

## Church History I

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### Session Seven

#### “Christianity in North Africa” – Part One

#### Introduction

As a result of Christ’s promise that the gospel would travel from Jerusalem to the “*end of the earth*” (Acts 1:8), Christianity began spreading throughout the Mediterranean region of North Africa. It reached distinguished and sophisticated cities like Alexandria and Carthage. In these cities, Christian leaders and apologists such as Clement, Origen, Tertullian, and Cyprian, dominated the theological and philosophical landscape within the church.

#### A. Alexandria

##### 1. Clement of Alexandria

- a. **Location:** The ancient Egyptian city of Alexandria was the second most important city in the Roman Empire, behind Rome. It had the reputation of being the Empire’s intellectual and cultural capital, and one of its most utilized trading ports. Alexandria was known as the center of artistic, scientific, and philosophical activity in the Roman world, containing a famous museum, world-class library, and university. It was a crossroads of sorts for the different religious movements and philosophies found throughout the world. Alexandria was a meeting place of scholars, adventurers, and charlatans, which led to a syncretistic spirit in the city.



It also had a high concentration of Jewish residents – mainly the “Hellenistic Jews” (Acts 6) that had Greek backgrounds. It’s unknown when the church was established, but we do know that Apollos came from there in the first century (Acts 18:24-28). Since many Hellenistic Jews lived in the area, it’s likely that church planters began gaining converts from local synagogues.

- b. **Background:** Clement appeared on the scene in the late second century (AD 170-180) and has been noted as the first great Christian teacher in Alexandria. He was most likely born in Athens and converted to the faith as an adult, from which he traveled throughout the Empire to learn from different Christian teachers. His goal was to find someone who could give him deeper instruction in the Christian faith. Clement seemed to learn the most from a Stoic philosopher named Pantenus, who had been a missionary and later head of a Christian

academy in Alexandria. He taught Clement how Christianity was superior to Gnosticism. Following Pantenus' death (AD 190), Clement took over as the main Christian instructor in Alexandria. His goal was to help those in quest of deeper truth and to help pagan intellectuals discover that the Christian faith was credible and true. However, after persecution broke out, Clement had to leave the city, where he traveled along the Eastern Mediterranean through places like Syria and Asia Minor. He died in AD 215.

- c. **Teaching:** Clement's intellectual and philosophical background equipped him to meet the Pagan intellectuals of Alexandria on equal terms, and present the Christian faith to them in a way they could understand and honor. His books overflowed with quotations from the philosophers and poets of Greece.
- ***“Exhortation to the Greeks”*** – This work was aimed at defending the Christian faith from pagans who claimed it was a religion for the ignorant and superstitious. He supported the claims of Christianity by making use of Plato and other philosophers. Clement believed that just as God gave the Law to the Jews, he gave philosophy to the Greeks, and the truths outlined in Greek philosophy were rooted in God's truth. Clement saw himself as the “true Gnostic” – not claiming a special knowledge, but the revealed knowledge of God, who made himself known through the Logos (i.e., Christ), the Eternal Word. He also argued for “Apophatic Theology” (negative theology), which is the idea of describing God's character and attributes by saying what God is not instead of trying to describe who he is (e.g., “*God lives in unapproachable light;*” God is immutable, indescribable, etc.). Sometimes we are better off leaving God's being to mystery than to make errors.
  - ***“The Tutor”*** – This work was a sequel to “*Exhortation to the Greeks,*” and it was a handbook of instruction for new believers. Clement wanted to help Christians understand how to conduct themselves in the world. He discussed very practical areas of life, such as food and drink, homelife, marriage, recreation, music, dancing, etc. Clement recommended a simple lifestyle, between luxury and poverty.

## 2. Origen

- a. **Background:** While Clement was known as the first great Christian teacher in Alexandria, Origen was known as his greatest student.
- **Childhood:** “Origenes Adamantius,” best known as “Origen,” lived from AD 185-254. He was born to Christian parents and was raised in the faith. From an early age, Origen displayed spiritual purity, character, and a strong desire to understand the Bible. It's been said that his father, Leonides, would tiptoe to young Origen's bed at night and kiss his sleeping son's chest, “*where it seemed so clear that the Holy Spirit of God had made His temple.*” However, during the same persecution that eventually led to Clement's exile, Origen's father was martyred in AD 202. In an attempt to prevent him from following his father into martyrdom, his mother hid his clothes so he could not leave the home.

