

After Origen: ‘Gnostic’ and ‘Simple’ Believers in Alexandria on the Eve of Nicaea

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Περίληψη: Το άρθρο χαρτογραφεί το κοινωνικο-θρησκευτικό πλαίσιο του χριστιανισμού στην Αλεξάνδρεια, που χαρακτηρίζεται από οξεία θεολογική αντιπαράθεση και πληθώρα πολιτισμικών ταυτοτήτων στον κρίσιμο αιώνα που μεσολάβησε μεταξύ της πρώτης συνόδου ενάντια στον Ωριγένη (232) και της Συνόδου της Νίκαιας (325). Στο επίκεντρο της παρούσας εξέτασης βρίσκονται δύο τάσεις που αναπτύχθηκαν μεταξύ των πιστών: από τη μια, η ανθρωπομορφική ερμηνεία των Γραφών από τους «απλούστερους» και από την άλλη η διερεύνηση των διαφορετικών επιπέδων ενός βαθύτερου νοήματος από τους «γνωστικούς».

Summary: Mapping the socio-religious arena dominated by heated theological debate and a mosaic of cultural identities in the crucial hundred years before the Council of Nicaea (325), the article provides a kaleidoscopic view of the interaction and tension interwoven with the story of those Alexandrian Christian believers who stuck with the plain sense of Scripture and those who dared challenge these beliefs by proposing a more figural interpretation.

In 232, a synod under Bishop Demetrius (189-231)¹ exiled Origen (d. ca. 253) from Alexandria and declared his ordination to presbyter invalid. Soon after, the condemnation was repeated by a Roman synod, led by Bishop Pontian (230-35). Around 236, Heraclas (231-47), Origen’s former disciple and Demetrius’ successor, accused his old master of being a heretic to Bishop Fabian of Rome (236-50), which led Origen to defend his orthodoxy. Origen passed the last two decades of his life in Palestine, where he was tortured during the persecution of Decius (249-51) and died a confessor.² Several scholars have argued that although Origen was not explicitly

*Warmest thanks to the anonymous reviewer, Stella Panagiotou and Maria Pavlou for their corrections, comments and suggestions.

¹ Throughout this article, Greek names appear in their most common English form in literature (e.g., Heraclitus for Heraklitos, Eusebius for Eusebios, Demetrius for Demetrios, etc). For the chronology of Alexandrian bishops, see the table in S. J. Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy: The Egyptian Church and its leadership in Late Antiquity* (Cairo and New York, 2005), 133.

² Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.8.4-5, 23.4, 6.26, 36.4, 39, Εὐσεβίου Καισαρείας, *Εκκλησιαστική Ἱστορία (Δ΄-ΣΤ΄)*, ed. P. Chrestou (Thessalonike, 1977), 238, 276, 284, 296, 300-2 (on the circumstances of Origen’s condemnation and his confession); Jerome, *Letter 32, Sancti Hieronymi Epistola XXXIII ad Paulam*, in *Patrologia Latina* 22 (1845), col. 447 (on the Roman synod); Photius, *Library*, CXVIII, Photius, *Bibliothèque*, vol. 2, ed. R. Henry (Paris, 1960), 91-92 (on the accusations against Origen and implying his condemnation in two synods under Demetrius). Literature on Origen is vast. For a chronological reconstruction of his life and work, see P. Nautin, *Origène, sa vie et son*

condemned as a heretic in 232, opposition against him was largely provoked by the rising tension between ‘simple’ and ‘gnostic’ believers. Friction between the two tendencies became evident after Origen’s completion and circulation of *On First Principles* in 229-30, a treatise exploring theological questions through a philosophical methodology.³

A few decades before Origen’s condemnation, another Alexandrian biblical interpreter, Clement (d. ca. 202), painted in the seventh book of his *Stromateis* the portrait of the ‘gnostic’ Christian. So wrote Clement, in response to accusations by Hellene philosophers that the Christians deny the gods:⁴

“Time has come for us to show the Hellenes that only the knowledgeable [gnostic]⁵ is truly pious; so that the philosophers, having learned of what quality is the true Christian, would condemn their own ignorance in vainly and misguidedly persecuting the Name,⁶ and in futilely calling ‘godless’

œuvre (Paris, 1977). For the underlying power game behind Origen’s condemnation, see A. Stewart-Sykes, ‘Origen, Demetrius, and the Alexandrian Presbyters’, *St Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 48 (2004), 415-29. On the circumstances of his condemnation in the context of episcopal institutionalisation in Rome and Alexandria, see C. Kyriacou, ‘On the Origins of the Alexandrian School: Rhizomes, Episcopal Legitimation, and a Tale of Two Cities’, *Religions* 14/482 (2023), 16-20.

³ E.g.: G. W. Butterworth, *Origen, On First Principles. Being Koetschau’s Text of the De Principiis Translated into English, Together with an Introduction and Notes* (London, 1936), v-x; B. Stavrides, ‘Αἱ ὠριγενιστικαὶ ἐριδές’, *Θεολογία* 28 (1957), 550-57; Nautin, *Origène*, 366-70; M. A. Mikhail, *The Legacy of Demetrius of Alexandria (189-232 CE): The Form and Function of Hagiography in Late Antique and Islamic Egypt* (London and New York, 2017), 121 (n. 2); J. Corke-Webster, *Eusebius and Empire: Constructing Church and Rome in the Ecclesiastical History* (Cambridge, 2019), 112-13; J. McGuckin, *Origen of Alexandria: Master Theologian of the Early Church* (New York and London, 2022), 9; A. Jakab, ‘The Social History of the Alexandrian Church’, in R. E. Heine and K. J. Torjesen (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Origen* (Oxford, 2022), 125-29. On questions raised by modern editions of *On First Principles*, see P. W. Martens, ‘The Modern Editions of *Peri Archon*’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 28 (2020), 303-31.

