21.

<sup>20</sup> “universum mundum velut animal quoddam immensum atque inmane opinandum puto quod quasi ab una anima virtute dei ac ratione teneatur.” (*De Principiis* II, 1, 3).

<sup>21</sup> CROUZEL / SIMONETTI: *Origène*, 133, n. 15.

<sup>22</sup> At *Contra Celsum* I.19.1–9, the world is less than ten thousand years old, according to the account of Moses.

than those of men, the saints and the angels. This idea is clearly inspired by *Phaedrus* 246b-d, but Origen moves away from Plato in his negative view of the Gnostic religion. Origen also introduces his own Christian version of Stoic ἐκπέρωσις; there is the possibility of successive worlds, because once souls have learnt to make the morally correct choices this world will pass away, although the continued existence of free will leaves open the possibility of a further fall.

Origen's account of the creation of the stars is more Platonic than Christian, which proved to be problematic for him, since the Church condemned the notion that the stars were alive. Although, for obvious reasons, Origen cannot claim, like Plato, that the planets are heavenly gods, he does view them as the products of rational design.<sup>23</sup> The heavenly bodies are beings intermediate between angels and men, who accept a material body in order to be of use to humanity. Of note here is the precise method by which the celestial orbs are constructed.<sup>24</sup> For Origen, the soul is older than the body, as in the *Timaeus*, and both are constructed separately. This image of insertion from outside is particularly interesting, since the stars seem to exist at some point without corporeality, though in light of the creation account in terms of the enmattering of souls, it is hardly surprising.<sup>25</sup>

In Origen, we are actually dealing with creation in the true sense of the word – not the mere ordering of pre-existent matter. His view of matter, however, is in line with standard Middle Platonic teaching. It is an amorphous substrate which has to be informed by a specific quality: it can be arranged as an instantiation of any particular Form without being engendered by it.<sup>26</sup> For Origen, matter is not the origin of evil and there can be no question of it existing as an uncreated principle, as in dualistic Platonists such as Speusippus or Plutarch. It would not be suitable to be ordered by divine wisdom if it had not been created by divine Providence.<sup>27</sup> As Plato asserted in the *Timaeus*, all matter was used up by the Demiurge during creation; however, Origen interprets this to mean that God calculated the necessary quantity of matter precisely and only created that amount.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>23</sup> *De Principiis* I, 7, 3.

<sup>24</sup> "fecit deus duo luminaria magna, luminare maius in principatum diei et luminare minus in principatum noctis et stellas an non cum ipsis corporibus, sed extrinsecus factus iam corporibus inseruerit spiritum, pervidendum est." (*De Principiis* I, 7, 4, 107–11).

<sup>25</sup> It is necessary to note that Rufinus may use *spiritus* to translate νοῦς rather than πνεῦμα, (although he usually translates νοῦς by *mens* or *animus*).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *Contra Celsum* III, 41; IV, 47, *Comm. Jn.* XIII, 21, 27; XIII, 61 (59), 429, *Frag. Gen.*, PG 12, 485; *De Principiis*. IV, 4, 5–8; III, 6, 4.

<sup>27</sup> *De Principiis* II, 1, 4, 125–156.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *De Principiis* II, 9, 1 where God only creates as many creatures as are necessary for adorning the world.

It could, of course, be argued that the Father merely uses up all matter in creation, but in fact the quantity of matter used to make each body is directly linked to the depth of the fall of the soul. Angels have more refined bodies than humans, while those of demons are heavier. Therefore, only God would be capable of creating the precise amount necessary for creation. Origen uses Stoicism to bridge the gap between Platonism and Christianity: at *De Principiis* IV, 4, 7, (34), he points out that even those who regard matter as uncreated accept that its qualities are created by God. He argues that once his opponents concede that matter is nothing other than an assemblage of qualities, one dispenses with the substrate; if matter only consists of qualities than these qualities are created by God, therefore matter is created by God. Of course, Origen is somewhat inconsistent, since elsewhere he states that matter is a substrate without qualities, but in its instantiation in the material realm it always exists with them.

This raises the question of Origen's conception of matter. I do not think he would be willing to postulate a pre-existent matter, since this would make it coeval with God. Once created, it does not seem that it is possible for it to disappear completely even at the end of the created world; rather it will gradually be converted into aether.<sup>29</sup> Since Origen accepts the possibility of a further fall,<sup>30</sup> this would indicate that during a subsequent creation this aether could be re-converted by God into matter. Origen, rather conveniently supplies us with a definition of matter.<sup>31</sup> It is "the substrate of the body... by which the body exists with the addition or insertion of qualities." These four qualities, heat, cold, dry and wet, are not actually part of matter, although matter does not exist without qualities.

For Origen, matter is the product of God.<sup>32</sup> He even avails of a Stoic loophole: the view that matter is uncreated and amorphous, but that its qualities are created by God.<sup>33</sup> Origen argues that once his opponents are forced to concede that matter is merely an assemblage of qualities, they dispense with the

<sup>29</sup> "Sed quoniam non ad subitum omne indumentum corporeum effugere poterant, prius in subtilioribus ac purioribus inmorari corporibus aestimandi sunt, quae ultra nec a morte vinci nec aculeo mortis compungi praevalent, ut ita demum paulatim cessante natura materiali et absorbeatur mors et exterminetur in finem atque omnis eius aculeus penitus retundatur per divinam gratiam cuius capax effecta est anima et incorruptionem atque immortalitatem meruit adipisci." (*De Principiis* II, 3, 3, 109–118).

