

ERASMUS OF ROTTERDAM'S RECEPTION OF ORIGEN'S UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN FREEDOM

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Abstract:

This article explores Erasmus of Rotterdam's reception of Origen of Alexandria's understanding of human freedom. While Erasmus is often associated with his debate with Martin Luther on the topic of free will, this article focuses on his incorporation of Origen's ideas into his own works. Origen's belief that human beings' rationality and free will are a result of their participation in the divine Logos, or rationality itself, greatly influenced Erasmus' understanding of human freedom. This article provides references to Origen's works, including *De principiis*, and examines how Erasmus used and adapted these ideas in his own treatise on free will.

Key Words:

Origen, Erasmus, human freedom, reception, biblical interpretation

In northern Europe, Erasmus of Rotterdam's understanding of the free will of the human being is most often connected to the harsh debate between him and Martin Luther concerning this theme. There are good reasons for this since Erasmus wrote his treatise on free will as a critical remark to Luther's and the Lutherans' understanding of sin and grace which, according to Erasmus, left no place for human beings' free will

and free choice.¹ However, the theme of this article is Erasmus' reception of Origen of Alexandria's understanding of the free will of the human being. This is inspired by the research project *The History of Human Freedom and Dignity in Western Civilization* which ended in 2021. This project studied several cases of reception of Origen's ideas about human freedom and dignity throughout history.²

Erasmus is so broadly influenced by Origen that it can be appropriately claimed that Origen is one of his most important sources of inspiration.³ Erasmus expresses this by saying that he learns more from reading one page from Origen than ten pages from Augustine.⁴ He published an edition of Origen's works and introduced this with a biography

¹ The title of Erasmus' treatise is *De libero arbitrio ΔΙΑΤΡΙΒΗ sive collatio*. The treatise was published in September 1524. Luther answered with his treatise *De seruo arbitrio* in 1525. Erasmus answered to Luther's treatise in 1527 with a treatise in two parts which was entitled *Hyperaspistes diatribae aduersus seruum arbitrium Martini Lutheri*. The Latin text with a German translation of Erasmus' treatises is available in *Erasmus von Rotterdam. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Bd. 4, Winfried Lesowsky (introduction and translation), Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1969. Luther's *De seruo Arbitrio* is available in *Weimar Ausgabe* 18, 600–787. Both texts are available in English translation in E. Gordon Rupp / Philip S. Watson (eds.), *Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and Salvation*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 1969, and Ernst F. Winter, *Erasmus and Luther. Discourse on Free Will*, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company 2002. Concerning the debate between Erasmus and Luther about the will, see for example Aku Visala, Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Erasmus versus Luther: A Contemporary Analysis of the Debate on Free Will", *Neue Zeitschrift für systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 62:3 (2020), 311–335.

² See <https://itn-humanfreedom.eu/>.

³ André Godin, *Érasme, lecteur d'Origène*. Genève: Droz 1982. Godin's monograph is the most authoritative work on Erasmus' reception of Origen. See further, Jan den Boeft, "Erasmus and the Church Fathers", in: Irena Backus (ed.), *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West. From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, vol. 2, Leiden: Brill 1997, 537–572 (on Origen pp. 567–570); Christian Hengstermann, "Die Seele zwischen Tier und Gott. Die origeneische Freiheitsanthropologie bei Erasmus von Rotterdam", in: Alfons Fürst / Christian Hengstermann (eds.), *Autonomie und Menschenwürde. Origenes in der Philosophie der Neuzeit*, Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2012, 139–167.

⁴ Erasmus wrote this in a letter to Johannes Eck in 1518 (ep. 844), *Desiderius Erasmus, Epistola 844*, R.A.B. Mynors, D.F.S Thomson, P.G. Bietenholz (eds.), *The Correspondence of Erasmus. Letters 842–992, Collected Works of Erasmus*, vol. 6, University of Toronto Press: Toronto 1982.

of Origen.⁵ References to Origen can be found scattered throughout many of Erasmus' works. Erasmus' dependence on Origen is most clearly and directly expressed in his *Commentary on the Romans* and in his treatise on free will. Erasmus' reception and use of Origen in his treatise on the free will is the theme of this article. Even though Erasmus' understanding of human beings' will is a well-known theme in studies on Erasmus,⁶ his reliance on Origen in his treatise on the free will has only been the theme of a few studies.⁷ In the following I will briefly present Origen's ideas about human freedom and thereafter go more into depth with Erasmus' reception of these ideas in his treatise *De libero arbitrio*.

