

# Liberation: Challenges to Modern Orthodox Theology from the Contextual Theologies<sup>1</sup>

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When it comes to the articulation of theology, context is at the same time an inevitability, a responsibility, and a liability. It is inevitable that every expression of theology is brought forth in a particular language, at a particular time and place. It is a responsibility in that the framing of theology must be responsive to evolving cultural, linguistic, and even socioeconomic realities: it must address its prophetic word to people where they are. But context can also be a liability when a theological expression remains bound to an ancient or otherwise distant formula without perceiving the need to “translate” it from its original setting.<sup>2</sup> Context can also be a liability when it overtakes theology, where theology becomes so beholden to its linguistic, cultural, and sociological setting that it loses its prophetic character altogether. Such, then, is the challenge facing anyone who dares articulate theology: to express genuine, timeless, true theology in a way that is conditioned by context, receivable within context, but not diluted by context.

At different points in history, theological expression has been stamped to greater and lesser degrees by its historical setting. As an example of heightened contextual awareness, the Liberation theologies that arose out of Latin America in the 1960s engendered several movements of pastoral, theological, and ecclesiological significance. Cut to the heart by societal and ecclesiastical injustice, as well as inattention to the plight of the poor and otherwise marginalized and dehumanized of society, theological expressions arose from numerous geographical and socioeconomic settings, coming collectively to be known as “contextual theologies” owing to the primary role played by the contexts that engendered them. These began within the Roman Catholic Church and continued to find expression both there and in Protestant and independent churches. The question underlying the present essay is why the Orthodox churches, flourishing over the centuries in lands with as much poverty, oppression, and suffering as anywhere, have not produced a significant “contextual” or “liberation” theology.

Here I will first introduce, especially to Orthodox audiences unfamiliar with it, the phenomenon of the modern contextual theologies, exploring their basic features and the impulses that evinced them. I will proceed to examine twentieth-

1 Portions of this essay were delivered at a conference at the Volos Academy for Theological Studies, June 3-6, 2010. The conference title was “Neo-patristic Synthesis or Post-patristic Theology: Can Orthodox Theology be Contextual?”

2 As an example of the latter, the Chalcedonian “in two natures” language bears the indelible stamp of a highly particularized context: classical Greek ontological terminology that had undergone various Christian adaptations over centuries. This language continues to challenge its contemporary interpreters.

century Orthodox thinkers in terms of their responsiveness to their own contexts. Underlying both explorations will be the issues of poverty and injustice, the scriptural word to the poor, and the theological response to that word.

#### “CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGIES” AND THE RUBRIC OF LIBERATION

A constellation of theological/practical systems emerging from within Western Christianity came to be called “contextual theologies,” owing to the fact that they consciously took their respective contexts—whether regional, sexual, or socio-political—as their starting point. Latin American Liberation Theology, drawing on centuries-old roots in Church advocacy for the marginalized,<sup>3</sup> was the first, most enduring, and most emblematic example. Its context was Roman Catholic Latin America, but more significantly it was a setting of systemic poverty, political oppression, and dehumanization. Its early proponents were quick to note that “Liberation Theology” is a misnomer, since the movement was primarily concerned with praxis. In fact, “theology”—something seen as abstract and intellectual—was taken as part of the problem since it did not speak to the people, addressing neither their spiritual nor their material needs, and did nothing to overturn systemically unjust political structures. Nonetheless, a theology (testified by countless books, essays, and tenured faculty positions) inevitably emanated from within the Liberation movement.<sup>4</sup> Its hallmark was a vision of salvation in Christ as bound up with spiritual and practical liberation, stemming from God’s particular love for the poor and oppressed from among his people.

Liberation theologies took many forms within Latin America—some with greater and others with lesser concern for accountability to a traditional apostolic faith and ministry. The Catholic Church itself responded at times favorably, but more often in condemnatory tones—the latter especially in those instances where Christian liberation movements allied themselves (explicitly or implicitly) with Marxist ideology or advocated violent resistance.

The rubric of salvation-as-liberation was taken up subsequently within several other contextual theologies. These included regional expressions, such as Minjung theology, which spoke in a dramatically contextualized way to the societal wounds of Koreans under the Park regime in the 1960s and 70s. But more notably, in the sense of carrying a wider resonance, several sectors within Western society developed their own liberation-based theologies in response to their own particular situations. Examples include black theologies (in particular to the plight of African Americans), feminist theologies, gay/queer/LGBT theologies, and others. While these represent a broadly diverse set of contexts and theological expressions, even

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3 The 16th-century Dominican friar Bartolomé de las Casas, Bishop of Chiapas, is a prime example of such advocacy.

4 A rudimentary bibliography of seminal works would include: Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988, c1973), Juan Luis Segundo *The Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1976), Leonardo Boff, *Liberating Grace* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979) and *Ecclesiology: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), Jon Sobrino *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1978), and José Míguez Bonino *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1975).

from within each of their respective subsets, they arise out of related concerns and espouse broadly similar methodologies, of which I will here focus on three, presenting them initially without value judgment.

#### A) INADEQUACIES OF TRADITIONAL THEOLOGY

Underlying most expressions of the contextual theologies is the fundamental perception that traditional expressions of theology and Church life have failed to speak genuinely to people—other than to European and North American middle- and upper-class intellectuals. This has to do both with the perceived failure of traditional theology to go beyond its (largely Greek and philosophically-conditioned) modes of thought and expression, as well as the relative silence within traditional theology regarding the glaring injustices that describe human society both universally, and particularly in certain contexts.

#### B) CHRIST AS LIBERATOR

Contextual theologies portray Christ and Christianity as being primarily about liberation. Their readings, both of society and of Scripture, is such that Christ—in his teaching and in his self-sacrificial act—demonstrates the depravity of human power-structures, and demonstrates and effects God’s liberation of those who are poor and oppressed. His death on the cross is not in itself ontologically instrumental as much as it is the inevitable culmination of a life of prophetic truth-telling within an unjust society and a corrupt religion, and a sign of divine solidarity with the oppressed.

#### C) SCRIPTURE AND THE POOR

Contextual theologies rest on the observation that, when it comes to God’s relationship to the poor and the oppressed, the scriptural voice is clear and consistent. While God loves “humanity,” the Law (notably the Exodus narrative), the Psalms, the Prophets, and the words and actions of Jesus Christ himself, testify in unison that God has a special concern for the oppressed and the poor. What becomes a slogan of liberation theology, “God’s preferential option for the poor,” comes to be extended to God’s particular love for any class that is oppressed for its socio-economic status, its race, its gender, or its sexual orientation.

