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In what sense is the *Prototokos* a *kosmos*? *Origen's Exegesis of John 8:32*

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Introduction

To conclude a discursive exegesis of John 8:32,¹ Origen asks in what way the, “Firstborn (Prototokos) of all creation is able to be a world.” The word translated as “world” in John’s gospel and in Origen’s text is κόσμος (kosmos). Origen then proceeds to explain in what sense he thinks the Prototokos is able to be a kosmos—but the explanation itself seems to require explanation. What sense of the word kosmos does Origen mean? The problem is unresolved. In fact, the use of kosmos here is so cryptic that even in Lampe’s *Lexicon* the lexical entry for κόσμος contains a sub-definition that cites *only the present passage from Origen as an example of this particular meaning of the word*. Yet the meaning itself remains unclear. Origen is using the word in a new way, and in so doing makes a radical Christological claim. This article will present the problem as it stands, introduce prior attempts at interpreting the cryptic passage, and finally put forth an original interpretation. In addition to attempting a better understanding of this particular passage in Origen’s commentary on John, the question has implications for our understanding of how Origen viewed the very dynamics of creation.

The Kosmos

Origen is quite clear that he does not mean that the first-born is a “world” in any kind of physical sense (οὐκ ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης), and so we are encouraged to consider how the first-born might be a kosmos in another sense of that word. The meaning of kosmos that refers to the physical world is actually a relatively late one in the semantic development of the word. In classical Greek the word kosmos is related to the verb κοσμέω (kosmeō) which means “to set in order”. The original meaning

¹ And he said to them: You are from below, I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world.

of kosmos is thus “order” as in “measure”. Its literary heritage stretches all the way back to Homer.² The word also comes to mean “ornament” or “decoration” (cf. Eng. “cosmetic”) especially of women.³ Another later meaning is “ruler” as in the one who orders or regulates the state.⁴ The meaning of kosmos as “world” or “universe” as its origins in philosophy, and is particularly well illustrated in the well-known quote of Heraclitus:

κόσμον τόνδε οὔτε τις θεῶν οὔτε ἀνθρώπων ἐποίησεν, ἀλλ’ ἦν ἀεὶ καὶ ἔστιν καὶ ἔσται πῦρ.⁵

No one of gods or of men made this world, but it always was and is and will be fire.

Most of these meanings of kosmos given above find expression also in the Septuagint and among the New Testament authors. For instance, in 1 Peter we read:

Your adornment [κόσμος] should not be an external one: braiding the hair, wearing gold jewelry, or dressing in fine clothes, but rather the hidden character of the heart, expressed in the imperishable beauty of a gentle and calm disposition, which is precious in the sight of God.⁶

By far the most common meaning of kosmos, however, among the New Testament authors is that which refers to the “world” in the sense of the English word, whether this world be the planet earth,⁷ humanity in general,⁸ the human experience,⁹ or the fallen world as the world as opposed to the divine existence.¹⁰

It is this latter most sense that the author of the Fourth Gospel likely intended the word kosmos to be understood at 8:23.¹¹ When Jesus says, “You

² cf. Il. 10.472, εἶ κατὰ κόσμον, “in good order” i.e. “duly”; also Od. 8.179, οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, “shamefully”.

³ cf. Pl. *Rep.* 2.373c, γυναικεῖος κόσμος, “women’s adornment”.

⁴ cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1272 a 6.

⁵ Heraclitus Fr. 30, trans. mine.

⁶ 1 Peter 3:3 – 3:4.

⁷ cf. Mt. 4:8, ἐν ὅλῳ τῷ κόσμῳ.

⁸ cf. Jn. 8:12, ὁ σωτήρ τοῦ κόσμου.

⁹ 1 Cor. 7:33, τὰ τοῦ κόσμου, “the affairs of the world”.

¹⁰ cf. Jn. 12:31, ἀρχὸν τοῦ κόσμου i.e. the devil; 1 Cor. 1:20, σοφία τοῦ κόσμου vs. σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ; cf. also Eng. “worldliness”.