Origen's Understanding of Human Freedom⁸

Alfons Fürst, who has studied Origen's ideas about human freedom intensively, claims that Origen introduces a new understanding of human freedom which transforms classical philosophical concepts of human freedom. Briefly explained, the long classical tradition (mainly Platonism and Stoicism) before Origen considered to varying degrees human beings to have a free choice as an element of their rationality. Origen agrees with that, but he develops the idea by claiming that human beings' rationality, and therefore their possibility of making free decisions, was a result of them being created in the image of God, who is freedom itself. Freedom is thus according to Origen a consequence of human beings' participation in the divine. Fürst defines this as a metaphysics of

⁵ Erasmus, *Origenis Adamantii Eximii Scripturarum Interpretis Opera*, Basel: Froben 1536. This edition included a biography of Origen. An English translation of the life of Origen is available in: Thomas P. Scheck, *Erasmus's Life of Origen* (translation and commentary), Washington: Catholic University Press 2016.

⁶ Christian Houth Vrangbæk, "Erasmus and the Will between Salvation and Education", in: *Paths in Free Will: Theology, Philosophy and Literature from the Late Middle Ages to the Reformation*, Lorenzo Geri, Pasquale Terracciano, and Christian Houth Vrangbæk, Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura 2020, 125–136.

⁷ Godin 1982, 449–489, also finds that Erasmus is strongly dependent on Origen in his treatise on the free will.

⁸ Regarding this part of the article, see Anders-Christian Jacobsen, "Freedom and Providence in Origen's Theology", *Church Studies* 4 (2008), 65–77.

freedom.⁹ I agree with this interpretation of Origen's understanding of human freedom. This idea about a metaphysics of freedom is for example expressed in the following quote from *De princ.* 1.3,8:

God the Father bestows on all the gift of existence; and a participation in Christ, in virtue of his being the word or reason, makes them rational. From this it follows that they are worthy of praise or blame, because they are capable alike of virtue and of wickedness.¹⁰

Christ the Logos is, according to Origen, the image of God the Father. Human beings are created according to that image.¹¹ Thus, human beings participate in what characterizes the Christ Logos. This idea that human freedom is a consequence of participation in Logos' rationality means that freedom is an inherent part of human nature, of human beings, since the divine Logos, in whom human beings participate, is rationality or logos itself.

The long discussion on human freedom in *De princ.* 3.1 is the most important text on human freedom in Origen's works. As we shall see later, Erasmus reused this text intensively in his own treatise on human beings' freedom.¹²

⁹ Alfons Fürst, *Wege zur Freiheit. Menschliche Selbstbestimmung von Homer bis Origenes*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2022.

¹⁰ *De princ.* 1.3,8. English quotes from *De princ.*, follow Origen, *On first principles*, (ed.) George William Butterworth, Eugene Or.: Wipf & Stock, 2012. *Deus pater omnibus praestat ut sint, participatio vero Christi secundum id, quod verbum vel ratio est, facit ea esse rationabilia. Ex quo consequens est ea vel laude digna esse vel culpa, quia et virtutis et malitiae sunt capacia.* The Latin and Greek texts of *De princ.* is from GCS, *Origenes Werke* Bd 5, ed. P. Koetschau, J.C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, Leipzig 1913. See also Origen, *Com. in Joh.* 2.2–3, *Origenes Werke* Bd. 4, ed. E. Preuschen, Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, Leipzig 1903.

¹¹ Anders-Christian Jacobsen, *Christ – the Teacher of Salvation. A Study on Origen's Christology and Soteriology*, Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2015, 124.

¹² This presentation of Origen's understanding of human freedom and free choice is based on the Greek text of *De princ.* 3.1, which is handed down in Greek in the *Philokalia*, a collection of Origen's text made by Gregory of Nazianzus and Basil the Great; cf. Origen, *Philocalie*, 1–20: *Sur les Ecritures; et la Lettres a Africanus sur l'Histoire de Suzanne, Source Chretiennes* 302, edited by Marguerite Harl and Nicolas de Lange (Paris: Editions du Cerf

In *De princ.* 3.1,2–5, Origen defines free will (τὸ αὐτεξούσιον) in the following way: Creation, he says, can be divided into four groups, each according to how they move. First one must distinguish between the things which cannot move by themselves but can only be moved by another power and the things which are able to move themselves. Things such as stones and wood (either firewood or timber – not living trees) belong to the first group. The other group of things which can move themselves includes plants, animals, and everything else that grows and has a soul. One could also say that the first group consists of dead things and the second group consists of living things. It is the second group that is of interest in this context. This group must be divided further to understand which creatures can be said to have free will. First we must among the living creatures distinguish between those which possess a soul (τὰ ἔμψυχα) and those which have no soul (τὰ ἄψυχα). Origen says that the creatures without a soul move *out of* themselves (ἐξ ἑαυτῶν), but those with souls move by themselves (ἀφ' ἑαυτῶν). Beings with a soul move themselves because ideas arise in them upon which they act. Furthermore, we must also make distinctions within the group of the beings with souls, specifically between the beings with souls which are equipped with reason (λόγος),¹³ and those that are not. Creatures with souls that are not endowed with reason act instinctively upon the ideas which arise in them. When the idea of a honeycomb arises in a bee it instinctively builds a honeycomb without thinking about, whether it is reasonable or not. By contrast there are those beings with a soul that are also endowed with reason. They use reason to assess the ideas that occur to them. Based on this assessment they decide how they will act in response to the ideas they have. Free will is, according to Origen, the abil-

