
Exegetical Mysticism: Scripture, *Paideia*, and the Spiritual Senses

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A retrieval of the tradition of the spiritual senses—the idea that there is a spiritual apparatus of perception analogous to the five physical senses—has been a major part of Sarah Coakley’s theological project.¹ Coakley’s explorations of this tradition have opened up new avenues in contemporary theology. Many of her deepest preoccupations converge around this theme: her commitment to doctrinal *ressourcement* through a rereading of patristic sources; her emphasis on contemplative

1. See especially Sarah Coakley, “Gregory of Nyssa,” in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Paul L. Gavrilyuk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 36–55; idem, “The Resurrection and the ‘Spiritual Senses,’” in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 131–52; idem, “The Identity of the Risen Jesus,” in *Seeking the Identity of Jesus*, ed. Beverly Gaventa and Richard Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 301–19.

practice; her understanding of embodiment and of the role of the body in knowing; her concern to identify more fluid “feminine” modes of knowing not reducible to the logocentric discourse; and her interest in the epistemological problems identified in the tradition of analytic philosophy of religion. The patristic sources are fundamental to Coakley’s work in this area. In this paper I will explore the roots of the spiritual senses tradition in the writing of Origen of Alexandria, before making some suggestions about how Origen’s teaching might inform a contemporary retrieval of the spiritual senses.

There is substantive research on Origen’s teaching on the spiritual senses, building on the pioneering work of Karl Rahner.² One of the most significant recent studies appears in the volume on the spiritual senses co-edited by Sarah Coakley.³ Origen plays an important role in Coakley’s own reflections on the spiritual senses, even though it is Gregory of Nyssa whom Coakley regards as the exemplary representative of the spiritual senses tradition. In this chapter I will take a closer look at Origen’s teaching on the spiritual senses, and I will argue that his language about the spiritual senses is intimately linked to his understanding of the spiritual interpretation of scripture. I will try to demonstrate that, for Origen, scriptural exegesis is the main context in which the spiritual senses are developed. This will lead to some critical questions about whether Coakley has adopted Origen’s mystical outlook without preserving its connection to Origen’s commitment to the practice of biblical exegesis. If there is to be a contemporary retrieval of the Origenist tradition of the spiritual senses, then we will need more than an account of contemplative silence; we will need an account also of contemplative reading and of the mysticism of exegesis.

2. Karl Rahner, “The ‘Spiritual Senses’ according to Origen,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 16, trans. David Morland (New York: Seabury, 1979).

3. Mark J. McIntroy, “Origen of Alexandria,” in *The Spiritual Senses: Perceiving God in Western Christianity*, ed. Sarah Coakley and Paul L. Gavrilyuk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 20–35. For a broad account of the Origenist tradition, see also the monograph by the same author, *Balthasar on the Spiritual Senses: Perceiving Splendour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chapter 1.

Spiritual Senses and Scriptural Exegesis in Origen

Origen's commentary on the Song of Songs explores the rich sensual language of the Song, and argues that each of the five senses has a corresponding spiritual sense. When the divine Logos encounters believers, he "takes possession of their hearing, their sight, their touch, and their taste as well, and offers excellences from himself that match each single sense according to its natural capacity."⁴ Having caught a glimpse of Christ's glory, our eyes desire to see nothing else but him. Having heard his word of life, our ears desire to hear nothing else. Having handled the Word of life in our hands, we yearn to take hold of him and to touch him more than any other thing. "Because he tastes so sweet and so delightful, all other flavors will now seem harsh and bitter compared to him."⁵

Origen is not referring to a spiritual capacity that is activated in one moment, but about an extended process of growth. The senses need to be exercised and educated. They can be cultivated through practice. The perfect, Origen says, "have their senses trained." The spiritual senses "are acquired by training" so that the believer comes to apprehend spiritual realities "with more acute perception."⁶ The Christian life is an education in spiritual perception. As our desire for Christ grows, so our perception becomes ever more refined and more receptive to divine realities. "Only those who with their whole intention and with all their love hold the divine Logos in their heart will be able to perceive the odor of his fragrance and his sweetness."⁷

Considering such passages from Origen's commentary in their immediate contexts, it is possible to advance two hypotheses about the way the spiritual senses relate to the wider structures of Origen's thought. First, the cultivation of the spiritual senses belongs to *paideia*, the educative process by which Christ transforms the believer. Second, the spiritual senses are activated specifically in the interpretation of

4. Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.4; English translation in Origen, *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson, ACW 26 (New York: Newman, 1956).

5. Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 1.4.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, 2.10.

scripture, which is itself the principal instrument of Christ's *paideia*. Let me try to substantiate both these hypotheses.

