COLLECTANEA THEOLOGICA

**91 (2021) nr 4, 224–227**
czasopisma.uksw.edu.pl/index.php/ct
DOI http://doi.org/10.21697/ct.2021.91.4.11

**Mark Randall James, *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and the Logic of Interpretation* (Studies in Systematic Theology 24), Brill: Leiden–Boston 2020, pp. 339.**

In the context of the postmodern multiplicity of approaches to the biblical text, an urgent theological task is to return to past masters of theological interpretation, not only as resources for our thinking but as teachers and trainers of our practice. Returning to Scripture must include, as M.R. James argues, returning to pre-modern exemplars of scriptural interpretation (cf. p. 1).

Yet what seems to be one of the most difficult problems is a lingering arbitrariness that afflicts modern reading and interpretation of Scripture. Sometimes, however, various post-modern theories have intensified anxiety about interpretive arbitrariness by giving the impression that arbitrariness is an inexorable feature of all interpretation. As a consequence, affirms M.R. James, today's theologians not only dispute what this or that text means; we also hear them asking whether texts have any determinate meaning at all (p. 2).

In a certain way, it was a reaction to the domination of the historical-critical method in biblical exegesis. Historical biblical scholars have frequently represented their own critical methods as the only legitimate way to determine the meaning of the scriptural texts. Theological interpreters argue that this claim lacks warrant, and hence that it arbitrarily forecloses the possibility of reading Scripture in ways that take seriously the traditional theological concerns of religious readers (p. 2). Hence, we perceive the arbitrary dogmatism of historical criticism on the one hand and the arbitrary relativism of post-modernity on the other (p. 3).

M.R. James concludes his evaluation of the present situation: If theological interpreters are right to worry that historical critical scholarship excludes certain traditional ways of reading without reason, it is less clear that they have succeeded in proposing ways of reading that do not suffer from their own forms of arbitrariness. One question to ask in returning to past masters of theological interpretation is whether they have something to teach us about how to correct our contemporary tendency towards arbitrariness (p. 8).

As an answer to this situation, in his book *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and the Logic of Interpretation* M.R. James suggests the return to Origen as a compelling model of non-arbitrary interpretation of Scripture. In certain respects, he is an obvious choice as a teacher of theological interpretation. He is the father of Christian Biblical scholarship and the first to write what we might want to call a systematic theology (p. 8). Not without reason, M.R. James reminds us that over and over again in the history of the Church, saints and scholars have drawn on Origen to renew scriptural interpretation in their own time (p. 8).

The actuality of Origen's reading of the Bible is connected with the fact that his problems are also reminiscent of our own. The Church in his day was in the midst of a severe hermeneutic crisis provoked by the challenges of Marcion and various gnostic groups to the church's received ways of reading Scripture. Origen devoted his life to teaching his own communities how to return to Scriptures they found increasingly alien (p. 9).

The distrustful attitude of modern exegetes and theologians seems to be connected with supposed arbitrary interpretation. M.R. James suggests that if Origen appears arbitrary to modern readers, then, this has at least two possible explanations. First, Origen's exegesis is in fact arbitrary. Second, those to whom he appears arbitrary have not yet imagined the possible rule governing his exegesis (p. 11).

In his book, the Author seeks an answer to the second point: "As the title of this book indicates, I argue that the notion of *learning language* provides a powerful vantage point from which to grasp the logic of Origen's exegetical procedures. The Origen that emerges is one whose dynamic thought and spiritual life, as de Lubac saw, cannot be separated from exegesis in the church. But if Origen is a 'man of the church,' he sees the church not so much as a community committed to a particular orthodoxy as a school of learners, a community of inquiry in pursuit of wisdom. Origen is indeed a bold and speculative philosopher, just as de Faye recognized. But his philosophical thought operates *through* his exegesis rather than arising independently of it" (pp. 17–18).