⁴ Author’s translation of Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, VII.1.1.1-2, 1.2, Clément d’Alexandrie, *Les Stromates: Stromate VII*, ed. A. Le Boulluec, Sources chrétiennes (Paris, 1977), 39-42: “Ἦδη δὲ καιρὸς ἡμᾶς παραστήσαι τοῖς Ἑλλήσι μόνον ὄντως εἶναι θεοσεβῆ τὸν γνωστικόν, ὡς ἀναμαθόντας τοὺς φιλοσόφους, οἷός τις ἐστὶν ὁ τῷ ὄντι Χριστιανός, τῆς ἐαυτῶν ἀμαθίας καταγνῶναι, εἰκὴ μὲν καὶ ὡς ἔτυχεν διώκοντας τοῦνομα, μάτην δὲ ἀθεοὺς ἀποκαλοῦντας <τούς> τὸν τῷ ὄντι θεὸν ἐγνωκότας. Ἐναργετέροις δ’ οἶμαι πρὸς τοὺς φιλοσόφους χρῆσθαι προσήκει τοῖς λόγοις, ὡς ἐπαίειν ἐκ τῆς παρ’ αὐτοῖς παιδείας ἤδη γεγυμνασμένους δυνάσθαι, καὶ εἰ μὴδέπω ἀξιόους ἐαυτοὺς μεταβαλεῖν τῆς τοῦ πιστεῦσαι δυνάμεως παρεσχήκασιν ... Πρόκειται τοίνυν παραστήσαι ἡμῖν μόνον τὸν γνωστικόν ὁσίον τε καὶ εὐσεβῆ, θεοπρεπῶς τὸν τῷ ὄντι θεὸν θρησκεύοντα· τῷ θεοπρεπεῖ δὲ τὸ θεοφιλὲς ἔπεται καὶ φιλόθεον. Τίμιον μὲν οὖν ἅπαν τὸ ὑπερέχον ἡγεῖται κατὰ τὴν ἀξίαν· καὶ τιμητέον ἐν μὲν τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς τοὺς ἄρχοντας καὶ τοὺς γονεῖς καὶ πάντα τὸν πρεσβύτερον, ἐν δὲ τοῖς διδακτοῖς τὴν ἀρχαιοτάτην φιλοσοφίαν καὶ τὴν πρεσβίστην προφητείαν, ἐν δὲ τοῖς νοητοῖς τὸ πρεσβύτερον ἐν γενέσει, τὴν ἄχρονον ἀρχὴν τε καὶ ἀπαρχὴν τῶν ὄντων, τὸν υἱόν· παρ’ οὗ ἐκμανθάνειν τὸ ἐπέκεινα αἴτιον, τὸν πατέρα τῶν ὄλων, τὸ πρέσβιστον καὶ πάντων εὐεργετικώτατον, οὐκέτι φωνῇ παραδιδόμενον, σεβάσματι δὲ καὶ σιγῇ μετὰ ἐκπλήξεως ἀγίας σεβαστὸν καὶ σεπτὸν κυριώτατα. Λεγόμενον μὲν πρὸς τοῦ κυρίου ὡς οἶον τε ἦν ἐπαίειν τοῖς μανθάνουσι, νοούμενον δὲ πρὸς γε τῶν ἐξευλεγμένων εἰς γνῶσιν παρὰ κυρίου, «τῶν τὰ αἰσθητήρια» φησὶν ὁ ἀπόστολος «συγγεγυμνασμένων». The terms ‘Hellene’ and ‘Hellenic’ are used throughout this article to designate ‘Pagans’ and ‘Paganism’.

⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, VII.10.55.1, ed. Le Boulluec, 180: “Ἔστιν γάρ, ὡς ἔπος εἰπεῖν, ἡ γνῶσις τελείωσίς τις ἀνθρώπου ὡς ἀνθρώπου, διὰ τῆς τῶν θείων ἐπιστήμης συμπληρουμένη κατὰ τε τὸν τρόπον καὶ τὸν βίον καὶ τὸν λόγον, σύμφωνος καὶ ὁμόλογος ἐαυτῇ τε καὶ τῷ θεῷ λόγῳ.

⁶ G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, ‘Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?’, *Past and Present* 26 (1963), 9: ‘... I am going to be dogmatic and say that from at least 112 onwards (perhaps, as we have seen, from 64) the normal charge against Christians was simply “being Christians”: they are punished, that is to

those who have known the true God. Clearer arguments, I believe, must be employed towards the philosophers, in order to be able, having already been trained by their own education, to comprehend, despite not yet having presented themselves worthy to partake of the power of believing ... Therefore, we will show that only the knowledgeable acts and thinks piously,⁷ worshipping properly the true God; and that being loved by God and loving God⁸ is followed by offering God-fitting worship. He, thus, considers valued everything excellent according to its worth; and among perceptible beings [he honours] the rulers and parents and all of the elders, while among subjects that can be taught the most ancient philosophy and the most reverend prophecy. Among noetic realities what is more august in the line of creation, the timeless and beginningless principle, the beginning of everything that is: the Son, from whom we learn thoroughly the cause that is beyond, the Father of all, the most august and most beneficent of all, no longer described orally, but reverend and venerable most supremely with sacred wonder and veneration [or in the *sacra*]⁹ and in silence. Described from the Lord as far as those who listened were able to understand, but

say, “for the Name”, the *nomen Christianum*. On the Name of God in the Old Testament, see A. Paparnakis, *Ἡ ἐπικλήση τοῦ ὀνόματος τοῦ Θεοῦ στὴν Παλαιὰ Διαθήκη* (Thessalonike, 2006).

⁷ Despite the extreme similarity between ὁσιος and εὐσεβής in Hellenic religious traditions, there seems to be a tendency to associate ὁσιότης with ritual observance and order, and εὐσέβεια with behaviour, character and state of mind; cf. S. Peels, *Hosios. A Semantic Study of Greek Piety* (Leiden and Boston, 2016), 83-84.