1983). The *Philokalia* is the best version of Origen's text. However, the *Philokalia* was probably not known to Erasmus since the first Greek editions of Origen were published in the 17th century. The *Philokalia* was published in 1618; cf. Alfons Fürst, "Das Freiheitsdenken des Origenes in der Neuzeit", in: A. Fürst & C. Hengstermann (eds.), *Autonomie und Menschenwürde* [Adamantiana 2], Münster 2012, 25. At the time of the free will controversy, Erasmus probably mainly used the Latin Merlin edition of Origen's works (Paris 1519, reprint of the first edition 1512).

¹³ I translate τὰ λογικά as rational beings. According to Origen, this group includes not only humans but also angels, heavenly beings, and demons; see for example *Com. in Joh.* 2.23; 10.45.

ity to select between various possible choices in a given situation. Rational beings use free will to choose between the possibilities given in a concrete situation.¹⁴

There are two specific aspects of this definition of the rational beings' free will that need to be examined more closely. The first aspect is the role that reason or rationality – *logos* – plays. The other is the fact that free will, according to Origen's understanding of it, is expressed in concrete religious and ethical choices. Both aspects are, as we shall see, also important for Erasmus. People must choose between a life lived in virtue or one lived lustfully. *De princ.* 3.1,2–5 explicitly states that people use free will in connection with concrete religious and ethical decisions. Origen himself uses an example in *De princ.* 3.1,4 as a clear expression of this. The example concerns a pious man who has decided to forswear sexual relations. However, he is not able to carry out this intention because he meets an attractive woman. Origen's point is that it is in one way the woman, with whom the man has sexual relations, which caused the man to abandon his vow of chastity. But it is not the woman's fault that the man was compelled to give up on his intentions to stay chaste. The woman simply placed the man in a position where he was free to choose to keep his vow or to break it. Rational beings, through the use of reason, have been given the ability in such situations to distinguish between the good (τὸ καλόν) and the bad (τὸ αἰσχρόν).¹⁵ People who select the good earn praise. Those who chose the bad or lustful earn blame (*De princ.* 3.1,3). In this way freedom of choice becomes the foundation of judgment. Free will is, according to Origen, a necessary condition for judgment because it only makes sense to talk about judgment in connection with acts which are freely performed. Judgment is meaningless in relation to predetermined actions.

In the passage from *De princ.* 3.1,4 referenced above, Origen says that while the man discussed there gave up his vow of chastity when he met the woman, another man who finds himself in a similar situation may decide to act differently, because he has attained more knowledge and

¹⁴ Regarding this definition of *free will*, see also Origen, *De oratione (De orat.)* 6.1–5, ed. P. Koetschau, Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, Leipzig 1899, and further H.S. Benjamins, *Eingeordnete Freiheit. Freiheit und Vorsehung bei Origenes*, Leiden: Brill 1994, 58–70.

¹⁵ This example shows that bodies limit freedom, see Anders-Christian Jacobsen, "Body and Freedom in Origen", in: Alfons Fürst (ed.), *Perspectives on Origen and the History of his Reception*, Münster: Aschendorff Verlag 2021, 31–47.

understanding. According to Origen, free will is thus an ability, given through reason, to choose between different possible responses to a particular situation. This emphasis on reason as the basis for free choice corresponds quite well with the general impression of Origen's theology as a logos-centered theology. How then can people, according to Origen, prepare themselves to meet such challenges? The ability to choose the good can be trained. It is a matter of instruction and discipline, says Origen. The reason (λόγος) can be strengthened by exercise and confirmed by the right teaching. The ability to use the free choice to do good is thus not a stable condition, which one has or does not have. It is a capacity which must be trained and developed. Origen stresses the importance of education. The reason why training is necessary to be able to use one's freedom and free will is because human beings are distanced from God the Father and Logos which are their sources for life and rationality. This distance from God is a result of misuse of the free will. This is Origen's understanding of sin (*De princ.* 2.9).

