

Creating Christian Self-identity

Through Rhetorical Definition, Classification, and Association in Origen

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Origen, a third-century church father, was one of the most influential Christian teachers in history, influential not only as an allegorical reader of the scriptures¹ but also as a rhetorical presenter of the biblical message.² Since his Christian audience was a minority within the larger religious and cultural world before the day of free Christianity, it was necessary for Origen, a Christian preacher, to read and preach on his sacred text in such a way as to help form a strong Christian self-identity in the mind of his Christian audience and thereby help it survive the religious, cultural, and social pressures of the day. It is to achieve this goal of survival or a successful competition with the Jews and the Greco-Romans that Origen made use of various rhetorical strategies, especially rhetorical definition, classification, and association.

¹ Among many works on this topic, see especially Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1964), 1-14; Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et esprit: L'Intelligence des Écritures d'après Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1950; reprint, Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2002); idem, *Exégèse Médiévale*, vol. 1 (Paris: Aubier, 1959), 198-304; R. P. C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event* (London: SCM Press, 1959; reprint, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); Henri Crouzel, *Origen*, trans. A. S. Worrall (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 61-84.

² See Robert M. Berchman, *From Philo to Origen: Middle Platonism in Transition* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1984), 215-23; Karen Jo Torjesen, "Influence of Rhetoric on Origen's Old Testament Homilies" in *Origeniana Sexta*, eds. Gilles Dorival and Alain Le Bouluéc (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 13-25; P. O'Cleirig, "Topoi of Invention in Origen's *Homilies*" in *Origeniana Sexta*, 277-86; Samuel Hong, "Origen, the Church Rhetorician: The Seventh Homily on Genesis" in *Studia Patristica* 44 (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 293-8.

Such a rhetorical project of creating self-identity in the mind of the audience and using appropriate strategies to achieve that goal is one of the main research areas of modern rhetoricians, especially those who envision rhetoric as not simply representing or reflecting reality but rather creating or evoking it.³ This concept of rhetoric as epistemic or truth-creative is an excellent conceptual tool for analyzing Origen's rhetorical practice because his main concern was in the formation of a viable, strong Christian identity in the mind of his Christian audience which he thought was too dangerously wavering between Christianity and paganism or between Christianity and Judaism.

Since rhetoric-as-epistemic is an important theoretical framework which I believe explains well Origen's preaching and exegetical activity, the immediately following section will tackle the issue and its relevance to Origen. In the next section, I will attempt to identify Origen's audience as well as its situation. The reason why I propose to identify it before directly dealing with the various rhetorical strategies he used is that a discussion of the audience is logically to precede a discussion of the specific rhetorical strategies employed to solve the problems it faces. The final section will turn to his actual practice of rhetoric in the Christian church and discuss how masterfully he employed the rhetorical strategies of definition, classification, and association to create a strong Christian self-identity in the mind of his Christian audience.

³ See Robert L. Scott, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic," *Central States Speech Journal* 18 (1967): 9-17; idem, "On Viewing Rhetoric as Epistemic: Ten Years Later," *CSSJ* 27 (1976): 258-66; Richard A. Cherwitz and James W. Hikins, "Burying the Undertaker: A Eulogy for the Eulogists of Rhetorical Epistemology," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990): 73-77; Thomas B. Farrell, "From the Parthenon to the Bassinet: Death and Rebirth along the Epistemic Trail," *QJS* 76 (1990): 78-84; Alan G. Gross, "Rhetoric of Science Is Epistemic Rhetoric," *QJS* 76 (1990): 304-6; Robert L. Scott, "Epistemic Rhetoric and Criticism: Where Barry Brummett Goes Wrong," *QJS* 76 (1990): 300-303; William A. Covino and David A. Jolliffe, *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions, Boundaries* (Boston, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, and Singapore: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 4-8.