In the passages already quoted, Origen does not only describe the spiritual senses and their cultivation, he also explains how the spiritual senses operate. He states that a reader will not be able to understand the commentary that is before them unless their senses have been trained. The "sensual man," Origen says, will not be able to "perceive and understand" when he hears "these matters so interpreted."⁸ Because his senses are dull, he will judge Origen's exegesis as "foolish and empty"; he will hear without hearing, and the sweet aroma of the Song of Songs will be for him an unpleasant odor, "the odor of death" as Origen says quoting St. Paul (2 Cor. 2:15-16). By contrast, those who bring to the commentary a "subtle spiritual sense" will embrace "this kind of interpretation" of the Song⁹—that is, the spiritual or anagogical interpretation that Origen is presenting.

It is not simply that Origen uses scriptural passages to explain the function of the spiritual senses. He connects spiritual senses with the practice of scriptural reading itself. It is as one reads and interprets scripture anagogically that one perceives Christ, the Logos, with the eyes and ears and nose and mouth and hands of the heart.

One of the most peculiar things about Origen's exegetical practice is the fact that the real subject-matter of his commentaries is so often the practice of exegesis itself. He writes commentaries about the process of writing a commentary. The spiritual realities that Origen finds in the scriptural writings turn out to be these writings themselves as instruments of divine *paideia*. This is because spiritual exegesis is, for Origen, always about encountering the Logos who speaks in the text. When readers ascend anagogically through the text, they are brought into the presence of Christ the Teacher. The passage in which the bridegroom is said to come leaping on the mountains and bounding over the hills (Song 2:8)¹⁰ is taken by Origen to refer to Christ leaping toward humanity over the mountains and hills of the prophets and

8. *Ibid.*, 1.4.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Old Testament references and quotations are from the Septuagint (NETS edition).

apostles.¹¹ And Origen explains this interpretation by referring to the experience of scriptural reading:

Now every soul . . . if at any time it is in the thick of an argument about some passage—and everyone knows from his experience how when one gets into a tight corner like this, one gets shut up in the straits of propositions and enquiries—if at any time some riddles or obscure sayings of the Law or the Prophets hem in the soul, if then she [this soul] should chance to perceive Him [the Word] to be present, and from afar should catch the sound of His voice, immediately she is uplifted. And, when he has begun more and more to draw near to her senses and to illuminate the things that are obscure, then she sees him “leaping over the mountains and the hills”; that is to say, then he suggests to her interpretations of a high and lofty sort, so that this soul can rightly say: “Behold, he comes leaping upon the mountains, skipping over the hills.”¹²

What Origen describes here is simply the experience of a patient, contemplative reading of the Bible. Laboring over a difficult passage, the reader suddenly catches a glimpse of the divine Logos and “perceives him to be present” in the text. As Christ “draws near to [the] senses” he “illuminates the things that are obscure,” so that the soul sees him clearly. He “leaps” over the text toward the expectant soul.

For Origen, then, scriptural exegesis is not a convenient method for uncovering certain facts about Christ. The practice of exegesis is itself the means by which spiritual transformation, including the refinement of the spiritual senses, takes place. What the Bible turns out to be *about* is Bible-reading—as long as one remembers that “Bible-reading” for Origen refers to the whole economy in which the divine Logos communicates itself and imparts itself to the believer, drawing the believer into an unceasing process of growth and transformation.

Because the subject-matter of scripture is divine *paideia*, and because scripture is the instrument of that *paideia*, Origen finds scripture filled with references to exegetical practice. The planks of Noah’s ark refer analogically to the “divine library” of the prophets and apostles; and the soul should likewise become a library containing these writings.¹³

11. Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs* 3.11.

12. *Ibid.*

The lamb eaten by the Israelites is analogically related not, as one might expect, to Christ's sacrifice but to Christ's teaching through scripture. Commenting on the command that the Israelites were to "eat the meat this night, roasted in fire" (Exod. 12:8), Origen says that the lamb is the text of scripture: "If the lamb is Christ and Christ is the Logos, what is the flesh of the divine words if not the divine scriptures?"¹⁴ And the roasting with fire refers to the work of the Holy Spirit who uses the text of scripture to induct the reader into spiritual realities: "For the words are changed by such fire."¹⁵

The same tendency to interpret scripture as a book *about* scriptural reading is very pronounced in Origen's Song of Songs commentary. When the bridegroom is portrayed as peering through the lattice (Song 2:9), Origen comments that the lattice represents the text of scripture. The sensitive reader perceives Christ himself peering through the letters of the text, and calling the reader to come away with him. Thus the reader's "spiritual senses" are linked to what is usually called the figural or "spiritual sense" of the text. Not all readers can perceive Christ in scripture. It takes a reader whose senses have been properly trained and educated. Origen writes: "For the Word of God . . . does not appear as set in public places where everyone can see. . . . Rather he is found when he is sought for, and found, as we said, not in the open courtyard but covered over and as it were hiding behind the wall."¹⁶

Origen makes much of the "wound of love" referred to in the Septuagint version of Song 2:5. In one of his surviving homilies on the Song, he explains that it is scriptural interpretation that inflicts this wound on the soul of the hearer. "How beautiful, how fitting it is to receive a wound from Love! . . . If anyone is wounded by this homily, if any is wounded by the teaching of the divine scripture," then that person has shared the experience of the disciples on the road to Emmaus [Luke 24:32], who said, "Were not our hearts burning within

13. Origen, *Homilies on Exodus 2*; English translation in Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, FC 71 (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1981).

