Róbert Somos


In the tradition of Alexandrian theology and biblical exegesis a number of figures stand out on account of their extensive knowledge of Greek philosophy and their use of its resources in their writings. One thinks in particular of the succession of Philo, Clement, Origen, Didymus and to a lesser extent Cyril, covering the entire period from the first to the fifth centuries of our era. It is now generally agreed that these men were primarily biblical exegetes and apologists for the judaeo-christian tradition rather than philosophers or systematic theologians. In fulfilling their exegetical and apologetic aims they make ample use of their knowledge of Greek philosophy, but it is never their aim to participate in that tradition and develop any aspect of it for its own sake. This might seem to happen in apparently purely philosophical treatises such as those of Philo, but a closer look shows that it is not the case. The aim is apologetic and there are often covert references to scripture.

A feature of this tradition is that it makes widely scattered use of the methods of Greek philosophy (and rhetoric as well), but seldom if ever dwells on them specifically. This is where the monograph under review aims to make its contribution. The author focuses on the role that logic plays in the vast œuvre of Origen, taking the term in a broad sense that is virtually equivalent to rationality. It includes theoretical aspects but there is a particular emphasis on the practical features of argumentation and dialectics. The motto of the book, he states in the introduction, might be the rational methods and techniques that Origen uses when he undertakes ‘to confirm our belief with reason’ (_Princ._ 4.1.1).

In the book’s opening chapter Somos emphasises that Origen is not interested in providing a clear formula or description of the role of logic. Of the few comments that he makes on it, by far the most important is found in the prologue of the _Commentary on the Song of Songs_ only preserved in Rufinus’ translation. Logic, he writes there, is not a fourth discipline in addition to and separate from the three basic disciplines of ethics, physics and epoptics (i.e. theology), but is ‘mingled and interwoven with them.’ Thus logic for Origen does not have the sole function of being an instrument, the view attributed to Philo on the basis of _Agr._ 14-16 (but the more negative statement at _Prob._ 80 that it is λογοθηρία is wrongly adduced, since it is put forward as the view of the Essenes and not his own view), but rather ‘it pervades the entirety of knowledge and it has theological relevance, the reason being that during the interpretation of the Scriptural text, logic provides the rules, that is the formal
aspect of the expansion, whereas *epoptica* provides the non-formal aspect of interpretation’ (p. 24). The remaining nine chapters of the book can be seen as a detailed explication of this basic insight.

The first of these treats logic as epistemology and natural knowledge. Somos rightly emphasises that Origen does not have a developed epistemology. Theory of knowledge has a primarily theological focus and must be reconstructed on the basis of sporadic evidence. Nevertheless, there is a clear connection with the role of the Son of God as the Logos, providing a basis for the coherence and credibility of Christian teaching and a generally positive view of the role of logic broadly conceived. The next chapter points out that there are both practical and theoretical applications of logic and the dialectics associated with it. Practical application is prior to theory in relation to us, and the demonstration that logic can provide exemplifies the action of divine power, but in absolute terms theory is prior, enabling contemplation and unification with God on the basis of the divine intellectual nature (the underlying Aristotelian distinction here is developed in the *Commentary on John* and discussed at some length in chapter six). Next Somos turns his attention to Origen’s most systematic work, the Περὶ ἀρχῶν. Although the biblical and theological content of its twelve axiomatic teachings may seem strange from a Greek philosophical point of view, the scientific-theoretical structure in which they are placed and have their function is clearly indebted to Greek science and particularly to the process of dialectical demonstration. It is striking that Origen interprets paradise as a school where souls collect and amplify their knowledge of what they had seen on earth in a gymnastic setting (Princ. 2.11.6). Two chapters are devoted to particular logical doctrines, the role of homonymy (with a strong Platonist slant) and of logical paradoxes (where various fairly casual allusions reveal Origen’s deep knowledge of the subject). Two further chapters deal explicitly with dialectics and the theory of argumentation. Chapter nine, which gives an overview of Origen’s argumentative strategies in the *Contra Celsum*, is a highlight of the book and could be developed into a monograph on its own. Somos shows that Origen’s technique is to use the formal criteria of logic to demonstrate that the informal criticisms that Celsus directs against Christianity are irrational and incoherent. A shared theoretical basis is assumed and it is the Christian thinker and not the philosopher who adheres to the proper logical procedures. The final tenth chapter goes in a slightly different direction. Our author rightly argues that logic in Origen’s time was for the most part a general discipline shared between the philosophical schools. Although some of his logical doctrines may have originated in the Stoa, it is wrong to assume that he derived it directly from a study of Stoic sources. It appears that he used material of a mixed Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic origin as it had been incorporated in