⁸ Rather than using τὸ θεοφιλὲς ἔπεται καὶ φιλόθεον as a pleonasm, Clement seems to imply a progress in the relationship between God and the gnostic, corresponding to his earlier statement that μόνον τὸν γνωστικὸν ὁσιόν τε καὶ εὐσεβῆ, θεοπρεπῶς τὸν τῷ ὄντι θεὸν θρησκεύοντα. The second term is explained a few paragraphs later to denote the gnostic's love to God; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, VII.1.4.1, ed. Le Boulluec, 46: Ταύτη ἄρα φιλόθεός τε τὸ πρῶτον. Ὡς γὰρ ὁ τιμῶν τὸν πατέρα φιλοπάτωρ, οὕτως ὁ τιμῶν τὸν θεὸν φιλόθεος. Quoting Theophrastus (*On Piety*, Fr. 9), Clement writes (ibid., VII.6.34.2, ed. Le Boulluec, 126) that δεῖ τοῖνυν «θυσίας προσφέρειν τῷ θεῷ μὴ πολυτελεῖς, ἀλλὰ θεοφιλεῖς». That θεοφιλῆς is employed by Clement to describe the one loved by God is also clear in Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, II.5.20.1-3, Clément d'Alexandrie, *Les Stromates: Stromate II*, ed. P. Th. Camelot and Cl. Mondésert, Sources chrétiennes (Paris, 1954), 48: Πάντα τοῖνυν τὰ προειρημένα φαίνεται παρὰ Μωυσέως τοῦ μεγάλου ἐπὶ τοὺς Ἕλληνας διαδεδοσθαι δόγματα. Πάντα μὲν οὖν τοῦ σοφοῦ ὑπάρχειν διὰ τούτων διδάσκει· «καὶ διότι ἡλέησέν με ὁ θεός, ἔστι μοι πάντα». Θεοφιλῇ δὲ αὐτὸν μηνύει λέγων· «θεὸς Ἀβραάμ, θεὸς Ἰσαάκ, θεὸς Ἰακώβ». Ὁ μὲν γὰρ «φίλος» ἄντικρυς κεκλημένος εὐρίσκεται, ὃ δὲ «ὀρών τὸν θεόν» μετωνομασμένος δείκνυται· τὸν τε Ἰσαάκ ὡς καθωσιωμένον ἱερεῖον ἀλληγορήσας ἐξελέξατο ἑαυτῷ τύπον ἐσόμενον ἡμῖν οἰκονομίας σωτηρίου. Perhaps the kind of God-Man relationship implied by Clement in his description of the gnostic is the experience and departure of divine grace (θεοεγκατάλειψις or God-forsakenness), leading the believer to seek God with greater love and spiritual zeal: S. Sakharov, *Περὶ Προσευχῆς* (Essex, 1994), 105-6; S. Sakharov, *Ὀψόμεθα τὸν Θεὸν καθὼς ἐστὶ* (Essex, 1996); E. Vatopedinos, *Ἀθωνικὸς Λόγος* (Mt Athos, 2010), 159-75; M. Hogan, ‘Marked Absence: Pneumatic Abandonment as Desert Hermeneutic’, *Religions* 14/642 (2023), 1-11. If this is indeed the case, then Clement's enigmatic phrase may be one of the earliest testimonies on the God-forsakenness theme in the history of Christian asceticism.

⁹ Σεβάσματα could be also rendered as *sacra*, an inclusive Roman term for the sacred objects, scriptures, rites and sacrifices guarded, performed and interpreted by the *pontifex maximus*; F. Van Haepen, ‘Grand prêtre ou hiérophante. Les traductions grecques du terme *pontifex*’, *L'Antiquité Classique* 73 (2004), 149-63. Note that, according to Eusebius in the fourth century (*Ecclesiastical History*, VI.11.6, ed. Chrestou, 246), Clement was a presbyter of the Alexandrian Church.

comprehended more deeply by those selected by the Lord for the knowledge; ‘whose senses’, as the apostle says, ‘were trained’ (Heb. 5:14)”.

Christian distinction between the deceiving nature and even dangers of reality perceptible by the bodily senses, in contrast to the hidden, spiritual, and often scorned truth of God goes back to Paul’s letters (e.g., 1 Cor. 1-3; Gal. 5-6:10),¹⁰ as does the early use of allegory among Christian biblical interpreters (e.g., Gal. 4:21-31 and Heb. 8-10). Jesus’ parables in the Gospels (e.g., Mk 12:1-12) are also forms of allegory.¹¹ Philo’s (d. ca. 50) legacy in Alexandrian Christianity, being a bridge between Judaism and the Hellenic philosophical tradition, with its allegories and concern for analysis and precision, is well known and will not be discussed here.¹² The article aims at mapping the socio-religious arena of Alexandrian Christianity, dominated by heated theological debate and a mosaic of cultural identities in the crucial period between Demetrius’ synod against Origen (232) and Nicaea (325). The examination concentrates on the complex relationship between those Alexandrian Christian believers who stuck with the plain sense of Scripture and those who dared challenge these beliefs by proposing a more figural interpretation. Based on Clement’s definition of the ‘gnostic’, this article argues for the co-existence of different Christian pedagogical currents in Alexandria, manifested and expressed in biblical interpretation by ‘gnostic’ teachers. The geographical scope of this examination is strictly Alexandrian and does not take into consideration other parts of Egypt or the broader Christian world (e.g., Asia Minor and Palestine).

Sometime under Hadrian (117-38) and Antoninus Pius (138-61) Basilides taught in Alexandria a version of Christianity that was considered by many other Christians heterodox and threatening to the true teaching of Christ and the apostles.¹³ From Alexandria, another heterodox Christian teacher, Valentinus, travelled to Rome and attracted disciples sometime between ca. 136 and 166.¹⁴ Basilides, Valentinus, and other teachers of the period were labelled by contemporary and later Christian opponents (Irenaeus of Lyons, Hippolytus of Rome, and Epiphanius of Constantia) ‘gnostics’, to describe those offering—in ways similar to Heraclitus or Plato—instruction, direction, and initiation into superior knowledge. As demonstrated by

¹⁰ E.g., Chr. Karakolis, ‘Σὰρξ’ και ‘πνεῦμα’ στην προς Γαλάτας Επιστολή και στον Γνωστικισμό’, in *Εισηγήσεις Η’ Συνάξεως Ορθοδόξων Βιβλικών Θεολόγων: Η προς Γαλάτας επιστολή του Αποστόλου Παύλου. Προβλήματα μεταφραστικά, φιλολογικά, ιστορικά, ερμηνευτικά, θεολογικά* (Thessalonike, 1997), 155-74.

¹¹ I. E. Ramelli, ‘The role of allegory, allegoresis, and metaphor in Paul and Origen’, *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 14 (2018), 130-57.

¹² E.g., D. T. Runia, *Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey* (Minneapolis, 1993); P. Borgen, *Philo of Alexandria: An Exegete for His Time* (Leiden, New York, and Köln, 1997); A. van den Hoek, ‘The “Catechetical” School of Early Christian Alexandria and its Philonic heritage’, *Harvard Theological Review* 90 (1997), 59-87. On the connection between Homeric hermeneutics and Alexandrian Bible interpretation, see M. R. Niehoff, *Jewish Exegesis and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria* (Cambridge, 2011).

¹³ W. A. Löhr, *Basilides und seine Schule: Eine Studie zur Theologie- und Kirchengeschichte des zweiten Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen, 1996).

¹⁴ C. Marksches, *Valentinus Gnosticus? Untersuchungen zur valentinianischen Gnosis mit einem Kommentar zu den Fragmenten Valentins* (Tübingen, 1992); P. Lampe, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries*, trans. M. Steinhauser (Minneapolis, 2003), 294.

