

Ante-Nicene Fathers: Part 2 - Option 2

Grade 9 - Patristics - Unit 4, Option 2

OBJECTIVE

The objective of this lesson is to continue learning about the apologetic fathers, the characteristics of their writing, and their impact on the church until today.

INTRODUCTION

Check this quote & tell me what your reaction to it is:

“Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.”

Perhaps you can already guess who said it (it’s Richard Dawkins). What do you think of this quote? And what would you want to say to Dawkins about it? (discussion). Is faith against reason or against scientific evidence?

The point is that the claim that Christianity and science/philosophy just don’t fit together is actually a very old one. Let’s see what that was like in early Christianity.

CONTENT (KEY POINTS)

We have learned so far about the apostolic and the apologetic fathers. As the church grew, it faced different types of challenges. First, there were very few Christians (Christianity was a minority), very few writings and a lot of persecution. Then Christianity started spreading and different problems started showing up. People became suspicious of Christians who did not sacrifice to the Roman deities, who said they gathered to eat the “Body and Blood” of their God, and who collected infants that some Romans left to die. Who are these people? Are they good, law-abiding and pious? Or are they atheists, cannibals and infant sacrificers? The apologetic fathers like St Justin Martyr and others rose to defend Christianity against these claims and protect Christians from being judged and executed on these charges.

By the late 2nd century and early 3rd century, other challenges were appearing. As Christianity spread, Greek and Roman intellectuals were becoming interested in learning about this Christian faith. Before that, many people had considered Christianity to be a religion of the common people and lower class, and that philosophy was for the intellectuals and high class. But now, because of people like St. Justin Martyr and others, more intellectuals were interested in hearing what Christianity had to say. If you want to learn about a new religion, what do you do? You can ask the religious leaders and you can read their sacred texts. So these intellectuals (like university professors and public intellectuals in our days) did that. But most Christians were not well-educated at that time. They knew they believed in the Christian God, in His incarnation and redemption, and they were very willing to be martyred for it. But



many could not hold up in a debate with intellectuals who had been studying philosophy and history and religion all their lives. So the intellectuals began to read the Scripture. But they said, what is this? There is no high philosophy here! The Hebrew Bible tells us events and stories of miracles like parting the Red Sea (Exodus 14) or people who win battles without fighting (Joshua 6 and 7) or a talking donkey (Numbers 22), and lots of other stories like that. And the Gospels had lots of miracle accounts too: Jesus feeding the crowd and healing the sick and raising the dead and lots of others. The intellectuals read this and said: these are all myths! Just like the Iliad and the Odyssey and all the Roman gods are! This Christian faith is just another myth, and we can't find anything intellectual here like we find in our philosophers Socrates, Plato and Aristotle.

This was the challenge of the 3rd century. Is Christianity a set of myths? Can it only speak to the less educated? Does Christianity respect the human mind or not? If not, how do you convince an intellectual who has no use for miracles? And how would you explain the Bible to them? (discussion)

Some church fathers were brilliant at this point and what they did and wrote is still important to us today. They taught us how to respect our minds, know that Christianity is beyond but not against our intellects, and learn how to understand and read the Bible until today. Let's see one of the most interesting and brilliant figures, Origen of Alexandria.

Origen was an Egyptian, born and bred in Alexandria. He was very well educated in the Greek sciences and literature and also in the Christian faith. When he was about your age (around 17), his father was martyred for being a Christian, and there is a story that says Origen wanted to be martyr too, but his mother didn't want him to die so she hid all his clothes! It may sound kind of funny to us today, but that's how amazingly zealous Origen was in his love for God. So he started to live a simple, ascetic and pure life devoted to God.

He wasn't martyred at a young age, and after his father's martyrdom, their possessions were confiscated and the family faced financial hardship. So Origen went out to work & provide for his family. He worked as a teacher. But he never forgot his real passion: the love of God and of His church. And Origen put all his zeal into learning and teaching and writing about the faith. He wrote astonishing amounts of books, almost two thousand books and homilies!—including topics that no one after him will write, for centuries.

Imagine that you were asked to do research on a difficult verse in the Bible that is not easily understood, and the meaning of the original words that were used. What do you do? First, you can check the verse in a different Bible translation. Many websites now offer different translations in many languages. Perhaps you will check out the different English translations first, and then if you can read Spanish or Arabic, perhaps you will look it up in these languages. Or if you are good at Greek or Coptic, perhaps! What would you do if you didn't have the internet? You'd need a physical library with copies of different translations.