<sup>30</sup> *De Principiis* II, 3, 3, 130–142.

<sup>31</sup> *De Principiis* II, 1, 4, 108–117.

<sup>32</sup> "Hanc ergo materiam, quae tanta ac talis est ut et sufficere ad omnia mundi corpora, quae esse deus voluit, queat et conditori ad quascumque formas velit ac species famularetur in omnibus et serviret, recipiens in se qualitates, quas ipse voluisset imponere, nescio quomodo tanti et tales viri ingenitam. Id est non ab ipso deo factam conditore omnium putaverunt, sed fortuitam quondam eius naturam virtutemque dixerunt". (*De Principiis* II, 1, 4, 118–125).

<sup>33</sup> *De Principiis* IV, 4, 7, (34).



substrate.<sup>34</sup> Since matter only consists of qualities which are created by God, then it can be said to have been created by God. However, Origen's position here appears to have been adopted merely for the purpose of polemic, since elsewhere, as previously stated, he regards matter as consisting of a substrate, although it exists without qualities merely as a thought experiment.<sup>35</sup>

Since Origen does not posit a recalcitrant matter, this cannot be responsible for the existence of evil in the material realm.<sup>36</sup> Evil is introduced through the free will of created intelligences. The devil, for example, is evil through his own free choice. As devil, he is not the work of God, but insofar as he is a being, he is the creature of God.<sup>37</sup> While Plato continually affirms that the Demiurge created the best kind of world which he could, Origen tends to emphasise that the evils which exist in the material realm are in some sense part of the divine plan. Although God's Providence defends the world against the spread of evil at *Contra Celsum* IV 64, 18–23, at IV 70, 11–14 God is said to use the malice of evil individuals to preserve cosmic order. In this sense, even though God is not responsible for the existence of evil, it plays a role in the divine scheme. God is no more responsible for the existence of evil than a carpenter is responsible for the existence of sawdust which results from his woodworking (*Contra Celsum* VI, 55, 17–24).

The material realm may be a second-best option, originating as it does through the fall of souls, but it is not true to say that God's creation is limited in any way; it is exactly as He envisages it through divine foreknowledge.<sup>38</sup> God creates everything in His likeness which is why all entities are equal at the outset. Yet if some creatures fall further than others due to the choices made according to their characters, then surely God could be held responsible for giving some a nature more susceptible to corruption than others. Origen counters this possible charge of divine favouritism by adopting the Stoic view of the cosmos as a house for human and divine inhabitants, which contains vases of wood and earth in addition to those of more precious materials.<sup>39</sup> In spite of this combination of positive and negative elements, God, like the Platonic Demiurge, has still produced a harmonious world. God (or more strictly speaking Divine Providence) is responsible for the creation of individuals who turn to evil (rather than evil individuals) so that it can subsequently save

<sup>34</sup> Origen is referring here to prime matter, which can be posited as non-existent.

<sup>35</sup> *De Principiis*, IV, 7, 358. Cf. BERCHMAN: *From Philo to Origen*, 133.

<sup>36</sup> As LYMAN points out at *Christology and Cosmology*, 54, God is not limited by matter, but is capable of creating as He wishes.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Contra Celsum* IV, 40 on the transgression of Adam.

<sup>38</sup> *De Principiis* II, 9, 6, 183–198. Cf. LYMAN: *Christology and Cosmology*, 55.

<sup>39</sup> *De Principiis* II, 9, 6, 198–212.

them.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, God is also responsible for the existence of physical evil “in order to purify and to raise up those who refuse education and teaching.”<sup>41</sup>

A final similarity between the creation account of the *Timaeus* and that of Origen can be observed in the notion of secondary creation. Origen regards *καταβολή* (“a throwing down”) as the correct term to refer to the generation of the world, since rational souls were literally cast out into the material realm. This produces two natures: the rational and the corporeal. Animals are the result of a secondary creation, since they are merely a modification of matter; they contain no soul and do not possess free will. This is a move against the particularly distinctive Pythagorean-Platonic doctrine of metempsychosis of the soul. In Origen’s system, no matter how far a soul falls, it will only ever be implanted into a rational being (although this includes demons).

In conclusion, then, it is apparent that Origen is heavily influenced by the Platonic Demiurge of the *Timaeus*: he attempts to address the major issues raised by this account of the origin of the universe and even adopts its various motifs, in so far as they do not interfere with his Christian beliefs. It is hardly a shocking claim to assert that Origen attempted to Christianise the *Timaeus*, just as Valentinus had attempted to gnosticise the Demiurge, but evidently his efforts failed to prevent the *De Principiis* being burned as a heretical work. This was mainly due to the view that he claimed that the Son was a creature of the Father, a position which he does not actually assert and which ironically seems to have resulted from reading the text with the Middle Platonic “Second God” in mind. Ultimately in his account of creation, it seems that Origen possessed the most unenviable reputation of being a Platonist to Christians and a Christian to Platonists. That he failed to resolve the inconsistencies between Platonic demiurgy and Christian creation to the satisfaction of his (Christian) contemporaries is evident from the fate meted out to the *De Principiis* by his opponents.

<sup>40</sup> *Contra Celsum* VI, 56, 1-24.

<sup>41</sup> *Contra Celsum* VI, 56.