

ORIGEN, AUGUSTINE, AND “WORKS OF LAW”

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Introduction

It is a tragedy of the Pelagian controversy, though certainly not unique to it, that all figures writing before that controversy are interpreted, with profound anachronism, as though they were aligned with one or the other party in that controversy. Thus, the fate of Origen was to be forever labeled as the forerunner of Pelagius, falling with the latter under the shadow of the great Augustine (or, perhaps, more recently, to be heralded along with Pelagius as a forerunner of modern humanism¹). A brief summary of the charges will suffice for our purposes. Origen, it is said, downplays the doctrine of salvation by grace in his commentaries on Paul,² such that faith itself becomes a mere “regrettable necessity” rather than the “glorious reality” that it is for Paul.³ Origen gives undue prominence to the place of “rules and precepts” in Christian life, making Christ into a second lawgiver after Moses.⁴ Origen thinks of justification as “a gradual, linear progress toward perfection in virtue, rather than a singular, dramatic, and grace-filled event in the life of the Christian.”⁵ Origen over-emphasizes free will and autonomy at the expense of grace, making salvation into a kind of divine-human synergy,⁶ even holding that “a person can do good works prior to receiving grace or baptism.”⁷ Origen agrees with Pelagius, says one commentator, that “human nature has the

1 See Robert F. Evans, *Pelagius: Inquiries and Reappraisals* (New York: Seabury, 1968), 1–5.

2 Robert Eno, “Some Patristic Views on the Relationship of Faith and Works in Justification,” *Recherches Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 19 (1984): 4. Eno complains that Origen’s approach “seems to place the Christian back into a Law situation” (*ibid.*, 26).

3 Maurice F. Wiles, *The Divine Apostle: The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles in the Early Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 111.

4 *Ibid.*, 127.

5 Caroline P. Bammel, “Justification by Faith in Augustine and Origen,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47.2 (1996): 231. See also William S. Babcock, “Augustine’s Interpretation of Romans,” *Augustinian Studies* 10 (1979): 59, 61.

6 “[H]e makes grace and merit so complementary as to cast an iron-curtain of human capacity, human desert, human achievement around the free Grace of the Almighty . . . opening the way for the later (and supreme) heresy of Pelagius”; Benjamin Drewery, *Origen and the Doctrine of Grace* (London: Epworth Press, 1960), 205.

7 J. Patout Burns, “The Interpretation of Romans in the Pelagian Controversy,” *Augustinian Studies* 10 (1979): 48.

power to do good and avoid evil. Augustine insisted that it does not."⁸ Cowed by the specter of Marcionism, Origen was unable to summon up the courage to admit the essential distinction between the two testaments, the essential opposition between Law and Gospel.⁹

Origen is understood, in short, to have fundamentally misunderstood Paul's doctrine of grace. From an Augustinian perspective, Origen's approach seems to "distract from the main point of Paul's words," says one historian.¹⁰ "Augustine alone," notes another, "perceived the implications of [the doctrine of grace] and carried its implications through in his teaching."¹¹ More recently, some have concluded that Origen was not even terribly interested in the question of justification by faith, understanding Paul's letter to the Romans more in light of the historical situation of Jews and Gentiles in the first century than in man's eternal quest to "find a merciful God."¹² In sum, there has been a longstanding tendency to understand Origen as having ignored, misunderstood, or even denied Paul's doctrine of justification by grace, interpreting Paul more along the lines of Pelagius than those of Augustine.

Those who hold this view sometimes draw support from Origen's well-known restrictive interpretation of the phrase "works of law" (*erga nomou*) in Paul's letter to the Romans. Namely, when Paul declares that we are justified "not by works of law" (Rom. 3:20), Origen interprets that phrase to mean not "good works" in general, but only ceremonial Jewish rituals.¹³ Pelagius later adopted this same position,¹⁴ which gave him room to advance a more positive sense in which "good works" other than Jewish ceremonies *do* contribute to justification, even in the absence of sanctifying grace. Caroline P. Bammel, one

8 Burns, "Interpretation," 49.

9 Eno, "Some Views," 5. See also Wiles, *Divine Apostle*, 49–52, 57, and E. Molland, *The Conception of the Gospel in the Alexandrian Theology* (Oslo: I kommisjon hos J. Dybwad, 1938), 121.

10 Bammel, "Justification," 231. "The apostle would have indignantly rejected this exegesis." See also William J. P. Boyd, "Origen on Pharaoh's Hardened Heart," *Studia Patristica* 7 (1955): 440. See Babcock, "Augustine's Interpretation," 74: Babcock concludes that Augustine simply read Paul more closely than others in his later years.

11 Burns, "Interpretation," 49–50.

12 Those who make this claim often align Paul with the recent "new perspective" on Pauline studies. See, among others, Mark Reasoner, *Romans in Full Circle* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005). But see Eric Osborn, "Origen and Justification: the Good is One, There is None Good but God (Matt. 19.17 et par.)," *Australian Biblical Review* 24 (1976): 18–28. Osborn shows that Origen does not talk about justification only when the text requires him to, as Einar Molland once claimed, but makes it a frequent theme.

13 Origen, *Commentaria in Epistolam B. Pauli ad Romanos* [Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans] 8.7.6, in *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Thomas P. Scheck, Fathers of the Church 103 (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2002), 159. See also 3.7.2, 3.9.8. Also see below for a full treatment of these passages.

14 See John Burnaby, *Augustine: Later Works* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1955), 187.

of the foremost scholars on Origen's biblical exegesis, showed that Augustine had followed Origen's more restrictive interpretation of that phrase in his early career but abandoned it at the time of the Pelagian controversy. In his anti-Pelagian work *The Spirit and the Letter*, says Bammel, Augustine decisively rejects Origen's restrictive interpretation in favor of a broader one: "works of law" means "good works," showing that no good works can justify apart from grace:

One might hastily conclude that the law of works belongs to Judaism, and the law of faith to Christianity, on the ground that the Jewish law prescribes circumcision and suchlike works, which Christian practice has abandoned. The error in this distinction is what we have all along been endeavoring to prove. . . . Man is not justified by the precepts of the good life, but only through the faith of Jesus Christ: that is, not by the law of works but by the law of faith, not by the letter but by the spirit, not by the deserts of our actions but by the grace freely given.¹⁵

Thus, Bammel attempts to show how Origen's restrictive and Augustine's broader interpretation of "works of law" signify different underlying perspectives on the role of grace and works.¹⁶ Wiles agrees, holding that Origen "did not understand Paul's critique of the law to be a critique of law in general. . . . Christ frees us from a law . . . in order that we may serve a new law."¹⁷ Wiles adds that the more mature Augustine "rejects [Origen's] interpretation [of "works of law"] as alien to the argument of Romans as a whole,"¹⁸ preferring to interpret Romans as a refutation of works-righteousness in general. Camille Verfaillie, too, highlights Origen's restrictive interpretation of "works of the law" as the key to Origen's ethical system: this qualification of the meaning of the phrase is necessary to safeguard the necessity of moral works for Origen.¹⁹ In summary, Origen's restrictive interpretation of "works of law," when that

15 *De Spiritu et Littera* [The Spirit and the Letter] 21–22, in *Augustine: Later Works*, trans. John Burnaby, 210, 212 (my emphasis).