#### CRITICAL APPRAISAL

Contextual theologies have been the subject of considerable criticism, almost entirely from the church bodies from which they sprang.<sup>5</sup> These follow several com-

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5 Among several critical statements emanating from the Vatican, see the *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the “Theology of Liberation”* by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 1984. Available online at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19840806\\_theology-liberation\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19840806_theology-liberation_en.html) (accessed December 1, 2010).

mon themes.<sup>6</sup> One is the problem of sin and righteousness: Liberation theologies make “the poor,” and sometimes the otherwise-oppressed, into a discrete class of humanity, and notably a *sinless* class. Liberation theologies do not focus on the universality of human sin, and steer clear of the potential role of the complicity of “the masses” with oppressive regimes. Sin lies exclusively with the oppressor. The poor are the sinned-*against*, putting them in an entirely different category vis-à-vis repentance and salvation. (It ought to be noted that much of this criticism stems from persons who have not themselves been the subjects of systematic de-humanization and abject poverty.)

Another common criticism is that theology itself, the supra-transcendence of God, and most notably the divinity of Christ, do not play prominent roles in liberation theologies, particularly inasmuch as these distance God and Christ from the people. The deeply soteriological theology that we Orthodox consider vital—the doctrine of Christ’s perfect divinity and humanity and its concomitant sacramental theology—is seen as only perpetuating the impenetrability and irrelevance of Greek philosophical categories and ontological terminology to an impoverished and dehumanized people.

Moreover, Liberation theologies rarely prioritize accountability to the Church as a whole, geographically and temporally. The criterion of “apostolicity” fades before that of the people: the local community and their collective personal experience form the genuine hermeneutical community. As a subset of this criticism, it is noted that Liberation theologies have the potential of being deaf to the inherent paradox of being movements of *empowerment*—of the poor, of women, of gay people, etc.—within a Church that is founded upon kenosis. (Admittedly, this is a complex and problematic dynamic, owing to the systemic abuse of power in society and the Church alike, one that shamefully utilizes Christian kenoticism.)

And finally, some Liberation theologies, though far from all of them, have aligned themselves more or less explicitly with Marxist ideology, going beyond Marxism’s fundamental imperative to redress gross imbalances of wealth. In particular there is a tendency to define all human history, as well as the scriptural imperatives of love and peace, in terms of class struggle. Marxist strains within some Liberation theologies are further aggravated by their advocacy of violent resistance to oppressive structures.

These criticisms are by now well known, and each of them deserves a hearing as well as a response from Liberation theologians. Yet before we consider the case to be closed, and before we consider ourselves as Orthodox to have provided all the satisfactory answers, we must look more closely at the liberation movements, and at ourselves. I would contest that even if we find fault in much that is expressed under the banner of “Liberation theologies,” it would be impossible to fault some of the impulses that evinced them. For example, it would be difficult to read the Bible without noticing a consistent word addressed to the poor, together with a very different word addressed to those who oppress the poor and perpetuate their poverty.<sup>7</sup> The message

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Arthur F. McGovern, *Liberation Theology and Its Critics: Towards an Assessment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> Within the Pentateuch alone, see Deut. 15:4-11; 24:19-22; Exod. 22:21-27; 23:6-11; Lev. 19:9-10; 25:25-28; 25:35-55. Within the Psalms and Prophets the examples of God’s solidarity with the

to the poor is indeed one of consolation and the expectation of deliverance. Almost never does Scripture call to remembrance their sin. “Because the poor are despoiled, because the needy groan, I will now arise,” says the LORD; “I will place him in the safety for which he longs” (Ps. 12:6). The message to the oppressor is entirely the opposite, consisting of the harshest rebuke, because forsaking the poor runs counter to God’s call to His people to walk in His ways. Scripture doesn’t say that the poor are automatically sinless—indeed, some people are poor *because* of their sin.<sup>8</sup> But as a whole, Scripture speaks undeniably about God’s preferential option for the poor. And woe to the one who oppresses them.

Hear this word, you cows of Bashan, who are in the mountain of Sama’ria, who oppress the poor, who crush the needy, who say to their husbands, ‘Bring, that we may drink!’ The Lord GOD has sworn by his holiness that, behold, the days are coming upon you, when they shall take you away with hooks, even the last of you with fishhooks. And you shall go out through the breaches, every one straight before her; and you shall be cast forth into Harmon,” says the LORD. (Amos 4:1-3)

We need not cite here Jesus’ consistent words about poverty, his solidarity with the poor, and his words for the rich. It is worth recalling that the preaching of good news to the poor is one of the Messianic signs, one that Jesus himself invokes concerning his ministry (Luke 4:18; cf. also Luke 7:22 and Matthew 11:5).

Whatever their faults, Liberation theologies have hearkened to a voice that is at the very root of the scriptural message, and have attempted to give it not only practical but also theological and ecclesiological expression.

With this in mind, for the remainder of this essay I will attend to two questions pertaining to Orthodox theology. The first question rests at the general level: what has characterized the contextuality of twentieth century Orthodox theology? In other words, what aspects of their particular contexts were most compelling to twentieth century Orthodox theologians? The second question is more particular: given that Orthodox Christians in the twentieth century suffered no less poverty, no less oppressive and murderous brutality than any Christians who produced liberation-based theologies, what has prevented them from producing a theology emanating from the context of poverty and oppression, and what might constitute such a theology?

## 20TH CENTURY ORTHODOX THEOLOGY: A SELECTIVE CONTEXTUALITY

Although many of the contextual factors that evoked Liberation theologies are common to societies in which Orthodox theologians lived and flourished in the twentieth century, the contextuality of Orthodox theology has produced a very different picture. What are some of the features of the twentieth century Orthodox context? To begin with, we might note the fact that the émigré theologians (who, partly

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poor, and His wrath with those who oppress them, would be far too numerous to mention here.

8 cf. Deut 28:15ff.; Prov. 13:21.

because they were able to flourish as their colleagues behind the Iron Curtain could not, constituted a significant portion of the twentieth-century Orthodox output) were thrust into contexts where Orthodox Christianity was the minority, something that had profound effects on the framing of their theologies. Placed among Roman Catholics, Anglicans, and Mainline Protestants, the émigré theologians quickly sought to reframe and rephrase Orthodox theology in terms of both harmony and distinction from the Christian West. Further, they began to elaborate fresh ecclesiological thinking. Not only the inter-Christian, but in some places also the inter-faith landscape has influenced Orthodox theology. The parabolic rise of scientific inquiry and discovery has also made it necessary to consider, for example, the relationship between scientific theories about the genesis of the universe (and specifically the human being) and the Christian readings of Genesis 1-3.

