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**Ἰχνος ἐνθουσιασμοῦ Origen, Plato and the inspired Scriptures\***

*Inspiration as a subjective criterion:  
the evidence of the act of reading*

No other text in Origen's quite considerable complex of writings displays a methodological awareness of the kind we meet in the fourth book of *Perì archôn* (IV, 1-3)<sup>1</sup>. It is indeed his *discours de la méthode* as a commentator of the Bible, though other important pronouncements on the same subject may be found throughout his work. Already in antiquity they had been collected in the anthology called the *Philokalia*, and there are some modern equivalents<sup>2</sup>. The "Treatise on Biblical Hermeneutics", however, offers the best introduction to the way Origen treats the inspired Scriptures, first delivering an explanation of their divine character and then recommending the criteria for an interpretation of the Holy Scriptures to conform exactly to that character<sup>3</sup>. Partly because of its well-known hermeneutical schemes (first and foremost, the threefold sense of the Scriptures), this impressive presentation attracts the Alexandrian's readers, who normally do not perceive the tensions hidden within his discourse. In reality, despite the systematic effort he clearly deploys here, he does not wholly succeed in overcoming the problems raised by setting up certain polarities in his arguments. I will limit myself only to one aspect of them, concerning the first section of the Treatise (*PArch* IV, 1) devoted to establishing the inspired nature of the Christian Scriptures.

In this case the polarity is the result of the intersection of two different lines of reasoning. His main one relies on the link between prophecy and history, applying a traditional apologetic argument to the problem of inspiration. The coming of Jesus Christ and the spread of Christianity throughout the *oikoumene* confirm the prophecies in the Scriptures, and for the same reason supply a proof of their divine character<sup>4</sup>. The emphasis is therefore on the apologetic, objective demonstration provided by the course of history and by its retroactive justification in the Old Testament, as well as in the preaching of Jesus and the apostles. On the other hand, Origen hints at a different approach to the claim that the Christian Scriptures are divinely inspired. He also argues for a subjective experience of the same thing, in that reading the "prophetic texts" with particular care and attention can lead readers to "experience" within themselves "the trace of the divine inspiration" (ἰχνος ἐνθουσιασμοῦ)<sup>5</sup>.

In Origen's formulation this subjective, personal criterion seems more a tentative suggestion than a well-rounded thesis, since he abandons it immediately after introducing it. The development of his reflection on inspiration reverts to the "objective" criterion provided by the relation between prophecy and history. We may then wonder what weight we should give to this point. Is Origen not wholly convinced by it, since his emphasis falls on Christ as the only key to our understanding the Scriptures? Do the prophecies

\* I would like to thank Prof. Charles Hindley (University of Bologna) for the final revision of the English text.

<sup>1</sup> Regarding the problem of "method" in Origen, see my article: *Metodo*, in A. MONACI CASTAGNO (ed.), *Origene. Dizionario: la cultura, il pensiero, le opere*, Roma 2000, 276-281. I quote *Perì archôn* (= *PArch*) from the edition of P. KOETSCHAU (GCS 22, Leipzig 1913).

<sup>2</sup> With regard to the *Philokalia*, see especially the first pzig 1913).

<sup>3</sup> With regard to the *Philokalia*, see especially art (chapters 1-20): *Origène. Philocalie, 1-20. Sur les Ecritures*, ed. M. HARL, SC 302, Paris 1983. For modern equivalents of the *Philokalia*, see, for instance, H.U. VON BALTHASAR, *Geist und Feuer*, Freiburg 1991<sup>3</sup> and U. NERI (ed.), *Origene. Testi ermeneutici*, Bologna 1996.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the structure and themes of *PArch* IV, 1-3, see my contribution: *L'argomentazione di Origene nel Trattato di ermeneutica biblica. Note di lettura su Περὶ ἀρχῶν IV 1-3*, in "Studi Classici e Orientali", 40 (1990) 161-203.

<sup>5</sup> From its beginnings, apologetic discourse held up the success of Christianity among the Gentiles as major evidence of the divine origin of the new religion and its message. Origen himself will often point to it in *Contra Celsum*: see H. CHADWICK, *The Evidence of Christianity in the Apologetic of Origen*, in *Studia Patristica*, II, Berlin 1957, 331-339.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. *PArch* IV, 1, 6 (302.4-5).

of the Old Testament manifest their inspired character only through God's revelation in his Son and as a consequence of a preceding faith in Christ? Or is the relevance of the act of reading necessarily played down by the apologetic stance of the "Treatise", which obliges Origen to rest upon undisputed factors? We should probably look for an answer in this latter direction, though apologetic concerns may of themselves be ambivalent, inasmuch as they are directed not only against the pagans, but also against the Jews. According to Hermann Josef Vogt, it is precisely the polemic against the Jews which prevents Origen from whole-heartedly accepting the second criterion of inspiration<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, the claims of a subjective verification of the inspired Scriptures "through the act of reading itself" (ἐξ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἀναγινώσκειν) lead him to accept a point of view already expressed within the spiritual horizons of Hellenism. Origen's view has a very important parallel in the ideas formulated by Plato in his dialogue *Ion*, and is probably not devoid of Aristotelian echoes. Both directions lead us, on the other hand, to discover one of the most characteristic aspects of Origen's conception of the Holy Scriptures.

*Plato's paradigm for interpretation:  
the spiritual magnetism of inspiration*

If we go back to Origen's formulations regarding the "trace of inspiration" in the Bible and the "experience" that spiritually alert readers are able to make of this, we can detect the influence of philosophical sources both in the language and in the ideas. The closest parallel is apparently to be found in Plato's *Ion*, where the philosopher elaborates an analogous paradigm for interpreting Homer's poetry. In the course of the dialogue Socrates leads the rhapsode Ion to recognize the true factors required for both the proper interpretation of Homer's verses and its empathetic reception on the part of the hearers. The main point is that the *hermeneia* does not derive from the possession of a "technique" (τέχνη) or a "science" (ἐπιστήμη), but from a "divine power" (θεία δύναμις)<sup>8</sup>. This is originally at work in the poet himself and then operates in his interpreter as well as in his hearers, thus creating a truly magnetic chain (an example chosen by Plato himself) of inspired dynamism as the indispensable premise for participating in the process<sup>9</sup>. The poet, the interpreter and the hearer all enjoy, as a consequence, what should be called an "ecstatic" experience (which of course at first sight recalls what Origen terms ἐνθουσιασμός)<sup>10</sup>. It is precisely this ecstatic experience which leads the hearers and/or the readers to recognize that they have to do not with merely human work, but with something divinely inspired<sup>11</sup>.

