

Sunday, December 12, 2010—Grace Life School of Theology—*Church History: A Tale of Two Churches*—Lesson 13 The Patristic Period: Alexandria The Hot Bed of Corruption

Review/Introduction

- Before we study what was going on in Alexandria Egypt during the Patristic Period we need to review the cycle of church history from a previous lesson.
 - *Preaching*—which may be called Evangelism
 - *Teaching*—which may stand for Education
 - *Culture*—which means the introduction of science, philosophy, and tradition (Col. 2:8) into the teaching
 - *Apostasy*—includes ecumenical overtures (compromise) with pagan religious systems or unsaved people.
 - *Paganism*—which means the original condition the populace was in before they were “evangelized.”
- Regardless of ones view of what came out of Alexandria it is undeniable that when we study this supposed great university we studying the history of how “culture” was introduced into the mainstream of Christian thought and thereby contributed to the apostasy that was already underway.
- There are good Scriptural reasons for a Bible believer to skeptical of anything originating or coming out of Egypt There is principal in Bible study called the first mention principal that ought to be considered when discussing Egypt in the Bible. E.W. Bullinger explains this practical when he states, “the first occurrence of a Word, or an Expression, or an Utterance is the key to its subsequent usage and meaning; or at least a guide to the essential point connect with it.” (Bullinger, 304)
 - Genesis 12:10-14
- In the Bible, Egypt is a type of the world, and God would not tolerate his Son (Matthew 2: 13, 19-21), His nation (Exodus 12-15), His saints (Genesis 50:5), or even the bones of his saints (Exodus 13:19) to stay there.
- A scriptural analysis would not lead any Bible believing scholar to think that such a place would be a “neutral” or “pure” location for God’s word or his truth to be preserved.

Background on the School of Alexandria

- As we have already ready seen in previous studies early believers where constantly battling Gnosticism and other false teachings when they were not being persecuted by the Roman Caesars.
- As a result, many Christians resisted the efforts of orthodox scholars to reconcile the Christian faith with Greek philosophy. Men like Tertullian violently resisted movements to merge Platonic philosophy by arguing that heresies were promoted by philosophy. (Shelley, 79)

- Leadership in the field of combining Greek philosophy with Christian doctrine arose in Alexandria at the so-called catechetical school led by Clement and Origen. These men attempted to blend into Christianity all that was best in the culture of the Hellenistic world, especially in the Platonic and Stoic philosophers. (Shelley, 80)
- According to church historians, a Sicilian Christian named Pantaeus established the school in Alexandria around 180 AD. According to Bruce Shelley, Pantaeus “aimed to enter the thought world of pagans to show the superiority of the catholic faith. The teaching was Gnostic because it asked the big questions of meaning; but it was “Christian Gnosticism” because it retained orthodox answers.” (Shelley, 80)
- How one reaches this conclusion is somewhat suspect since Pantaeus left no writings behind.
- Leadership of the school was assumed by Clement in 190 AD who was followed by Origen in 202 AD all of whom were openly seeking to philosophize the Christian faith and all of whom would not hesitate to correct the Bible when it suited their needs.

Popular View of Clement and Origen

- We know Clement primarily through his surviving writings: *Exhortation of the Heathen*, *Instructor*, and *Miscellanies* which he never finished. His contemporaries know him more as a messenger of Christianity in philosopher’s garb than as a writer. (Shelley, 81)
- Clement is often referred to in church history books as “the first Christian scholar” who was well versed not only in Scripture but also in Greek philosophy and classical literature. Bruce Shelley author of *Church History in Plain Language* presents Clement as a teacher of Christian philosophy in the metropolis of the Hellenistic scientific world that was driven by a missionary eagerness to bring all lovers of wisdom to the truth of Jesus Christ. (Shelley, 81)
- Clement wanted to be an apostle to Hellenistic intellectual world. He wanted to offer Christian converts between clever, eloquently defended heresy and dull, narrow-minded orthodoxy.
- “Clement contended that the philosophy of the Greeks was a preparation for the Gospel, to those who were familiar with it paving the way for perfection in Christ.” According to Clement, “it is possible for one who is unlearned to become a Christian believer, but it is impossible for one without learning to comprehend fully what has been made know in the Christian faith.” (Latourette, 148)
- According to Bruce Shelley, Clement’s ministry marked an important juncture in the progress of Christian doctrine because it united Greek thinking with Christian thought. Moreover, without the work of Clement “the staggering theological achievements” of the first church councils would not have been possible. (Shelley, 82)
- Origen’s genius was to build upon the theological and philosophical union established by Clement, according to Shelley. (Shelley, 82)

