Shorter writings

Origen of Alexandria (c. AD 185–253)

SermonIndex.net / Church Fathers

A Letter from Origen to Gregory

1. Greeting in God, my most excellent sir, and venerable son Gregory, from Origen. A natural readiness of comprehension, as you well know, may, if practice be added, contribute somewhat to the contingent end, if I may so call it, of that which any one wishes to practise. Thus, your natural good parts might make of you a finished Roman lawyer or a Greek philosopher, so to speak, of one of the schools in high reputation. But I am anxious that you should devote all the strength of your natural good parts to Christianity for your end; and in order to this, I wish to ask you to extract from the philosophy of the Greeks what may serve as a course of study or a preparation for Christianity, and from geometry and astronomy what will serve to explain the sacred Scriptures, in order that all that the sons of the philosophers are wont to say about geometry and music, grammar, rhetoric, and astronomy, as fellow-helpers to philosophy, we may say about philosophy itself, in relation to Christianity.

2. Perhaps something of this kind is shadowed forth in what is written in Exodus from the mouth of God, that the children of Israel were commanded to ask from their neighbours, and those who dwelt with them, vessels of silver and gold, and raiment, in order that, by spoiling the Egyptians, they might have material for the preparation of the things which pertained to the service of God. For from the things which the children of Israel took from the Egyptians the vessels in the holy of holies were made,-the ark with its lid, and the Cherubim, and the mercy-seat, and the golden coffer, where was the manna, the angels' bread. These things were probably made from the best of the Egyptian gold. An inferior kind would be used for the solid golden candlestick near the inner veil, and its branches, and the golden table on which were the pieces of shewbread, and the golden censer between them. And if there was a third and fourth quality of gold, from it would be made the holy vessels; and the other things would be made of Egyptian silver. For when the children of Israel dwelt in Egypt, they gained this from their dwelling there, that they had no lack of such precious material for the utensils of the service of God.

And of the Egyptian raiment were probably made all those things which, as the Scripture mentions, needed sewed and embroidered work, sewed with the wisdom of God, the one to the other other, that the veils might be made, and the inner and the cuter courts. And why should I go on, in this untimely digression, to set forth how useful to the children of

Israel were the things brought from Egypt, which the Egyptians had not put to a proper use, but which the Hebrews, guided by the wisdom of God, used for God's service? Now the sacred Scripture is wont to represent as an evil the going down from the land of the children of Israel into Egypt, indicating that certain persons get harm from sojourning among the Egyptians, that is to say, from meddling with the knowledge of this world, after they have subscribed to the law of God, and the Israelitish service of Him. Ader at least, the Idumaean; so long as he was in" the land of Israel, and had not tasted the bread of the Egyptians, made no idols. It was when he fled from the wise Solomon, and went down into Egypt, as it were flying from the wisdom of God, and was made a kinsman of Pharaoh by marrying his wife's sister, and begetting a child, who was brought up with the children of Pharaoh, that he did this.

Wherefore, although he did return to the land of Israel, he returned only to divide the people of God, and to make them say to the golden calf, "These be thy gods, 0 Israel, which brought thee up from the land of Egypt. And I may tell you from my experience, that not many take from Egypt only the useful, and go away and use it for the service of God; while Ader the Idumaean has many brethren. These are they who, from their Greek studies, produce heretical notions, and set them up, like the' golden calf, in Bethel, which signifies "God's house. In these words also there seems to me an indication that they have set up their own imaginations in the Scriptures, where the word of God dwells, which is called in a figure Bethel. The other figure, the word says, was set up in Dan. Now the borders of Dan are the most extreme, and nearest the borders of the Gentiles, as is clear from what is written in Joshua, the son of Nun. Now some of the devices of these brethren of Ader, as we call them, are also very near the borders of the Gentiles.

3. Do you then, my son, diligently apply yourself to the reading of the sacred Scriptures. Apply yourself, I say. For we who read the things of God need much application, lest we should say or think anything too rashly about them. And applying yourself thus to the study of the things of God, with faithful prejudgments such as are well pleasing to God, knock at its locked door, and it will be opened to you by the porter, of whom Jesus says, "To him the porter opens." And applying yourself thus to the divine study, seek aright, and with unwavering trust in God, the meaning of the holy Scriptures, which so many have missed. Be not satisfied with knocking and seeking; for prayer is of all things indispensable to the knowledge of the things of God. For to this the Saviour exhorted, and said not only, "Knock, and it shall be opened to you; and seek, and ye shall find," but also, "Ask, and it shall be given unto you." My fatherly love to you has made me thus bold; but whether my boldness be good, God will know, and His Christ, and all partakers of the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. May you also be a partaker, and be ever increasing your inheritance, that you may say not only, "We are become partakers of Christ," but also partakers of God.