Origen's strong defense of human freedom is a reaction against determinism. Gnostics from the Valentinian tradition and Marcionites disputed the idea that humanity has free will and consequently the freedom to choose between good and bad, right and wrong.¹⁶ Origen disagrees with this viewpoint because he finds that it contradicts Christian ideas of judgment. Origen has undoubtedly developed his understanding of humanity's free will in opposition to these forms of determinism. In *De princ.* 3.1 Origen does not explicitly identify whom he is arguing with, although it is directly stated in the text that it is written as a guide in the struggle against the thinking of others. There are, however, such specific references to those being opposed that it is possible to identify the opposition as the Valentinian Gnostics and the Marcionites. This identification of the opposition is further supported by other texts in which Origen more directly indicates the identity of his opposition. That is, for example, the case in *De princ.* 2.9,5 where he discusses the cause for differences within creation. There, he mentions those who claim that these differences are due to different and fixed natures of

¹⁶ Origen's claim that the Valentinians rejected the idea that human beings had freedom to choose is disputed in modern research on Gnosticism, cf. Carl Johan Berglund, *Origen's References to Heracleon: A Quotation-Analytical Study of the Earliest Known Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 450, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2020.

souls. According to Origen, the advocates of this viewpoint are the followers of the schools of Marcion, Valentinus, and Basilides. This way of thinking necessarily excludes human beings from exercising free will. Origen argues for human freedom and free will to avoid a determinist view of salvation.

Origen had developed a theology of human beings' salvation which was based on their freedom and free will. Erasmus was familiar with Origen's theology. Thus, when Erasmus found himself in a similar situation, experiencing that major parts of reformation theology developed deterministic concepts of salvation, Origen's thought was useful.

Erasmus' Reception of Origen's Ideas about Human Freedom and Free Will

In the following, I will present Erasmus' reception of Origen's ideas about human beings' free will or free choice by help of his reception or use of Origen's long text about human free choice in *De princ.* 3.1. We find Erasmus' reception of Origen's text in his *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,1–3.a,17. Erasmus presents this part of his text as an interpretation of biblical passages which seems to exclude human free will. Erasmus intends, of course, to show that these texts and the Bible in general do not exclude human freedom and free will.

The First Example: The Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart

One of the most important biblical texts in this respect is Ex. 9:12–16 concerning God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Paul refers to this passage in Rom. 9:14–18. At first sight, Erasmus' text represents a reception and interpretation of Paul's understanding of God's temporary rejection of the Jewish people (Rom. 9–11). This is obvious, but for our purpose it is important to understand that Erasmus follows Origen in his interpretation of Paul and The Old Testament. Erasmus realizes that Origen has done all the work for him in his long treatise on human freedom in *De princ.* 3.1 where he defends human free will and free choice using the same biblical texts as Erasmus. Or it is probably the other way around: Erasmus uses the same biblical texts as Origen did. Thus, Erasmus' *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,1–3.a,17 is not only a reception of the Old Testament and Paul, but also and even more so of Origen. As often is the case, we are dealing with a long chain of reception and interpretation.

In *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,2 Erasmus refers explicitly to Origen's interpretation of the story about the hardening of Pharaoh's heart:

Since it is obviously contradictory that God, who is not only just, but also merciful, should have hardened the heart of a man, in order to show his might by the former's evilness, Origen resolves the difficulty in the third book of his *Commentary on St. John* as follows: God permitted an occasion of induration, but the guilt is Pharaoh's. His malice caused him to become more obstinate, rather than penitential.¹⁷

Erasmus is thus not hiding his reception and reuse of Origen's exegesis. The English translation, which I quote here, has a mistake since it refers to Origen's *Commentary on John*. The Latin text correctly says "Origenes libero περὶ ἀρχῶν tertio".

De libero arbitrio 3.a,2 references closely *De princ.* 3.1,10–11. According to Erasmus, God provides the situation which leads to the hardening of Pharaoh's heart, but God's intention was to lead Pharaoh to conversion. Pharaoh did not convert but hardened his heart even more. This means that Pharaoh was himself responsible for the hardening of his heart. He chooses freely his reaction. Erasmus illustrates this with three parables: The first parable is about how different types of soil react to rain: Cultivated soil absorbs the rain and produces good fruit. Uncultivated soil absorbs the rain and produces thorns and thistles. The second parable is about how different types of material react to sunshine: When the sun shines it melts the wax but hardens the mud. The third parable is about a father or master who says to his son or slave that he destroyed him, because he did not punish him immediately when the son or slave

