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Justification by Works: Fate and the Gospel in the Roman Empire

ROBERT L. WILKEN

A prominent theme in the Christian writings of the second and third centuries is that men are "rewarded and punished according to the quality of their works." It is sounded in the middle of the second century by Justin Martyr in his First Apology: "We have learned from the prophets and declare as the truth, that penalties and punishments and good rewards are given according to the quality of each man's action."¹ A century later, Origen, in *Contra Celsum*, lists this belief as an article of faith alongside the resurrection and virgin birth. "Almost the whole world has come to know the preaching (*to kerygma*) of Christians better than the opinions of philosophers," writes Origen. For has not everyone heard of the Christian teaching about "Jesus' birth from a virgin, and of his crucifixion, and his resurrection and the proclamation of the judgment which punishes sinners according to their deserts and pronounces the righteous worthy of reward?"²

¹ Justin Martyr, *Apologia* 43.

² Origen, *Contra Celsum* 1.7 (Text by P. Koetschau in *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte* [Leipzig: J. C. Heinrichs, 1931]; Eng. trans., Henry Chadwick, *Origen: Contra Celsum* [Cambridge: University Press, 1965]). See also *Con. Cels.* 1.9, 29, 38; 3.16, 76; 4.3, 10; 5.16, 83; 6.55; 8.48, 51; et passim.

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To ears attuned to the Reformation the statements of Justin and Origen sound like a not too subtle support of justification by works. Where we would expect Christian thinkers to accent the gracious action of God, we find that they assert that man is capable, according to his works, to appear righteous before God. "The apostles taught," says Origen, "that the soul . . . will be rewarded according to its deserts after its departure from this world; for it will either obtain an inheritance of eternal life and blessedness, if its deeds shall warrant this, or it must be given over to eternal fire."³

³ Origen, *De Principiis* 1. pref. 5; also 3.1.1; see also *Con. Cels.* 8.51: "The whole foundation of [Christian] faith is God and the promises concerning the righteous given by Christ and the teaching about the punishment of the wicked." (Chadwick, p. 489)

For rewards and punishment in the New Testament see Matt. 25:31-46 and 2 Cor. 5:10, to mention only two instances. The problem has engendered a large and often quite tendentious literature, especially among Protestants. See Ernst Wuerthwein and Herbert Preisker, *misthos*, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, IV (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 69-72; G. Bornkamm, "Der Lohngedanke im Neuen Testament," *Evangelische Theologie* VI, (1946), 143-66; Floyd V. Filson, *St. Paul's Conception of Recompense* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1931); Bo Reicke, "The New Testament Conception of Reward," *Aux Sources de la Tradition Chrétienne: Mélanges offerts à M. Maurice Goguel* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux and Niestlé, 1950), 195-206; Willem Cornelis van Unnik, "The Teaching of Good Works in I Peter," *New*

The primitive Christian belief in grace seems to have given way to a doctrine of works based on the freedom of man's will to choose good and evil. Describing this transformation in early Christian thought one historian wrote: "There is no need to dwell upon the disastrous results of such tendencies and ideas. . . . In it a defective theology and a defective experience of God combine with an unintelligent misapprehension of the essence of morality and a stereotyped ethical code to undo the entire work of revelation. . . . The vision of God is fading; and as it fades the characteristic dangers of Judaism come back, only thinly disguised by a veneer of Christian phrases."⁴

In this article we examine the early Christian belief in "rewards and punishments" and ask why, in the situation of the second and third centuries, Christians were led to assert something that sounds very much like "justification by works." How do the words of Justin and Origen look when viewed from the perspective of the Greco-Roman world of the second century? What is the setting for belief in "rewards and punishments" and what role does this belief play in Christian thinking during the period?

I

In antiquity appeal to "rewards and punishments" or "praise and blame" usually appeared in connection with an argu-

Testament Studies (1954—55), pp. 92—110. For rewards in the teaching of Jesus, see John Reumann, *Jesus in the Church's Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1968), pp. 241—50, with recent bibliography.

⁴ Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Vision of God* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1931), pp. 138—39; 111.

ment for moral responsibility.⁵ The distinction between voluntary and involuntary actions—central to Aristotle's view of ethics—is based on the view that man is under certain conditions not responsible for his actions while under other conditions he is responsible. "Virtue is concerned with feelings and actions," writes Aristotle. "But it is only voluntary feelings and actions for which praise and blame are given." Therefore we must distinguish what is voluntary from what is done by coercion, for only then can we "assign rewards and punishments." Aristotle wished to show that when man acts out of neither ignorance nor compulsion he is the "author of his own actions," and for this reason we designate such actions "dependent on ourselves and voluntary." This conclusion is supported, says Aristotle, by the practice of lawgivers who "punish and exact redress from those who do evil (except when it is done under compulsion, or through ignorance for which the agent himself is not responsible), and honor those who do noble deeds, in order to encourage the one sort and to repress the other; but nobody tries to encourage us to do things that do not depend upon ourselves and are not voluntary."⁶

Aristotle is addressing himself to the problem of moral behavior, and he tries

⁵ There is no survey of the idea of rewards and punishments in antiquity nor in early Christianity. However, the literature on fate, astrology, free will, and so forth discusses the problem. See especially David Amand, *Fatalisme et Liberté dans l'Antiquité Grecque* (Louvain: Université de Louvain, 1945), and the literature cited in note 7.

