

ARTIKLAR

ORIGEN ON THE HOMILETIC EXEGETE AS PHYSICIAN OF THE SOUL

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Abstract:

In this paper, I examine a selection of Origen's homilies in which he comments on the healing or medicinal properties of scripture, followed by an analysis of passages in which he discusses the role of the exegete in the healing process. I argue that the analogy of the healing physician helps Origen make the case that the ideal exegete is one who has had both the appropriate training in the discipline and, accordingly, the knowledge concerning when and how to apply said training for the sake of healing the sinful souls of his audience members. These general claims of Origen concerning the role of the exegete provide us with insight concerning his self-understanding as one such exegete-physician. Accordingly, I attend to the rhetorical use to which Origen put the metaphor of the physician as he worked to present himself as an authoritative, well-trained interpreter.

Key Words:

Origen of Alexandria, ideal exegete, early Christian soul care, homiletic exegesis

Introduction

The past decade has seen an exciting resurgence of scholarship on health, healing, medicine, and disability in Christian late antiquity. Excellent work has recently been conducted on such topics as the medical contexts of early monastic spiritual direction; late ancient thought on

bodily deformities, wounds, and scars; and the relationship between hospitals and Christianity in antiquity to name but a few.¹

This resurgence has in part been made possible due to developments in the fields of both the history of medicine and the study of ancient philosophy; in the past few decades, scholars of both fields have increasingly begun to emphasize that in antiquity the disciplines of medicine and philosophy overlapped a great deal,² since both concerned themselves with “‘healing’, or ‘attitudes and actions with regard to health and sickness.’”³ Philip van der Eijk puts it this way:

scholars in ancient philosophy have come to realise that a number of “philosophers” too had their own particular reasons for being interested in areas and themes that we commonly associate with medicine and for pursuing these interests in a variety of forms, theoretical as well as practical – and, in so doing, were interacting with medical writers in the setting of their agendas, the formation of their ideas, concepts and methodologies and in their practical activities.⁴

¹ See for example the very recent book of Jonathan L. Zecher, *The Medical Art of Spiritual Direction in Early Christian Monasticism* (Oxford Early Christian Studies), Oxford: OUP, 2022; Heidi Marx, “Religion, Medicine, and Health”, in: Nicholas Baker-Brian and Joseph Lössl (ed.), *A Companion to Religion in Late Antiquity*, Oxford: John Wiley & Sons 2018, 511–28; Sethina Watson, *On Hospitals: Welfare, Law, and Christianity in Western Europe, 400–1320*, Oxford: OUP, 2020; Heidi Marx and Kristi Upson-Saia, “The State of the Question: Religion, Medicine, Disability and Health in Late Antiquity”, *Journal of Late Antiquity* 8:2 (2015), 257–72. See also the recent special issue of edited by Kristi Upson-Saia that is dedicated to “Rethinking Medical Metaphors in Late Ancient Christianity” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2:4 (2018). Note also the forthcoming collection of essays edited by Susan R. Holman, Chris L. de Wet, and Jonathan L. Zecher, *Disability, Medicine, and Healing Discourse in Early Christianity: New Conversations for Health Humanities*, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2024.

² See especially the following within the substantial amount of literature on the topic: Philip van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy in Classical Antiquity: Doctors and Philosophers on Nature, Soul, Health and Disease*, Cambridge: CUP, 2009; Jacques Brunschwig and Martha C. Nussbaum (eds.), *Passions and Perceptions: Studies in Hellenistic Philosophy of Mind*, Cambridge: CUP, 1993; Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics*, Princeton: PUP, 1994.

³ Van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy*, 6.

⁴ Van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy*, 9.

A major underlying assumption of all thinkers of this period, an assumption that accounts to some degree for the overlap in the functions of the physician and the philosopher, was that the body and the mind/soul were so tightly connected that the treatments of the ailing body and the mind/soul shared some common features as well.⁵ It has furthermore been demonstrated that in this construal, protreptic becomes a key element in medico-philosophical therapeutics aimed at identifying the root of soul sickness and helping the patient return to health, particularly as it developed within the virtue ethics of moral philosophy.⁶

This insight concerning philosophical protreptics has been particularly useful for scholars of Christianity in late antiquity, for the tool obviously lent itself well to the Christian project of healing the sinful soul, especially in homiletic contexts. Christian preachers, like the moral philosophers of their past and present, can thus fruitfully be understood to be engaged in the therapeutic work of caring for the health of the souls under their care. To date, the corpus of John Chrysostom has received the most attention within this framework.⁷ The words of Wendy Mayer, whose work has been instrumental in this discussion, are illustrative of this development in Chrysostom scholarship:

if we are to accept that John viewed himself primarily as a Christian philosopher and psychagogue, then we should perhaps also consider that in his approach to exegesis he inherited or at least drew upon another aspect of that tradition. The performance of exegesis is not alien to the role of a therapist raised in the traditions of the Hellenistic moral philosophers.⁸

⁵ Van der Eijk, *Medicine and Philosophy*, 27.

⁶ On this development see Gill, "Philosophical Therapy", 339–360.