¹¹ Brown, Raymond. *The Gospel and Epistles of John: A Concise Commentary* (The Liturgical Press: Collegeville, 1986) 53.

belong to what is below, I belong to what is above. You are of this world, I am not of this world,”¹² he is responding to “the Judaeans” who are questioning what he meant in a previous statement where he says, “but you will die in your sin. Where I am going, you cannot come.”¹³ Jesus is represented as an ambassador to the Father in much the same way as he was first introduced to Nicodemus.¹⁴ In fact this “from above” and “from below” dichotomy is sometimes one of the central interpretative keys to understanding the Fourth Gospel.

Origen’s Exegesis of John 8:23

Origen’s exegesis of John 8:23 is his fullest discussion of the idea of the kosmos in the *Commentary on John (commJohn)*, but this is due to an accident of history. In his exegesis of John 1:29 (ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου) Origen asks the reader to consider “what we have said in earlier books about the meaning of the term ‘world’ in Scripture” so that he does not have to repeat it here.¹⁵ In order to frame the analysis of the special sense in which Origen calls the Prototokos a kosmos, it will be good to review briefly the exegesis of John 8:23 that leads up to that cryptic sentiment. “And he said to them: You are from below, I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world.”

After quoting 8:23 Origen adduces a passage from earlier in the Gospel, “He who is of the earth is of the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. What he has seen and heard, to this he bears testimony.”¹⁶ The most pressing question on his reader’s mind, Origen anticipates, will be whether “to be of the earth” and “to be from below” are the same. Origen thus sets out on a discussion of what it means to be “from below” and “from above,” and what it means to be “of this world” and “not of this world.” The contents of this discussion (*commJohn* 19.130 – 145) illustrate the various ways Origen thinks kosmos can be understood. There are in fact three different interpretations of the word kosmos in Origen’s exegesis of John 8:23, all of which mean “world” in some sense. The first is the kosmos that is the physical world, which includes both the heavens and the earth, that is, land and sky. The second is the kosmos that is the sinful world, as

¹² ὁμεῖς ἐκ τῶν κάτω ἐστέ, ἐγὼ ἐκ τῶν ἄνω εἰμί· ὁμεῖς ἐκ τούτου τοῦ κόσμου ἐστέ, ἐγὼ οὐκ εἰμί ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου.

¹³ Jn. 8:21.

¹⁴ cf. Jn. 3:13, καὶ οὐδεὶς ἀναβέβηκεν εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εἰ μὴ ὁ ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ καταβάς, ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

¹⁵ *commJohn* 6.301. Heine (1993) agrees with Blanc (1970) that this discussion must be missing from the extant portions of the commentary. All translations are those of Heine (1993) unless otherwise indicated.

¹⁶ Jn. 3:31 – 3:32.

opposed to the divine world. It is this sinful kosmos that the Savior frees us from. The third is the kosmos that is not able to be seen (κόσμος ἀόρατος) and that is “spiritual” (νοητός). This is not the first place in the *commJohn* that Origen has introduced this idea of a spiritual world. It comes up in book one of the commentary in a discussion of light and with particular reference to the sense in which Jesus calls himself the light of the world.¹⁷ There, Origen is grappling with the question of what it means that Christ has been given various titles to do with light—the light of men,¹⁸ the true light,¹⁹ the light of the gentiles.²⁰ The light must be one of a metaphorical sense, since “the sun is the light of the world perceived by the senses” (αἰσθητὸς κόσμος).²¹ Origen thus supposes that “the Savior is the light of the spiritual world (νοητὸς κόσμος) because he shines on those who are rational and intellectual, that their mind may see its proper visions.”²² The terms under which one is able to behold this spiritual world are described in book one in ways similar to those of book nineteen—the spiritual world is an invisible world that is apprehended only by the pure of heart in the light of Christ.

Since the question of what Origen means by kosmos in the subsequent exegesis requires some unpacking of his text, it will be helpful first to offer the text itself in full along with the translation of Heine.