A Letter to Origen from Africanus About the History of Susanna

Greeting, my lord and son, most worthy Origen, from Africanus. In your sacred discussion with Agnomon you referred to that prophecy of Daniel which is related of his youth. This at that time, as was meet, I accepted as genuine. Now, however, I cannot understand how it escaped you that this part of the book is spurious. For, in sooth, this section, although apart from this it is elegantly written, is plainly a more modern forgery. There are many proofs of this. When Susanna is condemned to die, the prophet is seized by the Spirit, and cries out that the sentence is unjust. Now, in the first place, it is always in some other way that Daniel prophesies-by visions, and dreams, and an angel appearing to him, never by prophetic inspiration. Then, after crying out in this extraordinary fashion, he detects them in a way no less incredible, which not even Philistion the play-writer would have resorted to. For, not satisfied with rebuking them through the Spirit, he placed them apart, and asked them severally where they saw her committing adultery. And when the one said, ”Under a holm-tree” (prinoj), he answered that the angel would saw him asunder (prisein); and in a similar fashion menaced the other who said, ”Under a mastich-tree” (sxhinoj), with being rent asunder (sxhisthenai). Now, in Greek, it happens that ”holm-tree” and ”saw asunder,” and ”rend” and ”mastich-tree” sound alike; but in Hebrew they are quite distinct. But all the books of the Old Testament have been translated from Hebrew into Greek.

2. Moreover, how is it that they who were captives among the Chaldaeans, lost and won at play, thrown out unburied on the streets, as was prophesied of the former captivity, their sons torn from them to be eunuchs, and their daughters to be concubines, as had been prophesied; how is it that such could pass sentence of death, and that on the wife of their king Joakim, whom the king of the Babylonians had made partner of his throne? Then if it was not this Joakim, but some other from the common people, whence had a captive such a mansion and spacious garden? But a more fatal objection is, that this section, along with the other two at the end of it, is not contained in the Daniel received among the Jews. And add that, among all the many prophets who had been before, there is no one who has quoted from another word for word. For they had no need to go a-begging for words, since their own were true; but this one, in rebuking one of those men, quotes the words of the Lord: ”The innocent and righteous shall thou not slay.” From all this I infer that this section is a later

addition. Moreover, the style is different. I have struck the blow; do you give the echo; answer, and instruct me. Salute all my masters. The learned all salute thee. With all my heart I pray for your and your circle's health.

Letter of Origen to Gregory

When and to whom the Learning derived from Philosophy may be of Service for the Exposition of the Holy Scriptures; with a lively Personal Appeal. This letter to Gregory, afterwards bishop of Caesarea, and called Thaumaturgus, was preserved in the Philocalia, or collection of extracts from Origen's works drawn up by Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea. It is printed by Delarue and Lommatzsch in the forefront of their editions of the works. It forms a good preface to the commentaries, as it shows how Origen considered the study of Scripture to be the highest of all studies, and how he regarded scientific learning, in which he was himself a master, as merely preparatory for this supreme learning. Dräseke has shown that it was written about 235, when Origen, after having had Gregory as his pupil at Caesarea for some years, had fled before the persecution under Maximinus Thrax to Cappadocia;while Gregory, to judge from the tenor of this Epistle, had gone to Egypt. The Panegyric on Origen, pronounced by Gregory at Caesarea about 239, when the school had reassembled there after the persecution, shows that the master's solicitude for his pupil's true advancement was not disappointed.

1. Gregory is Urged to Apply His Gentile Learning to the Study of Scripture.
All hail to thee in God, most excellent and reverend Sir, son Gregory, from Origen. A natural quickness of understanding is fitted, as you are well aware, if it be diligently exercised, to produce a work which may bring its owner so far as is possible, if I may so express myself, to the consummation of the art the which he desires to practise, and your natural aptitude is sufficient to make you a consummate Roman lawyer and a Greek philosopher too of the most famous schools. But my desire for you has been that you should direct the whole force of your intelligence to Christianity as your end, and that in the way of production. And I would wish that you should take with you on the one hand those parts of the philosophy of the Greeks which are fit, as it were, to serve as general or preparatory studies for Christianity, and on the other hand so much of Geometry and Astronomy as may be helpful for the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. The children of the philosophers speak of geometry and music and grammar and rhetoric and astronomy as being ancillary to philosophy; and in the same way we might speak of philosophy itself as being ancillary to Christianity.