Plato's hermeneutical paradigm, on the one hand, reflects a common assumption of ancient hermeneutics, which is best summarised in the axiom *simile a simili*, according to which knowledge is possible only on the basis of a certain similarity between subject and object. A methodological conviction of this sort is generally shared unproblematically by both pagan and Christian authors. In other words, only a spiritual reader is able to grasp the deep meaning of the inspired Scriptures<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, Plato's perspective focuses on the transcendent nature of the inspired text more than on subjective perception or the personal prerequisites required for that, which is the case in Origen's treatise. Yet for both of them we have to do with a process that enables us to recognise that a specific text (Homer's poetry or

<sup>6</sup> While for M. SIMONETTI (*I Principi di Origene*, Torino 1968, 491 n. 32) this second proof, "avanzata con discrezione" [put forward discreetly], depends in a general sense on the hermeneutical presupposition of spiritual disposition (*simile a simili*), M. HARL sees it as an experience of those who already believe in Christ (*Philocalie*, 65).

<sup>7</sup> "Zusammenfassend möchte ich festhalten, daß Origenes offenbar durch die Auseinandersetzung mit den Juden so geprägt war, daß er sein ganzes Leben hindurch... bei der Überzeugung geblieben ist, erst das Christusereignis lasse die alttestamentliche Offenbarung als solche erkennen, obwohl er in einem gewissen Widerspruch dazu behauptet, das Alte Testament könne auch unmittelbar als inspiriert erkannt werden" (H.J. VOGT, *Die Lehre des Origenes von der Inspiration der Heiligen Schrift. Ein Vergleich zwischen der Grundlagenschrift und der Antwort auf Kelsos*, in "Theologische Quartalschrift", 170 [1990] 99-100).

<sup>8</sup> Ἄλλὰ παντὶ δῆλον ὅτι τέχνη καὶ ἐπιστήμη περὶ Ὀμήρου λέγειν ἀδύνατον (*Ion*, 532 c; cfr. also p. 542 b: θεῖον εἶναι καὶ μὴ τεχνικὸν περὶ Ὀμήρου ἐπαινέτην).

<sup>9</sup> Οὕτω δὲ καὶ ἡ Μούσα ἐνθέους μὲν ποιεῖ αὐτή, διὰ δὲ τῶν ἐνθέων τούτων ἄλλων ἐνθουσιαζόντων ὄρμαθός ἐξαρτᾶται (*ibid.*, 533 e).

<sup>10</sup> Plato highlights the ecstatic condition of the poet and his interpreter, by noting the fact that they abandon their "mind" (νοῦς): κοῦφον γὰρ χρῆμα ποιητῆς ἐστὶν καὶ πτηνὸν καὶ ἱερὸν, καὶ οὐ πρότερον οἷός τε ποιεῖν πρὶν ἂν ἐνθεὸς τε γένηται καὶ ἔμφρων καὶ ὁ νοῦς μηκέτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐνῆ (*ibid.*, 534 b).

<sup>11</sup> Ἐν τούτῳ γὰρ δὴ μάλιστα μοι δοκεῖ ὁ θεὸς ἐνδείξασθαι ἡμῖν, ἵνα μὴ διστάζωμεν, ὅτι οὐκ ἀνθρώπινά ἐστιν τὰ καλὰ ταῦτα ποιήματα οὐδὲ ἀνθρώπων, ἀλλὰ θεῖα καὶ θεῶν, οἱ δὲ ποιηταὶ οὐδὲν ἄλλ' ἢ ἐρμηνῆς εἰσὶν τῶν θεῶν (*Ion*, 534 e). According to H.J. VOGT, *Die Lehre des Origenes von der Inspiration der Heiligen Schrift...*, 97, Origen's critical approach to Plato's thought may be ascertained already at the start of his argument on behalf of the inspired Scriptures. In this sense, Origen would set the diffusion of the Christian doctrine on God against Plato's statement in *Timaeus* 28 C 3-5 (the impossibility of making God known to everybody).

<sup>12</sup> H. DÖRRIE, *Zur Methodik antiker Exegese*, in "Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft", 65 (1974) 121-138.

the Bible) is not merely human. Origen expresses this result almost in the same words in the passage of the Treatise under discussion<sup>13</sup>.

If Plato's model of inspired Scriptures has to be regarded as the nearest parallel to Origen's hermeneutical pattern in *PArch* IV, 1, 6, there may be another philosophical influence present. Scholars have pointed to a possible allusion to a lost writing of Aristotle, the *Peri philosophias*. In a fragment preserved by Synesius of Cyrene, we find a wording similar to some expressions of the Treatise. Synesius' autobiographical treatise *Dion* quotes Aristotle when comparing the author's way of life as a well-educated humanist, fond of the Greek *paideia*, to the conduct of the religious. The latter do not aim to attain an intellectual education, but are eager for an initiate's immediate experience of the divine<sup>14</sup>. The key-word in the passage, taken over (probably not literally) from Aristotle's work, is παθεῖν, which of course may be echoed by Origen's formulations (παθῶν... Ἰχνος ἐνθουσιασμοῦ, δι' ὧν πάσχει...) <sup>15</sup>. A point common both to Plato and to Aristotle is the fact that this kind of experience occurs without the involvement of the mind. Also for Aristotle, then, we may speak here of an ecstatic condition.