⁶ See *Nicomachean Ethics* 3. 1-5. On Aristotle see the superb commentary by Harold Henry Joachim, ed. D. A. Rees, *The Nicomachean Ethics* (Toronto: Oxford Press, 1951).

to show the integral part that responsibility plays in a proper understanding of morality. What he says here helps to lay the groundwork for a later discussion in Hellenistic times, namely, human responsibility and freedom in contrast to fatalism and determinism. The argument for freedom based on moral responsibility was developed and expounded by the academic philosopher Carneades in the second century B. C. But Carneades had a somewhat different goal in mind since he was contending against belief in fate and the growing interest in astrology.⁷ By his time the intellectual and social situation had changed considerably from the days of Aristotle. Zeno had founded the new philosophical school of the Stoics, and this school had come to great prominence and influence by the second century B. C. Furthermore, astrological thinking had begun to assume a greater role in the Hellenistic world, and it joined with Stoicism to present a united front on the question of fate and necessity.

⁷ On fate and astrology see Amand and Wilhelm Gundel, *Beiträge zur Entwicklungsgeschichte der Begriffe Ananke und Heimarmene* (Giessen, 1914), and his article "Heimarmene" in *Paulys Realencyclopädie der Classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, VII (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1912), 2622—45; Max Pohlenz, *Die Stoa*, I (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1948 to 49), 110 ff.; also Pohlenz, *Freedom in Greek Life and Thought* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel Publishing Co., 1966); W. O. Schroeder, "Fatum" in *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, VII (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1950), 523—636; Frederick H. Cramer, *Astrology in Roman Law and Politics* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1954); Franz Cumont, *Astrology and Religion among the Greeks and Romans* (New York: Dover Publications, 1960), unabridged republication of 1912 translation; William Chase Greene, *Moirai, Fate, Good and Evil in Greek Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1944).

Carneades left no writings, but through the citation of his arguments by later writers, and as a result of the careful researches of Dom David Amand, we can reconstruct the basic outline of his arguments against fatalism.⁸ Carneades had a number of fixed targets in mind—the Stoic Chryssipus for example—and his challenge to fatalistic thinking takes two forms. He offers a series of arguments against astrology, attempting to show how fragile the rationale and empirical base of astrology actually is. We have, he says, no truly scientific means to calculate the movement of the stars and the moment of a person's birth. This lack of precision renders it impossible to prepare an accurate horoscope. He argues further that men born under the same sign of the Zodiac frequently have different fortunes in life, and that men born under different signs, for example, all the people of a given land or nation, frequently have similar customs, institutions, temperament, character, and so forth. Presumably this is determined by their own history and traditions, rather than by the stars.

These arguments are widely repeated by Christians and non-Christians alike in the centuries after Carneades. However, it is Carneades' second series of arguments which concern us here. Carneades also opposed fatalism on the basis of a moral argument derived from the concept of rewards and punishments and an appeal to human responsibility. He maintained that the acceptance of astrological fatalism

⁸ On Carneades, see Amand, pp. 41—70; 571—86. The chief value of Amand's study is that he reconstructs, on the basis of the later tradition, Carneades' arguments against fatalism.

simply rendered moral action meaningless. If men's actions are determined by fate or the stars, virtue makes no sense and there can be no "praise or blame" or "rewards and punishments." Legislation against criminals would be useless and absurd, for there would be no basis for distinguishing right and wrong action. Furthermore, what would be the purpose of persuasion, encouragement, and so forth, for these, too, presuppose a freedom of choice and the capability of doing something willingly. Finally, astrological fatalism destroys piety and religion, for there is no purpose in prayer or sacrifice. What will be is determined by immutable fate and cannot be changed.

The attack on astrological fatalism continued unabated during the first centuries of the Christian era. Members of differing philosophical schools entered the fray, offering arguments which sprang out of their particular philosophical beliefs. The Platonists insisted on the existence of divine powers which influence man, but denied the existence of fate. The Peripatetics stressed the lack of an empirical grounding for the claims of astrologers. Sceptics, Cynics, and others denied there was any possibility of genuine knowledge, much less knowledge of the movement of the stars and planets. Religious and ethical thinkers pressed the moral argument against the view that man's actions were determined by someone other than himself. In this category fall a number of writings, for example, that of a "student" of Plutarch who wrote *De Fato*; Maximus of Tyre's "If divination exists, what is left to Free Will?" and the important work of Alexander of Aphrodisias, also called *De*

Fato,⁹ written toward the beginning of the third century.

