

“On first principles”: Exploring the theological contribution of Origen of Alexandria and its relevance to African Christianity today

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ABSTRACT

African Church Fathers played a significant role in the formation, promotion, and preservation of Christian theology. The Church Fathers helped shape Christian doctrines and dogmas throughout the centuries. Among the Fathers of the Church, Origen of Alexandria played an important role in the development of Christian theology. This study is qualitative that adopts a historical-analytical approach to explore the theological contribution of Origen, *On First Principles*, and its implication to African Christianity. From a historical viewpoint, the study examines Origen's theology *On First Principles*, which provides contemporary African Christianity with fundamental tools in understanding and integrating biblical truths. Origen was the first theologian to systematize Christian doctrine. He is a theologian of the highest rank, whose role in developing Christian doctrine and theology is evident throughout history. However, he is often negatively remembered, and his mistakes pronounced; this attitude ought to change. There is an effort by African theologians and their sympathizers to develop a theology that is truly African, because many see Christianity as foreign, and the theology the church upholds is considered a western ideology. But as African theologians search for contextual theology, the tremendous influence of Origen could offer contemporary African scholars the right tool for revitalization. Therefore, historians and churchmen ought to conscientize the theological involvement of the African Church Father, Origen in the quest to make Christianity genuinely African. Indeed, a reconsideration of this African hero and his theological contribution could provide contemporary African Christianity with theological relevance in the quest for modern African Christianity.

KEYWORDS

African Christianity; Origen of Alexandria; *On First Principles*; Theological Contribution

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INTRODUCTION

So much has been written about the growth and the developmental role of African Christianity. However, on many occasions, the roles played by African Church Fathers like Origen have not been explored nor given their due place; instead, they are evaluated and judged on their failures and weaknesses. Many of these early African theologians are only remembered as heretics with little evaluation and consideration of the tremendous and numerous contributions they made in preserving and developing Christian theology for the church. Similarly, some African theologians have questioned the significance of modern Christian theology to the African mind. Recently, there has been a clamor among African theologians to demystify many aspects of Christian theology.

Meanwhile, the clarion call for theology with an African flavor tends to demonstrate the ignorance of many on the life and work of some early African Church Fathers. Indeed, the life and faith of these African Fathers have impacted and shape global Christian theology throughout the ages. Notably, many Africans contributed to the development and the formation of Christian doctrine throughout the centuries.¹ Christopher A. Hall avers, any theological consensus began with the rejection of the classical Christian tradition.²

¹ Albert Pero and Ambrose Moyo, *Theology and the Black Experience: The Lutheran Heritage Interpreted by African and African-American Theologians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1988), 77.

² Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 19.

Accordingly, Staff wrote, “These bishops, priests, deacons, and pious lay members of the ancient Christian church contributed intellectually and pastorally to the development of both the East and Western Christian traditions (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant).”³

By implication, the study of the lives of these patristic African heroes, their mistakes, their successes all contributed to shaping Christian theology throughout history. Rather than emphasizing the errors of the early Church Fathers, African theologians must begin to evaluate the significant role played by these heroes. There is the need to examine the spirit of preserving these African Fathers and their love for the truth so that Christian theology will be made relevant to the African mind rather than developing a theology of self-identification. Therefore, it is necessary to study the contribution of the Church Fathers despite their mistakes and failures; such help shapes modern theology.

Meanwhile, of all the early African Church Fathers, this paper examines the life and work of Origen, a native of Alexandria. The article evaluates one aspect of Origen’s work, *On First Principles*. He was among the early Church Fathers, whose theological relevance and contribution to shaped Christian theology. in Africa, there is the proliferation of different kinds of theology to meet the needs of the African people. therefore, in a time where numerous theologies are thriving, African theologians need to revert to the theology of classical times and the legacies of the Church Fathers.

THE LIFE OF ORIGEN

For many theologians and scholars of the early Christian centuries, the life and work of Origen of Alexandria are role models.⁴ For instance, the Alexandrian interpretive method of the fourth century followed the footsteps of Origen. Reputable theologians like Athanasius, Eusebius, Apollinaris, the Cappadocian Fathers, and Cyril of Alexandria, all wrote and followed the allegorical interpretative spirit of Origen’s anagogical dynamics.⁵ Indeed, one cannot but cherish the influence of the early Church Fathers. Erasmus noted that the life of these early church Fathers was focused on sacred Scripture and sacred tradition, noting that Origen was a saint who is worthy of emulation.⁶

Origen was probably born in 185 AD to a devout Christian parent and lived for about sixty-nine years. He led a vibrant Christian life characterized by fasting, abstinence from wine, and walked barefooted.⁷ His passion for the Christian faith led to the decision to castrate himself a decision he later regretted.⁸ In his lifetime, Origen pursued intellectual life, and at seventeen, he became the headmaster of the Christian Catechetical School at Alexandria.⁹ Origen’s father died a martyr, and Origen also sought a martyr’s death but was prevented by his mother. However, in 250 AD, the Roman Emperor Decius accused Christians of a recent plague, which led to the persecution of the church and the arrest of many Christians, including Origen.

