

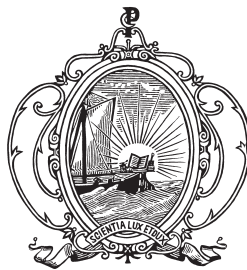
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MARKUS VINZENT

Volume 4:
Rediscovering Origen



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Equivocality of Biblical Language in Origen

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ABSTRACT

In his biblical hermeneutics, Origen emphasizes the polysemic character of the biblical word. To explain this phenomenon in an analytic way he appeals to the concept of *homonyma*. This term, deriving from philosophical tradition, is substantially re-conceptualized by Origen, in a way that corresponds to the constitution of his biblical hermeneutics. His use does not coincide either with the logical understanding of homonymy by Aristotle or with Plato's idea of the homonymous nomination of a physical phenomenon and its metaphysical idea. *Homonyma* in Origen's theory of biblical interpretation denotes the paradoxical relation that a linguistic designator of sensible matter has with its spiritual content; this relation is to be considered from the angle of dialectical ontology. The explicative and epistemological function of equivocation in Origen's hermeneutics involves the thought shifting between the poles of difference and similarity. Another special characteristic of Origen's use of homonymy is that it designates only one of the members of the homonymous pair, with the other one – usually radically different from it – only implied. In this case the homonymy of biblical articulation appears in the form of a mystical metaphor. On the linguistic level the homonymy of biblical language reflects the Apostle Paul's dichotomic division of the outer and inner man, which is the anthropological basis of Origen's hermeneutics.

I. Equivocality as paradoxical polysemy

Origen frequently expressed his position on the narrative and linguistic aspects of the Bible, with the Apostle Paul's words from *2Cor.* (4:7): 'But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us.' This hermeneutical expression may be loosely considered to be a basic principle in Origen's exegetical theory. In accordance with St. Paul's words he finds an apparent diversity in the Bible between a linguistic designator and the sense implied by it. The founder of the theory of biblical hermeneutics considers this ambiguity of the Biblical language to be deliberate, in order to hide the real content of the inspired text. As M. Harl has remarked, Origen considers two kinds of ἀσάφεια lying in the biblical text: on one hand, the vague vocabulary (the equivocal character of biblical words and figurative expressions) and lack of coherent sequence in narration, on the other.¹ In that

¹ See Marguerite Harl, 'Origène et la sémantique du langage biblique', in Marguerite Harl, *Le Déchiffrement du Sens. Études sur l'herméneutique chrétienne d'Origène à Grégoire de*

excellent research, M. Harl's goal is more to provide an outline of Origen's hermeneutical project as a whole than to provide detailed analysis of its constitutive elements. This contribution here will focus on the theological function of the first kind of biblical ἀσάφεια, that is, the apparent contradiction between a linguistic utterance and the unexpected content present in it, which appears in Origen's hermeneutics as the term *homonyma* and related words.

In the introduction to the commentary on the *Epistle to Romans*, Origen states that the difficulty of comprehending this Epistle is largely due to the fact that the Apostle puts different meanings into identical words.² According to Origen, St Paul moves from one meaning of a word to another, without any explanation.³ By way of illustration, he brings forth a group of words (law, Israel, circumcision, man *etc.*), which denote various concepts, sometimes radically opposed ones, within one linguistic utterance. This paradoxical polysemy is due to there being two semantic levels in inspired Scripture: *secundum litteram* and *secundum spiritum*, which are equivocal to each other. If we do not take this fact into consideration, says Origen, we could think that the Apostle Paul contradicts himself.

II. The function of homonymy within the dichotomic ontological structure

The *locus classicus* explaining the phenomenon of equivocality is given in Aristotle's *Categories*. The definition reads: 'Things are equivocally named, when they have the name only in common, the definition corresponding with the name being different.' For instance, a man and a portrait can both properly be named 'animals' equivocally.⁴ Origen cites this definition almost verbatim in his *Commentary on Jeremiah*.⁵ The above textual evidence is of special interest in so far as Origen does not strictly trace the notion of equivocality represented in the Aristotelian definition.