Ζητήσεις δὲ εἰ κατὰ τι τῶν σημαιομένων δύναται ὁ Πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως εἶναι κόσμος, καὶ μάλιστα καθ’ ὃ σοφία ἐστὶν ἢ πολυποίκιλος· τῷ γὰρ εἶναι πάντας οὐτινοσοῦν τοὺς λόγους, καθ’ οὓς γεγένηται πάντα τὰ ὑπὸ τοῦ Θεοῦ ἐν σοφίᾳ πεποιημένα, ὡς φησὶν ὁ προφήτης· “Πάντα ἐν σοφίᾳ ἐποίησας,” ἐν αὐτῷ εἶη ἂν καὶ αὐτὸς κόσμος, τοσοῦτω ποικιλιώτερος τοῦ αἰσθητοῦ κόσμου καὶ διαφέρων ὅσῳ διαφέρει γυμνὸς πάσης ὕλης τοῦ ὅλου κόσμου λόγος τοῦ ἐνύλου κόσμου, οὐκ ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης, ἀλλ’ ἀπὸ τῆς μετοχῆς τοῦ Λόγου, καὶ τῆς σοφίας, τῶν κοσμούντων τὴν ὕλην κεκοσμημένων.

But you will inquire if, in some sense, the first-born of all creation can be a world, and especially in so far as he is the manifold wisdom. For by being the principles of absolutely everything according to which all things made by God in wisdom have come to be - as the prophet says, “You made all things in wisdom” - in himself he would himself also be a “world” that surpasses the world of sense perception in its diversity and excels it as much

¹⁷ *commJohn* 1.158; cf. Jn. 8:12.

¹⁸ Jn. 1:4.

¹⁹ Jn. 1:9.

²⁰ cf. Is. 49:6.

²¹ *commJohn* 1.160.

²² *ibid.* 1.61.

as the principle stripped of all the material of the whole world differs from the material world, a “world” constituted, not on the basis of matter, but on the participation of the things that have been set in order in the Word and Wisdom, which set matter in order.²³

It is a difficult passage even in English and there are points at which I disagree with Heine’s translation, but I have included that translation here simply to illustrate the ambiguity of the translation of kosmos as “world”, which is the very problem this paper seeks to address. Other possible readings of this text will be discussed later, but for the time being let us simply look at the general structure of Origen’s argument. If we were to construct a bulleted list of Origen’s argument as to why or how the Prototokos is able to be a kosmos, it might look something like this:

- Because he is “the manifold wisdom” (σοφία ἡ πολυποίκιλος)
- By his being ‘the principles’ of creation (οἱ λόγοι)
- And creation was fashioned by God in wisdom (ἐν σοφίᾳ)
- Not because of his material nature (οὐκ ἀπὸ τῆς ὕλης)
- But because he participates in Word and Wisdom (ἀπὸ τῆς μετοχῆς τοῦ Λόγου, καὶ τῆς σοφίας)
- And these are what set matter in order (κοσμούντων τὴν ὕλην)

It is quite clear that here we are dealing with a sense of the word kosmos which Origen has not yet introduced in the preceding exegesis of John 8:23. Maurice Wiles assumes that Origen here is equating the spiritual world (νοητὸς κόσμος) with the Son of God.²⁴ Wiles writes, “He does suggest that in one sense at least the νοητὸς κόσμος may be identified with the Son. This world is a κόσμος by virtue of the λόγος and the wisdom by which its basic material is ordered.” This is partly true, inasmuch as the Son as a kosmos has something to do with λόγος and σοφία, but here, at least, Origen is clearly not equating the Son with the spiritual world he has just described. The νοητὸς κόσμος is a kind of state of being, access to which is granted to persons who were originally *from below* but who have achieved a purity of heart through spiritual ascendancy.

Origen, however, is asking a completely different question. How is the Son, as the firstborn of creation (i.e. the Prototokos), able to be a kosmos? Tzamalikos comes closer in asserting that, in this particular passage, Origen is using the term

²³ trans. Heine (1993).