He was tortured for two years with the instruction to renounce his faith, something Origen never did. However, shortly after his release from prison, he died around 254 AD due to his suffering.¹⁰

Meanwhile, the person of Origen is known mainly through his thought and work. He is described as an exegete, scholar, and saint who taught classical disciplines like grammar, Greek literature, and philosophy.¹¹ Origen interpreted the Scripture with great caution rather than authoritatively. Jerome, the learned Church Father, described Origen as “The greatest teacher of the church after the apostles.”¹²

³ Urban Faith Staff, “The Faith of Our Fathers: Reclaiming the North African Church Fathers,” *Urban Faith*, last modified February 13, 2014, accessed March 29, 2019, <https://urbanfaith.com/2014/02/the-faith-of-our-fathers-reclaiming-the-north-african-church-fathers.html/>.

⁴ James William McClendon, *Systematic Theology*, vol. Vol. 2 (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1986), 252.

⁵ Bruce M. Metzger and Michael David Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 312.

⁶ Desiderius Erasmus, *Erasmus’s Life of Origen* (CUA Press, 2016), xi.

⁷ Geza Vermes and Penguin Books LTD, *Christian Beginnings: From Nazareth to Nicaea* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2013), 214.

⁸ Mayeul de Dreuille, *Seeking the Absolute Love: The Founders of Christian Monasticism* (New York: Gracewing Publishing, 1999), 9.

⁹ Norman K. Whitcomb, *Myopic Man: Can a United Church Prevent the Collapse of the American Empire?* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2010), 102.

¹⁰ Michael D. Robinson, *Christianity: A Brief History* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019).

¹¹ Metzger and Coogan, *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, 312.

¹² George D. Chryssides, Margaret Wilkins, and Margaret Z. Wilkins, eds., *A Reader in New Religious Movements: Readings in the Study of New Religious Movements* (London: A&C Black, 2006), 65.

John Anthony McGuckin avers that Jerome described Origen as the most critical thinker since the generations of the apostles.¹³ Importantly, Origen is a person who labored with increasing success, working almost day and night with the crowd, including heretics, and non-Christians as well as members of the church who attended his lectures or came to him in private.¹⁴

In Origen's environment, Gnosticism flourished, and Origen was the first genuinely philosophical thinker to turn his hand not only to a refutation of Gnosticism but to offer an alternative Christian system that was more rigorous and philosophically respectable than the mythological speculations of the various sects.¹⁵

From the above assertions, Origen can be described as a theologian who set the pace for other church Fathers after him on the way to confront and refute the heresies that came after. All contribution in the later history of the church to protect and preserve the unity and purity of the church has its foundations on Origen of Alexandria.

Origen's life is unique among the Church Fathers because of some significant interval in the middle of it. "He began his life, lived his formative years, and built a reputation as a Christian scholar and teacher in the thriving intellectual center of Alexandria".¹⁶ As painted in the pages of history, the life of Origen is characterized by uprightness. He was a man who was seen as a figure not too familiar in church history because his character was nothing but good. He is known to be humble. In hostile criticism, Erasmus admires Origen's true humility.¹⁷ Christopher A. Beeley submits that Origen was a man of great humility and personal piety, which can be described as a giant teacher of the church, whose works are beneficial in the central and ongoing task of interpreting Scripture.¹⁸

In the world of intellectuals, Origen was an excellent one. As an exegete, he was a man who stood alone, towering above the Greek Fathers as Augustine was above the Latins. Origen was a diocesan priest who was ordained in Palestine by the local bishops to preach officially in the name of the church.¹⁹ He rubbed shoulders with some of the greatest intellectuals of his day while he was in Alexandria.²⁰ These intellectuals include philosophers, grammarians, physicians, mathematicians, poets, library and textual scholars, geographers, and others since Alexandria was the center of learning that attracted scholars to either teach or learn.²¹ Amid these calibers of people, Origen was distinguished for his eloquence and learning, speaking conversationally and applying scriptural passages from both the Old and New Testaments to the lives of his listeners.