The parallels between Alexander and Christian writers are close. Origen, for example, repeats many of the traditional arguments which Alexander had used and sometimes relies on the same illustrations from Greek antiquity. To Alexander, an Aristotelian, denial of free will and belief in fate not only undercuts moral responsibility and makes moral action meaningless; it also makes belief in providence impossible, casts piety to the wind, and "upsets the whole life of man." If everything is determined before it happens, asks Alexander, how can one speak of "praise and blame"? "If things take place . . . in such a manner, how can some of us still be praised and others be under censure with any just reason? We see in fact that nobody attributes the cause of good and noble actions to destiny or necessity." The idea of providence requires belief in rewards and punishments for providence concerns itself with "merited reward" rather than with reward according to some previously established necessity. Thus we can take comfort from the life of a virtuous man, for this shows that men are not bound to be what they were at birth and that the "possession of virtue lies in our own power." (eph hêmin)¹⁰

⁹ Pseudo-Plutarch, *De Fato*, in Frank Cole Babbitt, *Plutarch's Moralia*, Loeb Classical Library, VII (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959); Maximus of Tyre, ed. H. Holbein, *Maximi Tyri Philosophoumena* (Leipzig, 1910); Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Fate*, ed. Augustine Fitzgerald (London: B. G. Teubner, 1931). On the many works written against fatalism during the second century, see Cramer, pp. 195—208; Amand, pp. 101—56.

¹⁰ Alexander, *On Fate*, 16 (Fitz., pp. 80 to 84); 18 (Fitz., p. 84); 27 (Fitz., p. 116).

In Christian authors the phrase "rewards and punishments" and related terms occur in much the same setting that they do in non-Christian writings of the period. That is, reference to rewards and punishments is part of the discussion of morality and human responsibility and the related problems of freedom of the will and providence. The Christian writers, however, face a somewhat unique problem, because they find themselves charged with fatalism and they appeal to "rewards and punishments" as proof that they do not think man is determined by forces over which he has no control. The Christian belief in a God who elects man for salvation led some to think that Christians believed in a doctrine similar to fatalism.¹¹ Further, some saw the Christian belief in prophecy as another indication of predestination. The prophecies suggest that "events were foreknown and predicted and took place according to inevitable destiny," says Justin. But this is not our understanding, he continues,

for we have learned "from the prophets" that "penalties and punishments and good rewards are given according to the quality of each man's action. If this were not so, but all things happened in accordance with destiny, nothing at all would be left to us (*to eph hēmin*). For if it is destined that one man should be good and another wicked, then neither is the one acceptable and the other blameworthy. And if the human race does not have the power by free choice to avoid what is shameful and

¹¹ *Octavius* 11.6. "For whatever we do, what some attribute to Fate, you attribute to God; thus your sect believes that men will, not of themselves but as they were elected to will. Therefore you create an unjust Judge who punishes men on the basis of lot and not of will." (Kytzler, p. 78)

to choose what is right, then there is no responsibility for actions of any kind.¹²

Justin's argument is of course highly traditional. What is not traditional, however, is the new use made of the argument, the definition of the Christian belief in prophecy, and the claim that he learned about "rewards and punishments" from the prophets. He cites two texts, Deut. 30:15, "I have set before you good and evil, choose the good," and Is. 1:19, "If you are willing and listen to Me, you will eat the good of the land."¹³ Justin's rendering of these texts is somewhat free but his point is clear. Both Deuteronomy and Isaiah say that man "chooses" good and evil and is not determined or predestined to be good or evil. Therefore man acts on the basis of free will, not by the power of fate. Justin's posture is basically defensive. He does not reflect on the implications of enlisting belief in rewards and punishments in support of the Christian cause, nor does he sense, much less investigate, the consequences of claiming that free will and rewards and punishments is a teaching derived from the prophets.

After Justin, Christian apologists regularly appealed to rewards and punishments and free will against determinism and astrology. Thus, in his *Oratio ad Graecos*, Tatian polemicizes at length against astrology and he relies on belief in free

¹² Justin, *Apol.* 43 (Trans. E. R. Hardy, p. 269).

¹³ These texts and others become part of the standard repertoire of Christian defenders of free will. See, for example, Origen, *De Principiis* 3.1.6. On the subject of the use of Scripture in connection with astrology and free will see Utto Riedinger, *Die Heilige Schrift im Kampf der griechischen Kirche gegen die Astrologie* (Innsbruck: Universitätsverlag Wagner, 1956), pp. 173—74.

will as support for his argument.¹⁴ Clement of Alexandria also draws on the same series of arguments, not so much against fatalistic astrology, but against the Stoics. If the soul does not have the "power of inclination and disinclination" (*hê exousia tês hormês kai aphormês*) and evil is involuntary, we can hardly speak of "praise or censures, nor of rewards and punishments."¹⁵ However, it is not until Origen that the question receives extended treatment and the problems and possibilities of relying on these arguments becomes apparent.

