

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sowing seeds of progressive revelation: Origen on the knowledge of the prophets

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Abstract

Many scholars dismiss Origen's theology of scriptural inspiration as hopelessly lacking in historical sensibility. They point to his anachronistic attribution to the Old Testament prophets of extensive knowledge of the details of Christ's incarnation and of the allegorical significance of their own writings. I dispute this assessment, arguing that Origen's view of prophetic knowledge is more sophisticated than scholars have recognised and can contribute to contemporary reflection on progressive revelation, both anticipating and chastening it. I conclude with three analogies Origen offers us for conceptualising the development of revelation and doctrine.

Keywords: development of doctrine; history; inspiration; Origen; progressive revelation; prophecy

The exalted terms Origen uses to describe the prophets' knowledge of the coming Christ have drawn nearly universal criticism from twentieth-century scholars. At times, Origen suggests that nearly everything about Christ's coming was known to the Old Testament prophets, that their knowledge virtually equalled that of the apostles and that they consciously intended the allegorical readings of their texts the church later developed. Even sympathetic interpreters object: Henri de Lubac says that Origen 'lets himself be carried away', while Henri Crouzel calls his view 'inadequate' and 'astonishing'.¹ The critics are more damning: R. P. C. Hanson dismisses Origen's view as 'totally unscriptural, totally uncritical, totally unreal'.² Origen's view of prophetic knowledge seems to clash with historical sensibilities and threatens the dramatic 'newness' of the light shed on the Old Testament by Christ's coming.

Previous attempts to rehabilitate Origen's appreciation of history have focused on the question of allegory, touching on hermeneutical questions rather than the issues

¹Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2007), p. 296. Henri Crouzel, *Origen: The Life and Thought of the First Great Theologian*, trans. A. S. Worrall (San Francisco, CA: T&T Clark, 1989), p. 72.

²R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event: A Study of the Sources and Significance of Origen's Interpretation of Scripture* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1959), p. 209.

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of inspiration and progressive revelation implicated in the knowledge of the prophets.³ In passing, Peter Martens explicitly drew attention to this very lacuna in his article in *Modern Theology* defending Origen on allegory.⁴

This article argues that Origen's writings on the knowledge of the prophets, rather than being hopelessly outdated, actually provide critical early resources which both anticipate and chasten modern thinking about progressive revelation. After compiling Origen's stronger statements on prophetic knowledge and surveying historical and theodramatic objections to this caricatured view, a fourfold defence of Origen on prophetic knowledge follows. First, I contextualise his high view of prophetic knowledge within his apologetic and anti-heretical project. His view serves to protect key Christian affirmations, contributing to thought about development by listing conditions which any theory of progressive revelation would have to meet. Second, I show that he retains a strong sense of the significance of history as dramatic event even with this maximal view of prophetic knowledge. Third, I demonstrate that Origen's high view of prophetic knowledge is merely tentative; he also proposes more limited accounts of prophetic knowledge elsewhere which leave open the possibility or even assume the reality of progressive revelation. Finally, I argue that Origen's discussion in book 13 of his *Commentary on John* contains several useful analogies or models of progressive revelation which anticipate modern theological paradigms while still protecting key Christian affirmations often neglected by contemporary scholarship.

Assuming the worst: a composite portrait

For argument's sake, a remarkably lofty account of prophetic knowledge can be pieced together from Origen's strongest statements. In *Contra Celsum*, he argued that 'the prophets of God foresaw everything that Jesus would suffer and prophesied them'.⁵ In the *Commentary on John* he claimed that the prophetic writings do not merely objectively contain foreshadowing of Christ – the prophets understood the referent 'as if they saw them before their eyes'.⁶ Origen occasionally views this knowledge as fairly detailed, as if actualisation were all that was missing: the prophets 'desired to see the mystery of the incarnation of the son of God effected'.⁷ He suggests that the apostles who beheld the events 'understood the events no more than the fathers and the prophets'.⁸ Finally, he holds that the allegorical meanings the church later drew from prophetic texts were part of the authors' original intent: 'Moses and the prophets have accurately understood the

³See Peter Martens, 'Origen Against History? Reconsidering the Critique of Allegory', *Modern Theology* 28/4 (2012), pp. 635–56. Treatments of the question of allegory are important and necessary, but these responses do not exhaust the objections to Origen's notion of history.

⁴Martens writes that one of 'two additional history-related criticisms that I will not address' is 'that Origen's allegory was not sensitive to progressive revelation'. *Ibid.*, p. 651, n. 6. This article helps to fill this lacuna and thus complements Martens' work.

⁵Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: CUP, 1980), pp. 393–4 (6.81). 'The Old Testament prophets knew almost everything about the Messiah beforehand.' Gunnar af Hällström, *Charismatic Succession: A Study on Origen's Concept of Prophecy* (Helsinki: Toimittanut Anne-Marit Enroth, 1985), p. 19.

⁶Origen, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to John: Books 1–10*, trans. Ronald Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), vol. 1, p. 97 (2.10). The Word 'enlightens them with the light of knowledge, causing them to see things which they had not perceived before his coming'.

⁷*Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 176 (6.28).