¹⁷ This and the following quotations from Erasmus, *De libero arbitrio* is from Ernst F. Winter, *Erasmus and Luther. Discourse on Free Will*, New York: The Continuum Publishing Company 2002. This translation uses a different division of the text than the standard edition. I therefore refer to the section numbers in the translation (Winter, section 30): *Quoniam autem absurdum videtur, ut deus, qui non solum iustus est, verum etiam bonus, indurasse dicatur cor hominis, ut per illius malitiam suam illustraret potentiam, Origenes libro περὶ ἀρχῶν tertio sic explicat nodum, ut fateatur occasionem indurationis datam a deo, culpam tamen in Pharaonem reiciat, qui sua militia factus sit obstinatio per haec, per quae debebat ad paenitentiam adduci.* The Latin text with a German translation of Erasmus' treatises is available in *Erasmus von Rotterdam. Ausgewählte Schriften*, Bd. 4, Winfried Lesowsky (introduction and translation), Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1969.

deviated from the right way. The first two parables intend to show that human beings react differently to the same conditions. It is therefore not God that hardens Pharaoh's heart and makes him unfree, but it is Pharaoh's reaction to the condition given by God which makes him unfree. The same is of course the case with all other human beings. The third parable legitimates that punishment is used at all. If fathers, masters, or God avoid punishing out of their love for sons and slaves, this will worsen the condition of humans. Erasmus reproduces Origen's argument precisely and he uses the same three parables in exactly the same sequence and with the same meaning as Origen. However, Erasmus' text is shorter than Origen's.

In *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,3, Erasmus references *De princ.* 3.1,12–13. The theme is the same as in *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,2: why does God not immediately correct human beings who deviate from God's will, but lets them advance in obstinacy? The answer is that it is necessary for humans to find the right way themselves. God would prevent them from this if he corrected them too quickly. To fail is also part of human freedom and progress. Erasmus' reception of Origen is also evident in this paragraph. This can for example be seen from his use of biblical texts. Erasmus refers to Jes. 63:17; Ps. 89:33; and Jer. 20:7, while Origen refers to Jes. 63:17–18; Jer. 20:7; Susanna 42; Wisd. 16:18; Luk. 14:11; 18:14; and 10:21. There is thus a clear, but not a full, overlap between the biblical quotations used by Origen and by Erasmus. Furthermore, Erasmus mentions that Jerome (*Comm. in Esaiam* 17.43) interprets Jes. 63:17–18 in the same way as Origen. Thus, Erasmus explicitly states that he uses Origen and Jerome's reception of Origen. It is important for Erasmus also to be in agreement with Jerome, because Erasmus considers Jerome to be one of the most important figures among the Fathers. It does not seem to be a problem for Erasmus, that Jerome became a harsh critic of Origen. The direct reception of Origen in *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,3 is also clear from Erasmus' use of Jer. 20:7 which reads:

Thou hast deceived me, O Lord, and I am deceived: thou hast been stronger than I, and thou hast prevailed.¹⁸

In accordance with what I have already mentioned, Erasmus interprets this as meaning that God did not immediately call the sinner back from

¹⁸ *Seduxisti me, domine, et seductus sum, fortior me fuisti et invaluablei.*

error or sin. Further, he interprets this quotation from Jeremiah, using Origen's image from *De princ.* 3.1,13 of a surgeon who avoids letting a wound heal too quickly but keeps the wound open to drain it. A too quick healing would leave the inflammation in the body.¹⁹ Erasmus follows Origen closely and openly.

In *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,4, Erasmus explains how God turns Pharaoh's evil deeds into something good for his people. Erasmus' point of view is that human beings' free will is not overruled by God when he uses human decisions to reach other and better goals than those planned and decided by human beings. He concludes like this:

Just as he guides the intentions of the villains to benefit the pious, so the intentions of the latter miss their goal if God's grace does not assist them. This is what Paul means when he says: "So then there is question not of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God showing mercy" (Romans 9,16). God's mercy recedes our will, accompanies it, and gives it fruitfulness. Nevertheless it remains that we wish, run and attain, except that all this we must ascribe to God, to whom we belong with everything we are.²⁰

In this paragraph, Erasmus quotes Rom. 9:16. In *De princ.* 3.1,18–19, Origen also quotes Rom. 9:16 in the context of the story of the Pharaoh. He writes:

Now the objectors say: If it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that hath mercy, then salvation does not come from what lies in our power but from the constitution we

¹⁹ Cf. Origen, *Comm. in Rom.* 7.16, ed. C.P. Hammond Bammel, *Der Römerbriefskommentar des Origenes. Kritische Ausgabe der Übersetzung Rufins, Buch 7–10*, Verlag Herder, Freiburg 1998.