2. This Procedure is Typified by the Story of the Spoiling of the Egyptians.
It is something of this sort perhaps that is enigmatically indicated in the directions God is

represented in the Book of Exodus as giving to the children of lsrael. They are directed to beg from their neighbours and from those dwelling in their tents vessels of silver and of gold, and raiment; thus they are to spoil the Egyptians, and to obtain materials for making the things they are told to provide in connection with the worship of God. For out of the things of which the children of lsrael spoiled the Egyptians the furniture of the Holy of Holies was made, the ark with its cover, and the cherubim and the mercy-seat and the gold jar in which the manna, that bread of angels, was stored. These probably were made from the finest of the gold of the Egyptians, and from a second quality, perhaps, the solid golden candlestick which stood near the inner veil, and the lamps on it, and the golden table on which stood the shewbread, and between these two the golden altar of incense. And if there was gold of a third and of a fourth quality, the sacred vessels were made of it. And of the Egyptian silver, too, other things were made; for it was from their sojourn in Egypt that the children of lsrael derived the great advantage of being supplied with such a quantity of precious materials for the use of the service of God.

Out of the Egyptian raiment probably were made all those requisites named in Scripture in embroidered work; the embroiderers working with the wisdom of God, such garments for such purposes, to produce the hangings and the inner and outer courts. This is not a suitable opportunity to enlarge on such a theme or to show in how many ways the children of Israel found those things useful which they got from the Egyptians. The Egyptians had not made a proper use of them; but the Hebrews used them, for the wisdom of God was with them, for religious purposes. Holy Scripture knows, however, that it was an evil thing to descend from the land of the children of lsrael into Egypt; and in this a great truth is wrapped up. For some it is of evil that they should dwell with the Egyptians, that is to say, with the learning of the world, after they have been enrolled in the law of God and in the Israelite worship of Him. Ader the Edomite, as long as he was in the land of Israel and did not taste the bread of the Egyptians, made no idols; but when he fled from the wise Solomon and went down into Egypt, as one who had fled from the wisdom of God he became connected with Pharaoh, marrying the sister of his wife, and begetting a son who was brought up among the sons of Pharaoh.

Therefore, though he did go back to the land of Israel, he came back to it to bring division into the people of God, and to cause them to say to the golden calf, "These are thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt. I have learned by experience and can tell you that there are few who have taken of the useful things of Egypt and come out of it, and have then prepared what is required for the service of God; but Ader the Edomite on the other hand has many a brother. I mean those who, founding on some piece of Greek learning, have brought forth heretical ideas, and have as it were made golden calves in Bethel, which is, being interpreted, the house of God. This appears to me to be intended to convey that such persons set up their own images in the Scriptures in which the Word of God dwells, and which therefore are tropically called Bethel. The other image is said in the word to have been set up in Dan. Now the borders of Dan are at the extremities and are contiguous to the country of the heathens, as is plainly recorded in the Book of Jesus,

son of Nave. Some of these images, then, are close to the borders of the heathen, which the brothers, as we showed, of Ader have devised.

3. Personal Appeal.

Do you then, sir, my son, study first of all the divine Scriptures. Study them I say. For we require to study the divine writings deeply, lest we should speak of them faster than we think; and while you study these divine works with a believing and God-pleasing intention, knock at that which is closed in them, and it shall be opened to thee by the porter, of whom Jesus says, "To him the porter openeth." While you attend to this divine reading seek aright and with unwavering faith in God the hidden sense which is present in most passages of the divine Scriptures. And do not be content with knocking and seeking, for what is most necessary for understanding divine things is prayer, and in urging us to this the Saviour says not only, "Knock, and it shall be opened to you," and "Seek, and ye shall find," but also "Ask, and it shall be given you." So much I have ventured on account of my fatherly love to you. Whether I have ventured well or not, God knows, and His Christ, and he who has part of the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ. May you partake in these; may you have an always increasing share of them, so that you may be able to say not only, "We are partakers of Christ," but also "We are partakers of God."

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.