⁸*Ibid.*

spiritual meaning of all the books of the law and the prophets' down to the symbolic significance of details like the 'twenty-nine kings' in Joshua or the typological referents of the two seraphs in Isaiah.⁹ These meanings were concealed beneath the letter due to rhetorical stratagem, not ignorance.¹⁰ The prophets could not be wise unless they 'understood "the words from their own mouth"'.¹¹ Thus, rather than progressive revelation, the prophet 'could see better than us that the things accomplished through himself were shadows of certain realities'.¹²

Historical and theodramatic lines of attack

Assuming for the moment that this composite portrait accurately represents the full scope of Origen's position, two objections immediately arise. First, Origen's view of prophetic knowledge seems hopelessly incompatible with a genuine historical sense. To modern people, aware of the profound difference between historical epochs, the knowledge he attributes to Old Testament figures is simply unimaginable: that Rebekah and the patriarchs were sophisticated philosophers or that the prophets 'knew nearly as much about [Christian doctrine] as the apostles did'.¹³ The charge is not merely factual error, that Origen attempts a historical and critical exegesis and fails. The charge is that there was never even an attempt. What the prophets knew is deduced ahistorically from the nature of inspiration and the fact that the wise must understand what they say. The particularities of the prophets' style or context do not factor into Origen's conclusions about what the prophets knew, for the style is a rhetorical strategy and the fact of divine inspiration trumps the limitations of context.¹⁴ No attempt is made to determine what the prophet might have known as a person of their time. Exegetically, this means that Origen reads 'into the mind of the biblical author thoughts which are really his own', the cardinal sin of exegesis.¹⁵ From a modern historical perspective, what really matters is 'what any given text meant when it was first written or uttered to the first audience for which it was intended'.¹⁶ Theologically, Origen's view means that the human side of the process of inspiration is neglected.¹⁷ Thus de Lubac concludes that Origen 'assuredly [does] not' show 'a true historical sense', and Hanson writes that 'Origen never accepted the biblical viewpoint' on 'the significance of history'.¹⁸ If these charges are accurate,

⁹Origen, *A Commentary on the Gospel According to John: Books 13–32*, trans. Ronald Heine (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2012), vol. 2, p. 134 (13.319); vol. 2, p. 174 (6.22–3). From here on, these two volumes are cited as if they were a single work.

¹⁰See Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, 'Prophecy in Origen: Between Scripture and Philosophy', *Journal of Early Christian History* 7/2 (2017), p. 25; and Robert Hauck, *The More Divine Proof: Prophecy and Inspiration in Celsus and Origen* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989), p. 115.

¹¹Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 174 (6.21).

¹²Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, 174 (6.22). In de Lubac's words, the prophets were 'all the more conscious of their treasure as they were closer to the beginning of time'. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 300.

¹³For the patriarchs, see de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 281. The quotation comes from Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, p. 368.

¹⁴He relied heavily on Scripture's divine authorship for determining the "will", "intent", or "aim" of this collection of writings.' Peter Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp. 194–5.

¹⁵Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, p. 363.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 368.

¹⁷See Crouzel, *Origen*, pp. 71–2.

¹⁸De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 281. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, p. 363.

why should Origen's views on prophetic knowledge be taken seriously rather than set aside as relics of a pre-critical, pre-historical age?

Second, Origen's view seems to rob the event of the incarnation of its dramatic significance. If the preincarnate Word had already enlightened the minds of the prophets to such a high degree, what role is left for Christ's incarnation in disclosing the mysteries of the Old Testament? What need is there for Emmaus, at least for the prophets? At least when it comes to the intellectual elite, Origen flattens the trajectory of the history of revelation, placing equally wise figures on either side of the Christ event.¹⁹ Thus the dramatic structure of the incarnation is lost, along with the 'newness of Jesus Christ', which was 'unforeseeable'.²⁰ Rather than the light of Christ retroactively shedding light on implicit truths contained in mystery in the Old, Origen's view, taken to an extreme, would make the Old Testament 'an intellectual dress rehearsal for the New', in which everything about the coming dispensation was known to the 'enlightened', with history following in the wake of intellectual apprehension, rather than vice versa.²¹ Origen would fall afoul of de Lubac's warning not to 'forget the rupture' or 'conceal the impassable threshold' only crossed in the incarnation.²² Theo-drama would be replaced by dress rehearsal.

Contextualising the portrait: the protective function of Origen's view of prophetic knowledge

Even while assuming for the time being the accuracy of this caricatured depiction of Origen's view of prophetic knowledge, one can begin to restore the tarnished reputation of his doctrine by noting the role it plays in the wider context of his apologetic response to various heresies. Attributing extensive knowledge to the prophets helps Origen defend at least four core Christian affirmations: the unity of the testaments, the intrinsic spirituality of the Old Testament, the christological character of revelation and the freedom and agency of the prophets.

First, in the context of Marcionism, Origen's high view of the knowledge of the prophets helped preserve the unity of the testaments.²³ Origen knew that 'some of the heterodox' had invented another god, to whom they attributed the Old Testament, attempting 'to subvert the prophets' testimonies about Christ'.²⁴ Heracleon, for example, held 'a rather slanderous view of John and the prophets', claiming that 'the whole prophetic order is a noise'.²⁵ It was in response to this minimisation of 'the gift given to the fathers and the prophets' that Origen insisted that 'the apostles

¹⁹So extreme is Origen's account of the relation of Old Testament to New Testament that the reader is constantly tempted to conclude that for him there is no fundamental distinction between the revelation given in the Old Testament and that given in the New.' Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, p. 202.