¹⁴ Tatian, *Oratio ad Graecos* 7.4-11.1; see also Justin, *Dial.* 102.4; 88.5; Athenagoras, *Embassy* 24.4; Theophilus of Antioch, *To Autolytus* 2.27; *Clementine Recognitions* 4.23; and the interesting work by Bardesanes, *Book of the Laws of the Countries* (*Le Livre des lois des pays*, ed. Francois Nau [Paris, 1899], English translation: *The Book of the Laws of Countries*, ed. William Cureton, [London: Revingston, 1855]). For other Christian authors see *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*, VII, 586 ff.

¹⁵ Clement of Alex., *Stromateis* 1.17, ed. Otto Stählin, p. 54. Clement, like Justin before him and Origen after, is defending free will. See also *St.* 4.19 (124); Clem. Alex., *Frg.* VII (Stählin, p. 224-14-27); *St.* 2.16 (74-75). These and other texts show that the Christian defense of free will was much more than a simple defense of an earlier idea. In Clement we see the idea of free will changing from the earlier Aristotelian notion of free choice to the voluntaristic notion of God's free creating will. The fathers defend "free choice" (*προαίρεσις*), but they speak of God "willing" to create man, "willing" to save man, "willing" to show man mercy. The Greek idea of free will begins to undergo a profound transformation at the hands of the early Christian theologians. Unfortunately the question is too vast to enter upon here, but I hope my comments below prepare the way for a discussion of the larger question. For the beginning of a discussion of the problem, see Hermann Langerbeck, *Aufsätze zur Gnosis* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), pp. 156 ff.

II

Free will and belief in rewards and punishments are central theological ideas for Origen.¹⁶ Free will comes up for discussion frequently in his works and often receives extended discussion. The more important passages are: (1) the commentary on Gen. 1:14, "Let there be lights in the firmament of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days" (*Philocalia* 23); (2) *De Principiis* 3.1 et passim; (3) *De Oratione* 6.2; (4) *Contra Celsum* 1.66; 2.20; 4.3, 67; 70; 5, 21 et passim. The commentary on Genesis and *De Principiis* are early works, the *De Oratione* was written in the middle of his life, and *Contra Celsum* is one of his last works. Though the problem of free will unites each of these works, in every case Origen places the discussion of free will in a different context. Thus the discussion in his Genesis commentary is almost wholly a discussion of astrology, whereas in *De Oratione*, Origen is concerned about the value of prayer if there is no free will. *De Principiis* is almost wholly an exegetical discussion of a string of passages from the Old and New Testaments. We begin our study with *De Principiis*.¹⁷

Justin's somewhat casual appeal to Deuteronomy and Isaiah in support of free will seemed innocent enough. What Justin

¹⁶ On free will in Origen, see Hal Koch, *Pronoia und Paidensis* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1932), pp. 276 ff.; Eugene de Faye, *Origène*, III (Paris: Bibliothèque de l'École des Nautes Études, 1928), 179-98; Amand, pp. 297 ff.

¹⁷ Text of *De Principiis*, ed. P. Koetschau, GCS, XXII (Berlin: J. C. Hinrich, 1899); trans. G. W. Butterworth, *Origen: On First Principles* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

overlooked, however, was that there are many more passages in Scripture which say quite the reverse, namely that man is not free and that it is not in his power to keep the Commandments. It did not take critics of free will long to discover this, and Origen was chafing under this criticism. He unrolls a long list of passages in support of the opposite position, and he has no little difficulty in showing how they can be understood in the light of free will. Origen knew the texts cited by Justin in support of free will, and he quotes these as well as several others. These are but a handful, however, says Origen, for there are "in the Scriptures ten thousand passages which with the utmost clearness prove the existence of free will."¹⁸ But there are "certain sayings from both the Old and the New Testaments [which] incline us to the opposite conclusion," and it is these that we wish to discuss here, says Origen. Now this whole section of *De Principiis* is prefaced with the statement that the "teaching of the church includes the doctrine of the righteous judgment of God." This, says Origen, "assumes that [we] acknowledge that deeds worthy of praise or of blame lie within our own power." He then devotes a section of this work to the subject of "free will, a problem of the utmost urgency."¹⁹ Origen had made it clear in the preface to the work that the topic needed attention because of the belief in astrology, but now he turns himself almost wholly to exegetical matters. What are we to do with the passages that seem to oppose belief in free will?

Origen's argument for free will is a

¹⁸ *De Princ.* 3.1.6, 7 (Butterworth, p. 166).

