

ARTIKLAR

ANGELS, SCRIPTURE, AND THE EXEGESIS OF ORIGEN

Miriam DeCock (mirde@cas.au.dk)
Aarhus University

Abstract:

In this paper, I analyze one aspect of Origen of Alexandria's angelology, namely, his presentation of the ways in which angelic beings engage with Scripture. I demonstrate that for Origen, angels knew scripture intimately due to their participation in the production of that which became Scripture, and as evidenced by their thoroughly scriptural speech and song. I argue that this understanding of the angels lends no little rhetorical force to Origen's claims that angels are engaged with his own exegetical-homiletical endeavours, and that he himself interprets Scripture "angelically."

Key Words:

Origen of Alexandria, angels, exegesis, Scripture, homily

Introduction

Throughout his extant writings, Origen reflects frequently on the nature and activity of angels, for, as he claims in the preface to his *Peri Archon*, he considers the heavenly powers to be a basic subject of ecclesiastical

preaching.¹ Despite their importance within Origen's theological programme, angels are a surprisingly understudied aspect of his thought. While several overviews of his angelology exist,² the passages gathered in these brief treatments have yet to receive a thorough analysis.³ Furthermore, while Origen's angelology has received some recent attention in broader treatments of angels in late antique Christianity, these studies have mainly dealt with Origen's angelology as a precursor to later thinkers, such as Augustine or Evagrius, and have thus tended to focus on either his demonology or the extent to which he thought it possible for angels to rise or fall away from God.⁴

In this paper, I will examine Origen's presentation of one particular angelic activity, namely, angelic engagement with Scripture.⁵ In particular, I explore Origen's presentation of angelic engagement with his

¹ *Peri Archon*, *Pref.* 10. Indeed, a discussion of angels surfaces in each of Origen's extant works, though he does not approach the theme systematically, as is true of many theological topics within his oeuvre. Angels feature prominently in the new *Homilies on the Psalms*, due in no small part to their prominence in the biblical text itself.

² For the few existing studies on angels in Origen's thought, see the following: Cécile Blanc, "L'angéologie d'Origène," *SP* 14.3 TU 117; (1976): 79–109; Johan Leemans, "Angels," *Westminster Handbook on Origen* (ed. John McGuckin; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 51–53; Alan Scot, *Origen and the Life of the Stars* (Cambridge: CUP, 1991). Although he is one of many patristic authors, Origen features prominently in Jean Daniélou's, *The Angels and their Mission: According to the Fathers of the Church* (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1957).

³ Joseph W. Trigg's article, "The Angel of Great Counsel: Christ and the Angelic Hierarchy in Origen's Theology," *JTS* 42.1 (1991): 35–51, provides an exception in that he has focused on one significant aspect of Origen's angelology in great detail, namely, his belief that Christ serves as a guardian angel to the perfect, who are no longer in need of the angels' care.

⁴ For example, see Ellen Muehlberger, *Angels in Late Christian Antiquity* (Oxford: OUP, 2013); David Brakke, *Demons and the Making of a Monk* (Oxford: OUP, 2006); Adam Ployd, "Participation and Polemics: Angels from Origen to Augustine," *HTR* 110.3 (2017): 421–439. See also Rangar Cline's important study of pagan angelology in the inscriptional record, *Ancient Angels: Contextualizing Angeloi in the Roman Empire* (Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 172; Leiden: Brill, 2011). I will not venture too far into this discussion, as it does not have direct bearing on my topic, but see my very brief discussion of the issue in n. 13 below.

⁵ This feature of his thought was recently examined by Catherine Michael Chin in a study of angelic participation in the homiletical-exegetical process, based primarily on Origen's

exegesis and preaching of Scripture in order to highlight his self-conception of his privileged exegetical role. Two features stand out: 1) the rhetorical force of his claims that angels are interacting with his homiletic exegesis, and 2) his claim to have the capacity to perform the exegetical task in an angelic mode, a mode which, on some occasions, requires non-literal reading. I will argue that Origen understands himself to play an angelic, and thus, mediating role between God and his own audience, especially when he interprets and discovers teachings that are beyond that which is written in Scripture. I contend that Origen's claims to interpret Scripture in the presence of angels, and even more boldly, to function as an "angelic" exegete himself, constitute one significant rhetorical strategy for defending his non-literal exegesis of Scripture.⁶

Before approaching our main theme, I will provide a brief account of the place of angels in Origen's thought more generally. Next, I will examine Origen's understanding of two significant angelic engagements with Scripture: first, throughout salvation history, the angels had a foundational role in creating that which would become the content of the Christian Scriptures, i.e., the law, the prophets, and the Gospels. According to Origen, the angels' role within this process provides them with intimate knowledge of Scripture itself, rendering them more advanced in their knowledge and understanding of Scripture than the prophets and apostles, the human authors of Scripture. Secondly, the words of Scripture constitute the angels' very speech and mode of communication, not only with each other, but with God the Father and

Homily 20 on Joshua. See Chin, "Who is the Ascetic Exegete? Angels, Enchantments, and Transformative Food in Origen's *Homilies on Joshua*," in *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses* (ed. Hans-Ulrich Weidemann; Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 203–218. Chin's essay dealt with *Hom. Josh 20* in both the Greek of the Philocalia and in the fourth-century Latin translation of Rufinus. Chin helpfully reveals the communal aspects of the exegetical process, wherein angels interact with the preacher and his audience, in Origen's own thought and with an eye to fourth-century Origenist modes of ascetic exegesis.

⁶ There were certainly other available strategies. For example, in many instances he claims to receive direct communication from the Logos himself as he interprets Scripture in his exegetical homilies, and in other places, he claims to have received interpretive assistance upon praying to the Trinity. See, for example, *Hom. Ps15 1.6*; *Hom. Jer 20.8.4*. How such strategies relate to Origen's understanding of himself as a recipient of interpretive assistance from angels, and indeed as an angelic interpreter, is a subject for future inquiry.

the Son, and also with humanity. We will see that attending to Origen's descriptions of the angels' engagement with Scripture allows us to appreciate why angels serve as good candidates to supervise the human interpreter and to underscore the rhetorical force of Origen's claims to possess angel-like interpretive abilities. This section leads into an analysis of Origen's descriptions of the angels' engagement with his own homiletic exegesis. Finally, I examine Origen's understanding of his own privileged position in relation to the angels. He moves beyond mere claims that angels are engaged with his homiletic exegesis, disclosing in several instances that he possesses his own "angelic" interpretive qualifications. In these cases, it becomes clear that the angels are considered by Origen as interpretive role models for the elite Christian exegete.