I. Rhetoric as epistemic

Classical rhetoricians in general treated rhetoric as something intrinsically separated from truth. They assumed that truth exists outside “*verba*, the world of words” and that rhetoric is nothing more than a proven means to making the truth accessible to the audience by way of a certain mode of expression and presentation. Since there is a fundamental cleavage between the world of words and the world of truth, they argued, rhetoric should be categorized as a discipline intrinsically different from the so-called “scientific” ones such as logic or mathematics. Representative of this view of rhetoric were Plato and Aristotle. Plato is known for his harsh criticism of the sophists: he criticized that they were concerned only with “verbal surface of things rather than things themselves.”⁴ Aristotle, in spite of his noble attempt to give rhetoric a semi-scientific status when he called rhetoric a “counterpart” (ὁμοίωμα) or “likeness” (ὁμοίωσις) of dialectic,⁵ was no different from Plato when it came to the issue of a real speechmaking in front of the crowd. He spoke of the language (*verba*) used in oratory as a concession to “the corrupt condition of the audience” (ἐκ τῆς ἀπορίας τῶν ἀκροατῶν) and to “the inability of most listeners to attend to strictly logical argument.” In short, for classical rhetoricians, reality resides outside the world of *verba* and the rhetor’s function is basically to use words to compromise the truth in some way to make it attractive and accessible to the audience.⁷

⁴ C. H. Knoblauch, “Modern Rhetorical Theory and Its Future Directions,” *Perspectives on Research and Scholarship in Composition*, eds. Ben W. McClelland and Timothy R. Donovan (New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 1985), 31.

⁵ *Rh.* 1.1.1 (Loeb Classical Library 193, 2); 1.2.7 (LCL 193, 18).

⁶ *Rh.* 3.1.6 (LCL 193, 346).

⁷ Knoblauch, “Modern Rhetorical Theory,” 32; Richard Cherwitz, “Rhetoric as ‘a Way of Knowing’: an Attenuation of the Epistemological Claims of the ‘New Rhetoric,’” in *Rhetoric: Concepts, Definitions*,

Modern rhetoricians, however, take a different view of language in oratory.

According to them, there is an inseparable relation between reality and language. Reality is not to be seen as something like “a lump of matter, decorated and disguised, but finally delivered intact” to the audience. Rather it is to be regarded as “a web of shifting complexities whose pattern emerges *only* in the process of writing [and speaking], and is in fact modified by the writing [and the speaking].”⁸ In other words, rhetoric is not simply a verbal vehicle by which a certain truth is delivered to the audience in a somewhat distorted way. Rather it is a creative way of using language, creative in the sense that it uses language as a tool of generating knowledge. It is in this sense that rhetoric is claimed to be a “way of knowing” and epistemic.

Origen’s rhetorical activity reflects this concept of rhetoric-as-epistemic. Though he was educated in classical rhetoric and definitely before the conceptualization of the modern idea, his writings amply reveal how modern his perspective was: he used rhetoric to create a certain Christian reality in the mind of his audience. In fact, from his perspective as a Christian preacher in the third century, he had no other option but to attempt to create a new reality for Christians, because the Christian church had no ancient tradition to claim like Judaism on the one hand, and on the other hand his contemporary Christians comprised only a minority which he feared was in danger of extinction without a strong Christian self-identity. So as a preacher responsible for the wellbeing of his Christian flock, no wonder

Boundaries, compiled by William A. Covino and David A. Jolliffe (Boston, London, Toronto, Sydney, Tokyo, and Singapore: Allyn and Bacon, 1995), 452.

⁸ Richard Ohmann, “In Lieu of a New Rhetoric,” in *Professing the New Rhetorics: A Sourcebook*, eds. Theresa Enos and Stuart C. Brown (New Jersey: A Blair Press Book, 1994), 300. Italics added.

Origen was concerned with the formation of a strong Christian self-identity and employed various rhetorical strategies to achieve the goal.

II. Origen's Audience

Having considered the epistemic nature of rhetoric and its relevance to Origen's rhetorical project of creating a reality by which his audience might be helped to develop a strong Christian identity, it is necessary for us now to consider his audience as he perceived it. For just as a typical orator would invent and arrange materials in such a way as to best achieve his goal, so would Origen: he would select and use the kinds of rhetorical strategies that would best appeal to the specific mindset or situation of his audience. So in this section we will discuss the nature of Origen's audience, its situation, and the exigence perceived by him as a third-century Christian orator.