²⁰For these words, see de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 465.

²¹For this account of the retroactive effects of the light of Christ, *ibid.*, pp. 190, 461, 466. For the quotation and the argument that the rest of the sentence paraphrases, see Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, p. 204: 'the Old Testament contains the whole gospel contained in the New – Christology, ministry, sacraments, everything – only presented in the Old as a number of intellectual propositions apprehended by the enlightened, instead of enacted on the stage of history'.

²²De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 507.

²³See af Hällström, *Charismatic Succession*, p. 19: 'It is, however, possible that Origen's strong anti-Marcionite attitude made him stress the knowledge of the prophets regarding Christ.'

²⁴Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 149 (2.199).

²⁵*Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 199 (6.108).

are not wiser than the fathers or Moses and the prophets'.²⁶ A high view of prophetic knowledge restored the dignity of the prophets and corresponded to his conviction that the same spirit inspired both the prophets and the apostles, endowing both with similar degrees of knowledge.²⁷ Robust prophetic knowledge of Christ similarly made the tie to the New Testament indissoluble.²⁸ Thus the motive behind Origen's view is noble and highly orthodox: 'there is only one God, author of both Testaments, faithful to himself throughout both'.²⁹ A radical supersessionism which maligned the prophets and left the Old Testament behind was unacceptable, and part of Origen's counterstrategy was a high view of prophetic knowledge.

Second, extensive prophetic knowledge helped Origen defend the intrinsic spirituality of the Old Testament. If the prophetic writings were from the same Spirit and part of the same economy, they had to contain a spiritual message. A powerful way to establish this spiritual character was to assert that the prophets knew and intended the allegorical dimensions of what they wrote.³⁰ Thus the idea 'that in the law and the prophets there is no deeper doctrine' was 'a very vulgar error'.³¹ The prophets were spiritual, and for this very reason, they knew spiritual truths.³² They also knew how to conceal them within the body of the letter, as spiritual masters like Plato had done.³³ The Old Testament was not carnal, nor did it gain spiritual depth as an extrinsic addition imported from the New Testament – since the authors were initiated into spiritual mysteries, the Old Testament was already intrinsically spiritual. The allegorical exegesis practised by the church was not an imposition but corresponded to prophetic intention.

Third, Origen's insistence on the extensive knowledge of the prophets guarded the christological character of revelation. All scripture comes through the Word and points back to him. Origen would have found it difficult to defend this truth if he accepted the idea that the prophets knew nothing of Christ. His high view of

²⁶Ibid., vol. 1, p. 177 (6. 31, 30).

²⁷See de Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 344: 'The link of all Scripture to the Spirit is a pledge of its unity'; Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, p. 211: 'the anti-Gnostic polemic is insinuated by insisting upon the one Spirit, who inspired authors belonging to both testaments'; cf. Crouzel, *Origen*, p. 64. Enrique Nardoni writes that 'both the prophets and the apostles shared the same light, so that the former were equal in spiritual knowledge to the apostles and evangelists'. Enrique Nardoni, 'Origen's Concept of Biblical Inspiration', *The Second Century: A Journal of Early Christian Studies* 4/1 (Spring 1984), p. 13.

²⁸See Ramelli, 'Prophecy in Origen', p. 18: 'the issue of the Christological prophecies ... was pivotal for Origen's tenet of the unity of the two Testaments and of the two economies, which he supported against Marcionite and "Gnostic" ... tendencies'.

²⁹De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 190. See Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 175 (19.32): 'the God of the prophets is also Father of Christ, and he is our God and Father.'

³⁰'When Jesus and Paul pointed to the deeper sense of the law and prophets, they were not highlighting something that the authors of these Scriptures did not already know ... it is the prophets themselves who knowingly introduce another sense into their writings.' Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, p. 159

³¹Origen, *Contra Celsum*, p. 409 (7.18).

³²At this time, the dominant model of inspiration was highly intellectual. In Plato 'the highest inspiration involves the lifting of the soul to the intelligible realm and the vision of divine truth'. Hauck, *The More Divine Proof*, p. 22. Insisting that the prophets were spiritual naturally led Origen to a high view of their knowledge: 'Our prophets also had certain truths in their minds that were too exalted to be written down and which they did not record.' Origen, *Contra Celsum*, p. 320 (6.6).

³³'These men saw better than Plato what truths should be committed to writing, and how they should be written, and what ought under no circumstances to be written for the multitude.' Ibid.

prophetic knowledge reinforces the belief that the prophets were in contact with the Word and that the ultimate referent of their writings was Christ. Therefore Origen insisted that Christ was active in the Old Testament: 'Christ came spiritually even before he came in a body'.³⁴ He insists that the prophets 'had an understanding of the' christological 'through whom'.³⁵ Ultimately, 'the religion of the ancients was holy and acceptable to God by its understanding of, and faith in, and expectation of Christ'; 'Christ was the good awaited by the people'.³⁶ All biblical revelation was christological without exception.