Origen's Angelology⁷

For Origen, angels were created in God's image as pure intellects.⁸ Similar to those intellects who became human as a result of falling away from God, so too did angels fall, but to a much lesser degree. Therefore, within the hierarchy of beings, angels rank above humans.⁹ Unlike human beings, angels are spiritual beings, with spiritual souls and bodies.¹⁰ While angels are above humans in the hierarchy of beings, there is also a hierarchy within the angelic host, based on the degree to which an angel has fallen. Said positively, the merit of an angel's activity determines its position in the hierarchy and the kind of tasks it is entrusted with.¹¹ Like human beings, then, angels are moral beings with free wills, and Origen maintains that it is theoretically possible for them

⁷ The following brief account is based primarily on the introductory discussions of angels in Origen's thought by the scholars mentioned in note 3. As I mentioned above, much more analysis of the place of angels in Origen's thought is needed, probably in a book-length study, for each aspect of the Alexandrian's angelology mentioned here deserves more attention in its own right.

⁸ *Peri Archon, Pref.* 1. 1, 6.

⁹ *Comm. Matt* 15.27.

¹⁰ *Peri Archon, Pref.* 2.8; *Contra Cels.* 4.24–25.

¹¹ *Peri Archon*, 1.8.1; *Comm. Matt* 17.2, 30. Famously, for Origen there is also a hierarchy of human beings. The perfect minority is classified thus due to *their* merit and proximity to God. See *PA* 4.2.3, where he outlines the three groups of believers and the corresponding levels of Scripture, which they have the capacity to understand.

to sin or neglect their duties.¹² In any case, the angels (the devil and *his* angels excepted) provide spiritual examples for human beings insofar they are already “little Christs,”¹³ which suggests, to me at least, that Origen does not expect the angels to fall a second time from their current position.¹⁴

Angels have positively engaged with humanity across salvation history;¹⁵ they were guardians of Israel,¹⁶ they administered Torah at Sinai,¹⁷ they spoke through and alongside the prophets, they assisted the preaching of the apostles,¹⁸ and they escorted Christ’s resurrected and ascending body back to the Father.¹⁹ Of course, angels were not only

¹² *Hom. Num* 11.4; 20.3.6–7. This is most explicit in 20.3.6, where Origen discusses the free will of both the angelic guardian and the human being under the angel’s charge. Conversely, and infamously, Origen seems to have maintained that it is at least possible that demons, even Lucifer himself, could make their return to their previous celestial status, a speculation which caused no little dispute in the centuries that followed. Again, this is not the place for such a discussion.

¹³ For Origen, to the extent that one has been perfected, this person becomes “angelic” and in turn, a “little Christ,” taking on, through the participation in God, the virtuous qualities of the divine, though not the divine essence. Cf. *Comm. Jn* I. 23. For a lucid discussion on Origen’s treatment of this issue and its reception in Jerome, see the recent article by Katarina Pålsson, “Angelic Humans, Glorious Flesh: Jerome’s Reception of Origen’s Teachings on the Resurrection Body,” *ZAC* 23.1 (2019): 53–81. Benjamin B. Blosser helpfully discusses the human capacity to become “angelic” in terms of rank rather than essence. See Blosser, *Become Like the Angels: Origen’s Doctrine of the Soul* (Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2012), 145–182. This based on such passages as *PA* 1.8.5; *Comm. Jn* 2.188–192.

¹⁴ I agree, then, with Blosser that there is no need to suggest more than one angelic fall for Origen. See Blosser, *Become Like the Angels*, 208.

¹⁵ I should note that Origen is often not clear about the extent to which he understands the work of angels to relate to that of Christ or the Holy Spirit. I suspect this aspect of his angelology in particular requires a great deal more attention. In any case, as I examine the relevant passages throughout this paper, when Origen thinks it necessary to reflect on this issue, I will draw the reader’s attention to his discussion. If I am silent on the issue, this is due to Origen’s own silence. In any case, I suspect that most often, he understands the angels to work in collaboration with the members of the trinity, and does not always deem it necessary to comment in instances in which we might expect it.

¹⁶ *Contra Cels.* 4.8; 5.31.

¹⁷ *Comm. Matt* 17.30.

¹⁸ I will discuss the angels’ assistance to the prophets and apostles in more detail below.

¹⁹ *Hom. Ps* 15 2.8. This is not an exhaustive list of angelic activities vis-à-vis Israel and indeed throughout salvation history. See note 3 above for more thorough accounts.

active in past eras of salvation history; they continue to work on behalf of humanity, indeed all creation, in the present age.²⁰ While they are primarily servants in God's court,²¹ they have also been assigned a mediating role between God and creation, and are therefore responsible for all manner of tasks. Angels act as guardians for individual Christians,²² churches,²³ and even nations;²⁴ they assist the churches and individuals in their worship and prayer;²⁵ they assist individuals before and during the rite of baptism;²⁶ they lead humans to repentance and assist them in their spiritual ascent to the divine; they instruct Christians in the doctrines of the faith;²⁷ and they oversee and order all of the elements of the created world.²⁸ Their heavenly work is to contemplate God and God's Wisdom, the Logos, and it is thus their responsibility to draw humans into this work, which their human charges can do now in part, but will, at the end of the age, be able to do completely.²⁹ That said, Origen also comments throughout his writings on the small portion of humanity that "can already be like the angels in their disposition (οἱ ἤδη τῆ διαθέσει τὸ ἰσάγγελοι εἶναι ἐσχηκότες)." ³⁰ (We will see below that

²⁰ *Hom. Jer* 10.6; *Contra Cels.* 8.31.

²¹ *Contra Cels.* 8.13; *Comm. Matt* 15.7.

²² *Comm. Matt* 13.26–28. According to Daniélou, Origen is to be credited with developing the first substantial account of this angelic responsibility. *The Angels*, 69. Some scholars have, however, observed that Origen is not altogether consistent concerning just who has need of a guardian angel. That is, it is not always clear whether all humans or all Christians need the protection of the guardian angel. If, as in many discussions in his corpus, it is the Christian who needs the guardian angel, do the initiate and the advanced Christian alike require the angel's services? For a helpful discussion of these issues, see Leemans, "Angels," 52–53.

²³ *Hom. Num* 20.3; *Hom. Lc* 13.5.

²⁴ *Hom. Gen* 9.3; *Hom. Josh* 23.3.

²⁵ *Hom. Lev* 9.8; *De Orat.* 11.

²⁶ *Contra Cels.* 5.57. Again, Origen is not always consistent about the point in time at which a person receives angelic assistance. In some instances, it appears that the Christian receives it before baptism, whereas in others, after. See Leemans, "Angels," 52–53.

²⁷ *Hom. Num* 14.2.

²⁸ *Hom. Jer* 10.6

²⁹ I comment on the work of angels in more detail on pages 19, 23–24 below.

³⁰ *Comm. Jn* 13.99. (SC 222:82; FC 89:77). Just what is meant by "being like the angels in disposition" is not completely clear, though I take it to relate to one's capacity to take on virtue. Cf. *Comm. Matt* 15.27. Cf. *Contra Cels.* 4.29; See also, Leemans, "Angels," 52.

in all likelihood, Origen considered himself to belong to this elite minority group.)