14. Origen, *Peri Pascha 26*; English translation in Origen, *Treatise on the Passover and Dialogue of Origen with Heraclides*, trans. Robert J. Daly, ACW 54 (New York: Paulist, 1992).

15. Origen, *Peri Pascha 27*.

16. Origen, *Commentary on the Song of Songs 3.13*.

us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?”¹⁷

The close connection between exegesis and the spiritual senses also explains Origen’s warnings against the debasement of the spiritual senses. In a homily on Exodus, he suggests that “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Exod. 21:24) refers to the removal of false teachers from the church:

Let [the false teacher] also surrender an eye for an eye if he injured the eye of [another] soul, that is, if he disturbed its understanding. Let his own eye be removed by him who presides over the church, and let that turbulent and fierce intellect of him who produces a stumbling block be cut off. But also if he injured a tooth of the hearer with which he had been accustomed, when receiving the food of the Word, to crush or grind it with his molars in order to transmit the subtle meaning from these words to the stomach of his soul; if that man damaged and tore out this tooth so that . . . the soul cannot receive the Word of God subtly and spiritually, let the tooth of that man who did not crush well and divide the foods of the scriptures be removed. Indeed, perhaps it is for this reason that it is said elsewhere about the Lord: You have broken the teeth of sinners [Ps. 3:8].¹⁸

Heterodox interpretation of scripture injures the spiritual eye so that it cannot see and damages the spiritual tooth so that scripture can no longer be chewed and digested. Scriptural interpretation is what the spiritual senses are *for*. Heresy dulls or distorts the senses so that believers can no longer properly discern the presence of the Logos in scripture.

Elsewhere Origen uses sensory language to describe the difference between mature and immature believers. In a homily on Genesis, he tells a spiritually inept congregation that their own immaturity has placed limits on what the preacher is able to tell them:

And you, if you should not still be “a little child” and in need of “milk,” but should bring your “senses exercised” [Heb. 5:12-14] and should come more capable to an understanding of the Word of God after very much instruction has been set before you, there will also be a great feast for you.

17. Origen, *Homilies on the Song of Songs* 2.8; English translation in *The Song of Songs: Commentary and Homilies*, trans. R. P. Lawson.

18. Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* 10.4.

The vegetables of the weak will not be prepared for you as food, nor will you be nourished with milk by which “little children” are nourished, but the servant of the Word will make a great feast for you. He will speak to you the wisdom which is offered among the perfect. . . . He will reveal Christ to you.¹⁹

The feast of the Word, Origen continues, is “for those who know how to hear more perfectly, and bring their senses instructed and exercised for hearing the Word of God.”²⁰ Here spiritual purification is depicted as the cultivation of the senses for the sake of a rich spiritual interpretation of scripture.

Origen even suggests that the same Logos will taste different to each individual hearer of a homily. In a homily on the manna in the wilderness (Exodus 16), Origen remarks that we become capable of digesting the “solid food” of the Word only once we have been perfected through “long exercises.” He refers to the rabbinic tradition according to which the manna in the wilderness tasted like whatever each person desired.²¹ Manna “imparts the kind of taste to each mouth that each one wishes,” so that “if you receive the Word of God which is preached in the church with complete faith and devotion, that word will become whatever you desire.”²² The same scriptural passage can communicate different truths and different degrees of truth. The Logos who speaks in scripture is lovingly adapted to the individual need and capacity of each listener.

Origen’s extensive use of sensory language finds its place within the overarching structure of his conception of spiritual *paideia*. The refinement or debasement of the spiritual senses is a gauge of the soul’s level of purification through divine teaching. The perception of believers undergoes a continuing transformation as they come under

19. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 14.3; English translation in *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine.

20. Origen, *Homilies on Genesis* 14.3.

21. Cf. the Exodus midrashim on the manna: “It had all sorts of flavors, the Israelites tasting in it each what they desired” (Exodus Rabbah 25:3); “the manna descended with a taste varying according to the needs of each individual Israelite. The young men, eating it as bread, . . . the old, as wafers made with honey, . . . [while] to the babes it tasted like the milk from their mothers’ breasts” (Exodus Rabbah 5:9).

22. Origen, *Homilies on Exodus* 7.8.