It is not my intention to contend that Origen relies directly upon the two Greek philosophers for his idea of a subjective experience and personal recognition of the inspired nature of the Holy Scriptures (though in my opinion this seems to be quite certain, at least with Plato's *Ion*). I am concerned rather to see how such evident affinities with Plato and Aristotle function within Origen's writings and thought. If the experience of inspiration is understood as a kind of ecstatic participation by the reader, analogous to the experience originally made by the prophet or by the hagiographer of the Sacred Writings, we should try to clarify further the Alexandrian's view of ἐνθουσιασμός and his general attitude towards ἔκστασις. Both subjects are of course important for Origen, especially concerning the distinctive nature of Jewish-Christian prophecy compared to pagan (as is the case in his dispute with Celsus). But they also impinge more generally upon the views he has of the relation between God and man, the realm of the divine, and human existence, with its final goal of spiritual perfection. We shall note Origen's significant efforts to distinguish the biblical view of inspiration and ecstasy from that of the pagan world. To avoid an all-embracing exhaustive investigation, I shall try to link further elaboration with our initial approach: the experience of reading (or hearing) the Scriptures as a way to infer their divine character.

### *The effectiveness of the inspired Scriptures*

The word itself occurs rather seldom in Origen's writings. There are only a few mentions of ἐνθουσιασμός and the related verb ἐνθουσιᾶν in the *Commentary on John* (= *ComIoh.*) and the *Against Celsus* (*CC*). Before we examine these passages, we should try to collect at least some of the evidence regarding the effects of the act of reading, a subject dealt with in many of his other works. As already stated, the προσοχή recommended by *PArch* IV, 1, 6 describes an attitude of spiritual alertness, which is often inculcated by Origen, also in association with its negative counterpart, προπέτεια, "hastiness"<sup>16</sup>. In *CC* 3, 20 this respectful attention on the part of the reader, when brought to Paul's letter, will

<sup>13</sup> Compare *PArch* IV, 1, 6 (ὁ δὲ μετ' ἐπιμελείας καὶ προσοχῆς ἐντυγχάνων τοῖς προφητικαῖς λόγοις, παθῶν ἐξ αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἀναγινώσκειν Ἰχνος ἐνθουσιασμοῦ, δι' ὧν πάσχει πεισθήσεται οὐκ ἀνθρώπων εἶναι συγγράμματα τοῖς πεπιστευμένοις ἡμῖν εἶναι θεοῦ λόγους) with *Ion*, 534 e, quoted above (n. 11). A similar formulation appears also in *PArch* IV, 1, 2 (μεῖζον ἢ κατὰ ἀνθρώπων τὸ πράγμα εἶναι λέγειν οὐ διατάξομεν), in this case implying the recognition of the historical triumph of Christianity as divinely supported.

<sup>14</sup> Οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐστὶν οἷον ἐπιστάσια τῆς γνώσεως, ἢ διέξοδος νοῦ τὸ χρεῖμα ἱερόν, οὐδὲ οἷον ἄλλο ἐν ἄλλῳ· ἀλλ', ὡς μικρῶ μεῖζον εἰκάσαι, καθάπερ Ἀριστοτέλης ἀξιοῖ τοὺς τελουμένους οὐ μαθεῖν τι δεῖν, ἀλλὰ παθεῖν καὶ διατεθῆναι, δηλονότι γενομένους ἐπιτηδεύουσ· καὶ ἡ ἐπιτηδειότης δὲ ἄλογος, εἰ δε μηδὲ λόγος αὐτὴν παρασκευάζει (SYNESIUS OF CYRENE, *Dion* 8 = fr. 15 ROSS; I quote from *Opere di Sinesio di Cirene*, a cura di A. GARZYA, Torino 1989, 682-684).

<sup>15</sup> The similarity was stressed by M. HARL, *Philocalie*, 65, since also Origen, in the Treatise and elsewhere is open to the idea of a πάθος τῆς ψυχῆς as an access to knowledge. On the other hand, *PArch* IV, 1, 7 introduces a notion of providence, which is contrary to Aristotle's doctrine: "Man könnte also gewissermaßen für die Verteidigung der vollen Inspiration den Kampf gegen Aristoteles und Gnostiker ausnutzen" (H.J. VOGT, *Die Lehre des Origenes von der Inspiration der Heiligen Schrift...*, 102). Origen's readings of Aristotle are not comparable with his extensive knowledge of Plato. See G. DORIVAL, *Filosofia*, in A. MONACI CASTAGNO (ed.), *Origene. Dizionario...*, 171-177, esp. p. 175; see also ID., *L'apport d'Origène pour la connaissance de la philosophie grecque*, in R.J. DALY (ed.), *Origeniana Quinta*, Leuven 1992, 189-216.

<sup>16</sup> *PArch* IV, 3, 5 sums up in προσοχή the methodological indications of the second section of the Treatise for a correct interpretation of the Scriptures: διόπερ πολλὴν προσοχὴν συνεισακτέον τῷ εὐλαβῶς ἐντυγχάνοντι ὡς θεοῖς γράμμασι ταῖς θεαῖς βίβλοις (p. 331.16-17). The positive content of προσοχή emerges in *Phil.* 1, 28 against its counterfeit, the προπέτεια. M. HARL's commentary on this text eloquently describes the "ideal reader" in Origen's eyes: "il faut une âme 'purifiée', 'consciente de la faiblesse humaine'... et du caractère 'indicible' de la Sagesse de Dieu; une âme prête à 'chercher' en conformité avec... le Logos et la Sagesse de Dieu" (*Philocalie*, 204-205).

lead to recognition of the greatness of the man and his thoughts, unless he wishes to make himself ridiculous for being unable to grasp it<sup>17</sup>. The "careful" reader is the one who is able to reach beyond the "mean letter" (ιδιωτική λέξις) of the Sacred Text and discover its hidden treasures. A result of this kind, however, does not depend only on the spiritual disposition of the reader, but is granted by God in response to human effort.

The paradox betrayed by the contrast between the apparent simplicity of the letter and the deeper meaning behind it is solved by Origen thanks to the idea that there is a mighty power at work, which comes from God and thus transcends the categories and forms of human discourse. Faced with the pagan criticism of the Bible, instead of defending the literary or poetic character of at least some portions of the Bible (admitted even by Greek readers such as Pseudo-Longinus, if not by the neo-pythagorean philosopher Numenius, who otherwise was sensitive to the "barbarian philosophy" of the Jews), Origen lays claim to a spiritual effectiveness of another kind<sup>18</sup>. In a passage from the fourth Book of *Comloh.*, found in the *Philokalia*, Origen goes so far as to justify even the grammatical mistakes and the inelegance of style of the Scriptures, so that he may strengthen the view of a divine "dialectic" operating through them. His formulations essentially rest upon the Pauline statement of 1 Cor. 2, 4, combining moreover this passage with 2 Cor. 4, 7<sup>19</sup>. While restating some of the ideas expressed in the contemporary "Treatise on biblical hermeneutics", Origen emphasises the fact that the Scriptures avoided the beauties of style. The success of Christianity did not depend on human eloquence and persuasiveness, but was brought forth through the power of the Spirit<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, such power penetrates every single word of the Scriptures, so that not even one letter is devoid of an "operating capacity" (ἐργατικότητα), as he eloquently argues in a fragment from the *XXXIXth Homily on Jeremiah*, thus extending a characteristic of the prophetic word to the whole Bible<sup>21</sup>.