In his study, M.R. James focuses on a single body of texts, twenty-nine recently discovered homilies of Origen on the Psalms.[3] The primary task of his work is to describe basic rules of reasoning which are operative in Origen's exegetical procedures in his *Homilies on the Psalms* and to display

[3] L. Perrone (ed.), with M. Molin Pradel, E. Prinzivalli, and A. Cacciari, *Die neue Psalmenhomilien. Eine kritische Edition des Codex monacensis Graecus 314*, (Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2015).

their non-arbitrariness. To do so, he adopts a method of logical inquiry developed by the scriptural pragmatist philosopher Peter Ochs. M.R. James affirms that the method he applies in interpreting Origen is a version of the descriptive logic that Ochs uses in his own analysis of contemporary post-critical Jewish and Christian interpreters of Scripture (p. 19). But at the same time, the Author seeks a mode of inquiry in Origen that will enable modern readers to reclaim or newly imagine ways of thinking that have been lost. He does so by seeking the operative logic underlying Origen's writings (p. 20).

According to M.R. James, the goal of Origen's exegesis is not so much understanding the meaning of particular texts as it is the acquisition of *linguistic competence*. This task has a definite logical character. It requires the exegete to reason from a finite set of actual utterances (the written texts of Scripture) to an infinite set of possible utterances (the language of Scripture).

In the first chapter of his book, "Origen and Stoic Logic" (pp. 27–72), the Author affirms that Stoic philosophy of language provides the best introduction to Origen's philosophical assumptions about language. Origen follows the Stoa in arguing that the discipline of *logic* is necessary for interpreting the words of the wise; in viewing meaning as a nonarbitrary relation between words and things; and in seeking the many ways that names may be appropriate to what they designate. At the same time, logic, meaning, and naming assume a distinctly Christian feature in Origen's philosophy of language, influenced by the particular concept of wisdom he finds in the Bible.

The second chapter, bearing the title "From *Lexis* to *Logos*" (pp. 73–112), contains a discussion with a view of Origen's exegesis as a movement from one kind of meaning to another, namely from the literal to the spiritual senses. According to M.R. James, we should frame it instead as a pedagogical increase in capacities from *lexis* to *logos*, from mastering the words of Scripture to learning to use them rationally in conformity with the divine Logos.

The following two chapters, namely, "The Pragmatics of Scriptural Utterances" (pp. 113–152) and "The Grammar of Scriptural Language" (pp. 154–208) form the main corpus of the book. M.R. James demonstrates here how Origen's exegesis proceeds from the performative and logical examination of the usage of particular sentences to the formulation of grammatical rules governing this usage. In the next chapter, "The Deification of Discourse" (pp. 209–243), the Author draws theological conclusions from his former analyses, especially in the context of incarnation and deification.

For Origen, the divine Logos became human so that human rationality might be deified.

The last chapter, "Origenism as Pragmatism: A Sketch of a Sapiential Hermeneutic" (pp. 244–294), goes beyond analyses of Origen's exegesis and thought towards a larger formulation of sapiential theology of Scripture. Thus, the Author returns to questions posed in the introduction and to the context of the modern crisis affecting biblical interpretation. For Christians, he states, wisdom is not merely a regulative ideal. Rather, Wisdom is actual as the second person of the Trinity, the Logos who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. A sapiential theology of Scripture would further determine the nature of wisdom in light of its identity with Jesus Christ.

Therefore, I am convinced that the book of M.R. James constitutes a new and fresh insight in the exegesis and theology of Origen and at the same time formulates a new method of research, which is very useful for both biblical and patristic scholars. Yet, the reception of M.R. James's work finds at least two obstacles. First, his approach to Origen's exegesis (contrary to the classic work *Origène* by Henri Crouzel) is based on the modern Anglo-Saxon philosophy of language. Second, M.R. James creates new and complex terminology to describe the linguistic logic underlying Origen's exegesis, which requires a special interpretative effort not only to understand Origen but also to understand M.R. James. Nevertheless, I hope that this monograph will inspire young researchers to apply this method to the analysis of other Origen's works and to adopt new ways of approaching the symbolical-allegorical interpretative tradition in the Church.

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