Finally, angels will, for Origen, persist in providing humans with assistance at the close of the age at which time they will act as witnesses to both Christ's second coming³¹ and humanity's return to paradise.³² They will examine human souls,³³ escort and welcome those who are perfected,³⁴ and so participate in "the eschatological harvest of humanity's fruit," as Origen describes it in his first homily on Ps 80.³⁵

Angelic Participation in the "Production" of the Contents of Scripture in Salvation History

Let us now turn our attention to the main topic of this paper, namely, Origen's understanding of the angels' engagement with Scripture. I hope to demonstrate in this section that, for Origen, angels have been intimately connected with Scripture from the beginning. Indeed, they participated in, and were witnesses to, the process that resulted in the law, the words of the prophets, and the teaching of the apostles, the last of which became the contents of the Gospels. This will allow us to see more clearly the significance of Origen's claims to possess angelic exegetical capabilities.

First, for Origen, the angels ordained the law of Moses, which became *the* central scriptural text of Israel, and subsequently, the Christian church (in the form of the Old Testament). This Origen discusses succinctly in his *Commentary on John* during a refutation of a rhetorical opponent. The opponent argues that if one assigns the task of sowing souls in bodies to angels, such a person speaks in error, for God alone forms people. Origen's response is to draw on an analogy, which he takes as self-evident: "One must reply to this that just as the law was ordained by angels (διεπάγη δι' ἀγγέλων) (Gal 3:19), [and the] word spoken [by angels] became steadfast (λαληθεὶς λόγος ἐγένετο βέβαιος) (Heb 2:2), although it is obvious that it was spoken by God, so it is

³¹ *Hom. Num* 11.4.

³² *Hom. Gen* 13.2.

³³ *Hom. Lc* 23; *Comm. Rom* 7.12.

³⁴ *Hom. Judg* 7.2; *Hom. Num* 5.3.

³⁵ *Hom. Ps* 80 1.2. *Origenes Werke XIII. Die Neuen Psalmenhomilien: Eine Kritische Edition des Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* (eds. Lorenzo Perrone, mit Marina Molin Pradel, Emanuela Prinzivalli und Antonio Cacciari; Berlin, De Gruyter, 2015), 482.

also possible to say that God forms man in the womb by the angels, who have been appointed over creation."³⁶ Here we should observe that, for Origen, God's assignment of a given task to angels does not preclude God's own simultaneous activity, for, as he claims with the help of the apostle Paul, "are not angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (Heb 1:14).³⁷ We should also note that Origen also takes his cues about the angelic ministry of the law from the apostle Paul. Thus, Scripture itself teaches him that angels were somehow involved in producing that which became Scripture, as construed in his time.

According to Origen, the words of the prophets, which came to be recorded in the prophetic writings, were likewise assisted by the angels.³⁸ He makes this point explicitly in his fourth homily on Ps 77. As he comments on the phrase, "and he gave them bread of heaven, a man ate bread of angels," a verse that we will see him return to in several other instances below, Origen explains that Christ's words in the Gospel, "I am the living bread who came down from heaven (Jn 6:51)," indicate that such bread is given by God.³⁹ He continues his explanation of this heavenly bread, claiming that it is sometimes given by God directly, as in the case of Christ, the living bread, and sometimes given by angels. As proof that heavenly bread is sometimes given by angels, Origen claims, "you will find angels speaking in the prophets (εὐροῖς ἄν καὶ ἀγγέλους τοὺς λαλοῦντας ἐν τοῖς προφήταις)."⁴⁰ Unfortunately, Origen seems to think this passing comment self-explanatory, and does not explain it further, moving on to discuss the fact that it is necessary for angels to accommodate human weakness and lack of

³⁶ *Comm. Jn* 13.327–329. (SC 222:214; FC 89:138–139). Cf. *Comm. Cant* 2.8.

³⁷ *Comm. Jn* 13.327–329. (SC 222:214; FC 89:138–139). Paul, like other second temple Jews, maintained that angels were present at the time in which the law was given through Moses at Sinai. Other such potential references in early Jewish texts are: 1 QMX 10; 1 Enoch 93.6. See the following discussions of the early Jewish belief: L. Dequeker, "The Saints of the Most High," *OtSt* 18 (1973): 133–162, here 157; George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch 1: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch, Chapters 1–36, 81–108* (Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 446.

³⁸ Throughout Origen's corpus, the roles played by the angels and prophets often overlap. See, for example, *Comm. Jer* 15.4; *Comm. Cant* 2.8.

³⁹ *HomPs* 77 4.3. (OW XIII:392).

⁴⁰ *HomPs* 77 4.3. (OW XIII:392). Cf. *Contra Celsum* 3.28. *Comm. Matt* 13.30; *Comm. Cant Pref.* 4.

understanding in the bread that they give; in this case, the words of the prophets. Even so, it would appear that he is here equating the angels' bread with the words of the prophets or, at the very least, drawing a strong correlation between the two. Again, we should note that Origen thinks the angels cooperate with God in providing humans with heavenly bread, in this instance, speaking on God's behalf through the prophets.⁴¹

According to Origen, the preaching and teaching of the apostles was also assisted by angels, and therefore certain of the angelic host were involved in the creation of that which became the material recorded in the Gospels. For example, in his eleventh homily on Numbers, in the course of a discussion of Paul's words, "or do you not know that we will judge angels?" (1 Cor 6:3), Origen discusses his belief that each of the apostles had personal assistance from an angel, even if certain apostles will, in the end, be in a position to judge certain of the angels. In this context, Origen says, "I grant that the apostles themselves make use of the angels they have as helpers in order to fulfill the mission of their preaching and to complete the work of the gospel."⁴² Just as angels ordained the law and spoke through the prophets of old, so too were they active in the apostolic age, assisting the apostles in their preaching of the gospel. For this reason, they are intimately familiar with its contents.

The Scriptural Speech and Song of Angels

We now turn to examine another feature of the angels' thorough knowledge of Scripture. Given Origen's understanding of the role of angels in God's self-revelation, it is no surprise that, throughout Origen's programme, when angels speak – whether to each other, to God, to Christ,

⁴¹ Origen does not feel the need to address how he understands the inspiration of Scripture by Christ and by the Holy Spirit to relate to the angels' speaking through the prophets here.

⁴² *Hom. Num* 11.4.2. (SC 442:36–38; ACT; Scheck, 55). Cf. *Comm. Jn* 1.75, 83, 88. I have attempted wherever possible in this paper to deal primarily with Origen's Greek writings, given the well-known issues with the Latin. However, I am inclined to agree with an emerging consensus about the overall trustworthiness of Rufinus as a translator.

or to humans – they speak the words of Scripture.⁴³ Indeed, so thorough is their knowledge of the Scriptures, and so high is their position within the hierarchy of beings, that their speech (and song) is entirely and genuinely scriptural.⁴⁴ This is significant because one of Origen’s primary exegetical goals is to teach his hearers about Scripture in such a way that their speech grows closer and closer to resembling its words.⁴⁵ Because the angels’ speech is already scriptural, they serve as instructive examples for the human who seeks ascent to the divine.⁴⁶ I will discuss three examples of angelic speech here, though there are many others we might have examined.