Among contextual factors influencing twentieth century theologians in the West (whether of the “Paris School” or the “Neo-Patristic” movement), a privileged place surely goes to continental philosophy, with an emphasis on the influence of German Idealism. Little captivated the thought of Bulgakov, Florovsky, Lossky, and their notable disciples in Greece and the United States more than the thought of Hegel, Schelling, and their respective ideas about both ontology and the nature of history. (As it happens, here in 2010, German Idealism could scarcely be *less* relevant. Times change.)

In retrospect, it is at the same time understandable and puzzling that the above factors provoked a contextualized response from twentieth-century Orthodox theologians, while the same cannot be said for World War II, the continued advance of Islam, the slaughter through weaponry and starvation alike of tens of millions of Orthodox Christians in Russia, Ukraine, Serbia, and elsewhere, together with the prohibition of teaching and preaching the Gospel. The near-absence of *theologically* based words of inspiration from modern Orthodox thinkers to the impoverished, the war-torn, and those suffering under oppressive regimes, has indeed been seen as alarming even by Orthodox thinkers. In a rare modern-Orthodox essay dedicated to the blight of social injustice, G. P. Fedotov suggested that Marxism has wrested away what properly belongs to Christianity: the social gospel of Christ. He asserts that Marxism was awaiting an answer from Christianity, and that the destiny of the world depends on the response.<sup>9</sup> Later on, Alexander Schmemmann would deem this response a failure:

Is it a mere accident that today [1979] some ninety percent of Orthodox people live in totalitarian, atheistic and militantly anti-Christian states? Does this not indicate a failure of the [contemporary] Eastern approach to the problems of the world?<sup>10</sup>

This constitutes a remarkable (and rare) invitation to self-criticism. And there is reason both to accept such a criticism as well as to defend twentieth century Orthodox

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9 G.P. Fedotov, “The Church and Social Justice,” in *St Vladimir’s Seminary Quarterly* 3.3 (1963), 417-432; cf. p. 432.

10 *Church, World, Mission* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1979) p. 26.

theology. Both of these would be useful lines of speculation, which I will only begin to suggest here.

If we want to defend twentieth century Orthodox theologians, we might begin by pointing out the terrible constraints that prohibited the flourishing of Orthodox theology of any kind, especially pertaining to justice issues, most especially behind the Iron Curtain and in occupied Western Europe. Another defense would consist of listing some of the instances where Orthodox theologians *did* address poverty and injustice theologically. The political theologies/philosophies, especially of Bulgakov, Berdyaev, to an extent Florovsky, and more recently Yannaras and Zizioulas have, each in their own way, attempted to express intersections between socio-political commentary and theology. In addition, poverty and injustice could be said to have played a part (though sometimes only implicitly) in the modern Orthodox reflections on theodicy and the problem of evil. More recently there is an increasing number of books and conferences organized around the theme of wealth and poverty in the Early Church, even if some of these are of historical and sociological interest rather than of theological significance.<sup>11</sup> We may also suggest that monasticism, as an institution, is by nature both an eschatological movement and a living solidarity with the poor—although here again this solidarity has not itself been the subject of considerable *theological* reflection.<sup>12</sup>

A crucially important reason that modern Orthodox thinkers did not give any great weight to poverty and injustice in their theological output was Orthodoxy's visceral distaste for Marxism. In one of history's greatest ironies, "Marxism"—growing theoretically from a concern for human beings and their universal flourishing, became practically associated with regimes that were among the most murderous and oppressive known to modernity. As a result, the mere utterance of expressions associated with Marxism or Socialism, such as "social justice" and "the social gospel," carried (and still carry) the most repulsive stench among many Orthodox. Marxism in its purest theoretical form deserved a hearing and a critical response, as Fedotov noted,<sup>13</sup> but such Marxism (not to speak of Socialism) was scarcely discernible within the Communist states. Fr. Sergius Bulgakov's lingering interest in his erstwhile Marxist ideology, compounded by the concern for social justice found in Soloviev and others of his predecessors, was an exception to the tacit rule of Orthodox non-engagement with Marxism.

The above constitutes some of the appropriate (or at least understandable) reasons that modern Orthodox thinkers have not applied their theological efforts in the direction of human poverty and oppression. Other reasons, I would suggest, are possibly more problematic. The most glaring of these might be the sharply limited approach within modern Orthodox theology to Holy Scripture. The modern study

11 The website [www.povertystudies.org](http://www.povertystudies.org) is an indispensable resource on this score. An important example of a recent theological conference is the Sophia Institute Academic Conference held in New York on December 4, 2009, on "Philanthropy and Social Compassion in Eastern Orthodox Tradition." The papers are published under that title by Theotokos Press, 2010.

12 Individual monastics, such as the remarkable twentieth-century saint Mother Maria Skobtsova, did write searching reflections on poverty, but was generally too busy serving the poor. See *Mother Maria Skobtsova: Essential Writings* (Orbis: 2003).

13 See above at note 9.

of the Old and New Testaments is typically relegated to a handful of “Scripture scholars,” who are often considered “Protestant” for their interest in the Bible, and who are themselves reluctant to enter the field of theology proper.<sup>14</sup> For the twentieth century Orthodox dogmatic and patristic theologians, Scripture tended to constitute a highly selective lexicon for the contemporary elaboration of classical theological assertions. In other words, although modern Orthodox theology often succeeds in giving fresh and topical articulation to theological doctrines and yields genuinely new insights on the apostolic faith, it continues to address almost exclusively ontological/philosophical issues. The problem is that when we look to Scripture primarily to answer questions about essence, nature, hypostasis, and the divine-human koinonia, we ignore some of Scripture’s most fundamental and overarching assertions about God and man. We are missing the forest for the trees. Proverbs 8:22 and 9:1 are keystones in our Christological and Mariological statements, and justifiably so. But there are literally ten times more references in Proverbs that deal specifically with poverty and oppression.<sup>15</sup>