The definition of equivocality in the *Commentary on Jeremiah* follows a discussion of the most significant hermeneutic issue: how the anthropomorphisms of God may be understood in Holy Scripture. Origen's response to that

Nysse, Collection des Études Augustiniennes. Serie Antiquité 135 (Paris, 1993), 61-88, especially, 71-9.

² *Comm. in Rom.* 70,6 (*Commentarii in Epistulam ad Romanos*, ed. Theresia Heither, Fontes Christiani 2/1 [Freiburg, 1990]).

³ *Ibid.* 214,16 (Bd. 2).

⁴ Aristoteles, *Cat.* 1,1a (*Aristotelis Categoriae et Liber de interpretatione*, ed. L. Minio-Paluello [Oxonii, 1956]): ὁμώνυμα λέγεται ὧν ὄνομα μόνον κοινόν, ὃ δὲ κατὰ τοῦνομα λόγος τῆς οὐσίας ἕτερος, οἷον ζῶον ὃ τε ἄνθρωπος καὶ τὸ γεγραμμένον. See Plat. *Soph.* 218 c (*Platonis opera*, rec. Ioannes Burnet, t. 1 [Oxonii, s.a.]) which contains the same sense as this definition.

⁵ *In Ier.* 20,1 (177,17): ὁμώνυμα δὲ ἐστίν, ὧν ὄνομα μόνον κοινόν, ὃ δὲ κατὰ τοῦνομα τῆς οὐσίας λόγος ἕτερος (*Origenes Werke III. Jeremiahomilien*, ed. Erich Klostermann, GCS 6 [Leipzig, 1901]).

metaphysical question is given in the light of the Judaic Hellenistic exegesis: we have to think about God in a manner that is appropriate to the goodness of the Divine being. This suggests a comprehension of God's 'dispositions' and 'actions' spiritually, viz. bearing in mind that these peculiarities are only equivocally expressed of God and have really no affinity with him.⁶

This means, however, that here we have to deal with a 'vertical' notion of homonymy, one which relates the sensible to the intelligible, and therefore, tends more towards Platonic ontological dialectics than to Aristotle's logical discursive understanding of the term.⁷

Plato uses the concept of equivocality in only a few passages, those which describe the relation between ideas and their sensible images and mean, in general, a difference in essence but a similarity in sense.⁸ Alcinoos used the term in the context of the dialectical division of the Platonic idea⁹ and later it appears frequently in Plotinus. After Plato and the Middle Platonic school tradition, the author of the *Enneades* appeals to the term to indicate the basic difference between the eternal entities and their alterable objects, and, at the same time, to point out some similarities between them; this relationship is consequently characterized as ἀναλογία καὶ ὁμωνυμία / κατ' ἀναλογίαν καὶ ὁμωνύμως.¹⁰

In spite of evident Platonic implications, neither the equivocal designation of the Metaphysical and the Physical, nor the dialectical division of idea can fully explain the peculiarity of Origen's homonymy, which is primarily to be considered from the angle of ontological relation.

III. Homonymy as reflective of Paul's anthropological model on the linguistic level

The Alexandrian master's treatise *Dialogue with Heraclitus* supports the notion of a Christian anthropology as an immediate source for Origen's equivocal allegory. His intention here is to interpret the biblical message of the double creation of man.¹¹ Being a defender of the homogeneity of the Biblical text, he tries to

⁶ *Aporia* and the answer to it is first discussed by Aristobulos, representative of Judaic Alexandrian allegorical exegesis.

⁷ In Aristotle 'equivocality' and 'analogy' are mental and linguistic terms.

⁸ See *Parm.* 133d (I. Burnet, t. 2), *Tim.* 52a (I. Burnet, t. 3), *Phaed.* 78c-e (Burnet, t. 1). Plato uses the word ὁμώνυμα very seldom. One can say that in fact it does not function in Plato as a technical term.

⁹ Alcinoos, *Didask.* 30 (183,17) (*Alcinoos, Enseignement des doctrines de Platon*, ed. John Whittaker et traduit par Pierre Louis [Paris, 1990]).