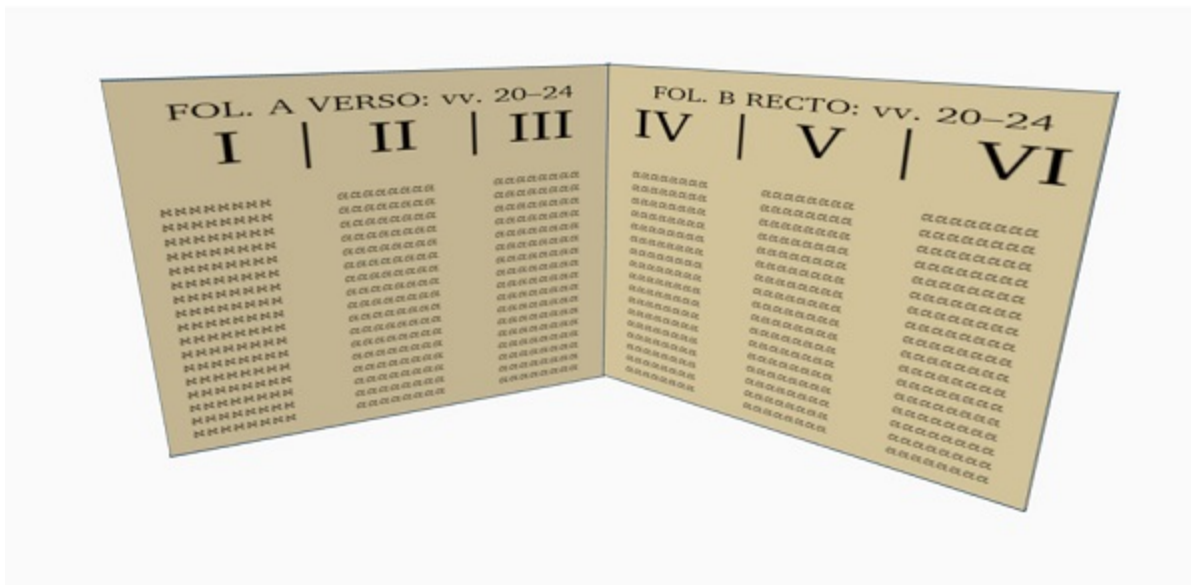
Well, Origen was in kind of the same bind. There were several Greek translations of the Old Testament during his lifetime, and he wanted to put them all in comparison with each other and with the original Hebrew text, because most people, including Jews, understood Greek better than Hebrew. In other words, he's creating the whole software, like Biblehub.com! But for him it was much more difficult.



There were no books like today—he had to search for each manuscript, and sometimes he would only find a few books from one translation and then look for the rest. Or pay lots of money for someone to write him a copy & send it to him.

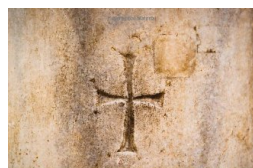
But none of this stopped him. He made a HUGE document with 6 columns, which is why we call it the Hexapla (from the Greek word for “six”). The first column contained the Hebrew words, the second a transliteration of the Hebrew in Greek letters (you know how sometimes we write the Coptic hymns in English letters and call them Coptish? This is the same). The other 4 columns were different Greek translations of the Old Testament. The Hexapla took almost tens of volumes to write and it took him TWENTY-EIGHT years to complete!!

It would have looked something like this:

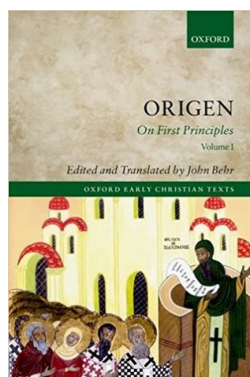
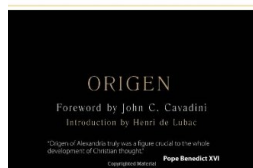


What else can you do to find the meaning of a verse? You can also look for bible commentaries. Well, Origen wrote pretty long and detailed commentaries on many Books of the Bible, like Genesis, Exodus, Song of Songs, Gospels of Luke and John, and others. We still have some of them.