In an attempt to be faithful to the Fathers, the modern Orthodox approach to Scripture is too often anachronistic. Florovsky speaks in his eponymous essay of reclaiming “the lost scriptural mind,” but his stated solution rests not in reading the Bible but in preaching the Creeds and the Councils.<sup>16</sup> (One might think that recovering the lost scriptural mind might also have something to do with actually reading the Bible). Of course, these interrelate: Scripture was the chief criterion for the Fathers and the Councils, and Florovsky himself liked to say that Tradition (through the creeds and councils) functioned only to read Scripture properly, or in his words, “Tradition was actually Scripture, rightly understood.”<sup>17</sup> But Tradition does not end with the age of the seven ecumenical councils, and neither should the “right understanding of Scripture” end with the eighth century. The use of Scripture within the Creeds and Councils was necessarily limited to the articulation of strictly Christological and Trinitarian dogmas, owing to the pressing theological questions that threatened the life of the Church. The problem then lies in an incomplete transmission from ancient to modern contexts: although confronted with a wide spectrum of new problematics, modern Orthodox theologians have adopted the scriptural purview that was dictated by the ancient doctrinal crises, almost never transcending its bounds. As in the age of the Councils, so today, Scripture rarely speaks to theologians outside of its latent Christological and Trinitarian data.<sup>18</sup>

There is at least one more reason for Orthodox theological reticence on poverty and injustice, and this lies with the observation that, just as in the Patristic

14 Pantelis Kalaitzidis has recently remarked on this problem, referring to a modern Orthodox “patristic fundamentalism.” See his “From the ‘Return to the Fathers’ to the Need for a Modern Orthodox Theology,” *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 54 (2010), 5-36.

15 See, e.g., Proverbs 13:23; 14:21; 14:31; 16:19; 19:17; 21:13; 22:9; 22:16; 22:22; 29:7; 29:14; 31:9.

16 “The Lost Scriptural Mind,” in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, Collected Works, Vol. I (Vaduz: Buechervertriebsanstalt, 1987), 9-16.

17 “The Function of Tradition in the Ancient Church,” in *ibid.*, 75.

18 My colleague Fr. John Behr has frequently pointed to the lack of a holistic scriptural consciousness in modern Orthodox theology: cf. especially *The Way to Nicea*, and *The Mystery of Christ: Life in Death* (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 2001 and 2006, respectively).

reflections of the first Christian millennium, the perennial problems of the poor and the marginalized are properly relegated to the practical and homiletic spheres. There is robust social action in the Early Church, there is the great *Basiliade*, and there are the homilies of St Basil, St John Chrysostom, and many others on social justice, orations that indeed perfectly echo the Scriptures, perhaps especially the spirit of the Old Testament prophets. The idea, then, would be that poverty is not a theological issue but an ethical one. Yet this should strike us as a compartmentalization of theology that also may have been appropriate to an earlier age but needs to be redressed today. Nikolai Berdyaev is known for the dictum, “When I am hungry, it is a material problem; when my neighbor is hungry, it is a spiritual problem.” While this is a compelling sentiment, it perpetuates a basic spirit-matter dualism. The problem of hunger is always material, spiritual, and theological. Theology and faith are “dead” when not expressed in good works (St. Maximus the Confessor echoes the pastoral epistles of St. James and St. John when he says that “theology without action (praxis) is the theology of demons.”).<sup>19</sup> But furthermore, how can ethics and praxis not be grounded in theology, and how can theology be deaf to poverty and injustice, which are so perfectly emblematic of the tragic fallenness of humanity? So finally, how can material problems be understood as discrete from spiritual problems? We need more than an ethic or a rebuke; we also need a theology of poverty and injustice—even if it only serves to underscore the ethical rebuke.

#### A THEOLOGY OF POVERTY?

Allow me to sketch out a few possible directions that might be fruitfully pursued toward a theology of poverty, beginning with some that have already begun to be explored. The twentieth century has seen some halting efforts at casting social responsibility in a Trinitarian light. The Russian theologian Nikolai Fyodorov (+1903) is known for little else than his statement, “Our social program is the Holy Trinity.” Although he is often idiosyncratic in the extreme, his work deserves more attention. Some decades later, a “social doctrine of the Trinity” has been criticized on several points,<sup>20</sup> one of them being that it is foreign to the Church Fathers: but this is an argument from silence. The absence in the Fathers of a robust “social Trinitarianism” should not prevent us from attempting to articulate our own. A more appropriate critique of social Trinitarianism may rest in the limitations of its purview: ironically, it has thus far addressed almost exclusively the (supra-non-knowable) divine realm and takes little concern to apply its conclusions to the human sphere that lies right before our eyes. Reflections on social Trinitarianism ought to go beyond an abstract “communion ontology,” however significant that might be within its own proper limits, and enter deeply into the practical realm, exploring what it might look like to realize, from within a broken world, something of the kenotic interpersonal communion that describes the Holy Trinity.

What about the Christological dimensions of poverty? No one fails to no-

<sup>19</sup> *Epistle 20* (PG 91, 601C). Cited in Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (Penguin, 1997) p 207.

<sup>20</sup> A summary of the arguments *pro et contra* can be found in Alan Brown, “On the Criticism of *Being as Communion* in Anglophone Orthodox Theology,” in Douglas H. Knight, ed., *The Theology of John Zizioulas: Personhood and the Church* (Ashgate, 2006), 35-78, at pages 41-43 and 65-68.

tice that a vast proportion of Jesus' words address poverty, wealth, and tax-collection, but what of the fact that the saving and victorious act of Christ is one of willed subjection to religious and societal injustice, subjection that bore a latent but decisive triumph? The *kenotic* Christ, the voluntarily impoverished slave who becomes a curse for us, is the scriptural icon of man as well as of God Himself. What does it mean, for us personally and for human society, to speak not only of the kenotic Christ but the kenotic *God*? Might not such a theology build profoundly upon the Scriptural message of God's *particular* love for the poor, as well as go beyond it? Vladimir Lossky periodically hints at such an idea, such as where he speaks of God as "a beggar of love, waiting at the soul's door, never daring to force it."<sup>21</sup> In such areas, even if they will make their own particular stamp, Orthodox theologians may profit from and respond to the reflections of others who are loosely or deeply associated with liberation movements.<sup>22</sup>

What of anthropology? Our theology of the divine image in the human person is rightly brought to the service of a pro-life ethic that sees life as sacred from the womb onward. This needs to be expanded to dictate a consistent life-ethic that is based in theological anthropology at every turn, addressing issues of abortion, reproductive technology, poverty, politics, the food industry, education, war, health care, the penal system, and eldercare. Poverty and injustice, as life-and-death issues, are theological, Christological, anthropological, and ecclesiological in nature. They are soteriological and missiological issues as well, in that they evoke a practical response whose absence threatens the integrity of our life in Christ and our witness to the world.