In the first example, in the fifteenth of his *Homilies on Jeremiah*, Origen claims that angels speak the words of Scripture about human beings. His concern is to interpret the words, “woe is me, mother,” of Jer 15:10. These words, he claims, are not unusual for Christ to speak as he looks upon the sins of humanity, for they are indeed words used by Christ in the Gospels.⁴⁷ Origen brings angels into his discussion as he turns to his audience, saying:

⁴³ Likewise, when humans deign to speak to angels, it is with the words of Scripture. See, for example, *Hom. Ps* 15 1.4; *Hom. Lk* 23.7. However, as I mentioned above, Origen believes that humans need angels only until they have reached a certain level of maturity – the end goal is to speak freely and directly with God. See *Hom. Ps* 36 1.6; *Comm. Cant. Pref.* 4. I discuss this in detail in a forthcoming article, “Origen’s Exegetical Treatment of Romans 8:15: Seeking the Divine Gift of the Spirit of Adoption” in the volume, *Patristic Exegesis in Context: Exploring the Genres of Early Christian Biblical Interpretation* (eds. Elizabeth Klein and Miriam DeCock; Washington DC: CUA Press, forthcoming).

⁴⁴ For Origen, God’s speech is also scriptural. See, for example, *Hom. Ex* 8.2.

⁴⁵ Mark Randall James describes this as “deified speech.” He has demonstrated convincingly in his doctoral dissertation and forthcoming Brill monograph, *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and Exegesis*, that one of the main goals of Origen’s exegesis, at least in the case of the *Homilies on the Psalms*, is to teach his hearers how to speak the words of Scripture. See, for example, the following examples throughout Origen’s corpus in which he discusses this particular exegetical goal: *PEuch* 10.2; *Contra Cels* 5.4, 11; *Hom. Ps* 67 1.2; *Comm. Jn* 13.21–22; 28.23–38; 32.121.

⁴⁶ I have accounted for the phenomenon of the angels’ scriptural speech by suggesting that in presenting it thus, Origen provides his readers with angelic models for their own speech. However, there might be other explanations, such as the need for both God and the angels to accommodate their communication in the face of human limitations.

⁴⁷ *Hom. Jer.* 15.4. (OW 11:380–382; FC 97:161).

But let him not say about us, let the angels of heaven not say about us: "Woe is me!" If our savior says, "Woe is me," they also say, "Woe is me." For they are not better than our savior, and they see our faults. But blessed are those about whom the angels will not say, "Woe is me," but call blessed. For there is "more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine people who need no repentance" [Luke 15:7]. May this be in consolation.⁴⁸

Clearly Origen assumes that when angels speak of humans, they speak with the words of Scripture, here, those of the prophet Jeremiah. Furthermore, these words are also spoken by Christ, exhibiting a similar tone of lament. Here again the angels work alongside Christ in their actions, and in this case, their speech.⁴⁹ Finally, the apostle and evangelist Luke provides for Origen the scriptural authorization for his claim that the angels, like Christ, speak the prophetic words of woe concerning the sins of humanity.

In our second example, we will see that, for Origen, the angels also spoke Scripture to one another, and to Christ as he ascended into heaven after his resurrection. In a discussion of the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice in Book 6 of his *Commentary on John*, Origen discusses the ascension of Christ in connection with Jesus' words to Mary in John 20:17, "Do not touch me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father."⁵⁰ According to Origen, as Christ ascends, "certain powers (τινες δυνάμεις) say, 'Who is this that is coming from Edom, with scarlet garments from Bostra, so beautiful?' (Is 63:1)"⁵¹ Subsequently, the angels responsible for escorting Christ to heaven say to those who meet them at the gates, "Lift up your

⁴⁸ *Hom. Jer* 15.4. (OW 11:380–382; FC 97:161).

⁴⁹ Unfortunately, Origen does not comment any further on the relationship between the angels' and Christ's speech here; he seems simply to suggest that their speech is overlapping.

⁵⁰ *Comm. Jn* 6.288–290. (SC 157:348–350; FC 80:246–247). Cf. *Hom. Ps* 15 2.8. Origen provides an extremely similar account of the angelic reception of the ascension of Christ as he treats Ps 15:9 in the new psalm material, making use of the same set of scriptural verses for the angels' speech.

⁵¹ *Comm. Jn* 6.288. (SC 157:348; FC 80:246).

gates, and the king of glory will come in" (Ps 23:7).⁵² Upon Christ's entrance through the gates of heaven, Origen claims, the powers inquire further about his appearance, for his right hand is "blood-stained" and his body full of "the words of prowess." Now they speak directly to Christ, saying, "Why is your apparel red and your garments like the residue of a full wine-vat which has been trampled down?" (Is 63:2–3), and Christ responds with his own scriptural explanation: "I have crushed them in pieces" (Is 63:3).⁵³

Thirdly, the new material from the *Homilies on the Psalms* offers an excellent example from his second homily on Ps 67 where the angels communicate with the words of Scripture, this time, the songs of Moses, as they sing to God. In this example, not only do we have further evidence of angelic scriptural speech, but also a clear articulation of Origen's belief that angels are exemplary for human speech habits. If Origen's human hearers or readers are to strive to become those who can speak and embody the words of Scripture, the angels represent those who can already do so, and therefore serve as role models for humans, whose speech is not entirely scriptural, nor can be until the consummation of the present age.

Within his lengthy explanation of how "something also deeper can be understood (πῶς καὶ βαθύτερόν τι νοηθῆναι)" in Ps 67:5, "Sing to God, play music to his name," Origen discusses the exemplary songs sung to God by angels.⁵⁴ That there is something deeper to be explored in these words, Origen claims, has been "suggested (ὑποβέβληκεν)" to him by the "marvelous apostle Paul" who says in Eph 5:19, "speaking to yourselves in psalms, hymns and spiritual odes, singing and making music in your hearts to God" and in Col 3:16, "by grace singing in your hearts."⁵⁵ In the case of both Pauline texts, Origen is interested in the words, "in your hearts," which he understands to be distinct from regular speech or from singing with the bodily voice. He begins with a typical claim that indicates he wishes to move beyond the literal level, saying, "If one relies on the wording (τὴν λέξιν) in these passages, I do not know how it can be established how the heart sings in a way that would

⁵² *Comm. Jn* 6.288. (SC 157:350; FC 80:246).

⁵³ *Comm. Jn* 6.289. (SC 157:350; FC 80:246–247).