²⁴ Wiles, Maurice F. *The Spiritual Gospel: The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel in the Early Church*. (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1960) 77.

kosmos as a kind of metaphor, “in order to indicate the ‘multi-decorated’ wisdom of God.”²⁵ But Origen ascribes kosmos to the Son not only on account of wisdom, but also in relation to οἱ λόγοι, the “principles” of creation, as well as by the Son’s participation in the Λόγος and Σοφία together, which “cosmify” the world, that is, set it in order (κοσμοῦντων). Thus – and this is essential – the Son as kosmos somehow involves the meaning of kosmos that echoes the verbal meaning involving “ordering” or “arranging”. It must also be kept in mind that Origen doesn’t call the Son a kosmos, but he specifically calls *the firstborn* (πρωτότοκος) a kosmos.

Kosmos Itself

There is no scholarly consensus on the proper understanding of *commJohn* 19.147. This is largely due to difficulties inherent to the text. In 1954 Ralph Marcus of the University of Chicago published a short note in *Harvard Theological Review* discussing a disagreement of the then four modern editors of Origen’s text (Lommatzsch, Migne, Preuschen, and Brooke) about the punctuation (and therefore the meaning) of this passage.²⁶ The main point of disagreement discussed in that note is the correct sense in which to read ἐν αὐτῷ after the Scriptural quote. Lommatzsch, Preuschen, and Brooke give a comma after the prepositional phrase, connecting it with the preceding infinitival phrase (τῷ γὰρ εἶναι). Migne places a comma after the quote, connecting ἐν αὐτῷ with what follows. There are also some minor issues with the text itself. For instance, in the Bodleian codex ὄλου is missing from τοῦ ὄλου κόσμου. Also for Migne’s accusative πάντας Marcus reads a genitive πάντος, connecting it with οὐτινοσοῦν instead of τοὺς λόγους. Marcus thinks Migne’s punctuation is the correct reading, but he also thinks that such a reading would leave the infinitival phrase lacking “an adverbial complement to εἶναι.”²⁷ He therefore posits that either ἐν σοφίᾳ or ἐν αὐτῷ has been omitted after εἶναι.

Marcus senses an omission because of his reading of the syntactic function of the dative of the articular infinitive, which he understands as introducing a full subordinate clause dependent on a main clause whose verb is εἶη. As such, he understands the dative *causally*. In each of the three possible translations Marcus gives in his note, he renders the infinitival phrase as “Since the *logoi* of anything whatever [...]”, the logical consequence of which he understands to be expressed

²⁵ Tzamalikos, P. *Origen: Cosmology and Ontology of Time*. (Brill: Boston, 2006) 117.

²⁶ Marcus, Ralph. “A Note on Origen” *The Harvard Theological Review*, Vol. 47 No. 4 (Oct., 1954), pp. 317 – 318.

²⁷ *ibid.* p. 317.

in the main clause ἐν αὐτῷ εἶη ἂν καὶ αὐτὸς κόσμος. For this reading to work, τοὺς λόγους must be taken as the grammatical subject of the infinitive εἶναι, in which event some kind of predicate adjective, a noun, or an adverbial phrase is lacking to answer what, where, how, etc. *the logoi of each thing are*. Marcus thus suggests an omission, that the *logoi* are either “in wisdom” or “in him” (i.e. the Prototokos).

If one takes the expressed ἐν αὐτῷ following the Scripture quote as the adverbial complement to εἶναι (as do Lommatzsch, Preuschen, and Brooke), then the following εἶη also lacks an adverbial complement. Thus Marcus suggests an omitted prepositional phrase within the infinitival phrase, and translates the passage in the following way:

For since the *logoi* of anything whatever, in accordance with which all things created by God in wisdom came into being, as the prophet says, ‘All things hast thou made in wisdom’, are [in wisdom] (or [in the first-born / the Logos]), (then) there would also be in it (i.e. the Logos) the (intelligible) world which is as much more manifold than the sense perceptible world and different from it as the Logos of the whole world, which is bare of all matter, differs from the enmattered world, not because of its matter but because of its participation in the Logos and wisdom, which (both) order the matter of ordered things.²⁸

By “intelligible” world, Marcus seems to mean the invisible or spiritual world (κόσμος νόητος). This spiritual world then is understood to be within the Logos - but the antecedent of αὐτῷ, which Marcus reads as Logos, cannot be Logos but rather must be Prototokos. Origen’s question is not how the Logos is able to be a kosmos, but how the Prototokos is able to be a kosmos. Indeed, Marcus seems to regard the two titles as nearly synonymous. An additional inadequacy of the translation is the complete neglect of αὐτός, which he must understand as a modifier of κόσμος, yet omits in his translation.