16 "Whereas Origen distinguishes various different kinds of law, including the law of Moses . . . Augustine simply refers to the law without further qualification." This, says Bammel, "gives evidence of a reaction against Origen's views"; Caroline P. Bammel, "Augustine, Origen and the Exegesis of St. Paul," *Augustinianum* 32 (1992): 353, 359.

17 Wiles, *Divine Apostle*, 66–67. See also Prosper Grech, "Justification by Faith in Origen's Commentary on Romans," *Augustinianum* 36 (1996): 344–345. Grech sees this interpretation of "works of law" as crucial but has a more appreciative viewpoint.

18 Wiles, *Divine Apostle*, 68.

19 *Doctrine de la justification dans Origène d'après son commentaire de l'Épître aux Romains* (Strasbourg, 1926), 82.

term is used by Paul to describe that which does not justify, appears to some commentators to imply a kind of proto-Pelagianism, since it can be taken to imply that some “works of law” *do* justify, even in the absence of grace.

It is the purpose of this study to call into question this argument by means of an exploration of Origen’s view of the salvific efficacy of the Jewish ceremonial laws, and in particular by explaining what Origen meant by the “letter” and “spirit” of these laws. The author is confident that, once this is understood, Origen’s interpretation of this term will be seen to undergird a larger theological system that is sharply divergent from that of Pelagius, and not substantially different from that of Augustine, at least in terms of justification by grace.

A study like this must set definite limits in order to maintain its focus. Thus, in terms of texts, Origen’s *Commentary on Romans*, along with the relevant Old Testament homilies, will be the primary objects of study.²⁰ Although these were written at different points in Origen’s life, the approach to the present question is so constant and unvarying²¹ that there is no reason to suspect that Origen’s view underwent significant development: hence the chronological relationship between Origen’s various works will be generally ignored unless it appears relevant.

The question of whether Rufinus’s translation of Origen’s *Commentary on Romans* faithfully reflects the latter’s work cannot, however, be ignored. Without denying that Rufinus extensively abbreviated Origen’s work and took some significant liberties with certain portions, most scholars conclude that “on the whole, the substance can be regarded as representing Origen’s thought.”²² Rufinus was most likely to alter Origen’s expressions when the subject being discussed was theologically controversial and might be misunderstood, such as Origen’s teaching on the Trinity or the resurrection.²³ Yet there is no evidence that Origen’s teaching on Jewish ceremonial laws was a matter of controversy at the time of Rufinus’s translation: hence there is little reason to think that Rufinus had any motivation to substantially alter Origen’s expressions on the issue.²⁴ This study will also prescind from the

20 Unfortunately, Origen’s *Commentary on Galatians* is almost entirely lost to history. The author intends a future study to investigate whether Origen’s interpretation of “works of law” as found in that commentary might be appropriated through that of Jerome, who, by his own admission, heavily plagiarized Origen’s commentary when writing his own.

21 See Riemer Roukema, *The Diversity of Laws in Origen’s Commentary on Romans* (Amsterdam: Free University Press, 1988), 17.

22 Ronald Heine, introduction to Origen: *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, ed. Ronald Heine (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1982), 38. See *ibid.*, 30–39 for a thorough treatment of Rufinus’s accuracy as a translator of Origen.

23 *Ibid.*, 38.

24 See Roukema, *Diversity of Laws*, 13.

question of whether Origen was *correct* in his interpretation of "works of law" in Romans, although it is fair to note that most commentators today agree with Origen's interpretation, as opposed to Augustine's.²⁵ Also, this treatment will focus on the value of *Jewish* ceremonial works: the question of the good works of pagans, while related, will not be considered here.

The procedure for this study will be (1) to begin with the texts in which Origen expresses the interpretation mentioned above and to move from those texts to an analysis of what Paul means by (2) the "literal" and (3) the "spiritual" interpretation of the law. Finally it will (4) draw conclusions about the theological significance of Origen's interpretation of "works of law" and attempt a summary comparison with Augustine's views.

I. Origen's Interpretation of "Works of Law" in His Commentary on Romans

To understand Origen's interpretation of the "works of law" in Paul, the present section will summarize Origen's comments on seven passages in Romans where "works of law" (or some variant of the phrase) is excluded by Paul as a means toward justification or righteousness.²⁶ It will be seen that Origen normally understands the phrase to refer to the ceremonial laws of Moses, understood literally rather than spiritually. In cases when he does not *prefer* this interpretation, he at least proposes it as an alternative.²⁷ (What Origen means by the "spiritual" and "literal" interpretation will be explored in the subsequent section.)

1. *Romans* 3:19–21: "[19] Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be shut, and the whole world may be subjected to God. [20] Therefore no flesh will be justified in the sight of God by works of the law. For through law comes the knowledge of sin. [21] But now apart from law

25 "Modern exegetes tend to refer the Apostle's doctrine of Law to Mosaic Law" (Grech, "Justification," 342).

26 An eighth passage that might be chosen is Rom. 4:1–8, on Abraham not being "justified by works." But Origen's interpretation of Paul's already difficult passage is somewhat ambiguous: at least, we might note that he does describe the justified here as "Jews in secret in the spirit, not in the letter"; see *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 4.1.4 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 238).

27 One of the profound differences between Augustinian and Origenian exegesis is that Augustine prefers to state directly and unequivocally what the text means whereas Origen prefers to highlight confusing or ambiguous passages and then propose multiple possible interpretations, often leaving it to the reader to decide between them. This is known by scholars as his "Problems and Solutions" technique and is a hallmark of his style. See Ronald Heine, "Recovering Origen's Commentary on Ephesians from Jerome," *Journal of Theological Studies* 51 (2000): 486–488.

the righteousness of God has been disclosed, attested by
the law and the prophets.”²⁸

Although Origen understands “law” in v. 19 in reference to the natural law, he thinks Paul has changed the meaning of the term by v. 21, where it means the law of Moses. He does not, however, comment on the meaning of law in the all-important v. 20 which falls in the middle (“no flesh will be justified . . . by works of the law”), so it is difficult to determine his view on this verse from this passage alone. When he quotes v. 20 in a later passage, however, he interprets “works of law” in terms of the law of Moses, spiritually interpreted.²⁹ This, along with the sweeping statement he makes in connection with Romans 11:6 (see below), increases the possibility that Origen understands “works of law” in v. 20 in terms of the ceremonial laws of Moses, when observed literally.