Furthermore, Origen learned the Hebrew language to work with the Scriptures²², which no other Christian theologian did in his days, and very few did after him in the patristic period. Erasmus also describes Origen as "a life-giving homiest, catechist, and apologist in the early church. He so impressed Erasmus that the prince of humanists adopted a reform program that placed the imitation of Christ as its center".²³ Origen received praise from reputable men like Augustine, Basil, and Gregory Nazianzen.

It is noteworthy that Origen was committed to preserving what the Church Fathers had laid down. "Origen is known as a person who exemplified the diversity and breadth of the early Christian movement in antiquity. His life reflects a Christian ancestry coupled with a consistent and deepening commitment to God".²⁴ By this assertion, Origen was high-class in spiritual intellectualism and exploratory in orthodoxy.

¹³ John Anthony McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), ix.

¹⁴ G. W. Butterworth, *On First Principles* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), i.

¹⁵ "Origen of Alexandria | Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy," accessed April 11, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/origen-of-alexandria/>.

¹⁶ Ronald E. Heine, *Origen: Scholarship in the Service of the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), vii.

¹⁷ Erasmus, *Erasmus's Life of Origen*, xi.

¹⁸ Christopher A. Beeley, *The Unity of Christ: Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition* (London, WC: Yale University Press, 2012).

¹⁹ Johannes Nicolaas Jacobus Kritzinger, *Exploring Theology: An Introductory Dictionary* (Telangana, India: Research Institute for Theology and Religion, 2004), 130.

²⁰ Heine, *Origen*, vii.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Mark Randall James, *Learning the Language of Scripture: Origen, Wisdom, and the Logic of Interpretation* (Leiden: BRILL, 2021), 49.

²³ Erasmus, *Erasmus's Life of Origen*, xi.

²⁴ Paul Foster, *Early Christian Thinkers: The Lives and Legacies of Twelve Key Figures* (SPCK, 2012).

Therefore, most of his works were not a response to any issue outside the church but to address the problems within the church. Joseph W. Trigg asserts that Origen advocated a “rule of truth” or “Of the church.” He never developed a new rule but was committed to the unity of Scripture, which distinguished him and his believing community from Gnostic heresies²⁵. Because of the radical Christian community that Origen grew, which demanded fundamental Christian commitment, Origen was an almost fanatical Christian of the most exclusive variety, who pursued holiness to the point of self-castration²⁶

THE THEOLOGY OF ORIGEN

“Fortune did not favor Origen and his work, the greatest of the Alexandrian teachers and the most important theologian of Eastern Christianity.²⁷” Christianity has always been considered a religion of the poor and the uneducated. However, in the third century, the story changed when Christianity had the most excellent scholar (Origen) of the age known to be a Christian. “Heathen, heretics, and Christians admired Origen, and his immense learning and scholarship would have a significant influence on future Christian scholarship.²⁸”

Origen’s theological achievement was his work on the Bible and his effort for its better understanding and use; thus, the bulk of his literary production derived from this concern. Because Origen dictated so much of the work, Ambrose provided seven secretaries trained in beautiful handwriting. These trained secretaries were busy without pause or interruption with the dictation of Origen’s work.²⁹ Origen produced 2000 works, including commentaries on almost every book of the Bible and hundreds of homilies.³⁰ David L. Edwards noted that “His [Origen] interest was in the study of Bible exposition; he became the first Bible commentator to write several commentaries of the Bible.”³¹ Also, Daryl Aaron asserts, “Origen was one of the first to write commentaries on the Books of the Bible.”³² Daryl Heine further submitted that Origen produced more commentaries on the Bible than any other early Christian author. He took the format of commentary literature developed by the commentators of Greek literature and applied it to the Christian commentaries on the Scripture.³³

When turned to the theological contribution of Origen, so much can be outlined. He is known for his willingness to take endless trouble on the biblical text. His work focused on verse-by-verse exposition of the individual books of Scripture. Under Origen’s supervision, the whole Bible was copied in six columns, sharing the various versions in Hebrew and Greek.³⁴ Origen was also determined to restate the biblical message in terms that could reach the educated Greeks. Though Origen wrote extensively, most of his work was condemned and destroyed in the council of Alexandria in 400 AD.³⁵ However, what survived in Origen’s work are his sermons, which are exceptionally esteemed for their pastoral use of the Old Testament.

²⁵ Joseph W. Trigg, *Origen* (London: Routledge, 2012), 4.

²⁶ Ibid

²⁷ Though later church fathers and the reformers accused him of heresy, before the council of Nicea in 325, doctrines were unpredictable, and Origen was a pivotal figure to be appreciated. In the Ecumenical Council of 553, his works were considered heretical and were condemned. But recent scholars are beginning to understand his works and contribution to church history. In the writings of historians, Origen is appreciated. Many scholars, like the French cardinal and theologian Henri Lubac of 1964 affirmed that Origen was an obedient child of the church because his intentions, indeed, add up for something amid his sincerity. Karl Baus and Hubert Jedin, *From the Apostolic Community to Constantine*, vol. 1 (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 234.