Michael A. Williams, however, none of these groups seems to have ordinarily used ‘gnostic’ as self-designation, either to identify their own community of faith or as an umbrella term for sects with similar characteristics. Even so, there is good reason to think that some of these Christians might have occasionally called themselves ‘gnostics’ to stress the correctness of their beliefs.¹⁵ And it was only with Clement of Alexandria that came a more systematic definition of what it meant to be a gnostic believer against the teachings of Basilides, Valentinus, and the like, and the criticisms of Hellene philosophers.¹⁶

Clement considered himself a member of the ‘Worldwide Assembly’ or ‘Catholic Church’ (καθολικὴ ἐκκλησία),¹⁷ consisting of numerous local communities of Christians meeting and worshipping in their house churches (παροικίαι), which also functioned as ‘schools’ in the tradition of philosophical house-schools.¹⁸ Like other Christian ecclesiastical authors before and after him (e.g., Papias of Hierapolis, Irenaeus of Lyons, Origen, Tertullian, and Basil of Caesarea), Clement claimed to have known Christ’s unwritten teachings. Unlike the teachings of ‘heterodox’ (as viewed by their opponents) Christian masters, however, these oral traditions (ᾠγραφα) were not destined to become a passport for the salvation of only a small circle of advanced spiritual believers; in the words of Guy G. Stroumsa, ‘not only the perfect, or “true gnostics” but also the *simpliciores* partake of salvation, offered by Christ to all who believe in him’.¹⁹ In agreement with Heraclitus’ aphorism that ‘Nature tends

¹⁵ M. A. Williams, *Rethinking ‘Gnosticism’: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton, 1996), 29-53; cf. M. J. Edwards, *Origen against Plato* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2002), 29. For an up-to-date discussion of ‘Gnosticism’, pointing out the difficulty to provide definite answers on its possible origins (e.g., Persian, Hellenic, Jewish or other), see G. W. Trompf, G. B. Mikkelsen, and J. Johnston (eds), *The Gnostic World* (London and New York 2019). On the epistemology and metaphysics of Heraclitus and Plato, see, among numerous studies: H. W. B. Joseph, *Knowledge and the good in Plato’s Republic* (Westport, 1981); C. L. Griswold, *Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Phaedrus* (New Haven, 1986); P. K. Curd, ‘Knowledge and unity in Heraclitus’, *Monist* 74/4 (1991), 531-49; G. Fine, *Plato on Knowledge and Forms: Selected Essays*, (Oxford and New York 2003); P. Stern, *Knowledge and Politics in Plato’s Theaetetus* (Cambridge, 2008); A. Tschemplik, *Knowledge and Self-Knowledge in Plato’s Theaetetus* (New York and London, 2008); A. Cankaya, ‘What is the Source of Knowledge in Heraclitus?’, in E. Fantino, U. Muss, C. Schubert, and K. Sier (eds), *Heraklit im Kontext* (Berlin and Boston, 2017), 303-8.

¹⁶ A. Le Boulluec, *Alexandrie antique et chrétienne. Clément et Origène* (Paris, 2006), 48-49, 60. More generally on Clement, see P. Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria: A Project of Christian Perfection* (London and New York 2008).

¹⁷ Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, VII.18.106.3, ed. Le Boulluec, 318. On ‘Catholic’ meaning ‘world-wide’, see A. Brent, *Ignatius of Antioch and the Second Sophistic. A Study of an Early Christian Transformation of Pagan Culture* (Tübingen, 2006), 7, 213, 229-30, 306. On rendering ἐκκλησία as ‘assembly’, see J. S. Kloppenborg, *Christ’s Associations. Connecting and Belonging in the Ancient City* (New Haven and London, 2019), 20.

¹⁸ For this interpretation, see A. Brent, *Hippolytus and the Roman Church in the Third Century: Communities in Tension Before the Emergence of a Monarch-Bishop* (Leiden and New York, 1995), 401-5.

¹⁹ R. G. G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom. Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Leiden and Boston, 2005), 27-45, 104-5 (quotation at 105), 122 (‘... [Origen] specifies that the *simpliciores* deal with ethics, while the *perfecti* understand the divine secrets’); R. Roukema, *Jesus, Gnosis and Dogma* (London and New York, 2010), 132-44. Writing against Celsus, Origen argued that the prayers of both uneducated (ἰδιῶται) and spiritually advanced (μετὰ λόγου) believers are accepted by God, for both categories are in the process of spiritual ascent (ἀνάβασις); see L. Perrone, ‘Prayer in

to hide itself” and that the Delphic truth ‘is neither revealed nor hidden but rather manifested through signs’,²⁰ the Catholic Christian gnostic was called to penetrate the dark riddles of divine revelation, written or unwritten, so as to discover the light of truth hidden to the many.²¹ On the other hand, the heterodox gnostic was accused by his/her opponents of keeping his or her teachings and practices a communal secret, sharing different versions of a myth with non-initiate sympathisers.²²

In the Catholic gnostic tradition, the ‘mystery’ (μυστήριον or *raza* in Aramaic and the Syrian authors) was essentially restricted to the core message of what would become the canonical New Testament after the fourth century: the Christological interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures, namely the constant presence of the Son in the Old Testament before the Incarnation and the fulfillment of prophecies in Jesus Christ.²³ The totality of the Christian truth was gradually revealed to the believers depending on their status (e.g., catechumens and full members of the ecclesiastical body) and spiritual maturity. In a world that was not yet Catholic Christian, the need to preserve this reverend truth from anti-Christian contempt and attacks made secrecy and careful instruction vital. This is why, as explained by Basil of Caesarea (d. 379) in his *On the Holy Spirit*, Catholic Christians kept for generations some of their doctrines, proclamations, and mysteries unwritten, secret, and obscure;²⁴ not because, we may add, they were elitists or because secrecy was inherent to their beliefs, as in the case of heterodox ‘gnostics’.²⁵

Secrecy and (in)accessibility to divine knowledge, thus, set a concrete boundary between internal and external, ‘us’ and ‘them’. In the eyes of ‘outsiders’ the similarity of such esoteric practices by both Catholic and heterodox gnostics could be misinterpreted. When Origen, being part of the same Catholic gnostic tradition as Clement,²⁶ decided to divide his students into two groups —the less educated (τῶν ἰδιωτικωτέρων or τῶν ἄρτι στοιχειουμένων), who were introduced to encyclical education (ἐπὶ τὰ ἐγκύκλια γράμματα), and those trained in the habit of Christian life (τῶν ἐν ἔξει)— this categorisation seems to have raised suspicion concerning

Origen’s *Contra Celsum*: the knowledge of God and the truth of Christianity’, *Vigiliae Christianae* 55 (2001), 11-12.