2. *Romans* 3:28: “For we hold that a man is justified through
faith without works of the law.”

In much of Origen’s commentary on this verse, he seems to depend upon a broader understanding of “works of law” (he includes a diverse list of virtues and vices as examples of “works of law”), yet in his closing comments he invites the reader to consider whether it might refer instead to the “law of Moses . . . or to the law of the letter and the law of the Spirit.”³⁰ Riemer Roukema, however, believes—on the basis of a surviving papyrus fragment of Origen’s Greek original—that Rufinus has excessively abbreviated Origen’s text, and that Origen’s original commentary interpreted “works” here as the literal interpretation of the law of Moses, in contrast to its spiritual interpretation.³¹ This possibility is strengthened by the fact that, when Origen refers to this verse elsewhere, he clearly understands “law” to refer to specifically Jewish customs.³²

3. *Romans* 4:13: “For the promise to Abraham and his
descendants that they would be heirs of the world did not

28 These biblical translations are from the actual *lemma* (that is, the portions of the Bible that are cited before commenting on them) of his *Commentary on Romans*, which sometimes differ from modern translations.

29 “Prior to this he had said that a man is not justified by works of the law. In the Gospels the Savior says, ‘Moses wrote about me’ [Jn. 5:46]. Whoever then does not believe in Christ, of whom Moses wrote in the law, sets aside the law; but he who believes in the Christ, of whom Moses writes, confirms the law through the faith by which he believes in Christ”; *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 3.11.1 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 233).

30 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 3.9 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 229–230).

31 Roukema, *Diversity of Laws*, 35.

32 “Those who are of the law” = the descendants of Abraham. See *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 4.5.8 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 262).

come through the law but through the righteousness of faith."

Here Origen strongly asserts that the law of Moses is intended: that is, it is Moses's law that cannot lead to the promised inheritance. The servile, fear-motivated observance of the precepts of the law obtained nothing, but rather the charity which arises from faith. Origen admits that another person might argue that "the law" refers to the natural law, but this is not Origen's position.³³ A bit further on in the same discourse, he adds the explanation that the law of Moses leads to belief in Christ when read spiritually, but not when read in unbelief.³⁴

4. *Romans* 6:14–15: "[14] For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. [15] What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!"

Here Origen prefers to understand "law" in terms of the "law of the members" (Rom. 7:23), something of a synonym in Origen's writing for the power of sin: we know from other sources that heretics appealed to this verse to defend libertinism, so Origen was likely swayed to this interpretation for apologetic purposes.³⁵ But he expresses an openness for another interpretation—that is, "to the law of Moses," in which case he clarifies: "we are not to be under the law of the letter, which kills, but under the law of the Spirit, who makes alive."³⁶

5. *Romans* 7:1–6: "[1] Do you not know, brothers—for I am speaking to those who know the law—that the law exercises dominion over a man for as long a time as it lives? [2] Thus a married woman is bound by the law to her husband as long as he lives; but if her husband dies, she is discharged from the law of her husband. [3] Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she belongs to another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is freed from that law, so that if she belongs to another man, she is no longer an adulteress. [4] Consequently, my brothers, even you have been put to death to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, who rose again from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. [5]

33 Ibid. 4.3.1–2.

34 Ibid. 4.4.11.

35 Roukema, *Diversity of Laws*, 54.

36 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 6.1.9 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 5).

For while we were in the flesh, the vices of sins, which were through the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. [6] But now, having died we have been discharged from the law in which we were being held, so that we might serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter.”

Driven by v. 6, one of Origen’s favorite passages in Romans, Origen understands the “law” from which we have been discharged in terms of Jewish ceremonial laws, observed literally—“the oldness of the letter, that is, . . . circumcision and Sabbaths and the other things that the oldness of the law of the letter contains.”³⁷ The way the allegory works, then, is that the soul’s first husband—the laws of Moses observed literally—dies, allowing the soul to marry a new husband—the same law observed spiritually.³⁸

6. *Romans* 9:32: “Why? Because it was not from faith, but as it were from works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone . . .”

Here, again, Origen understands “works” (together with “law” in the previous verse) to mean the literal observance of Jewish ceremonial laws: “the law of righteousness according to the letter . . . has not attained unto the law. Which law? Doubtless, that of the Spirit.”³⁹

7. *Romans* 11:6: “But if it is grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.”

Here Origen makes the most sweeping statement regarding the meaning of the “works of law” that Paul excludes from justification:

One should know that the works that Paul repudiates and frequently criticizes are not the works of righteousness that are commanded in the law, but those in which those who keep the law according to the flesh boast; that is, the circumcision of the flesh, the sacrificial rituals, the observance of Sabbaths or new moon festivals. These, then, and works

37 Ibid. 6.7.18 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 28).

38 The “law” in v. 5, however, which seems to produce vices and sins, Origen prefers to see as the “law of the members” (Rom. 7:23), since Origen cannot imagine the law of Moses in such a negative way. Here, too, it seems to be an anti-Marcionite apologetic driving this move. See Roukema, *Diversity of Laws*, 58.

39 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 7.19.7 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 129).

of this nature are the ones on the basis of which he says no one can be saved.⁴⁰

The comprehensive and summary way that this statement is introduced allows us to strengthen the more ambiguous and tentative suggestions made in the other passages analyzed in this section: Origen seems to intend "works of law" to be interpreted this way not only in regards to this passage, but in all other passages in which Paul denies that the "works of law" justify.

In conclusion, the preceding survey has shown that, when Origen comes across statements in Paul that exclude "works of law" from justification, he tends to interpret the phrase in terms of the ceremonial laws of Moses, when observed in a fleshly, literal, or servile manner. A key verse seems to be Romans 7:6 ("we have been discharged from the law in which we were being held, so that we might serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter"). While not in itself controversial, this point must be noted carefully in order to establish, as a baseline, that Origen has a clear and consistent pattern of exegesis regarding this term. The next question, then, will be what, precisely, Origen means by the observance of the Mosaic law "in the oldness of the letter," and in particular, why this could not justify.

