Origen's Theory of Language and the First Two Columns of the Hexapla.

Origen's primary aim in compiling the Hexapla has been the subject of much speculation. The Hexapla has been seen as an ideologically neutral source of comparative text-critical data, as a weapon in polemical struggles against Judaism and its claims on Scripture, even as a text-book for learning Hebrew.¹ In Comm. in Matt.15.14, Origen himself describes the aim of his text critical work to heal the dissonances between the manuscripts of the Old Testament. In Ep.ad Afr.9 Origen implies that a major motivation for the compilation of the Hexapla was to facilitate the comparison of the Jewish scriptures with the Septuagint so that Christians disputing with Jews would know if certain passages and phrases were common to both.² There were, then, both polemical and scholastic motives for the compilation of the Hexapla.³ The Hexapla was a complex document and it should not surprise us that its function was equally complex and multiplicitous.

If the function of the Hexapla has been open to question, then we might expect that the intended functions of the individual Hebrew and Greek columns within Origen's great text-critical work have also been the subject of speculation. Our interest here is in the role of the Hebrew text of the first two columns of the Hexapla but, obviously,

³The inclusion of older, obscure versions, such as the Quinta, Sexta and purported Septima, for some portions of the Hexapla can only have been for scholarly purposes—such non-current versions can have served little or no polemical purpose.
the function of individual columns within the Hexapla is to some extent influenced by
the overall function, or functions, for which the synopsis as a whole was intended.
Schaper has contended that the aim of Origen's textual work was the creation of a
reliable Greek text based on the traditional Septuagint of the Church and that the basis
for the text-critical operation involved in achieving this aim was a comparison of
available Greek versions. The function of the Hebrew was only to indicate
quantitative differences between the Hebrew and Greek texts, or to provide
corroborations of a particular Greek reading where there was disagreement amongst
the Greek versions. Thus, the Hebrew text was not of primary importance in the
Hexapla—that position was occupied by the LXX and the various Greek versions.4

We would suggest that Origen's estimation of the relative role of the Greek and
Hebrew scriptures is not so clear-cut as Schaper's arguments would imply. Origen's
thought on this issue betrays contradictory tendencies. On the one hand, Origen's own
descriptions of the Hexapla and the text-critical programme behind it evince
considerable concern for the integrity of the Septuagint Bible of the Christian Church,
for harmonizing potential sources of dispute between the Septuagint and the minor
versions, and for protecting Christianity's Greek scriptures from criticisms originating
from without the Church, particularly in the case of pluses and minuses in the Greek
bible vis à vis the Hebrew. On the other hand, the very construction of the Hexapla
implies a far more significant and determinative role for the Hebrew Scriptures in
Origen's thought than simply as a check for the Greek versions. There is but one

4J. Schaper, "The Origin and Purpose of the Fifth Column of the Hexapla" in A. Salvesen (ed) Origen's
Hexapla and Fragments. Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum 58. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck,
Hebrew text cited in the Hexapla, against at least four Greek versions. There is no indication of the existence of variant Hebrew traditions. Furthermore, the Hebrew text contained in the first (two) column(s) appears to provide the ordering principle around which the Hexapla is structured.

The Hexapla involves the comparison of versions of the biblical text in two languages, Hebrew and Greek. Of central relevance to the whole design of the Hexapla is the issue of translation. The columnar construction of the Hexapla allows the reader to observe, for any given Hebrew word in the first two columns, the range of Greek renderings—including absence of any equivalent—represented in the various versions which Origen reproduces. There would seem to be little room to doubt that the facilitation of such comparison was a primary function of the Hexapla. Yet, if the issue of translation is a principal interest of the Hexapla, it must be deemed noteworthy that very little modern commentary on the Hexapla has concerned itself with Origen’s theory of language. Language theory is directly relevant to the problem of translation and, as such, Origen’s thought in this area can cast light on the nature of the Hexapla and its construction, and, more specifically, highlight the complexity of the role played by the Hebrew in this work.

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Origen's Theory of Language

Origen’s thought on language is striking to the modern reader on account of its containing elements which are nonreferential in character—that is, Origen knows of the use of language which is empty of semantic sense, but is nevertheless possessed of contextually construed meaning. In a comparative analysis of the theories of language evidenced in the thought of Origen and of Pseudo-Dionysius, N. Janowitz argues that, for Origen, language is of divine, not human, origin.⁶ Names do not represent or imitate for Origen—names point to the deepest meanings of objects, signifying their nature. Origen considers that divine names are “a summing up denomination which gives the real essence of the named object”—they manifest divine power.⁷ Origen attributes the power of divine names to a non-arbitrary correspondence between the signifier and the signified, the name and the divinity. Moreover, Origen accepts that the power of a divine name is automatic and not based on the intention of the speaker. Thus, although Zeus may be but a daimon and not a god, a Christian must not utter the word "Zeus", for to do so might automatically produce a miracle.⁸