¹⁰ *Enn.* VI 3.1.6; VI 3.5.3 (*Plotini Enneades*, rec. Hermannus Fridericus Mueller [Berolini, 1878]) but this discourse does not stress the aspect of similarity in homonymy.

¹¹ *Gen.* 1:26; 2:7.

reconcile the two messages on the basis of Paul's *dichotomic* division of the outer and the inner man. In accordance with this division, the two biblical messages are found to reflect a spiritual and a corporeal creation. In *Genesis*,

incorporeal is called by the same name (ὁμωνύμως) as corporeal; hereby the corporeal corresponds to the outer man, whereas the equivocal (ὁμώνυμα) to the corporeal thing corresponds to the inner man.¹²

Origen puts even more emphasis on the similarity in homonymy in his extensive *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. The linguistic body and the real sense, implied in it, illustrate opposite semantic poles: sensible love and spiritual love; equivocality as a property of language is responsible for overcoming this divergence. Already in the prologue to the treatise, Origen appeals to Paul's division of ἕξω and ἔσω ἄνθρωπος. He remarks that the idea of the double nature of a man was initially included in the account of the double creation in Moses' book, and later expressed more explicitly by St Paul.¹³ The discourse is followed by a descriptive definition of homonymy:

... in the Divine Scriptures through homonyms, that is through similar words, precisely through identical terms are designated the limbs of the outer man and parts and emotions of the inner man; and not only are they compared with the same words, but the things themselves are compared with one another.

'... scripturis divinis per homonymas, id est per similes appellationes, immo per eadem vocabula et exterioris hominis membra ei illius interioris partes affectusque nominantur eaque non solum vocabulis, sed et rebus ipsis invicem comparantur.'¹⁴

This descriptive definition differs essentially from the Aristotelian one in the *Categories*. In the words '... sed et rebus ipsis invicem comparantur' the principle of similarity occurs instead of that of diversity (λόγος τῆς οὐσίας ἕτερος). Thinking about the conceptual premises of this phrase one can appeal to the fact that the vertical notion of equivocality, already present in Platonism, implies a relativity of difference between equivocal metaphysical and physical phenomena. Besides, although the notions 'outer' and 'inner man' are antithetical,¹⁵ Origen believes that they are ontologically connected to each other.

In the *Commentary on Luke*, when discussing the metaphor 'the light of the body is the eye' (*Luke* 11:34)¹⁶ Origen instructs his listener/reader on how to

¹² *Entretien d'Origène avec Héraclide et les évêques ses collègues, sur le Père, le Fils et l'âme*, ed. J. Scherer, SC 67 (Paris 1960), 78-80.

¹³ *Comm. in Cant.* 63,29-64, 16 (*Origenes Werke VIII. Kommentar zum Hohenlied in Rufins und Hieronymus' Übersetzung*, ed. W.A. Baehrens, GCS 33 [Leipzig, 1925]).

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 64,17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 64,2: '... though our outer man perish, yet the inner man is renewed day by day'; see *2Cor.* 4:16.

¹⁶ *Hom. in Luc., Frg.* 78 (468,19-474,5) (*In Lucam homiliae*, ed. Hermann-Josef Sieben, *Fontes Christiani* 4/2 [Freiburg, 1992]).

penetrate these words and grasp their content, namely that ‘the light of soul is the mind’. The discourse resembles an example of the homonymy based on analogy from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, where Aristotle links the term equivocality with analogy: many things are called ‘goodness’ equivocally; for example as the eye is a goodness for the body, in the same way the mind is a ‘goodness’ for the soul.¹⁷ But to the Alexandrian theologian, as opposed to Aristotle, the relation between the parts of an analogy is not a logical one. As Origen argues, one must not be surprised at the analogy he draws between the soul and the body, because either the ‘simplicity’ (ἀπλότης) or the ‘evil’ (πονηρία) of our intellect influences our body while moving and using it as an instrument: ‘We take body in a figurative way (τροπολογικῶς) for soul, even though the latter by its essence is invisible and incorporeal – and is indeed created according to the image of the invisible God – for we find that in figurative interpretations (τροπολογικῶς) the powers of the soul are equivocally (ὁμωνύμως) called members of the body, not being bodies as such.’ In Origen’s hermeneutical insight the equivocal links between the spiritual and somatic aspects in man correlates with the same relation between man and God, as evident from the Divine anthropomorphisms, both belonging to the anagogic structure of his exegesis.