⁷ See the essay of Wendy Mayer: "Shaping the Sick Soul: Reshaping the Identity of John Chrysostom", in: Wendy Mayer and Geoffrey G. Dunn (ed.), *Christians Shaping Identity from the Roman Empire to Byzantium: Studies Inspired by Pauline Allen* (SVC 123), Leiden: Brill, 2015, 140–164. See also Robert G. T. Edwards, "Healing Despondency with Biblical Narrative in John Chrysostom's *Letters to Olympias*", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28:2 (2020), 203–231; David Rylaarsdam, *John Chrysostom on Divine Pedagogy: The Coherence of his Theology and Preaching*, Oxford: OUP, 2014.

⁸ Mayer, "Shaping the Sick Soul", 151.

In other words, according to Mayer, since Chrysostom situated himself within the Hellenistic medico-philosophical tradition, students of his exegesis should move beyond analyzing it solely within the context of Jewish and Christian modes of scriptural interpretation and should focus as well on his own goals of exegesis, namely, the healing of his audience members' souls. For, in a very real way, Chrysostom expected that his interpretation and preaching on the appropriate sections of scripture contributed to this end as he directed his energy toward teaching his audiences how to regulate their souls with respect to their mindset, emotions, and desires vis-à-vis the scriptural text.

I contend that Origen had similar goals for his exegesis, although his comments on the topic are much less extensive than those that we find in Chrysostom's corpus.⁹ For one thing, it is less clear that Origen situated himself within the medico-philosophical tradition. Perhaps for this reason, Origen's voice is much less considered in the above-mentioned discussions. Nevertheless, Origen does frequently make use of the analogy of the physician and his medicinal remedies as a way of describing Christ, scripture, and the exegetical task within his preaching.¹⁰ This has been observed in a 1999 study, *Cristo médico, según Orígenes*, in which Samuel Fernández provided a thoroughgoing treatment of Origen's understanding and use of the metaphor of the physician as it applies to God and Christ, and to a lesser degree, to scripture and the scriptural interpreter.¹¹ After his treatment of Origen's use of the metaphor

⁹ Origen comments more generally (and positively) on the science of medicine throughout his corpus. See, for example, *Contra Celsum* 2.67; 3.6, 121–3, 222–5, 42, 61–62; 4.15; *Comm. Matt.* 13.6; *Hom Num* 17.1.3. For a general treatment of Origen's assessment of medical theory and its role within his theology, see David G. Bostock, "Medical Theory and Theology in Origen", in: HPC Hanson and Henri Crouzel (ed.), *Origeniana Tertia: The Third International Colloquium for Origen Studies, University of Manchester September 7th–11th, 1981*, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1985, 191–199.

¹⁰ It is well known that Origen considered Christ to be a physician of souls. See the following examples: *Peri Archon* 3.1.15; *Philocalia* 27.9; *Contra Celsum* 2.24; 4.15.

¹¹ Samuel Fernández, *Cristo médico, según Orígenes: La actividad médica como metáfora de la acción divina* (Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 64), Roma, 1999. For other treatments of Origen's understanding of the metaphor of Christ as physician, see the recent article by Francesco Rotiroti, "The Violent Shepherd: Constructing Legitimate Violence in Pre-Ni-

throughout his corpus, Fernández spends approximately 10 pages of his nearly 300-page work on Origen's understanding of scripture's healing capacity and much less directly, on the interpreter himself. A key observation of Fernández was that it is the presence of Christ in scripture that results in its healing power.¹² Fernández went on to demonstrate that for Origen, scripture's healing capacity was only recognized by "the saint" who had had special preparation in acquiring the knowledge of scripture's medicinal value. However, Fernández's emphasis was not on the exegete so much as the exegetical methods required to deal with the healing capacities of scripture.¹³

In this paper, I will build on the substantial work of Fernández, though I give much more attention to Origen's comments on the difficult and puzzling nature of the medicine (τό φάρμακον) of scripture,¹⁴ and accordingly, to his comments about the required training and spiritual maturity of their ideal interpreter, the homiletic exegetical physician (ιατρός).¹⁵ I begin with a close analysis of a selection of passages from Origen's exegetical homilies in which he discusses the healing or medicinal properties of scripture, followed by an analysis of passages in which he discusses the role of the exegete in the healing process. I argue that the analogy of the healing physician helps Origen make the case that the ideal exegete is one who has had both the appropriate training in the discipline and, accordingly, the knowledge concerning when and

cene Christianity", *Zeitschrift der Savigny-Stiftung für Rechtsgeschichte: Kanonistische Abteilung* 109:1 (2023), 1–52. Rotiroti provides an exhaustive examination of the discursive violence of the pastor-shepherd vis-à-vis the biblical metaphor in the first few centuries of the church's existence. He demonstrates that of the pastor's role is to separate the infected livestock from the healthy, thus overlapping in function with the physician. See his treatment of Origen in this connection in particular on pages 32, 48, and 50.

¹² Fernández, *Cristo medico*, 277.

¹³ Fernández, *Cristo medico*, 274, 276–277.

¹⁴ The Greek term τό φάρμακον can also be translated as poison, and I will discuss the harmful capacity of scripture below. Unfortunately, the relevant example discussed below is no longer extant in Greek, and thus we must work with the Latin translation. The term used in that example is *venenum*.