²⁸ A. Kenneth Curtis, J. Stephen Lang, and Randy Petersen, *The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History* (Grand Rapids, Mich: F.H. Revell, 1998), 26.

²⁹ Anthony Grafton, *Christianity and the Transformation of the Book: Origen, Eusebius, and the Library of Caesarea* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 69.

³⁰ Curtis, Lang, and Petersen, *The 100 Most Important Events in Christian History*.

³¹ David L. Edwards, *Christianity: The First Two Thousand Years* (London: Cassell and Company Ltd, 1997), 65; Everett Ferguson, ed., *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity: Second Edition* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 835.

³² Daryl Aaron, *the 40 Most Influential Christians Who Shaped What We Believe Today* (Minnesota: Baker Books, 2013).

³³ Heine, *Origen*, 23.

³⁴ Edwards, *Christianity*, 67.

³⁵ Fernando Báez, *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books: From Ancient Sumer to Modern Iraq* (Philippines: Atlas & Company, 2008), 129.

Furthermore, the Bible in six columns can be called the Hexapla³⁶, which remains the most significant biblical scholarship in the early church. The Hexapla is described as the most massive textual project with estimated pages of 6500.³⁷ Martin Roberts wrote:

Origen excelled in theological scholarship and eventually produced a work called the Hexapla, which means an edition of the Bible in six versions. This work included Hebrew, Hebrew in Greek characters, the Septuagint, and the Greek writings of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. We can liken the Hexapla to an early example of what today we know as a parallel Bible. One can imagine if six versions were in one Bible today, it would be huge in book form!³⁸

Meanwhile, Origen made the *Hexapla* the basis for his interpretation of the Old Testament, making him both the father of systematic theology of all times and the first-ever systematic theologian.³⁹ Accordingly, Origen's *Hexapla* was a feat of textual criticism. Tim Dowley noted that "His [Origen's] sermons and massive biblical commentaries illustrated his theory that there are three levels of meaning in any biblical text: literal sense, moral application to the soul, and the allegorical or spiritual sense, referring to the mysteries of the Christian faith."⁴⁰ Origen emphasized the meaning of spirituality based on historical facts of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, which significantly impacted many Bible interpreters in both the East and the West; thus, his allegorical approach soon became a dominant means of interpretation of the Middle Ages.

Another significant contribution of Origen is "On First Principles," which is the focus of this article. In the "First Principles," Origen attempted to present the fundamental Christian doctrines in a systematic form. E. B. Fryde noted that *On First Principles* is the first known systematic exposition of Christian theology, and the work represents Origen's frequent warnings and achievement.⁴¹ Importantly, in *On First Principles*, Origen formulated a Trinitarian conception of deity. He tried to bring the doctrine of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit, of creation, of the faith expressed in the church, and he made an effort to simplify and pull out what was only understood in the faith.⁴² Origen remained the first exemplary theologian who attempted to understand the biblical testimony and rule of faith concerning Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴³ He examines the group of the principle: the relationship between the three persons of the Godhead. Origen Adamantius wrote:

All who believe and are assured that grace and truth were obtained through Jesus Christ, and who know Christ to be the truth, agreeably to His declaration, I am the truth, derive the knowledge, which incites men to a good and happy life from no other source than from the very words and teaching of Christ....as the teaching of the church, transmitted in orderly succession from the apostles, and remaining in the churches to the present day, is still preserved, that alone is to be accepted as truth, which differs in no respect from ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition.⁴⁴

³⁶ In the *Hexapla*, Origen provided an essential basis for the study of systematic study of the scriptures in the Hexapla, which is six columns of arranged texts of various Hebrew and Greek versions of biblical texts. John M. Riddle, *A History of the Middle Ages, 300–1500* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

³⁷ Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen, eds., *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 48.

³⁸ Martin Roberts, *Defending the Bible Against "Christians": A Study of How the Bible in English Came to Be and the Unlikely Sources Who Challenge Its Authenticity and Translation Even Today*. (Bloomington, IN: West Bow Press, 2014), 79.

³⁹ John Gavin, *They Are Like the Angels in the Heavens: Angelology and Anthropology in the Thought of Maximus the Confessor* (Roma, RM: Institutum patristicum Augustinianum, 2009), 62; Tom Greggs, *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity* (Oxford, OX2: OUP Oxford, 2009), n.p.