As it seeks further to realize its contextual imperative, modern Orthodoxy has no need of either mimicking Liberation theology or subscribing wholesale to an existing articulation of the "social gospel." But Liberation theology, and more importantly its acute sensitivity to Scripture's message about the poor and to societal injustice, deserves a more serious response and engagement from us Orthodox. Unless our theology is pierced by the problem of poverty and injustice it will neither be responsive to context and history, nor will it be fully scriptural. It is a task of Orthodox theology to heed that word and to engage it through the riches of its theological tradition, which has always striven for a balance of being "in the world" (contextual and embodied) and "not of this world" (eschatological and prophetic). In its unique way, Orthodox theology must freshly articulate the apostolic faith and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ, fully divine and fully human, at once the Son of the Father beyond time and the Son of Mary in time, is the restorer of the divine image, the liberator from sin and liberator from oppression, who applied to himself the scriptural prophecy,

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4:18)

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21 *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*, (Crestwood, NY: SVS Press, 1978), 73.

22 Lines of thought emanating from the life and writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, finding more explicit expression also in Jürgen Moltmann, are among the many promising examples.

## Reading Origen of Alexandria from the Perspective of Contemporary Semantics

SERGEY TROSTYANSKIY

In this article I will be looking at a third-century Alexandrian theologian, Origen, and his approach to Scriptural interpretation. I will be making an attempt to justify this approach philosophically. I will demonstrate that the epistemological value of Origen's approach to the Scriptures is equal to that of the contemporary critical-historical method, and that any attempts to diminish the value of the traditional patristic approach to the Scriptures or to present it as epistemologically inferior are philosophically unjustified. I will be paying attention to the original context out of which Origen's theology emerged, namely, certain philosophical premises of late antiquity. However, I will also use some notions and concepts that mark twentieth-century philosophical development, assuming that they can facilitate a proper understanding of Origen's exegesis. I believe that as of today it is impossible to study the patristic tradition without taking into account twentieth-century logic and philosophy of language.

Origen's significance is associated with an attempt to redefine Christianity in terms of philosophical categories of late antiquity. It was a great apologetic achievement of Origen to demonstrate that Christianity is not a set of arcane doctrines inaccessible to the enlightened mind, but rather, an intellectually advanced set of principles that affect social practices and lead human beings toward the creation of a new socially constructed reality (a reality meant to facilitate deification and sanctification of fallen humanity).

Today, Origen's theology in general, and his approach to the Scriptures in particular, do not have the same appeal to scholars as they did over the centuries. The major reason for this shift is the change of paradigms in Scriptural exegesis during the last few centuries and the introduction of critical-historical methods of Scriptural exegesis. The critical-historical method is a child of post-enlightenment philosophical development and carries with it all of the philosophical presuppositions that characterize post-enlightenment thought. Among these I should mention positivist metaphysics and epistemology, as well as the view of exegesis as a department of history that studies historical events of the Bible in light of causal laws of nature; these laws are considered universal, necessary, and exclusive of the possibility of Divine intervention into the phenomenal order of reality. The critical-historical method has proven to be beneficial for Biblical scholars. In my opinion, the traditional patristic approach to the Scriptures and the critical-historical method of Scriptural interpretation are meant to supplement each other as they reflect two different approaches to the same subject; namely, Scripture. One investigates a chain of historical events pertaining to Scripture, and the other elucidates Scripture in light of the economy of salvation. Thus, both approaches have boundaries within which they operate. Sometimes, however, the critical-historical method, being pushed to its ultimate extent by scholars and being presented as an all-embracing explanatory model, transgresses its

own boundaries, compromising its validity and critical character. In this scenario it can be easily transformed into a set of positivist dogmas, thus frustrating its own purpose, reflected in its name, 'critical.' The traditional patristic approach, transgressing its own boundaries, suffers a similar fate. Thus, both approaches suffer enormously by claiming exclusivity and universality, one turning into mythology and the other becoming a manifest form of Scriptural positivism.

In order to approach the patristic sources properly, we should make an attempt to engage the premises of late antiquity. On the other hand, these premises should also be validated. Contemporary philosophy of language can guide us in that direction. Here I intend to use some elements of Frege's philosophy of language in order to justify Origen's approach to Scripture. I propose here, as a methodological principle, that there is a certain isomorphism between late antique and contemporary semantics, and that one can be analyzed in terms of the other.<sup>1</sup>

Origen's exegesis can be characterized by the use of allegorical and typological methods of Scriptural interpretation. The Stoic philosophers were the originators of such methods. They made an attempt to re-describe the fables of pagan religion and present them as symbolic representations of noetic (intellectual) reality. In this re-description, narratives with obscure content were presented as manifestations of a higher reality. Middle Platonists adapted these methods and used them quite extensively. Philo, a Middle Platonist philosopher, made an attempt to apply allegorical and typological methods to the Hebrew Scriptures. Origen stood on the ground of Middle Platonism and applied these methods to Scripture as a whole, including the New and Old Testaments. Up until the late eighteenth century these methods were very much favored by scholars. For example, as late as the end of the eighteenth century, Immanuel Kant suggested that such methods should be used to reinterpret the Old Testament (which sounds offensive to Christian morality) despite the fact that in some cases such interpretations seem to be forced. However, later generations stopped using such methods as the major paradigmatic shift, associated with the introduction of the critical-historical method, was about to take place.

The entire theological framework offered by Origen was based on the idea of the unity of two traditions (Hebrew and Christian). This unity was determined by its single originative principle that is the Godhead of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Logos. This principle suggested a particular approach to Scriptural interpretations, namely, Christological and eschatological readings of Scripture as a whole. It is clear that contemporary scholarship, being sympathetic to the idea of a radical discontinuity between the two traditions, does not easily accept such unity, and by implication argues against Christological and eschatological readings of the Scripture as a holistic unity of two Testaments. Thus there is an unfortunate lack of mutual appreciation between two rival approaches.

Having been trained as a Middle Platonist and keeping in mind a multi-layered structure of reality, Origen proposed the following way of reading Scripture: "A person ought then in three ways to record in his own soul the purposes of the Holy Scriptures; that the simple may be edified by, as it were, the flesh of Scripture (for thus

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1           The idea behind this proposed isomorphism is based upon the similarity of the Stoic notion of *lecton* with the one of sense.

we designate the primary sense), the more advanced by its soul, and the perfect by the spiritual law, which has a shadow of the good things to come.”<sup>2</sup> It is quite self-explanatory that “the good things yet to come” signify the incarnate Logos.