¹⁵ I use the Greek medical terminology here, though five of my eight passages are unfortunately Latin translations of the original Greek.

how to apply said training¹⁶ for the sake of healing the sinful souls of his audience members.¹⁷ These general claims of Origen concerning the role of the exegete provide us with insight concerning his self-understanding as one such exegete-physician. My contribution, then, is that I attend to the rhetorical use to which Origen put the metaphor of the physician as he worked to present himself as an authoritative, well-trained interpreter. In so doing, I add the important voice of Origen to the current discussion of the ways in which ancient Christians made use of medical metaphors in their writings. In the period prior to what is typically understood as Late Antiquity, such influential Christians as Origen also worked with the notion that scripture had healing properties and that the capable homiletic exegete resembled a physician.

The Mysterious Medicinal Properties of Scripture

In several instances throughout his exegetical homilies in particular, Origen describes scripture in terms of its medicinal properties. We will examine four examples. The first two work together to demonstrate that the healing power of scripture is the result of Christ's presence therein. The third shows that for Origen, scripture can be difficult to understand, but that it does its healing work simply by virtue of being spoken aloud,

¹⁶ As will become clear throughout the remainder of this article, my findings concerning Origen's presentation of the exegete-physician as one who has had the appropriate specialized training, corroborate the findings of a forthcoming study by Jeremiah Coogan, who has demonstrated that Origen styled himself an elite specialist reader of Gospel literature in particular, or what he calls "a conduit of disciplinary knowledge." Coogan compares Origen's presentation of disciplinary knowledge formation concerning the Gospels to that of the disciplines of medicine, forensic oratory, jurisprudence, and literary criticism in his forthcoming article, "Failed Gospels and Disciplinary Knowledge in Origen's *Hom-Luc. 1*", in: Esther Brownsmith, Liv Ingeborg Lied, and Marianne Bjelland Kartzow (ed.), *Unruly Books: Rethinking Ancient and Academic Imaginations of Religious Texts*, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark.

¹⁷ We will see throughout this article that sin is the overarching ailment of the Christian for Origen, though he sometimes specifies particular conditions, such as the weakness or weariness of soul, an attachment to worldly things, and he even alludes to the inhabitation of evil powers, which require removal from the Christian's soul. The medicine found in scripture and applied appropriately by the exegete-physician has the capacity to heal all of these wounds. For a more extensive list of the various ailments of the Christian soul, see Fernández, *Cristo medico*, 89–104.

regardless of its being understood by the hearer. The fourth is similar: it demonstrates that Origen thought the remedies of scripture to be concealed and to do their work gradually and mysteriously.

The first example occurs in an admittedly ambiguous passage in Origen's second homily on Jeremiah, particularly concerning the words of Jer 2:22, "'Even if you wash in lye and cover yourself with soap, you are yet stained in your iniquities before me,' says the Lord." Here Origen explains to his audience that "bodily lye" does not have the capacity to cleanse the sinful soul, but that instead "one needs to see that the Word has every power, and just as he has the power of every Scripture, so the Word has the power of every ointment and he is the most cleansing power of any purifying agent."¹⁸ It is notoriously difficult to translate ὁ λόγος in Origen (and in much contemporary literature), as he uses the term to refer not only to Christ the Word, but also to the scriptures generally, to a specific passage or verse of scripture, to a teaching, or even to rational thought itself.¹⁹ In this passage it is no less difficult to know exactly how to translate the term, and accordingly, to differentiate Christ the Word from the prophetic scriptural words.²⁰ Nevertheless, this ambiguity actually proves my point, for both the personal *Logos*, Christ, and the scriptural *logos*, seem to be in view. While the cleansing power of Christ the Word is the primary emphasis, Origen connects this power to scripture itself, and he does so in connection with medical terminology, i.e., τὸ φάρμακον. The main point for our purposes is that the cleansing power of scripture and Christ are bound together, and it

¹⁸ *Homilies on Jeremiah 2.2*, in: *Origenes Werke XI. Die Homilien zum Buch Jeremia*. Eingeleitet und übersetzt von Alfons Fürst und Horacio E. Lona (OW, 11), Berlin: De Gruyter 2018; Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah and 1 Kings 28* (Fathers of the Church 97), trans. John Clark Smith, Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2010. (OW 11:148; FC 97:25). Ἀλλὰ χρὴ εἰδέναι, ὅτι ὁ λόγος πᾶσαν δύναμιν ἔχει καὶ ὡσπερ πάσης γραφῆς δύναμιν ἔχει, οὕτως ὁ λόγος ἔχει παντὸς φαρμάκου δύναμιν καὶ παντὸς τοῦ καθαρίζοντος δύναμὶς ἐστὶ καὶ σημεῖον ὁμολογίας.

¹⁹ For a recent discussion of the difficulties of translating the term, see Joseph W. Trigg's comments in his introduction to his recent translation of Origen's Homilies on the Psalms. Trigg, "Introduction," to *Homilies on the Psalms: Codex Monacensis Graecus 314* (Fathers of the Church 141), Washington D.C., CUA Press, 2020, 30–31.

²⁰ That the reader can be certain that Christ is in view at all here is clarified by the following section of the homily, in which Origen uses the term "Jesus" rather than "Logos." See *HomJer 2.3*.

is sin, in all of its variety, that must be cleansed or healed by Christ.²¹ Origen goes on in the remainder of the homily to explain in more detail how exactly Christ himself cleanses, i.e., he baptizes with water and fire (Luke 3:16), but this is not our main interest here.