This hermeneutic discourse from the *Commentary on Luke* is a vivid example of how Origen replaces the principle of diversity in essence of the traditional definition of homonyms with the principle of ontological affinity. Due to the innovative concluding words of the definition of homonyms from the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* (‘*sed et rebus ipsis invicem comparantur*’), the Alexandrian master’s understanding of homonyms stands in a sort of relation with the Aristotelian notion of synonymy.¹⁸

Origen does not appear to have been particularly concerned about his definition differing from that of Aristotle. He writes a commentary on the *Song of Songs* – acknowledged as one of the most mystical books of the Bible with a long Judaic exegetical tradition. In doing so, he finds himself preeminently in that conceptual framework. According to the Judaic allegorical interpretation the setting of the main event in Salomon’s is the *sancta sanctorum*, that is in the ‘place’ where the elected people of Israel come into mystical union with their God.¹⁹ For the Alexandrian theologian too the *epoptic* drama develops in the *sancta sanctorum*, that is beyond the heavenly Jerusalem, where, as he

¹⁷ *Eth. Nic.* 1,6,1096b29 (Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics* with an English translation by H. Rackam [Cambridge, 2003]). It is worth mentioning that the conception of equivocality based on analogy occurs in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* while criticizing Plato’s metaphysics. The example evidently stems from the Academy, see Plat. *Rp.* 508b-509a (Burnet, t. 4).

¹⁸ Arist., *Cat.* 1a6 (L. Minio-Paluello, 1956): συνώνυμα δὲ λέγεται ὅν τό τε ὄνομα κοινὸν καὶ ὁ κατὰ τοῦνομα λόγος τῆς οὐσίας ὁ αὐτός, οἷον ζῶον ὃ τε ἄνθρωπος καὶ ὁ βοῦς.

¹⁹ Origenes. *Homélie sur le Cantique des cantiques*, ed. Olivier Rousseau, SC 37^{bis} (Paris, 1966, 2^e éd.), 12-3.

assumes, the human soul joins the Word of God to become *unus spiritus* with him.²⁰ If we return to Judaic Hellenistic exegesis, we come across a similar notion in such an authority as Philo, whose point was evidently well known to the Christian commentator: According to Philo, none of the messages originated from the Biblical authors themselves; they only gave phonetic shape to those messages, that were bestowed on them by the in-dwelling Spirit.²¹ The interpretation of the Biblical language as being a result of inspiration is found extensively in Origen; this is especially the case in his commentary on the *Song of Songs*. As Origen says, in the book of Solomon the Word of God and the doctrine of the Holy Spirit sound in all their might instructing mankind in the sublime truth.²² In this extreme form of allegorical paradox Origen finds a vivid union between the human and the Divine Word.²³

All this discourse *per se* stresses the essential similarity between the human soul and God.²⁴ One can clearly trace how the Alexandrian theologian in the *Commentary on the Song of Songs* deliberately avoids introducing his sceptical view of the linguistic faculty of giving knowledge of God, which he elucidates in the 4th book of *De principiis*. Nevertheless, it would be unjust to accuse him of inconsistency. The notion of equivocality is a mobile one for shifting thought dialectically between the poles of difference and similarity.²⁵ Ambivalent as it is, its structure enables one to reconcile linguistic scepticism with the Judaic notion of the sacred character of Biblical language.

IV. Homonymy as metaphor

Another special characteristic of Origen's use of *homonymy* is that the word in his biblical hermeneutics does not designate equally the pairs compared in equivocal analogy. This means that Origen sees in the Biblical text only one of the members of this homonymous pair, whereas the other one – usually radically

²⁰ *Comm. in Cant.* 85,17-25 (W.A. Baehrens, GCS 33, 1925); *Hom. in Cant.* 1, 66,2 (O. Rousseau, SC 37, 1966).