This non-arbitrariness of divine names is especially true for Origen with regard to the divine names contained in scripture. This, Janowitz argues, is connected with Origen's estimation of the special qualities of the Hebrew language.⁹ Hebrew is, for Origen, the language of creation. Hebrew names, and the prayers which contain them, lose their efficacy in translation. They must be uttered in Hebrew or they will be


"weak and ineffective" and "no different from the names which have no power at all". A corollary of this attribution of special effectiveness to the Hebrew language is Origen's opinion that it is not the signification of the name, per se, which imbues it with power but, instead, it is the very sounds of the word which are effective.

Origen's elevation of Hebrew to the status of natural language is also indicative of a more specific influence on his thought by Jewish theories of language, an influence to which Origen himself makes specific reference. Jewish theories of language admitted of inherent, automatic power attributed to the names of God. A variety of Jewish exegetical traditions attributed the creation of the world to God speaking his own name, and pronunciation of the divine name was forbidden in Jewish tradition because of the name’s automatic, effective power. As with Origen, the language theory of the Jewish exegetes attributed power to the very sounds of the divine name. But, for the Jewish exegetes, the problem of translation was not the pressing concern that it was for Origen: they, after all, worked with the Jewish scriptures in Hebrew, not, as did Origen—a Christian—in Greek.

It is clear that Origen's ideas concerning effective, nonreferential language resemble the theories of automatic language encountered in so-called "magical" ritual texts of the Graeco-Roman period. But, as Janowitz argues, we must resist labeling Origen's

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12Contra Celsum (CC) 4.34. See N. Janowitz, History of Religions 30 (1991) 364-365.


14See Janowitz, The Poetics of Ascent, 25, 135 n.20 and literature cited there.
appeal to the automatic power of divine names as "magical". Origen himself very carefully distinguishes between the use of effective language, such as healing in the name of Jesus, and acts of "magic".15 Such an analysis involves largely modern categories—with an aesthetic preference for referential models of language and a condescension for any other, nonreferential, language theory—and is ultimately unhelpful in describing native ideas about magic and religion.16

Janowitz observes that, for Origen, the presence of the divine name in a text imbues that text with effective power. Origen gives expression to the idea that Hebrew scripture, by virtue of the divine names it contains, is possessed of the power to effect transformation in the hearer, even when comprehension of what is being heard might be absent.17 This point is of importance. Origen appears to explicitly extend the automatic, effective power of the divine names found in scripture to the scriptural texts as a whole. To hear scripture was, through the agency of the divine names it contained, to be subject to inner transformation, whether or not what was heard was consciously comprehended or not. As Origen, under the influence of the Jewish scholarly traditions with which he had dialogue, considered Hebrew as natural language, translation of Hebrew scripture for Origen presented something of a problem. The automatic power of scripture to effect transformation in the hearer—a function of the Hebrew divine names present in the text—was lost when these texts were translated out of their native Hebrew into Greek.

The relationship of the transliterated Hebrew text found in the second column of the Hexapla to the Hebrew text in Jewish script recorded in the first column, and the relationship of both of these two columns to the remaining columns containing a selection of Greek translations of the Hebrew are problems which have been the subject of much debate. Origen's thought on automatic, efficacious language, as described by Janowitz, has the potential to cast some light upon these issues. The issue of translation looms large in the background of the Hexapla—the comparison of Biblical text in Hebrew and Greek versions makes this quite clear. This accords with what we have observed about various aspects of Origen's thought on language. Translation of scripture from Hebrew into Greek represented an issue of some significance for Origen's language theory. The efficacious sounds of the language of scripture lose their power if translated out of the Hebrew. This importance of Hebrew as natural language is reflected in the structure of the Hexapla. The first two columns of the Hexapla determine the shape of the rest of the work. Insofar as we may consider the evidence of the Milan Codex (Rahlfs 1098) representative of the original arrangement of the text of the Hexapla, the Hebrew columns—Jewish script and transliteration—appear to have been arranged on the basis of a single word per line.\footnote{Note that the Milan Codex may only be representative for the Hexapla of the Psalms. There are also occasional exceptions to the one Hebrew word per line principle. See G. Norton, "Observations on the first two columns of the Hexapla", \textit{Rich Seminar Volume}, 115-123.} The text of the Greek columns is manipulated to align with the Hebrew text. The importance of Hebrew in Origen's ideas concerning language is also evidenced by the fact that the Hexapla employs a single Hebrew text as the basis of comparison for multiple Greek versions. If Origen was aware of forms of the Hebrew text other than
the proto-Masoretic text which appears to be reflected by the transliterations contained in the Milan codex, he gives no indication of this. This may be a consequence of Origen’s apparently limited practical knowledge of Hebrew. But it may also be seen as a reflection of Origen's estimation of Hebrew as natural language—if Hebrew was natural language, Origen could hardly have allowed the ready admission of a multiplicity of Hebrew textual traditions. Much has been made of the centrality to Origen’s biblical hermeneutics of the concept of oikonomia. This theory embodies the belief that there is “some form of providential or divine guiding spirit present in the translation”. Thus, Origen considers both the correct reading and the variant reading of a text legitimate objects of exegesis. Herein is explanation