⁵⁴ *Hom. Ps* 67 2.3. (OW 13:204).

⁵⁵ *Hom. Ps* 67 2.3. (OW 13:204).

be distinct from just speaking.”⁵⁶ What it means “to sing in the heart,” then, must “be examined (ἐξεταστέον),” and his examination leads him to claim that there is, in addition to a bodily voice, “a mental one (φωνὴ νοητή),” heard by God alone.⁵⁷ However, this voice is also, according to Origen, “the voice of the pure mind (φωνὴ νοῦ καθαροῦ).” It is therefore not the possession of all, but only of those whose minds are “being brought into rhythm (ὀυθυμίζων)” with the music of the Logos.⁵⁸ Concretely, for Origen, keeping with the musical metaphor, this means that when one’s mind is not “out of tune” concerning Christ, nor “out of rhythm” concerning God – when one rather sees rightly and speaks with “appropriate knowledge (δεόντως εἰδώς)” concerning the Father and the Son – only then can one keep the commandment of the verse, “Sing to the Lord.”⁵⁹

Here enter the angels, for, as Origen goes on to observe, quoting Revelation 15:3, “we have read in the Apocalypse of John ... that angels celebrate (ἑώρῳνται) having harps and making music and some celebrate singing the song of Moses, God’s servant”.⁶⁰ The verse, in which the seven angels who possess the last seven plagues are said to sing to God with “the song of Moses,”⁶¹ assists Origen. He claims that “all of us must sing to God,” whereas now we sing “in part” (1 Cor 13:10), which we are bound to do until that time when we shall join the angels in hymning God.⁶² At present, the angels sing the song of Moses to God as examples for those humans who would embark on the ascent to the divine, but in the age to come, Origen tells his hearers, humans will join the angels in their work of singing and seeing God with a pure heart.⁶³ The angels, then, are those whose speech is already scriptural, unlike the majority of humans, who are below the angels in the hierarchy of beings, and who therefore must wait for the consummation of the age for their own speech to be thus scriptural.

⁵⁶ *Hom. Ps 67 2.3.* (OW 13:204).

⁵⁷ *Hom. Ps 67 2.3.* (OW 13:204–205).

⁵⁸ *Hom. Ps 67 2.3.* (OW 13:206).

⁵⁹ *Hom. Ps 67 2.3.* (OW 13:206).

⁶⁰ *Hom. Ps 67 2.3.* (OW 13:207).

⁶¹ In Rev 15, the “song of Moses,” is itself a combination of scriptural texts, including Psalm 111:2,3; Deut. 32:4; Jer. 10:7; Psalms 86:9; 98:2.

⁶² *Hom. Ps 67 2.3.* (OW 13:207).

⁶³ *Hom. Ps 67 2.3.* (OW 13:207).

Angelic Engagement with Origen's Homiletic Exegesis

As we have observed, for Origen, angels possess intimate knowledge of Scripture. This is demonstrated both in their role in delivering that which became its semantic content, and by their scripture-saturated speech. It follows, then, that according to Origen, angels are well-qualified to engage human attempts to understand and interpret Scripture. In several passages throughout his corpus, Origen indicates that he understands his own preaching to belong to the current age of salvation history, and therefore as a direct extension of the age in which the law was given to Moses, and of the time of the prophets and apostles.⁶⁴ This itself is a remarkable claim to prophetic and apostolic authority, with no little rhetorical force. For our purposes, we will examine one of the ways in which he legitimates such claims that his own preaching belongs to an extension of the former age, namely, by suggesting that the present age of the presentation of Scripture (within his own homilies), is also supervised and witnessed by angels. Significantly, however, the angels are not mere observers of Origen's preaching, but are actively involved in his delivery of Scripture: they pray for the homiletic exegete; they rejoice as he presents Scripture fittingly; and they serve as mediators between Origen and Christ as he makes his homiletic-exegetical offerings. We will examine three passages in which Origen discusses the angels' engagement with his own homiletic exegesis of Scripture.

The first is in his ninth homily on Joshua. As Origen comments on Josh 8:32, "And Joshua wrote Deuteronomy upon the stones in the presence of the sons of Israel," he wonders how it could have been possible that the Israelites did not get bored and wander away while such a large book was written on stone tablets, and furthermore, how such a large book could fit on the tablets.⁶⁵ These issues with the letter (*litterae*) suggest to Origen that "the truth of the narrative (*in hoc historiae veritas*)" is demonstrated not with respect to those among whom "to this day when Moses is read, a veil lies over their heart" (2 Cor 3:15).⁶⁶ The "sons of Israel" in Josh 8:32, then, are not the literal Israelites, but the angelic hosts, for, he argues, "if we understand correctly that 'Israel' means,

⁶⁴ See for example, *Hom. Jer* 19.14.9; *Hom. Ps* 67 1.1; *Hom. Ps* 36 3.11.

⁶⁵ *Hom. Josh* 9.4. (SC 71:250; FC 105:99).

⁶⁶ *Hom. Josh* 9.4. (SC 71:250; FC 105:99).

‘seeing God by way of the mind,’ (*mente Deum videntem*) even more correctly is it said concerning angelic ministries.”⁶⁷ Thus the verse pertains to that time immediately after one comes to believe in God, when Christ the Lord writes “the second law,” i.e. Deuteronomy, in one’s heart.⁶⁸ Origen informs his hearers that just as angels facilitated the provision of the Torah to Israel, “the heavenly powers (*coelestes virtutes*), the ministries of angels (*ministeria angelorum*), and ‘the church of the firstborn’ (Heb 12:23) were present at the time when the mystery of the faith was transmitted to you.”⁶⁹ Again, it is Paul who instructs Origen concerning this issue, for he argues, “the apostle plainly (*manifeste*) points this out to the Hebrews, saying, ‘For you have not drawn near to the sound of a trumpet and to a fiery mountain, but you have drawn near to Mount Sion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to the church of the firstborn written in heaven, and to the multitude of angels praising God together’ (Heb 12:18, 22–23).”⁷⁰ Origen likens his own homiletic task to the previous eras of salvation history saying, “even now, through these things that we are speaking, Jesus is writing Deuteronomy in the hearts of those who receive these things that are said with a sound faith and with all their mind.”⁷¹ By implication, then, the angels are present as he offers the Scriptures to his hearers, just as they were in the previous salvation-historic age.

Secondly, angels occasionally pray for and rejoice with the exegete-preacher, Origen himself. For example, in his *Homilies on Luke*, Origen again discusses the fact of the angels’ presence in the Christian assembly, and then turns to explain their interaction with the preacher, claiming, “if we say anything in accord with reason (*iuxta rationem*) and according to the intent of the Scriptures (*iuxta scripturarum dicimus voluntatem*), the angels rejoice and pray with us.”⁷² Here, as the angels rejoice whenever Origen’s homiletic interpretation of Scripture is in

⁶⁷ *Hom. Josh 9.4.* (SC 71:252; FC 105:100). I have translated *mente* as “according to the mind” instead of Schek’s “in the mind” in order to emphasize what I understand to be the ablative of agent.