II. Origen's Understanding of the "Literal" Observance of the Law of Moses

By the "literal observance of the law" Origen did not mean a mere textual literalism or a hollow formalism in religious ritual. As will be seen below, he meant an observance of the law *without regard for the christological, pneumatological, ecclesiological finality* of the Jewish ceremonies. In other words, the literal observance of the law means the observance of the law without faith in Christ. And this, in the end, is why it could not justify: because it did not fundamentally alter the sinful condition of the Jewish people (a condition shared with all humanity), a condition marked by idolatry, sin, fear, greed, and discord. Rather, the fact that the law inexplicably failed to justify—in fact, it was never meant to do so—pointed to the Messiah who *would* alter that sinful condition by transformation in the Spirit through the Church and sacraments.

Origen is convinced that the divine economy is "a carefully graded hierarchy of demand, adapted to the spiritual capacity of each person," to accommodate the fact that men are often at very different stages of advancement on their spiritual journey.⁴¹ Thus the Jewish ceremonial laws are "adapted to childish souls . . . until they should receive the preparation necessary."⁴² Origen is the apparent originator of the theory, so common among later Fathers, that

40 Ibid. 8.7.6 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 159).

41 Wiles, *Divine Apostle*, 128.

42 *Commentaria in Evangelium Joannis* [Commentary on John] 1.7.38, in Origen, ed. Joseph W. Trigg (London: Routledge, 1988), 84. See *Homiliae in Leviticum* [Homilies on Leviticus]

the custom of animal sacrifice was a mere concession to Israel necessitated by the idolatrous practices they grew accustomed to in Egypt.⁴³ The physical rite of circumcision, too, he views as a mere indigenous, national rite that many people were unwilling to surrender, such that God tolerated it as a condescension to weakness.⁴⁴ In this way the ceremonial laws of Moses allowed for many weak people to escape from the trap of idolatry, sin, and death and take a small, hesitant step along the right path.⁴⁵ Thus even the prophets, who understood the higher meanings of the law, “on account of the multitude, . . . seemed to keep the fleshly observation [of the law] as well,” so as not to offend those who remained carnal in their understanding.⁴⁶

Origen sees the Jewish law as a preliminary stage in the divine pedagogy, to help make clear the sinfulness of sin and thus prepare the way for the coming redemption.⁴⁷ Or to borrow another analogy, the Jewish law is an advance guard sent to weaken the grip of a brutal tyrant: “For through the law the cleansing of sins began to be ushered in, and from a certain part of [Death’s] tyranny resistance began through victims, various acts of expiation, sacrifices and commands.”⁴⁸

Origen especially highlights the cruel, temporal punishments threatened by the law: these punishments were instituted to condescend to those who, like children, were immature and required threats to spur on their education: “we frighten children in order that it may halt the lack of education in youth.”⁴⁹ The spiritually immature are motivated by fear of punishment, the mature by love: “whereas the observance of the law merely evades punishment, the merit of faith awaits the hope of the promise. Precept is laid on slaves, but faith is sought by friends.”⁵⁰ The Jewish law thus becomes a condescension to those who are motivated by servile fear.

1.4.4, in *Homilies on Leviticus*, trans. Gary Wayne Barkley, *Fathers of the Church* 83 (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1990), 36.

43 Origen commented: “Since the Jews loved sacrifices, being accustomed to them in Egypt, as the golden calf in the desert gives witness, God permits them to offer them to himself so as to curb their disordered tendency to polytheism and to turn them away from sacrificing to idols.” The quote is from Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture according to Origen*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 291n48.

44 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 2.13.8 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 154).

45 Roukema, *Diversity of Laws*, 78.

46 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 6.7.6 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 22).

47 Wiles, *Divine Apostle*, 54–55.

48 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 5.1.32 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 322).

49 *Homiliae in Jeremiam* [Homilies on Jeremiah] 19.15.4, in *Homilies on Jeremiah and 1 Kings* 28, trans. John Clark Smith, *Fathers of the Church* 97 (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1998), 217.

50 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 4.3.1 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 253). So,

The literal observance of the law is similarly associated by Origen with the motivation of greed, since the law of Moses offered temporal rewards: "It is therefore consistent that those whose way of thinking is according to the flesh hope as well in a fleshly manner for the promises of the law."⁵¹ But the land of Judea was a mere shadow and type of the heavenly promise, which should have motivated the Jewish people to long for the latter.⁵² The literal interpretation of the law, then, cannot justify precisely because it cannot lead to that which the law promised: the Jews rejected Christ precisely because He did not deliver what the law promises, temporally understood.⁵³

Origen connects the literal observance of the Jewish law not only to servile fear, but also to pride and arrogance. "Judaic boasting," for Origen, which does not "embrace the humility of the cross of Christ," arises from an excessive attachment to the works of the law.⁵⁴ That arrogance led Jews to place value on the literal observance of the law is found by Origen, expressed allegorically, in the lowering of Moses's hands during the battle with Amalek: "Since the Law and the works of the Law are meaningless among those who 'seek to establish their own righteousness and are not submissive to the righteousness of God' [Rom. 10:3], the hands of Moses were lowered, disbelief prevailed, and the people were conquered."⁵⁵

Origen also connects the literal observance of the Mosaic law with Jewish ethnic separatism. He notes that both circumcision⁵⁶ and dietary

too, Origen points out that a man who abstained from fornication only because he feared punishment and would have committed the act if he could have gotten away with it has less merit than one who abstained out of sincere devotion; see Ibid. 4.4.9 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 257).

51 Ibid. 6.12.9 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 52).

52 Origen adds that, once the heavenly inheritance was made available by Christ, it was necessary that the shadows and types be destroyed: hence, the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of its Temple. See *Homiliae in librum Jesu Nave* [Homilies on the Book of Joshua] 17.1, in *Homilies on Joshua*, trans. Barbara J. Bruce, *Fathers of the Church* 105 (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2002), 157–158.

53 See *De principiis* [On First Principles] 4.8–9, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols., eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 4 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004 [reprint]), 356–357.

54 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 3.9.6–7 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 228–229). Scheck points out elsewhere that Origen equally opposes Christians boasting of their good works, a position not shared by other Fathers. See Scheck, "Justification by Faith Alone in Origen's *Commentary on Romans* and its Reception during the Reformation Era," in *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition*, ed. L. Peronne (Louvain: Peeters, 2003), 1284n44.

55 *Homilies on the Book of Joshua* 1.2 (Bruce, *Fathers of the Church*, 28).