²¹ See, for example, *Spec. leg.* IV 49 (*Philo* with an English translation by F.H. Colson, v. VIII [Cambridge, 1960]); *Quis rer. Div. her.* 259 (F.H. Colson, v. IV [1958]); *Mos.* I 277 (F.H. Colson, v. VI [1959]).

²² See, for example, *Comm. in Cant.* 63,29; 159,13; 208,1 (W.A. Baehrens).

²³ Origen prefers to speak about Holy Scripture as the body of the *Logos*, where He reveals His truth and makes mankind to participate in His mystery. This Judaic Hellenistic *Logos* theology is, nonetheless, intimately linked to Origen's Christology and ecclesiology. See Henri de Lubac, *Geist aus der Geschichte. Das Schriftverständnis des Origenes*, übers. und eingel. von Hans Urs von Balthasar (Einsiedeln, 1968), 424-36; Henri Crouzel, *Origène et la connaissance mystique* (Paris, 1961), 73f.

²⁴ See Philo, who thought that the human soul, who is in-dwelted by the Spirit, can be named God, *Quis rer. Div. her.* 84 (F.H. Colson, v. IV); *Spec. leg.* I 37 (F.H. Colson, v. VII).

²⁵ Also Aristotle's notion of *homonymy*, as given in the definition of the *Categories*, is ambivalent in itself, for it presents both similarity and difference.

different from it – is only implied. In this case, the homonymy of biblical articulation appears in the form of a mystical metaphor. The Alexandrian theologian is keen to utilize the concept of equivocality in this very function, although the term and its derivatives frequently occur in their common meaning of merely linguistic identity.²⁶ As we have seen,²⁷ figure and equivocality are related concepts in Origen's hermeneutics; they appear together in each case where the idea of a human word is at work as an adequate designation of its spiritual meaning.

With such an understanding of equivocality, Origen comes close to the point of Atticos. That Platonic philosopher argued, on one hand, that equivocality based on analogy and equivocality based on metaphor belong to one and the same figure, and, on the other hand, he reckoned the latter to be equivocality based on analogy. An intense philosophical debate went on within the Platonic school on this matter, as we can infer from the late Neo-Platonic commentaries on the *Categories* of Aristotle.²⁸ Atticos' view was strongly criticized by Platonists,

²⁶ He was indeed also well acquainted with the classification of homonymy, elaborated in the schools of Late Antiquity; see Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* VIII 8 (PG 9, 592B); Porph., *In Cat.* 65,19-66,21 (*Porphyrii Isagoge et in Aristotelis Categorias commentarium*, ed. Adolfus Busse, CAG IV [Berolini, 1887], 1); see Amm., *In Cat.* 21,16-22,10 (*Ammonii in Aristotelis Categorias commentarium*, ed. Adolfus Busse, CAG IV [Berolini, 1895], 4); Phil., *In Cat.* 16,22-17,19; 21,16-22,14 (Philoponi [olim Ammonii] in *Aristotelis Categorias commentarium*, ed. Adolfus Busse, CAG, XIII [Berolini, 1898], 1); Simpl., *In Cat.* 31,23-19 (*Simplicii in Aristotelis Categorias commentarium*, ed. Carolus Kalbfleisch, CAG VIII [Berolini, 1907]); Olymp., *In Cat.* 34,7-35,14 (*Olympiodori Prolegomena et in Categorias commentarium*, ed. Adolfus Busse, CAG XII [Berolini, 1902], 1); Elias, *In Cat.* 139,30-140,25 (*Eliae in Porphyrii Isagogen et Aristotelis Categorias commentaria*, ed. Adolfus Busse, CAG XVIII [Berolini, 1900], 1).

²⁷ See above *Hom. in Luc., Frg.* 78 (468,19-474,5) (H.-J. Sieben).