⁴⁰ One major characteristic of Origen was his approach to the literal translation of the Bible. He always interpreted the literal meaning of the passage, an allegorical explanation, or a text-critical decision. Origen was more conservative about authorship and historicity and thought that the Bible in its entirety had the same authority even though he could identify some historical problems. Yet, Origen held and emphasized more on the deeper spiritual meaning of the passage, especially when the literal meaning seems troubling to him. Tim Dowley, ed., *Eerdman's Handbook to the History of Christianity*, 1st American ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 104; Peter William Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 118.

⁴¹ E. B. Fryde, *Greek Manuscripts in the Private Library of the Medici, 1469-1510* (Aberystwyth, SY: National Library of Wales, 1996), 682.

⁴² Jonathan Street, *All Shall Know Me: His Name Is Jesus* (Meadville, PA: Christian Faith Publishing, Inc., 2020).

⁴³ Roger E. Olson and Christopher Alan Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 24.

⁴⁴ Origen Adamantius, *On First Principles* (Fig, 2012), 1; also read, Origen of Alexandria, *Delphi Collected Works of Origen (Illustrated)* (East Sussex, UK: Delphi Classics, 2020).

Importantly, the principle that guarded Origen's interpretation was Scripture and tradition; and the attitude that Origen emphasized in the approach of Scripture was a requirement for a more profound reverence.⁴⁵ Origen emphasized the daily reading of Scripture, which was the well-spring of his personal religious life. As a teacher, Origen strived towards perfection, which drew him to center on Christ, which accurately self-knowledge and brings self-awareness of his sinfulness. To Origen, choosing to imitate Christ will enable one to reach the goal quickly.⁴⁶

Surprisingly, a genius in church history (Origen) is quickly forgotten and his work was abandoned and destroyed. McGuckin summarizes the reason for Origen's unfavorable reception and the destruction of his work, thus outlining three unsuitable factors:

First, Origen's speculative mind stretched the boundaries of Christian thought and imagination of his day and for the generations after him. Secondly, Origen's work did not gain favor and became more and more problematic to the church because as the definition of Christian orthodoxy was becoming ever more rigidly established and policed by imperial and synodical laws, Origen became more problematic. Thirdly, his teachings were revered by following generations and Christian thinkers. As an undoubted genius the early history ever produced, his reputation became something the church had to control and correct. Therefore, after several "Origenic Controversies" agitations in the fourth and sixth centuries, the emperor Justinian moved against him with a decree in 543 that led to most of his work being destroyed and considered a heretic. But despite the banned on the use of his work, there remains so much an extraordinary testimony by all the patristic thinkers who were always in his debt.⁴⁷

Despite the negativity towards Origen and the rejection of his theological contribution, he remains the father of systematic theology and one who sets the standard for the right interpretation of the Bible. Meanwhile, the focus of this paper is *On First Principles*, an aspect of Origen's contribution that gave him precedence over other biblical interpreters. His contribution was an essential mediator of Greek Christian thought.⁴⁸

"ON FIRST PRINCIPLES": ORIGEN'S THEOLOGICAL CONTRIBUTION

We have noted some contributions of Origen to the theological circle. This section examines the composition of an aspects of Origen's theological contribution "On First Principles," which gave him the position of a systematic theologian. Indeed, as the first systematic theologian, he laid the foundation for modern exegetes. His "system" set the agenda for the most significant theological debate in the Mediterranean churches for over three centuries.⁴⁹ Edward Moore noted that understanding the terms "system" and "systematic" will save us from judging Origen's era by the norms and standards of our own.⁵⁰

As a systematic theologian, he would first lay out the basics as well as the details of the Christian faith coherently and systematically, for his readers to understand the notions he wanted to advance. Being a systematic theologian, he was reflective and thoughtful in his writings. His goal was to search for a deeper meaning – a higher truth in Scripture.⁵¹

Meanwhile, Peri Arkhon's treaty is called *De Principiis* in Latin and *On First Principles* in English.⁵² In the famous work of Origen, he explained how the things that the Bible teaches could be correct, and in it, he displayed the intelligence of how these truths as shown in the Bible are interrelated. *On First Principles* is the most transparent and boldest example of Origen's speculative genius, and as such, it contains theories that have caused extensive controversy throughout Christian history.⁵³ Origen's theological contribution (*On First Principles*) remains the first ever Christian systematic theology handbook that gave him a reputation in his own time.

⁴⁵ David Mills, ed., *The Pilgrim's Guide: C. S. Lewis and the Art of Witness* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 90.

⁴⁶ E. Glenn Hinson, *The Early Church: Origins to the Dawn of the Middle Ages* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2010).

⁴⁷ McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, 25–26.