That Origen considers Christ's presence in scripture to be medicinal is corroborated by a brief passage in Homily 16 of his *Homilies on Genesis*. As Origen comments on Genesis 12:10, "there came a famine in the country, and Abraham went down to Egypt to dwell there, since the famine prevailed in the land," he makes use of Amos 8:11, "Behold the days come, says the Lord, and I will send forth a famine on the land, not a famine of bread nor thirst for water, but a famine for hearing the word of the Lord," to authorize his move to provide a figurative reading of the famine in the verse at hand.²² This spiritual famine, Origen claims, prevails over sinners, who are overly concerned with earthly things and who are thus unable to perceive spiritual things. This then is the particular form of sin, that is, the ailment that requires healing, in this context. He goes on to mention in passing the medicinal properties of the Gospels in particular. Within an indirect comment on the benefits of each section of the (still developing) canon, Origen says: "They do not hear the commands of the Law; they do not know the reproaches of the prophets; they are ignorant of the apostolic consolations; they do not experience the medicine of the Gospel (*evangelii medicanum*)."²³ He says no more about the medicinal properties of the Gospels here, though he goes on to say that,

The Gospels will invite you to recline also in the bosoms of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob "in the kingdom of the Father" [Matt 8:11], that there you may eat "from the tree of life" [Rev 2:7] and drink wine from "the true vine" [Jn 15:1], "the new wine with Christ in the kingdom of his Father" [Matt 26:29].²⁴

²¹ Cf. *HomEzek* 3.8.

²² *Homilies on Genesis* 16.4, in: *Origenes Werke VI. Homilien Zum Hexateuch*. W. A. Baehrens (ed.), Berlin: de Gruyter, 1920 (GCS, 29), Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus* (Fathers of the Church 71), trans. Ronald E. Heine, Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1981. (GCS 29:140; FC 71:219).

²³ *HomGen* 16.4 (GCS 29:140; FC 71:219–220).

²⁴ *HomGen* 16.4 (GCS 29:140; FC 71:220–221).

In light of this description of the Gospels' content, and in light of the previous passage in which we saw him tie Christ so tightly to scripture, we might surmise that the section of scripture, i.e., the Gospels, which present directly the life and teachings of Christ, would be particularly potent medicine. Indeed, it is typical of Origen to treat the Gospels²⁵ as distinct amongst the scriptural writings because they contain "the narration of the deeds, sufferings, and words of Jesus," and thus the foundational Christian message of salvation, as he says elsewhere.²⁶ That said, as we saw above, Origen thinks Christ is to be found in all of scripture, and therefore, all of scripture is medicinal, as we will see more clearly in what follows.

In a third example, we are given more detail as to *how* scripture does its healing work. In homily 20 on the book of Joshua, Origen makes the following statement:

Therefore, O Hearer, if you observe that sometimes you recite in your ears a Scripture that you do not understand and its meaning seems obscure to you, submit nonetheless to its chief benefit: By the hearing alone, as if by a certain incantation, the poison of the noxious powers that beset you and that plot against you is expelled and driven away.²⁷

There is much that could be commented upon here, but given our present purposes, we will leave aside the "magical" overtones of the passage, particularly Origen's use of the term "incantation," and focus in particular on Origen's explanation of the healing power of the spoken words of scripture to drive out the poisonous powers besting the

²⁵ I use Gospels in the plural here, despite Origen's use of the singular "Gospel" in this particular context, given that we clearly have a description of the various sections of the "canon."

²⁶ For example, see his preface to his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 1.12–14, 20, in which he privileges the Gospels over the rest of the components of scripture.

²⁷ *HomJosh* 20.2, in: Origène. *Homélie sur Josué*. Texte latin de W.A. Baerhens (GCS 30), introd., traduction et notes par Annie Jaubert. (Sources chrétiennes, 71), Paris: Cerf 1960. Origen, *Homilies on Joshua* (Fathers of the Church 105), trans. Barbara J. Bruce, Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 2002 (SC 71:412; FC 105:176–177).

hearer.²⁸ Further, the words of scripture need not be understood for this power to take effect. Origen then goes on to remind his audience of a key teaching concerning the nature of inspired scripture, namely, that it is inherently “useful” whether we understand its usefulness or not.²⁹ It is in this context that he draws on the analogy of medicine and the physician’s work to describe scripture’s healing capacity:

Doctors (*Medici*) are accustomed at times to offer some food and at other times to give some drink that is prescribed, for example, to alleviate dimness of the eyes. Yet in consuming the food or in drinking, we do not perceive that it is useful and that it benefits the eye. But when one day passes, and another, and a third, the power of that food or drink, when conveyed to sight in its own time, through certain secret ways, little by little cleanses the faculty of seeing. Then at length we begin to understand that that food or drink benefited the eyes...Therefore, we should also believe this about Holy Scripture, that it is useful and benefits the soul even if our perception at the present does not understand why. For, as we have said, both the good powers that assist us are refreshed by these discourses and are fed, and the hostile ones are made inert by these meditations and are driven away.³⁰

Like the remedies prescribed by doctors, the remedies available in scripture (recited aloud) do their healing work even apart from the understanding of the patient-hearer. Furthermore, the remedial nature of scripture does its work gradually, just like the remedies of physical medicine, cleansing the hearer little by little, presumably after repeated

²⁸ For a thorough and highly interesting treatment of this homily, see the essay of C. Michael Chin, “Who is the Ascetic Exegete? Angels, Enchantments, and Transformative Food in Origen’s Homilies on Joshua”, in: Hans Ulrich Weidemann (ed.), *Asceticism and Exegesis in Early Christianity: The Reception of New Testament Texts in Ancient Ascetic Discourses*, Bristol, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013, 203–218. He deals in greater detail with the incantational aspect of the passage, but he is more interested in how the incantation of scripture functions within the human-angelic exegetical dialectic set up by Origen in the homily. Origen says more about the incantational magic of the chanting of scripture in the first part of this homily. See *HomJosh* 20.1.