56 Circumcision served "to distinguish them from other nations." See *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 2.13.30 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 162).

laws⁵⁷ served the purpose of segregating Israel from other nations, whose ignorance and idolatry threatened to corrupt Israel's covenant. This situation, however, proved counterproductive, since the ethno-specific nature of Jewish customs prevented the other nations from learning the divine teaching. It is precisely in this that Christianity surpasses Judaism, since the latter is merely a national religion,⁵⁸ whereas the former is uniquely capable of penetrating other nations and becoming a universal system.⁵⁹ Thus, the literal observance of the law failed to achieve the promises of God because it proved incapable of overcoming the national divisions of humanity.

Origen also lays great emphasis on the *impossibility* of the literal observance of the law, which is yet another reason why it could never justify. Even before the time of Christ the law was "weak" because it was practically impossible to fulfill.⁶⁰ Yet, by Origen's own day, he says, it is truly "dead," since the fall of Jerusalem and its temple cult make it literally impossible to carry out: "What should I say of the sacrificial system, which also has become completely impossible to carry out? For there is no temple or altar or any other place for sacrificing. In each of these things, I would not [merely] say that the law is impossible and weak, but it is plainly already dead."⁶¹ In other words, it is the concrete, historical situation of mankind that makes the law of Moses a religious dead end when interpreted literally.

57 God "wanted to lay down certain distinctions so that the people who were being assessed under the law would seem to be distinguished from the other nations through observances of this sort, as long as that people was considered to be holy and separated from the other nations a distinction of clean and unclean things seemed likewise necessary, a distinction that would separate and distinguish God's special people from the nations that the ignorance of God and the worship of idols were making unclean"; see *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 10.3.2 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 258).

58 See A. J. Philippou, "Origen and the Early Jewish-Christian Debate," *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 15 (1970): 146. Peter Gorday claims that one of the main purposes of the *Commentary on Romans* was to defend "Gentiles against Jewish exclusivism." See Peter Gorday, *Principles of Patristic Exegesis: Romans 9–11 in Origen, John Chrysostom, and Augustine* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1983), 50. Note also *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 2.13.12–16, where Origen points out that certain literal precepts of the law are not intended to apply to foreigners.

59 See *Contra Celsum* [Against Celsus] 1.43, 2.52, in *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); compare *On First Principles* 4.1.

60 "For through the letter the law is weak so that it may not be fulfilled"; see *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 1.10.2 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 79). Origen gives the examples of immobility on the Sabbath day and quarantining disease.

61 *Ibid.* 6.12.2 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 48); see also 6.7.11 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 25); *Homilies on the Book of Joshua* 2.1 (Bruce, *Fathers of the Church*, 37). Scheck notes that Origen was unique among the Fathers in emphasizing the significance of the fall of Jerusalem and its temple in this fashion. See "Law," in *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, ed. John Anthony McGuckin (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 139.

The most fundamental reason the literal observance of the law failed to justify, however, is that for Origen the rites serve primarily as vehicles for an inner, spiritual reality, which they did not only signify but contained in germ. To the extent that some Jews observed these ceremonial laws merely in their external, formal reality, without a recognition of their true, spiritual meaning, these were morally culpable and failed to attain righteousness.⁶² This is not a mere set of fanciful, esoteric double-meanings to delight the intellectual elite: Philo, for example, tended to see them in this way, and yet Philo remained fully attached to the literal observance of the law, while Origen did not. The reason is that the Jewish ceremonial laws have a historical dynamism, a messianic finality, for Origen that they do not have for Philo.⁶³ Origen complains that many Jews of his own day, when asked the reason for apparently ridiculous laws (such as, for example, not combining different fabrics), admit that they have no idea what the laws mean, and instead point to the inscrutability of the divine will: "This is what has seemed good to the Lawgiver."⁶⁴ Their meaning, for Origen, is revealed only by the Spirit, who alone can remove the veil over the face of Moses.⁶⁵

Therefore, Origen's opinion that the literal observance of the works of the law cannot justify does not arise from some quasi-Pelagian desire to clear the way for some other works that *can* justify. Rather, it arose from a conviction that the entire regime of the law of Moses—its bestowal upon Israel, the way it was practiced by the majority of Israelites, and its limited efficacy—was inextricably tied up with the sinful condition of mankind, a condition from which the Jewish people were not excluded. If, in fact, Origen shared Pelagius's optimism with regard to the human condition apart from Christ, he would presumably have taught that the literal observance of the law *did* justify, at least in part. After all, Pelagius had a much more optimistic view of the Jewish law, holding that it was at least partially effective in restoring human nature.⁶⁶ That Origen did not adopt this view suggests that he had a stronger appreciation than Pelagius of the necessity of the grace of Christ in justification. But to clarify this it is necessary to examine next exactly what Origen meant by observing the law in the "newness of the Spirit."

62 See De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 146.

63 Ibid., 319. See also *ibid.*, 324: "A 'typology' that is not essentially 'spiritual' would be only a caricature of Christian exegesis."

64 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 2.9.1 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 132).

65 Ibid. 6.7.18.

66 "By constant application of [the Jewish law's] abrasive injunctions the rust of ignorance was to be done away and man's newly polished nature was to stand out again in its pristine brilliance"; see Evans, *Pelagius*, 103.

III. Origen's Understanding of the "Spiritual" Observance of the Law of Moses

The present treatment will offer an alternative to the answer offered by Prosper Grech. Grech, for his part, understands Origen to mean something like the following: the ceremonial rites of the Jewish law were intended to serve as allegories pointing to the universal moral law (the natural law, but also embodied in the Decalogue). Wiser Jews who realized this worked hard to obey *that* moral law (rather than the ceremonies themselves, which they only kept up a pretense of doing), and thus achieved justification through the Spirit. Therefore, for Grech, Origen's understanding of the "spiritual observance" of the law becomes a quasi-Pelagian form of justification by works.⁶⁷ When combined with the restrictive interpretation of the Pauline "works of law" that do not justify, discussed above, Grech's solution seems to lead to the conclusion that Origen thinks that the only ones who are not justified are those who aren't working hard enough to obey the moral law.⁶⁸ Origen explicitly denies, however, that the meritorious works of Jews can justify apart from Christ,⁶⁹ and thus Grech's understanding leaves us with something of a puzzle. It is the purpose of this section to formulate an alternative understanding of what Origen meant by the "spiritual observance" of the law of Moses.

