

2.6 ORIGEN ON THE THREE WAYS OF READING SCRIPTURE

The Alexandrian theologian Origen (c.185–c.254), who wrote extensively in the first half of the third century, is widely regarded as one of the early church's most influential and creative interpreters of Scripture. Origen here uses the imagery of "body, soul, and spirit" to distinguish three different ways in which Scripture may be read, according to the maturity of the reader in question. The distinction between different levels of maturity and advancement on the part of Christians is characteristic of both Clement of Alexandria and Origen. See also 2.3, 2.8, 2.9, 2.11, 2.12, 2.15.

There are three ways in which the meaning of the Holy Scriptures should be inscribed on the soul of every Christian. First, the simpler sort are edified by what may be called the "body" of Scripture. This is the name I give to the immediate acceptance. Secondly, those who have made some progress are edified by, as it were, the "soul." Thirdly, the perfect [...] are edified by the "spiritual" Law, which contains the shadow of the good things to come. Thus just as a human being consists of body, soul, and spirit, so also does the Scripture which is the gift of God designed for human salvation. [...]

Some parts of Scripture have no "body." In these parts, we must look only for the "soul" and "spirit." Perhaps this is the point of the description in John's

gospel of the water-pots "for the purifying of the Jews, holding two or three measures" (John 2: 6). The Word implies by this that the apostle calls the Jews in secret, so that they may be purified through the word of the Scripture which sometimes holds two measures, that is what one may call the "soul" and "spirit"; sometimes three, that is, the "body" as well. [...] The usefulness of the "body" is testified by the multitude of simple believers and is quite obvious. Paul gives us many examples of the "soul." [...] The spiritual interpretation belongs to people who are able to explain the way in which the worship of the "Jews after the flesh" (1 Corinthians 10: 18) yields images and "shadows of heavenly things" (Hebrews 8: 5) and how the "Law had the shadow of good things to come."

Comment

Origen draws a distinction, which was not universally recognized, between uneducated Christians and their more sophisticated counterparts, among which latter group he clearly numbered himself. The basic distinction being made is between "fleshly" and "spiritual" ways of reading Scripture, which Origen illustrates with reference to various ways of interpreting certain biblical verses.