Finally, Origen's high view of prophetic knowledge ensured that the freedom and agency of the prophet were respected. Origen insists that prophetic graces were received 'from Jesus in relation to [the prophets'] free choice'.³⁷ Not only did they have a choice whether to prophesy, they also remained free (conscious and in their right mind) while prophesying. Unlike pagan priestesses or the Montanist prophets, who often prophesied while in ecstatic frenzies, Origen claimed that the prophet 'ought to possess the clearest vision at the very time when the deity is in communion with him'.³⁸ Any form of inspiration in which someone 'has no control of her faculties' must by definition be demonic; in Crouzel's words, 'the devil possesses, God respects freedom'.³⁹ If the prophets had not really understood their message, Origen reasoned, then there would have been no difference between divine revelation and demonic possession, which made a person a mechanism for dictation.⁴⁰ Instead, he insisted that the prophet was initiated into the message he proclaimed and was transformed with his cooperation until he was 'a living witness of the message he conveys to the people' who could proclaim divine truths with full knowledge and consent.⁴¹ Origen emphasised the wisdom of the prophets to pay tribute to human freedom.

Origen's high view of prophetic knowledge was not merely a symptom of a historically uncritical age. In the context of his apologetic task, it played a critical role in protecting key Christian affirmations. Thus Christian theologians can only discard or surpass this theory if they can show that reductions in the knowledge attributed to the prophets do not come at the expense of lapsing into Marcionism, losing the spiritual dimension or christological character of the Old Testament or making the prophets passive vessels of a message which bypasses their freedom and participation. Origen's view of prophetic knowledge is not a relic of a bygone age. It lays the groundwork for contemporary Christian reflection on inspiration by laying out four conditions which any theory of progressive revelation must meet.

³⁴Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 41 (1.37).

³⁵Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 112 (2.71).

³⁶Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, pp. 150-1 (2.208-9).

³⁷Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 178 (6.35). 'He says of the prophet that he must not speak "ex necessitate", but of his own free choice.' Af Hällström, *Charismatic Succession*, p. 15.

³⁸Origen, *Contra Celsum*, p. 396 (7.3). 'His considered opinion was that inspiration did not remove or paralyse the prophet's or evangelist's control of his rational faculties.' Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, p. 195. The ecstatic view of prophecy was quite common in the ancient world. *Ibid.*, p. 194. For Montanism, see Hauck, *The More Divine Proof*, pp. 120-1.

³⁹Origen, *Contra Celsum*, p. 396 (7.4); Crouzel, *Origen*, p. 76.

⁴⁰For Origen, 'prophecy was imparted in a new way which had nothing in common with the divination inspired by daemons'. Origen, *Contra Celsum*, p. 401 (7.7). In Hanson's words: 'mere dictaphones, mechanically reproducing the words given to them without interference or modifications from their own individual personalities'. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, p. 194.

⁴¹Nardoni, 'Origen's Concept', p. 13.

Clarifying the portrait: Origen retains the significance of history

Moreover, it is worth noting that, even under the assumption of maximal prophetic knowledge of the incarnation, Origen affirms 'the significance of history'.⁴² Extensive prophetic anticipation does not render the historical coming of Christ redundant or otiose. Rather, no matter how much the prophets may have known in advance regarding the coming Messiah, the pivot of Origen's account of revelation remains the incarnation as actual historical *event*.

First, it should not be forgotten that the *content* of prophetic knowledge is historical – the coming of Christ, his suffering and his victorious resurrection, together with their salvific significance. What Origen believes the prophets knew, precisely in his most radical claims about the extent of their knowledge and his most contestable readings of the Old Testament, is not some allegorical truth abstracted from all history but the *event* of the incarnation (which of course has a spiritual meaning as well): 'everything that Jesus would suffer'.⁴³ Even if some people are granted profound glimpses in advance, what they glimpse is a history. Thus, prophetic knowledge does not replace the events foretold as historical occurrences, but presumes and reaffirms them, in their historicity. Moreover, the prophets did not cease to anticipate the actualisation of this history because they knew what it contained; rather, they 'desired to see the mystery of the incarnation of the son of God effected'.⁴⁴ The fact that they desired to see the events transpire, despite exhaustive propositional knowledge, shows clearly that Origen has an appreciation for the historicity of events as such. Both the *content* of prophetic knowledge and the *mode* of anticipation remain historical.

Thus, even when it comes to the prophets who supposedly had exhaustive knowledge, Origen does not abandon the significance of history, but rather affirms it. Origen does not as much replace history with an ahistorical truth as allow one history to shed light on another. 'History' as an abstract category does not suffer at his hands.⁴⁵

Second, although Origen may affirm that the prophets (or some of them, at least) knew the details of the incarnation in advance, he does not extend this to the vast majority of the Jewish people or make it an intrinsic property of the prophetic texts. For although 'Moses and the prophets' may 'have accurately understood the spiritual meaning of all the books of the law and the prophets ... the things they sowed had to be written in words that were veiled and obscure'.⁴⁶ The prophetic writings, despite the extensive or comprehensive knowledge of their authors, were written in a way which rendered their referent mysterious to their readers and hearers until light was shed by the historical event of the incarnation. They were not yet 'gospel' in the full sense, for they did 'not contain the proclamation which belongs to the definition of the gospel since he who explained the mysteries in them had not yet come'.⁴⁷ Before this event, 'the Old Testament is not gospel since it does not make known "him who is to

⁴²For the term, see Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, p. 363.