²⁰ Winter, section 32: *Quemadmodum igitur malorum conatus vertit in bonum piorum, ita bonorum conatus non assequuntur, quod expetunt, nisi adiuti gratuito dei favore. Nimirum hoc est, quod subicit Paulus: "Igitur non volentis neque currentis, sed miserentis est dei". Praevenit dei misericordia voluntatem nostrum, comitatur eandem in conando, dat felicem eventum. Et tamen interim volumus, currimus, assequimur, sic tamen, ut hoc ipsum, quod nostrum est, ascribamus deo, cuius sumus toti.*

have received from him who constituted us what we are or from the will of him who has mercy when he pleases.²¹

Origen's answer to this objection is the same as Erasmus': Human beings' free will works together with the power of God. Without the power and help of God, human beings cannot do what they will. Origen adds two images: the farmer and the captain of a ship. Their expertise leads to a good result of their work, but without God's goodness and help they could not reach their goal. The farmer cannot make the crops grow without God sending rain, sunlight etc., and the captain of a ship cannot make the ship sail without God sending wind. Erasmus does not use these images, and he does not refer directly to Origen. He also connects the Pauline quote closer to the Pharaoh story than Origen does, but their conclusion is the same: God gives the power which helps human beings act positively and freely.

The Second Example: Esau and Jacob

In *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,11–12, Erasmus reuses Origen's *De princ.* 3.1,22. In this paragraph, Erasmus comments on the second Old Testament story that seems to contradict the idea of human beings' free will and free choice. This is the story from Gen. 25:3 and Mal. 1:2 about Esau and Jacob. According to Mal. 1:2, God says that he loved Jacob and hated Esau. Erasmus includes both Old Testament texts in his argument, while Origen only mentions Mal. 1:2–3. Origen mentions only briefly Esau and Jacob in *De princ.* 3.1,22, because he refers to *De princ.* 2.9,7 where he wrote about the soul. His viewpoint in *De princ.* 2.9,7 is that God hated Esau and loved Jacob because of what they did before they were born into this world. In Origen's case, this is an argument for his idea about the so-called pre-existence of the souls.²²

Erasmus (3.a,11–12) writes a longer text including two interpretations: a) God's hate toward Esau is only temporary and not eternal. b) Following Paul (Rom. 9:13), he interprets Esau and Jacob as images of

²¹ *De princ.* 3.1,18: οἱ γὰρ ἐπιλαμβανόμενοι φασιν· εἰ μὴ τοῦ θέλοντος μηδὲ τοῦ τρέχοντος, ἀλλὰ τοῦ ἐλεούντος εοῦ', οὐκ ἐκ τοῦ ἐφ' ἡμῖν τὸ σώζεσθαι, ἀλλ' ἐκ κατασκευῆς τῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ τοιοῦσδε κατασκευάσαντος γεγεννημένης ἢ ἐκ προαιρέσεως τοῦ ὅτε βούλεται ἐλεοῦντος.

²² Peter Martens, "Origen's Doctrine of Pre-Existence and the Opening Chapters of Genesis", *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 16 (2013), 516–549.

Jews and Christians. He underlines that the Christians were included because of their belief in Christ, and the Jews were excluded because of their unbelief. Both were responsible for their own situation, which could be changed. In this paragraph, Erasmus follows Paul closer than Origen.

Third Example: The Potter and the Clay

Erasmus uses the image of the potter and the clay in *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,13–14, and Origen uses it in *De princ.* 3.1,21. It is thus clear that Erasmus also reuses Origen in this part of his treatise about the free will.

We find the metaphor of the potter and the clay in Jer. 18:6 and Rom. 9:18–23. Thus, we also have a clear example of internal reception in the Bible. In Jeremiah 18:6, God asks whether he can do to Israel what the potter does to the clay, and he concludes that he can: Israel is like clay in God's hands. In Rom. 9:18–23, which is part of the long pericope on the relation between the Jews and the heathens, Paul argues that God shows mercy towards whom he wills and hardens whom he wills. Paul expects that this will lead to the objection that God then cannot blame anybody since he himself decides their destiny. To answer this objection Paul refers to Jer. 18:6 about the clay and the potter and concludes that what is formed is not allowed to ask the one who formed it about the reason why he formed it as he did. Paul makes clear that God shows mercy towards whom he wills and hardens whom he wills (Rom. 9:18). But he also suggests in Rom. 9: 22–23 that this has a pedagogical aim: God acts as he does to show patience with those under his wrath and glory to those under his mercy. Using this passage from Rom. in *De princ.* 3.1,21, Origen refers to his adversaries' (Gnostics / Marcionites) point of view:

Now someone will say, if, just as the potter from the same lump makes some vessels for honour and some for dishonour, so God makes some creatures for salvation and some for destruction. The salvation or destruction does not rest with us nor are we possessed of free will.²³

²³ ἐρεῖ γὰρ τις· εἰ ὡς ὁ κεραμεὺς ἐκ τοῦ αὐτοῦ φυράματος ποιεῖ ἅ μὲν εἰς τιμὴν ἅ δὲ εἰς ἀτιμίαν σκεύη, οὕτως ὁ θεὸς ἅ μὲν εἰς σωτηρίαν ἅ δὲ εἰς ἀπώλειαν, οὐ παρ' ἡμᾶς τὸ σώζεσθαι ἢ ἀπόλλυσθαι γίνεται, οὐδέ ἐσμεν αὐτεξούσιοι.