Origen also wrote a very well-known book called *On First Principles*, which spoke about how to interpret the Bible so it is useful for our spiritual lives, and what Christianity means and how it understands God and the world. This book is very famous. It has survived and is available until today and has been translated in many languages.



On First Principles





In his writings, Origen explained many parts of the Bible allegorically (symbolical or a meaning that transcends the literal sense) rather than literally. In this he follows a scheme that was very popular among philosophers of his time. Sometimes it may sound weird to say that the Bible meant to say something that is different from the direct simple meaning. But on other occasions it makes sense to do so. Let's take an example.

Remember that Dawkins quote from the beginning of our lesson? He was saying that faith means we don't look at the scientific evidence! Well, in his book *On First Principles*, Origen says something very interesting. When Origen was commenting about the creation narrative in Genesis 1-2, he noticed that there was no sun, moon, or stars for the first 3 days, so they cannot be "days" in the same sense as our 24-hour days! He writes: "What person of intelligence, I ask, will think it is reasonable to say the first and second and third day, in which there are said to be both morning and evening, existed without sun and moon and stars, while the first day was even without a heaven? ... some things cannot be accepted as history but contain a spiritual meaning" (*On First Principles* III.1).

Fast forward to our time, when Pope Shenouda III was asked the same question, he said the same thing: "We determine a day from one day's sunrise to the next sunrise, or from one day's sunset until the next sunset. Scripture tells us that God made the sun on the 4th day (Genesis 1: 16). This means the first 3 days are not defined, so they are not literal days but long epochs of time" (*Years with People's Questions*, Part 1) (The servant can print these two quotes beside each other and show them to the youth).

So this means that ever since the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, Christians were grappling with science and with philosophy, and they did not see that faith was against thinking rationally about the world and about science.

Finally, Origen is considered one of the greatest geniuses of the Christian church until today. A lot of saints learned from him and his books like Saints Augustine, Basil, Gregory, Evagrius, John Chrysostom, John Cassian, and others. Today, he is considered the first Christian systematic theologian and the first Christian textual critic in history.

By the end of his life, he was captured and tortured in order to recant his faith in Christianity. But he refused, and although he did not die from the torture in prison, the persecution broke his health and he died about a year later.

In the Coptic church we do not consider him a saint because, many years after he died, the church decided that some things he said were too confusing. Recall what we just said about the allegorical interpretations, sometimes it makes sense but sometimes it doesn't. Also, Origen used terms that can be understood to mean that the Son and the Holy Spirit are less than the Father. In the Council of Nicaea, the church settled on specific terms to avoid confusion and clearly state that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are of the same essence, but the Council of Nicaea is almost 100 years after Origen died, and hence it is difficult to blame Origen for not using Nicaea's terms.

So, instead of confusing people, the church took some of Origen's writings with a grain of salt. But it is important to know that Origen never wanted to go against the church! He used to say the church was



our mother and we are her children. He always advised people to live according to the teachings of the church and to the rule of faith. We can learn a lot from reading his books and Scriptural commentaries today.

DISCUSSION/ACTIVITY

What can we learn from Origen?

Being zealous for God!

In the Book of Revelation (3: 15-16), Christ says: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.” One thing Origen never was, was lukewarm! When he didn’t die as a martyr, he lived all his life learning and teaching and writing about God and the Bible. And he was tortured before he died, so he would leave his faith, but he did not.

How can I fight lukewarmness? (discussion). Sometimes we think ... I come from a godly family, so I’m alright! I don’t need to put a lot of effort in my prayers or in coming to church or in serving God. Really, just once a week to the divine liturgy and to Sunday School is just fine. Well, Origen was the son of a martyr so people looked up to him. Wow, son of a martyr! Such a godly family! But Origen said: Having a martyr as a father is no advantage to me unless I live well and honor it by being faithful like my father. He used to say: “As for myself, my desire is to be truly a man of the church. I desire to be, and to be called, a Christian in my works as in my thoughts.”

I have to be faithful and love God all my life!

Faith is not against philosophy/science

As Christians, we should take science seriously. We know that without science, so many more people would have died from COVID. Science is a gift from God to us, and many of you will become doctors and engineers and scientists. St Anthony said that God has given us two Books to know Him: the Bible and nature.