⁴⁸ Ian Hazlett, *Early Christianity: Origins and Evolution to AD 600: In Honour of W.H.C. Frend* (London, SW: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1991), 153.

⁴⁹ Gillian Rosemary Evans, ed., *The First Christian Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Church* (Carlton: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004), 132.

⁵⁰ Edward Moore, "Origen of Alexandria and St. Maximus the Confessor," 37.

⁵¹ Willem H. Oliver and Mokhele J. S. Madise, "The Formation of Christian Theology in Alexandria," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 35, no. 1 (June 12, 2014): 13.

⁵² J M. Cooper, ed., *Plato: Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 1638.

⁵³ Edward Moore, *Origen of Alexandria and St. Maximus the Confessor* (Florida: Universal-Publishers, 2005), 36.

“The originality of *On First Principles* consists of its vastness of plan, in the unity of its purpose, and in the genius with which it was executed.”⁵⁴ In “*On First Principles*,” Origen taught that all Christian understanding proceeds from the teaching of Christ, which is illuminated in first, the apostles and followed by their traditions. McGuckin asserts that all that Origen intended was to manifest the truth with clarity.⁵⁵

Meanwhile, most of the original Greek version of *On First Principles* has perished, and what we have today in its larger form is the interpretation of it by Rufinus.⁵⁶ However, Jerome accused Rufinus of misinterpreting Origen’s work, *On First Principle*; consequently, Jerome tried to rewrite “*On First Principles*.”⁵⁷ In the meantime, the question is asked about what Origen intended to achieve when he wrote: “*On First Principles*” such a question has baffled the mind of scholars, and Bingham noted that Clues for an answer to that question had been searched for in the title and the preface. It contended that *On First Principles* was a relatively common title of philosophical works in the Platonic schools, where it referred to the highest ontological principles. These principles were matter, ideas, and God.⁵⁸ As a result, therefore, many have attempted to study *On First Principles* based on a philosophical framework.

On the other hand, *On First Principles* has been explored based on a theological context. However, it is interesting to submit that the document conveys the theological view of Origen.⁵⁹ “*On First Principle*” is divided into four major sections: theology, cosmology, anthropology, and teleology. This paper is not a critical evaluation of *On First Principles* but a cursory overview and its importance to contemporary African theology. Meanwhile, Origen’s work, *On First Principles* is divided into five sections for easy understanding. The first section began with a preface that affirmed some essential biblical truths that Jesus Christ declared through His apostles and the Church Fathers. The apostles and Church Fathers served as custodians of these fundamental biblical truths. Other sections of *On First Principles* are classified into four books, with each book affirming particular aspects of Christian theology.

THE STRUCTURAL COMPOSITION OF THE FIRST PRINCIPLES

The structure of *On First Principles* is complex and echoes philosophical treaties. *On First Principles* sets out the rule of faith, emphasizing the teaching of the apostles on monotheism, which contributed to the development of the Trinity.⁶⁰ As Origen Reflected *On First Principles*, he developed the most highly and complex doctrine of God in the history of Christian theology.⁶¹ Indeed, Origen emphasized the oneness of God in three distinct natures; the nature of divine spirit and the relationship and unity of the divine Persons.⁶² What Origen advocated was against the notion that God has a material body. He, however, promoted the immaterial nature of God, emphasizing that all scriptural passages that give the impression of God as having a material body are, in reality, speaking metaphorically. In his assertion, Origen affirmed that God is incomprehensible, far better than a human of any kind.⁶³

Similarly, on the Son, Origen noted that Jesus is the wisdom of God, coeternal with the Father.⁶⁴ He also spoke about God’s will as always complete and sufficient to emphasize the relationship between the Father and the Son. Origen accentuated that the unity of activity forms the basis for the ‘imaging’ of the Father and the Son. This unity does not mean that the resemblance of the Son to the Father is a kind of limited moral resemblance. Michel R. Barnes asserts, “the unity of activity between the Father and Son indicates that the will is the source of the Son...that is, the origin of the Son is in the act of God’s will proceeding from His mind.”⁶⁵

⁵⁴ Butterworth, *On First Principles*, viii.

⁵⁵ McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, 36.

⁵⁶ Butterworth, *On First Principles*, iv.

⁵⁷ D. Jeffrey Bingham, *The Routledge Companion to Early Christian Thought* (Oxon, OX: Routledge, 2009), 196.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Maximus the Confessor* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 146.

⁶⁰ Patrick Whitworth, *Suffering and Glory: The Church from the Apostles to Constantine* (Durham, DH: Sacristy Press, 2018), 248.

⁶¹ Roger E. Olson and Adam C. English, *Pocket History of Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 24.

⁶² Chad Meister and Paul Copan, eds., *Routledge Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (London & New York: Routledge, 2010), 537.