Taking into account this constitutive efficacy of the divine Scriptures, also generally indicated by Origen with the word ὠφέλεια ("utility"), we can understand why he sees it at work even when we are not conscious of it. There is a revealing reflection on this point in the *XXth Homily on Joshua*, where Origen in a sense comes to a conclusion not too far from the "ecstatic" experience of the act of reading as laid down in *PArch* IV, 1, 6. As with enchantments, endowed with a natural capacity to affect people, though they are unaware of it, so the Word of God, especially the pronunciation of the names of the Holy Scriptures, affects the souls of the believers. This effect is much more important than that of enchantments, since it is the result of the co-operation of the benign powers present within us and which respond to the action exerted on our soul by the Word of God<sup>22</sup>. Even if the reader sometimes does not perceive the spiritual utility of the Scriptures, he should nevertheless believe that the evil powers are subject to their enchanting power like snakes that undergo enchantment<sup>23</sup>. As stated by Origen himself,

<sup>17</sup> See CC 3, 20, 11-14: Ἐὰν γὰρ ἐπιδῶ ἑαυτὸν τῇ μετὰ τοῦ προσέχειν ἀναγνώσει, εὖ οἶδ' ὅτι ἡ θαυμάσεται τὸν νοῦν τοῦ ἀνδρός, ἐν ιδιωτικῇ λέξει μεγάλα περιουόντος, ἢ μὴ θαυμάσας αὐτὸς καταγέλαστος φανείται (quotations are based on the edition of M. BORRET: *Origène. Contre Celse*, I-V [SC 132, 136, 147, 150, 227: Paris, 1967-1976], with indication of book, chapter and line, while the translation occasionally provided is taken from *Origen: Contra Celsum*, transl. with Introd. and Notes by H. CHADWICK, Cambridge 1953).

<sup>18</sup> See "*Longinus*" *On the Sublime*, ed. D.A. RUSSELL, Oxford 1964, 92 ff., with regard to the style of *Genesis*. For Numenius's openness to the Jewish-biblical tradition, one should recall his famous phrase on Plato as a Μωϋσῆς ἀπτικίζων (ed. E. DES PLACES, Paris 1973, 51).

<sup>19</sup> CC 1, 2 exploits in a similar manner 1 Cor 2, 4 to support the idea of an ἀπόδειξις of the Spirit, superior to Greek "dialectics".

<sup>20</sup> Ἴσως γὰρ εἰ κάλλος καὶ περιβολὴν φράσεως ὡς τὰ παρ' Ἑλλήσι θαυμάζόμενα εἶχεν ἡ γραφή, ὑπενόησεν ἂν τις οὐ τὴν ἀλήθειαν κεκρατηκέναι τῶν ἀνθρώπων, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐμφαινόμενην ἀκολουθίαν καὶ τὸ τῆς φράσεως κάλλος ἐψυχαγωγῆκέναι τοὺς ἀκρωμένους, καὶ ἠπατηκὸς αὐτοὺς προσειληφέναι (*Comloh.* IV = *Phil.* 4). In conformity with this the *Commentary on Hoseas* (= *Phil.* 8) recommends us not to correct what we take to be grammatical and syntactical mistakes in the Scriptures, since they too provide a key to its hidden meaning.

<sup>21</sup> Καὶ οὐ θαυμαστόν εἰ πᾶν τὸ ῥῆμα τὸ λαλούμενον ὑπὸ τῶν προφητῶν εἰργάζετο ἔργον τὸ πρέπον ῥήματι. Ἀλλὰ γὰρ οἶμαι ὅτι καὶ πᾶν θαυμάσιον γράμμα τὸ γεγραμμένον τοῖς λογίοις τοῦ θεοῦ ἐργάζεται. Καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ἰῶτα ἢ μία κεραία γεγραμμένη ἐν τῇ γραφῇ ἥτις τοῖς ἐπισταμένοις χρῆσθαι τῆς δυνάμεως τῶν γραμμάτων οὐκ ἐργάζεται τὸ ἑαυτῆς ἔργον (*Homler.* 39 = *Phil.* 10, ed. HARL, 366.13-368.20).

<sup>22</sup> Εἰσὶ γὰρ τινες δυνάμεις ἐν ἡμῖν, ὧν αἱ μὲν κρείττονες διὰ τούτων τῶν οἰοεὶ ἐπωδῶν τρέφονται συγγενεῖς οὖσαι αὐταῖς, καὶ ἡμῶν μὴ νοούντων ἐκείνας τὰς δυνάμεις νοούσας τὰ λεγόμενα δυνατωτέρας ἐν ἡμῖν γίνεσθαι πρὸς τὸ συνεργεῖν τῷ ἡμετέρῳ βίῳ (*Homlos.* XX = *Phil.* 12, ed. HARL, 388.17-390.21). For M. HARL, "ces puissances ont reçu les âmes en partage: ce sont donc des envoyés divins, anges ou démons. Elles sont capables de 'comprendre' les incantations alors que l'intellect ne les comprend pas et, si elles prennent force, elles 'coopèrent' à la vie de l'âme" (*ibid.*, 396). We could compare this psychic condition with the platonic idea of a "demon" speaking through Socrates' interiority: "Cette interiorité est... renforcée chez Socrate par la représentation de ce *daimôn*, de cette voix divine, qui, dit-il, parle en lui et le retient de faire certaines choses" (P. HADOT, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie antique?*, 1995, 63).