Origen answers that if this were true, God would contradict himself. He points to several exhortations to conversion and improved behavior which means that it is possible for human beings to change. When God creates some to honor and others to dishonor it is, according to Origen, not because of his foreknowledge of what they will do in this life, but because of what they already did in a previous existence. Again, Origen's argument is based on his idea about the preexistence of the souls. Further, God's wrath is, according to Origen, not eternal, but will be changed in the end after a process of education where Logos cooperates with those who are temporarily under God's wrath. In *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,13, Erasmus writes:

In both quotations the prophets rebuke the people murmuring against the Lord, while afflicted for their own betterment, just as Paul rejects their godless talk by exclaiming, "O man who art thou to reply to God?" (Romans 9,20). In this case we are obliged to submit to God, like moist clay to the potter's hands. Truly, our free will is thereby not completely cancelled out, because it is not impossible for our will to work together with the divine will for our eternal salvation. Thus follows in Jeremiah soon the exhortation to do penance. We have already quoted this passage. It would be a useless exhortation if everything happened of necessity.²⁴

According to Erasmus, Paul does not totally reject free will in Rom. 9:19–23 which follows from the exhortation to conversion in Jer. 18:8. He thus argues along the same lines as Origen, and he uses the same biblical texts to do so. Erasmus obviously relies on Origen. However, Erasmus does not buy into Origen's argument of the idea of the pre-existence of souls.

²⁴ Winter, section 39: *Uterque locus prophetae obiurgat populum obmurmurantem domino, quod affigeretur ad emendationem. Horum impias voces retundit propheta, quemadmodum Paulus retudit hanc impiam responsionem: "O homo, tu qui es?" In his autem non aliter debemus submittere deo, quam figuli minibus obtemperatutum udum. Verum hos non adimit in totum liberum arbitrium nec excludit voluntatem nostrum voluntati divinae cooperantem ad salutem aeternam. Etenim apud Hieremiam mox sequitur cohortatio ad penitentiam, quem locum ante retulimus. Ea frustra fit, si ex necessitate fiunt omnia.*

Fourth Example: The Heart of Stone, Ez. 11:19–20

Ez. 11:19 is a divine promise to give the people a new and undivided heart of flesh in exchange for their stone hearts. In *De princ.* 3.1,15, Origen quotes Ez. 11:19 and interprets it as saying that a teacher can educate the uneducated (stone heart) if the uneducated contacts the teacher asking to be educated:

We, however, shall reply that these words must be understood in the following manner. It is as when a man who suffers from ignorance and want of education and becomes conscious of his personal defects either from the exhortation of his teacher or from his own reflection, entrust himself to one whom he believes to be capable of leading him on to education and virtue. When he so entrusts himself, his instructor promises to take away his lack of education and to implant in him education, not as if it counted for nothing in regard to his being educated and escaping from his ignorance that he should have brought himself to be cured, but because the instructor promises to improve one who desires improvement. So the divine word promises to take away the wickedness which it calls a 'stony heart', from those who come to it, not if they are unwilling, but if they submit themselves to the physician of the sick; just as in the gospels the sick are found coming to the Saviour and asking to obtain healing and being healed.²⁵

²⁵ *De princ.* 3.1,15: Ταῦτα μὲν ἐρεῖ ὁ ἀπὸ τῶν ψιλῶν ῥητῶν τὸ ἐφ' ἡμῖν ἀναιρῶν. ἡμεῖς δὲ ἀποκρινόμεθα τούτων οὕτως ἀκούειν δεῖν λέγοντες ὅτι, ὥσπερ ὁ ἐν ἀμαθίᾳ καὶ ἀπαιδευσίᾳ τυγχάνων, αισθανόμενος τῶν ἰδίων κακῶν ἦτοι ἐκ προτροπῆς τοῦ διδάσκοντος ἢ ἄλλως ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ, ἐπιδίδωσιν ἑαυτὸν ᾧ νομίζει δύνασθαι αὐτὸν χειραγωγῆσαι ἐπὶ παιδευσιν καὶ ἀρετῇ, ἐπιδιδόντος δὲ τούτου ὁ παιδεύων ἐπαγγέλλεται ἐξελεῖν τὴν ἀπαιδευσίαν καὶ ἐνθήσειν παιδείαν, οὐχ ὡς οὐδενὸς ὄντος εἰς τὸ παιδευθῆναι καὶ φυγεῖν τὴν ἀπαιδευσίαν ἐπὶ τῷ ἑαυτὸν προσαγοχῶτι θεραπευθόμενον, ἀλλ' ὡς ἐπαγγελλόμενος βελτιώσιν τὸν βουλόμενον· οὕτως ὁ θεῖος λόγος ἐπαγγέλλεται τῶν προσιόντων τὴν κακίαν ἐξαιρεῖν, ἣν ὠνόμασε "λιθίνην καρδίαν", οὐχὶ ἐκείνων οὐ βουλομένων, ἀλλ' ἑαυτοὺς τῷ ἱατρῷ τῶν καμνόντων παρεσχηκότων· ὥσπερ ἐν τοῖς εὐαγγελίοις εὐρίσκονται οἱ κάμνοντες προσερχόμενοι τῷ σωτῆρι καὶ ἀξιούντες ἰάσεως τυχεῖν καὶ θεραπευόμενοι.