By the "spiritual observance" of the Jewish ceremonial laws, Origen obviously meant something similar to the "spiritual interpretation" of the Jewish law generally. Origen understood Christianity as the gradual unfolding of divine instruction (*paideia*),⁷⁰ by which the benevolent God draws mankind closer to Himself through progressively fuller revelation. The Old Testament, then, served as a rudimentary exposition of the fuller principles to be revealed in the New, though even the New Testament points toward a further revelation of the perfection of heaven, the soul's destiny.⁷¹ Thus the sacrifice of the lamb in the Jerusalem Temple signified not only the crucifixion of Jesus, but

67 Grech, "Justification," 344–345, 356. Grech does not, however, accuse Origen of Pelagianism: he says that this aspect is "unclear." Grech bases his comments on *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 6.12.8 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 51).

68 See also Wiles, *Divine Apostle*, 65.

69 "[T]he one under the law does not believe on Christ on account of the common prevailing opinion, but nevertheless may accomplish what is good. . . . Such a person does not have eternal life, since, though he does believe in the only true God, yet he has not believed in his Son Jesus Christ whom God sent"; *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 2.7.4–5.

70 Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), especially 67.

71 "I think that probably not even in the coming of Jesus or in his incarnation do we learn what is perfect and complete. Even though he is already led to the cross and perfected in all things, and even though he is raised from the dead, this does not disclose to us through him the entirety of what is perfect"; see *Homilies on the Book of Joshua* 3.2 (Bruce, *Fathers of the Church*, 45).

also the eternal immolation of Christ on the altar of heaven.⁷² The "spiritual interpretation" of Scripture is meant to point the soul toward both of these future realities: the revelation of the new covenant and the perfection of heaven. Hence there is a "mystical sense" (which points to Christ and the Church) and a "moral" or "spiritual sense" (which marks out the path of the soul toward virtue).⁷³

In regards to the former, mystical sense, Origen can say that the journey of Israel signifies the Church "outside of which . . . no one is saved,"⁷⁴ its catechuminate and baptism, and the priesthood that administers these.⁷⁵ He can say of circumcision that the shedding of blood that it entails signifies the blood shed by the Savior⁷⁶ and the "grace of the [baptismal] bath."⁷⁷ And in regards to the latter, moral sense, he says that the same ritual signifies circumcision of the heart, "which is, of course, understood to be none other than the cleansing of the soul and the casting aside of vices."⁷⁸

Thus, the Jewish rites show both the Christological, ecclesial, and sacramental economy which uplifts and transforms man and the moral obligations that the soul must undertake in cooperation with this economy. The key, however—and this is what seems to be missing in the analysis of Grech, above—is that the Jewish rituals point to both these sets of realities in a *simultaneous and integrated manner*, such that they not only teach the moral law (as in Grech), but also make possible the observance of this law. The Jewish ceremonies never become a mere ethical classroom for eager moralizers in Origen's thought—they introduce the children of Israel to the pathway to salvation, a pathway that runs through Christ and his Church. By participating in the liturgical ceremonies of the law of Moses, the Israelite symbolically enacts, in advance, the life of Christ and that of his Church.⁷⁹ Thus the one who observes the law spiritually, the "Jew in secret" of Romans 2:29, is not merely the ethically upright Jew—he is the Jew who enacts these liturgical mysteries precisely *as* anticipations of Christ and the Church. He is, in short, the Spirit-filled, Christ-believing Jew.

72 *Homilies on Leviticus* 1.3.

73 See De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 161–171.

74 *Homilies on Leviticus* 3.5 (Barkley, *Fathers of the Church*, 50).

75 *Ibid.* 4.1 (Barkley, *Fathers of the Church*, 52–53).

76 "The pouring out of the blood of many came first until the redemption of all was accomplished through the blood of the one"; see *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 2.13.32 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 163); cf. *ibid.* 2.13.29 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 161).

77 *Ibid.* 2.13.2 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 143).

78 *Ibid.* 2.12.2 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 141).

79 See De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 165, 209.

This is what Grech and other commentators seem to be missing who understand Origen's "spiritual observance of the law" as though Origen meant merely allegorical understanding of the law, rather than something like "Spirit-filled understanding of the law." The Israelite who observes the law in its spiritual sense does so *by grace, through faith, through the indwelling presence of Christ and His Spirit, effected through the love they pour out in the heart* (see Rom. 5:5).

By grace, because the spiritual interpretation of Scripture is not a clever achievement of human ingenuity, but an unmerited gift of God, given by prayer rather than acquired by human effort:

But if [the reader] wishes to be a Christian and a disciple of Paul, let him hear Paul saying that "the Law is spiritual" [and] declaring that these words are "allegorical" when the law speaks of Abraham and his wife and sons. And although no one of us can by any means easily discover what kind of allegories these words should contain, nevertheless one ought to pray that "the veil might be removed" from his heart, "if there is anyone who tries to turn to the Lord,"—"for the Lord is Spirit"—that the Lord might remove the veil of the letter and uncover the light of the Spirit and we might be able to say that "beholding the glory of the Lord with open face we are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as by the Spirit of the Lord."⁸⁰

Through faith, because Christ is the "end of the law," He to whom the entire law points, and only by an acknowledgement of this is one able to keep the law as it is meant to be kept: "one who does not accept Christ as the end of the law is not capable, without Christ, of fulfilling that righteousness that is from the law."⁸¹ No degree of human achievement—no keeping of the natural law, nor of the Jewish law—can attain to justification without faith in Christ.⁸²

80 *Homiliae in Genesim* [Homilies on Genesis] 6.1, in *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, ed. Ronald Heine (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1982), 122. Thus, Grech's suggestion that Origen thinks that the Spirit is "acquired by means of merit" (Grech, "Justification," 356) should be severely qualified. See also *On First Principles* 1.pref.8, where Origen insists that only the grace of the Holy Spirit allows for one to arrive at the spiritual interpretation.

81 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 8.2.2 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 136). Roukema rightly concludes: "[O]nly through faith in Christ one can understand and observe the law of Moses in its ultimate sense and be saved" Roukema (*Diversity of Laws*, 70).