⁶⁸ *Hom. Josh 9.4.* (SC 71:250; FC 105:99).

⁶⁹ *Hom. Josh 9.4.* (SC 71:252; FC 105:100).

⁷⁰ *Hom. Josh 9.4.* (SC 71:252; FC 105:100).

⁷¹ *Hom. Josh 9.4.* (SC 71:252; FC 105:100).

⁷² *Hom. Lk 23.8.* (SC 87:322; FC 94:101).

accord with what they know to be its true intent, their celebratory attention serves as a kind of implicit authoritative standard to which he aims in his exegesis. Just as significant is his claim that the angels pray with the preacher whose homiletic interpretation is aligned with the intent of Scripture. Unfortunately, Origen does not explain the content or effects of such angelic prayers, but surely, he thinks the impact of his homiletic exegesis is strengthened by the angels' prayers in these instances.

Thirdly, in one significant passage from his eleventh homily on Numbers, Origen outlines his understanding of another way in which the angels serve as intermediaries between his preaching and Christ, the high priest. As he discusses the angels' role in offering humanity's first-fruits to Christ, the Alexandrian tells his hearers that each person has an angel that attends to the field of her heart. In Origen's own case, his offering in this context is the interpretation of Scripture in his exegetical homilies. He tells his readers the following, concerning both his offering and the mediating role of his church's particular angel, as he makes his exegetical offerings to Christ, the "supreme high priest":

And if today I should be deserving to bring forth some great interpretation that is worthy of the supreme high priest ... it could possibly happen that the angel who presides over a church would choose something from all these statements and would offer it to the Lord in the place of the first fruits from the little field of my heart.⁷³

For Origen, then, it is through the angels, who are present as he preaches, that Christ, the high priest, is alerted of worthy interpretive offerings. Here, the angels' role is best described as evaluative, and it is clear that Origen presumes they occupy the necessary position vis-à-vis Scripture to fulfill this role. I suspect, however, that such a comment also serves a rhetorical purpose for Origen, namely, assuring his hearers that they are in the fortunate position to receive explanations of Scripture that could potentially receive the "stamp of approval" from the heavenly beings who enjoy direct contact with Christ himself.

⁷³ *Hom. Num* 11.5.1. (SC 442:46; ACT; Scheck, 57). Cf. *Hom. Ezek* 2.3.1. (SC 352:106). In this context, the angels judge his interpretations at the eschaton.

Origen's Angelic Exegesis

We have seen that Origen assumed the angelic powers to be attentively engaged with his exegetical-homiletical endeavours. This itself is a significant claim to interpretive authority. However, there are also several instances in his writings where Origen claims that his exegesis and teaching of Scripture have an angelic dimension of their own. Significantly, in these instances, Origen does not claim to have received direct guidance or assistance from the angels, but instead claims either the capacity to interpret at the level of angels, or at least the aspiration and/or potential to do so.⁷⁴ This, I suggest, is a powerful claim to interpretive authority, which we shall see specifically in our third example, particularly as it relates to a defense of non-literal exegesis. We will examine three instances here.

I will begin with an example in which Origen articulates his aspiration to interpret angelically. In his second homily on Ezekiel, as he comments on Ezek 13:2, "Prophecy; and you shall say to the prophets who prophecy from the heart, and you shall prophecy and say to them, 'Listen to the word of the Lord'," Origen reflects on the homiletical-exegetical task in light of the angels' engagement with Scripture. He takes this verse to be spoken directly to himself, and all those who would teach in the churches, for those who would assume the role of teacher should, he claims, have an appropriate fear of God.⁷⁵ In addition, Origen continues, the verse enjoins the teacher to "venture to bring forth discourses as though they were a commentary written not by humans but by the angels of God (*ut periclitemur quasi sub commentario scripto non ab hominibus, sed ab angelis Dei*)."⁷⁶ Once again, Origen associates the angels with a right understanding of Scripture, and in light of this prophetic verse specifically, argues that he and the other teachers of the

⁷⁴ I do not understand Origen's claims to possess angelic interpretive abilities to constitute a straightforward claim to have reached this level of exegesis (or existence) purely on his own merit. The Alexandrian is of course well aware of his need for divine assistance, as is evidenced by the many instances throughout his exegetical commentaries and homilies in which he pauses to pray for interpretive help, and in *Comm. Jn* 13, it is clear that the one receiving "living water," asks and receives from Christ. However, I do think it significant that he understands himself to occasionally come to an interpretation of Scripture, or as we shall see below, of "that which is beyond Scripture," that is angelic in nature.

⁷⁵ *Hom. Ezek* 2.3.1. (SC 352:106).

⁷⁶ *Hom. Ezek* 2.3.1. (SC 352:106). Cf. *Comm. Cant.* 2.8.34.

church must aspire to homiletic exegesis that is angelic. Whether or not he or any other teacher-exegete has interpreted Scripture correctly will be revealed at the end of the age, when such persons are judged by the “order” (*ordo*) of the angels, justified by “what has been said well (*erunt quae bene dicta sunt*),” and condemned by “those explanations which were different from what truth demands (*ea quae secus quam veritas poscit sunt explanata*).”⁷⁷ In this case, then, Origen argues that the exegete should operate according to the knowledge that the angels will, at the end of the age, judge and examine his interpretive endeavours, and that one’s exegesis should therefore meet angelic standards. We will see in our next example that Origen clearly thinks it possible to meet this standard (for some), and, moreover, counts himself among the privileged minority.

Our second example is again from a passage in the new material on the psalms, and here Origen claims explicitly to possess an angelic interpretive capacity. As he turns to interpret Ps 77:25a, “a man ate the bread of angels,” a verse we have seen him deal with above, he provides an extensive discussion of the content of the angels’ bread, which he understands here to refer to their work, claiming, “the work set out before them is to contemplate reality (*θεωρεῖν τὰ πράγματα*) and to enjoy the wisdom of God and to see the Logos of the order of the universe.”⁷⁸ For Origen, as we noted above, it is possible that those human beings who have made great progress on the journey toward divinity, can “eat the bread of angels.” Here, he goes so far as to claim that he has reached the rank of angelic understanding, saying, “Men have also received bread of angels, which nourishes angels, for when I gain understanding about God, about the cosmos, about Christ, about his divinity and about his inhabiting a human body and soul, I eat bread of angels.”⁷⁹ He continues, commenting specifically on his angelic rank with respect to exegesis: “When I explain (*ἐξετάζω*) the words of the Holy Spirit, I eat the bread of angels.”⁸⁰ He says no more here about his angelic

⁷⁷ *Hom. Ezek* 2.3.1. (SC 352:106).

