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Therrien, Mark E.: Cross and Creation. A Theological Introduction to Origen of Alexandria. – Washington: The Catholic University of America Press 2022. (XXIV) 300 S. (Patristic Theology), pb. \$ 34,95 ISBN: 9780813235301

Therrien's book is part of the renewed interest of North American scholarship in Origen, but it does so with an approach that appears rooted in attitudes and perspectives coming from previous seasons of academic research on the Alexandrian Master, especially European, as the subtitle makes clear: *A Theological Introduction to Origen of Alexandria*. From the point of view of the literary genre, an "introduction" aims to illustrate the key elements that can enable the reader to enter and orient himself in the whole of an author's work while having clear in mind how to place the single details of argument in the general framework of the author's theol. In this sense, it is inevitable to assume that there is a certain coherence, if not systematicity in the author's oeuvre as a whole, something that in the case of Origen was the subject of a scholarly debate that seemed to have ended with a substantial recognition of the more zetetic than systematic character of his thought, which however, according to T., "is certainly systematic, in the sense that there is an inner coherence or unity to it" (7). In order to reopen the question and illustrate such an inner coherence, he proposes an analysis based on *De principiis* and the first books of the *Commentary on John*, both early writings of Origen, which is structured around eight themes corresponding to as many chap.s (each concluded by a useful summary): God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, the end, the soul, the world, the cross, deification.

In his analysis, however, T. holds firmly to one of the most relevant outcomes of the last seventy years of research on Origen, especially in France and Italy, namely the biblical and exegetical foundation of his thought and of his very way of doing theol., so that he can programmatically reaffirm "the scriptural (and especially Pauline) roots of Origen's teaching" (5) and thus define Origen "as a scriptural theologian", since for the Alexandrian Master "theology itself is scriptural exegesis" (10, italics in the text). In this sense, the weight of Paul and of the first letter to the Corinthians in particular emerges as an essential reference for Origen's theol. (in this regard, alongside the excellent thematic index that concludes the volume, a biblical index would have been of great use). Before briefly presenting the contents of each chap. that make up a coherent and unitary path, it is important to emphasise what T. considers to be Origen's own perspective, namely the orientation of his thought towards eschatology understood as the final realisation of the Church as the body of Christ. In this sense, T. questions the widespread scholarly perspective that emphasises the intimate connection between protology and eschatology in Origen's vision, to emphasise instead how the latter's interest is towards the redemption of the world and mankind, rather than their origin.

Following the argument of *De principiis*, in chap. one, T. shows how “incorporeality” and “simplicity” are the fundamental attributes of Origen’s absolutely transcendent God, which determine a new way of speaking of God and at the same time highlight “the necessary limits on all creaturely means of speaking of God, even in regard to created intellectual realities” (45), that is to say the *noes* of the first creation, angels and human beings before the Fall. Thus, chap. two brings out the key role of Christ in the process of creation and in God’s relationship with the world: “Since the Father is eternally the Father of his Son, and since the Son eternally bears within himself the ‘creation that will be’” (74), God is at the same time absolutely transcendent, as said in chap. one, and totally immanent to the world through the Son. The function of the Holy Spirit illustrated in chap. three can also be understood within this scheme: for Origen, the sanctification brought about by the Spirit constitutes the completion of the creation, as the latter does not merely come from God, but subsists in God, and this is possible only through the action of the Spirit. Thanks to this peculiar reading of Origen’s pneumatology, T. can break the connection between protology and eschatology generally attributed to Origen and characterise his perspective in an eschatological sense in chap. four: “The end determines the beginning” (112), not the contrary. For Origen, the end will mark the completion of the church as the perfect body of Christ in unity, as taught by Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, thus validating in the eschatological perfection the progress in faith made by the believers in their life in this world.