²⁰ Heraclitus, Fragments, 8, *Ἡράκλειτος*, ed./comm. E. N. Roussos (Athens, 2000), 52-53 (Φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ), 54-55.14 (Ὁ ἄναξ οὗ τὸ μαντεῖόν ἐστι τὸ ἐν Δελφοῖς, οὔτε λέγει οὔτε κρύπτει ἀλλὰ σημαίνει); Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 93.

²¹ Ibid., 11-26, 92-108.

²² Ibid., 105; A. D. DeConick, ‘Sociology of Gnostic Spirituality’, *Gnosis: Journal of Gnostic Studies* 4 (2019), 39-42.

²³ A. Golitzin, ‘The image and glory of God in Jacob of Serug’s homily “On that chariot that Ezekiel the Prophet saw”’, in: B. Lourié and A. Orlov (eds), *The Theophaneia School: Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism* (Piscataway, 2009), 192-93; Roukema, *Jesus, Gnosis and Dogma*, 143-44.

²⁴ Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, XXVII.66-67, Βασίλειος Καισαρείας, *Δογματικά*, ed. Th. Zisis, *Ἕλληνες Πατέρες τῆς Ἐκκλησίας* (Thessalonike, 1974), 456-64; Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom*, 34-35. According to Basil, tradition is a hermeneutical tool of the true meaning of the Scripture; see M. Varlas, *Ἡ Ἁγία Γραφή καὶ ἡ ἱερὰ παράδοση κατὰ τὸ Μέγα Βασίλειο* (Thessalonike, 1986), 16-17.

²⁵ On secrecy and elitism, see G. Simmel, ‘The sociology of secrecy and of secret societies’, *American Journal of Sociology* 11/4 (1906), 441-98 (esp. at 487).

²⁶ See Introduction in Evagrius of Pontus, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, trans./ann. R. Darling Young, J. Kalvesmaki, C. Stewart, C. Stang, and L. Dysinger (Oxford, 2024), 1-5.

Origen's orthodoxy. As already mentioned, the circulation of *On First Principles* made things worse, eventually resulting in Origen's condemnation.²⁷

Little do we know about the profile of 'simple' believers (ἀπλοί, ἀπλούστεροι, ἀκεραιότεροι, ἰδιῶται, τὸ πλῆθος τῶν πιστευόντων, οἱ πολλοί, ὄχλοι, ἀνεπιστήμονες, and νήπιοι in Origen). Studies by Gunnar af Hällstöm, Peter W. Martens, Adele Monaci Castagno, Dragos Andrei Giulea, Judith L. Kovacs, Benjamin A. Edsall, and Attila Jakab suggest that these Christians were of low social status, did not belong to the group of *honestiores*, and probably favoured an anthropomorphic understanding of the Scriptures, which was closer to Second Temple Judaism.²⁸ The gradual prominence of the simple in Alexandria during Origen's time might have been an indirect consequence of the Septimian persecution of 202, which targeted mainly members of the elite, forcing Christian *honestiores* to flee the city.²⁹ But how are we to understand anthropomorphism?

Two kinds of this tendency, most often indistinguishable, existed in Early Christianity. On the one hand, since the times of the Old Testament anthropomorphic believers sought a tangible, so to speak, and corporeal perception of a God who was at the same time transcendent and could not be worshipped in idols. This contradiction created tension within the Hebrew tradition, which explains the co-existence of anthropomorphic and non-anthropomorphic references in the Bible.³⁰ A sub-trend

²⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.15, 18.2-4, ed. Chrestou, 258, 260-62; Nautin, *Origène*, 48; Jakab, 'The Social History', 125-26. A basic level of education was necessary for studying and interpreting the Scriptures; see, e.g., L. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy. An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, 2004), 35-36. On Origen as a gnostic, see P. W. Martens, *Origen and Scripture. The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford, 2012), 110.

²⁸ G. af Hällstöm, *Fides simpliciorum according to Origen of Alexandria* (Helsinki, 1984); A. M. Castagno (ed.), *Origene: Dizionario. La cultura, il pensiero, le opere* (Rome, 2000), 440-43, s.v. 'Semplici'; Martens, *Origen and Scripture*; D. A. Giulea, 'Simpliciores, Eruditi, and the Noetic Form of God: Pre-Nicene Christology Revisited', *Harvard Theological Review* 108 (2015), 263-88; J. L. Kovacs, 'Reading the "Divinely Inspired" Paul: Clement of Alexandria in Conversation with "Heterodox" Simple Believers and Greek Philosophers', in V. Černušková, J. L. Kovacs, J. Plátová, and V. Hušek (eds), *Clement's Biblical Exegesis: Proceedings of the Second Colloquium on Clement of Alexandria (Olomouc, 29-31 May 2014)* (Leiden and Boston, 2014), 325-43; B. A. Edsall, *The Reception of Paul and Early Christian Initiation: History and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge, 2019), 165-68; Jakab, 'The Social History', 111-13.

²⁹ A. Rousselle, 'La persécution des chrétiens à Alexandrie au III^e siècle', *Revue historique de droit français et étranger* 52 (1974), 222-51; Jakab, 'The Social History', 113-15. On the historicity of the persecution, see W. Kinzig, *Christian Persecution in Antiquity*, trans. M. Bockmuehl (Waco, 2021), 67-72; R. S. Bagnall, 'The emergence of the Alexandrian church, then city bishops; The persecutions of Christians', in R. S. Bagnall (ed.), *Roman Egypt: A History* (Cambridge, 2021), 152. Even before the Septimian persecution, the simple might have been already an important part of the Christian community of Alexandria in terms of numbers. We should keep in mind that their visibility to the modern historian largely depends on what Clement and Origen say about this particular social group.