¹⁹ *De Princ.* 3.1.1 (Butterworth, p. 157); see also 1. pref. 5 and *De Princ.* 3.1.2.

blending of the traditional philosophical arguments set alongside extensive exegesis of the problematic biblical texts. In much the fashion of Alexander of Aphrodisias he tries to show that free will applies only to rational beings, for they alone can "contemplate good and evil and are led to choose good and avoid evil," and for this reason we are "worthy of praise when we devote ourselves to the practice of good and of blame when we act in the opposite way." Free will means that one acts not on the basis of an "external cause" or because of one's "constitution," but on the basis of reason.²⁰ The more interesting material in the chapter, however, is the exegesis. At first it appears as though the problem is relatively simple and can be dismissed with a few general principles. No matter what the text seems to say, Origen rules out any interpretation which suggests that man is not responsible for his actions. Then he discusses the story of Pharaoh, of whom it was said that God "hardens his heart." If this is so, says Origen, "he [Pharaoh] is not responsible for the sin, and if this is so, Pharaoh has no free will." Some take this text to mean that Pharaoh had an "earthly nature," but this is nonsense, says Origen. A man with an "earthly nature" is completely disobedient to God, and does not need his heart to be hardened. But this was not so with Pharaoh; it was "possible for him to obey." Further, God is like a physician who lets his patient "re-

²⁰ See Alex. of Aphrod., *De Fato*, 14. For the sources of Origen's distinctions in 3.1.2 (things moved from without, things moved from within, including those "out of themselves," that is, living things, including animals and rational beings) see B. Darrell Jackson, "Sources of Origen's Doctrine of Freedom," *Church History*, XXXV (1966), 15 ff.

main in the fever and sickness for a long time in order that he may regain permanent health." Therefore God deals with men according to His goodness, and sometimes this goodness requires that men be chastised.²¹

Ostensibly the subject of this chapter is free will, but the reader who has come to Origen with the antifatalistic discussions in mind cannot but be struck by the shift in emphasis. The center of gravity here is not free will at all, but providence, and the discussion is really concerned to show how the scriptural picture of God's mercy, justice, wrath, and grace can be reconciled with belief in free will. Thus Origen has little to say about man, but much to say about God. At the outset the discussion seeks to show that man is free and responsible and that it is in man's power to put away wickedness and live a life of virtue. But after going through the many texts which attribute the good that man does to God, Origen discovers that he cannot simply assert free will without qualification. He is driven to the more delicate task of trying to explain how free will and God's power can exist side by side with each other. Scripture says over and over again that "what is built without God . . . is built in vain," and that it is "not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God that has mercy." We must recognize, he says, that some part of the work had been done by man but that the happy result was to be gratefully attributed to God who brought it to pass. In the same way, human will (*thelein*) is not sufficient to enable us to attain the end, nor is the running of those who are athletes sufficient to enable

them to gain "the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." These things are accomplished by God's assistance (*theou gar symparistamenou tauta anuetai*). It is well said that "it is not of him that wills, nor of him that runs, but of God who has mercy." Therefore, concludes Origen, "our perfection does not come to pass without our doing anything, and yet it is not completed as a result of our efforts, but God performs the greater part of it. . . . So indeed with our salvation the effects of God's work are very much in excess of what we can do."²²

Origen's conclusion is nothing short of remarkable in the light of the intellectual milieu in which he was writing. Let us briefly retrace his steps. His purpose was to show that man possessed free will and that, for this reason, rewards and punishments, praise and blame had meaning. He wanted to show that the life of virtue, or of vice for that matter, was in man's power and that man was not subject to imputable fate, the movement of the stars, or impersonal necessity. In *De Principiis* 3.1 he proposed to give an exegetical base for this claim by refuting the biblical exegesis of those who rejected free will and by pointing to those texts in Scripture which establish free will and human responsibility. En route to this goal, however, he has to deal with the many texts which stress the action of God in shaping the life of man (e. g., Ezek. 11:19-20; Rom. 9:16; Ps. 127:1; Phil. 3:14; and others), and by the end of the discussion Origen is moving in quite a new direction from the one in which he began. Origen assumes, and sometimes employs, the moral argument

²¹ *De Princ.* 3.1.8, 13 (Butterworth, pp. 169, 181).

²² *De Princ.* 3.1.19 (Butterworth, p. 197).

forged by Carneades, and he agrees with its basic contention, yet the old Greek arguments take on a new shade as they are injected into the Christian context. For the Greeks there seemed to be no middle ground or compromise between fate and free will, and with this Origen agrees, at least in theory. But the Christian tradition, though rejecting belief in fate, nevertheless confessed a God who appeared quite as capricious as the gods of the astrologers. The prophets and apostles repeat over and over again: "I, the Lord, choose you . . . have formed you in your mother's womb . . . have made you what you are." "I take away the stony hearts of men and put in them hearts of flesh that they may walk in my judgments." To the outsider, and to many insiders as well, the Christian God appeared as only the latest expression of the age-old belief in fate and destiny.