Only at this point, dealing with Origen’s treatment of soul in chap. five, T. addresses the difficult issue of Origenian protology, or rather the dynamics of the dual creation and incorporation of souls, once again drawing on the Pauline framework of Origen’s speculation. In this case, T.’s argumentation appears less compact, reflecting the very difficulties he detects in the thought of Origen, who, in his view, “emphasises the ambiguity within Scripture’s teaching about the soul” (143) thus remaining open to further questioning and investigation. A broader treatment of Origen’s threefold anthropology, derived from 1 Thess 5:23 (“your whole spirit, soul and body”), would have been appropriate to clarify the inner articulation of the human self, which does not coincide only with the *nous-psyche* pair, and would also have helped to better clarify the sense in which Origen in the wake of Paul uses the term “psychic”. Chap. six on the cosmological speculations of *De principiis* 3.5.4 also pivots on the primacy of eschatology over protology. It is the discourse on the end times that clarifies the sense in which creation can be considered a *katabolê*, an overthrow of God’s original creation: “Creation is indeed subjected to vanity, but it is subjected in hope because of the redemptive work of Christ in becoming incarnate and in being obedient to the Father, even unto death” (178). Thus, chap. seven deals with the central role of Christ’s suffering on the cross as the ultimate revelation of who God is as the God of Love, in Origen’s view. Correspondingly, the Cross constitutes “the principal means by which the created being’s deification becomes possible” (221). In this way, the way in which the believer can access the vision of God, in this and the next life, is mirrored by what happens to Christ’s soul during the Passion, which is the subject of the last chap. Here T. deals with the difficult passage in Book 32 of the *Commentary on John* about the human soul of Christ, a text that would seem to challenge what Origen has stated in his earlier works. On the contrary, T. writes: “For Origen, the weakness of the Cross, freely experienced by the Son in his very own soul to such an extreme point that he even gives up that very soul in death, becomes the manifestation of supreme kingly power. [...] The Son becomes king over creation not only as the Word in whom it was made and who eternally provides for it, but even as this human soul, which in enduring weakness unto

death is rendered divine. In turn, this same soul becomes a fount of divine life for others, through which he deifies them and gradually brings his redemptive work to perfection in the ages to come, until death itself is brought to an end and God becomes ‘all in all’ (258f). From this perspective, the very meaning of the title of T.’s book is made clear: “Cross and creation” and not the chronological – and apparently logical – order of creation and Cross, because Origen’s eyes are pointed to the future of the creation and not to its past.

T.’s proposal is very compact, but must be subjected to verification. In particular, it must be assessed whether the proposed interpretative scheme can integrate the multiplicity of themes of Origen’s enormous theol. and exegetical production, which range over many areas not touched upon in T.’s book, from anthropology “according to the image” and free will, to angelology and demonology, somewhat too schematically discussed only in regard to the relationship between Lucifer and this world intended as the believer’s battleground for salvation (162–169), eluding the problem of the reasons why “something has gone seriously wrong within God’s creation”, that is protology. Only further investigations will therefore show whether Origen’s thought remained anchored to these tenets outlined in his early works or whether it instead underwent an evolution, in whole or in part, depending on changes in the historical and cultural context that may have affected Origen in the course of his life and in his career as a writer.

In any case, T.’s book has the merit of fully vindicating the consequences of Origen’s proud self-definition as “*vir ecclesiasticus*”, that is, his rootedness in the church understood first and foremost as a place for listening to and explaining Scripture, in the face of interpretations that consider him instead from a phil. point of view (even in a new fashion, as in the case of the neo-idealist perspective proposed by Alfons Füst and Theo Kobusch of Origen as a theorist of human dignity and freedom) or in any case extraneous to the context of the development of the Great Church and its doctrines in the first half of the third century. Even in this case, however, we must always be careful not to reconstruct Origen’s theol. thought in too *dogmatikos* a way, but rather to appreciate him as an interpreter of Scripture in its complexity and even in its contradictions, which often prevent him from offering too clear-cut solutions in favour of open answers that are subject to constant adjustment and re-evaluation.

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