⁶³ W. Paul Harkins, trans., *The Fathers of the Church: St John Chrysostom on the Incomprehensible Nature of God* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2010), 12.

⁶⁴ Wendy Elgersma Helleman and Musa A. B. Gaiya, *Early Christianity: A Textbook for African Students* (Cumbria, CA: Langham Publishing, 2019), N. P. see, John Macquarrie, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought* (London, NI: Hymns Ancient and Modern Ltd, 2010), 155.

⁶⁵ Michel R. Barnes, *The Power of God: Dunamis in Gregory of Nyssa’s Trinitarian Theology* (CUA Press, 2001), 118.

Accordingly, Origen affirmed that God the Son cannot possibly be human, hence, was not procreated by the Father out of things non-existent. On the other hand, Origen insisted that corporeal constructions will lead nowhere; therefore, he insisted that the Son was begotten without human feeling.⁶⁶ Consequently, “Origen conceived in the *First Principles*, God’s Son, the Logos and wisdom of God, as the bridge between the pure oneness of the incorporeal God and the diversity of corporal creation.”⁶⁷

Furthermore, Origen addressed the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Though Origen did not offer an elaborate doctrine of pneumatology, he, however, noted the need for a careful investigation in Scripture about the person of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Origen contends that the Holy Spirit inspired all the prophets and the apostles, thus affirming that their testimony was trustworthy and must be adhered to.⁶⁸ Adamntius wrote, “And that this Spirit inspired each one of the saints, whether prophets or apostles; and that there was not one Spirit in the men of the old dispensation, and another in those who were inspired at the advent of Christ, is most clearly taught throughout the churches.”⁶⁹

Origen further affirmed the reality of the soul, free will, and rationality with their rewards or punishment after death:

After these points, also, the apostolic teaching is that the soul, having a substance and life of its own, shall, after it departs from the world, be rewarded according to its deserts, being destined to obtain either an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness, if its actions shall have procured this for it, or to be delivered up to eternal fire and punishments.⁷⁰

Besides, the second book is a discourse on the material world. First, Origen taught about the existence of the devil and evil angels. Origen affirmed from the teachings of the early Fathers that there had been the view that the devil exists and that it was because he fell from his state as an angel that he became the devil pulling as many other angels as possible to himself, which to this day are his angels.⁷¹

Additionally, Origen wrote that the world had a starting point and an end, which will come from her wickedness.⁷² He also discussed the fall of man; nevertheless, Origen treated the fall of Adam and the redemption of humans as connected and only possible in Christ. He opined that the development of cosmic moral struggle is the sole duty of humankind. Origen wrote:

We believe that some such opinions ought to be entertained regarding the divine promises when we direct our understanding to the contemplation of that eternal and infinite world and gaze on its ineffable joy and blessedness. But as the preaching of the church includes a belief in a future and just judgment of God, which belief incites and persuades men to a good and virtuous life, and an avoidance of sin by all possible means.⁷³

Meanwhile, Origen emphasized the value of human free will as the basis of moral teleology even when demons attempt to make permanent the fallen nature in humans. Certainly, he felt the need to make a compelling justification that the concept of free will was essential within the teaching of Christ.⁷⁴ In *on First Principles*, Origen provided free will as a philosophical concept and, therefore, taught that moral ignorance should not be punished but rather should be modified

⁶⁶ Olson and Hall, *The Trinity*, 24.

⁶⁷ Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter, *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies* (OUP Oxford, 2008), 910.

⁶⁸ James Orr, *Revelation and Inspiration* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2002), 207.

⁶⁹ Origen Adamntius, *On First Principles*, 4.

⁷⁰ James C. Swindal and Harry J. Gensler, eds., *The Sheed and Ward Anthology of Catholic Philosophy* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2005), 72.

⁷¹ Bernard J. Bamberger, *Fallen Angels: Soldiers of Satan’s Realm* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2010), 85.

⁷² Patrick V. Reid, ed., *Readings in Western Religious Thought: The Ancient World* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1987), 363.

⁷³ Alexander Roberts, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to A. D. 325 Volume IV Fathers of the Third Century -Tertullian Part 4; Minucius Felix; Commo* (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2007), 302.

⁷⁴ James B. Miles, *The Free Will Delusion: How We Settled for the Illusion of Morality* (Leicestershire LE: Troubador Publishing Ltd, 2018), N. P.

through the use of education.”⁷⁵ Thus, God’s processes in punishments are more of a cleansing system rather than punishment. Thus, the third book ends with the doctrines associated with the transformation of all things in the wisdom of God, resurrection, the final judgment that is characterized with judgment to the disobedient, and eternal reward to the righteous, which is culminated in immortality.