<sup>23</sup> Ἐκείνο τὸ παράδειγμα λαβέτω εἰς τὴν γραφήν, ἧς ἀναγιγνωσκομένης καὶ μὴ νοουμένης, ἐνίοτε ἀκεδιᾶ καὶ ἐκ-

the notion of inspired Scriptures necessarily implies an overall utility for their readers, even when they do not experience it immediately. The benefits will become manifest later on, like a medicine that displays its positive results only after a time. In this way Origen is pleading once again for the advantages of the "mere act of reading", though connecting it in different terms to the idea of inspiration<sup>24</sup>. It is once again an unconscious experience, as we assumed in *PArch* IV, 1, 6, but the recognition of the inspired character of the Scriptures now emerges only in the long run, not as the apparently immediate fruit of a kind of "ecstatic" experience.

*The Scriptures compared with Plato:  
the meanness of the letter and the might of the Spirit*

After reviewing some further examples of Origen's conception of biblical inspiration and its effects, we can now examine the few occurrences of ἐνθουσιασμός and ἐνθουσιᾶν in his other writings. Only one passage in *CC* 6, 5 puts forward the same thematic connection between the act of reading and inspiration. It is indeed a significant context, inasmuch as Origen has committed himself to refuting Celsus' vindication of the superiority of Plato's doctrine on God when compared with the Christian message and its idea of a revelation<sup>25</sup>. There is another apology for the "mean style" of the Bible, in reaction to its rejection by the pagan author, in the name of a sociability that is assumed to be alien to Plato's concerns. According to Origen, Plato's thought, despite the truths he managed to discover about God and the ways we can know him, results in a teaching for just a few educated and philosophically trained people, whereas Christianity addresses everybody. It was because of this missionary audience that inspired authors adopted such a "mean style", in a rather similar way to the choice Epictetus made in contrast to the selective λέξις of Plato<sup>26</sup>. Yet the Alexandrian defends himself from "saying this in criticism of Plato ("for the great world of mankind has derived help from him also")<sup>27</sup>. At the same time, he declares his intention to clarify the meaning of 1 Cor. 2, 4-5 thus: "The divine scripture says that the spoken word, even if it is true in itself and very persuasive, is not sufficient to affect a human soul unless some power is also given by God to the speaker and grace is added to what is said"<sup>28</sup>. Only such a power of the Spirit can explain the fact that the Jewish-Christian Scriptures, in spite of their "mean letter", have led those who read them "with a genuine mind" to "participate in their divine inspiration" (ἐνθουσιᾶν), an effect that Plato's writings were not able to produce. Their "truth" did not even lead their author to practice true piety<sup>29</sup>.

Origen offers no further explanation here with regard to the meaning of ἐνθουσιᾶν, apart from spiritual disposition, already emphasised above, and the moral and religious consequences determined by the Word of God. We can still observe, at any rate, the connection with the act of reading, though the action of ἐνθουσιᾶν appears elsewhere in *CC* in a different light as originally linked to prophetic activ-

κακεῖ ὁ ἀκροατῆς, καὶ πιστευέτω ὅτι αἱ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀσπίδες καὶ αἱ ἐν αὐτῷ ἐχιδναὶ ἀτονώτεροι γίνονται ἀπὸ τῶν φαρμάκων τῶν φαρμακεύοντων, οἷον παρὰ σοφοῦ Μωσῆ, παρὰ σοφοῦ Ἰησοῦ, παρὰ σοφῶν τῶν ἁγίων προφητῶν (*ibid.*, 390.2-8). According to *Phil.* 6, the Scriptures are like music, appeasing and at the same time hindering the action of the evil spirits.

<sup>24</sup> If we confidently expect the positive consequences of taking a remedy for our eyes, we should do the same with the Scriptures: οὕτω τοίνυν πίστευε καὶ περὶ τῆς θείας γραφῆς, ὅτι ὠφελεῖται σου ἡ ψυχὴ, κἂν μὴ ὁ νοῦς τὸν καρπὸν λαμβάνει τῆς ὠφελείας τῆς ἀπὸ τῶν γραμμάτων, ἐκ μόνης ψιλῆς τῆς ἀναγνώσεως. Τὰ γὰρ ἐν ἡμῖν ἐπάδεται καὶ τὰ μὲν κρείττονα τρέφεται, τὰ δὲ χείρονα καταργεῖται (*ibid.*, 392.22-26).

<sup>25</sup> As the starting point of his refutation, Origen accuses Celsus of directing his criticism of the Bible also to aspects that could capture even the cultivated reader: κοινωποιῶν τὰ δυνάμενα ἐλεῖν τινα καὶ συνετὸν ἐκ τῶν ἱερῶν γραμμάτων (*CC* 6, 1, 5-6).

<sup>26</sup> *CC* 6, 2, 14-18.

<sup>27</sup> *CC* 6, 2, 19-20 (p., 317). With regard to Celsus' quoting *Timaeus* and *Ep.* VII, 341 C, Origen admits the beauty of such passages, but at the same time criticizes Plato's restraint: "It is 'holding down the truth', as our scripture testifies, when they think that *the highest good cannot at all be expressed in words*, and say that 'it comes suddenly by long familiarity with the subject itself and by living with it, like a light in the soul kindled by a leaping spark, which after it has come into being feeds itself' (6, 3, 25-20 [p. 318]). Plato's contradictory conduct is then stressed by Origen in a sort of counterpoint with Rom 1, 20-25 (cfr. 6, 4). Moreover, the prophets since Moses were thoroughly familiar with the idea that the "highest Good cannot at all be expressed in words". The same can be said of "the idea that 'a light suddenly arrived in the soul as though kindled by a leaping spark': "it was known before Plato by the Word" (6, 5, 1-2 [p. 319]). Origen's argument results in a *synkrisis*, a true "comparison" between Plato and the Scriptures.

<sup>28</sup> *CC* 6, 2, 25-29 (P. 317).