- Due to the outbreak of widespread persecution, Clement turned his famed school over to Origen at the ripe old age of 18 years old. Shelley compares the fame of Origen's wisdom to that of Solomon whom the Queen of Sheba traveled great distances to learn from. (Latourette, 149) Gregory one of Origen's most beloved students is said to have learned from his mentor that, "there can be no genuine piety toward God in the man who despises the gift of philosophy." (Shelley, 84)
- Origen wrote extensively thanks to the services of seven shorthand writers that had been provided to him by a wealthy friend. In an attempt to establish the accuracy of the Old Testament, he produced a parallel study of six version of the Old Testament called the *Hexapla*. (Shelley, 85)
- Origen was the father of "allegorical interpretation" of Scripture. If the apparent sense of a given passage contradicts the necessary convictions of morality or the nature of God, there must be some deeper lesson underneath the surface of the passage. Therefore, Origen maintained that there were three levels of understanding in the Bible: the literal sense, the moral application to the soul, and the allegorical or spiritual sense, which refers to the mysteries of the Christian faith. (Latourette, 150)
- Many view Origen as having dealt heresy a death blow through his writings. "The persistent tendency of heresy, whether ancient or contemporary, it to lay hold upon a few impressive texts and to wrench some rigid and erroneous interpretation from these. This Origen would not allow. He wanted the whole Bible to speak, because he knew that what the Bible taught in its entirety are the central Christian truths of catholic Christianity." (Shelley, 85)
- Shelley goes so far as to state that "Origen saved the Scriptures for the church and thus protected the historical foundation of the Christian faith." (Shelley, 85) Origen believed that where the church had not spoken, one was free to speculate.
- Origen's speculations ultimately lead to the teachings of universalism that Hell would be emptied out and everyone even the devil would be resorted to communion with God. (Latourette, 86) In addition, Origen taught that God's original creation had been spiritual. Only after the fall did God form a physical world. (Jones, 25)
- Finally, Origen's followers renounced physical comforts. Origen himself drank only water and wore no shoes. In literal obedience to Matthew 19:12, Origen castrated himself. (Jones, 25)

Critical Analysis of the Great Alexandrians

- David W. Bercot editor of *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* highlights a scholarly bias towards the works of Origen that is not shown towards the teaching of Marcion. Bercot writes, "Most of Origen's teachings were quite harmonious with the orthodoxy of the pre-Nicene church. Nevertheless, because of his brilliant mind, Origen came up with a number of theological speculations that most Christians have judged to be unsound. It must be remembered that the amount of defined dogma in the pre-Nicene church was quite small, and Origen was very careful not to teach contrary to any dogma defined by the Church." (Bercot, 487)

- Gregory of Thaumaturgus one of Origen's students penned the following concerning his teacher, "It is my purpose to speak of one who has indeed the semblance and reputation of being a man, but who seems, to those who are able to grasp the greatness of his intellectual ability, to be endowed with powers more noble and nearly divine." (Bercot, 487)
- While believing in the virgin birth, the Crucifixion, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ Origen also believed in the transmigration of souls, allegorical reading of Scripture, no literal hell, and the universal salvation of all men.
 - *Origen on Transmigration*—"When the Scriptures are carefully examined regarding Jacob and Esau, it is not found to be unrighteous of God to have said—before they were born, or had done anything in this life—that "the older will serve the younger." However, it is not unrighteous . . . if we feel that Jacob was worthily beloved of God **according to the deserts of his previous life . . .** **Owing to causes that have previously existed, a different office is prepared by the Creator for each one in the proportion to the degree of merit.**" (Bercot, 489)
 - *Origen on Transmigration*—"It is possible that someone who is now a vessel of dishonor is one **because of reasons more ancient than the present life.** After reformation he may become a vessel of honor in the new creation." (Bercot, 489)
 - *Origen on Transmigration*—"It think it should be inquired into as to the reason why a human soul is acted on sometimes by good and at other times by bad. I suspect that the reason for this **is older than the bodily birth of the individual. .** **And in consequence of this prior existence,** our souls contracted a certain amount of guilt in their sensitive nature, before their birth in the body." (Bercot, 489)
 - *Origen on Allegorical Method*—"The word of God has arranged for certain stumbling blocks, offenses, and impossibilities to be introduced into the midst of the Law and the history . . . **For where the Word found that things done according the history could be adapted to these mystical senses,** He made use of them, **concealing the deeper meaning from the multitude.** . . . Furthermore, sometimes a few words **are interpolated that are not true in the literal meaning.** Sometimes, a larger number." (Bercot, 488) In other words, not only does the Bible contain mistakes but Origen fancied himself qualified to correct the Bible because it cannot be understood by the common man.
 - *Origen on the Allegorical Method*—"What need is there to say more, since those who are not altogether blind can collect numerous instances of a similar kind that are recorded as having occurred. **Yet they did not literally take place.** In fact, the Gospels themselves are filled with the same kind of narratives. One example is when the devil leads Jesus upon into a high mountain in order to show him from there the kingdoms of the whole world." (Bercot, 488)
 - *Origen on the Allegorical Method*—"For how can anyone be said to believe the Scripture in the full sense when he does not see in it the mind of the Holy Spirit, which God would have us to believe, rather than the literal meaning." (Bercot, 488)