Judging from numerous references and allusions in his homilies and commentaries, the condition of Origen's audience was far from desirable. It was a disorderly, mixed group which lacked a clear sense of identity. There was a wide spectrum of behavior and morality in his congregation. Some of them went to the circus or the amphitheatre where pagan values were honored and did not feel any guilt in participating in such pagan pastimes. Others seldom came to church to listen to the word of God except on festal days. Still others who finally showed up were not attentive to the preaching of the word: while in

church they only thought about their business dealings, profits, or in case of women, their children or the various needs of the household.⁹

What was more distressing to Origen than those problems, however, was that some of his congregation members kept the Passover together with the Jews and fasted together with them. Some women even refused to bathe the day of the Sabbath to literally keep the day holy.¹⁰ Some others frequented the Jewish synagogue on Saturdays and came to church on Sundays. So exegeting the Leviticus law that the fellowship offering of thanksgiving and the Passover lamb should be consumed on the day and that nothing of them should remain until the next morning, Origen emphasized that the law has a spiritual lesson for the Christians: they should eat the word of God every day freshly from the Church and never eat the yesterday's meat, i.e., the meaning according to the letter as the synagogue provides. So against those Christians who failed to make a sharp distinction between the church and the synagogue, Origen emphatically said, "If you bring into the Church today what you learned from the Jews yesterday, it is to eat yesterday's meat of sacrifice."¹¹

Throughout his preaching and writing, Origen kept this antithetical attitude towards the Jews. He characterized them as carnal, literal, spiritually blind, and belonging to the old dispensation. He preached to his members that they should keep away from them. Why did he need to take such a hostile attitude towards the Jews? It is because they were the most formidable competitor in the area of the sacred text, the Hebrew Bible, and in the area of proselytism. More importantly, his Christian audience was not strong enough to compete

⁹ *HomGen* 10.1 (Sources Chrétiennes 7 bis, 254-8), 10.3.24-43 (SC 7 bis, 264); *HomEx* 13.3 (SC 321, 380-8).

¹⁰ *HomJer* 12.13 (SC 238, 44-50).

¹¹ *HomLev* 5.8.3 (SC 286, 242).

successfully with them. As he perceived it, it lacked a distinct Christian identity; it lacked a set of boundaries with which to recognize the irreconcilable differences between them and the others. To cope with this problem of a loose identity, Origen took such an antithetical stance against the Jews and warned his members about the danger of associating with them.

But Judaism was not the only perceived threat to the church. Another threat came from paganism, paganism not in the sense of various mystical religions within the Empire but in the sense of the cult of the traditional Roman gods and the system of values based on it. According to the popular cosmology in Late Antiquity, the divine realm was thought to be inhabited by three major groups: the supreme God, gods, and daimons. And among the three, the daimons were believed to be especially responsible for the affairs relating to humans: as guardians of various cities and areas of the human life, they give blessings to those who please them and calamities to those who offend them.¹²

From the perspective of the Greco-Romans, it was very important not to offend the daimons (and the gods) because any offence to them would mean calamity on the personal or communal level. And what did the Christians do to them? The Christians refused to honor them and by doing so displeased them, which was the reason why they believed there were so many disasters in the Roman Empire. Hence “No rain, because of the Christians!” was proverbial among the Romans and also the justification for the persecution of the Christians.¹³ In fact, as Origen personally experienced two major persecutions in his life,

¹² Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire A.D. 100-400* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1984), 12-3. In the popular level, the gods were also believed to be manipulable as the daimons were.

¹³ Robbin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1986), 425. See also Tertullian *Apologia* 40.2 (LCL 250, 182-3, trans. T. R. Glover), “They take the Christians to be the cause of every disaster to the State, of every misfortune of the people. If the Tiber reaches the walls, if the Nile does

i.e., persecutions under Septimius Severus and Decius, persecution was always a possibility for any Christian at the time.

