

Series: Early Christians Speak

By Bill Lockwood

2016

Origin

One of the most outstanding of the Church Fathers was Origen. Unquestionably a learned and educated man, his life's story is an inspirational tale of overcoming severe trials and obstacles. His total reliance upon the Holy Scriptures and perfect familiarity with not only the Holy Writings of both Old and New Testaments, but also his wide knowledge of pagan and Jewish philosophers, made him one of the most revered and respected of church leaders in all ages.

Of the Church Fathers as a whole it has been stated, "The great feature of the Ante-Nicene theology, even in the mistakes of the writers, is its reliance on the Holy Scripture. What wealth of Scripture they lavish in their pages! We identify by their aid; but, were they lost in other forms, we might almost restore them from their pages." (editorial note in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4). Regarding Origen himself, the same editor notes that the "church is forever indebted to Origen for the patient and encyclopedic labor and learning which he bestowed on the Scriptures..."

Origen was born, in all probability, in Alexandria, Egypt about the year 185 A.D. His surname was Adamantinus. It is supposed that his parents were Christians at the time of his birth. His father Leonides was particularly pious. As a young man, Origen was daily required by his father to commit to memory and repeat various portions of the Scripture. Leonides was thrilled to have a son that appeared to be a genius in mental capacity but, more importantly, one who was so pious in his disposition.

In the year 202, however, a great persecution of Christians under Septimius Severus began and among the victims was Leonides who was placed in prison. Origen determined to share the fate of his father but his mother hid his clothes to prevent him from carrying out his purpose. Origen wrote to his father, however, and encouraged him to be faithful in trials for Jesus Christ. He admonished his father not to change his stand for Christ to please his family.

His father finally met with death and the imperial treasury, like so many dictators and kings throughout history, confiscated all of the property of Leonides which left the family penniless. Origen was obligated to care for his mother and his six younger brothers. Origen therefore entered upon a career of teaching grammar to support himself and his family. Due to his father's careful overseeing of Origen's instruction in Grecian literature, Origen was able to open a school which attracted many pupils. Two of his pupils in Alexandria included Plutarch, who later died a martyr's death, and Heraclas, who afterwards became a bishop of the church in Alexandria.

After the martyrdom of his father, Leonides, during the persecution of Christians under the emperor Septimius Severus in the year 202 A.D., Origen began teaching grammar to support himself and his family. He was still a teenager and the care of his family included his mother

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and siblings. One writer calls this period of his life *the second stadium of his career*. Two young men, Plutarch and Heraclas, noted Church Fathers themselves, studied under Origen.

As persecutions raged in Alexandria, Origen was compelled to flee from house to house to escape death. Later he discontinued teaching grammar in order to teach in a Catechetical School during which time he refused all remuneration for his labors. He sold books which he possessed – “many of them manuscripts which he had copied” – and led a life of the greatest devotion to study of the Scriptures. Origen would labor in the school during the day and devote the greater part of the night to the investigation of Scriptures, sometimes sleeping on the bare ground.

Upon one occasion he visited the church at Rome after which he returned to Alexandria and turned over the duties of the Catechetical School to his former pupil Heraclas. This he did that he might give a more thorough investigation to the Holy Scriptures. He acquired knowledge of the Hebrew language during this period. The *Hexapla* is the result of these labors. This is considered the *magnum opus* of his works.

The *Hexapla* (Greek word meaning ‘six-fold’) is described as “an immense and complex word-for-word comparison of the Greek Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) and other Greek translations.” Origen produced this edition of the Old Testament in which he placed side-by-side the (1) Hebrew; (2) *Secunda* (Hebrew *transliterated* into Greek); (3) *Aquila* of Sinope (an earlier translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek); (4) *Symmachus* (another Greek translation of the OT Hebrew); (5) A recension or revised text of the Hebrew OT with notes explaining where the Septuagint departed from the Hebrew; (6) *Theodotion’s* Greek translation of the OT Hebrew text dating from about 150 A.D.

As one can imagine, Origen’s work was a massive undertaking. Originally the work was said to be about 6,000 pages in 15 volumes. It was stored in the library at Caesarea until the Muslims destroyed it during the invasion of Palestine in 638 A.D. There are surviving fragments that are just now coming to light and which are being collated in the modern *Hexapla Project*. One can learn of this at hexapla.org.

Origen’s mind continued to grasp new fields. Continuing his investigation of the Scriptures, he began studying the various doctrines of Grecian schools in order that he might “meet his opponents upon their own ground.” In spite of being a noted lecturer himself, Origen attended the lectures of Ammonius Saccas in Alexandria. Saccas was the founder and expounder of Neo-Platonic philosophy in that age. Origen’s own reputation was growing and the Roman governor of the province of Arabia sent for him that he might personally interview him.

When, in the year 216 A.D., Caracalla the Emperor leveled a bloody persecution against the Christians of Alexandria, Origen was compelled to flee for his life. He withdrew to Caesarea in Palestine to his friend Bishop Alexander who had been an elder in the church at Jerusalem. Origen then accepted an invitation from Alexander and one of the bishops of the church at Caesarea, Theoctistus, to expound upon the Scriptures in a series of lectures.

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It was during this period that Origen became fast friends with Ambrosius, or Ambrose. Ambrose provided Origen seven secretaries and seven transcribers in order to publish for posterity Origen's great learning. The scholar from Alexandria blossomed during these years.

It was during this period that a noblewoman, Julia Mammaea, the mother of Alexander Severus, heard of the fame of Origen and invited him to Antioch, the capital of Syria, so she might hear him expound the Holy Scriptures. Later, he was called to Greece to assist in defeating the heretical views that had entered the churches in that place. The date was 228 A.D.

Two years later, Origen returned to Alexandria where he found the bishop of the church incensed that he had accepted the office of "bishop" while at Caesarea. Demetrius declared that our scholar was a "layman" and not worthy to be entitled "Bishop." A "synod" was summoned which "ex-communicated" him from fellowship. Origen once again fled to Caesarea where he remained for nearly a quarter of a century. Historians note that there was "no doubt jealousy" on the part of leaders in Alexandria, including especially Demetrius.

Once in Caesarea again, Origen devoted himself to his exegetical studies upon the books of Scripture and his friendship with the two bishops, Alexander and Theoctistus, enabled him to establish a theological school in that city "to a degree of reputation which attracted many pupils." However, another persecution, this time waged by the Emperor Maximin, forced Origen to flee to Cappadocia where he remained concealed in a Christian house.

Finally, on the outbreak of the Decian persecution in 249 A.D., Origen was imprisoned at Tyre. Here he suffered great cruelties. He had already lived as an ascetic and, his body being weakened, was not able to withstand the wickedness to which he was exposed. Five years later he died at the hands of his torturers.

After his death at 70 years of age in 254 A.D. his friends continued to collect his written works, which Jerome later estimated to be more than any man could read. Epiphanius would state that his writings filled 6,000 volumes. His greatest apologetic work, *Against Celsus*, was undertaken by special request of his friend Ambrosius to answer the attack of the noted heathen philosopher. "It has always been regarded as the great apologetic work of antiquity; and no one can peruse it without being struck by the multifarious reading, wonderful acuteness, and rare subtlety of mind which it displays." This reading continues to this day to be one of the favorites of modern-day students.