⁷⁸ *Hom. Ps* 77 4.10. (OW 13:406). Note that above, in a passage from the same (lengthy) homily on Ps 77, the “bread of angels” was to speak through the prophets. I suspect that for Origen, these two kinds of angelic “work” were not incompatible. In any case, he is famously willing to offer several interpretive options for a given verse.

⁷⁹ *Hom. Ps* 77 4.10. (OW 13:406).

⁸⁰ *Hom. Ps* 77 4.10. (OW 13:406).

homiletical-exegetical work before he moves to the next verse, but, even so, it is clear that he considers himself to be such an angelic interpreter; one who can, on occasion, with the angels themselves, contemplate reality and understand God, the mystery of Christ, and the communication of the Holy Spirit in the words of Scripture.

Finally, we return to Origen's *Commentary on John*. In a remarkable section of this work, Origen again deals with the angelic exegetical capacity of the elite minority, and this within the context of a defense of the necessity of non-literal exegesis. It is here that we can see most clearly the rhetorical impact of Origen's claims to understand Scripture in an angelic mode. In Book 13 of his *Commentary on John* Origen makes a two-fold argument concerning the angelic valences of his exegesis: 1) the angels have understanding of teachings concerning God that are "beyond that which is written" in Scripture; and 2) Origen himself has access to such teachings, wherein a shift to the non-literal plane is required. In this instance then, the rhetorical force of his claim to possess angelic exegetical capacities serves to authorize his penchant for non-literal exegesis. I will proceed by outlining the overall shape of Origen's treatment of this passage before moving to discuss how angels, and indeed Origen himself, fit within the exegetical picture laid out by the Alexandrian.

Book 13 of Origen's *Commentary on John* is dedicated to an extensive treatment of the Samaritan Woman at the well in John 4, and while Origen deals with the text at the literal level, much of his interpretive energy is spent dealing with his non-literal reading, which is primarily concerned with the theme of scriptural interpretation itself.⁸¹ Within this non-literal reading, the Samaritan woman, who represents the heterodox (read, "gnostics," such as Heracleon), sits in conversation with Jesus, the Jew (i.e., the church) at the well, which represents the Scriptures.⁸² Jesus offers the Samaritan woman "living water," which Origen understands as "different from" (ἕτερον παρὰ) the well of Scripture,⁸³ since this "living water" represents Jesus' teachings, which, in turn,

⁸¹ I discuss this passage in greater detail in chapter 3 of my forthcoming book, *Alexandrian and Antiochene Exegesis and the Gospel of John* (SBL Press, 2020).

⁸² While Book 12 of *Comm. Jn*, where Origen sets up his interpretation of this passage, is lost, he summarizes the overall shape of his treatment in 13.3–7, 81, 101.

⁸³ *Comm. Jn* 13.42. (SC 222:54; FC 89:77).

become “a fountain capable of discovering everything that is investigated,” which one can possess within oneself.⁸⁴ In other words, for Origen, Scripture itself has limits, for the person who has drunk from the Scriptures will continue to thirst, and will thus of necessity return to the well again and again.⁸⁵ On the other hand, once a person has received the water of Jesus’ teachings, he or she “will receive so great a benefit that a fountain capable of discovering anything that is investigated will gush forth within him.”⁸⁶

The rigorous biblical interpreter, Origen, does not eschew the place of Scripture altogether – one must of course begin with the Scriptures, for they are indeed “useful” (χρήσιμον), and they are “elementary rudiments of and very brief introductions to all knowledge (τῆς ὅλης γνώσεως στοιχεῖά τινα ἐλάχιστα καὶ βραχυτάτας εἶναι εἰσ-αγωγὰς).”⁸⁷ However, they do not contain some of “the more lordly and more divine aspects of the mysteries of God,” nor have human voices or tongues ever contained them.⁸⁸ This latter assertion Scripture itself indicates to Origen, the ever-attentive reader, for John 21:25, which he cites, reads, “For there are also many other things that Jesus did, which if they were each written, I suppose not even the world itself would contain the books that would be written.”⁸⁹ Scripture provides further indication that its contents are limited, since, as Origen notes, the apostles John and Paul were both forbidden to write about the mystical experiences they underwent (Rev 10:4; 1 Cor 12:4).⁹⁰ Finally, Origen takes Paul’s phrase from 1 Cor 4:6, “beyond that which is written,” which the apostle meant to *deter* his followers from going beyond the literal meaning of the written words of his letters, and uses it, as Margaret M.

⁸⁴ *Comm. Jn* 13.14–16. (SC 222:40–42; FC 89:71–72).

⁸⁵ *Comm. Jn* 13.7, 13. (SC 222:38–40; FC 89:70–71).

⁸⁶ *Comm. Jn* 13.16. (SC 222:42; FC 89:72).

⁸⁷ *Comm. Jn* 13.23–24, 30. (SC 222:44–46; FC 89:73).

⁸⁸ *Comm. Jn* 13.27. (SC 222:46; FC 89:74). The extent to which Origen thinks the teachings found in Scripture and the teachings found beyond Scripture overlap is not entirely clear in Book 13. I suspect that this requires further study.

⁸⁹ *Comm. Jn* 13.27. (SC 222:46; FC 89:74).

⁹⁰ *Comm. Jn* 13.28. (SC 222:46; FC 89:74).

Mitchell has observed, “to refer the extra-scriptural, extra-textual knowledge of divine things, which is the water of Jesus.”⁹¹

Having established the existence of such supra-scriptural teachings, Origen warns his reader that they are to be examined only by the minority of persons who are capable, not the majority.⁹² These teachings are therefore known to those such as the apostles John and Paul, who heard them, but were not able to speak them or commit them to writing.⁹³ They will also be known to those who have received Christ’s living water, “the fountain of water leaping into eternal life to those who no longer have the heart of man, but who are able to say, ‘But we have the mind of Christ’ [1 Cor 2:16], ‘that we may know the things that are given to us by God, which things also we speak, not in the learned words of human wisdom, but in words learned of the Spirit’ [1 Cor 2:12–13].”⁹⁴ The Samaritan woman, who asked for and received Jesus’ living water, is another such person, for she has now not only moved from the camp of the heterodox to the fold of the church, but more significantly, has gained access to “that which is beyond what is written.”⁹⁵

It is here, within Origen’s discussion of the Samaritan woman’s reception of the living water of Jesus’ teachings, that we encounter the angels, for he claims that once she has received the living water, the

⁹¹ *Comm. Jn* 13.31. (SC 222:48; FC 89:74–75). See Mitchell’s treatment of this passage of Book 13 in her *Paul, the Corinthians and the Birth of Christian Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: CUP, 2010), 34–37.

⁹² *Comm. Jn* 13.32–33. (SC 222:48; FC 89:75).

⁹³ *Comm. Jn* 13.33–34. (SC 222:48; FC 89:75).