Heine’s translation reflects a different reading of the text at a couple of points, the first of which is his rendering of the infinitival phrase, which he does not regard as fully subordinate to the main clause. In other words, the grammatical subject of each clause, according to Heine’s reading, is the same — an unexpressed Πρωτότοκος. Unlike Marcus, Heine thus reads τοὺς λόγους not as the grammatical subject of εἶναι but as the predicate nominative qualifying an unexpressed Πρωτότοκος:

²⁸ *ibid.* p. 318, all punctuation and bracketing his.

For by being the principles of absolutely everything according to which all things made by God in wisdom have come to be (as the prophet says, ‘You made all things in wisdom’), in himself he would himself also be a ‘world’ that surpasses the world of sense perception in its diversity and excels it as much as the principle stripped of all the material of the whole world differs from the material world, a world constituted, not on the basis of matter, but on the participation of the things that have been set in order in the Word and Wisdom, which set matter in order.

Removing the relative clause reveals the differences between the two renderings even more clearly:

Marcus: For since the *logoi* of anything whatever are in wisdom (or in him), then there would also be in him the (intelligible) world ...

Heine: For by being the principles of absolutely everything, in himself he would himself be a ‘world’ ...

A second point at which Heine differs from Marcus is his understanding of ἐν αὐτῷ and αὐτός, the latter of which Marcus does not even translate. Heine’s translation is questionable at this point; he reads ἐν αὐτῷ as a reflexive (“in himself”), which it cannot be, and he reads αὐτός as an intensive adjective modifying not κόσμος but again an unexpressed Πρωτότοκος. This reading puts quite a strain on the grammar. Neither of these renderings of αὐτῷ or αὐτός is a common or natural one. In order for αὐτός to act as the intensive, the modified noun must be expressed—otherwise it must be understood as the third person pronoun, “he” or “it” (as in ἐν αὐτῷ, “in him”). It would be very unusual indeed to see αὐτός as an intensive in the absence of a modified noun. Grammatically speaking, the regular way to understand αὐτός in this passage is in fact the one which both Marcus and Heine have neglected, and that is to take it as the intensive adjective modifying κόσμος, “the kosmos itself” or “kosmos itself.”

Here we must note also the third major point at which Marcus and Heine differ, and that is their reading of the verb εἶη. Marcus takes this as an example of the so-called “existential εἶμι” which is usually found at the beginning of a clause and, if in the present indicative, is accented (ἔστι, “there is”), i.e. is not enclitic. Here the verb is optative; thus Marcus translates, “there would also be...” Heine takes it as a regular copulative verb with an unexpressed subject modified by an unusual use of αὐτός as a bare intensive; “he would himself be ...” From a grammatical point of view Marcus clearly has the stronger reading. The positioning of εἶη in front of αὐτὸς κόσμος certainly suggests its being understood

impersonally (i.e. “existential” εἰμί). Reading εἶη as a copulative verb in the manner of Heine requires a very strained use of αὐτός as an intensive modifying, not the noun that immediately follows it (κόσμος), but one that is unexpressed. It should also be noted that Heine, along with Marcus, follows Migne in placing a comma after the Scripture quotation in order to connect ἐν αὐτῷ with what follows.

With respect to the infinitival phrase, Heine’s reading must be preferred (i.e. “For by being the principles...”) in opposition to the suggestion of Marcus that an adverbial complement has been omitted. In the main clause, however, the reading of Marcus is to be preferred over that of Heine, for the reasons already given. Marcus however neglects to translate αὐτός, which should be taken as an intensive adjective modifying κόσμος, i.e. “the kosmos itself.”