³⁰ A. Orlov and A. Golitzin, '"Many lamps are lightened from the one": paradigms of the transformational vision in the Macarian homilies', in Lourié and Orlov (eds), *The Theophaneia School*, 215. Apart from Lourié and Orlov's edited volume, bibliography on biblical anthropomorphism includes: T. N. D. Mettinger, *The Dethronement of Sabaoth: Studies in the Shem and Kabod Theologies* (Lund, 1982); Paparnakis, *Ἡ ἐπικλήση*; A. K. Knafl, *Forming God: Divine Anthropomorphism in the Pentateuch* (University Park, 2014); C. T. Fritsch, *Anti-Anthropomorphism in the Greek Pentateuch* (New Jersey, 2016); M. S. Smith, *Where the Gods Are. Spatial Dimensions of Anthropomorphism in the Biblical World* (New Haven and London, 2016). Much like Hebrew non-anthropomorphites, Xenophanes of Colophon (d. ca. 478 BCE) was critical towards anthropomorphism

among Christian anthropomorphites influenced by the Hebrew tradition was the heterodox reading of divine anthropomorphism in the Old Testament as a manifestation of the inferior, demiurgic Creator.³¹

On the other hand, there were those who, due to theological illiteracy and difficulty in comprehending the subtle philosophical language employed in Scriptural exegesis (in turn, the result of low socio-economic status),³² misunderstood what they read, filtering everything through the text's 'plain' sense.³³ Origen was particularly concerned with the proper interpretation of the Scriptures and with guiding the simple through their journey of spiritual ascent.³⁴ Yet in the end, his structured curriculum for gradual initiation into the mysteries of faith backfired.³⁵

While acknowledging the polemical and rhetorical use of 'simplicity' in debates over faith, Jack Tannous argues that within Late Antique Christian communities, there seem to have existed different layers of understanding and engaging with highly complex theological teachings and doctrines.³⁶ One layer in the stromatography was that of informal dispute and discussion among common people. In this case, polemical exchanges were mostly conversational and presented a tendency for labelling the 'other' in negative ways. The majority of evidence concerning this kind of non-elite interaction and conflict has been lost to the modern scholar.³⁷ Another layer was created by the instrumentalisation of Hellenic *paideia* in the decoding of theological works: here we are dealing with small circles of cultural elites.³⁸ According to Tannous, the vertical line of knowledge layering is crossed by a horizontal axis encompassing the plurality of theological viewpoints among cultural elites and visualising their lack of agreement on what is orthodox.³⁹

Gnostic and simple believers represented the kind of knowledge layering described by Tannous. The upper part of the vertical axis is occupied by gnostic believers, while the lower part indicates the simple in faith. The diversity of theological positions between supporters and opponents of Origen and his theology is

in the epic; see, e.g., P. Feyerabend, 'Xenophanes and the Homeric Gods', *The Kenyon Review* 9/4 (1987), 12-22.

³¹ Martens, *Origen and Scripture*, 130.

³² Ibid., 28.

³³ J. Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East. Religion, Society, and Simple Believers* (Princeton and Oxford, 2018), 11-81 (mostly for later centuries). On the distinction between 'literal' and 'plain' sense, see Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 32.

³⁴ M. Sheridan, *Language for God in Patristic Tradition: Wrestling with Biblical Anthropomorphism* (Downers Grove, 2015).

³⁵ In her study on Ammonius Saccas (d. 242) and the Ammonian philosophical community, E. DePalma Digeser, *A threat to public piety: Christians, Platonists, and the Great Persecution* (Ithaca and London, 2012) proposed (at 145) that similarities between Christian and Hellene Ammonians in the third century CE alarmed Christians outside the Ammonian tradition, in which Origen belonged, since 'Origenists ... looked more like Hellenes than Christians'. These similarities included (at 14-17): (a) the allegorical interpretation of texts; (b) the belief that the world of the senses was an image of the divine world; (c) rejection or reluctance to accept traditional religious rituals, especially blood sacrifices; (d) commitment to the 'true philosophy' of their spiritual mentor and guide (Hermes, Pythagoras, Plato, and Jesus Christ).

³⁶ Tannous, *The Making of the Medieval Middle East*, 57-58.

³⁷ Ibid., 129, 436.

³⁸ Ibid., 220.

³⁹ Ibid., 228 (on Islam).

demonstrated with a horizontal line, the two extremes of which signify various degrees of reception and opposing approaches to Origen's legacy. The horizontal axis also shows the relationship between non-elite believers and cultural elites in relation to Origenian theology: while some of the simple were closer to Origen's views, others (e.g., the anthropomorphites) rejected his figural hermeneutics. The knowledge layering model suggests that —far from being homogenous— Christian identities were subject to 'competitive tendencies';⁴⁰ it is, thus, more accurate to speak of 'tendencies', rather than fixed 'groups' of 'Origenists' or 'anti-Origenists'. This is also the case with 'educated' and 'illiterate' Christians: Origen's theology (or its polemical denouncement) penetrated all cultural strata, from simple to gnostic believers, regardless of the way they identified themselves.

How did this happen? Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339), an apologist of Origen and his theology,⁴¹ downgrades the degree of Alexandrian opposition against Origen after 232. Following the narration of Origen's expulsion in the *Ecclesiastical History*, Eusebius remains very laconic and even silent concerning the stance of Alexandrian bishops towards Origen and his students. However, we know that for the rest of the third century, catechetical teaching in Alexandria was firmly controlled by the episcopate, following a similar Roman tendency for ecclesiastical centralisation and legitimation.⁴² Heraclas, who had been responsible for instructing the simple under Origen before assuming the full directorship of the Alexandrian School⁴³ and is praised by Eusebius as a Christian philosopher, became a bridge between non-elite Christians and their ecclesiastical leadership, eventually succeeding Demetrius.⁴⁴ Heraclas' attack on Origen, not mentioned by Eusebius, is indicative of his alienation from his master's person and teachings.⁴⁵ In 247, Heraclas was himself succeeded by his presbyter Dionysius (247-64), another erudite bishop glorified by Eusebius' pen and used by him as a source in the *Ecclesiastical History*. This former student of

⁴⁰ Cf. Kloppenborg, *Christ's Associations*, 151.

⁴¹ Not least for defending his own Trinitarian views and Caesarean tradition beginning with Origen, as well as the model of institutionalised Christian learning under the bishop-philosopher; see, Nautin, *Origène*, 21, 25-26; T. C. Ferguson, *The Past is Prologue: The Revolution of Nicene Historiography* (Leiden and Boston, 2005), 17, 47-56; M. J. Hollerich, *Making Christian History: Eusebius of Caesarea and His Readers* (Oakland, 2021), 268 (n. 140); Kyriacou, 'On the Origins of the Alexandrian School', 6-7.

⁴² Davis, *The Early Coptic Papacy*, 27; Kyriacou, 'On the Origins of the Alexandrian School', 1-27.