82 "[I]f anyone should hold to absolutely everything which the law of nature teaches and the awareness of sin accuses him in no respect whatsoever, nevertheless, if he does not also have the grace of faith, he is not able to be justified." See *ibid.* 4.5.7 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 262). In connection with this, see also the comment by Hans Urs von Balthasar:

The prophets, not through any human effort but through a "divine perception," were "laying hold on the Logos by faith,"⁸³ by what Henri de Lubac calls an "anticipated illumination" of the coming Messiah.⁸⁴

Through the indwelling presence of Christ in His Spirit, because neither Christ nor the Spirit are rigidly confined to the times of the new covenant, but have always been eternally active throughout the divine economy of salvation. The divine Word who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, for Origen, "was also dwelling prior to this, yet not in a body, in each of the holy ones" of the Old Testament: this is how Origen interprets phrases like Jeremiah 11:1 ("the word which came to Jeremiah . . .").⁸⁵ Further, in a fierce anti-Marcionite invective, Origen attacks those who deny the Spirit's activity in the Old Testament:

I am aware, of course, that certain mindless people have treated "newness of the Spirit" in such a way that they can say that the Spirit is new, as if he did not exist previously nor was he known by the ancients. And they do not realize that in this they are uttering the most serious blasphemy. For the Spirit is in the law, he is in the Gospels. . . . Consequently, he is not new, but he renews those who believe when he leads them from the old evils to the new life and the new observance of the religion of Christ, and when he makes spiritual men out of carnal ones.⁸⁶

Through the love they [Christ and His Spirit] pour out in the heart, because Origen insists that "[p]recept is laid on slaves, but faith is sought by friends,"⁸⁷ and the literal observance of the law could only be motivated by servile fear.

"Everything in the type and spirit that Origen is and the whole system of his thought exclude the possibility that the impulse to conversion (*initium fidei*) comes from the human being." See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Origen, Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1984), 193.

83 See *Against Celsus* 1.48 (Chadwick [trans.]). For the same idea in the thought of St. Thomas, see Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [Summary of Theology] III, q. 8, a. 3, ad 3 (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947).

84 De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 303.

85 *Homilies on Jeremiah* 9.1 (Smith, Fathers of the Church, 85). See also *Commentary on John* 1.7.37: "But it must not be ignored that there was a presence of Christ before his fleshly presence, namely an intellectual presence which occurred to . . . the Patriarchs, to Moses the attendant (see Heb. 8:5), and to the prophets who contemplated the glory of Christ" (Trigg, Origen, 84).

86 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 6.7.19 (Scheck, Fathers of the Church, 29). Scheck proposes, rightly, that Origen has Marcion in mind here.

87 *Ibid.* 4.3.1 (Scheck, Fathers of the Church, 253). So, too, Origen points out that if a man abstained from fornication only because he feared punishment and would have committed the act if he could have gotten away with it, this man has less merit; *ibid.* 4.4.9 (Scheck, Fathers of the Church, 257).

Such a motivation is foreign to the grace-filled spiritual observance of the law, which requires for its motivation that love which is a divine gift.⁸⁸ Such a love is divine and not human in origin: the existential “arrow of love” that God fires to wound the human heart and provoke a response of love.⁸⁹ This new orientation does not come through a gradual, linear progress in human virtue; it comes in a single, blinding moment, as it did for St. Paul: “and in a single stroke, the law of Moses appears spiritual to our eyes.”⁹⁰

So who is the “Jew in secret” (Rom. 2:28), the Israelite who observed the law spiritually? He is the Jew who recognizes the *christological, pneumatological, ecclesiological finality* of the law, a finality that he is able to recognize *by grace, through faith, through the indwelling presence of Christ and His Spirit, effected through the love they pour out in the heart*. In this category Origen includes the patriarchs, Moses, “the prophets and whoever was wise among the people back then.”⁹¹ These Jews, because they lived by faith, did not transgress the moral law but upheld it.⁹² They did so not by their own works but by faith: Origen is content to view Abraham, for example, as a kind of “Christian before Christ,” since his supreme act of faith was implicitly an act of faith in the coming Savior: “what Abraham believed as a matter of the future is believed by us as accomplished.”⁹³ Those Jews who imitated the Christological faith of Abraham, and none others, are those who Origen can say are “justified by the Law.”⁹⁴

Thus, in sum, we can see that Origen’s praise for the “spiritual interpretation of the law” is not his way of clearing a path for Pelagian “works-right-

88 See *ibid.* 4.5.3 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 268): “love is the perfection and culmination of the entire work. That is why love is said to be greater than everything else.”

89 See *Commentary on John* 1.32.229. See also Hannah Hunt, “Love,” in McGuckin, *The Westminster Handbook to Origen*, 145–146.

90 *Exegetica in Psalmos* [Commentary on the Psalms] 118.102, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*, ed. J. P. Migne, 161 vols. (Paris: Garnier and J. P. Migne, 1857–1866), 12:1053–1685. See De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 306: “Israel did not gradually, as if naturally, become the Church. The early [sic] Jerusalem was not changed through a slow evolution into that Jerusalem come down from heaven, which is our mother. . . . A supernatural metamorphosis [was accomplished], without analogy in history, and not a process of spiritualization, like what is offered by more or less all religious tradition maintained through long centuries.”

91 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 6.7.6 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 22). Moses knew the spiritual meaning of the law; his scorn for its outward letter was shown by his smashing of the stone tablets. *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 2.14.12; see also *Against Celsus* 7.20 (Chadwick [trans.]); *Homiliae in Numeros* [Homilies on Numbers] 5.1, in *Homilies on Numbers*, ed. Thomas Scheck, *Ancient Christian Texts* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2009).

92 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 4.4.8.

93 *Ibid.* 4.7.3 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 274).

94 *Homilies on the Book of Joshua* 3.1 (Bruce, *Fathers of the Church*, 42).

teousness." It is precisely the opposite: it is his way of insisting that justification and righteousness can come only by means of the grace of Christ, while also affirming that this grace was operative among the Jews in the old covenant.⁹⁵ The "literal" observance of the law did *not* justify precisely because this form of observance excluded the saving grace of Christ, which alone can justify.

IV. *The Theological Significance of Origen's Interpretation of "Works of Law": A Comparison with Augustine's View*

Having surveyed what Origen means by the "literal" and "spiritual" observance of the law, we may briefly return to the claim mentioned earlier that Augustine decisively rejected Origen's interpretation in his *The Spirit and the Letter*. Here is the claim made by Bammel:

In this work [*The Spirit and the Letter*] Augustine rejects Origen's methods of explaining Paul's use of the term "law." . . . Paul's words in 2 Cor. 3: 6, "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life," are to be understood not with reference to the literal and figurative senses of the Jewish law, a purpose for which Origen had repeatedly quoted them, but of the command to live rightly, which is itself the letter that killeth, unless the life-giving Spirit is present to inspire good desire in our hearts. This provides the key to the understanding of Romans, and Augustine rejects possible references to the Jewish ceremonial law. . . . Origen's exposition of these verses must have been most objectionable to him, since it promises rewards for good works to unbelieving Jews.⁹⁶

The distinction that Bammel highlights between Augustine and Origen, however, is a distinction without a difference. As we have seen, Origen's understanding of the literal and spiritual observance of the law is precisely intended to highlight the necessity of the life-giving Spirit in the hearts of the faithful, and even more, the impossibility of justification without justifying faith in Christ made present by grace. The exegetical shift on Augustine's part—that is, interpreting "works of law" as good deeds rather than Jewish ceremonies—does not signify a substantive doctrinal shift. It should be clear, then, that Origen's restrictive interpretation of "works of law" in Paul's letter to Romans, as compared with Augustine's broader, ethical interpretation, does

95 Peter Gorday has noted that Origen's treatment of Romans includes a very positive treatment of the Jewish religion, as compared to Chrysostom's and Augustine's, which see Paul's polemic against works as simultaneously a "disparagement of Judaism essentially and as a whole." See Gorday, *Principles*, 227, 230–231.