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19 Origen’s rudimentary proficiency in Hebrew raises the further question of who composed the second column transliteration. As it stands, the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew text found in the surviving Hexaplaric materials is a work of some sophistication. It demonstrates an awareness of the shortcomings of the Greek script in representing Hebrew phonology and evidences attempts to compensate for these inadequacies (E. Brønno, Studien über hebräische Morphologie und Vokalismus (1943) 146f, 275-77, 326; A. Sperber, HUCA 12-13 (1937-38) 114f; W.E. Staples, “The Second Column of Origen’s Hexapla”, JAOS 59 (1939) 74f). At the very least, the transliteration demonstrates a fairly sound knowledge of an established tradition of vocalization of the Hebrew consonant text. This would require a level of knowledge of the Hebrew language far in excess of that which Origen appeared to possess. All of these observations lead to the conclusion that the transliterations were most probably the products of Jewish scholarship.


given of Origen’s comparison of the Greek versions in the Hexapla. Though they differ one from the other, each of the Greek versions embodies the action of some divine providence at work in the process of translation which produces a Greek text from the unique, original Hebrew text.

The assertion that the Hexapla presents only a single Hebrew text assumes, of course, that the second column of transliterated Hebrew formed an integral unit with the preceding column of untransliterated Hebrew text—that is, that both columns reflect the same Hebrew text presented in different forms. That such was the case has been argued by both Norton and Emerton. Their arguments are based upon the contention that, in one fashion or another, the essential function of the second column transliteration was to provide a pronunciation guide for the unpointed Hebrew consonant text of the first column. Emerton in particular argued strongly for this position. He claimed that the imperfect nature of the Greek transliteration’s reproduction of Hebrew phonology would have meant that, read aloud, a transliterated Hebrew text would have been incomprehensible to anyone who actually understood Hebrew. On the other hand, Emerton argued, there would be little purpose in the reading of a transliterated Hebrew text in a congregation where knowledge of Hebrew had entirely lapse—it would make far more sense simply to read a Greek translation. Instead, Emerton contended, the transliterated Hebrew texts were designed to be read in conjunction with the Hebrew consonant text. In effect, the Greek transliteration of

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the second column functioned as a vocalization aid for the Hebrew consonant text found in the first column. This necessarily implies that the second column transliteration was derived from the particular Hebrew consonant text preserved in the first column.

Emerton's arguments were largely framed as a refutation of the claims made by a number of earlier scholars that the transliterations contained in the second column of the Hexapla represented an example of a type of text which may have circulated in Jewish circles as independent documents from a relatively early period. It became a point of contention whether Origen had himself composed—or had had composed by collaborators better versed in Hebrew—the second column of the Hexapla, or whether he merely employed an example of a type of document readily available from Jewish sources and, consequently, whether the first and second columns represented two different official versions of the Hebrew text. But, if we consider this question in the light of Origen's thought on language—and the position occupied by Hebrew in this thinking—we will see that it is highly unlikely that the first and second columns of the Hexapla could represent two independent versions of the Hebrew text. As the Hebrew text of the Hexapla seems to provide the organizational principle which determines the arrangement of the Greek translations, and as Hebrew was, in Origen's estimation, the efficacious language of creation, the first two columns of the Hexapla

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must, it would seem, bear witness to two different methods of recording the one Hebrew text.