⁴³Origen, *Contra Celsum*, pp. 393–4 (6.81). See Martens, 'Origen Against History', for a refutation of the idea that Origen abstracts from Scripture timeless truths rather than history.

⁴⁴Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 176 (6.28).

⁴⁵If anything, the specificity of Israel's history and the context of the individual prophet are, while not totally neglected, arguably too hastily passed over in favour of an emphasis on the history of the incarnation (but this is a quibble one could bring against nearly all Christian exegesis predating the historical-critical method).

⁴⁶Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, pp. 135–6 (13.319).

⁴⁷Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 40 (1.33).

come”, but proclaims him in advance’.⁴⁸ Thus Origen still assigns Christ’s coming a decisive, dramatic and revelatory role. It is this event, as well as the New Testament which records and elaborates on it, which effects a transformation on the rest of scripture. Only now, ‘since the Savior has come’, has Christ ‘made all things gospel’.⁴⁹ The pivot of Origen’s doctrine of revelation is Christ’s coming as a historical event, which makes possible the witness of the New Testament, which in turn sheds light on what was contained in the form of anticipation in the Old Testament: ‘Nothing of the ancients was gospel, then, before that gospel which came into existence because of the coming of Christ.’⁵⁰ The historical and dramatic function of the incarnation remains decisive, prophetic knowledge notwithstanding.

Thus (and this is the final point), the ‘first fruits’ of scripture, the heart of revelation, is for Origen not the didactic teaching of the epistles or the writings of the prophets (however knowledgeable), but precisely the most directly historical part of the New Testament, the writings of the four evangelists: ‘everything written in the Epistles will not be gospel when it is compared with the narrative of the deeds, sufferings and words of Jesus. The gospel [primarily for Origen the four Gospels, with a special emphasis on John] ... is the firstfruits of all Scripture.’⁵¹ It is the scriptures which record the historicity of the incarnation, including the concrete detail of ‘deeds, sufferings and words’, which Origen exalts above all, a lasting testament to the significance of history in his thought.

Revising the caricature: alternate assessments of prophetic knowledge in Origen

Up to this point, for the sake of argument, I have assumed the worst: that Origen embraces a maximally extensive account of prophetic knowledge of the incarnation fully and without qualification. I showed that this account should not be casually dismissed, for it plays a key role for Origen in protecting the unity of the testaments, the spirituality and christocentrism of the Old Testament and the freedom and agency of the prophets. Furthermore, I suggested that, even when Origen *does* assume a maximal view of prophetic knowledge of Christ’s coming, he shows evidence of appreciating ‘the significance of history’ as decisive event.

However, a closer look exposes a tentativeness or hesitation regarding the knowledge of the prophets which runs throughout Origen’s works. Although he *usually* settles on a high view of prophetic knowledge, this is only after proposing and seriously considering alternatives. Moreover, at key points Origen qualifies his account of prophetic knowledge in the Old Testament. Thus, he leaves the door open for, and sometimes embraces, a less extensive view of prophetic knowledge and thus an account of progressive revelation.

Critics tend to focus on *Contra Celsum* and book 6 of the *Commentary on John*, which clearly adopt a high view of prophetic knowledge.⁵² However, books 13 and 19 are much more cautious. As Crouzel notes, ‘Book XIII restores the balance.’⁵³

⁴⁸Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 35 (1.17).

⁴⁹Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 40 (1.33).

⁵⁰Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 41 (1.36).

⁵¹Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 36 (1.20).

⁵²Almost all of the relatively few scholars who have dealt with the subject of prophecy in Origen have limited their analysis to Origen’s *Contra Celsum*, from Robert Hauck’s influential monograph onwards.’ Ramelli, ‘Prophecy in Origen’, p. 18.

⁵³Crouzel, *Origen*, p. 77.

Origen addresses the passage which says that 'he who sows and he who reaps may rejoice together', interpreting those who sow as the prophets and those who reap as the apostles.⁵⁴ While the prophets sowed intellectual seeds of the harvest to come, 'the writings of the law and the prophets ... were not white to those who had not received the presence of the Word'.⁵⁵ Only at the Transfiguration did some of the prophets 'see the glory of the Son of God, which Moses and Elias had not previously seen', rejoicing with the apostles who reaped the harvest they had not lived to see.⁵⁶ According to this first interpretation, the knowledge of the prophets was limited: 'things hidden to former generations, including even Moses and the prophets, have been revealed to the holy apostles during the sojourn of Christ'.⁵⁷ Origen notes that 'some will accept these interpretations readily and have no hesitations', while others 'will hesitate to assent to this, not daring to assert that so great a man as Moses and the prophets did not, during their earthly life, anticipate the things that have been understood by the apostles'.⁵⁸ Origen then lays out several biblical passages to support each of these views. On the one hand, 'Many prophets and just men desired to see the things that you see, and did not see them'.⁵⁹ But on the other, 'A wise man will understand the words from his own mouth, and upon his lips he bears knowledge'.⁶⁰ He seriously presents the arguments for both sides, reaching no explicit verdict. He ends the discussion with a possible view, introduced as what 'someone else will say': 'Moses and the prophets have accurately understood the spiritual meaning of all the books of the law and the prophets, but that the things they sowed had to be written in words that were veiled and obscure'.⁶¹ The only indications that this view is his own are the fact that it gets the last word and that it matches what he argued in book 6.⁶² Origen floats a theory of progressive revelation as a genuine possibility. Although he does not appear to favour it, his conclusions are tentative. As Henri de Lubac explains:

although he finds a way to respond to all the arguments with which he confronts himself, he is not far from conceding that, without being inferior to the apostles, Moses and the prophets could not know all that Jesus Christ was to reveal at the time of his coming in the form of a slave.⁶³

These are not the conclusions of a theologian dogmatically committed to a maximal interpretation of the extent of a prophetic knowledge – Origen seems genuinely unsure.

In book 19, Origen once again appears to waver. This time the occasion is Jesus' statement, 'You know neither me nor my Father'.⁶⁴ Origen begins with a shocking statement: 'It is indeed possible to agree with the heterodox view, that Moses and the

⁵⁴John 4:36, cited in Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 131 (13.301). His interpretation begins in earnest at vol. 2, p. 132 (13.305).

⁵⁵Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 132 (13.305, 307). It is not entirely clear whether 'those who had not received the presence of the Word' is meant to include the prophets themselves.

⁵⁶Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 133 (13.310).

⁵⁷Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 134 (13.314).

⁵⁸Ibid.

⁵⁹Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 134 (13.315).

⁶⁰Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 135 (13.316).

⁶¹Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, pp. 135–6 (13.319).

⁶²See Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 136, n. 354: 'Origen says this himself in Jo. 6.22–23.'

⁶³De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 305.

⁶⁴John 8:19, cited in Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 173 (19.26).

prophets did not know the Father.⁶⁵ For in the entire Old Testament, ‘we have not found a single person who has prayed and addressed God as “Father”. Perhaps it is because they did not know the Father. They pray to him as God and Lord, awaiting the one who pours out the spirit of adoption on them.’⁶⁶ For a moment, it seems that Origen accepts this beautiful account of progressive revelation with a dramatic christological consummation. However, Origen follows this possibility with another option, which once again proposes a high view of prophetic knowledge: ‘unless perhaps Christ had sojourned in them spiritually ... But they spoke or wrote about God as Father in secret and not in a manner intelligible to all, so that they might not anticipate the grace that is poured out to all the world through Jesus.’⁶⁷ As de Lubac writes, ‘In book 19, we find the same hesitation ... The matter is left in suspense.’⁶⁸

Nor are these the only places where Origen qualifies his stronger statements about prophetic knowledge. At one point in the *Commentary on John*, responding to Heracleon’s view that ‘only a prophet knows everything’, Origen protests that ‘the prophet does not know everything, “for we know in part and we prophesy in part”’.⁶⁹ Earlier in the commentary, Origen had introduced a gradation in the knowledge of the prophets. Some virtually equalled the apostles: ‘Those who had been perfected and who excelled did not desire to see what the apostles saw, for they had seen them.’⁷⁰ However, ‘those, however, who have not, like these, succeeded in ascending to the sublimity of the Word, have longed for the things known by the apostles through Christ’.⁷¹ Finally, and most decisively, Origen held in the *Homilies on Joshua* that some knowledge about the economy of salvation was hidden from the fathers. He sees great significance in the fact that the tribes arranged by Moses numbered two and a half, rather than three: ‘In these things, I see an indication that those prior ones who used to be led by the Law did indeed touch upon the knowledge of the Trinity, yet not entirely and perfectly but “in part”. Concerning the Trinity, they lacked the knowledge of the incarnation of the only begotten one.’⁷² The fathers were not perfect, but nor were they ignorant: ‘those tribes are neither two, lest the fathers be outside the faith and salvation of the Trinity, nor three entire and perfect, lest the mystery of the blessed Trinity seem already fulfilled among them.’⁷³ Their faith was poised between promise and perfection, requiring Christ for its dramatic fulfilment.⁷⁴ Nor does Origen stop there. Stirred ‘to a further degree’, he extends his theory of progressive revelation all the way to Pentecost and the church age:

⁶⁵Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 173 (19.27).

⁶⁶Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 174 (19.28).

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 305.

⁶⁹Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 2, pp. 86–7 (13.91).

⁷⁰Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 172 (6.16).

⁷¹Ibid. Af Hällström notes that in *Contra Celsum* 4 ‘some variation is accepted within the team of pedagogues’, although he assumes that ‘all canonical prophets were of the “seeing” type’. Af Hällström, *Charismatic Succession*, pp. 8, 28. Given the variety of views Origen expresses on the subject, I am not sure it is necessarily the case that Origen meant to include only non-canonical prophets in the non-seeing category.