- **Early Leadership:** Origen enrolled in Clement’s Christian academy, devoting himself to studying the Bible and Greek Philosophy. Tradition says that while he was in school, he embraced a literal understanding of Matthew 19:12 (“*eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven*”) and castrated himself – although later in life he expressed regret and disapproval for such an interpretation and application. However, it was clear to everyone, including his bishop, Demetrius of Alexandria, that Origen was brilliant. At the age of 17, he was quickly appointed to be the head of the Alexandria catechetical school, a school for instructing those who wanted to be baptized. In those days, such baptismal candidates were called “catechumens” (Greek – *katecheo*, κατέχω, to teach or instruct), and were required to spend 2-3 years in study prior to their baptisms. After several years in this role, Origen’s genius became well known, and he was promoted as head of a school for Christian philosophy – which was not only for Christians but also pagans that were interested in his teaching. Many famous people came to hear him teach, such as the mother of the emperor and the governor of Arabia.
  - **Division:** However, Origen’s fame became too much for the local bishop, Demetrius. Conflict quickly arose between the two, as Demetrius tried to control the catechetical school and increase his power. Origen wanted the school to remain independent of the local church, and as a result he made a lifelong enemy of the bishop. However, the school continued to prosper, attracting vast numbers of students, including some outstanding future bishops of the Eastern church.
  - **Travel:** Origen traveled far and broad throughout the Empire to learn from the best Christian and Pagan teachers, but finally settled in Caesarea, where he was ordained as a presbyter in the church. His ordination was the final straw for Demetrius, who opposed the decision. It was uncommon for a man to be ordained outside of his bishop’s jurisdiction, and church-law prevented a man from ordination who had been self-castrated. At this point, Demetrius excommunicated Origen from the Alexandrian church. However, he made Caesarea his base of operations for the rest of his life, writing, traveling, and preaching.
  - **Martyrdom:** In AD 250, emperor Decius brought a great persecution against the church, and Origen was arrested and subjected to atrocious torture. In AD 254, Origen died as a result of his injuries.
- b. **Writing:** Outside of his vast knowledge and wisdom, Origen was best known for his massive literary output. He wrote commentaries on many books of the Bible, along with apologies and theologies.
- **Hexapla** – This book was a scholarly edition of the Old Testament with six columns. He paralleled the Hebrew text, a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew, and four Greek translations of the Old Testament. He also included an entire system of symbols indicating variants, omissions, and additions. The *Hexapla* would have been an incredible tool for those who studied Scripture.