Origen is saddled, then, with a problem quite new to Greek thought. He realizes the necessity of supporting free will and its corollary of "rewards and punishments," but he also must give a place to the biblical account of a transcendent, free, creating, loving God. The conflict is a real one for Origen, and he will have to return to it in the last years of his life when he writes against Celsus. The Greeks saw no real conflict between God's power and man's will. "The schism which we feel between the divine influence and human decision did not 'exist' for the Greek," writes Max Pohlenz.²³ One or two Greek writers had an inkling of the difficulties, but they were able to dismiss the matter quickly. For example, in his *Coriolanus* Plutarch won-

dered about the Homeric statements that gods and goddesses prompted or inspired action. In the *Iliad* Achilles cries, "Goddess, it is necessary that I obey the word of you two, angry though I am in my heart." This suggests to some, says Plutarch, that it is impossible to believe in "choice" (*proairesis*). But this does not follow. Some acts require "inspiration and desperate courage." God does not take away choice but "prompts man's choice, setting his will in motion."²⁴ The gods sometimes incite us to action or engender conceptions and ideas, but they do not move our hands and feet or compel our decision.

The comparison with Origen is striking, if for no other reason than that the Homeric gods are so unlike the God envisioned by the texts in this chapter of *De Principiis*. Consequently Origen's attempt to defend free will and to establish the Christian belief in rewards and punishments leads him to a consideration of God's power and grace in the turning of man from evil to good. The conclusion to this chapter is that man's will is free, that men are not different because of diverse natures, but that man is what he is by virtue of his will working in conjunction with God's power. "The power of God does not by itself fashion a man for honor or for dishonor, but God finds a ground of difference in our will as it inclines to the better or to the worse."²⁵

This conclusion must be viewed in light of the earlier discussion. Taken at face value it seems trite and innocuous at best, and at worse a blatant synergism, to use the

²⁴ *Iliad* 1.216; Plutarch, *Coriolanus* 32.

²⁵ *De Princ.* 3.1.24 (Butterworth, p.208).

²³ Pohlenz, *Freedom*, p. 125.

Reformation term, demonstrating the decadence of the second and third centuries. But seen in context it is remarkable, for it is hardly the kind of thing to say to an opponent who was a fatalist. Origen could have made it much easier for himself if he had stuck with the traditional Greek arguments against fatalism and for freedom of the will. They were tough to answer and the kinks and loopholes had long been eliminated.

In fact, this is precisely the argument that he chooses in the *Commentary on Genesis*. Here the topic is explicitly astrological fatalism which was suggested by Gen. 1:14 and the references to the stars, and the opponents are practitioners of divination within and without the Christian community. Astrology destroys "free will," says Origen, and it makes "praise and blame unmeaning," for it undercuts the "distinction between acceptable conduct and conduct deserving of blame."²⁶ The bulk of the discussion, however, is relatively "untheological" and turns on the philosophical

²⁶ *Philocalia* 23.1 (ed. J. Armitage Robinson [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1893], trans. George Lewis, *The Philocalia of Origen* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1911]), pp. 173-74; also *Phil.* 23.3 (Lewis, p. 176); 23.8 (Lewis, p. 181); *Phil.* 23.14-18. For a summary of many arguments against astrology in the second century see Aulus Gellius' synopsis of Favorinus' antiastrological discourse in Gellius, *Noctium atticarum* 14.1; summary in Amand, p. 98, n. 2; Cramer, pp. 197-98. Here are two examples of arguments similar to those used by Origen. "The constellation prevailing at conception is necessarily different from the one at birth. Which of the two is the decisive one, or must somehow both be reconciled?" "Not even technically can usually the exact moment of birth be established. The smallest difference in time produces a different constellation. Thus even technically it is impossible to obtain an accurate birth horoscope."

criticism of astrology sprinkled with illustrations from the Christian Bible.

III

In the *Contra Celsum* the scene has changed again.²⁷ The old debate over the scriptural exegesis in *De Principiis* seems forgotten, as well as the question of prayer.²⁸ The influence of the stars on human behavior is mentioned several times and discussed once, but it does not hold the center of attention. Nevertheless the phrase "rewards and punishments" occurs more frequently in this work than in any other and seems at times to bear the main weight of the argument. In this last section I would like to show how the problem raised in *De Principiis* 3.1, that is, the tension between divine power and man's free

²⁷ The question of astrology does come up in *Con. Cels.* 2.20-21, and the argument here is similar to that in the *Commentary on Genesis*. The debate centers in part about foreknowledge. Interestingly this section of *Con. Cels.* is inserted in the *Philocalia* in the middle of the section from the *Commentary on Genesis* (*Phil.* 23.12-13). Origen here relies on traditional arguments and illustrations against foreknowledge. For example, he cites Euripides, *Phoenissae* 18-20, a stock example, also cited by Alex. of Aphrod., *On Fate*, 31. See Henry Chadwick, "Origen, Celsus and the Stoa," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XLVIII (1947), 46, n. 2.

²⁸ The work on prayer contributes little new to the discussion, except to indicate how fate and astrology caused problems for popular piety, for Christians as well as others. Here are two objections against prayer, says Origen. "First, if God knows the future beforehand, and it must come to pass, prayer is vain. Secondly, if all things happen according to the will of God, and if what is willed by him is fixed, and nothing of what he wills can be changed, prayer is vain" (*De Orat.* 5.6; trans. Henry Chadwick, *Library of Christian Classics* II [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1954]), 250. For the attitude of Romans, see citation from Valens Vettius referred to in fn. 9.

will, reemerges and leads Origen to reflect on a series of issues apparently unrelated to free will and rewards, but in fact intimately part of the same scheme of thought.