96 Bammel, "Augustine," 361–362.

not signify a substantial difference between the two regarding justification by grace. This proposal might be strengthened by a brief survey of similar points of contact between Origen and Augustine on the topics of grace and justification.

Augustine did, after all, read Origen extensively before composing his work on Romans and “found much to agree with in his reading of Origen and picked up a number of ideas from him.”⁹⁷ The two thinkers agree strongly, against Pelagius on the essential doctrine of original sin.⁹⁸ The two also agree, against Pelagius, that the Church baptizes infants to remove the inherited sin that is transmitted to newborn children.⁹⁹ Both agree that the primary purpose of the law is to reveal the sinful state of mankind and alert humans to their need for a redeemer.¹⁰⁰ Both deny that good works antecedent to faith justify,¹⁰¹ and both affirm that both free will¹⁰² and faith¹⁰³ are themselves gifts of God, rather than human accomplishments. Both deny the possibility of strict, condign merit in relation to God,¹⁰⁴ and thus both deny the possibility

97 Bammel, “Justification,” 229. Elsewhere, Bammel notes that “Origen’s *Commentary on Romans*, even in the drastically reduced version of Rufinus, was a work of Pauline exegesis greatly superior to anything Augustine had so far at his disposal.” See Bammel, “Augustine,” 363.

98 See *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 5.1.14 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 311): “all men . . . [were] in Adam’s loins when he was still in paradise. And all men who were with him, or rather in him, were expelled from paradise when he was himself driven out from there.” Bammel notes the irony and points out that the originators of the Pelagian party were motivated by opposition to Origen for this reason. See Bammel, “Augustine,” 363. Augustine comments favorably on Origen’s position on original sin in *Epistula* [Letter] 166.27, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]), 1:531–532.

99 See *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 5.9.11.

100 Ibid. 5.1.25–26, 31–35; compare Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* (trans. Burnaby), 13–14.

101 “[I]f anyone should hold to absolutely everything which the law of nature teaches and the awareness of sin accuses him in no respect whatsoever, nevertheless, if he does not also have the grace of faith, he is not able to be justified”; see *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 4.5.7 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 262). Burns points out that Origen in 3.10.5 allows for good works antecedent to faith, but Origen insists that these do not justify unless they are perfected by faith. Thus Origen seems to see pre-baptismal good works merely as a predisposition for justification. See Burns, “Interpretation,” 48.

102 *On First Principles* 3.1.19. Compare Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* (trans. Burnaby), 58–60.

103 “Even the very faith by which we seem to believe in God is confirmed in us as a gift of grace”; see *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 4.5.4 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 259); compare Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* (trans. Burnaby), 60.

104 See *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 4.1.14 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 243): “I can hardly convince myself that there could be any work which would demand from God repayment as something due. For even the fact that we are able to do anything at all, to think and to speak, we do through his gift and generosity. What debt will he have to pay

of human boasting before God.¹⁰⁵ Both claim that justification inherently sanctifies a person (as opposed to, say, merely imputing the status of righteousness),¹⁰⁶ enabling—as well as obliging—that person subsequently to obey the moral law.¹⁰⁷ On the possibility of “good pagans,” Origen and Augustine have a similar position: they acknowledge the possibility of genuine virtue among the unbaptized but deny that it can merit eternal life.¹⁰⁸ And finally, Augustine can affirm with Origen that many saints of the Old Testament lived by faith and thus became anticipatory members of the Church, members of Christ’s Body born before the Head, like Jacob’s hand emerging first from the womb of Rebekah.¹⁰⁹

This survey does not intend to deny important differences between the two thinkers, which should certainly be noted and taken into consideration. Yet such differences should not be allowed to overshadow the similarities between the two thinkers, similarities that have been receiving increasing attention in recent decades. As Thomas Scheck has noted, Origen’s explanation of the phrase “justification by faith” from the *Commentary on Romans* was read aloud to the bishops at the Council of Trent, the same bishops whose decree on justification draws so heavily from Augustine.¹¹⁰

back to us, seeing that his capital came first?” Compare Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* (trans. Burnaby), 22.

105 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 3.9.6–7; compare Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* (trans. Burnaby), 16.

106 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 4.10.12 (Scheck, *Fathers of the Church*, 292): “From the fullness of the Spirit, the fullness of love is infused into the hearts of the saints in order to receive participation in the divine nature.” See also Scheck, “Justification,” 1282n35: “although Origen does not pose the question of knowing if justice is imputed or inherent, one can see that the spiritual realism of his psychology favors the latter conception.” Compare Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* (trans. Burnaby), 26: “It will work . . . until all that is old be changed and pass into that newness which day by day has increase in the inward man.”

107 *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 4.1.18: “For faith which believes in the one who justifies is the beginning of being justified by God. And this faith, when it has been justified, is firmly embedded in the soil of the soul like a root that has received rain, so that when it begins to be cultivated by God’s law, branches arise from it, which bring forth the fruit of works.” Compare Augustine, *The Spirit and the Letter* (trans. Burnaby), 45.

108 See *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 2.7.5; compare Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* [City of God] 19.25, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st Series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint], 2:418–419).

109 See Augustine, *De Catechezandis Rudibus* [On the Instruction of Beginners] 3.6, in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 1st series, 14 vols., ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994 [reprint]), 3:286. This is, admittedly, an early work, but he still holds that the saints of the Old Testament could be justified even at the time of writing *The Spirit and the Letter*. See Burnaby (trans.), 189.

110 Thomas Scheck, *Origen and the History of Justification* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), 15.

While Origen and Augustine came to part ways in their exegesis of the phrase “works of law” in Paul’s letter to the Romans, they shared a common understanding of the absolute necessity of the grace of Christ for justification.