It was against the backdrop of this unfavorable situation, i.e., a life under the threat of persecution as well as a need to compete with Jewish proselytism, that Origen the Christian preacher attempted to tackle the issue of Christian identity. According to his judgment, the Christians were not fully aware of the danger of associating with the Jews and the pagans; they did not realize that their loose sense of identity was actually inviting harmful non-Christian values to penetrate into their Christian minds and create an unhealthy condition. So to resolve this *exigence* or urgency of the matter¹⁴ as Origen perceived it, I argue, Origen used the rhetoric of difference and took an aggressive stance against the Jews and the Greco-Romans throughout his writing and preaching.

III. Rhetorical Definition, Classification, and Association

In his tenth homily on Genesis, Origen admonishes those members who come to church only on festal days, i.e., the Lord's days. What is special in this admonition is that he associates them with the Jews and put both groups in the same category. He says,

Tell me, you who come to Church only on festal days. Are the other days not festal days? Are they not the Lord's days? It belongs to the Jews to observe solemn feasts on certain and rare days. And therefore God says to them, "I cannot endure your new moons and Sabbaths and great day. My soul hates your fast and

not rise to the fields, if the sky doesn't move or the earth does, if there is famine, if there is plague, the cry is at once: 'The Christians to the lion!' What, all of them to one lion?"

¹⁴ For the classical discussion of the theory of exigence and the rhetorical situation, see Lloyd F. Bitzer, "The Rhetorical Situation," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 1.1 (1968): 1-14; Bitzer, "Functional Communication: A Situational Perspective," in *Rhetoric in Transition: Studies in the Nature and Uses of Rhetoric*, ed. Eugene E. White (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980): 21-38.

festivals and festal days.” God hates, therefore, those who think that the festal day of the Lord is only on one day.¹⁵

For Origen, what defines the Jews is the belief that only one day of the week is special and holy and, therefore, that it is enough to come to their synagogue only that day. If any Christians follow that pattern and come to church only on Sundays, Origen emphasizes, they are more like the Jews than the Christians. Of course, we cannot expect him to be fair and objective in such a characterization of the Jews, for rhetoric is an art of creating *presence*.¹⁶ For a rhetorical purpose, i.e., to disqualify those infrequent Christians as practicing a dangerous non-Christian value, Origen selects only one aspect of the Jewish life and presents it as their core value.¹⁷

Such a rhetorical strategy is recognized and recommended by Aristotle under the heading of the argumentation from definition (ἡ ἀπὸ τῆς ἐπιπέδου ἀποδείξεως)¹⁸ As a rhetorical *topos*, Aristotle teaches, it helps the rhetor to draw conclusions on the subject in question as he wishes to. In other words, a rhetorical definition does not aim at objectivity in presenting a fact and drawing a conclusion based on it, but at the creation of a certain reality by which

¹⁵ *HomGen* 10.3.37-43 (SC 7 bis, 264). See also *HomGen* 11.3.51-60 (SC 7 bis, 288-90). For a comprehensive study of the meaning and usage of *Ioudaizein* among the Greeks, Jews and Christians, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, *The Beginnings of Jewishness: Boundaries, Varieties, Uncertainties* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 175-97.

¹⁶ Chaim Perelman and L. Olbrechts-Tyteca, *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 119, “All argumentation is selective. It chooses the elements and the method of making them present. By doing so it cannot avoid being open to accusations of incompleteness and hence of partiality and tendentiousness.”

¹⁷ For the discussion of Origen’s rhetorical practice of misrepresenting the Jews or his pro-Jewish Christians as literate or carnal, see Roger Brooks, “Straw Dogs and Scholarly Ecumenism: The Appropriate Jewish Background for the Study of Origen,” in *Origen of Alexandria: His World and His Legacy*, eds. Charles Kannengiesser and William L. Petersen (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 63-95; Seán Freyne, “Christians in a Jewish World: The First Century,” in *New Visions: Historical and Theological Perspectives on the Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, ed. Val Ambrose McInnes (New York: Crossroad, 1993), 11-30.