Celsus had accused the Christians of being innovators.²⁹ They had spurned the ancient doctrines embraced by civilized peoples to urge new and strange teachings which did not have the sanction of antiquity. According to Celsus this ancient doctrine taught that the order of the world was fixed and established and that nothing could interfere with the regular course of nature without upsetting the balance. "For if you changed any one quite insignificant thing on earth you would upset and destroy everything," writes Celsus (*Con. Cels.* 4.5). The regular recurrence of nature gives continuity to human experience and meaning to life, for "according to the determined cycles the same things always have happened, are now happening, and will happen." The "period of mortal life is similar from beginning to end." Celsus (4.67) reasoned that if this were not so, then one would have to attribute change and alteration to the interference of a divine power; eventually this would lead to the conclusion that God was the author of evil.

Origen sarcastically replies that if this is so, then we will have to endure Celsus writing his book, *The True Word*, every time the wheel of man's fortune makes its cycle. It is "inevitable that Socrates will always be a philosopher and be accused of introducing new deities and of corrupting the youth. . . . Moses will always come out of Egypt with the people of the

²⁹ *Con. Cels.* 1.14; 5.25; see Carl Andresen, *Logos und Nomos* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1955), pp. 189 ff.

Jews; Jesus will come to visit this life The same people will be Christians, and Celsus will write this book again, though he has written it before an infinite number of times." If Celsus is correct, asks Origen, "how can free will be preserved and praise and blame be reasonable?" (4.67). Origen urges the same argument against Celsus that he offered against the astrologers, Gnostics, and others. He seems to reduce every problem to the same issue. Is this a lack of imagination and resourcefulness on the part of Origen, or is he really speaking to the point?

The unspoken issue underlying the debate with astrologers and fatalists in antiquity is, of course, freedom. In Greek thinking, freedom at one time had highly political overtones; it designated the ideal of political freedom of a city or state and had the power to incite and move men to action. But during the Hellenistic period freedom lost many of these connotations and underwent a gradual process of internalizing. Inner freedom of the individual became the goal for which men strove.³⁰ The debate over astrology and fate can be read as a struggle to win this kind of individual freedom for men. In this context free will becomes the center of attention, for only if man has the possibility of choice can he be free. But freedom of choice demands the possibility of doing something new, of breaking the inevitable causal chain of action. And newness or innovation requires change and alteration. It is pre-

³⁰ Pohlenz writes: "Political freedom, for which men had once been enthusiastic, was gone beyond recall; what now took its place was the inner freedom of the individual, a possession not of the philosophical schools alone, but of the whole educated world." (*Freedom*, p. 144)

cisely at this point that Origen joins the issue with Celsus. We say, writes Origen, that "certain things change" and that there is a "new reformation" by which "God . . . makes good that which is wrong." He corrects men in a "world of alteration and change." It is in the "nature of our free will to admit various possibilities" (4.69; 5.21; 4.4). For Origen free will is really a symbol of openness to the future and to new possibilities, to use the modern phrase. It is freedom from the past.

Change and new possibilities for Origen have reference primarily to the sphere of moral behavior. He does not have in mind a change of beliefs or opinions, but rather the change which comes about through moral betterment, improvement, and reforming of one's life. For this reason the chief evidence that Origen brings to support his view of free will—and here is where he parts company with his non-Christian contemporaries—is the empirical fact that with the coming of Christianity more men had been changed from evil to good than through any other philosophical school. I say "empirical" because Origen is not theologizing about what "should" be the case with Christianity, but what has in fact taken place. There is evidence of the work of Jesus, he writes, for "in the churches of God there are people converted through Jesus from countless evils" (1.67). Christianity offers itself to men as do other philosophical schools and asks that it be judged on its accomplishments. "Philosophy should be approved on the ground that its doctrines in those who persuaded them had the power to change men from such evils although they had previously been gripped by them" (1.64). Origen is not dreaming

dreams, since the testimony of Galen on the Christians supports him, as well as the statements of other observers. Alexander of Lycopolis wrote: "The great multitude listen to them [the Christians]—as one can learn from experience—and increases in virtuousness and piety are stamped on their characters, giving rise to the type of morality which this way of life engenders and leading them gradually towards the desire for the noble."³¹

The conclusion to Origen's argument is that without belief in free will and rewards and punishments, change from evil to good, betterment, improvement could hardly occur. Therefore Origen claims that many uneducated and simple people have been "made better . . . by the belief that they are punished for sin and rewarded for good works" (1.9). What Origen has done is to bind together the experience of Christianity as a force for moral betterment with the traditional ideas of free will and rewards and punishments in the Greco-Roman world. Christians believe in rewards and punishments because they believe that men are capable of changing from good and evil and that they are not destined to remain what they are by birth.