⁹⁴ *Comm. Jn* 13.35. This is one of Origen’s favourite Pauline verses, and he summons it time and again as his spiritual aspiration and the scriptural authorization and vocabulary for his claims to interpretive precision on the non-literal plane. See for example, *Peri Archon* 4.2.3; *Comm. Jn* 13.5–6. This is therefore an implicit claim to belong to this privileged minority, a claim which will become more explicit below. However, he has already claimed as much explicitly in the preface-like section of Book 1 of the *Commentary on John*. As he discusses the privileged position of John’s Gospel, the first-fruits of the four Gospels, he makes a distinction between those able to interpret John’s Gospel rightly, i.e., the spiritual Levites and priests, and the majority of Christians who are not so devoted to the study of Scripture, i.e., the spiritual Israelites. See *Comm. Jn* 1.10–12. Origen clearly identifies with the first group, the Levites, for he says, “we are eager for those things that are better, all our activity and our entire life being dedicated to God.” *Comm. Jn* 1.12. (SC 120:60; FC 80:33–34).

⁹⁵ Origen develops this argument in *Comm. Jn* 13.40–42. (SC 222:52–54; FC 89:76–77).

Samaritan woman could, “apart from Jacob’s water, contemplate (θεω-
 οῦσαί) the truth in a manner that is angelic (ἀγγελικῶς) and beyond
 man.”⁹⁶ Origen continues, describing in more detail the capacity of the
 angels: “For the angels have no need of Jacob’s fountain that they may
 drink. Each angel has in himself a fountain of water leaping into eternal
 life, which has come into existence and been revealed by the Word
 himself and by Wisdom herself.”⁹⁷ The angels, then, clearly understand
 that which is beyond Scripture without recourse to Scripture per se, for
 their knowledge has been given to them directly by the Word himself.
 The Samaritan woman, having now received the living water of Jesus’
 teachings, has an “angelic” understanding of the truth.

Once Origen has explained how the Samaritan woman received the
 living water of Jesus’ teachings, he subtly likens himself to both the
 biblical figure and the angels. This, as he deals with Jesus’ words in John
 4:32, “I have meat to eat which you do not know.” The meat of Christ
 reminds Origen of another kind of heavenly food, namely, the bread of
 angels. Once again, Ps 77:25, “man ate the bread of angels,” elicits his
 reflection on the content of that bread and thus angelic epistemology.
 As he interprets these words, he claims that, “we must ascend by reason
 from irrational and human beings to the angels who are also nurtured,
 for they are not totally without need,” quoting the verse directly, “man
 ate the bread of angels.”⁹⁸ That Scripture itself has instructed Origen that
 angels are not without need – for they receive some kind of nourishment
 from this bread – does two things for Origen here. First, it prompts him
 to search the Scriptures for examples in which humans literally “eat the
 bread of angels,” a search that leads him to find the example of Abraham
 in Gen 18, who offered his (angelic) visitors at Mamre unleavened
 bread, which he ate with them.⁹⁹ Second, the fact of the angelic need for
 nourishment suggests to Origen that humans, who are also in need, are
 not so far below those needy angels, and therefore finds another Scrip-
 tural authorization for his interpretation of the Samaritan woman’s
 angelic understanding, and implicitly, his own capacity to reach angelic
 epistemological status as he interprets Scripture.

Origen’s overarching non-literal treatment of the Samaritan woman

⁹⁶ *Comm. Jn* 13.41. (SC 222:54; FC 89:77). Cf. *Comm. Jn* 13.91.

⁹⁷ *Comm. Jn* 13.41. (SC 222:54; FC 89:77).

⁹⁸ *Comm. Jn* 13.214. (SC 222:148; FC 89:112).

⁹⁹ *Comm. Jn* 13.214. (SC 222:148; FC 89:112).

at the well in John 4, I argue, constitutes a claim to belong to the select minority of Christians, alongside the apostles, the Samaritan woman, and the angelic hosts, each of whom possess the capacity to understand that which is beyond Scripture. In other words, he has both demonstrated that the biblical text itself invited, or perhaps instructed, him to move beyond the letter so as to reach an understanding of Jesus' teachings, and that he has in fact reached such an understanding through his non-literal interpretation of John 4. He is thus able to describe and explain the journey vis-à-vis Scripture embarked upon by the Samaritan woman, for he has undergone a comparable journey as one who has spent his life "engaged very diligently (ἐπιμελέστατα ἀσχοληθέντα)" with the Scriptures.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, his entire reading of this passage can be seen as a kind of defense of non-literal reading, that mode of exegesis that allows humans access to the teachings of Jesus beyond what is written in Scripture, to which the angels and a select group of human beings, such as himself, are privy.¹⁰¹

Conclusion

For Origen, as we have seen, angels are thoroughly scriptural. That is, not only does Scripture itself guide Origen in his thinking about their nature and their role within his cosmological and theological programme, but angels are also extremely well-versed in Scripture, given their foundational role in the provision of the messages that would become its contents. This is demonstrated in every instance where the angels speak and sing, for, according to Origen, their words are always scriptural. The Alexandrian therefore considers the angels to be heavenly intermediaries on his behalf as he presents Scripture to those under his charge. In fact, they are the perfect source of authority for claims concerning the legitimacy of his own biblical interpretation.

¹⁰⁰ *Comm. Jn* 13.42. (SC 222:54; FC 89:77). Cf. *Comm. Jn* 1.10–12.

¹⁰¹ Based on Book 13 as a whole, and on such passages as Book 13.110, in which Origen refutes the person who is "enslaved to the letter," John A. McGuckin has argued that Origen implicitly refutes those within the walls of the church who in his view read Scripture too literally, and who, presumably, had accused him of fanciful and therefore erroneous interpretation. See McGuckin's, "Structural Design and Apologetic Intent in Origen's *Commentary on John*" in *Origeniana Sexta: Origène et la Bible: Actes du Colloquium Origenianum Sextum, Chantilly, 30 août–3 septembre 1993* (ed. G. Dorival and A. Le Boulluec; Leuven: LUP, 1995), 441–457.

Not only do they provide him with supervision, mediation, and prayer during the exegetical-homiletical process – no small rhetorical claim – but they also provide attainable exegetical examples, for, as we have seen, Origen believes that certain elite members of the church, such as himself, can on occasion, reach angelic levels of understanding. Significantly, Scripture itself has guided Origen toward this self-understanding vis-à-vis the angels; as we saw, in those contexts in which he discusses his own capacity to do the work of angels, he found justification for this claim in such verses as Ps 77:25, “man has eaten the bread of angels,” and in the existence of the “living water” of Jesus in John 4, which indicated to him that one must search beyond that which is written to reach the level of angelic understanding. Origen’s claims to possess the capacity to understand God in the Scriptures, and indeed, in that which is beyond Scripture in an angelic mode, authorize his movement to the non-literal plane. Surely the exegetical homilist who, on occasion, does the work of angels, is to be trusted with the appropriate handling of the Scriptures.

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