To underline the free decision of the one who seeks education, Origen puts most weight on the action of the one who turns to the teacher. The teacher cannot educate unless the pupil willingly turns to the teacher. As soon as one turns to the teacher the teacher is ready to educate.

In *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,16–17, Erasmus refers directly to Origen’s interpretation of Ez. 11:19–20 in *De princ.* 3.1,15. Erasmus uses the same example as Origen does: the grammar teacher. The grammar teacher (God) can remove the barbarian tongue from the pupil (the sinner) and insert a Roman tongue, says Erasmus. The pupil must be diligent, and the teacher must do his work. Erasmus underlines that both must contribute to the “exchange of tongue”. It is common to both Origen and Erasmus to understand salvation as education. They are both great educators and they both consider spiritual education to be central to Christianity.²⁶

Thus, we also at this point have a direct reception of Origen in Erasmus. It is furthermore important to notice that Paul does not refer to Ez. 11:19–20 in Rom. 9–11. This means that we here have a direct line of reception from Erasmus back to Origen. Erasmus follows Origen even when Origen does not include Paul.

Erasmus’ conclusion to this long passage in *De libero arbitrio* 3.a,1–17 is found in paragraph 3.a,17:

If man could effect nothing, why do they admonish us to work?
If man can effect something, why say that God alone works all things in all? By utilizing and distorting one set of passages, man appears impotent. By emphasizing in partiality the other set, man will be doing everything. Now, if man could do nothing, there would be no room for merit and guilt; consequently also none for punishment and reward. If on the other hand man were to do all, there would be no room for grace, which is very often mentioned and emphasized by Paul. The Holy Spirit can not contradict himself. The canonical books of Holy Scripture originated under his

²⁶ Vrangbæk, “Erasmus and the Will”, 134–136.

inspiration. Their inviolable sublimity is acknowledged and affirmed by both parties in the dispute. Therefore one must find an interpretation which resolves this seeming contradiction.²⁷

Erasmus argues for a solution to the question whether human beings have a free will and free choice or not by appealing to a middle way between the two extremes. It is the concept of synergy which Erasmus clearly outlines in his conclusion. In this he rightly believes to be in line with Origen's point of view.

Conclusion

What can we then conclude about Erasmus' reception and reuse of Origen's ideas about human beings' freedom and free will? We can conclude that Erasmus reuses longer arguments from Origen in a very direct way. This is possible for Erasmus because he shares very basic theological convictions with Origen. Theologically they share the belief that human beings' situation in this world is not determined by God. God has not determined some to salvation and others to damnation. Erasmus and Origen develop their theologies in different historical contexts, but they are both confronted with a strong theological determinism which they consider to be a threat to their understanding of human beings and their salvation. They both believe that salvation is a process to which both God and human beings contribute. Human beings' free will and God's grace cooperate. Human beings can contribute to this process because they are created in the image of God – Christ – and thus participate in Logos' rationality. This capacity is not totally lost because of sin. Further, they share the belief that salvation is a pedagogical and educational process which must be inspired by the Bible. Thus, they have a common understanding of the Bible and its use. When Erasmus reads Origen, he immediately recognizes a familiarity in their theologies. This is why he can reuse Origen very directly.

²⁷ Winter, section 41: *Si nihil operatur homo, cur dicit: "Operamini"? Si quid agit homo, cur dicit: "Deus operator omnia in omnibus"? Quorum altera, si quis ad suam causam urgeat, totum facit homo. Quid si nihil agit homo, nullus est locus meritis. Ubi non est locus meritis, ibi nec supplicii nec praemiis locus est. Si totum agit homo, non est locus gratiae, cuius mentionem toties inculcate Paulus. Non secum pugnat spiritus sanctus, cuius afflatus proditae sunt canonicae litera. Utraque pars amplectitur et agnoscit inviolabilem scripturae maiestatem. Sed interpretationem quaerenda, quae nodum explicet.*