<sup>29</sup> "Ὅρα οὖν τὴν διαφορὰν τοῦ καλῶς λελεγμένου ὑπὸ τοῦ Πλάτωνος περὶ τοῦ πρώτου ἀγαθοῦ καὶ τῶν εἰρημένων ἐν τοῖς προφήταις περὶ τοῦ φωτὸς τῶν μακαρίων· καὶ ὅρα ὅτι ἡ μὲν ἐν Πλάτῳ περὶ τούτου ἀλήθεια οὐδὲν ὡς πρὸς εἰλικρινῆ εὐσέβειαν ὤνησε τοὺς ἐντυγχάνοντας ἀλλ' οὐδ' αὐτὸν τὸν τοιαῦτα περὶ τοῦ πρώτου ἀγαθοῦ φιλοσοφῆσαντα, ἢ δὲ τῶν θείων γραμμάτων εὐτελῆς λέξις ἐνθουσιᾶν πεποίηκε τοὺς γνησίως ἐντυγχάνοντας αὐτῇ (*CC* 6, 5, 26-33).

ity. The Jew to whom Celsus lends his own words in the first two books for criticising Jesus and his Christian co-religionists mentions, among other accusations, the exclusive vindication of the Old Testament prophecies on behalf of Christ. Such prophecies were made by prophets who "were under inspiration" (ἐνθουσιῶντες)<sup>30</sup>. Returning from the reader to the prophet, we get closer to the source of ἐνθουσιασμός. In the last resort, no communication with God or knowledge of Him is possible, unless there is divine inspiration. This point is expressly made by Origen in another important moment of his prolonged dispute with his pagan adversary, precisely when he deals with the ways we can know God as opposed to the view set out in the *Timaeus* (CC 7, 44). The Alexandrian, still replying to Celsus' vindication of the authority of Plato, points to ἐνθουσιασμός as an unavoidable implication of the knowledge of God, insofar as this is made possible only through participation in his grace<sup>31</sup>.

No explicit connection has emerged so far between ἐνθουσιασμός and ἔκστασις. Despite this, we can reasonably presume that Origen tacitly implies some spiritual possession and transport, bearing in mind his ideas about the efficacy of the Scriptures outlined above. At all events, such a link becomes clear in the two passages in *ComIoh.*, where we find our term. Origen introduces it in his well-known reflection on the *epinoiai*, the "titles" or "aspects" of the Logos, which occupies a large part of Book 1. According to this, the Logos as "the true vineyard" is the source of ἐνθουσιασμός in man, leading him to an experience of "ecstatic" nature: he frees him from human things, taking possession of him and making him drunken, though it is a drunkenness of a divine nature<sup>32</sup>. The immediate context, as a matter of fact, leads us back to ἐνθουσιασμός as the original experience of the prophet, as Origen clearly states in relation to Psalm 103, 15: the "wine that maketh glad the heart of man" is precisely the Logos taking possession of his mind, as happens first and foremost with the prophet<sup>33</sup>. At the same time, we face here the well-known theme of *sobria ebrietas*, since the drunkenness aroused by the Logos-Wine is not an "irrational" one<sup>34</sup>. In this sense the ἐνθουσιασμός experienced by the prophet results in an ἔκστασις different from its more common notion that implies, as we saw before with Plato's idea of the poetical inspiration or Aristotle's view of religious knowledge, some abandonment of the intellect<sup>35</sup>. Such an "intellectualistic" concern on the part of Origen reappears a little later, when the Logos as "wine" is distinguished from the Logos as "bread". It is not the "ethical teachings" (i.e. the "bread") but the participation in "the ineffable and hidden theoremes (θεωρήματα)" that produces ἐνθουσιασμός<sup>36</sup>. On the other hand, this statement can be taken as a synthetic definition of the prophetic role, so that we are now led to a closer examination of the relationship between prophetic inspiration and the act of reading and interpreting the Scriptures.

### *The prophet and the reader*

Even a brief analysis of Origen's conception of prophecy brings us nearer to understanding what he expects the reader's "experience of inspiration" to be, while observing again a polarity in his thought that he was not able to suppress completely<sup>37</sup>. For Origen, the exercise of prophecy demands that the person

<sup>30</sup> See Celsus' sentence in CC 1, 50, 9 and its quotation by Origen in 1, 51, 8.

<sup>31</sup> Κέλσος μὲν οὖν ἦτοι τῇ συνθέσει τῇ ἐπὶ τὰ ἄλλα ἀνάλογον τῇ παρὰ τοῖς γεωμέτραις καλουμένη συνθέσει ἢ τῇ ἀπὸ τῶν ἄλλων ἀναλύσει ἢ καὶ ἀναλογία ἀνάλογον τῇ παρὰ τοῖς αὐτοῖς ἀναλογία οἰεταὶ γινώσκεισθαι τὸν θεόν, ἐπὶ τὰ πρόβυρα εἰ ἄρα τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ δυναμένου τινὸς οὕτως ἐλθεῖν ὁ δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ λόγος εἰπών· Οὐδεὶς ἔγνω τὸν πατέρα εἰ μὴ ὁ υἱὸς καὶ ὃ ἂν ὁ υἱὸς ἀποκαλύψῃ· θεία τιμὴ χάριτι, οὐκ ἀθεεὶ ἐγγινομένη τῇ ψυχῇ ἀλλὰ μετὰ τινος ἐνθουσιασμοῦ, ἀποφαίνεται γινώσκεισθαι τὸν θεόν (CC 7, 44, 1-9). On this debate, see recently A. MAGRIS, *Platonismo e cristianesimo alla luce del Contro Celso*, in L. PERRONE (ed.), *Discorsi di verit'. Paganesimo, giudaismo e cristianesimo a confronto nel Contro Celso di Origene*, Roma 1998, 54 ff. I have dealt with the passage under examination in: *Prayer in Origen's Contra Celsum: the knowledge of God and the truth of Christianity*, in "Vigiliae Christianae", 54 (2000) 1-19.

<sup>32</sup> *ComIoh.* 1, 30, 206: εἰ γὰρ ἡ καρδία τὸ διανοητικόν ἐστι, τὸ δὲ εὐφραίνον αὐτὸ ὁ ποτιμώτατος ἐστὶ λόγος, ἐξιστῶν ἀπὸ τῶν ἀνθρωπικῶν καὶ ἐνθουσιῶν ποιῶν καὶ μεθύειν μέθην οὐκ ἀλόγιστον ἀλλὰ θείαν.