*The Function of the Second Column*

If the first two columns of the Hexapla represent two modes of representing the one Hebrew text, we still find ourselves left with the question of what the function of the second column transliteration might have been. In other words, why did Origen provide two different forms of his Hebrew text? Emerton's explanation of the second column as a vocalization aid to the Hebrew consonant text of the first column is not entirely satisfying. As it is framed, this explanation is dependent upon a modern preference for wholly referential language theory. It is founded upon the assumption that a listener’s ability to comprehend a Hebrew text read aloud was of paramount importance. But as we have observed, according to Janowitz, Origen's theories of language encompassed non-referential elements, particularly where Hebrew was concerned. A listener’s comprehension of the oral performance of a Hebrew text cannot be assumed to have been a priority. In this regard, it is useful to consider the grammatological issues surrounding a text like the second column transliterations. As Herrenschmidt has recently argued, the Greek alphabet embodies an entirely different theory of writing to that represented by Semitic consonant alphabets.24 The unique innovation represented by the Greek alphabet lies in the fact that it accomplishes the severance of phonetic from semantic information. The Greek alphabet conveys only phonetic data. With the Greek alphabet, for the first time, it becomes possible to produce true transliterations—to read a text and reproduce the sounds of a language

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without the reader understanding what is being read. It is not possible to derive such purely phonetic information from a Semitic consonant alphabet without also understanding the language which is being recorded. In the light of the nonreferential elements in Origen’s language theory, the relevance of a Greek transliteration’s ability to record the sounds of a language—indipendently of whether a reader can understand the meaning of what is being uttered—should be obvious for understanding what must have been at least a part of the function of the Hexaplaric second column. Origen attributed automatic efficacy to Hebrew divine names. The reading of scripture in Hebrew, whether or not the language of the text was actually understood by either reader or audience, was capable of effecting a transformation in those who heard the divinely empowered sounds of the language. The second column transliteration made possible the reproduction of the sounds of Hebrew scripture, even for those readers who knew no Hebrew. In fact, Origen’s own citations of Hebrew bible in his other writings appear to rely exclusively upon transliterations.25 The significance, then, of the text of the second column for Origen is emphasized. If Origen was not able to adequately and independently engage with the Hebrew text as represented in the first column of the Hexapla, the second column transliteration would have provided both a means of locating specific points in the text when engaged in dialogue with Jewish interlocutors, as well as access to the efficacious sounds of the divine language. In this way, the Hexapla’s very structure is a reflection of the role of Hebrew as natural and divine language. Languages other than Hebrew may exist, but Hebrew remains uniquely efficacious, its very sounds possessed of automatic power derived from its origins in divine speech and the divine names which it embodies. This may also be seen to dictate the form in which the Hebrew text is

presented in the Hexapla. The Hebrew text in Hebrew characters is not sufficient on its own. The second column, with its inscription of the sounds of the Hebrew language, records—particularly for readers with little or no Hebrew—the essential, effective element of the Hebrew text.

The Function of the First Column

As a final question, we might ask, if Origen possessed only a passing knowledge of Hebrew, and if the second column transliteration provided access to the effective sounds of this language, why did Origen bother to include the first column of Hebrew consonant text? Here again, ideas concerning nonreferential language, such as those evidenced by Origen, might provide part of the answer. Whilst we do not wish to deny that the inclusion of the Hebrew text in Jewish characters would have been an important element of the Hexapla if it were to be usefully employed in polemical contexts with Jewish interlocutors, we would suggest that there may have been other considerations at work. Janowitz has suggested that the vocabulary of the semiotic analysis of Charles Pierce can be usefully applied to the notions involved in Origen’s conception of divine names. Janowitz suggests that, in Peircean terms, Origen’s conception of divine names may be termed "iconic". Peirce defines an icon as "a sign which would possess the character which renders it significant, even though the object had no existence; such as a lead pencil streak in representing a geometrical line." As in the example of the pencil line, where its form is crucial to its function as a sign, when a divine name is seen as iconic, its form—that is, the very arrangement of the letters, their shapes, their sounds—is vital. The term "icon" articulates the late antique

understanding that divine names are not arbitrary words used to refer to gods but that they actually embody in their shape and in the pattern of their sounds, the deity’s power. As Janowitz writes: "The term 'icon' helps us delineate many issues which emerge in the Jewish circles known to Origen, such as the need to preserve the shape exactly, the obsessive quality with which it is copied, and the treatment afforded to the scrolls which contain it." Insofar as Origen appears to extend the automatic character which he attributes to divine names to the texts in which those names are embedded, we might suggest that the iconic character of those names is similarly extended to the texts. Thus, the Hebrew text of scripture shares in the iconic aspects of the divine names which it contains. The shape of the Hebrew text—the very arrangement of the letters—recorded in the first column of the Hexapla is possessed of a significance equivalent to that of the efficacious sounds of the language recorded in the second column.

As the foregoing demonstrates, the profile of non-referential elements in Origen's language theory outlined by Janowitz is able to shed new light on the structure of the Hexapla and the function of the first two columns.

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27N. Janowitz, History of Religions 30 (1991) 371

28N. Janowitz, History of Religions 30 (1991) 371

29On the Jewish ideology of the power of the written text see N. Janowitz, The Poetics of Ascent, 102-3.