CHAPTER FOUR

THE CONCEPT OF KAIROS

The concept of kairos makes sense in consideration of history having a beginning and proceeding to an end. This process is crucial since creaturely motion is morally coloured with rational creatures striving to carry through the eschatological perspective. The conception of time as extension means that this motility relates to the will of God, positively or negatively, since ‘there is nothing between committing sin and not committing sin’. The notion of kairos underscores the significance of history as the milieu where this dialectical relation takes place. Reference to kairos is made in order to express significant facets of this theology, particularly of the conception of history.

Kairos denotes a quality of action in time, when an event of outstanding significance occurs. It has been argued that kairos pertains to God’s action only. I shall explore the extent to which Origen entertains this idea. The fact is that the distinction between ‘time’ (χρόνος) and ‘kairos’ (καιρός) is regularly made and the concept of kairos is closely related to that of prophecy in two ways at least. First, kairos is a moment of time when a prophecy was pronounced. Second, kairos is a time when a prophecy is fulfilled.

The kairoi of God’s action

A main principle is that knowledge of ‘how’ and ‘when’ God is going to intervene into the world is beyond the cognoscibility of all conscious historical

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2 O. Cullmann, Christ and Time, p. 55f.
3 commMatt, 10, 10 (after Eccl. 3, 1); 14, 9; 14, 12; 17, 6; commEph, section 5; frLuc, 165; 228; selPs, 36, PG.12.1317.37; 118, 12 1616.10. The distinction between ‘time’ (χρόνος) and ‘kairos’ (καιρός) is Biblical. Quite significantly though, beyond Eccl. 3, 1, it appears only in the Greek translation of the book of Daniel: 2, 21 (also in Theodotion’s version); 4, 37; 7, 12 (‘until the time and kairos’). It appears thereafter in the words of the resurrected Jesus, in Acts, 1, 7. God is represented as ‘changing kairoi and times’ in the sense of being He who ‘removeth kings and setteth up king’ (Daniel, 2, 21; 4, 37). Origen is indebted to this distinction, not only because he draws on Daniel 2, 21 and 7, 12 (Cels, VIII, 68; frPs, 74, 6), but also because the notion was functional for him to bolster up his crucial exegesis on the precarious notion of ‘God’s repentance’ (μεταμέλεια Θεοῦ): this is argued to be not a ‘passion of God’ (οῦ πάθος Θεοῦ), but ‘a change of oikonomia’ (οἰκονομίας μεταβολή), or ‘a transfer of the divine oikonomia from one thing to another’ (μετάθεσις οἰκονομίας). The idea is expounded in homJer, 20 and frReg, 4; 5, and is also referred to in advusGen, PG.17.13.1f and Cels, VI, 58.
4 frLuc, 34.
agents. God alone knows the ‘opportune times’ for his action, when He ‘takes the right action’ (καιρὸς ἐστὶ χρόνος κατορθοδόσεως τῶν Κυρίων).
5 Such statements constitute an explicit definition of kairos with regard to God’s action.

In Princ, God is the ‘perfect superintendent, who has full knowledge of both the times (καιροῦς) and the appropriate aids and the paths and the ways’ of his action.6 It is only for the master and his divine knowledge to know the kairos of each man’, which means to know ‘when the time of fruits is near’ and when this is faraway’.8 This, because ‘the causes’ of what is done ‘lie entirely in the sphere of Providence, and it is not easy for men to come upon their explanation’.9

Jerome ascribed to Origen the opinion that angels perform ‘duties at the various times, which are known to God the Artificer’,10 whereas ‘others’, ‘in their various places and times, which the Artificer alone knows, undertake the governance of the world. These we believe be the angels’.11

The notion is also found in commGen and it is worth-comparing the passage in Greek to the tendentious rendition of this. For the allegation that ‘angels . . . undertake the governance of the world’ is a concoction: what Origen really holds is that those beings are servitors to God’s will; they are ‘functioning spirits’ being ‘sent in order to minister’:

For the holy angels, the functioning spirits who are sent in order to minister,12 receive, as it is natural, orders which are written according to the law of God, in the appropriate order, and when they should and as they should carry out the better things; for it would be absurd to maintain that they come at random and not according to a fixed order . . . Thus they read the book of God, so that they carry out this task neither at random nor by chance; and so they perform what it is appropriate to them.13

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5 selPs, 118, PG.12.1616.12–14. The expression is actually Philo’s (De Opificio Mundi, section 59): “what can the meaning of kairos be other than a time of achievement?” (χρόνος κατορθοδόσεως). Philo treats the portion of Gen. 1, 14, which is significant in Origen’s account of kairos (s. infra). Philo’s expression was upheld word for word by Evagrius Ponticus, Scholia in Ecclesiasten, scholia 63&70 and John of Damascus, Dialectica sive Capita Philosophica (recensio fusion), section 68.
6 Princ, III.1.14 (Gr. & Lat.).
7 Cf. Matt. 21, 33 & 43.
8 commMatt, 17, 9.
9 Cels, III, 38.
10 Jerome, epAv, 9; apud FP, p. 240, n. 3.
11 Jerome, epAv, 9; apud op. cit, p. 241, n. 6.
12 Cf. Heb, 1, 14.
13 commGen, 3, PG.12.84.45 (Philocalia, 23, 21); selGen, PG.12.101.34; commJohn, 1, XII: 10, XXX; 32, XVII; Cels, V, 4; VIII, 34; commMatt, 12, 13; 17, 22; Commentatorum Series in Evangelium Matthaei (Mt. 22.24–27.63), p. 148; Scholia in Matthaeum, PG.17, 304.36; De Engastrimytho (= Homilia in i Reg. [i Sam.] 28.3–25), section 7; Scholia in Canticum Canticorum, PG.17.269.17; deOr, XXVII, 10; selPs, 27, PG.12.1284.46; 103, PG.1561.2; excPs, 27, PG.17.117.3; expProv, PG.17.205.41.