<sup>33</sup> *ComIoh.* 1, 30, 205: προσθετόν τοῖς εἰρημένους πῶς ἐστὶν ὁ υἱὸς ἀληθινὴ ἄμπελος'. Τοῦτο δὲ δῆλον ἔσται τοῖς συνειεῖσιν ἀξίως χάριτος προφητικῆς τὸ 'Οἶνος εὐφραίνει καρδίαν ἀνθρώπου'.

<sup>34</sup> On this well-known theme of Judeo-Hellenistic and patristic literature see H. LEWY, *Sobria ebrietas. Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der antiken Mystik*, Giessen 1929.

<sup>35</sup> The relation between ἐνθουσιασμός and ἔκστασις is thus explained by F. PFISTER, *Enthusiasmus*, in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, V, 456: "Der Enthusiasmus ist wie die Ekstase ein πάθος τῆς ψυχῆς und eine Bewegung (κίνησις). Wenn der in der Ekstase befindliche Mensch von der Gottheit besessen und Gotterfüllt ist, hat die Seele ihn keineswegs verlassen, sondern sie hat sich nur verändert, dadurch, daß der νοῦς verdrängt, das klare Bewusstsein betäubt ist".

<sup>36</sup> *ComIoh.* 1, 30, 208: τὰ δὲ εὐφραίνοντα καὶ ἐνθουσιῶν ποιοῦντα ἀπόρητα καὶ μυστικά θεωρήματα.

<sup>37</sup> For a comprehensive investigation, see E. NARDONI, *Origen's Concept of Biblical Inspiration*, in "The Second Century", 4 (1984) 9-23; G. AF HALLSTRÖM, *Charismatic Succession. A Study on Origen's Concept of Prophecy*, Helsinki 1985; C.P. BÄMMEL, *Origen's Definitions of Prophecy and Gnosis*, in "Journal of Theological Studies", 40 (1989) 489-493; G. FILORAMO, *Profezia*, in A. MONACI CASTAGNO (ed.), *Origene. Dizionario...*, 376-379.

invested by God with this task should first possess a purity of heart, resulting from the practice of virtue and asceticism, in other words an already realised sanctity. These are the necessary prerequisites for divine "possession" (κατακωχή) through which inspiration is given to the prophet. In opposing Celsus' criticism of the Jewish-Christian idea of revelation, Origen particularly emphasises the moral and religious presuppositions of the biblical prophecy as distinguished from the practice of divination in the pagan world. Not only are the protagonists of prophetic activity in paganism devoid of such qualities, as demonstrated for Origen especially by the "indecent" way the Pythian prophetess delivers her pronouncements at the Delphi oracle<sup>38</sup>. They are also moved, first and foremost, by demons, for Celsus the privileged intermediaries between God and men<sup>39</sup>. In contrast, as Philo had anticipated, the prophets of Israel were either "wise" before they received the inspiration or they became so thanks to the intervention of the Holy Spirit<sup>40</sup>. To justify his view from every perspective, Origen among other things is at pains of explaining why God elects Balaam, a gentile and an evil-doer, to predict Christ's coming (*Num* 24, 17)<sup>41</sup>.

Moreover, Origen does not restrict the notion of prophecy to the prediction of future things, but connects it more fundamentally with γνῶσις, the knowledge of God and his mysteries. In this sense, Abraham is a prototype *par excellence* of the prophets as "seers" of divine things. The patriarch, having a "pure heart", is admitted to the vision of God, though "heart" to a large extent means for Origen platonically the "eyes of the souls" or the "intellect"<sup>42</sup>. We should keep this term - the νοῦς - in mind, since it is precisely the aspect that makes Origen's ideas on prophecy and the related act of inspiration different. In contrast to Philo's interpretation of prophecy as an ecstatic mood (apparently influenced by Plato's view of prophetism) as well as the Montanist, Gnostic and pagan views of that phenomenon<sup>43</sup>, he emphasises the ethical aspects of prophecy, conceived as a free co-operation of man with God. As such, it demands the full involvement of his mind. For this reason inspiration does not leave room to a dispossession of the intellect. The enlightening action of the Spirit exerts itself on the ἡγεμονικόν of the prophet, who remains conscious of that and expresses in words the revelation he has been endowed with<sup>44</sup>. Inspiration therefore does not imply of itself an "ecstatic" condition in the true sense of the word, though Origen occasionally has recourse to this concept. Even in such cases he remains convinced that this kind of *ekstasis* has to be seen in terms of *sobria ebrietas*. A conscious ecstasis is for him the only divinely inspired form of ecstasis, despite being faced with evidence of another nature, for instance, Pauline mysticism<sup>45</sup>. As we may expect, this is a consequence of Origen's peculiar intellectu-

<sup>38</sup> *CC* 3, 25; 7, 3; 8, 46. See now B. POUDERON, *La divination dans le Contre Celse d'Origène ou: du sexe des prophéties*, in "Caesardunum. Bulletin de l'Institut d'études latines et du Centre de Recherches A. Piganiol", Tours 1999, 95-111.

<sup>39</sup> See G. SFAMENI GASPARRO, *Ispirazione delle Scritture e divinazione pagana. Aspetti della polemica fra Origene e Celso*, in G. DORIVAL - A. LE BOULLUEC (ed.), *Origeniana sexta*, Leuven 1995, 287-302.

<sup>40</sup> *CC* 7, 7, 1-7: Τῶν δ' ἐν Ἰουδαίῳ προφητῶν οἱ μὲν πρὸ τῆς προφητείας καὶ τῆς θείας κατακωχῆς ἦσαν σοφοί, οἱ δ' ἅπ' αὐτῆς τῆς προφητείας φωτισθέντες τὸν νοῦν τοιοῦτοι γεγόνασιν, αἰρεθέντες ὑπὸ τῆς προνοίας εἰς τὸ πιστευθῆναι τὸ θεῖον πνεῦμα καὶ τοὺς ἀπὸ τούτου λόγους διὰ τὸ τοῦ βίου δυσμῆ-μητον καὶ σφόδρα εὐτονον καὶ ἐλευθέρῳ καὶ πάντῃ πρὸς θάνατον καὶ κινδύνους ἀκατάπληκτον.

