



ORIGEN c.185 – 254

Born in Alexandria, Egypt about 185, Origen was reared in a Christian home. His father recognized his son's brilliance and provided him with the best Greek education possible. He also had Origen memorize Scripture every day; even as a boy Origen knew whole sections of the Bible from memory. When his father was imprisoned for his faith, Origen was eager to join his father in prison and death if necessary but was prevented only by his mother hiding his clothes when he wanted to give himself up to the heathen authorities. His father was martyred and his mother left helpless with seven children.

A wealthy matron assisted Origen, and he began giving instruction in the Greek language and copying manuscripts. When he was 18, bishop Demetrius of Alexandria nominated him to become president of the theology school of Alexandria. There he was responsible for the instruction of all new converts to the faith. This led him to encounter arguments of heretics within the faith as well as Jews and pagans without.

Origen led a very disciplined life strictly following Jesus' admonition in Matthew 10:10, he had only one coat, no shoes, and took no thought for the next day. He refused any gifts or payments from his pupils, ate no meat, drank no wine, and slept on the bare floor. It was to literally follow Matthew 19:12 that Origen castrated himself, thereby removing any hint of scandal as he taught young women in the school (an act he later came to see as ill-advised and not to be taken as an example).

It was to study and teaching of the Scriptures that Origen devoted his life. During his early years at Alexandria he wrote *On First Principles*, the first systematic theology ever written. For twenty-eight years he worked on *Hexapla*, a massive work of Old Testament textual analysis. This work was a parallel edition of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament with a transliteration and four different translations into Greek. Origen's efforts made the church aware that the transmission and translation of the text of sacred Scripture should be carefully watched and controlled.

Origen's method of interpreting Scripture tremendously influenced the Middle Ages. He interpreted Scripture with three levels of meaning: the literal, the moral and the allegorical. He especially used his allegorical interpretation of Scripture to reveal Christ in the Old Testament. Origen made foundational contributions that would help theologians for centuries. His fertile and active mind, however, also led him into uncharted areas and some speculations that got him excommunicated from the church. He found refuge and acceptance with churches in Palestine and Arabia until, during a period of persecution, he was cast into prison, tortured and condemned to burn at the stake. The death of the emperor prevented his execution, but Origen's health was broken and he died at age 69 in 254.

Though he made some mistakes, his contributions are immense. One church father said of him, "He was the stone that sharpens us all."