The last section of the “Principles,” summarizes the whole work, which comes back to the method of biblical interpretation of Christian philosophy and teaching. For Origen, any vague understanding of a text is a deliberate act of God to draw the exegete to careful consideration and humility. Accordingly, Origen argued that Scripture was written by the Holy Spirit and had both literal and spiritual meaning. “The whole law is indeed spiritual, but that the spiritual meaning which the law conveys is not known to all, but to those only on whom the grace of the Holy Spirit is bestowed in the word of wisdom and knowledge.”⁷⁶ By implication, Origen noted that the Holy Spirit inspires the Bible to help Christians understand the “ineffable mysteries sounding the fate of humans” and hide the meaning of a subject that some people cannot handle. Hence, it is worth noting that Origen’s theological framework has remained the standard that theologians stand and build their teachings.

The Relevance of Origen’s Theological Contribution (*On First Principles*) to African Theology Today

“Like every theological achievement, that of Origen must be judged according to the possibilities and conditions which the age provided.”⁷⁷ Concerning Origen’s work *On First Principles*, this describes the personal achievement of Origen as well as an enormous advance in Christian theology. “*On First Principles*” provides a significant relevance to African theology as it provides a natural way to develop Christian thinking. Origen’s legacy offers modern African scholarship more than just a history lesson, but more importantly, it allows for a modern scholarship with ongoing insight into how robust doctrinal, ecclesiological, and conceptual differences can be negotiated.

The problem in African scholarship today is using old methods to solve issues in an ever-changing society. Some might wonder what has contributed to a pre-scientific era, with its differing cultural norms and difference in thinking can offer a complex, more enlightened, and sophisticated generation. But Foster noted few things that African theological scholarship needs to put into consideration; “Both failed sections and successful solutions from antiquity can direct and shape the modern response to contemporary issues. Any attempt to impose old solutions onto new situations is a failure to take the energy and creativity of [Origen] seriously.”⁷⁸

As early African Church Fathers confronted their issues with the available tools; they were not happy with stock answers to problems; instead, they challenged their new resolutions, pressed theological frontiers, willing to integrate the best insight of the broader philosophical, cultural, and political ideas into the formation of a healthy Christian faith. This is a legacy relevant to African theology. The belief system of Origen and many other early Church Fathers was not a hermeneutically sealed entity. Still, they see God as one who spread wisdom in all aspects of society, both Christians and non-Christians. Therefore, one overarching legacy for African scholarship from Origen is a call to engage one’s intellect in the fullest pursuit of truth, in the confident hope that honest inquiry is always of the highest benefit for the Christian faith.

Origen was not platonic, but he was very wise in adapting and using contemporary forms in his cosmology. He adopted three methods of biblical approach, literal, moral, and allegorical, which is vital for African theology. Benedict wrote that Origen’s determination to ascertain the true meaning of the biblical text, his systematic way of reading the Bible, which enabled him to interpret the Bible faithfully, and his passion and dedication to preaching the Bible are a functional requirement for a truly biblical understanding and effective communication of proper theology.⁷⁹ Consequently, Origen’s theological reflection is very relevant to African theology, which is characterized by faith and philosophy. Olson also wrote on this when he said, “Origen’s theological reflections began the proper roles of faith and philosophy...while divine revelation and faith were given the primacy.”⁸⁰

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ “CHURCH FATHERS: De Principiis (Origen),” accessed April 13, 2019, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0412.htm>.

⁷⁷ Baus and Jedin, *From the Apostolic Community to Constantine*, 1:240.

⁷⁸ Foster, *Early Christian Thinkers*.

⁷⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Great Christian Thinkers: From the Early Church Through the Middle Ages* (Fortress Press, 2011), 20–21.

⁸⁰ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (InterVarsity Press, 1999), 106.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, Origen left a legacy that has not been adequately appreciated. People have problems with past histories because they interpret the life and work of the past with modern lenses without considering the context to which each theologian or scholar lived and did their theologies. It must be noted that Origen did not gain acceptance because his fundamental conception of the Bible is so different. However, Origen's legacy made him the genius who became the most intellectual systematic theologian of his time. Oden rightly avers that the challenge that lies ahead for young Africans is rediscovering the textual riches of ancient African Christianity, which calls for a generation of African scholars to reevaluate prejudicial assumptions that ignore the demean African intellectual history.⁸¹ Christianity would not have its present vitality without the intellectual understandings developed in Africa through great men like Origen. It is, therefore, necessary for African theology to reflect on fundamental realities of literal, moral, and allegorical interpretations, where faith and divine revelations remain the guiding principle to her theological development.

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