²⁸ Porph., *In Cat.* 66,29-67,32 (Ad. Busse [1887], 1); Simpl., *In Cat.* 32,19-33,21 (C. Kalbfleisch [1907]); without mentioning Atticos: Amm., *In Cat.* 20,1-10 (Ad. Busse [1898], 1); Philop., *In Cat.* 20,22-21,13 (Ad. Busse [1898], 1); Olymp., *In Cat.* 36,8-37,14 (Ad. Busse [1902], 1); Elias, *In Cat.* 135,24-136,20 (Ad. Busse [1900], 1). Atticos and before him Nikostratos (2nd c. AD) being opponents of Aristotle's *Categories* denied the existence of homonymy as an independent logical/linguistic phenomenon. According to them, it was dialectically justified to consider homonymy as a kind of synonymy. As we learn from Simplicios (*ibid.* 30,16-31,21), Nikostratos was the first to raise an *aporia* that *homonyma* do not exist, which, afterwards has been refined by Atticos. Their argument against the existence of homonymy was rather casuistic: alongside a common name all homonyms have a common definition of homonymy (Simpl., *ibid.* 26,21; 30,27). The opponents of Atticos, however, believed that there are logical links between homonyms and synonyms. Olympiodoros paid attention and tried to explain, why Aristotle adduced the same example of 'man' when explaining *homonyma* (ζῶον ὃ τε ἄνθρωπος καὶ τὸ γεγραμμένον) and *synonyma* (ζῶον ὃ τε ἄνθρωπος καὶ ὁ βοῦς). As he argues, with these examples Aristotle intends to show affinity between them: man towards its portrait is equivocal, but towards a bull, as an animal, he is synonym (Olymp., *ibid.* 35,15-36,7). In fact, the problem of the interrelation of homonymy and synonymy was important, as far as it characterized the relation between ὄν, γέννη, εἶδη and αἰσθητά. Such a crucial philosophical problem as: whether ὄν belongs to genus or not, was also linked with the understanding of homonyms and synonyms (Simpl., *ibid.* 21,26-22,1).

who strove to preserve *homonyma* as a logical-discursive term. They accused Atticos and others of this trend of a wrong judgment. As Porphyry, and after him Simplicios, argue something can be named metaphorically when it has a proper name, but it loosely expresses some other name not proper to it. In this case no equivocality can be assumed because only those things which have a similar name can be called equivocal; nor is it possible to speak here about equivocality based on similarity (καθ' ὁμοίωσιν ὁμώνυμα) for no similarity exists in metaphor. Therefore, as they insist, something expressed tropologically cannot be equivocal to a thing which is named in the proper sense.²⁹ This viewpoint on equivocality, analogy and metaphor was not in consonance with the main intention of Origen's Biblical hermeneutics, which understands the Biblical text as a metaphor and applies the notion of equivocality as a tool for disclosing the Divine mystery.

Indeed it was not Origen who introduced the term *homonyma* into Biblical exegesis for the first time. At least two antecedents can be found in the same intellectual setting of Alexandria – Philo and Clement. As faithful adepts of the philosophical mentality, they preserved some interesting examples of the technical use of the term in its traditional philosophical understanding. Therefore, it appears to have been the great Alexandrian's drastic innovation to accept from the Academy the idea of ontological similarity implied in *homonyma* and to use it in a mystical sense for his anagogical exegesis. In so doing, he reconceptualized the conception of equivocality, remodeling it according to the Apostle Paul's doctrine of the outer and inner man; the term *homonyma* comes to the fore as a reflection of that anthropological division on the linguistic level, attesting itself as an essential part of Origen's hermeneutic theory. His task, to explain the vertical structure of Biblical language through the term *homonyma* resulted in a profound synthesis of various concepts. However, the idea rests on two main pillars: St Paul's anthropological doctrine and Platonic philosophy in its multiple manifestations.

²⁹ Porph., *In Cat.* 66,29-67,32 (Ad. Busse [1887]); Simpl., *In Cat.* 32,19-33,21 (C. Kalbfleisch [1907]). In the school classification of homonyms Aristotle's example from *Categories* – man alive and man depicted both are animals – is identified as equivocality based on similarity.

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