<sup>41</sup> See J.R. BASKIN, *Origen on Balaam: The Dilemma of the Unworthy Prophet*, in "Vigiliae Christianae", 37 (1983) 22-35; G. DORIVAL, "Un astre se lèvera de Jacob". *L'interprétation ancienne de Nombres 24, 17*, in "Annali di storia dell'esegesi", 13 (1996) 295-352.

<sup>42</sup> See *HGen* 4, 3. For the "pure heart" as the organ through which the vision of God is given, see also *CC* 6, 4 and above n. 32. As noted by G. FILORAMO, *Profezia*, 377, Origen generally associates this biblical motif with the Platonic theme of the "eyes of the soul" (for instance, in *ComRom*. 9, 31). On account of *Fr1Cor* 55, C.P. BAMEL gives the following definition of prophecy: "Prophecy is the art of indicating things that are unseen by means of words" (*Origen's Definitions of Prophecy...*, 490), while in *CatMt* 23 Origen formulates it in a narrower sense as πρόρρησις τῶν μελλόντων.

<sup>43</sup> According to J.R. BASKIN, despite the common emphasis they lay on the ethical presuppositions of prophecy, Origen and Philo depart from each other on the idea of a dispossession of the mind through God: "Philo's view of prophecy had its origins in Greek philosophy. Following Plato's *Timaeus*, Philo held that a man is incapable of inspired or true prophecy when in his right mind. Prophecy is a power of the irrational mind; it comes only when the power of understanding is inhibited by sleep or when a man is in an abnormal condition owing to disease or divine inspiration. But not everyone is worthy of such a visitation. For Philo, prophecy is a mark of moral distinction; it marks another way station on the path to divine comprehension. Although prophetic possession is an act of grace, it must be prepared for by diligent study and the acquisition of wisdom" (*Origen on Balaam...*, 24). The polemical context of Origen's view of prophecy, especially with regard to Montanism, is emphasised by T. SARDELLA, *Prognosis e Mantikê in Origene*, in "Augustinianum", 29 (1989) 191-221.

<sup>44</sup> *HomGen*. 3, 2.

<sup>45</sup> According to J.R. BASKIN, *Origen on Balaam...*, 26, "while a few passages in his writings suggest that he occasionally adopted the 'ecstatic' view of how the Holy Spirit inspired its agents, on the whole he rather believes that inspiration does not remove or paralyse the prophet's control of his rational faculties". This conclusion is shared by T. SARDELLA, *Prognosis e Mantikê...*, 303-304: "... se il profetismo cristiano, estraneo per Origene a qualunque forma di alienazione o di perdita della personalità, può dare anche luogo, sulla linea del pensiero paolino, a stati più vicini all'estasi, in realtà si tratta di una *sobria ebrietas* che, pur nel superamento dei limiti propri alla condizione umana, è, insieme, e soprattutto, consapevolezza di un'esperienza eccezionale".

alism, though surprisingly aimed also at rejecting a notion of prophecy supported by Greek philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle or Celsus.

To what extent then may the reader and/or interpreter of the Bible share the ἐνθουσιασμός operating in the prophet? We have so far assumed that in *PArch* IV, 1, 6 the act of reading was implicitly an "ecstatic" experience, especially in view of Origen's conviction of the efficacy of the Scriptures which is so crucial to him. Taking into account his notion of prophecy, we should now rather limit or reconsider the properly "ecstatic" aspects we have tacitly implied. Nevertheless there are deep analogies between the situation of the reader and/or interpreter of the Bible and that of the prophet, since both are called on to disclose the mysteries of God. The prophet certainly has a clearer vision of these mysteries than the reader of the inspired Scriptures can claim, but he too is called upon to participate in the vision of the prophet which has been committed in a veiled form to the words of the Scriptures<sup>46</sup>. Living a "prophetic life" within the church<sup>47</sup>, the authentic reader of the Bible partakes in the same spiritual attitudes that were practised by the prophet and accordingly prepares himself to receive the Spirit and to "see God". The pneumatic interpretation of the Scriptures, which penetrates the veil of the letter, is made possible through the gift of that same Spirit who has spoken through the prophets. We are therefore permitted to speak of the inspired interpreter as a new prophet in the context of the church<sup>48</sup>.

Returning to our initial question, though Origen clearly increasingly distances himself from the Platonic (and Aristotelian) idea of an "ecstatic" experience of divine inspiration or truth, we can affirm that in the last resort his (perhaps not totally consistent) ideas of ἐνθουσιασμός (both in the prophet and in the reader/interpreter of the Scriptures) pay more homage to the intellectual tradition of Hellenism than the Alexandrian himself would have been disposed to admit.

<sup>46</sup> On the prophets as seers of the divine mysteries, that altogether are to be kept under silence until the manifestation of the Logos, see *ComRom* 10, 43.

<sup>47</sup> *HomJer.* 15, 1. *FrLam* 116 claims the heritage of the prophets for the church against the Jews: ἰδοὺ γὰρ ζῶσιν ἐν ἡμῖν οἱ προφῆται, λαλοῦντες περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κηρύσσοντες, ἀλλ' οὐκέτι παρ' ἐκείνοις, τοῖς ἔτι καὶ νῦν αὐτὸν ταῖς ἑαυτῶν διαφθοραῖς περιβάλλουσιν, ὁσημέραι βλασφημοῦντες αὐτόν.

<sup>48</sup> For C.P. Bammel, *Origen's Definitions of Prophecy and Gnosis*, this conclusion is supported by Origen's association of prophecy and γνώσις, though the explicit formulation was made later on, with Ambrosiaster: "Origen's definition of prophecy is perhaps reflected in certain remarks of later commentators on I Corinthians. For Ambrosiaster the biblical exegete can be called a prophet, because, like the proclaimer of unknown future events, he reveals what is obscure to many" (p. 493: see Ambrosiaster, *In Ep. ad Cor. I* 14, 4). As stated by G. Sfameni Gasparro, *Ispirazione delle Scritture e divinazione pagana...*, this new prophecy rests on the coming of Christ: "soltanto la lettura cristologica operata nel nuovo contesto religioso, attraverso l'esegesi spirituale che a sua volta è percepita come divinamente ispirata facendo dell'interprete scritturistico un nuovo 'profeta' della parola divina, scopre intera la carica messianica e soteriologica dell'antico messaggio giudaico" (pp. 299-300)