¹⁸ *Rh.* 2.23.8 (LCL 193, 304).

the speaker could strengthen his or her own position and weaken the opponent's. That is what Perelman means when he says, "Definition is regarded as a rhetorical figure—the oratorical definition—when it aims, not at clarifying the meaning of an idea, but at stressing aspects that will produce the persuasive effect that is sought."¹⁹

But definition does not divide into those two kinds as Perelman supposes, definition as a rhetorical figure and definition as an objective tool for clarification. To the contrary, all definitions and by extension all divisions and classifications have a rhetorical motive in themselves, however implicit it may be. So Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star rightly describe them as "an ethical choice" and accordingly as "dangerous" as such. Each definition and classification is not an objective, value-free description, but necessarily "valorizes some point of view and silences another."²⁰ And this process of valorization and silencing in definitions and classifications often results in the creation of a new reality.

A good example is the category of "child abuse." According to Ian Hacking, the category of child abuse began to be singled out and emphasized since 1960,²¹ and with this new category a new reality began to emerge. As mass media regularly highlighted the issue and various support groups for abusers and victims were created, and as children were educated about what constitutes child abuse, some people now for the first time began to be *classified* as abusers or victims. Though there were abusers and victims before, they were

¹⁹ Chaim Perelman, *The New Rhetoric and the Humanities* (Dordrecht, Boston and London: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1979), 20.

²⁰ Geoffrey C. Bowker & Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1999), 5. Cf. Sonja K. Foss et al., *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*, 3rd ed. (Illinois: Waveland Press, Inc., 2002), 2. Foss and the co-authors argue that human beings construct realities through their symbolic choices.

²¹ Ian Hacking, "World-Making by Kind-Making: Child Abuse for Example," in *How Classification Works*, eds. Mary Douglas and David Hull (Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 193.

not recognized or made visible as such. Only when the category of child abuse was socially created, child abuse began to exist. The same kind of insight is shared by L. G. Schulz when he rightly observed, “the very labeling and intervention in child/adolescent/adult sexual interaction may themselves be victimogenic or traumatogenic.” Only when the victim experiences that his life is treated as a case, he begins to experience trauma or see himself as a victim.²²

In addition to the socio-rhetorical theory of classification, the theory of the “other” is found to have a similar function of creating realities. According to the anthropological studies, tribes frequently “call themselves alone by the arrogant title ‘man,’ and they refer to neighboring peoples as monkeys or crocodiles or malign spirits.”²³ Why do they do that? It is because their neighbors are *so much like them*. Since there is a great deal of shared thoughts and practices between themselves and their neighbors, they feel a strong need to be differentiated from them.²⁴ In fact, the conceptualization of the other is “requisite to the establishment of any society” and each society fabricates its others by “selecting, isolating, and emphasizing an aspect of another people’s life and making it symbolize their difference.” So in the final analysis, the notion of difference is not so much about the dissociation from the other as about the consolidation of the self. In that sense, to lay claim

²² Ibid., 227-8. For the same thesis of the creative power of labeling, see Foss et al. *Contemporary Perspectives on Rhetoric*, 3, “The frameworks and labels we choose to apply to what we encounter influence our perceptions of what we experience and thus the kinds of worlds in which we live.... Because we create our worlds through symbols, changing our symbols changes our worlds. Gloria Anzaldua describes the process of changing the world as one of shifting metaphors—choosing new terms to label and thus create experience.”

²³ Rodney Needham, *Primordial Characters* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1978), 5.

²⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, “What A Difference A Difference Makes,” in *To See Ourselves As Others See Us: Christians, Jews, ‘Others’ in Late Antiquity*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985), 47.

to the title of “man” for us and allow them only the title of monkeys, crocodiles, or malign spirits probably means that “we were, or could have been, or might yet be crocodiles too.”²⁵

The theories of definition and classification and the theory of the “other” have much relevance to the analysis of the rhetorical competition between Origen and his opponents in that both use basically the same strategies to defend themselves and discredit others and thereby attempt to create a certain reality by which to consolidate their own position. As we will see in the following paragraphs, the pagans defined and classified the Christians as ignorant, superstitious, and rebellious. In return, Origen used the same strategies: he defined and classified his opponents as Epicurean, carnal, and literal, and the Christians as spiritual and virtuous.

Let us first consider the case of the definition and classification by the pagans. The first mention of Christianity by the Romans appears in the second century in the writings of Pliny the Younger, Tacitus, and Suetonius,²⁶ and all the three classify the Christian movement as *superstitio*. And this classification is interconnected with other similar kinds such as irrationality, gullibility, lack of education, etc. Likewise Celsus, a second-century pagan philosopher, classifies Christianity as an irrational religion that teaches its members not to ask questions but just believe.²⁷ Again he characterizes the Christians as ignorant people who never dare to talk to intelligent men but always like to preach to their like such

²⁵ William Scott Green, “Otherness Within: Towards A Theory Of Difference in Rabbinic Judaism,” in *To See Ourselves As Others See Us: Christians, Jews, ‘Others’ in Late Antiquity*, eds. Jacob Neusner and Ernest S. Frerichs (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1985), 49-50.

²⁶ Pliny *Annals* 15.44 (LCL 322, 282); Tacitus *Letter* 10.96.8-9 (To Trajan. LCL 59, 288-90); Suetonius *The Lives of the Caesars* 6.16 (Nero. LCL 38, 110).

²⁷ *Contra Celsum* 1.9 (Die griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte 2, 61).

as women, slaves, children, cobblers, laundry-workers, and the like.²⁸ Since the Christians are ignorant, credulous and superstitious, Celsus says, they are always an easy prey to hucksters who “display their infamous words in the market places and beg around.”²⁹

But to classify the Christians in such a way is far from historical because the ratio of the uneducated is not much different from the case of other religious groups or organizations. As Celsus himself admitted, there were in the church “some moderate, fair and intelligent people, and those who are ready to interpret allegorically.”³⁰ Or as sociologist Rodney Stark argues, early Christianity could not be a proletariat movement; rather it should be a middle-class based movement because the Christian community at that time is to be classified as a cult rather than a sect³¹ and because the main group of participants in every cult movement is from the middle class.³²

²⁸ *CCels* 3.50 (GCS 2, 246); 3.55 (GCS 2, 250-1).

²⁹ *CCels* 3.50 (GCS 2, 246).

³⁰ *CCels* 1.27 (GCS 2, 79). See also other examples of Origen’s addressing those of privileged social classes, *HomGen* 13.3.30-6 (SC 7 bis, 320); *HomEx* 12.2 (SC 321, 356-8); *HomJos* 10.3 (SC 71, 276-80).

³¹ For a common list of sectarian features, see John H. Elliot, “Phases in the Social Formation of Early Christianity: From Faction to Sect—A Social Scientific Perspective,” in *Recruitment, Conquest, and Conflict: Strategies in Judaism, Early Christianity, and the Greco-Roman World*, eds. Peder Borgen, Vernon K. Robbins, and David B. Gowler (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1998), 296-300. Elliot’s list includes “the establishment and promotion of group consciousness” “the establishment and fostering of a distinctive social identity” “the assertion of social legitimacy and moral superiority” “the maintenance of internal social cohesion and management of internal conflict” “the maintenance of members’ confidence and emotional commitment” and “provision of a plausible, coherent worldview/symbolic universe integrating values, goals, norms, patterns of belief and behavior and supplying ultimate (divine) legitimation for the sect’s self-understanding, interests, program, and strategies.”

³² Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: A Sociologist Reconsiders History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996), 33. He draws this conclusion from his sociological research on various modern religious movements. See his book, pages 29-47. For a similar conclusion among other scholars, see Robin Scroggs, “The Sociological Interpretation of the New Testament: The Present State of Research,” *New Testament Studies* 26 (1980): 164-179; Jean Danielou and Henri Marrou, *The First Six Hundred Years* (New York: Paulist Press, 1964), 240; Robert M. Grant, *Early Christianity and Society: Seven Studies* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1911), 11; Abraham J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977), 29-59; Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 97; Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 311.

Now we should ask, why did the Roman intellectuals classify the Christians as credulous, uneducated and irrational,³³ though they knew or at least sensed that the Christians did not exactly fit into such categories? I contend that they classified the Christians in such a way to create a reality by which the Christians could be made visible and thereby easily targeted and discredited.

Against the pagans who classify the Christians as ignorant and superstitious, Origen provides a quite different classification, the classification of the Christians as virtuous. According to the basic assumption of the Greco-Roman culture, the Christians can never be classified as virtuous because only noble men with good education can be virtuous.³⁴ But according to Origen, the Christians are the exemplary model for virtues. Christ is the source and origin of all virtues³⁵ and the church is the place where even most infamous and wicked people may come and be changed into “a model of the purest moral character.”³⁶

Concerning his opponent Celsus, however, Origen classifies him as an Epicurean who in those days had a bad reputation among the philosophers. As an answer to his criticism that it is shameful for the Son of God to assume humanity and experience passion and death, Origen says,

But I do not know by what greater and clearer proofs Celsus would make him [Jesus] confirm the predictions. Perhaps, as it seems, he did not understand that

³³ Besides this rhetorical technique of associating Christianity with superstition and lack of education, there is another equally noticeable pattern of association, the association of Christianity with the spirit of rebellion. For such examples, see *CCels* 3.14 (GCS 2, 213); 5.33-4 (GCS 3, 35-6); 8.73 (GCS 3, 290); 8.75 (GCS 3, 292).

³⁴ Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideas of Greek Culture*, vol. 1, trans. Gilbert Highet (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 5.

³⁵ *CCels* 1.57 (GCS 2, 108).

³⁶ *CCels* 1.63 (GCS 2, 116).

the Logos had become the man Jesus, and did not want him to have human experiences nor to become a noble example to people about how to bear calamities. These seem to Celsus to be most lamentable and shameful, since he regards pain as the greatest of evils and pleasure as the perfect good—a view accepted by none of the philosophers who believe in providence and agree that courage, endurance, and great-spiritedness are virtues. So Jesus did not cast any discredit on the Christian faith by his sufferings, but rather strengthened it among those who are willing to accept the virtue of courage.³⁷

It is to be noted that here Origen uses the rhetorical figure of classification by which Celsus is excluded from the honored group of philosophers who believe in providence and accept the traditional virtues of courage (ὁβρυχη), endurance (ὑπομονή) and great-spiritedness (ἀνδρεία).³⁸ And with the same strategy of classification, Origen puts Christianity and the philosophers in the same category in which its members believe in providence and all those virtues.³⁹ Another thing we need to pay special attention to is that Origen is here consciously connecting the Christian virtue of martyrdom to the traditional virtues of courage and endurance. He says that Jesus, by his sufferings and death, became “a noble example to people about how to bear calamities” and “strengthened it among those who are willing to accept the virtue of courage.”

³⁷ *CCels* 2.42 (GCS 2, 165).

³⁸ These three virtues are part of what Alexander cherished in his mind on his military campaigns. He used to carry not only the works of Homer but also the philosophical treatises on fearlessness (ἄνδραγαθία), courage (ὁβρυχη), self-control (ἐγκράτεια), and great-spiritedness (ἀνδρεία). See Plut. *Mor. De Alex. fort.* 328a (LCL 305, 390); Troels Engberg-Pedersen, “The Hellenistic Öffentlichkeit: Philosophy as a Social Force in the Greco-Roman World,” in *Recruitment, Conquest, and Conflict: Strategies in Judaism, Early Christianity, and the Greco-Roman World*, eds. Peder Borgen, Vernon K. Robbins, and David B. Gowler (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1998), 26.