⁴³ By 'Alexandrian School' I refer to what was probably a household-church (or churches) functioning also as a school(s); cf. Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, V.45-46, Sokrates, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. G. C. Hansen and M. Sirinjan (Berlin, 1995), 301: Αὐθις δὲ ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ τῇ τετράδι καὶ τῇ λεγομένῃ παρασκευῇ γραφαὶ τε ἀναγινώσκονται καὶ οἱ διδάσκαλοι ταύτας ἐρμηνεύουσιν, πάντα τε τὰ συνάξεως γίνεται δίχα τῆς τῶν μυστηρίων τελετῆς. Καὶ τοῦτο ἐστὶν ἐν Ἀλεξανδρείᾳ ἔθος ἀρχαῖον· καὶ γὰρ Ὀριγένης τὰ πολλὰ ἐν ταύταις ταῖς ἡμέραις φαίνεται ἐπὶ τῆς ἐκκλησίας διδάξας. We may assume that curriculum was divided into elementary training under a grammarian and more advanced teaching under a philosopher/theologian; see, generally, Kyriacou, 'On the Origins of the Alexandrian School', 7-11.

⁴⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.3.2, 15, 19.13, 26, 29.4, 31.2, 35, ed. Chrestou, 224-26, 256-58, 268, 284, 288, 290, 294-96; Jakab, 'The Social History', 129.

⁴⁵ The main source for this is Jerome, *Letter* 32, col. 447.

Origen had been a close associate of Heraclas as scholarch;⁴⁶ as a bishop he corresponded with other bishops throughout the Roman Empire, studying and refuting the works of ‘heretics’, and instructing his flock on the ‘correct’ faith.⁴⁷ Given the two men’s collaboration and interdependence, it is reasonable to think that Dionysius shared Heraclas’ public renunciation of Origen’s theology.⁴⁸ Yet, following Wolfgang A. Bienert’s assumption, Origen’s death as a confessor in ca. 253 must have added to the master’s reputation in Alexandria as a virtuous ‘gnostic’ teacher and ‘orthodox’ biblical interpreter.⁴⁹ A positive image of Origen must have been also promoted by some of his former students, who became bishops in various sees.⁵⁰

Eusebius implies (quoting passages from Dionysius) that, in Dionysius’ struggle against Nepos’ millenarism, the Alexandrian bishop had defended allegory, namely the same gnostic method employed by Clement and Origen.⁵¹ Indeed, a critical application of allegorical exegesis on his part for anti-heretical purposes seems quite likely.⁵² The next bishops were Maximus (264-82) and Theonas (282-300). The last decades of the third century were marked by the activity of the presbyter Pierius, who interpreted the Scriptures before the Alexandrian congregation using the allegorical method, and Achilles, another presbyter-philosopher, and scholarch.⁵³ With Pierius, whose lapse from the faith goes unrecorded in Eusebius,⁵⁴ we have a biblical interpreter in Alexandria, who was remembered at the time of Jerome (d. 420) as *Origenes iunior*.⁵⁵ This suggests that Origen’s ‘gnostic’ legacy began to be once more visible in the city.⁵⁶ Around the same period, perhaps a bit earlier than Pierius, another Alexandrian ‘gnostic’, Theognostus, followed Origen’s method and views.

⁴⁶ Although not mentioned in the sources as the title for the head of the Alexandrian School (προϊστάμενος τοῦ διδασκαλείου), the term ‘scholarch’ (σχολάρχης) is employed here as a synonym, due to its use in English and conceptual relationship with Hellenic philosophical schools.

⁴⁷ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VI.35, 40-42, 44-46, ed. Chrestou, 294-96, 302-18, 328-34; *ibid.*, VII.Preface-1, 4-11, 20-26, Εὐσεβίου Καισαρείας, *Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Ἱστορία (Ζ’-Ι’)*, ed. P. Chrestou (Thessalonike, 1978), 8-10, 12-38, 50-78; Jerome, *On illustrious men*, LXIX, Ἱερώνυμος, *De viris illustribus. Πηγὲς καὶ πρότυπα*, ed. C. Siamakis (Thessalonike, 1992), 206. Two letters attributed to Dionysius are preserved in Armenian and were published by F. C. Conybeare, ‘Newly discovered letters of Dionysius of Alexandria to the Popes Stephen and Xystus’, *The English Historical Review* 25 (1910), 111-14.

⁴⁸ W. A. Bienert, *Dionysius von Alexandrien. Zur Frage des Origenismus in Dritten Jahrhundert* (Berlin and New York, 1978), 106, 222-23.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 222.

⁵⁰ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII.14, ed. Chrestou, 42; Stavrides, ‘Αἱ ὀριγενιστικαὶ ἔριδες’, 561-63.

⁵¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII.24-25, ed. Chrestou, 42-76.

⁵² Bienert, *Dionysius von Alexandrien*, 196-200, is reluctant to accept Dionysius as an allegorist; cf. Stavrides, ‘Αἱ ὀριγενιστικαὶ ἔριδες’, 560.

⁵³ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII.11, 28.3, 30, 32.26-27, 32.30, ed. Chrestou, 26-38, 82-94, 108, 110.

⁵⁴ J. Barns and H. Chadwick, ‘A letter ascribed to Peter of Alexandria’, *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 24:2 (1973), 446. A later tradition considers Pierius and his brother, Isidore, martyrs; Philip of Side, *Fragments*, VII, *Neue Fragmente des Papias, Hegesippus und Pierius in bisher unbekannten Excerpten aus der Kirchengeschichte des Philippus Sidetes*, ed. C. de Boor (Piscataway, 1889), 170-71. Note that Pierius was mentor to Pamphilus (d. 309), Eusebius’ own mentor; Photius, *Library*, CXVIII, ed. Henry, 92.

⁵⁵ Jerome, *On illustrious men*, LXXVI, ed. Siamakis, 212: *Origenes iunior vocaretur*. On Origen’s influence on Pierius, see also Photius, *Library*, CXCIX, ed. Henry, 92-94.

⁵⁶ Bienert, *Dionysius von Alexandrien*, 222.