²⁹ *HomJosh* 20.2 (SC 71:412, 414; FC 105:177).

³⁰ *HomJosh* 20.2 (SC 71:414; FC 105:177).

exposure to its teachings.³¹ In this context, one of the principal achievements of the healing recitation of scripture is its driving out certain hostile, toxic powers, presumably demons, from the Christian soul.

The healing capacity of scripture is thus present to the hearer or receiver of them regardless of whether its words are understood. However, the remedies of scripture are also frequently intentionally hidden to the average reader, and they are often deceptive in nature. This we will see in the final example of this section, for which we return to the Jeremiah homilies. In his twentieth homily on Jeremiah, Origen addresses the theme of the medicinal nature of scripture within the context of a discussion of the words, “you deceived me Lord, and I was deceived,” and the theological problem they present concerning God’s nature. That is, Origen asks, how is it that God can be said to deceive? Origen here presents the analogy of the physician (ιατρός) who deceives the patient who is unable to handle the truth of the surgery required for her healing, and thus, “[the physician] hides that surgery, the cutting knife, under the sponge, and again he conceals, as I shall call it, under the honey the nature of the bitter and the annoying drug (τὸ ἀηδέες φάρμακον), wanting not to mislead but to heal the one who is cured (βουλόμενος οὐ βλάψαι ἀλλ’ ἰάσασθαι τὸν θεραπευόμενον).”³² Like this benevolent yet deceptive physician, God is the physician of the human race, and what he prescribes is healing for all, even if he must, on occasion, deceive us.³³ Having used this analogy to articulate God’s benevolent deception, Origen then goes a step further, claiming that scripture itself is medicinal in that it presents such teachings about the nature of God: “With such remedies (φαρμάκων) the whole divine Scripture is filled, and some of what is concealed is pleasant, but some of what is concealed is bitter.”³⁴ Not only then does God provide the Christian believer with (deceptive) remedies, God does so vis-à-vis scripture, and, in a similarly deceptive manner, scripture’s remedial teachings are often

³¹ See Fernandez’s discussion of this passage in *Cristo medico*, 275.

³² *HomJer* 20.3.2 (SC 238:260; FC 97:226).

³³ In *HomJer* 14.1–2, Origen describes the prophets as physicians, based on a similar analogy to the one discussed here.

³⁴ *HomJer* 20.3.2–3 (SC 238:260, 262; FC 97:226). Τοιοῦτων φαρμάκων πεπλήρωται ὅλη ἡ θεία γραφή, καὶ τινὰ μὲν ἐστὶ χρηστὰ κρυπτόμενα, τινὰ δὲ ἐστὶ πικρὰ κρυπτόμενα. Note here as well that in *HomJer* 14.1–2, Origen claims that the prophet Jeremiah is also a healer or physician of sorts.

hidden to the patient. Origen does not claim here that a capable and trained exegete is required to discern the concealed remedies of scripture, but as we will see in the next section, he does make such claims elsewhere.

In this section, we have seen that for Origen, scripture possesses the power to heal the ailing (read, sinful) Christian soul, first and foremost due to Christ's presence within it, perceived perhaps most forcefully within the Gospels themselves, though throughout the rest of scripture as well. These medicinal scriptures, however, are not easy to understand, and indeed their remedies are concealed. In some instances, they even seem useless or superfluous, thereby posing danger to the uninitiated or careless reader who might skip over them and miss their difficult and/or hidden medicinal value.

The Homiletic Exegete is Like the Physician

Given Origen's understanding of the medicinal scriptures described above, it is no wonder that he makes the argument that they require a skilled, well-trained interpreter. In this section, I will examine three passages in which Origen is explicitly concerned to describe the homiletic exegete's role in the healing process. Again, he does so by way of the medical analogy. We will see that in all three cases, Origen uses the medical metaphor to argue that the homiletic exegete is one who has undergone appropriate training for the task of working with the obscure and difficult yet medicinal scriptures. In a fourth and final passage, I will examine Origen's comments concerning what he considers to be a "heterodox" treatment of scripture, in which the potentially healing scriptures instead become a poisonous drug in the hands of the wrong interpreters.