In light of these considerations, my reading of *commJohn* 19.147 is the following:

And you will ask in what sense the Firstborn of all creation is able to be a ‘kosmos’, especially inasmuch as he is manifold wisdom. For by being the principles of absolutely everything according to which all things made by God in wisdom have come into being (as the prophet says, ‘You made all things in wisdom’), in him there would be kosmos itself, surpassing the perceptible kosmos and excelling it as much as a principle stripped of all the matter of the whole kosmos surpasses the material kosmos, not on account of its matter but on account of its participation in the Logos and in Wisdom which order the matter of ordered things.

As noted in the previous section, it is not at all clear in what sense αὐτὸς κόσμος is to be understood in this passage. I have retained the Greek word kosmos in this translation in order to reflect this ambiguity; but I do think it is possible that Origen is using the word kosmos here in a rather specific way. If it is correct to take αὐτός with κόσμος, as I think it is, what would “kosmos itself” mean, other than the original etymological meaning of kosmos, that is, order? Origen’s reasoning is actually rather clear. The reason the Prototokos is kosmos itself is on account of its “participation in the Logos and in Wisdom, *which order the matter of ordered things*” (τῶν κοσμοῦντων τὴν ὕλην κεκοσμημένων). What connects the Prototokos as kosmos to the Logos and to Wisdom is the the creative process of the ordering or arranging of matter.

Gerald Bostock has recently proposed that, “It is the fundamental notion of ‘Cosmos’, meaning a reasoned and patterned Order, which is determinative for [Origen’s] philosophy of creation. This Order stands in contrast to the infinite variability of matter, and thus reflects the antithesis in Genesis I between the

polarities of chaos and ‘cosmos’.”²⁹ A reading of the text of *commJohn* 19.147 such as has been suggested in this paper would seem to support this claim. It is Order itself (Himself?) that takes the chaotic existence of matter and fashions it into the perceivable kosmos (ὁ αἰσθητὸς κόσμος). This is made possible by Order’s participation in Logos and Sophia (ἀπὸ τῆς μετοχῆς τοῦ Λόγου, καὶ τῆς σοφίας).

Conclusion

In the opening chapters of the *commJohn* before offering exegesis on the text itself Origen makes a few comments on what he thinks the nature of the Gospel to be. He says, “If the good things [τὰ ἀγαθὰ] in the proclamation of those who preach the good news are investigated, the apostles preach Jesus.”³⁰ Later he writes, “And let no one be surprised if we have understood Jesus to be announced by the plural ‘good things.’ For when we have understood the things of which the names which the Son of God is called are predicated, we will understand how Jesus . . . is many good things.”³¹ The Gospel illustrates the many good things of Jesus which give rise to his many titles and names. Indeed, much of the first book of the *commJohn* is dedicated to explaining this multitude of names. Inasmuch as the Son of God is Wisdom, Origen tells us in book 19, he is also kosmos, that which orders the physical matter of creation. It would not be a cause for concern to Origen that this title is not given to the Son of God in Scripture, for he says, “But one who presents how Jesus is a multitude of good things can infer [καταστοχάζεσθαι] from these innumerable things written about him that the things which are in him in whom all the fullness of divinity ‘was pleased’ to dwell ‘bodily’ are by no means contained in writings.”³² This process of inference is precisely what leads Origen to call the Prototokos a kosmos. Notice this process is not properly *eisegesis*, which aims to confirm already held beliefs by “proof-texts”. Origen begins from the text and makes inferences which, to him, appear logical. One could certainly argue to the contrary, that Origen holds clear convictions about the nature of the kosmos and reads these convictions into the text; but what emerges from a sympathetic reading of Origen’s text, I think, is that Origen - who is as much a product of his education as anyone in history has been - yet moves from one sentiment to the next in a kind of path of discovery. In calling the Prototokos a kosmos, Origen is aware the statement is a difficult one to understand, yet he invites the reader (ζητήσεις) to

²⁹ Bostock, Gerald. “Origen’s Doctrine of Creation.” *The Expository Times*. Vol. 118 No. 5 (2007) p. 223.

³⁰ *commJohn* 1.47.

³¹ *commJohn* 1.52.

³² *commJohn* 1.60.

consider what might (εἴη) prove to be one of those “mystical meanings stored up like treasure in the words.”³³

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³³ *commJohn* 1.89.