Origen, however, is quite aware that he has not done justice to the Christian claims by simply upholding belief in free will and rewards and punishments. If his argument thus far has been granted, namely, that the

³¹ For Galen, see Richard Walzer, *Galen on Jews and Christians* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 57 ff. In some matters they live in a way befitting "genuine philosophers" (*aléthôs philosophountes*). Citation of Alexander, *Contra Manich. disputatio*, ed. Augustus Brinkmann (Leipzig: B. G. Greubner, 1895), p. 3, 1-18; trans. Walzer, p. 72.

coming of Christianity brought genuine change and moral betterment, and that this could only be possible if men possessed free will, then the question arises: What is it about Christianity that gave men the power to make such radical change? Free will is a possession of all men, not only Christians. At this point Origen returns to the questions raised in *De Principiis*. Genuine change from evil to good is possible only by the power of God. We submit, he writes, that any teaching which is "able to deliver souls from the flood of evil and from licentiousness and wrongdoing and from despising God, and were to give as a proof of this work one hundred reformed characters (supposing this to be the number for the purposes of argument), could one reasonably say that it was *without divine help* that this man had implanted in the hundred men a doctrine capable of delivering them from evils of such magnitude?" (1.26). It was not until the coming of Jesus that the power of God was present in such an extraordinary way and that the dramatic improvement of mankind began. Jesus did things "beyond the power of human nature" (1.27), and even to this day "the power of Jesus brings about conversion and moral reformation in those who believe in God through him" (1.43). Such transformation of men does not happen unless some power is also given by God, for other teachings similar to ours have not had the "same power to win over souls." (6.2)

Now Celsus had seen clearly that Christianity did make such a claim about God's power. He also recognized that the Christian belief required that there be interference and interruption in the course of history and the order of the world. Therefore

he attacked the Christians for the absurd belief that there had been a "descent on the part of God" disrupting the course of history. Why could not the deity have simply changed men by "divine power" without sending "someone especially endowed for this purpose"? (4.3). Origen finds himself again in the same dilemma: God's power and providence are in tension with man's free will. Therefore he replies that if God had simply changed men by "divine power," this would have destroyed free will. For if you "take away the element of free will from virtue, you also destroy its essence" (1.4). Therefore God was present in Jesus and through Him God's power brought the re-formation of mankind for He came as the "re-former of the whole world" (1.8). "If one may say that certain things change by the presence of God's power and the advent of the Word to man, we will not hesitate to affirm that anyone who has received the coming of the Word of God into his own soul changes from bad to good, from licentiousness to self-control, and from superstition to piety." (1.5)

Conclusion

In the end Origen's defense of free will and rewards and punishments led him to the conclusion that genuine moral re-formation could only come about by divine power *and* man's will. But the claim that through the power of God in Jesus men were re-formed exposed Origen to precisely the charge he and other apologists sought to avoid, namely, that man is a plaything in the hand of God. The Christian view of grace and election appeared as another form of fatalism and determinism. Christians simply replaced one bondage by an-

other; man's freedom, now that he was released from the stranglehold of fate, was subject to the whims of the God of the Jewish Scriptures. So Origen winds up treading a very narrow path. Against fate and astrology he asserted free will and rewards and punishments; in response to the biblical picture of a saving, redeeming God he asserts that only through God can man really change. Origen wants to have it both ways: free will and God's power and grace. For if Christians taught only free will, how would they differ from other Hellenistic thinkers? But if they completely submerged man's will to God's power, how were they different from the fatalists and astrologers?

To the Roman world, Origen's point of view was contradictory, embracing belief in providence, while at the same time rejecting fate. The Stoics had accepted providence, but they also denied fate. The chief opponent of fatalism, Carneades, had denied providence for the very purpose of rejecting fate and upholding free will. Now the Christians come along and support Carneades, who rejects fate, but reject Carneades, who rejects providence. The Christian appeal to rewards and punishments was set against the goddess Fate, but it was adapted to embrace the God of grace. What may have appeared to later Christian thinkers as a gospel of

works was in the Greco-Roman world a gospel of freedom. For if men's wills were not free, God's goodness and grace and power made no sense.

Origen took the unprecedented step of embracing both horns of the dilemma. In doing so he put his finger on a great and troubling problem. He touched a sensitive nerve close to the center of the Christian experience. How does one give full place to the initiative of God's grace in man's salvation without making man an automaton? Justin Martyr, himself a thinker of some ability, did not realize what was at stake when he blithely set forth free will as Christian teaching. Oblivious to the dilemma he helped forge for Christian thought, Justin repeated arguments conceived and shaped in a wholly different intellectual and religious milieu. Origen, a more original mind and, more important, a more accomplished exegete, sensed the magnitude of the problem. It is not to his discredit that he was unsuccessful in solving it. Consider the others in the history of Christian thought who tried. Augustine and Pelagius, Duns Scotus and Thomas, Luther and Erasmus, the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Assembly. What Origen posed as a new problem was to captivate the most creative Christian minds for centuries.