The Exegete-Physician Has Been Well-Trained for the Task

In the first brief example, Origen makes a direct statement about the relationship between the physician and the exegete. This discussion occurs in his first homily on the Gospel of Luke as he deals with the words "Just as those who from the beginning saw and were ministers of the Word handed it down to us" of Luke 1:2. For Origen these words "implicitly teach us that the goal of one discipline is the discipline itself,

while the goal of another discipline is its application (*in opera computetur*),³⁵ for the ministers of the word both saw and handed the word down, and the term “minister” itself implies application.³⁶ Origen then proceeds to offer examples of each kind of discipline; he suggests that geometry is one in which the discipline itself is the end goal, whereas in medicine one must both amass knowledge and be able to apply the knowledge appropriately. The physician should learn the theory and principles of medicine *and* be able to incise wounds, prescribe regulated diets, detect fevers, and treat humours. Without the application of such principles, this knowledge is useless. It is precisely in this respect that the exegete’s science is like that of medicine, Origen claims: “There is a relation like that of the science of medicine to its application in the knowledge and service of the Word (*Simile quid scientiae medicinae et operi etiam in notitia ministerioque sermonis est*).”³⁷ So in this example, we have Origen’s (suggestive, if brief) claim that it is not only a thoroughgoing knowledge of the contents of the medicinal scriptures that is required of the exegete, but rather the appropriate *application* of the various parts of scripture in service to those under his charge.

For our second example, we turn to Origen’s eighth homily on Leviticus, where he provides more detail concerning the ways in which scripture can be said to have healing properties than we saw in our above examples, as well as comments concerning the exegete’s role in the healing process. In particular, he comments on the exegete’s training in the aspects of scripture that heal which ailments. Origen begins the homily in which he deals with the Levitical law codes on leprosy by reminding his audience that “our Lord Jesus Christ is called a physician (*medicum*) in the divine scriptures,” followed by a quotation of Matt 9:12–13, “The healthy need not a physician but those who are sick. For I

³⁵ *Homélie sur saint Luc 1.5*, in: Origène. *Homélie sur saint Luc*. Texte latin et fragments grecs de M. Rauer (GCS), introd., trad. et notes par Henri Crouzel, François Fournier, et Pierre Périchon, (Sources chrétiennes, 87), Paris: Cerf 1962. Origen, *Homilies on Luke* (Fathers of the Church 94), trans. Joseph T. Lienhard, Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1996 (SC 87:106; FC 94:8).

³⁶ *HomLuc 1.5* (SC 87:106; FC 94:8).

³⁷ *HomLuc 1.5* (SC 87:106; FC 94:8).

came not to call the just but sinners to repentance."³⁸ Origen first describes the "ordinary physician," who is trained within the school of medicine, where he learns how to identify the appropriate herbs, minerals, and animal organs for the preparation of useful medicines for the body.³⁹ The person without this training, should she find herself in the fields or mountains where such resources are found, would simply pass by these herbs "like cheap hay."⁴⁰ Such is the case with ordinary medicine. In the case of heavenly medicine, in which Christ is "the heavenly physician (*caelestem medicum*)," the Word of God "prepares medications for his sick ones, not from potions of herbs, but from the sacraments of words (*aegris suis non herbarum succis, sed verborum sacramentis medicamenta conquirat*)."⁴¹ In other words, Christ prepares the medications that are to be found in the sacramental words of scripture.

Here enters the discussion of what I take to be Origen's description of the qualifications of the homiletic exegete-physician, for Origen begins by bidding his audience: "Enter into his medical clinic, his Church (*hanc stationem medicinae eius Ecclesiam*)," thus acting as a kind of guide or junior physician under the study of Christ, the heavenly physician.⁴² He continues, explaining that only the interpreter who has been trained in the medicinal capacities of scripture knows how to discern within the verbal sacraments the medications that are found therein, just as the one trained in the school of medicine knows which herbs contain healing properties in the fields. This is training that prepares the physician under Christ's tutelage to identify that which heals within the vast expanse of scriptural words. Like the one who has not received ordinary medical training, Origen explains, "If anyone sees these verbal medicines (*verborum medicamenta*) scattered inelegantly through books as through fields, not knowing the strength of individual words, he will overlook them as

³⁸ *HomLev* 8.1.1 in: Origène. *Homélies sur le Lévitique, tome II (Homélies VIII–XVI)*. Texte latin, traduction, notes et index par Marcel Borret, (Sources chrétiennes, 287), Paris: Cerf 1981. Origen, *Homilies on Leviticus* (Fathers of the Church 83), trans. Gary Wayne Barkley, Washington D.C.: CUA Press, 1990 (SC 287:8; FC 83:153).

³⁹ *HomLev* 8.1.2 (SC 287:10; FC 83:153).

⁴⁰ *HomLev* 8.1.2 (SC 287:10; FC 83:153).

⁴¹ *HomLev* 8.1.2 (SC 287:10; FC 83:153–154).

⁴² *HomLev* 1.2 (SC 287:10; FC 83:153). One could argue that through the homiletic-exegetical context Origen also trains those under his charge to become those who have these exegetical skills themselves.

cheap things, as not having any elegance of word.”⁴³ However, the person who

in some part learns that the medicine of souls is with Christ (*Qui vero parte ex aliqua didicerit animarum apud Christum esse medicinam*) certainly will understand from these books which are read in the church how each person ought to take salutary herbs from the fields and mountains, namely the strength of the words, so that anyone weary in soul may be healed not so much by the strength of the outward branches and coverings as by the strength of the inner juice.⁴⁴

This rich quotation indicates several things. First, the one who would act as a kind of exegetical physician must have some kind of understanding of Christ’s capacity to heal the soul in order to discern the manner in which scripture heals and in turn to be able to participate in the healing provided by Christ, the heavenly physician. Second, each person who encounters the words of scripture in the Christian assembly has some responsibility or part to play in the taking or receiving of scripture’s remedies – it is not the sole responsibility of the physician exegete to ensure that an individual member is healed. Third, the spiritual ailment in question in this example is the weariness of the soul. Fourth, the words of scripture themselves possess a kind of strength or power, which we have seen previously, thought here particularly when their “inner” meaning is understood and offered by the exegete.