⁷²Origen, ‘Homily 3’, in *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce, ed. Cynthia White (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), p. 44.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

probably not even in the coming of Jesus or in his incarnation do we learn what is perfect and complete. Even though he is already led to the cross and perfected in all things, and even though he is raised from the dead, this does not disclose to us through him the entirety of what is perfect. We still have need of another who uncovers and reveals everything to us [the Spirit].⁷⁵

Origen is on the verge of not only a theology of progressive revelation, but also of the development of doctrine. And for once, he does not take any of this back with an 'unless perhaps'. Historical development and Christ's dramatic role as the consummation of the economy get the last word.

Origen did not dogmatically hold a maximally extensive view of prophetic knowledge. When he leaned in that direction, it was often tentatively and with hesitation, after seriously examining other possibilities. Nor was he incapable of qualifying the knowledge of the prophets and fathers. In the *Homilies of Joshua*, at least, he did so fairly decisively. The caricature must be discarded. While harmonising all of Origen's comments on the subjects or tracing a trajectory may be impossible, a full description of his view must take account of the nuances.⁷⁶ When this is done, the negative verdict on Origen's historical sense must be greatly qualified. As even the hostile R. P. C. Hanson admits, Origen sometimes 'speaks of the Bible in terms not very different from those which a modern exegete ... would use', adding that 'at times ... he is very near indeed to the doctrine of progressive revelation'.⁷⁷ Origen did not shut the door on progressive revelation or staunchly insist on maximal prophetic knowledge. He considered other views and left the door open, modelling the caution and nuance which should characterise any contemporary reflection on the subject.

Seeds of the future: analogies for progressive revelation

Origen did not merely leave the door open for a theory of progressive revelation or lay out conditions which such a theory would have to meet. He also developed helpful comparisons which show how progressive revelation can be reconciled with the free participation of the prophets in the economy of salvation, and how one can picture the dramatic structure of christological fulfilment. In book 13 of the *Commentary on John*, Origen proposed three analogies or metaphors which lay out a theory of progressive revelation which meets Origen's four conditions.⁷⁸

Origen's first analogy for progressive revelation involves a comparison to the development of a science. Origen notes that 'in the case of every art and science of the more important subjects of investigation, he who discovers the first principles sows'.⁷⁹ Those who are able to identify fundamental axioms lay the foundation for everything that follows. However, their achievements do not complete the science. Subsequent generations take up the task of completing the science, proceeding to the implications of the axioms: 'Others, receiving and elaborating these principles, by handing on their discoveries to others, become the causes ... for those of later times who

⁷⁵Ibid., p. 45.

⁷⁶De Lubac, asking if 'Origen became progressively less rigid', concluded that, 'even in the oldest works, Origen has restrictive texts'. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, pp. 304, n. 127.

⁷⁷Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, pp. 212–13, 231.

⁷⁸See 'Contextualizing the Portrait' above for the four conditions.

⁷⁹*Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 131 (13.302).

would not be able both to discover the first principles and to conjoin the things that follow.⁸⁰ The hard work of the forerunners is not left behind. The generations that follow remain dependent on their pioneering efforts, even if, standing on their shoulders, they are able to proceed to implications which were not foreseen by those who discovered the first principles. Others are able 'to take up, as if in their harvest, the full fruit of such arts and sciences that have reached maturity'.⁸¹ The completion of a science owes a debt to the efforts of those contributors who laboured while the science was still in its infancy. Origen suggests that this process is a model for the science of revelation or theology:

if this is true in the case of certain arts and sciences, how much more is it evident in the case of the art of arts and the science of sciences? For those who come later, by having elaborated the discoveries of former persons, have handed on the resources for one body of truth to be gathered with wisdom to those who next approach these discoveries with diligent inquiry.⁸²

Thus, even if the prophets did not have perfect knowledge of Christ's incarnation and the consummation of the economy, they participated in the ascent towards revelation's completion. They struggled in the Spirit to understand the truths they conveyed, demonstrating true wisdom and freedom, even if the knowledge of the apostles who succeeded them surpassed their own. The principles they discovered and the mode in which they discovered them were christological and spiritual, even if the full implications only became explicit later. Thus, Origen's metaphor of the development of a science suggests a model of progressive revelation which still affirms the four conditions he had laid out. Eschatologically, the contributions of every generation will be revealed, and all will celebrate the beauty of truth: 'when every task of the art of arts has been completed, and God who repays gathers all people to one end, "he who sows and he who reaps rejoice together"'.⁸³ Since the completion of this process does not culminate with Christ's coming but the eschaton, we find in Origen both a theology of progressive revelation and the idea of the development of the doctrine during the church age.

Origen's second model of progressive revelation is an organic one, as the references to sowing and reaping suggest. He indicates that 'those who "sow" are Moses and the prophets' while '[those who] "reaped" were the apostles who received the Christ and beheld his glory'.⁸⁴ Just as a seed contains hidden potential for new life, the contributions of the prophets blossomed into a harvest reaped by others, 'by the elaboration and grasping of "the mystery that has been hidden from the ages, but manifested in the last times"'.⁸⁵ Origen's image of the 'intellectual seed' which is hidden and needs elaboration is the equivalent of implicit knowledge. Yet the fact that this knowledge was implicit does not mean that the spiritual and christological dimensions of the Old Testament bypassed the prophets' freedom. Just as farmers cooperate in the miracle of growth by tilling the ground, the prophets laboured to understand the ultimate

⁸⁰Ibid.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²*Commentary on John*, vol. 2, pp. 131–2 (13.303).