- ***On First Principles*** – This work was the first known attempt in church history to produce a “systematic theology,” which is a book that outlines Christian doctrine based on topics found throughout the Bible (e.g., God, Christ, Holy Spirit, Law, Sin, Heaven, Church, Angels, etc.).
  - ***Against Celsus*** – One of Origen’s most notable works was an apology written to defend the faith against a Pagan philosopher named Celsus, who wrote a book in AD 170 called “True Word,” which attacked the Christian faith from several different angles. Celsus studied Christianity carefully and argued that Jesus was nothing more than an imposter and sorcerer, and the apostles clearly invented the “myth” of the resurrection. He argued that Christians were opposed to the Empire, not obeying the law, being anti-social, and highly divisive. However, in AD 248, Origen wrote his apology, answering Celsus point by point, displaying incredible learning and logic, while writing in a dignified and calm manner. One of Origen’s main points, regarding disobedience to Roman law, was that Christianity understood that God established empires, emperors, and laws – and Christians are commanded to honor and obey such. However, Christians must always honor and obey God’s law above human law, and peacefully suffer the earthly consequences for doing so.
- c. **Teaching:** Origen was well known for being a man of noble, humble character, and for his incredible knowledge of Christian theology and Pagan philosophy. However, he was very controversial in different ways.
- **Christian Scripture** – Origen drew criticism from the Pagans for his insistence that the Bible alone (not Plato, etc.) was the ultimate and decisive source of truth. The Scriptures alone contained the inspired, inerrant Word of God, and it must be the basis for all Christian thinking and living. He stated, “*Nothing which is at variance with the tradition of the apostles and of the church is to be accepted as true.*” Therefore, he believed in only one God, creator and ruler of the universe, which rejected Gnosticism. He affirmed that Jesus was both God and man, and that the Holy Spirit was no less divine than the Father and Son. He taught that there would be a future time when the soul would be rewarded or punished, and a final resurrection would take place for the living and the dead.
  - **Philosophical Influence** – While Origen was dedicated to the supremacy of Scripture as God’s only revealed Word, he allowed some of his training in Greek philosophy to govern how he interpreted and understood the Bible. Platonism greatly shaped his outlook. We see a similar tendency today, as some are quick to affirm Scripture, but see the Bible through the lens of the world, leading to faulty and worldly interpretations.
    - **Deeper Meaning of the Text** – Similar to Platonic philosophy, Origen believed that the Bible had three levels of meaning: (1) **Body**, which was the literal meaning; (2) **Soul**, which was the moral or ethical teaching; (3) **Spirit**, which was a spiritual meaning, or an allegorical meaning, almost like a deeper, hidden meaning. Needham gives an example (133-34): “Three men prepared a meal to feed their children.” The obvious meaning is that three male human beings prepared some food to be eaten by

their children. However, the hidden meaning is that the three men represent the Trinity, the meal represents the Lord's Supper, and the children represent the Church. So, the hidden meaning of the text is that the Trinity brought the Lord's Supper into being to nourish God's people spiritually." Origen used such methods to interpret many parts of the Bible, which gave him liberties to build his own theology without utilizing something other than the biblical text! Greek Philosophers used such methods to interpret works like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. We also see such interpretations today, where people want to skirt the obvious meaning of the text because it doesn't conform to their personal views or agenda.

- **Creation and Universalism** – By using this method, Origen believed that creation happened in two stages, because Genesis gives two accounts in chapters one and two. First, God created a purely spiritual world of spiritual beings. This creation did not take place in time, but in eternity past ("pre-existence of souls"). These souls misused their freedom and fell into sin, which led God to create the physical universe of space and time. Some of the spirits he placed in human bodies, and then brought them back to himself. Others became demons. However, both humans and demons could always return to God. Even Satan could repent and be saved. The process of salvation would not be complete until God had brought every rebellious spirit back to himself. Therefore, Origen taught a universal salvation for all fallen humans and angels. Hell was merely a place for purifying until fully cleansed from sin. Likewise, salvation was the process of connecting with the human Jesus, which allowed one to connect with the divine Jesus, thus gradually changing them into the likeness of God.
- **Trinity** – Around Origen's time, a Roman theologian named Sabellius taught that there is only one God and God was one person, meaning that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct persons, but God manifesting himself in three different modes at different times. Therefore, "Sabellianism" is the teaching that God the Father transformed into God the Son, and after Jesus' ascension, God the Son transformed into God the Holy Spirit. Today, this errant theology is called "Modalism," where God transforms into different "modes" of being. Origen rejected such teaching, but added his own twist to the controversy. He believed that the Father and Son were two different persons, but the Son was actually "generated" ("begotten") from the Father in eternity past – where like an earthly father produces a child from himself, so God the Father produced Jesus from his own natural and substance, giving him a fully divine nature. This teaching is known as the "*eternal generation of the Logos*." However, this "generating" didn't happen at a particular moment in time, it was an eternal act, meaning that there was never a time when God (Father) was without his Logos (Son). In order to avoid the idea that Jesus was a part of creation, Origen insisted that Jesus was the "uncreated offspring of the Father." However, while this theology opens the door for a trinitarian understanding of God, Origen also taught that the Son was not perfectly equal to the Father, but became "a degree less than perfect." Likewise, the Holy Spirit was divine but a lesser degree than the Son. Again, the idea that there could be different degrees of divinity came from Greek philosophy, namely Platonism.