Although criticised by Photius (d. 897), for whom the name Origen was synonym to ‘heresy’, both Theognostus and Origen were praised by Athanasius of Alexandria (328-73, with interruptions) for their erudition and commitment to “orthodoxy” (d. 373).⁵⁷ It is not clear whether Peter (300-11), who took office after Theonas and was martyred, had been —like Heraclas and Dionysius— a scholarch;⁵⁸ this is not mentioned by Eusebius, who nevertheless praises Peter for his virtue and knowledge of the Scriptures.⁵⁹ In addition, Eusebius says nothing about Peter’s perception of Origen and his teachings. From the surviving fragments of Peter’s works, it seems that he refuted heretical teachings attributed to Origen by his opponents, including the pre-existence of the souls and subordinationism. Justinian (527-65) in his attack on Origen, his theological *bête noire*, considered Peter an enemy of Origen.⁶⁰

Eusebius does not specify whether Achilles the scholarch became bishop for six months after Peter’s martyrdom. Given the Alexandrian succession tradition from scholarch to bishop, this scenario seems possible.⁶¹ We assume that Eusebius’ silence on the matter may be linked to the fact that Achilles the bishop (312) had pardoned Arius, a supporter of Melitius of Lycopolis (d. 327), who refused to accept lapsed Christians into communion; it was perhaps under the same bishop that Arius was ordained presbyter.⁶²

To conclude, this survey has shown that, far from being completely eradicated from Alexandria, the memory of Origen and the practices and values of the Catholic ‘gnostic’ tradition were very much alive at the beginning of the fourth century. This is not to say that all Catholic ‘gnostics’ followed or rejected Origen. Like the richness of

⁵⁷ *Reliquiae sacrae*, vol. 3, ed. M. J. Routh (Oxford, 1815), 217-30 (fragments of Theognostus and Athanasius’ reference); Photius, *Library*, CVI, ed. Henry, 72-74; Stavrides, ‘Αἱ ὀριγενιστικαὶ ἐριδες’, 565; J. A. Munitiz, ‘A fragment attributed to Theognostus’, *Journal of Theological Studies* NS 30:1 (1979). On Athanasius’ statement, see S. Athanasii, *De Decretis Nicenae Synodi*, *Patrologia Graeca* 25, coll. 460BC, 465B-468A.

⁵⁸ An assumption made by T. Vivian, *Saint Peter of Alexandria: Bishop and Martyr* (Philadelphia, 1988), 11-12.

⁵⁹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Ecclesiastical History*, VII.32.31, VIII.13.7, IX.6.2, ed. Chrestou, 110, 156, 194.

⁶⁰ *Reliquiae sacrae*, vol. 3, ed. Routh, 319-72 (Greek fragments of Peter’s works); Stavrides, ‘Αἱ ὀριγενιστικαὶ ἐριδες’, 566-67.

⁶¹ For a different view, see T. D. Barnes, *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1981), 202: ‘Since Eusebius wrote the relevant passage after Peter of Alexandria had died, his failure to record that his Achilles became bishop in Peter’s stead inevitably implies that his Achilles is not the bishop. But if Eusebius’ Achilles is identical with Arius’ associate, he provides a link between Arius and Pierius, the teacher of Pamphilus’. Achilles the associate of Arius was a different person than Achilles the bishop (his name follows that of Arius and he is mentioned as a presbyter by Sozomenus and as a deacon by Theodoret): Sozomenus, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.15.6-7, Σαλαμίνιου Ἐρμείου Σωζομενοῦ, *Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Ἱστορία (Α'-Δ')*, ed. C. Chrestou (Thessalonike, 1995), 94; Theodoret of Cyrus, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.3.1, 4.36.6, 4.56.14-15, 4.61.8, Theodoret, *Kirchengeschichte*, ed. L. Parmentier (Leipzig, 1911), 9, 18, 23, 25. On Arius and the Melitians, see also R. Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 2002), 39. The brief period of Achilles’ tenure may be another reason for not being mentioned as a bishop by Eusebius. On his short period of episcopate, see Severus of Hermopolis, *History*, ed./trans. B. Evetts, ‘History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria, II’, *Patrologia Orientalis* 1 (1904), 401-2.

⁶² This piece of information comes from Sozomenus, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.15.1-2, ed. Chrestou, 90-92. The tenth-century *History*, attributed to Severus of Hermopolis, agrees with Sozomenus; Severus of Hermopolis, *History*, ed./trans. Evetts, 401-2. According to Theodoret of Cyrus, *Ecclesiastical History*, I.2.8-9, ed. Parmentier, 6, Arius became presbyter under Achilles’ successor Alexander.

colour of a tulip's petals, the reception of Origen among Catholic 'gnostics' included different shades of brightness or darkness.⁶³ Different layers and degrees of Origenian influence co-existed, depending on the social role and responsibilities of the historical actor receiving it: Heraclas, Dionysius and Peter the bishops were more or less part of the earlier 'gnostic' tradition but chose to publicly distance themselves from Origen; Theognostus, Pierius and perhaps also Achillas, on the other hand, were more free to dive into the 'gnostic' scholastic legacy surviving under episcopal supervision and anti-Origenian criticism. It is this very legacy that shaped the history of Christian instruction, asceticism and biblical interpretation in Egypt and beyond; but that is another story.⁶⁴

⁶³ A non-Alexandrian opponent of Origen not examined here, Methodius of Olympus (ca. 311), was himself influenced by Origen's writings but rejected some of the teachings attributed to him, 'tending toward more biblical literalism than found in Alexandrian-type developments in the cosmological background of Christian theology': J. F. Dechow, 'Methodius' conceptual world in his treatise *De resurrectione*', in K. Bracht (ed.), *Methodius of Olympus. State of the art and new perspectives* (Berlin and Boston, 2017), 126. On Methodius and Origen's legacy, see also Digeser, *A threat to public piety*, 128-63, esp. at 157-59. This article does not examine the possible dispute over Origen between Palestinian and Egyptian confessors, leading to Pamphylus' (d. 310) *Apology for Origen*: Introduction in Pamphylus, *Apology for Origen with the letter of Rufinus on the falsification of the books of Origen*, trans. T. P. Scheck (Washington, D.C., 2010), 5-8.

⁶⁴ The anti-Arian Didymus the Blind (d. ca. 398) seems to have been a scholar of the Alexandrian School and was praised by Anthony the Great (d. 356); Sozomenus, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.15.1-10, ed. Chrestou, 326-30. Evagrius of Pontus (d. 399) called Didymus "great and gnostic teacher" (μέγας καὶ γνωστικός διδάσκαλος Δίδυμος); Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History*, IV.70, ed. Hansen and Sirinjan, 256. On Didymus among Evagrius' teachers, see also Evagrius, *The Gnostic Trilogy*, trans./ann. Darling Young et al., 16-19, 96, 209-10, 141-43. On the possible influence of Origen on Anthony, despite Athanasius' hagiographical depiction of Anthony as a divinely-instructed and 'simple' ascetic, see S. Rubenson, *The Letters of St. Antony. Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis, 1995). On the clash between 'Origenists' and anthropomorphites after Evagrius' death in 399, see P. A. Patterson, *Visions of Christ. The Anthropomorphite Controversy of 399 CE* (Tübingen, 2012).