⁸³*Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 132 (13.304).

⁸⁴*Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 132 (13.305).

⁸⁵Ibid.

referent of the revealed words they received. They did not merely ecstatically channel a message: 'Moses and the prophets labored that they might be able to advance to an understanding of the mysteries whose traces they left for us in their own writings.'⁸⁶ Here, Origen does not suggest that the prophets fully understood the mysteries they foretold, but only that they 'advanced' such an understanding, which remain implicit in 'traces'. The idea of progression and development is clear: with time, 'the Word always makes the labors of the former men clearer to those who are genuinely disciples'.⁸⁷ Origen harmonises the dignity of the prophets with the dramatic structure of the economy: the prophets did not need to know everything to participate freely and wisely, just as farmers participate in the growth of the plant even though the internal dynamism of its growth remains beyond their control or knowledge.

Finally, Origen proposes an analogy for the christological consummation of revelation which allays any concerns that he has destroyed its dramatic structure. The presence of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration symbolises the relationship between the New Testament and the Old. Origen suggests that 'the transfiguration of Jesus was a kind of harvest when he appeared in glory not only to the reapers, Peter, James, and John, who went up the mountain with him, but also to the sowers, Moses and Elias'.⁸⁸ The presence of these prophetic figures confirm the unity of the testaments and the christological and spiritual references contained in the prophetic writings – yet not without a dramatic structure. For while Moses and Elijah, as sowers, prophesied about Christ, seeing his glory with the apostles was still a dramatic moment which brought them genuine newness and unanticipatable joy: 'they rejoice together with them when they see the glory of the Son of God, which Moses and Elias had not previously seen, illuminated to such an extent by the Father and so illuminating those who beheld it'.⁸⁹ Whatever knowledge the prophets may have had, the arrival of Christ still represented the 'rupture' or 'impassable threshold' to which de Lubac referred.⁹⁰ The Transfiguration, which bewildered even the apostles, is a striking analogy for this dramatic structure. For continuity existed for both apostles and prophets, but the surprise remained. This commitment to dramatic structure was why Origen could affirm that Christ's coming 'has made all things gospel'.⁹¹ Whatever knowledge and implicit reference may have existed, 'Nothing of the ancients was gospel, then, before that gospel which came into existence because of the coming of Christ.'⁹² Origen's interpretation of the Transfiguration models the dramatic structure which any account of progressive revelation must preserve at all costs.

Even if Origen often ultimately settles on a higher view of prophetic knowledge, the models of progressive revelation he tentatively proposes in book 13 give the lie to the idea that he lacked a historical sense or abolished the dramatic structure of christological fulfilment. His views are not irrelevant relics of an ahistorical age; they are pioneering attempts to develop a view of progressive revelation which still remains faithful to the four conditions demanded by Christian orthodoxy.

⁸⁶*Commentary on John*, vol. 2, pp. 137–8 (13.325).

⁸⁷*Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 138 (13.326).

⁸⁸*Commentary on John*, vol. 2, p. 133 (13.310).

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, p. 507.

⁹¹Origen, *Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 40 (1.33).

⁹²*Commentary on John*, vol. 1, p. 41 (1.36).

Conclusion

After examining the fuller sweep of Origen's view of prophetic knowledge and the doctrine of inspiration, many of the charges brought by twentieth-century scholars ring hollow. The high view of what the prophets knew he sometimes expresses does not demonstrate the absence of any historical sense or neglect of the theodramatic character of the incarnation. Instead, these occasionally exaggerated descriptions are part of Origen's genuine attempt to grapple with the problem of continuity and discontinuity between the testaments. Once caricatures are left behind and the nuances of Origen's view are recognised, one can discover in his writings remarkable anticipations of a theory of progressive revelation and models for contemporary thought on development.

Yet useful as these more historically minded moments are, Origen's high view of prophetic knowledge should not simply be discarded. It contains important warnings which modern theologians often forget in their eagerness to embrace the historical-critical method and progressive revelation. These must not come at the expense of a new Marcionism which ruptures the unity of the testaments and denigrates the achievements of the prophets. Nor should these emphases eliminate the intrinsic spiritual character of the Old Testament or its christological reference, implicit or inchoate as these may be. Finally, the prophets must be seen as genuinely free participants in the message they carried, even if it was richer than they could have imagined. Only when historical-critical scholars are willing to learn these lessons at the feet of church fathers like Origen can their work be considered theologically adequate. Only thus chastened can theologians move on to consider the other resources in Origen's thought, such as the models for progressive revelation he deduced from the development of a science, from organic life and from the Transfiguration. For, despite first appearances, Origen did leave the door open to progressive revelation, as long as progressive revelation recognises that the Spirit was at work in wise human beings who expected a coming saviour. Our historical consciousness may differ from Origen's, but we are still reaping the seeds he sowed. While modern scholars may have a lower view of the degree to which the prophets knew the details of what was coming, one must still hold, with Origen, that the prophets sowed the spiritual seeds of expectation and longing which culminated in the faith of Mary and were met by the advent of her Son.