- *Origen on the Allegorical Method*—“From the prophetic Scriptures, in which historical events are recorded, it is possible to be convinced that the historical portions **also were written with an allegorical purpose** . . . Since the very fathers and authors of the doctrines themselves give them an allegorical meaning, what other inference can be drawn but that they **were composed so as to be allegorically understood in their chief meaning?**” (Bercot, 488)
- *Origen on the Millennium*—read lengthy passage from *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* on page 451
- *Origen on Universalism*—“I think, indeed, that the goodness of God, through His Christ, **may recall all His creatures to one end**. For all his enemies will be conquered and subdued.” (Bercot, 490)
- *Origen on Universalism*—“Those (angelic creatures) who have been removed from their original state of blessedness **have not been removed irrecoverably**. Rather they have been placed under the rule of those holy and blessed angelic orders that I have described. By availing themselves of this angelic help, and being remolded by salutary principles and discipline, they **may recover themselves and be restored to their condition of happiness**” (Bercot, 490)
- *Origen on Eternal Security*—“Certain ones of those (heretics) who hold different opinions misuse these passages. They essentially destroy free will by introducing ruined natures incapable of salvation by introducing others as being saved in such a way that they cannot be lost.” (Bercot, 588)
- Despite these clearly heretical teachings, Origen is given a pass in most church history and systematic theology books on the grounds that we now possess more light and understanding, and if Origen possessed what modern scholars do he would have certainly changed his mind.
- How much more light did Origen need? Origen was 19 centuries closer to the originals than modern scholars and he quotes the New Testament more than 17,900 times. In addition, he possessed an office full of stenographers and shorthand experts, and witnessed the martyrs dying all around him. (Moyer, 315) At what point do we just tell the truth about Origen? He was a Bible corrector and first rate heretic whose works have corrupted the thinking of countless believers.
- Origen is also viewed by many as the father of textual criticism. (Schaff, 790) In addition, Origen endorsed Old and New Testament Apocrypha such as Barnabas, Judith, and Tobit as inspired Scripture. (Newman, 282)
- While a detailed discussion of Origen’s work as a textual critic is beyond the scope of this class we would be remiss if we failed to mention the impact of the *Hexapla*. When Jerome translated the Latin Vulgate he used the *Hexapla* as source which helps explain why he included the Apocrypha and Catholic readings into his text.

- Writing before Origen, Clement of Alexandria refers to I John 5:7 over two hundred years before Codex Vaticanus and Sinaiticus removed it following manuscripts that Origen corrupted. (Hills, 190-193)
- Clement who quotes the Bible more than 2,400 times demonstrates that same bent towards heresy as his student.
 - *Clement on Salvation*—“god gives forgiveness of past sins. However, as to **future sins, each one procures this for himself. He does this by repenting, buy condemning the past deeds, and by begging the Father to blot them out.** For only the Father is the one who is able to undo what is done . . . So even in the case of one who has done the greatest good deeds in his life, but at the end has run headlong into wickedness, all his former pains are profitless to him. For at the climax of the drama, he has given up his part.” (Bercot, 587)
 - *Clement on Universal Salvation*—“And in Him is not darkness at all,”—that is no passion, no keeping up of evil respecting anyone. **He destroys no one, but grants eternal salvation to all.**” (Bercot, 591)
 - *Clement on Universal Salvation*—“He says that the Lord is the Propitiator, ‘not for our sins’—that is, for those of the faithful—‘**but also for the whole world.**’ **He indeed saves all. But (he saves) some by converting them through punishments.** However, those who follow voluntarily, (he saves) with dignity and honor.” (Bercot, 591)
 - *Clement on Baptismal Regeneration*—“The union of the Logos is like the agreement of milk with water. For, of all liquids, milk alone receives water. It allows itself to be mixed with water for the purpose of cleansing—**just as baptism does for the remission of sins.**” (Bercot, 52)
 - *Clement on Baptismal Regeneration*—“And he who has just been regenerated—as the name necessarily indicates—and has been enlightened, is immediately delivered from darkness, and instantly receives the light . . . **Thus also, we who are baptized, having wiped off the sins that obscure divine the light of the Divine Spirit . . .**” (Bercot, 52)

Concluding Remarks

- The great teachers from the school of Alexandria laid the foundation for modern evangelical scholars to undermine the authority of God’s written word. Beside the enduring legacy of their heretical beliefs, Clement and Origen paved the way for the following three issues that still threaten the recovery of truth within Christendom.
 - There is no final written authority on this earth because it was lost with the original autographs.
 - Final authority is matter of preference and opinion depending on what you think, how you feel, or what you want to prove.
 - The more education a man has, the better equipped he is to usurp the place of final authority.

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