It is interesting to note that a certain correlation can be found between the “flesh,” or an immediate historical level of Scriptural significance, and its “soul,” a moral level where one level can be expressed by means of the other. Thus the moral significance of scriptural passages might, under certain conditions, be perfectly transmitted by its literal meaning (but not vice versa); this happens when the Biblical narrative or the Pentateuchal Law affects practical reason and lead ones toward judging events or occurrences under the concepts of vice and virtue, good and evil. This ability to extract moral significance from the Scriptural narratives applies, apparently, to the vast majority of people. However, the spiritual transition toward “the good things yet to come,” or, in other words, towards the Prefigured Christ, is not as evident.

Seeing this difficulty, Origen noted that Scripture itself gives certain hints to the reader and helps to make a proper identification of the level of significance of a particular passage (flesh, soul, or spirit). He argued that in most cases the literal sense (the flesh of Scripture) is precisely what is intended by Scripture. However, some passages might contain certain marks that the literal sense is not what the reader should pay attention to. He noted that “if the use of the Law had been everywhere made perfectly clear, and strict historical sequence had been preserved, we should not have believed that the Scriptures could be understood in any other than the obvious sense.”<sup>3</sup> However, he pointed out, “The Word of God arranged for certain stumbling-blocks and offences and impossibilities to be embedded in the Law and the historical portion; the chief purpose being to show the spiritual connection both in past occurrences and in things to be done.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, Origen seems to suggest that when Scriptural passages cannot be understood literally, some sort of non-literal understanding is necessitated. Based on Origen’s reasoning certain Scriptural passages, being paradoxical in appearance, present difficulties to the reader. Some passages can be classified as offensive to Christian morality and some other passages describe events that could never occur. However, he insisted, these passages are not meaningless as Scripture is of Divine origin and nothing can be added to or removed from it. At this point Origen’s discourse seems to foreshadow Plotinus’s notion of *aporia*, which the reader encounters in a discourse about the Divine being. When the Scriptures speak of the Divine, such speech violates rules of language and logic by fusing contraries into the same subject by speaking impossibilities and offences, by distorting the historical chain of events, and so on. Thus, when the Scriptures present the reader spiritual matters, such presentation is necessarily marked by *aporia* to indicate that the literal understanding of the sentence will necessarily lead to meaningless conclusions and thus to nonsense.

In addition, Origen insisted on the importance of ontological implications in his approach to Scripture. He argued that in dealing with Scripture, one needs to take into account a proper structure of the universe that embraces different (sometimes

2 Origen of Alexandria, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (London: Peter Smith Publisher, 1973), 12.

3 *ibid.*, p. 17.

4 *ibid.*

incommensurable) layers. He pointed out that these multiple layers of reality (a notion he internalized from studies of Middle-Platonism) are reflected in Scripture, and should be properly extracted from it. These extractions, in turn, necessitate certain techniques to identify and decipher these layers (spiritual layers). Here, he concluded, allegory and typology can be useful.

Nevertheless, what is evident at this point is that the ontological account needs to be supported by the semantic justification, which can show how Scriptural passages can communicate these layers to the reader. For example, if one reads the story of Jonah and makes the identity statement "Jonah is the Prefigured Christ," it is obvious that both Christ and Jonah cannot be given as two logically independent, chronologically distanced, and yet identical entities or objects (insofar as in affirming such an identity one will inevitably arrive at nonsense). Firstly, Jonah and the Prefigured Christ (Logos) designate two heterogeneous realms of reality (celestial and terrestrial) somehow connected by Scriptural signs. Secondly, their relation pertains to something lying beyond their real referents, definite objects to which they refer. One can make this evident by pointing out the fact that a real referent of the divine Logos cannot be found in the realm of terrestrial reality prior to the incarnation. Thus, by reading Scripture allegorically or typologically, one can find him or herself in the realm of signs and their relations. Thus, the necessity for semantic justification of such readings becomes self-evident.

Now it is necessary to identify the key semantic issues associated with Origen's exegesis: 1. The behavior of a sign in meta-context, which is Scripture as a holistic unity of two Testaments (what happens to its referent and significance). 2. The possibility of identity statements (such as:  $A = B$ , where A (Jonah) is the sign drawn from Hebrew Scriptures and B (Christ) is the sign drawn from Christian Scriptures). 3. The possibility for a sign to bifurcate and signify multiple significations ( $A \neq A_1 \neq A_2 \neq A_n$ , where A,  $A_1$ ,  $A_2$ ,  $A_n$  are logically independent entities designated by the same proper name) such that, for example, we can read the story of two wives of Abraham as a symbolic narrative of two covenants.

Now what semantic conditions should one provide to allow for such readings of Scripture? Roughly speaking, these conditions are the following: the detachment of a sign from its ordinary referent so that it can enter into identity statements within a new meta-context. This condition will allow for cross-Scriptural references and identity statements, such as  $A=B$ , where A (Jonah) is the sign drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures and B (Christ) is the sign drawn from the Christian Scriptures. This possibility, in turn, entails a certain capacity for a sign to bifurcate, to stand for its content and for itself (thus signifying multiple significations). Thus in the context of the Old Testament story the sign/name Jonah designates the prophet who fled to Tarshish from the presence of God, and so on. However, being framed within Scripture as a whole, the name Jonah might also signify the Prefigured Christ. Therefore, the semantic issues are associated with the sign's behavior in a new meta-context.

I suggest that contemporary philosophy of language and semantics as represented by Gottlob Frege, the late nineteenth-/early twentieth-century German phi-

losopher and logician, can cast some light on these issues.<sup>5</sup> I use Frege's concepts and their implications for Scriptural exegesis to demonstrate the coherence of Origen's approach to the Scripture and its philosophical validity.

Frege, currently, is commonly regarded as the founder of contemporary logic and philosophy of language. However, not many theologians are familiar with his writings. As of today, many issues of religious metaphysics, epistemology, and semantics cannot be approached without taking into account Frege's achievements.

Now let us take a look at the following statement: Jonah is the Prefigured Christ. What kind of statement is it? Can it be expressed by means of propositional logic? Can we say, If A then B; A; B? It seems that the necessity of such connection cannot be justified in this statement. In other words, it will not necessarily follow that if Jonah, then Jesus. Can we express such statement by syllogistic reasoning? A is B; can we say that the Prefigured Christ as a concept is a predicate of Jonah? Yes, but this predication will seem quite awkward. Why? Because 'is' here is not a copula but a sign for identity. What are the identity statements?