Fifth and finally, given Origen’s own recent invitation to his audience to come and enter with him Christ’s clinic, he effectively acts as their guide, and thus his description of the person who understands that the medicinal efficacy of scripture for the healing of weary souls is with Christ is, I argue, a kind of indirect autobiographical statement concerning his own role. This becomes all the more evident as he goes on throughout this homily to provide various readings of the passage’s “inner juice,” after concluding his introduction by saying, “Therefore, let us see what diverse and varied medications for purification (*diversa et quam varia purificationum medicamenta conficiat*) this present lesson effects

⁴³ *HomLev* 8.1.2 (SC 287:10; FC 83:154).

⁴⁴ *HomLev* 8.1.2 (SC 287:10; FC 83:154). Cf. *HomNum* 27.1.4, 7. In this context it is human weakness that scripture can heal. In *HomNum* 14.2.10 it is articulated as sin.

against the uncleanness of birth and the infection of leprosy.”⁴⁵ As exegetical homilist, Origen claims, albeit indirectly, to have had the appropriate training in the medicine of souls vis-à-vis the fields of the scriptures, which in this context he explains to mean that his knowledge of Christ’s healing power, which is present to the trained reader, has prepared him to be able to discern which words of scripture are of medicinal value.⁴⁶ It also apparently allows him to understand and offer the words’ “inner juice” to his audience.

In our third passage, from homily 39 on Jeremiah, now preserved only in the *Philocalia*, Origen presents again the analogy of the training of the physician-herbalist and the exegete of scripture, though in this context he is much more careful to say that such a role is reserved for the few, not the many. The restrictive nature of his comments in this homily begin already in the first (rather lengthy) sentence:

As every herb has its own virtue whether for the healing of the body, or some other purpose, and it is not given to everybody to know the use of every herb, but certain persons have acquired the knowledge by the systematic study of botany, so that they may understand when a particular herb is to be used, and to what part it is to be applied, and how it is to be prepared, if it is to do the patient good; just so it is in things spiritual; the holy person is a sort of spiritual herbalist (βοτανικός πνευματικός), who culls (ἀναλεγόμενος) from the sacred Scriptures every jot and every common letter, discovers the value of what is written and its use (χρήσιμον), and finds that there is nothing in the Scriptures superfluous ... But it is not for everybody to know the power and

⁴⁵ *HomLev* 8.1.2 (SC 287:10; FC 83:154). Origen will go on to treat the uncleanness of birth and leprosy as code for the sinful condition of the soul.

⁴⁶ Origen was not the first Alexandrian to compare exegetical training to that of medicine. In *Stromateis* 1.9.43, Clement of Alexandria associated knowledge of the arts in general with the skilful application of scripture, and he included medicine as one such subject. He did not, however, develop the medicinal metaphor to the extent that Origen does.

use ... but those physicians (τῶν ἰατρῶν) who are expert anatomists can tell for what use every part, even the least, was intended by Providence.⁴⁷

So again, as we saw above, the trained exegete, here referred to as “the holy person,” for in Origen’s view, only the spiritually mature person can interpret scripture appropriately, is like the physician in that he or she is able to discern the use of every part of scripture, all of which is useful, as we Origen claim above. Origen stresses repeatedly in this passage that this task is simply not for everyone. This he says again a third time:

you may regard the scriptures as a collection of herbs, or as one perfect body of reason; but if you are neither a scriptural botanist (βοτανικὸς τῶν γραφῶν), nor can dissect the words of the prophets (μητε ἀνατομεὺς εἶ τῶν προφητικῶν λόγων), you must not suppose that anything written is superfluous, but blame yourself and not the sacred scriptures when you fail to find the point of what is written.⁴⁸

Again, we find the theme of the usefulness of every part of scripture regardless of the understanding of the reader, and again we find the comparison of scripture to a field or collection of remedial herbs waiting to be properly identified and used by the trained interpreter. The distinctive contribution of this passage of the *Philocalia* then is Origen’s repeated warning that such a task is not for everyone, and that it is in fact reserved for the “scriptural botanist,” who, like the botanist-physician of physical medicine, has had systematic training, and who is apparently also one of the elite, that is, a member of Origen’s highest category of his tripartite division of Christian believers, the “perfected ones.”⁴⁹ I suggest that Origen considered himself to belong to this group, given

⁴⁷ *HomJer* 39, preserved in *Philocalia* 10.2, in: Origène. *Philocalie 1–20 Sur les Écritures et La Lettre à Africanus sur l’histoire de Suzanne*. Introduction, texte, traduction et notes par Marguerite Harl, (Sources chrétiennes, 302), Paris: Cerf 1983. Origen, *Philocalia* trans. George Lewis, Edinburg: T & T Clark, 1911. (SC 302:368; trans. George Lewis, 52).

⁴⁸ *HomJer* 39, preserved in *Philocalia* 10.2 (SC 302:368; Lewis, 52).

⁴⁹ This is a very common way that Origen refers to mature Christians. See the classic discussion of them in his tripartite schema of believers in *Peri Archon* 4.2.4.

his own development of the analogy and his own self-understanding as inhabiting the position of adjudicating just who is and is not fit for the careful dissection of scripture.