³⁹ Cf. *CCels* 3.80 (GCS 2, 270-1). In this text, Origen accuses Celsus of Epicureanism and excludes him from the circle of the Pythagoreans and the Platonists because he does not believe in the survival of the soul. Then with the same strategy of classification, Origen classifies the Christians as belonging to the same category with the philosophers. For the case of the virtue of philanthropy practiced by both the Cynics and the Christians, see *CCels* 3.50 (GCS 2, 246); Dio Chrysostom *Discourse* 32.8-13 (To the Alexandrians. LCL 358, 178-84); Abraham J. Malherbe, “‘Gentle as a Nurse’: The Cynic Background to 1 Thess ii,” *Novum Testamentum* 12 (1970): 203-17. It is noteworthy that the virtue of philanthropy does not appear in *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, 4 vols., ed. Hans Friedrich August von Arnim (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1964). But Philo discusses it and piety as the queens of the virtues. See *De Virtutibus* 18.95 (LCL 341, 220).

One interesting fact, however, in relation to the labeling of Celsus as an Epicurean is that Origen is in fact not sure if his opponent really is an Epicurean. Though in most cases he calls Celsus an Epicurean,⁴⁰ in a couple of places he is hesitant. In his *Contra Celsum* 4.4, Origen admits that when Celsus suggests the existence of God he does not seem to be an Epicurean at all; but then Origen says, probably he is hiding his true opinion and simply pretending to believe in God.⁴¹ But later when he finds that Celsus expresses the belief that the transcendent God is not responsible for the creation of mortal beings, Origen is totally lost among these three possibilities: Celsus is simply pretending to abandon his Epicureanism, or he has really changed his mind, or he is simply “a namesake of the Epicurean.”⁴² But before long Origen calls him again an Epicurean⁴³ and finally in the section 5.3 he sets his mind to know him as an Epicurean: “See how, in his desire to demolish our beliefs, he who throughout the whole treatise has not admitted to be an Epicurean is convicted of being a deserter to Epicurus.”⁴⁴

Now we should ask, why did Origen finally decide to call him an Epicurean, though in fact he was not so sure of his real identity? Probably because Origen was well aware of the power of labeling and classification; he probably knew that with such a tool he could effectively discredit his opponent in the mind of his audience. If Celsus is discredited, then so are all of his arguments against the Christians.

⁴⁰ *CCels* 1.8 (GCS 2, 61); 1.10 (GCS 2, 63); 1.20 (GCS 2, 72); 2.42 (GCS 2, 165); 2.60 (GCS 2, 182); 3.80 (GCS 2, 271); 4.75 (GCS 2, 344); 5.3 (GCS 3, 3).

⁴¹ *CCels* 4.4 (GCS 2, 277L)

⁴² *CCels* 4.54 (GCS 2, 326).

⁴³ *CCels* 4.75 (GCS 2, 344).

⁴⁴ *CCels* 5.3 (GCS 3, 3)"

IV. Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered how Origen used the same rhetorical strategies that his pagan opponents used, that is, the strategies of definition, classification, and association. Just as the pagan philosophers characterized and labeled the Christians as ignorant, superstitious, and seditious, Origen read and preached on the scriptures in such a way as to characterize his opponents as Epicurean and literal, and classify the Christians as virtuous and belonging to the same category of the philosophers. His motive of employing those strategies was not simply to describe a true reality; rather it was to create a new reality and use it for a rhetorical purpose, i.e., to defend his position and discredit that of his opponents. And such an attempt to create a new reality in the mind of his Christian audience was necessitated by the specific exigence of the audience as he perceived it from a rhetorical point of view, the exigence that his audience was constantly under the threat of persecution by the Greco-Romans and at the same time had the task of competing with the Jews over the possession of the Hebrew Bible and the recruitment of new converts, but still did not have a strong sense of identity necessary for a successful competition. To cope with such an exigence, Origen read and preached on the scriptures according to the epistemic principle of rhetoric and tried to form a strong Christian self-identity in the mind of his Christian audience.