In his "Sense and Reference" Frege attempted to solve the issue of identity statements. Here he proposed that "Identity gives rise to challenging questions which are not altogether easy to answer. Is it a relation? A relation between objects, or between names or signs of objects?"<sup>6</sup> Traditionally, before the time of Frege, it was assumed that identity statements are necessarily tied to their referents. However, in cases where proper names enter into the relation of identity this assumption does not seem reasonable. For example, it is definitely impossible, following this assumption, to validate such an identity statement as A is B under conditions where A and B stand for two proper names designating two personal entities (say, Jonah and the Prefigured Christ). Frege, thus, rejected this assumption. He pointed out, moreover, that if the sign A is distinguished from the sign B only as object, not as sign, the cognitive value of A = A becomes essentially equal to that of A = B.

Frege answered this dilemma by arguing that a sign both refers and signifies. He affirmed that: "It is natural, now, to think of there being connected with a sign, besides that to which the sign refers, which may be called the reference of the sign, also what I should like to call the sense of the sign, wherein the mode of presentation is contained."<sup>7</sup> Frege identified the mode of presentation with the sense or signification and identified reference with a definite object. Moreover, he noted, the truth value of a sentence is its reference. He pointed out that two different signs – the morning star and the evening star – have the same reference (denote the same object). Thus, they differ not in reference (a definite object), but in the mode of presentation.

The idea behind this construct is quite simple: a definite object might have many modes of presentation. Thus, we can say that Aristotle is/was a pupil of Plato. Or that he was a teacher of Alexander the Great, or a man from Stagira, or the author of *Categories*. What is important is that the same definite object might be described in various ways, and thus have many modes of presentations, many senses or signifi-

5 I purposely formulated these issues in Frege's terms to avoid a possible misunderstanding of the subject under consideration.

6 Gottlob, Frege, "Sense and Reference," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (May, 1948): 209.

7 *ibid.*

tions or meanings. This means that a sign for the proper name normally refers to a definite object by presenting its object in a particular way. Thus, more than one sign (sentence) can be used to describe the same object. If a sign stands for a common name, it also refers to a number of homogeneous objects, or objects which share a certain property. Some signs both refer and signify. But this is not always the case. Some signs might signify but fail to refer to a definite object (say, fictional creatures) or to a number of definite objects. In this case we say that the sign has significance and a meaningful sentence can be formed out of it. What it lacks is a reference as there is no definite object which such a sign (a proper name) is meant to designate. Or it lacks existential import, thus there are no definite objects that fall under the class of things designated by a sign (a concept word). The truth value of a sentence is its reference, a definite object. There are two kinds of normal sentences: true and false. Therefore, a sentence containing signs which fail to refer to a definite object might be classified as false (at least as far as it is used in natural science).

It is interesting to note that in most cases signs/names keep the original connection with objects to which they refer. Thus, two names, such as the morning star and the evening star, refer to the same definite object (the particular planet named Venus) and comprise two modes of presentation of the same referent; both names keep the original connection with their referent and thus both refer and signify. This by implication tells us that these names can be used in the formation of truth value statements.

However, in some cases such referential connection is indirect or not evident. Frege exemplified this situation by formulating his concepts of direct quotations and indirect quotations. He introduced the concept of direct quotations by arguing that: "If words are used in the ordinary way, one intends to speak of their referents. It can also happen, however, that one wishes to talk about the words themselves or their sense. This happens, for instance, when the words of another are quoted. One's own words then first designate words of the other speaker, and only the latter have their usual referents. We then have signs of signs...Accordingly, a word standing between quotation marks must not be taken as having its ordinary referent."<sup>8</sup>

What is important here is Frege's notion that direct quotations designate words of the other speaker, "and only the latter have their usual reference."<sup>9</sup> Here the reference is provided only indirectly, as signs refer to other signs. Therefore, a sign that transmits a direct quotation does not have a definite object as its referent. Here one talks about the words themselves or their senses. On the other hand, in cases of indirect quotation a sign designates a thought. Here again the referential connection is only indirect. For this reason, it is impossible to assign truth value to such a sentence.

Now it is interesting to note that the sentence with direct or indirect quotations is neither false nor true. The truth value of such a sentence is indefinite. It seems to me that here Frege consciously or unconsciously rehabilitated historical studies rooted in textual analysis and reintroduced them as a limbo region, set in between science and fiction. By rehabilitation I mean the reestablishing of the reputation of textual studies as a meaningful activity, whose meaningfulness was previously

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8            *ibid.*, 211.

9            *ibid.*

questioned and denied by scriptural positivists. Thus, the study of ancient texts here has nothing to do with the work of sorting out sentences about objects, events, and occurrences whose existence in the past (and thus truth) can be demonstrated, and shredding sentences designating empty concepts and notions. On the contrary, the study of ancient texts, in Frege's view, has to do with the exploration of meanings/significations of such texts.

Here I can suggest that the scope of Scriptural exegesis can be defined as being situated within the boundaries of direct quotations framed into conceptual constructs (philosophical frameworks or sets of doctrines). Within this scope the line of investigation can proceed in various directions, such as: studies of the historical chains of events, reconstructions of cultural horizons, elucidations of philosophical premises, and so on. It is important, however, to remember that the quoted text and a set of doctrines always constitute the scope of exegetical activities. At the time of Origen conceptual constructs were predominantly Middle-Platonist with some elements taken from Aristotle, Chrysippus, and other philosophers. The elements of conceptual constructs (particular concepts and affirmations), in turn, can be equated with indirect quotations.

Now it is time to reflect on one important implication of the concept of direct and indirect quotations for Scriptural exegesis, namely, the impossibility of assigning truth values to exegetical works. Thus, Scriptural exegesis cannot be apprehended in terms of the truth or falsity of its referent (as signs here do not refer to definite objects but to other signs and thoughts). In other words, one can find oneself in the realm of significations pursuing a meaningful discourse. Nevertheless, the truth or falsity of such statements cannot be affirmed. It will be more than enough to say here that a discourse, associated with Scriptural interpretations, makes sense. However, it will be impossible to assign truth-value to such a discourse (by affirming its truth or falsity), or to claim the discovery of a scientific truth by means of Scriptural interpretations.

Here one can question the applicability of Frege's theory of truth values to the subject matter (which is exegesis), and ask for a more flexible account, say, of a free logic, which can be freed from ontological commitments and thus save the ideas of truth and falsity for Scriptural exegesis. Really, some signs, detached from their ordinary referents, still seem to be truer than others. Nevertheless, I think that Frege's account is superior in this case as it can drive away multiple reductionist approaches of various critical-historical textbooks by connecting the notion of truth with the one of definite objects.