In these three examples then, Origen claims that the exegete, like the physician, must receive the appropriate training in order to work effectively; that is, the exegete must be trained in the identification of the parts of scripture that contain medicinal teachings, as we saw in the first of the two passages, but the exegete must also be trained in the knowledge of how to apply his knowledge about scripture appropriately, as in our second passage. Of course, Origen's use of the analogy goes a step further, for he does indeed understand scripture to have healing capacities, and thus the analogy is particularly apt.

Scripture is Poisonous in the Wrong Hands

Now to our final passage, which is concerned with Origen's presentation of what he considers to be heterodox scriptural interpretation. While the trained (and orthodox) exegete has the capacity to heal by his or her appropriate treatment of the medicinal scriptures, in the wrong hands, the text can actually become poisonous and harmful for those receiving the teaching of those who are not trained.⁵⁰

In his thirty-first homily on Luke, Origen makes such a claim about heterodox teachers. As he discusses the devil's use of scripture in the temptation of Jesus in Luke 4, Origen presents Marcion as one who "reads the Scriptures as the devil does."⁵¹ The devil, Origen explains, reads not to become better, but to "use the simple, literal sense for killing those who are the friends of the letter" (*sed ut de simplici litera eos, qui amici sunt literae, interficias*).⁵² In other words, the devil, and those heterodox teachers whose skewed teachings are influenced by him, take advantage of the simple believers, who are not ready to move beyond the letter of the text. Accordingly, Origen warns his audience, they ought to be careful of trusting every speaker when they hear scriptural quotations and they must consider what kind of person the speaker is. Such a

⁵⁰ Here I wish to thank Jared Secord for his suggestion at the 2022 Canadian Society of Patristics Society meeting to pursue the question of the scriptures' capacity to poison or harm in the hands of the wrong teacher.

⁵¹ *HomLuc* 31.3 (SC 87:378; FC 94:126)

⁵² *HomLuc* 31.2 (SC 87:378; FC 94:126)

person might be “infected with the poisons of heresy” (*et venenis infectus haereseos*), and the devil himself might even be in him, citing the scriptures.⁵³ Even if the words of scripture are themselves medicinally powerful when they are simply spoken without explanation, if the speaker of scripture is himself infected with the poisons of heresy, so too is their scriptural teaching, Origen claims with great rhetorical force. Such instruction concerning how to approach potentially poisonous scriptural teaching from the likes of Marcion and Basilides works to reinforce Origen’s claims that the exegete’s training and spiritual maturity are of the utmost importance for the appropriate (read, orthodox) handling of the scriptures.

Conclusion

Based on my analysis of this selection of passages from Origen’s corpus, we can say that he likened scripture to medicine and the exegete to the physician so as to articulate scripture’s potential to heal the Christian person, whether the particular ailment be an unhealthy attachment to earthly things, a weak or weary soul, or the inhabitation of evil forces within the believer. The remedies found in the pages of scripture, however, are often difficult and concealed by the bare words, and can thus appear to be useless to the untrained eye. They therefore require a homiletic exegete-physician to draw out the medications contained in the “inner juice.”

The analogy of the physician, furthermore, allows Origen to articulate an important aspect of his conception of the ideal exegete, namely, thoroughgoing training in the science of interpretation. In the admittedly few examples examined here, the primary way in which the exegete resembles the physician is that (s)he has had rigorous training in both the identification of the appropriate remedies (i.e., the parts of scripture that heal a particular ailment) and in their application to the patient. By implication, given the exegetical-homiletical context in which these comments are found, Origen thus claims to belong to the

⁵³ *HomLuc* 31.3 (SC 87: 378; FC 94:126). Cf. *HomJosh* 20.2 where Origen discusses capacity of the recitation of scripture to remove “the poison of the noxious powers” besetting his hearers. This text we discussed in the previous section. Cf. *HomNum* 21.2.2 where Origen discusses the potentially carcinogenic material, bitumen, which he describes as “the fuel and nourishment of fire” in the context of a heterodox interpretation of scripture.

elite group who have had such training and who put it to use. The example of the poisonous scriptural teaching of the heterodox interpreter allows Origen to make more or less the same point – his hearers should be wary of the teacher who has not had the appropriate training, and worse, who is willing to take advantage of those who have not advanced beyond the level of the initiate.

While I have discussed Origen's use of the *analogy* or *metaphor* of the physician and his medicine as he describes the office of the exegete and the nature of scripture, I do so with the suspicion that for him, it is more than an analogy or metaphor.⁵⁴ Given the great overlap between medicine and philosophy, and indeed the Christian philosophy of an author such as Origen, we do well to pause and dwell on the extent to which he might actually have understood scripture to heal the soul who receives its application at the hands of the well-trained exegetical physician, and this in a very real way. For Origen, the appropriate selection, interpretation, and application of scripture is a matter of spiritual life and death. That is, there is real and serious help to be given or harm to be done by the exegete, and that is why thorough and rigorous training is required.

⁵⁴ Here again, I am influenced by Mayer's work. See her article, "Medicine and Metaphor in Late Antiquity: How Some Recent Shifts are Changing the Field", *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2:4 (2018), 440–463. As Mayer argues, it is a delicate and complex process to tease out how a metaphor was employed, as well as how literally or figuratively it was expected to be understood.