Now the following question arises: whether, under conditions of the detachment of a sign from its ordinary referent, one can preserve the truth of Scriptural affirmations and thus secure Christian faith. This question, however, unfolds only an apparent difficulty. The reason for it is the following: truth here is an equivocal term. In Frege's logic the truth or falsity of judgments are tied to definite objects.<sup>10</sup> However, in revealed religions, the concept of truth has a different significance (in Christianity it is always tied to Soteriology). Thus, one can easily accept a point of view based on which it would be possible to deny the truth value of a theological

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10 Frege understood both actual and abstract entities (say, numbers) as objects. However, the matter of Scriptural exegesis does not fall under these categories of actual or abstract objects.

discourse, as its proper subject does not consist of natural objects and occurrences. On the other hand, the soteriological truth of the Scriptural sources can be simultaneously affirmed as it is tied to the promise of salvation and deification.

Among the vast majority of statements associated with Biblical studies there might be only a few to which it is possible to assign truth value.<sup>11</sup> These rare exceptions are associated with Scriptural affirmations supported by the archeological data available to scholars. However, these exceptional cases lead us far beyond the sphere of exegesis *per se*. Even so-called critical-historical investigations allow for no more than explications of senses. For this reason any claims made by scholars that they have discovered a scientific truth by means of Scriptural exegesis will be nonsensical. Rather, what is discovered here is related to the truth of faith (and is a declaration of faith).

There is, however, another implication of the concept of quotations for Scriptural exegesis which has to do with its epistemological status. Do Scriptural interpretations grant us knowledge? Yes, but the knowledge of signs and their significance, not the knowledge of their referents. Nonetheless, it does not mean that Scriptural interpretations are completely determined by empty notions or concepts which lack existential import. Again, knowledge here is connected with Soteriology. Knowledge of the economy of salvation differs from the knowledge of sciences.

In sum, all affirmations regarding Scriptural texts do not have the privilege of being acquainted with objects designated the Scriptural signs (with their referents if such could exist). The proper objects of Scriptural exegesis are Scriptural signs *per se* and their significations. The knowledge of spiritual matters that arises out of Scriptural interpretations differs from scientific knowledge and does not pertain to the realm of definite objects. Finally, the truth of Scriptural interpretations is a truth of faith. From these statements it is easy to infer that the epistemological value of the critical-historical method is equal to the one of traditional patristic methods of Scriptural interpretations. Both approaches deal with Scriptural signs and their significations, and both make statements of faith. However, there is a certain tendency among scholars to assign a superior epistemological value to the critical-historical method. This tendency, I think, can be attributed to the dogmatism of the historical method and its adherents who attempt to present their premises as universal, necessary, and so on. Nonetheless, as soon as these premises are questioned philosophically, the assumed epistemological superiority suddenly disappears.

Now, signs, being detached from their ordinary referents (definite objects), seem to be capable of entering into various types of relations, including relations of identity or differentiation (since now their referents are other signs or thoughts) without making a sentence false. Again, in cases of signs that designate individual personal beings (say, Jonah and Christ) this might seem to be the only condition under which they can enter into such relations. The question one might ask at this point is the following: how does the semantic shift take place?

As Frege noted in *Begriffsschrift*, "the introduction of a sign for identity of content necessarily produces a bifurcation in the meaning of all signs: they stand at times

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11 Nevertheless, if one part of the statement contains a Scriptural quote and another one contains a truth value (as its object) the whole statement cannot contain truth value as its object.

for their content, at times for themselves."<sup>12</sup>

Now I should say that signs for identity of content necessarily produce bifurcation and, in the context of Scriptural exegesis, stand for their original significations and at times for themselves. However, when signs stand for themselves, their meaning is always indefinite (as taken out of the original context) and acquire definite status within a new meta-context by being assigned certain properties it might lack within its original context. Thus, a sign enters into a new relation and bifurcates, produces new significations; a semantic shift takes place.

For example, the name Jonah can stand for its own content (this particular man who fled to Tarshish) and for itself when it enters into the relation of identity. In this case its significance becomes indefinite and needs reinterpretation within the horizon of a meta-context. Here a sign carries its primary and obvious meaning, but allows for explication of other meanings if apprehended within a new statement of identity. Moreover, different signs might express the sameness of significations. All typological and allegorical interpretations of the Scriptural texts are ultimately grounded in this special capacity of signs to extend their designations beyond their ordinary referents, to bifurcate, to be the same and not the same, similar and dissimilar as their contents allow.

Based on this brief review of Frege's semantics it is possible to draw some conclusions about its applicability to and commensurability with Origen's exegesis. I would like to point out that Frege's philosophy of language and semantics allows for the apprehension of late antiquity from the standpoint of modernity. Two concepts are crucial in a process reconciling antiquity with modernity. First of all, Origen's Christological reading of the Hebrew Scriptures based on the unity of meta-context (Scripture as a whole including both the Old and New Testaments) necessitates a semantic concept capable of explaining how statements of identity (that combine different, apparently unrelated contents) are possible. Secondly, allegorical and typological readings of the Scriptures necessitate a semantic justification of the capacity of a sign to bifurcate, standing at times for their content, and at times for themselves (and thus signifying multiple significations). Both concepts were offered by Frege and can be used to justify Origen's approach to Scriptures. They explain the possibility of identity statements, such as  $A = B$ , where A is the sign drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures and B is the sign drawn from the Christian Scriptures (and thus for typological reading of the Scripture); and of the possibility for a sign to signify multiple significations (in the meta-context) which allows for a legitimate allegorical reading of Scripture.

This is done through the introduction of the concepts of reference, signification, direct and indirect quotations, and truth value. The implications of Frege's theory for Scriptural exegesis seem to be the following: in the meta-context, a sign necessarily becomes detached from its ordinary referent (which in Scriptural exegesis is constituted by another sign or a thought) and, being in-framed into a new meta-context, allows for meaningful statements which open up an entirely new realm of significations (without making references to particular objects). Thus in the meta-context the meaning of a sign becomes indefinite in its relation to the new whole, and

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12 Gottlob Frege, *From Frege to Godel: A Source Book in Mathematical Logic, 1879-1931*. Ed. Jean van Heijenoort (Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1967), 20-21.

retains its definiteness in relation to its original referent which now becomes a part of the new meta-context; it will reacquire its definite meaning in the new context through the reinterpretation based on the new whole.

In this light it would be unnecessary to ask whether Origen's Christological readings of the Scripture have a scientific value (constitute a positive knowledge of things). However, the question whether they make sense should definitely be answered. Does Origen's reading of the Scripture make sense? Unarguably-yes; and generations of so-called "historical-critical" exegetical textbooks that attempted to diminish the value of ancient philosophers' approach to Scriptural interpretation as part of their attempt to command our semantic concentration themselves thus stand as curiously un-philosophical.